

ÉDOUARD RISLER (1873~1929)

*"I immediately felt myself engulfed by the music; it was not just a matter of what he was playing, but also his charm, his faculty to reveal - to communicate the incommunicable. His unique way of making music overwhelmed me, it entered into me, into my very flesh. Risler presented to me a magical world which previously I had only known as an onlooker. He opened my soul to the appreciation of a music that was born of spontaneous inspiration. His feeling for orchestral colour was something that I had never associated with the piano. From that moment I understood how the vocation of the interpreter could transcend the métier of the pianist, I knew... I could see... I believed, and I was clear in my vision."*

The young Alfred Cortot on hearing Risler play Mendelssohn (author's translation)

### The French School of Piano-Playing in the 19th Century

If one wishes to trace a tradition of piano-playing associated with the Paris Conservatoire, then it was without doubt the figure of Louis Adam (1758-1848) who founded such a school. Adam, whose son was the composer of the ballet *Giselle*, was the senior professor at the Conservatoire from 1797 to 1842, and he wrote two methods on playing that were recommended to students. Louis Adam's most famous pupil was Friedrich Kalkbrenner, whose highly developed right-hand technique was trained specially to cope with the demands of the very florid salon music that was then the rage. During Adam's later years another teacher emerged whose students were to make their mark both as minor composers for the piano and as neat and cultivated players - this teacher was Pierre Zimmermann (1785-1853).

One of Zimmermann's pupils does stand out as a major figure, however, and that is Alkan, although he cannot be thought of as conforming to the regular mould of French pianists of that generation. Zimmermann's students Joseph Wieniawski (brother of the violinist), Emile Prudent, Henri Ravina, Louis Lacombe, Charles Duvernoy and Henri Rosellen were all pianists who were respected for a light and easeful style of playing that stressed elegance above all other considerations - the preoccupation that was to mar the development of French playing until figures such as Risler and Cortot set new standards of interpretation in the early years of the 20th century. Risler's principal teacher Louis Diémer (1843-1919) had been a pupil of the most fashionable professor at the Conservatoire of the post-Zimmermann generation, Antoine-François Marmontel (1816-1898), who, to the chagrin of Alkan, had taken over his master Zimmermann's class in 1848, and continued as a professor at the Conservatoire until his retirement in 1887. Some of his best-known pupils were Isaac Albeniz, Edward MacDowell, Georges Bizet, Gabriel Pierné, Claude Debussy and Vincent D'Indy. Marmontel had managed to win a *premier prix* in Zimmermann's class, although he had never been a successful virtuoso, and his dedication to teaching was made all the more effective because of the extreme care he took in matters of technique.

By the end of the 19th century the vogue for salon trivialities had waned and this type of music was rapidly supplanted by works of greater intellectual and aesthetic worth. César Franck and his followers, as well as the later so-called impressionist composers Debussy and Ravel, made the music of such composers as Godard, Ravina and Lacombe sound very obsolete, and by the time of the First World War there were few pianists who would give such music the time of day, except possibly as a frivolous encore.

Louis Diémer's artistry typified the best and worst aspects of the old Parisian school. He was renowned as a dry player, Mark Hambourg describing his tone as "rattling", and later in life he turned increasingly towards resurrecting the French clavecinists of the 18th century, such as Couperin and Rameau. On the other hand, his Gramophone & Typewriter Co. disc of Chopin's Nocturne in *Db*, Op.27 No.2 is animated and passionate and gives the listener a quite different insight into his artistry. It is not surprising, however, to find one of Diémer's students, the composer Alfredo Casella, writing that his teacher's comments on the interpretation of the great masters were "colourless and banal". It can be assumed that the majority of Diémer's talented pupils learned little other than technique from their master. One only has to mention the names of great pianists, such as Robert Casadesus, Alfred Cortot, Yves Nat and Marcel Ciampi - Diémer disciples - to see that they looked to the masterworks of Beethoven, Chopin and Schumann for their inspiration, as well as embracing Debussy and Ravel.

Running counter to the Diémer circle was Francis Planté, who, although also a pupil of Marmontel, was largely self-taught, and had loftier aims as an interpreter, as well as being much more eclectic in taste and repertoire. He was one of the first to popularise Schumann's music in France. Planté, born in 1839 and, dying as late as 1934, was one of the figures that the young Risler was attracted to, and it is known that the patrician Planté admired the young man enormously.

## ÉDOUARD RISLER

Although Édouard Risler trained and lived most of his life in Paris, he was neither a Frenchman by birth nor in artistic sympathy. His father was Alsatian and his mother German. Born in Baden-Baden in 1873, he was taken to Paris as child and entered the Paris Conservatoire in the preparatory class of Emile Decombes (1829-1912), into whose paternal trust many other French pianists and musicians were placed, including Cortot, Reynaldo Hahn, Victor Staub and, for a very short time, both Ravel and Satie. Decombes had been a disciple, if not an actual pupil, of Chopin, and he imparted a valuable sense of tradition to his own pupils. Having distinguished himself in the class with a first prize in 1887, Risler was quite naturally passed on to Diémer, with whom he remained or two years, being awarded the coveted *premier prix* in 1889.

Despite continuing to take other theoretical and practical examinations at the Conservatoire into the 1890's. Risler, with his background, quite naturally looked to Germany to further his musical education. Diémer himself had had some contact with the Liszt circle, as had Planté, and Risler went and took lessons from three Liszt pupils, Bernhard Stavenhagen, Karl Klindworth and, most importantly, Eugen D'Albert. He also mingled with the Cosima Wagner circle at Bayreuth, and spent

two summers there as a singing coach and stage manager. It was D'Albert and Hans von Bülow, widely regarded as the greatest Beethoven players of the post-Liszt era, who influenced the scope of Risler's interpretations.

Having spent much time in acquainting himself with contemporary music, both orchestral and instrumental, Risler began his international career in 1894, giving recitals in London on 17th and 23rd May. Although the programmes for these two concerts were perhaps on the conservative side, Risler in fact went on to make a speciality of giving one-composer recitals, and was renowned for his cycle of the complete Beethoven sonatas, which he first gave in Paris in 1905. In terms of repertoire generally, Risler was, like Planté, extremely adventurous. Aside from the Beethoven, he would perform both books of Bach's *Wohltemperirte Clavier*, and also give a Chopin series that was said to include the complete solo piano works, although it must be admitted that a number of pianists who claimed to present complete Chopin cycles were not wholly scrupulous in using the description (e.g. Robert Lortat and Alexander Brailowsky). Both Schubert and Schumann piano sonatas featured in Risler's programmes, and his advocacy of the G major Fantasia-Sonata, D894 was fairly novel outside the Leschetizky circle.

He also played the works of many modern composers; the Piano Sonata of Paul Dukas is dedicated to him. Perhaps taking a leaf from his teacher Diémer's book (he who flaunted a reportedly horrendous transcription of Mozart's *Magic Flute* Overture), Risler made his own piano version of Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* and this often featured in his recitals. During a series of concerts in Paris in 1913 he gave the Liszt transcription of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* an airing, and his reading of the Liszt Sonata was much admired by Saint-Saëns, who had been a friend of the composer. He compared Risler's "magisterial" performance to those of Busoni and Friedheim, thus confirming the impact that the Liszt school had made on his interpretation.

Although Risler taught at the Paris Conservatoire for a number of years, he perhaps channelled his energies more into public performance. His best-known pupils included Jacques Février, Pierre Luboschütz and Marcel Gaveau.

It is said that later in his career Risler's playing underwent something of a transformation, and that it became more reserved and rather dry. It is possible that the death of his wife of influenza at the end of the First World War effected a change in his personality; they were devoted to one another. However, the records were made prior to this. Like Pugno before him, in middle age Risler became rather corpulent and this contributed to his death in Paris in 1929 at the premature age of fifty-six.

Le Rappel des oiseaux (Rameau) & Le Tambourin (Rameau)  
Le Coucou (Daquin) & Le Tic-toc-choc ou Les Maillotins (Couperin)

During the years of 1887-1889, when Risler was studying with Diémer, his teacher's interest in the early French clavecinists began to be appreciated, and it was after the success of his historical concerts of 1889 that Diémer founded the Société des Instruments Anciens. Diémer also appeared as a harpsichordist. It was from his advocacy that Risler became accustomed to playing these pieces, and he very often would include such a group in his recitals. Whilst it is true that these

four miniatures are transformed into virtuoso showpieces, the delicacy of Risler's articulation allows them to retain something of their original spirit. There is a tendency to prolong trills in a rather mannered fashion, but little was appreciated regarding style at that date. The Couperin piece is played in an arrangement by Diémer, and the last bar very much bolsters the impression that it has been reworked as a vehicle for display on the piano.

#### Sonata No.18 in E flat, Op.31 No.3 (Beethoven) 2nd movement-Scherzo

It is sad that Risler did not make any electric recordings by which one could judge better his fame as an interpreter of the Beethoven sonatas. The acoustic recordings, which cannot be considered of the best sound quality for that period, give one little idea of his tone. In this Scherzo movement the record allows him no time to observe any of the repeats, and it appears that the fairly primitive recording device necessitated that he toned down many of the dynamic accents. Certainly Risler does not really bring out the *sf* markings on the last right-hand quaver of the bar in the main theme, but his technical control in the staccato of the accompaniment is remarkable, and he entirely avoids using pianistic effects to divert the attention when the material is repeated.

#### Sonata No.12 in A flat major, Op.26 (Beethoven) 4th movement-Finale

The work opens with a theme and five variations, followed by a brief Scherzo and Funeral March in the minor. The performance of this fleeting finale is incisive and superbly articulated, counterbalancing eloquence with assertive declamation.

#### Piano Concerto No.4 in G, Op.58 (Beethoven) 2nd movement-Andante con moto

Although it may seem a little strange to record a piece such as this; since the orchestral and solo writing are so clearly divided into a dialogue form, the effect is very satisfying. There are very few places where piano and orchestra come together in the original. The bare octaves of the orchestra set the extremely delicate and thereally expressive song of the piano into high relief. Risler's pianissimo playing was remarked upon by many critics, and here we can realise the effect this must have had in concert. His simplicity and directness indicate a much purer interpretative style than that of his disciple Alfred Cortot.

#### Scherzo in E minor Op.16 No.2 (Mendelssohn)

This gad-fly miniature is treated very much as an encore piece, with delicacy of execution being the prime intention. It receives a highly controlled and rather tense performance.

#### Waltz in C sharp minor, Op.64 No.2 (Chopin)

The pianist never allows the rhythm to languish and does not indulge in sustaining (whether by thumb or by pedal) the last right-hand quaver of the bar in the middle section, a practice not uncommon at that time, which adds another line to the music.

### Nocturne in F sharp, Op.15 No.2 (Chopin)

Risler is scrupulous in following Chopin's markings in both of these works. A comparison between his reading of the Nocturne and that of his colleague Raoul Pugno (1852-1914) raises an interesting question concerning the tempo. Pugno on his recording for the Gramophone & Typewriter Co. opts for a much slower speed than is usual, and in a book of written lessons explains that his teacher, Georges Mathias, a Chopin pupil, had told him that this familiar work was generally taken too fast. Well, Risler was a pupil of Emile Decombes, a Chopin disciple, and his tempo is very much faster and of the sort that one is accustomed to hear today. Alfred Cortot's recordings of the same piece confirms Risler's choice.

In the *doppio movimento* middle section of the Nocturne Risler achieves a real *sotto voce* effect, as is marked. In the last section, bar 53, he duplicates bar 13 from the introductory page - this adds variety to the score, although one cannot be sure that the change was intentional.

### Mazurka in A minor Op.17 No.4 (Chopin)

The pianist recorded this work some years earlier on a Hupfeld piano roll. In this beautifully coloured reading the improvisatory elements of the right-hand writing are especially sensitive and dreamy; an effective contrast is drawn with the stronger rhythmic pulse of the middle section in the major.

### Etude in G flat major Op.10 No.5 "Black Keys" (Chopin)

Here one admires the highly developed passage-playing associated with the Diémer school. But over and above this there is a spontaneity and energetic exuberance that transform the piece into something much more than a regular study.

### Aufforderung zum Tanz, Op.65 (Weber)

This and the Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody, are the only performances of Risler to extend over two sides of a record. The piece used to feature regularly in recital programmes, as did Weber's Second Piano Sonata in A flat, which Risler also played. In the slow introduction that precedes the waltz he uses a considerable variety of tempos and makes one or two modifications to the score that can be traced to the Tausig version, although Risler does not follow this grotesque re-writing. There is such bite and irrepressible brio in the way he attacks the main waltz that one can well imagine the rhythmic vitality that he must have brought to Beethoven. Risler crafts the dialogue between the voices in the sustained middle section with great expressivity. The impression made is that the work is a narrative and is ideally suited to the recording time available.

### Rhapsodie Hongroise No.11 in A minor (Liszt)

Diémer used to perform this Hungarian Rhapsody, so it is probably wrong to ascribe Risler's performance too much to his contact with the various Liszt pupils. He does take some licence with the piece in adding various frills and flourishes, and also in lengthening some notes. The overall mood is jaunty, though not

especially zigeunerisch. Risler's splendid technical command can be especially admired in the chromatic runs, which were also a speciality of Diémer. Things may become slightly inaccurate in the last bars, but Risler places freedom of spirit as his priority and any slight slips only add to the infectious vivacity of his playing.

#### Valse nonchalante Op.110 (Saint-Saëns)

This was another of Risler's favourite recital pieces. It was written in 1898 and is one of the few works that the composer himself recorded. Although there are elements reminiscent of Liszt's first Valse oubliée, the writing looks forward to Fauré, and it is amongst the peppery Saint-Saëns's most ingratiating pieces.

#### Dix pièces pittoresques (Chabrier) No.6 Idylle

This piece and the Scherzo-Valse are the most familiar works from the set. Its restless and haunted character is ideally suited to Risler's deft and direct playing, and it emerges as memorable, even if lacking in depth. Chabrier had given encouragement and advice to Risler in his youth, and he owned a manuscript copy of one of these pieces.

#### Danzas Españolas Op.37 No.10 in G (Granados)

Enrique Granados had died in the year previous to this recording and Risler would have considered him as a 'modern' composer whose works he wished to popularise. Granados had been a private pupil of Charles de Bériot in Paris during Risler's student days. In 1913 Risler played the first four pieces of *Goyescas* - only two years after their composition. In this Spanish Dance we get perhaps the most vivid glimpse of Risler as a colourist, and Cortot's description of his ability to create a trance is at its most apparent. Risler's playing may not have been as picturesque regarding 'Spanish flavour' as that of Ricardo Viñes, but one feels that he has succeeded in touching the essence of the music.

#### Deuxième Mazurka, Op.54 (Benjamin Godard)

The Berceuse from the opera *Jocelyn* is perhaps the only piece of Godard's music that has survived in the popular esteem, although a number of his piano pieces had a certain vogue until the 1920s. The style is similar to that of Moszkowski, and the piece bears no relationship to the mazurkas of Chopin. It is a mixture of elegance and pomposity, and Risler exploits the more poetic middle section in D flat with some ravishing pianissimo shading. It was also recorded by the French pianist Maria Roger-Miclos, who was Risler's senior by ten years or so; and Louis Diémer himself recorded Godard's Valse Chromatique on G&T.

James Methuen-Campbell

Risler's voice is preserved in his introductions to two of the pieces:

*Et maintenant Le Tambourin de Rameau*

and:

*Nous allons continuer, si vous voulez bien, avec Tic-toc-choc ou*

*Les Maillotins de Couperin.*

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