

Book reviews

Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism: An Historical Perspective*

New York: Pro/Am Music Resources, 1992; London: Kahn & Averill, 1992.

\$US23.95, £16.95, pp. 312, 37 photos, 4 appendices, bibliography, index.

What is the French piano school? What is French pianism? These important questions are tackled by the author, Dr Charles Timbrell, Professor of Piano at Howard University, Washington D.C., in the Coda of his excellent book:

A national school of playing can develop when a country's leading composers, performers, teachers and instrument makers hold common aesthetics and are able to influence one another... in France these circumstances allowed a distinctive pianistic style to develop during the 150-year period from the time of Louis Adam and his students, circa 1810, to that of Marguerite Long and her students, circa 1960. (p. 188)

Dr Timbrell then presents a selection of telling quotes from important French pianists, which serves to underline those qualities for which the French school is known:

it concentrates above all on grace rather than force, preserving especially its equilibrium and sense of proportion. (Marguerite Long, p. 188)

We have . . . a purely French tradition in the [operatic] works of Rameau. They combine delicate and charming tenderness, exact tones, and strict declamation of the recitatives, without any affected German profundity, over-emphasis, or exhausting explanation. (Debussy, p. 188)

I suppose [my method] can be called a 'French Method' because I am French and have born within me every Frenchman's admiration for clarity of design, precision, and logical exactness (E. Robert Schmitz, p. 188).

Dr Timbrell begins his well-researched historical study by shedding light on early piano manufacture in Paris, and the fact that firms such as Pleyel and Erard opened concert halls there, giving rise to the piano recital as a regular public event. Virtually all of the great pianists and teachers active between 1800 and 1850 had their influence in Paris, for example, Dussek, Cramer, Hummel, Field, Kalkbrenner, Lemoine, Moscheles, as well as Mendelssohn, Chopin and Liszt.

The prime importance of the Paris Conservatoire is well documented, from its beginnings in 1783 to

the present day. Pre-dating most of the world's other major music schools, a distinctive feature of the Paris Conservatoire is that it has never tried to offer its students a 'rounded musical education' (p. 9), but has concentrated instead on perfecting skills in performance and composition. Although other schools, notably the Ecole Normale de Musique, founded by Alfred Cortot in 1921, have also influenced French pianism, the Paris Conservatoire is perhaps one of the most important influences on the high technical standard of piano playing for which France is renowned:

the French conservatory system is unique in requiring a student to work with two different teachers each week. One, the assistant, primarily teaches technique; the other, the main teacher, primarily teaches interpretation. The French system, more than any other, seems to have been built on the supposition that technique and interpretation can be separated. (p. 190)

The book is logically divided into chapters concerning: the Nineteenth Century, Leading Artist-Teachers 1900-1940, Major Figures of the Post-war Period 1945-1985, the revealing collection of interviews which provide important primary source material on French piano playing and teaching, and a Coda on the French School, past and present. Of notable inclusion are a number of valuable appendices: biographies of interviewees, selected discography, a chronological list of Piano Professors at the Paris Conservatoire from 1795-1991, a listing of selected methods, exercises and etudes, and there is an extensive bibliography of books, articles and scores. Sources are well documented throughout, with an index and footnotes.

The main fascinating substance of this book comes from interviews, conducted exhaustively over a ten year period with an extensive list of nearly 60 subjects whom Timbrell sees as having been influenced by the French piano school and its methods. The interviews, some of which have formed the basis for several articles the author wrote in the 1980s for journals such as *The Piano Quarterly*, provide exciting first-hand accounts of

famous pianists and teachers concerning matters of interpretation and technique. For example, one gains a fairly complete picture of Alfred Cortot as teacher, in the interviews Dr Timbrell conducted with Eric Heidsieck, Yvonne Lefébure, Guthrie Luke, Marthe Morhange-Motchane, Vlado Perlemuter, and Magda Tagliaferro.

It seems that the golden era of a distinctly French school of piano playing had the seeds of its decline sowed as early as the 1920s:

By the 1920s however, some of the ideals and methods of the old French school were modified or rejected by such major pianists as Rislér, Cortot, Lazare-Lévy, Selva, Nat, and Ciampi, who all favored a greater use of arm weight and a more serious—and more Germanic—repertoire. (p. 190)

However, it was not until the post-war period that foreign influences began to seriously infiltrate the French school. Many French pianists chose to study abroad, following their initial studies in France. The Russian school in particular is cited

by the internationally-recognised French pianist Cyprien Katsaris as having made its mark in France:

The Russian school of playing sometimes produces a hard sound, with emphasis on arm-weight and not enough refinement of the fingers, while the old French school had a lot of refinement, but sometimes too much emphasis on the fingers. The current combination of the French and Russian schools is a very important trend here in France. (p. 194)

This outstanding publication reads very easily, the result not only of Dr Timbrell's scholarly research and lucid literary style, but also of the spontaneous nature of the interviews. A pianist can learn a great deal from the interviews alone. Print and layout of the book are clear and attractive, with a number of interesting photographs interspersed.

This book is a significant addition to available material on pianism, providing valuable reference material. It is thoroughly recommended for all serious teachers and students of the piano.

DARRYL G. COOTE