

CHOPIN: 4 Ballades for Piano, Opp. 23, 38, 47, 52 (recorded London, May 1929). **24 Preludes for Piano**, Op. 28 (London, 1926) Alfred Cortot, pianist. Music & Arts RR 317 (mono), \$9.98; \$8.98 if ordered directly from Music & Arts.

CHOPIN: Sonatas for Piano: No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 35; **No. 3 in B Minor**, Op. 58 (recorded in London, 1928). **Ballade No. 1 in G Minor**, Op. 23 (Victor, ca. 1927). **Berceuse in D-flat**, Op. 57 (Victor, ca. 1928). **Nocturnes: in E-flat**, Op. 9, No. 2 (London, May 1929); **in E-flat**, Op. 55, No. 1; **in F Minor**, Op. 55, No. 2 (HMV, 1947). **Waltz in E Minor**, Op. 64, No. 2 (London, May 1929). Alfred Cortot, pianist. Music & Arts RR 227 (mono), \$9.98; \$8.98 if ordered directly from Music & Arts.

Alfred Cortot (1877-1962) was one of the first important artists to fully realize the value of the phonograph in disseminating music and performance. He was also a man of his time in that he looked upon a given recording not as a document for posterity but, rather, as an ephemeral item to be replaced as the technology of sound reproduction (and his own interpretive insights) progressed. Thus, in contrast to Rachmaninoff, who made recordings with a perfectionist's attitude and remade them only reluctantly--first when he switched allegiance from Edison to Victor, and then when Victor, by then RCA, having introduced electrical recording, refused to sell the outmoded items done for the acoustic horn--Cortot was only too happy to "have another go" at the staple items of his repertory. Also, whereas Rachmaninoff refused to let his concert performances be broadcast lest some home recordist make an aircheck, and similarly insisted upon the destruction of all studio masters that failed to meet his approval (a few "outtakes" managed somehow to survive that edict), Cortot apparently couldn't have cared less about his droppings. The phonograph, then, was important to him, but for all that, an adjunct to his other activities of teaching and concertizing (also conducting: he was a notable Wagnerian and responsible for the first French performances of Götterdämmerung), no intentional passport to immortality....

The upshot of all this duplication is the maze that confronts the Cortot discographer. Music & Arts was scrupulous enough to identify their generous disc of the Ballades and Preludes as being derived from 1926 (Preludes) and 1929 (Ballades) masters. (Said generosity, alas, was probably facilitated by a gradual rise in pitch to nearly a semitone sharp--this they don't tell us.) No such information is provided with the second Cortot anthology save that the G Minor Ballade on that disc, and the two Op. 55 Nocturnes, are "from previously unreleased HMV 78s (test pressings)." I am therefore indebted to one of our readers, E.J. Bond, for his

letter to the editor supplying detailed discographic information.

RR 317, then, is devoted to the earliest complete Cortot recording of the Ballades and Preludes. There is a 1933 remake of the Ballades that is familiar from various EMI dubs, and there are two later studio versions of the Preludes--1933, familiar from the EMI reissues, and 1944--as well as a surprisingly viable "live" aircheck from 1955 on Fonit Cetra Documents DOC 28.

The fact is that Cortot never played anything the same way twice, and it is doubtful if he played any piece even once without sundry mistakes. Admittedly, wrong notes were a part of Cortot's credo, and he reputedly disparaged the recording of a young pianist whose playing he thought to be excessively careful: "That fellow hasn't the technique to hit wrong notes." Without denying Cortot his chance-taking, or his colossal equipment, I do wish that he had practiced more carefully: those sundry mishaps, although a Cortot insignia, are in no way beneficial to the realization of Cortot's musical ideas. As a matter for endurance, individual tastes vary on the degree to which they can be tolerated. My own feeling is that a work like the Liszt B Minor Sonata has a roughhewn quality that can absorb the blemishes in Cortot's magnificent 1929 interpretation, but that in the main Chopin's more patrician style is more easily poisoned by such lapses. It is, therefore, a matter of deep regret that Cortot was permitted to indulge his innate laziness; these days only a Nyiregyházy (remember him?) can get away with such messy pianism.

I have always admired Cortot's way with the Op. 28 Preludes and these earliest versions seem to be even a bit freer from technical strain, more vigorous in pulse and spirit. This is also true of the Ballades, where, in general, I take greater exception to Cortot's mannered style. On the other hand, the grinding surfaces of these very early electrics are far more obtrusive than Pathé's highly filtered transfer of the 1933 versions on COLH 91 (Ballades) and COLH 38 (Preludes). It should also be noted that the 1929 performance of the Fourth Ballade preserves a small but significant memory slip at bar 21 where Cortot inadvertently begins to embellish the first statement of the theme prematurely (as in bar 34). What a coincidence that Josef Hofmann should have been guilty of the same inattentiveness in his 1938 Casimir Hall recital performance (Desmar IPA 5007/8)!

In my review of the Da Capo (Electrola) reissue of the 1933 version of the Chopin B Minor Sonata (High Fidelity, November 1974), I noted that the performance "has its fitful moments, and that much of [Cortot's] extravagant rubato I find lurching and discontinuous." Evidently the memory of my reaction to that rubato was more extreme than the rubato

itself, for my initial reaction on hearing this ca. 1928 reading was that the earlier version was less finicky in its gesticulation than the remake. A subsequent rehearing of both, though, conclusively demonstrated that, while by no means a match in reflection and subtlety for the great 1947 recording by Cortot's gifted pupil, Dinu Lipatti (still one of the greatest extant recordings of this sublime sonata), the 1933 reading at least flows somewhat more agreeably than the 1928, and is far more efficiently reproduced. Perhaps in the turbulent fourth movement the 1928 account shows greater finger strength, but elsewhere that same additional energy only serves to make the interpretation sound all the more aggressive and disruptive.

Cortot made two later recordings of the B-flat Minor Sonata. I have not heard the second of these (which has been reissued on HMV FALP 376, and which I suspect might also, everything considered, preserve Cortot's strongest performance of the work), but certainly this ca. 1928 reading has notably more energy and faster tempos than the tattered performance from the 1950s, familiar through several EMI incarnations. All those skips in the scherzo (which Rachmaninoff hit dead center) are embarrassingly missed here, but as on the later version(s?), Cortot conjures spooky sounds of indefinite pitch from the bowels of the piano--an intriguing effect suggestive of a bubbling witch's cauldron.

Reader Bond contends that the G Minor Ballade performance, even wilder and more technically unkempt than that in the 1929 cycle, derives from a ca. 1927 American recording issued on Victor 6612 but never on HMV. (WERM makes no mention of even the American issue.) The C-sharp Minor Waltz, Op. 64, No. 2, and the E-flat Nocturne, Op. 9, No. 2 are from HMV DB 1321, recorded at the same time as the Ballades. It was here that Cortot's willfulness most disturbed me: the Nocturne is constantly disrupted by a crude and tasteless breaking of the hands, and his "lurching and discontinuous" rubato makes no sense to me at all in terms of harmonic structure--the phrases expand and all but fall apart just at the places they ought to move ahead. In the popular Waltz, the lyrical melody is mauled in the familiar manner of a cat playing with an unfortunate mouse, and the upward scale (every time!!) seems to omit a half-measure's worth of notes with the expected metric embarrassment. Cortot's much later remake of this Nocturne (on Pathé DTX 20007, with the aforementioned late version of the Op. 35 Sonata) preserves most of the same mannerisms, less aggressively presented and also somewhat prettified by the greater room resonance and greater frequency response of the more modern engineering. How could so respected an artist have been so cavalier about note values and dynamic markings? (One is unpleasantly reminded of the authoritarian Mengelberg rapping his baton

and hauling tempos about, or some of the gesturesome acting one experiences in silent films.) The Berceuse, on the other hand, is quite brilliantly played in this recording (from Victor 6752, another disc originating in America in the late Twenties), though the passagework is more exhilarating than reposeful--more akin to a swing than a cradle! If less apropos than the memorable Solomon interpretation (in HMV RLS 701), it is nevertheless masterful in its arbitrary way.

I was quite surprised to learn via Mr. Bond that the pair of Op. 55 Nocturnes derives from a late session held in 1947 (published as HMV DB 6730). When one listens carefully, a wider frequency response and greater room resonance are evident, as well as quieter surfaces--but, in this transfer, these sonic advantages are degraded by a very low volume level and a distracting amount of pitch instability which, as reader Bond notes, periodically creeps into some of Ward Marston's other transfers on these Music & Arts recordings. (In the main, however, I find the transfers quite serviceable, if less than ideal.) Neither of these Op. 55 performances constitutes particularly memorable Cortot material: the middle section of the F Minor loses power from being smeared, and the acceleration at the very end is bumpily fingered. As for the other, one has only to compare it with the truly Olympian (and much more pianistically distinguished) Ignaz Friedman performance, recently reissued on Danacord.

Harris Goldsmith

HINDEMITH: Theme with Variations for Piano and Strings ("The Four Temperaments")(recorded Montreux, September 22, 1947). **MOZART: Concerto No. 20 in D Minor for Piano and Orchestra**, K. 466 (October 1, 1954). Clara Haskil, pianist; String Orchestra of the Radiodiffusion Française conducted by Paul Hindemith (in the Hindemith); RIAS Symphony Orchestra, Berlin, conducted by Ferenc Fricsay (in the Mozart). Music & Arts CC 230 (mono), \$9.98; \$8.98 if ordered directly from Music & Arts.

One is tempted to say that the group of pre-WW II recordings made by Paul Hindemith as a violist show his choleric side (powerful temperament and an abrasive, downright gritty tone quality), and the group he made after the war, as a conductor, demonstrate his phlegmatic aspect. This becomes at once apparent when you compare the first Hindemith-conducted Mathis der Maler Symphony on Telefunken--from around the same period as those marvelous string trio recordings with Szymon Goldberg and Emanuel Feuermann and the accounts of the Op. 25 No. 1 Viola Sonata and Der Schwanendreher--with the comparatively tepid remake for DG/American Decca; the