

CHOPIN: Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 35  
SCHUMANN: Kinderszenen Op. 15  
Carnaval, Op. 9



Alfred Cortot, Piano

## Alfred CORTOT (1877-1962):

CHOPIN: Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 35 • SCHUMANN: Kinderszenen, Op. 15 • Carnival, Op. 9

The son of a French father and Swiss mother, Alfred Cortot was born in Nyon, Switzerland, in 1877. During his childhood the family moved to Paris and at the age of nine young Alfred joined the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied piano first with Emile Descombes (1829–1912) and, from the age of fifteen, with Louis Diémer (1843–1919). Cortot made his debut in 1897 with Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor*, Op. 37, and gave piano duet recitals with Edouard Risler (1873–1929) playing arrangements for four hands of music by Wagner. His enthusiasm for the German composer led to his appointment as choral coach, then assistant conductor at Bayreuth working under Felix Mottl and Hans Richter. Cortot's experiences in Bayreuth left him eager to introduce Wagner's music to French audiences, and in 1902 he founded the Société des Festivals Lyriques, through which in May of the same year he conducted the Paris première of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. The following year Cortot organized another society, enabling him to give performances of major works such as Brahms's *Requiem*, Liszt's *St Elisabeth*, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and Wagner's *Parsifal*, and not long after he became conductor of the Société Nationale, promoting works by contemporary French composers.

Cortot was a multi-faceted musician, a conductor and chamber music player as well as solo pianist. He formed a famous piano trio with Jacques Thibaud and Pablo Casals, but it was as a pianist for which he became renowned. He was appointed by Gabriel Fauré to a teaching post at the Paris Conservatoire, but was in such demand as a performer that he was invariably away on tour. In 1918 Cortot made his first tour of America, and during his second tour in 1920 he played all five of Beethoven's *Piano Concertos* in two evenings and Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor*, Op. 30, with the composer present. Also at this time he founded the Ecole Normale de Musique, for which he appointed a hand-picked staff. Cortot himself taught there until 1961; his most famous students

include Magda Tagliaferro, Clara Haskil and Yvonne Lefébure. Cortot was a great artist whose interpretations were often on a spiritual level. He managed to convey a depth of meaning through his playing and became associated with the works of Schumann, Debussy and particularly Chopin.

Throughout his long career Cortot recorded exclusively for HMV in London and Paris and its affiliate Victor in America. He recorded many works more than once, both by the acoustic and electrical process. The Second World War interrupted a complete recording of the works of Chopin that Cortot was making for HMV in Paris to mark the centenary of the composer's death. At the end of the War he was eager to continue this, but his wartime position as president of the professional committee of musical art, created by a Vichy law, caused animosity. In January 1947 the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire instructed its members not to perform with him in a performance of the Schumann *Concerto*. Cortot sued the French Musicians Union for damages but by 1950 the Paris Court of Appeal found he had no case; after many appeals and counter appeals, however, Cortot won the case in November 1953. Apparently, Cortot had been 'struck off' the membership of the Union in 1905 and the court found that the boycott had had 'a political and not a professional motive.'

Before Cortot's wartime activities became common knowledge, he had already written to HMV in London requesting a resumption of his complete Chopin cycle ready for the centenary of Chopin's death in 1949. Indeed, he had written as early as May 1945, but it was not until October 1947 that his first post-War sessions took place in England. He continued to record on a fairly regular basis each year when his tours led him to the United Kingdom.

On 5th May 1953 Cortot gave a 'Farewell Recital' at London's Festival Hall. He chose Chopin, and began with the complete *Preludes*, Op. 28. After referring to Cortot's reputation as 'a poet of the keyboard', one

critic, no doubt fairly, commented that, ‘Some of the simpler *Preludes* allowed him the rich chances to reveal this rare gift of poetry, but he was perhaps unwise to complete the evening with the two books of *Etudes, Op. 10* and *Op. 25*, which, while demanding poetry, also require prestidigitation of the first order.’

At the end of the same week, on the 7th and 8th May 1953, Cortot recorded the three principal works heard on this compact disc. By this time HMV/EMI were recording on tape and it is impossible to tell from which sessions master tapes were assembled, but Cortot was an artist who relied on his inspiration, no doubt preferring to play through a work complete and not bother about patching sessions. He had first recorded the *Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 35*, by Chopin on 5th December 1927 but the recording was not issued. Six months later, on 5th June 1928, Cortot recorded the work again (Naxos 8.111065), and HMV permitted him to record it yet again only six years later in July 1933. After making another recording of the *Sonata* for Victor in 1952 whilst in Japan, Cortot made his final commercial recording of it in London in 1953. It is interesting to read in a letter to HMV that one of the reasons Cortot wanted to record the work again was because he felt his interpretation would be ‘an example for the young pianists, who are so little imbued with the Romantic spirit.’ Indeed, Cortot immediately sets a dramatic mood from the outset and although he was 75 at the time and his technique frail, he manages to capture the spirit of the whole work including the demanding last movement.

Cortot previously recorded Schumann’s *Kinderszenen, Op. 15*, in 1935 and 1947. In this 1953 recording he begins rather hesitantly, with noticeable

*rubato* in the first piece. Things then settle down and after a rather breathless *Hasche-Mann*, Cortot’s familiar singing tone and poetic warmth come to the fore and he is particularly arresting in the intimate last two pieces – *Child falling asleep* and *The poet speaks*.

David Bicknell, Cortot’s producer for the post-war sessions, had persuaded him to record shorter more lyrical pieces for two reasons – because he was aware of Cortot’s failing technique, and that the 45rpm disc was at the time a popular format, replacing the 78rpm disc. It is surprising then to find Cortot recording large-scale works of Schumann, but on the other hand, these fitted perfectly onto one long-playing vinyl disc which HMV/EMI were beginning to produce at the time. A contemporary reviewer quibbled over wrong notes in the recording of *Carnaval, Op. 9*, and ‘waywardness exaggerated into eccentricity (the eccentricities include, incidentally, an actual performance of the enigmatic *Sphinxes*)’, but with hindsight Cortot’s individual interpretation full of colour and character – so important in this work – is far preferable to more bland and uninspired subsequent accounts from lesser pianists. Although it was written about the 1947 recording of *Kinderszenen*, the following applies to Cortot’s playing, and not only of Schumann. ‘Those people who have been speaking about Cortot’s playing with commiserating patronage – “handfuls of wrong notes, my dear” – should attune humble ears to his performance of the *Kinderszenen* and realise that there is probably not another pianist alive today who in spite of some inaccuracies, can re-create and, so perfectly express the warm youthful romanticism of this music.’

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## Producer’s Note

Portions of the Chopin sonata suffer from tape flutter in the original master, while *Carnaval*’s master has grittiness in some loud passages. Neither of these are a function of the LP pressings which were used for these transfers.

Mark Obert-Thorn

GREAT PIANISTS • ALFRED CORTOT

**Fryderyk CHOPIN (1810 - 1849)**

**Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 35**

**“Funeral March”**

**17:36**

- |   |                             |      |
|---|-----------------------------|------|
| 1 | I. Grave - Doppio movimento | 5:25 |
| 2 | II. Scherzo                 | 4:50 |
| 3 | III. Marche funèbre: Lento  | 5:42 |
| 4 | IV. Finale: Presto          | 1:39 |

Recorded 7th-8th May 1953

in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

First issued on RCA Victor LHMV 18

**Robert SCHUMANN (1810 - 1856)**

**Kinderszenen, Op. 15**

**17:15**

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 5  | No. 1. Von fremden Ländern und Menschen<br><i>(About foreign lands and peoples)</i> | 1:39 |
| 6  | No. 2. Curiose Geschichte<br><i>(A curious story)</i>                               | 0:58 |
| 7  | No. 3. Hasche-Mann<br><i>(Catch me if you can)</i>                                  | 0:34 |
| 8  | No. 4. Bittendes Kind<br><i>(Pleading child)</i>                                    | 0:51 |
| 9  | No. 5. Glückes genug<br><i>(Perfect happiness)</i>                                  | 1:12 |
| 10 | No. 6. Wichtige Begebenheit<br><i>(An important event)</i>                          | 0:53 |
| 11 | No. 7. Träumerei<br><i>(Dreaming)</i>   | 2:29 |
| 12 | No. 8. Am Camin<br><i>(By the fireside)</i>   | 0:52 |
| 13 | No. 9. Ritter vom Steckenpferd<br><i>(Knight of the hobby-horse)</i>                | 0:45 |
| 14 | No. 10. Fast zu ernst<br><i>(Almost too serious)</i>                                | 1:31 |
| 15 | No. 11. Furchtenmachen<br><i>(Frightening)</i>                                      | 1:41 |
| 16 | No. 12. Kind im Einschlummern<br><i>(Child falling asleep)</i>                      | 1:42 |
| 17 | No. 13. Der Dichter spricht<br><i>(The poet speaks)</i>                             | 2:07 |

Recorded 7th May 1953

in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

First issued on HMV BLP 1050

**Waldszenen, Op. 82**

- |    |                                |             |
|----|--------------------------------|-------------|
| 18 | No. 7. Vogel als Prophet       | <b>2:36</b> |
|    | Recorded 19th April 1948       |             |
|    | in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3 |             |
|    | First issued on HMV ALP 1197   |             |
|    | Matrix no.: 0EA 12922          |             |

**Carnaval, Op. 9**

**25:29**

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 19 | No. 1. Préambule  | 2:36 |
| 20 | No. 2. Pierrot  | 1:08 |
| 21 | No. 3. Arlequin   | 0:43 |
| 22 | No. 4. Valse noble  | 1:19 |
| 23 | No. 5. Eusebius   | 1:30 |
| 24 | No. 6. Florestan  | 0:53 |
| 25 | No. 7. Coquette   | 1:01 |
| 26 | No. 8. Réplique   | 0:26 |
| 27 | Sphinx 1-3  | 0:23 |
| 28 | No. 9. Papillons  | 0:43 |
| 29 | No. 10. A.S.C.H. - S.C.H.A.<br><i>(Lettres dansantes)</i> | 0:38 |
| 30 | No. 11. Chiarina  | 0:49 |
| 31 | No. 12. Chopin  | 1:17 |
| 32 | No. 13. Estrella  | 0:30 |
| 33 | No. 14. Reconnaissance                                    | 1:56 |
| 34 | No. 15. Pantalón et Colombine                             | 0:52 |
| 35 | No. 16. Valse allemande                                   | 0:54 |
| 36 | No. 17. Intermezzo: Paganini                              | 1:18 |
| 37 | No. 18. Aveu  | 0:53 |
| 38 | No. 19. Promenade   | 1:44 |
| 39 | No. 20. Pause   | 0:18 |
| 40 | No. 21. Marche des Davidsbündler<br>contre les Philistins | 3:36 |

Recorded 7th-8th May 1953

in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3

First issued on HMV ALP 1142

**Alfred Cortot, Piano**

Playing  
Time  
62:56

# CHOPIN • SCHUMANN

## Alfred Cortot (1877 - 1962)

8.111327

ADD



COMPACT  
DISC  
DIGITAL AUDIO

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	Fryderyk CHOPIN	
	Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 35	
	“Funeral March”	17:36
1	I. Grave – Doppio movimento	5:25
2	II. Scherzo	4:50
3	III. Marche funèbre: Lento	5:42
4	IV. Finale: Presto	1:39
	Recorded 7th-8th May 1953, in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3	
	Robert SCHUMANN	
5-17	Kinderszenen, Op. 15	17:15
	Recorded 7th May 1953, in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3	
	Waldszenen, Op. 82: No. 7	
18	Vogel als Prophet	2:36
	Recorded 19th April 1948, in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3	
19-40	Carnaval, Op. 9	25:29
	Recorded 7th-8th May 1953, in EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 3	
	Alfred Cortot, Piano	

Alfred Cortot was renowned above all as a pianist whose interpretations, especially of the works of Schumann, Debussy and Chopin, were often on a spiritual level. This 1953 performance of Chopin's *Piano Sonata No. 2* is his fifth and final commercial recording of the work (the 1928 recording is available on Naxos 8.111065; the 1927 recording is unissued). Cortot wanted to record the work again partly because he felt his interpretation would be 'an example for the young pianists, who are so little imbued with the Romantic spirit'. His 1953 and third recording of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* is notable for the familiar singing tone and poetic warmth he brings to *Kind im Einschlummern* (Child falling asleep) and *Der Dichter spricht* (The poet speaks). Cortot's interpretation of the youthful romanticism of *Carnaval* is full of colour and character, far preferable to bland and uninspired subsequent accounts from lesser pianists.

Reissue Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn  
Cover image: Alfred Cortot (Private Collection)

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