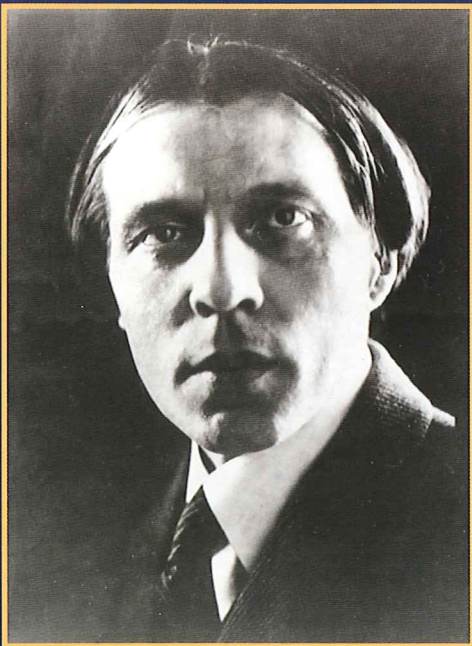




Great Pianists • Cortot

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8.110613



FRANCK
Symphonic Variations

SAINT-SAËNS
Piano Concerto No. 4
Waltz Etude

RAVEL
Piano Concerto
for the Left Hand

Alfred Cortot, Piano

Landon Ronald
London Philharmonic Orchestra

Charles Munch
L'Orchestre de la Société des
Concerts du Conservatoire, Paris

Historical Recordings 1931 - 1935

Alfred Cortot (1877-1962)

Concertos • Volume 2

César FRANCK (1822-1890)

1 Symphonic Variations 14:27

Landon Ronald, London Philharmonic Orchestra

(Recorded on 13th October, 1934 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London, on Matrices 2B 6829/32 (all Take 1). First issued on HMV DB 2185/6)

Camille SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Piano Concerto No. 4 in C minor, Op. 44 24:54

2 Allegro moderato - Andante 11:48

3 Allegro vivace - Andante - Allegro 13:06

Charles Munch and Orchestra

(Recorded on 9th July, 1935 in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1, London on Matrices 2EA 1514-9 (all Take 1). First issued on HMV DB 2577/9)

Maurice RAVEL (1875-1937)

Piano Concerto for the Left Hand 15:42

4 Lento - Più lento - Andante 6:36

5 Allegro - 4:43

6 Lento - Cadenza -Allegro 4:23

Charles Munch, L'Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, Paris

(Recorded on 12th May, 1939 in Paris on Matrices 2LA 3059-2, 3060-3, 3061-2 3062-2. First issued on HMV DB 3885/6)

Camille SAINT-SAËNS

7 Etude in the form of a Waltz 4:35

(Recorded in May, 1931 in Studio C, Small Queen's Hall, London on Matrice 2B 880-2. First issued on HMV DB 1535)

Each of the three concerted works on this disc breaks new, inventive ground in its composition.

Ten years separate the first two pieces: Cesar Franck's *Variations symphoniques* was written in 1885, Camille Saint-Saëns' *Fourth Piano Concerto* preceded it in 1875. Both works employ the technique of variation in direct, and in subtle, ways.

Alfred Cortot spoke of the Franck as being, "with the sonata for piano and violin, the most perfect artistic production that Franck wrote. I do not say the most beautiful, but the most lucid and the most polished." Calling it "the most vigorous and varied work that Franck ever wrote for the piano", he added that "though this work may be inspired at times by the most tender and even the most joyous feelings, feelings of sorrow, of struggle, of bitter conflict are also brought strongly into play, and what predominates in this work, which is neither 'likeable' nor 'gracious', is *pathos* and the depth of human emotion."

In the *Variations symphoniques*, Franck pushed the concept of variation well beyond its previous barriers. Cortot said "we escape from the rigid, boxed-up forms, and enter a kingdom infinitely more vast and free." Sir Donald Francis Tovey has described the work as "a finely and freely organized fantasia with an important episode in variation-form" (underlining mine), and he spoke of the variations within it as "a single flowing series forming little more than an episode placed between an introduction about half as long and a finale more than twice as long. The introduction and finale are on a totally different theme from that of the variations, this variation theme being only hinted at in the introduction and being only brought in as a bass counterpoint in two passages in the finale."

How ingeniously Franck constructs the work! There are two "elements" (as Cortot described them) which open the work, permeate it in various guises, are "in turn opposed or fused, clashing or merging, without losing

anything of their initial character" (Cortot's words), and which gives it both continuity and diversity. The first of these begins the piece, a roughly four-bar phrase strongly stated by the strings. The second "element" (of the same duration) follows immediately, played warmly by the piano without accompaniment. In these two, Cortot advised his students to "always make the alternation of (the) two ideas, poles apart, contribute dramatic feeling. (This) conflict of mood...is the vital principle of the work." In bar 35 the orchestra, playing *pizzicato*, presents the theme (in triple time) which becomes the basis of the variations.

Some have denigrated the abrupt change in mood which announces the *Allegro non troppo* of the work's extended final section. Cortot said "it seems to me that the candour and fresh spontaneity of the finale is an indispensable part of the general balance on which the work rests. No other device would in the same way have ensured the variety and completed the mood of the piece, founded as it is on an emotional progression."

Louis Diémer was Alfred Cortot's principal piano teacher, and it was Diémer (to whom the work is dedicated) who was the soloist in the première of the *Variations symphoniques*, on 1st May, 1886. Franck conducted. Once Diémer asked Cortot to play the orchestral part of the work with him on a second piano at a rehearsal, Cortot said "I did not relax my efforts until my master yielded to my wish and allowed me to work at the solo part of the work he had just brought to my notice." Cortot later referred to the piece as "the work of Franck's that I have played most, and of which I had the pleasure of being at least a loving interpreter – if I had no other merit – in nearly every city in the old and the new worlds." On this disc we have the second of the two recordings Cortot made of the work.

The Saint-Saëns *C minor Concerto* also had pushed the solo and orchestra genre into a new realm. Instead of

the previously-utilized three-movement, fast-slow-fast cast of a concerto, this work is nominally in two movements, but the first of them has two distinct sections, the second has three. It is the same pattern Saint-Saëns would use eleven years later in his *Organ Symphony*, but in the concerto thematic material is used in vaguely cyclical form.

Cortot described the work as “a genuine *Konzerstück*”, and contrasting its cyclic characteristics with Franck’s use of that device, said “When Franck defines a theme at the beginning of a work, and repeats it at the finish, its reappearance releases a sort of emotion derived from what has gone before. That is cyclic form interpreted from the philosophic point of view. We are not on the same ground here. A musical game is set before us. The principle, therefore, is entirely different.” Part of the “musical game” is that the chorale-like theme played first in the woodwind in the *Andante* which forms the second half of the first movement, then reappears in the *Andante* middle section of the second movement (as does more material from the first *Andante*), turns out to be the boisterous theme of the finale.

The opening movement’s first half is a set of variations (described by Saint-Saëns’ biographer Brian Rees as being “of Protestant sobriety”). The theme is announced immediately by the orchestra, and at the end of the variations we get a glimpse of the *scherzando* music which will begin the second movement (more of the “musical game”). The *Andante* ensues, and the first movement ends quietly, as Cortot says, “marked by resignation and calm. We ought to feel all the softness of falling dusk.” He suggests that the beginning scherzo of the second movement (which in the present recording he takes at a faster clip than Saint-Saëns specifies) “ought to be played with a clattering tone.” The first movement variation theme makes a brief, galumphing appearance (the “game” continues). As the music subsides we find

ourselves in the second *Andante*, with it at first quiet, then increasingly agitated launching into the final section which is heralded by a shout of horns and trumpets before the solo piano, in unadorned one-note-at-a-time presentation, initiates the folk-like, somewhat martial tune which dominates the music to its exuberant close.

Dr. Michael Stegemann, in his book on Saint-Saëns and the concerto form, describes this work as “a perfect union of classic intellect with the structural freedom of Romanticism.”

Although Ravel’s *D major Concerto*, composed starting in 1929 alongside the *G major Concerto* for two hands, contains some of the jazzy elements its composer – and many others at the time – flirted with, this work holds a gamut of moods, from sombre introspection through outburst, tenderness, and insouciance. In its way, this is some of the most inventive, varied, and dramatic music Ravel ever composed. The composer himself spoke of the concerto’s “mixed muses”. The piano writing is extraordinarily complex and inventive, far beyond what might be expected within the limitations of a single hand employed in the solo part. Again quoting Ravel: “In a work of this kind, it is essential to give the impression of a texture no thinner than that of a part written for both hands.” He succeeded beyond what must have been his greatest expectations. Nonetheless, Alfred Cortot arranged a version for two hands, seemingly alone in his feeling that it would be preferable. One can hardly help but wonder just how many fingers Cortot utilized in the recording at hand.

Saint-Saëns’ *Etude en forme de valse* is the last of the *Six études*, Op. 52, dating from 1877. Cortot described it as being “witty and vivacious” (“spirituelle et séillante”), and his fleet, charming performance of it here (the second of his two recordings of the work) is a delightful encore to the programme on this disc.

It may be noted that both the Saint-Saëns and Ravel

concertos are heard here in the only recordings Cortot made of them, and that, while it is customary to grant Cortot leeway in regard to some dropped notes in a performance (the second movement of the Saint-Saëns on this disc calls the point to mind), perhaps an extra

measure of indulgence is required in the Ravel recording, which has quite a bit of “slippage”. Nonetheless, the fluidity and beauty of pianism heard here, particularly in the extended cadenza at the end of the work, make this a quite special performance.

Norman Pellegrini

The Naxos Historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.

A Note on the Recordings

This release and its companion volume (Naxos 8.110612) contain Alfred Cortot's complete recorded piano concerto repertoire. The performance of the Franck presented here is the second of two commercial recordings of the work the pianist made, both with Landon Ronald conducting. (The earlier version was made in 1927 with the London Symphony.) The solo work which fills out this disc as a kind of encore is the only other electrical recording Cortot made of a work by Saint-Saëns.

The sources used for transfer were the quietest commercial pressings on which these recordings were issued: U.S. Victor "Z" Shellacs for the Franck; late 1930s Victor pressings for the Saint-Saëns concerto and the Ravel; and a laminated postwar Italian HMV (Voce del Padrone) Pressing for the solo work, which was never released on Victor.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings. Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performance to be heard with the greatest clarity. There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny brass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.



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FRANCK • RAVEL SAINT-SAËNS

Alfred Cortot, Piano

Playing
Time
59:38

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HONG KONG



Archivist & Restoration Producer: Mark Obert-Thorn

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Cover Photograph: Alfred Cortot (Lebrecht Collection)

