

OPENING BOOKS, OPENING MINDS.
CORTOT'S LIBRARY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PIANO PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Exploring Alfred Cortot's library's profound impact on piano performance, this article delves into the symbiotic relationship between literature, intellectual enrichment, and musical interpretation. Cortot's unconventional approach to interpretation transcended mere fidelity to the score, encouraging interpretive freedom and epistemic flexibility through deep engagement with the creative process. Drawing on literary and philosophical sources, Cortot advocated for a holistic approach to musical education that embraces the transformative power of ideas and culture. In an age of digital proliferation, his reverence for the printed word serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring significance of deep reading in nurturing creativity and critical thinking.

Keywords:

Alfred Cortot, piano performance, musical libraries, intellectual enrichment, cultural influence, critical thinking, holistic musical education

INTRODUCTION. PRO DOMO

The inspiration for this article originated from a renowned project underway at the Orpheus Art Research Institute in Ghent, titled "Resounding Libraries: Unfolding Archived Knowledge Through Artistic Research," spearheaded by the musicologist Bruno Forment. This endeavor, catalyzed by the library generously bequeathed to the Institute by the esteemed harpsichordist Ton Koopman, which I had the privilege of consulting in 2022, aimed to "reimagine the role of libraries in musical practice and to forge new avenues of interpretation and appreciation for the Baroque era." Indeed, the Belgian research center endeavors to reevaluate the archive and library through a pragmatic lens intricately intertwined with historically informed performance. However, the title of the project piqued my curiosity. How does one perceive the resonance of a musician's library? How does it encapsulate their cultural essence? To

what degree do the depth and caliber of ideas influence musical interpretation? After all, as we know, a performer is not merely a performer but rather a musician, and a musician, a cultivated individual, an intellectual. Hence, I wish to underscore from the outset that this article serves as an impassioned plea for the significance of reading, of books, and the intrinsic value they hold as epistemological tools in seamless harmony with the practical, technical, and pianistic dimensions. Additionally, during the month of December 2023, I undertook a research internship at the La Grange Fleuret Music Library, where the vast library of the pianist Alfred Cortot is housed.

Libraries, Treasuries of Human Knowledge

The libraries, by their very nature, represent a confluence, a crystallization of the vibrant intellectual ferment, the quests, inquiries, answers, and discoveries of humanity. Indeed, to books, we owe the preservation and perpetuation of humanity's loftiest ideas.

Without them, we might have consigned to oblivion the audacious Greeks who dared to entrust power to the people and named this audacious experiment 'democracy'; the Hippocratic physicians, who crafted the first code of ethics in history, pledging care for both the poor and the enslaved [...]; Aristotle, who founded one of the earliest universities and instructed his students that the difference between a sage and an ignorant person is akin to that between a living being and a dead one; (...) or the legal codes of those Roman visionaries who one day extended citizenship to all inhabitants of their vast empire; or that Greek Christian, Paul of Tarsus, who likely delivered the first egalitarian discourse in history" (Vallejo, 2019: p. 540).

Thus, a library transcends being a mere repository of books; it is a compendium of lives, histories, and discoveries, and reading and rereading them, as literary critic Matei Călinescu (2017) eloquently stated, are "strolls through textual forests, pleasure excursions, wanderings, or pilgrimages" (p. 35).

Numerous invaluable works have been dedicated to the exploration of books and reading, delving into various facets of this intricate process: Alberto Manguel's "A History of Reading" (1996), a captivating study that unveils the evolution, manifestations and significance of reading over time; Harold Bloom's "How to Read and Why" (2000), offering a profound and sensitive perspective on this practice, its psychological and spiritual nuances. Martyn Lyons' "Books: A Living History" (2011) brings to the forefront the evolution of the physical form of the book and its profound impact on culture and society.

Musical Libraries: Tracing the Origins and Evolution

It's widely acknowledged that the world's first library was the one in Alexandria, a remarkable realization of Alexander the Great's visionary genius. But when did musical libraries come into existence? Their history is "a captivating narrative of exchanges, circulation, and intersecting perspectives" (Fabris, 2010, p. 21) that transports us back in time to the great explorers, to whom we owe the establishment of the earliest musical libraries. These emerged in the 15th century, coinciding with the significant migrations of Flemish musicians across Europe. The first collection of musical books was identified in the extensive library founded in Seville by Hernando Colón (1488-1539), son of Christopher Columbus. Later, in the 17th and 18th centuries, specialized travelers and connoisseurs played pivotal roles in disseminating musical writings throughout Europe. Musician Charles Burney (1726-1814), renowned for his work "A General History of Music" (1776), was undoubtedly a key figure in this domain, amassing a vast collection of rare musical sources. Similarly, in Italy, the priest and musician Giambattista Martini, author of a music history encyclopedia ("Storia della musica", 1757), was among the foremost collectors of musical sources, often receiving them from various friends and copyists across Italy and Europe. Alongside Colón, Burney, Martini, notable figures such as Athanasius Kircher, Sébastien de Brossard, François-Joseph Fétis, Henry Prunières, and many others have left indelible marks on the history and progression of this passion, contributing invaluable works to the fields of historiography, interpretation and music theory.

Beyond Preservation: The Depth and Meaning of Musical Rarity Collections

The pertinence and profundity of a personal compilation of musical rarities transcend mere institutionalized endeavors such as the preservation and dissemination of cultural legacy. Rather, they stand as an emblematic portrayal—an exquisite tapestry—of the musician, reflecting their spiritual and intellectual nuances, their indulgences, delights, affinities, curiosity, and caprices. Thus, each collection serves as an illustrious window into the inner world of its custodian. Renowned musicologist, virtuoso harpsichordist and contemporary collector Davitt Moroney underscore the notion that such collections provide a more authentic portrayal of a musician than their public performances or recorded works ever could, unveiling a realm of privacy, intimacy, and uninhibited expression that starkly contrasts the veneer of solemnity and self-restraint often witnessed in public renditions. Thus, a collection transcends its role as a mere amalgamation of disparate artifacts, emerging instead as an immediate extension of a musician's interests, pursuits, and exigencies at any given moment.

Beyond Preservation: Exploring Cortot's Musical Rarity Collection

Cortot's library stands as a distinguished institution in the realm of music collectors and bibliophiles. Within its confines lie a treasure trove of monographs, pamphlets, scores, and manuscripts delving into the theory and history of music, interpretation, aesthetics, and philosophy. While undoubtedly serving as a tangible manifestation of a lifelong intellectual pursuit, its genesis bears a significant moment in 1913 when musicologist Henry Prunières became the French pianist's neighbor. "In 1913, I took residence on Boulevard Saint-Michel, a building where Alfred Cortot had long dwelled. We became neighbors. [...] One evening, after he had enchanted me with divine renditions of Domenico Scarlatti's pieces in an intimate setting, I couldn't resist the pleasure of presenting him with an original edition of Scarlatti's works... I revisit this cherished memory because I believe it laid the cornerstone of the grand monument we are inaugurating today..." (Prunières, 1936).

The library Cortot meticulously assembled over fifteen years commands admiration. While it predominantly houses works on theory and instrumental music, Alfred Cortot curated a collection spanning all facets of the musical arts, featuring significant works in various languages. "From this perspective, his collection eclipses even the most renowned modern libraries and appears to surpass the Fétis collection at the Royal Library of Brussels." (Prunières, 1936).

Today, the "La Grange-Fleuret" Music Library in Paris serves as the principal custodian of Cortot's invaluable collections, encompassing not only its book funds but also other prized artifacts, including Mahler's spectacles and portraits. The stewardship of this cultural treasure has been entrusted to the late musicologist Henri Louis de la Grange, a distinguished scholar and one of the foremost authorities on the music and life of Gustav Mahler. During the research scholarship at this library in December 2023, I had the privilege of conversing with musicologist Gabriella Elgarista, the library's documentarist. She disclosed, "Alfred Cortot had a penchant for rarities, for those gems seldom found."

Turning back to the pianist's catalogue, in the preface to a book published at the behest of the International Society of Musicology, Cortot (1936) underscored, "For a musician fervent about unraveling the mysteries of his craft, there exists no more delightful pursuit than delving into the texts where theorists, across the ages, be they erudite, naive, or impassioned, have sought to decode the enchantment behind the sounds" (p. 6). Thus, he validates his ardor.

However, in a 1953 interview with journalist Bernard Gavoty, Cortot rebuffed the notion of merely being a collector. To him, the library served as a practical instrument. "To me, it has been and remains a constantly consulted resource, enabling me to trace the roots of my art and refine my instrumental expression to align as closely

as possible with its original style, by examining a plethora of references hitherto overlooked. [...] Musical craftsmanship resides there, within those pages that have felt the direct touch of the master's hand, [...]" (Herlin, 2012, p. 20) It is a declaration encapsulating the psyche of the manuscript aficionado, the emotions, the inner fervor, the ecstasy of discovery and comprehension. For Alfred Cortot, these artifacts served as conduits for establishing a mental, emotional, and spiritual rapport between himself and the composer. We also note the recurring motif of mystery/mysterious. This term permeates other writings of the pianist; Alfred Cortot consistently situates musical works within the mystical realm (in a spiritual sense - implying a certain communion with divinity; enigmatic - bearing an air of obscurity and mystique). Given the Zeitgeist, we may surmise the influence of readings (since we remain within the context) by Romain Rolland and Bergson, both deeply intrigued by the enigma of mysticism.

"As for the portraits of musicians adorning my abode, stalwart witnesses over the years to my unwavering quest to fathom the essence of the genius that dwelled within their beings, and whose melodic message endures into eternity, I allude to Wagner, Chopin, Schumann, Mozart, Liszt. At times, I envisage their gazes, reverently captured by the skilled hand of a painter, casting a friendly glance my way, encouraging me in my pursuit" (Cortot, 1953).

The Manuscript as a Gateway: Cortot's Advocacy for Musical Graphology

In 1928, Cortot penned a nuanced article on musical graphology in "Le Monde musical", offering contemporary readers a crucial portal into the maestro's mindset. Here, Cortot champions the study of authentic, original handwriting as a means to glean deeper insights into the composer's character and intentions. Through examining manuscripts, one can uncover the composer's exploratory journey, the intricate process of work development, and the various stages of composition, thus forging a closer connection to the intimate realm of creation and the composer's persona. Cortot emphasizes that such insights are invaluable for achieving an authentic interpretation aligned with the composer's original vision. "As I've often observed, scrutinizing the French manuscripts I'm acquainted with, the passionate fervor of a theme often finds heightened expression in its notation compared to that of a development or secondary figuration. Nuances, too, bear a distinct manuscript characteristic. Consider the monumental 'ff' in Brahms' D minor Concerto, as showcased by the Berlin Library, underscoring the tragic outburst of the initial motif, entrusted to the quartet's naturally affectionate timbres" (Cortot, 1928, p. 42). And Cortot continues: "We ardently hope that these splendid photographic reproductions will find their way into the hands of students, as they have in recent years facilitated a more intimate communion with the musings of Beethoven, Bach, or Mozart." For Cortot, direct engagement with the

manuscript represents a gateway to understanding the composer's thought process as he revered manuscripts as portals to the composer's psyche.

Performing By or Beyond the Book? Cortot's Unconventional Interpretive Path

Cortot embarked on his journey as a pedagogue and virtuoso at a time when music history was emerging as an independent discipline in France, championed by figures like Romain Rolland, André Pirro, Paul-Marie Masson, and Laurent Ceillier. This era marked a burgeoning awareness among musicians of the historical dimension, spurred by a growing interest in reviving ancient music, championed in Cortot's time by Louis Diémer and later by Wanda Landowska. Unlike his contemporaries who sought period-specific sounds through historical instruments, Cortot delved into the composer's mindset and the ethos of the era. Additionally, Cortot equated the significance of two elements: the genesis of a musical work and the emotional state it embodies. Those acquainted with Cortot's performances understand that fidelity to the text or adherence to interpretive norms wasn't paramount; rather, he sought to capture the essence of the era, the composer's mindset, and their emotional resonance. Thus, the question, "Did Cortot play strictly by the book?" remains rhetorical. While Cortot strived to grasp the composer's thoughts, emotions, and creative processes, he advocated for a genuine, personal interpretation of pieces. The famous pianist Reine Gianoli, one of his disciples, recalls: "I was already a mature artist making a career for myself. I played a Beethoven's Concerto for Cortot. 'You know, sometimes respect kills love.' He meant I was becoming overly conscientious in a way that threatened to make my performances academic - sounding" (Taylor, 1988, p. 510). The pianist played impeccably, honoring the score, yet this wasn't sufficient. What was needed was her own narrative, her unique rendition. In his opening address for interpretive courses in 1931, Cortot cautioned, "Let's steer clear of interpretations bound by deplorable tradition, often mistaken for style, and of personal approaches that disregard formal requirements and the quest for emotional universality" (Cortot, 1931, p. 261).

When asked about his interpretation philosophy, Cortot replied, "I believe there are two ways to interpret – with fidelity or with deviation – I've chosen the latter. The key is to unleash the imagination, to recreate, to relive the work. That interpretation is..." (Gavoty, 1952). While such fervor and polarizing attitudes may seem exaggerated today, it perhaps served Cortot's aim of being clearly understood.

From Book to Stage: Cortot's Literary Lens on Musical Interpretation

What do these aspects signify for contemporary students and young pianists? How does reading and the library aid in this process? How did Alfred Cortot incorporate culture into the interpretive approach, and what were his objectives in his teaching?

1. The utilization of literature as an educational tool was evident in Cortot's directives, often directing students to reading exercises. Its significance is underscored in an episode featuring Alexandru Demetriad, one of Romania's preeminent pianists and an active participant in Cortot's interpretation courses. He performed "Fantaisie quasi una sonata. Après une lecture du Dante" by Liszt for the Maestro. The teacher's reflections and guidance, as reported in *Le Monde Musical*, emphasized the essence of immersing oneself in such works rather than seeking precise compositional details or relying solely on music history books. Cortot commended the interpreter for prioritizing the essential act of engaging with Dante's works, offering a pathway to understanding Liszt's sensations and the intricacies of his ideatic universe (Cortot, as cited in Thieffry, 1927).
2. Reading provides a psycho-historical contextualization of the work. Understanding musical context is a crucial part of a musician's development. It is an intangible factor, and one often overlooked, that separates a good musician from a brilliant one. Cortot required students to compile a comprehensive musical analysis as a precursor to their public performances, encompassing details about the composer, the composition, its historical context, and influences. Students were given up to several months to conduct their research, ensuring a thorough grasp of stylistic, technical, and expressive elements. Certainly, musical analysis requires cognitive and rational effort. However, as Cortot's ideology suggests, stage interpretation entails a synthesis between the rational and the intuitive, conscious control and relinquishing control, spontaneous impulses, and their tempering through analysis and research.
3. Reading contributes to the comprehension of the creative process, it fosters interpretive freedom and epistemic flexibility. "Truly liberated is the one whose internal and cultural wealth allows adaptation across a program ranging from Bach to Stravinsky, traversing Fauré, and becoming, simultaneously, a vibrant representation of the diverse sensitivities " (Cortot as cited by Thieffry, 1931). In this context, Cortot refers to the interpreter's adaptability and versatility across varied repertoire. Culture, with its wealth of information, facilitates this journey through the richness

of compositions and styles. Beyond interpretive freedom, Cortot emphasizes the ability to effortlessly capture a composer's essence.

4. Reading allows for an interdisciplinary approach. The emergence and conceptualization of ideas significantly influenced the evolution of major stylistic currents, initially manifesting in literature and philosophy before reflecting in music. Without a deep understanding of the literary or philosophical concepts underlying a musical work, it becomes extremely difficult to convey the authenticity and essence of that musical piece.
5. Reading engages advanced mental processes such as memory, cognitive and emotional empathy and creative imagination. Maryanne Wolf, a child development professor and director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University argues that "people are not born to read," but learning this skill "allows the brain to form new neural connections that underlie sight, hearing, cognition, and language" (Wolf, as cited in Patelos, 2013).

Furthermore, Cortot institutionalized this system of thought, this mental, rational aspect of the pianist's work, which involved engaging in cognitive processes in the act of interpretation: analysis, particularization, contextualization, abstraction, comparison, analogy, etc. Even his book was titled "Rational Principles of pianistic art", with "rational" not referring to a Cartesian, mathematical, strict execution of the text; the principles are rational, not the interpretation.

He implemented those principles in the curriculum of the *École Normale de Musique de Paris*, which was revolutionary, integrative, universalist, and humanistic. There was a paramount concern for the student, for approaching music intellectually and artistically. Hence, subjects such as music history, music theory, analysis (forms), harmony were included, subjects that were either nonexistent or minimally studied in Parisian music institutions; mastery courses conducted by prominent performers of that time were also part of the curriculum. The Statutes of the *Ecole Normale de Musique* stipulated that students were encouraged to go to the library, to visit museums.

Conclusions

What does reading help us with? It helps us understand people and times we haven't known, bring them into our present, and bring us closer to them and ourselves. Because as Alfred Cortot said, interpretation entails revealing oneself.

In an era where artificial intelligence can deceive us, offering us the illusion of knowledge and obtaining it easily, the empowerment of thought, information processing, decantation, prioritization and correlation of knowledge is a sign of

epistemological aristocracy (Mircea Miclea). Culture offers us that suppleness of thought so necessary for artistic performance. Moreover, direct, physical contact with this wonderful artifact called a book also has a biological substrate. The brain functions differently in contact with a book compared to interaction with a screen. Maryanne Wolf argues that this widespread characteristic of digital culture (with all that it implies: speed, immediate reactivity, informational abundance) jeopardizes cognitive processes such as inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical abilities, critical analysis, reflection, and insight (Wolf, as cited in Patelos, 2013).

Furthermore, as Silviu Man writes, "Books turn you into what they actually are: letter, word, and idea. You become, at least a little, verb, metaphor, symbol" (Man, 2021).

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