



**WEBER**  
**Sonata No. 2**

**LISZT**  
**Sonata in B minor**  
**Légende No. 2**  
**La leggierezza**

**SCHUBERT**  
**Ländler**

**Alfred Cortot**  
1931-1948 Recordings

## Alfred Cortot (1877 - 1962)

Weber: Sonata No. 2, Op. 39 • Liszt: Sonata in B minor, S 178 • Schubert • Brahms

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 the 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 début 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 *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.

In the first half of the twentieth century Weber's *Piano Sonata No. 2 in A flat, Op. 39*, was a popular work in the repertoire of many of the leading pianists of the day, including Vladimir de Pachmann, Moriz Rosenthal and Ferruccio Busoni. Cortot made one of the first recordings of it a few years before Australian pianist Noel Mewton-Wood recorded it for Decca. Cortot was in England for a Sunday afternoon recital at the London Palladium on 5th March 1939 where he played both books of Chopin's *Etudes* and the complete *Preludes, Op. 28*. On 15th March he played a concerto at the Bournemouth Festival and in between these dates went to the HMV Studio No. 3 at Abbey Road in London. On 10th March he recorded four of Chopin's songs in the transcription for solo piano by Liszt followed by the Weber *Piano Sonata No. 2* heard here. He only made one take of the first three sides of the sonata, and although he made second and (in the case of side 5) third takes of the remaining sides, all those issued come from first takes. No doubt the reason for this is because Cortot was a natural, spontaneous and impulsive player who performed in the recording studio just as he would in a live recital, and the stopping and starting and repeating of sections demanded by the engineers spoiled his flow of musical thought. Cortot gives a romantic rather than classical reading of this sonata, written between 1814 and 1816, on a full-toned Steinway piano emphasizing the *sturm und drang* elements of the first movement. He is capricious in the *Minuet* and *Trio* but is perhaps a little too fast in the *Rondo* finale which is marked *Moderato* although he is adept with the conversational aspects of the melodies in treble and bass. A tantalising footnote to this recording session is the fact that at the end of it Cortot recorded Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Unfortunately, the masters of this recording were damaged and it was lost; Cortot never recorded the work again.

Ten years earlier, almost to the day, Cortot recorded Liszt's *Piano Sonata in B minor* in the Small Queen's Hall during a number of sessions in March 1939. On 6th March he recorded Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and*

*Fugue* and Schumann's *Etudes Symphoniques*, on 11th March Chopin's *Four Ballades*, and two days later the Liszt *Sonata*, on a French Pleyel piano. Cortot only needed to make second takes of a few of the sides and the intensity of his conception of this masterpiece can be heard as all but one of the sides were issued from first takes. He even had time at the end of the session to record a Chopin *Nocturne* and *Waltz*. Although Cortot returned on 19th March to make retakes of the Schumann *Etudes Symphoniques* and Franck's *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* he was satisfied with the Liszt *Sonata* and made no further takes of any of the sides. This is a recording of the highest musical quality with Cortot laying before us his complete intellectual and architectural grasp of the composition. It is amazing to realise that in the 1930s this work was classed as 'second-rate' music. One reviewer at the time wrote, 'Cortot somehow helps us to see purer gold where we formerly saw only the thin-worn tinsel... It is just the power of a building thinker to make second-rate ideas, strikingly put together, seem better than they are.' Cortot was 52 at the time of recording and three years later in 1932 HMV recorded another classic version of this work by the 28-year-old Vladimir Horowitz (Naxos 8.110606).

On 18th May 1937, Cortot was at HMV's Studio No. 3 in Abbey Road. He recorded Schumann's *Dauidsblindertänze* and an arrangement of a Vivaldi concerto movement. The following day he returned to record the *Variations sérieuses* and a *Song without*

*Words* by Mendelssohn, Chopin's *Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 31*, and three works heard here – Liszt's *Légende de St François de Paule marchant sur les flots* (Legend of St Francis de Paule walking on the water) and two Schubert transcriptions. Whereas some pianists make their own selection from Schubert's *Waltzes* and *Ländler*, Cortot plays the set of twelve published as *D. 790 (Op. 171)* repeating No. 8 at the end. Cortot's own arrangement of Schubert's *Litany* displays his wonderful warm tone while the recording of the Liszt *Légende* is one of Cortot's best. Helped by a fine Steinway piano he conjures up a terrific storm on the waters. At the opening his right hand plays the melody in a seamless *legato* while the swirling waters in the left hand rise and subside with wonderful surges of sound. Notice Cortot's judicious use of the sustaining pedal at the chromatic climax. In the recording of Liszt's *La leggierezza* from 1931 Cortot ends the work with his own short cadenza which is perhaps not as effective as the one by Leschetizky which a few of his pupils used in their recordings, most noticeably Benno Moiseiwitsch (Naxos 8.110669). Cortot recorded very little of the music of Brahms. Apart from the *Double Concerto* with Thibaud and Casals in 1929 the only other work he recorded was his own arrangement of the famous *Lullaby* or *Wiegenlied* of which he made a previous recording in 1925 and a subsequent one in Japan in 1951.

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- Carl Maria von Weber:**  
**Sonata No. 2 in A flat Major, Op. 39** **23:21**
- 1** I Allegro moderato, con spirito ed assai legato 9:07
- 2** II Andante 5:51
- 3** III Menuetto capriccioso (Presto assai) and Trio 3:07
- 4** IV Rondo (Moderato e molto grazioso) 5:16
- Recorded on 10th March 1939  
 in EMI Studio No. 3, Abbey Road, London • Matrix 2EA 7595/7600, all take 1; Cats. DB 3799/3801
- 5 Franz Schubert: Ländler, D 790, Op. 171** **8:56**
- Recorded on 19th May 1937, EMI Studio No. 3, Abbey Road, London • Matrix 2EA 4943/44;  
 Cat. DB 3268
- Franz Liszt:**  
**Piano Sonata in B minor, S 178** **25:23**
- 6** I Lento assai - Allegro energico 10:58
- 7** II Andante sostenuto 5:49
- 8** III Allegro energico 8:36
- Recorded on 13th March 1939, Small Queen's Hall, London • Matrix Cc16221-1, 16222-1, 16223-1,  
 16224-2, 16225-1, 16226-1; Cats. DB1307/9
- Franz Liszt: Légendes, S 175/R 17:**
- 9** No. 2 - St François de Paule marchant sur les flots 7:38
- Recorded on 19th May 1937, EMI Studio No. 3, Abbey Road, London • Matrix 2EA 4947/48;  
 Cat. DB 3269
- Franz Liszt: Études de concert, S 144:**
- 10** No. 2 - La leggierezza 4:27
- Recorded on 13th May 1931, Small Queen's Hall, London • Matrix 2B879; Cats. DB 1535
- 11 Franz Schubert (arr. Cortot): Litanei auf das Fest Aller Seelen, D 343** **3:39**
- Recorded on 19th May 1937, EMI Studio No. 3, Abbey Road, London • Matrix 2EA 4945; Cat. DB 3338
- 12 Johannes Brahms (arr. Cortot): Wiegenlied, Op. 49, No. 4** **2:41**
- Recorded on 20th April 1948, EMI Studio No. 3, Abbey Road, London • Matrix 0EA12930; Cat. DA 1923

Special thanks to Donald Manildi

Playing  
Time  
76:04

ALFRED CORTOT (1877-1962)  
1931-1948 Recordings

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Alfred Cortot was one of the very greatest pianists of the 20th Century, renowned above all for his intuitive, highly personal interpretations of Romantic masterpieces. Drawn from sessions in London between 1931 and 1948, these recordings include a wonderfully poetic reading of Weber's introspective and playful *Second Piano Sonata*, and intense yet subtly nuanced renditions of Liszt's groundbreaking *B minor Sonata*, issued almost entirely from first takes, and *Légende No. 2*. Cortot's own arrangements imbue Schubert's *Litanei* and Brahms's famous *Lullaby* with a heartfelt touch.

MADE IN  
GERMANY



A detailed track list can be found in the booklet.  
Producer and Restoration Engineer: Ward Marston  
Special thanks: Donald Manildi

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Cover Photograph: Alfred Cortot [Private Collection]

