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1824 Wyoming Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009
10 March 1987

Dear Dr. Brody:

I had been looking forward to your lecture on Vines for MTNA, but I've decided that I must stay in D.C. then to get in some much-needed practice before some April recitals.

The enclosed interview is possibly related to your work, and I wanted to share it with you. As you may know, Loyonnet also studied with Charles de Bériot. Last year he was most lucid when I interviewed him at age 96!

I'm completing a book of some 30 interviews with French-trained pianists, mostly the older generation who studied with Cortot, Long, Philipp, Lévy and Nat. I'm starting to look for a publisher, and would value any suggestions you might have. (A year or so ago Claire Brook told me that the material was good but too specialized for Norton. By the way, I've gotten great use out of your Music Guides done with her.)

I'd like very much to read a copy of your MTNA lecture after you have given it. Would you be able to send me a copy? And of course I would not use any of the material without your permission.

Thank you very much, and best wishes for the lecture.

Sincerely,

Charles Timbrell

Charles Timbrell

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An Interview with Paul Loyonnet

by

Charles Timbrell

Foreword

During a recent trip to Canada it was an unexpected pleasure to discover that the noted French pianist Paul Loyonnet was living in Montréal and, at the age of 96, still teaching at McGill University. Fortunately we were able to have an interview -- part of an ongoing series I have had with French-trained pianists -- and at the conclusion he offered to put in writing some more detailed answers to my questions. I did not anticipate receiving a rich document of 25 single-spaced, neatly typed pages that vividly recaptured his student days and the musical personalities of Paris more than eighty years ago!

What follows is a translation of that document, condensed and combined with our interview from January 1986.

Biography

Paul Loyonnet was born in Paris on May 13, 1889 and studied at the Conservatoire and privately with Charles De Bériot (teacher of Viñes, Malats, Ravel, Granados, Roger-Ducasse and others; son of the violinist-composer who performed with Liszt in 1839), Isidor Philipp and Martinus Sieveking. His Paris recital debut took place in 1906, and during a 14-year period he played nearly 2000 concerts, as recitalist, duo-artist with violinist Lucien Capet and others, and as soloist with virtually all the major orchestras of Europe.

Following a stay in North Africa during World War II, he commenced a world tour in 1946 that included his American debut, of which a New York Times critic wrote: "A new, really big pianist is among us. Here is technique in the best meaning of that much abused word, and here is interpretation of such marked individuality and musicianship that it can denote only an artist of high caliber." Two New York recitals the following year consolidated his reputation with, among other works, the 24 Chopin etudes. In 1953 he returned to New York for three all-Beethoven recitals that elicited the highest acclaim.

His activities since the 1950s have been centered in Canada, where he settled in Montréal. His recordings include major works by Schumann, Fauré, Haydn, Ibert and Couperin. His publications include an edition of the 10 Beethoven Sonatas for Piano and Violin, edited with Lucien Capet (Paris, 1927) and two books: Beethoven, ce mal-connu (Paris, 1967) and Les gestes et la pensée du pianiste Paul Loyonnet (Montréal, 1985).

CT/ May we begin with your recollections of your first important teacher, Charles de Bériot (1833-1924)? Was that at the Conservatoire or privately?

PL/ At first privately, beginning when I was ten. Before that I had been studying for four years with one of his former students, a young organist, and I had been practicing only an hour a day. So my

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(Ouverture des Portes à 8 heures 1/2)

RÉCITAL DE PIANO

donné par M.

Paul LOYONNET

PROGRAMME

1. A. **Fantaisie** en *ut* . . . . . MOZART

   B. **Sonate** op. 110 . . . . . BEETHOVEN

   I. *Moderato Cantabile.*

   II. *Allegro molto.*

   III. *Adagio, ma non troppo : Fuga : Adagio : Fuga : Meno Allegro.*

2. **Etudes Symphoniques**. . . . . SCHUMANN

3. A. **Impromptu** op. 35 . . . . . LÉON MOREAU

   B. **Phalènes** . . . . . I. PHILIPP

   C. **Trois Valses**. . . . . REYNALDO HAHN

   I. *Mi majeur n° 2* — II. *Ninette* — III. *Berceau.*

   D. **Variations** en forme de **Petites Etudes** sur un Thème de SCHUMANN. . . . . P. S. HÉRARD

4. **Les Huguenots**, Fantaisie . . . . . LISZT

5. A. **Ballade** op. 23 . . . . . .

   B. **Valse** op. 64, n° 1 (I. PHILIPP) . . . . . .

   C. **Badinage** (GODOWSKI) . . . . . .

   D. **Polonaise** op. 53 . . . . . .

   } CHOPIN

audition with de Bériot went horribly! He told me to work all summer for 3-4 hours a day and then come back. I worked hard on scales, arpeggios, and other exercises from his book Mécanisme et style, and at the end of the summer I played Mozart's Sonata in G for him, and also Czerny's School of Velocity #15. He smiled and told my father, "This young man is amusant, I'll take him." Eight days later I had my first lesson, and immedately he dwelled on how to make a perfect legato and, in the slow movement of Mozart's C Minor Sonata, how to bring out the top notes in a series of chords. He had me buy a little book by him called La Sonorité au piano, which explained what he cared about as a teacher.

CT/ So from the start he emphasized slow practice and critical listening....

PL/ Oh yes. His main interest was clarity and a singing tone. He had studied with Thalberg and with Kufferath, one of Mendelssohn's preferred students, and a singing line was especially important to those musicians. I remember that he often said, "If a singer did what you are doing, one would laugh at him!" He was 65 when I went to him, and he was easily annoyed by his students! Instead of Czerny's Velocity he put me on the Cramer Etudes, which he considered more musical. Romantic that he was, he rarely made me study Bach. Instead we did pieces by Field, Dussek, Hummel, etc., to develop expression and velocity.

CT/ Did he often demonstrate at lessons?

PL/ Yes, he often showed exactly what he wanted. But aside from working on nuance, he gave little attention to technique, per se, thinking, like some other professors, that technique will develop itself through the pieces studied. This in itself is alright if one has good work habits and good preliminary formation of muscles. Unfortunately, he never told me how to organize my practice, and often if I played poorly he would say, "Play it again" -- sometimes writing in a fingering.

CT/ What were some of the more positive aspects of his teaching?

PL/ Certainly the use of the pedal, which began just a few weeks after my first lessons. Since my legs were still too short, he put a thick book on the pedals and we worked this way on Field's Fourth Nocturne. He was meticulous about the pedal, and because I was so young I think the rapport between the ear and the foot was lodged instinctively in me starting from those days. Another important and positive aspect of his teaching was having us maintain a certain amount of old repertoire at all times. We had to devote one day a week entirely to old repertoire, and I think this was very good advice.

CT/ When did you prepare for your entrance to the Conservatoire?

PL/ In 1903, when de Bériot had me audit his class there. My entrance exam reflected his taste: the Chopin Polonaise, Op. 3 (with cello), the Beethoven C Minor Concerto (exposition of the first movement) and Delioux's transcription of part of a Mozart string quintet! What a selection!

CT/ Can you recall the highlights of your first year?

PL/ I remember that I worked on Chopin's First and Third Ballades, Schumann's Carnaval and Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata. In addition to our weekly class, we also met on Fridays, which were devoted solely to Bach and Chopin -- we each had to learn a new prelude and fugue each week and a new Chopin etude, plus a "transcendental" etude by de Bériot himself! The Friday classes worked alright for the first month, and he was tolerant of our slow and often imperfect Chopin etudes. Gradually students stopped coming on Fridays, and he didn't mind, since it was his last year on the faculty and he was pretty detached already. I was one of the few who stayed in these Friday technique classes.

CT/ Did you hear his star former student, Ricardo Viñes?

PL/ Oh yes, rather often. De Bériot held monthly public classes in which we each had to play. Usually each session concluded with a performance by one of his former students, and it was often Viñes. Always he played the so-called "ultra-moderns," Debussy and Ravel, and I remember how de Bériot would listen to this music with the same indulgent smile that one would show when a child misbehaved! He didn't play a single really modern work. As a composer, he was very old fashioned, and he was bitter because his students never played his music.

CT/ What other important pianists do you recall from that period?

PL/ I remember being absolutely stupified when we heard Rosenthal, then at his height. What an enormous technique and brio he had, with hands thrown high and wide with such liberty! Among the French, I heard Planté, Risler, Selva...really an endless stream....

CT/ And who do you remember as the best?

PL/ Planté was unforgettable, really the most perfect of the French pianists then. His playing was marvelously articulated, and singing, too, when that was called for, and people have told me that it much resembled Liszt's. It had power without hardness, and at the same time I can say that no one in our time has surpassed him for sheer speed! Risler and Selva were a bit less exciting. Risler's playing was very accurate and faithful to the text, but for me it lacked real lyricism. I admired him more than I was moved by him. Selva was much the same, but with a drier touch, as I remember. Because of her enthusiasm for Breithaupt's ideas she became so relaxed that she seemed to drop weight on each note! The sound was very nice, but she seemed to avoid fast pieces.

CT/ I am interested in these three because I have early recordings by them, rather rare ones. Planté was very old when he recorded some Chopin etudes, but there are some astonishing moments. Also I have recordings by Diémer, made exactly when you were at the Conservatoire in 1904.

PL/ Diémer was a Parisian concert celebrity who was known as the "king of the scale and the trill." He married a rich woman, played free concerts and never gave a private lesson. A competition in his name was a very important one at the Conservatoire. It was held every three years and was open only to male first-prize winners of the preceeding 10 years. I remember hearing the Diémer Competition when the jury consisted of Paderewski, Rosenthal, Pugno, Philipp, Saint-Saëns and others. Imagine such names today! Only the best young pianists had the nerve to enter, with a jury like that! And two of the best were students of de Bériot: Joaquin Malats and Fernand Lemaire. Malats (1872-1912) was the first and best interpreter of Albeniz's Iberia. His "Appasssionata" on this occasion was brilliant, though he seemed nervous and sat quite high with his body curved above the keyboard, as I still remember. Lemaire showed qualities that Viñes lacked: sober expression, real brilliance, and admirable touch. Then came two Diémer students, of whom Lazare-Lévy was the best example: his playing was extremely clear and "pearled," faithful to the text, strong, and he played the Saint-Saëns Etude en forme de Valse in a way that was impossible to top! After much applause the jury deliberated, and Saint-Saëns wanted Lévy to win. But more eminent members wanted Malats. Finally it was decided: Malats was Prix Diémer, Lévy was Honorable Mention. Diémer said that he had never heard La Campanella played better than Malats had then. Malats came to de Bériot's class the next day and I played the Chopin Berceuse for him. What a loss that Malats died a few years later, barely 40!

CT/ Can we return for a moment to de Bériot's teaching? Can you remember any specifics about his technical or interpretive advice during that last year of his teaching?

PL/ With him it was always "interpretation, interpretation, interpretation!" Slow practice and the quality of one's sound were his main concerns. He never suggested how we might practice in order to play as he wanted or as he illustrated. I remember that a student brought in Mendelssohn's Variations sérieuses, and de Bériot stopped him after the first variation and played up to that point himself, to demonstrate that the top line must be brought out, and then he closed the book and let it be known that the student's 20 minutes were done. For four more weeks the scene was the same for the student! And if another student couldn't get the right sonority for the opening of Weber's Sonata in A-flat, he never got further than that page at a class lesson. To do him justice, though, I must say that all his students developed a taste for good musical "diction," a sense of good pedalling, contrasting touches, and clarity in fast tempos. My own longevity allows me to understand his value now.

CT/ Did he talk about Thalberg and Kufferath, his teachers?

PL/ He mentioned Thalberg only once that I remember, regarding repeated notes. In a Liszt Rhapsody, when a student was having trouble with repeated notes, he recommended Thalberg's Etude in A Minor. He said: "Each time that Thalberg played this etude, one wanted to go home and practice it immediately!" He also recommended that we buy Kufferath's etudes, which were more salon pieces than technical studies.

CT/ Did he have an assistant who taught technique, as was later the custom at the Conservatoire?

PL/ Not really. His main technical idea, and it was a big one, was that the fingers should always be close to the keys, to make an impression on them rather than to strike them. Though he didn't have an assistant, he did have a woman who gave me a few lessons. She in fact had quite a decisive influence on me. Her name was Madame Zeiger, and she had studied some with Anton Rubinstein. She devoted her whole life to writing a series of five volumes of exercises that unfortunately weren't as useful as she thought they'd be. But she was nevertheless a woman of genius. Her exercises had to do with finger independence of a frightening extreme, with different rhythms in the same hand simultaneously with opposing rhythms in the other hand: for example, 3 against 4 in the RH while 4 against 3 in the LH -- 4 voices at once! She was a fervant follower of d'Indy and she was the first to really reveal polyphony to me. She gave me unforgettable lessons on Beethoven's "Appassionata" and Chopin's Berceuse. Also Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 111. She would have been a wonderful teacher of the preparatory class at the Conservatoire, but d'Indyism and her infamous exercises prevented her being nominated.

CT/ And now may we talk about your long and important study with Philipp? May we begin at the beginning, with your earliest remembrances of him?

PL/ I studied with Philipp for one year at the Conservatoire (1904), and then he gave me free private lessons through my Paris debut in 1906 until my military service in 1909; and after that I studied sporadically with him until 1912. I remember that at the very first lesson I had to play for him some of his Exercises de tenues on the diminished seventh chord, with fingers played separately and then together, with held notes, etc., in the manner you know. He wanted us to articulate vigorously, with fingers curved from the tip and with each phalange contributing to a hollowed hand-position. Besides these, he had me do some Scarlatti, the Schubert Sonata in A Major, Op. 120, and, as de Bériot had asked, a new Chopin etude and a new Bach prelude and fugue each week. He also had us do scales in different rhythms and with the C Major fingering. He had us transpose difficult passages, and of course this gave us better facility in accurate lateral motions. His chief merit was his guidance in choosing the right progressive order of works that a student should

study -- but not in interpreting them. His ideals were: velocity, jeu perlé, and sobriety of expression.

CT/ In some ways, then, he was the opposite of de Bériot....

PL/ Yes, I would say so. He was not concerned with interpretation. He felt that his students should have that already, from their previous professors, so that his only task was to make a kind of "final judgment." Often he was content to say, "C'est bien," or "C'est à retravailler," or "C'est trop dur," or "trop faible," or, often to me, "C'est trop lourd." If one asked him to explain these basic criticisms, he would often respond with something sharp, like "Mettez votre tête au bout de vos doigts!" ("Put your head in charge of your fingers!")

CT/ At lessons, though, surely he had technical ideas that were based on the music you played?

PL/ That is an interesting point. Never did he invent on-the-spot exercises that were based on the music. Instead, he referred me to his published exercises for such-and-such a problem. Also he never asked me to try things out in front of him. To experiment on the spot was not his way.

CT/ Can you summarize his technical advice?

PL/ At my very first lesson he summarized it strongly -- and he never again repeated it. He said: "You must listen to yourself when you are working, repeat passages until you have them in your fingers, work the difficult parts in different rhythms, transpose them with the same fingering, and make up exercises in which you find the same type of difficulty." This was concise and wonderful advice that I have never forgotten.

CT/ What repertoire did you study with Philipp after you left the Conservatoire and worked with him privately?

PL/ I remember especially the early version of Liszt's Paganini Etudes, the nearly unplayable version! That made me make great progress! Also Philipp introduced me to Schumann's Humoreske, which I recorded, a lot of Liszt's music and his transcriptions, some Handel, etc. Philipp coached me through my Paris debut recital and others afterwards. I owe him a lot. But for interpretation, that I had to pick up more or less on my own, by hearing virtually all the great pianists of the day play in Paris by the time I was 25. Fortunately a friend of mine got me free tickets for all the important concerts.

CT/ And after your study with Philipp you then worked with Martinus Sieveking, a principal disciple of Leschetizky. For a French pianist, that must have been an unusual decision.

PL/ Well, I had wanted to go to Busoni, but Philipp claimed that Busoni didn't take teaching seriously. So Philipp advised me to go to Vianna de Motta, a former Liszt student in Berlin. By going to Sieveking instead, I took a new route entirely, and Philipp never forgave me for it. Many years later when I asked for a reconciliation with him, he refused.

CT/ In what principal ways did the schools differ?

PL/ The system of Sieveking, derived from Leschetizky, is based on the fact that the different muscular groups are able to be independent. Thus the fingers, the hand and the forearm are each innervated while the upper arm is relaxed. The fingers become pillars of weight. A relaxed arm and a strong hand were crucial, as with Breithaupt. But unlike Breithaupt, the Sieveking method called for strong, very articulated fingers. Only in that respect was it related to Philipp's concerns.

CT/ Did it also place more emphasis on color?

PL/ In general, the Leschetizky school was more romantic, with a freer approach to tempo, as you can hear in Leschetizky's piano roll of the Chopin Nocturne in D-flat. And I think that it was more concerned with the complete education of the fingers and the different kinds of attacks -- so in that sense, yes, you can talk about color. On the other hand, the French notion of "the atmosphere of a dream" -- in which the music can nearly approach silence, ppp -- was contrary to Leschetizky's ideal that everything always had to "sing", to have a round sound even when it was quiet.

CT/ From my study and conversations with elder French pianists, I am under the impression that -- except for Cortot, Yves Nat, and maybe Lazare-Lévy -- the notions of piano playing in France were pretty much an extension of the ideals and means of the clavecin school.

PL/ The use of weight and arm was not much cultivated in France, that is true. Today of course, the picture has changed. But the Russians and Germans have always used more, and the reason is that their music demands it. It is a fact that composers engender the education of interpreters. For the French, there can be grandeur without heaviness and passion without violence. The dreamlike aura of Fauré is rarely appreciated in full outside France, and even there it is not meant to act directly on a crowd, like Tchaikowsky can.

CT/ Did you hear some Russian pianists before the Revolution?

PL/ Yes, especially Lhevinne and Gabrilowitsch. Lhevinne was closer to the French style, in that he played quite strictly in tempo, cleanly and fast. Gabrilowitsch was quite the opposite, very free and with a technique that was frankly quite feeble. Among Russian composers, I think that Prokofiev in his Visions fugitives is the least different from the French aesthetic.

CT/ In your youth did you know or play for Debussy and Ravel and their contemporaries?

PL/ Oh, yes--for many of them, beginning when I was in my teens. At some of Philipp's monthly public classes he had all his students play works by a single composer. I remember that Fauré and Widor attended, and they gave us their ideas on interpretation. Later I became friends with both of them. As for Debussy, I don't know why, but Philipp detested his music. Never during my time with Philipp did a single Debussy work get played!

CT/ But you did play for Debussy eventually, yes?

PL/ Yes, I went to his house and played some of his Préludes for him. He wasn't always in agreement with me in some matters of tempo and sonority. In one of the pieces he said my tempo was too fast, so I said, "Give me your tempo," and when I played it again in his tempo, he said, "No, it's decidedly too slow!" And then I remember that when I played La cathédrale engloutie, Debussy said, "Well, it's too engloutie!"

CT/ That's funny! Was Ravel more helpful?

PL/ Not really. I played Gaspard and Tombeau de Couperin for him, but he didn't have much to say. For Ondine he commented that "If you don't count the exact number of rhythms in the opening figure, it doesn't matter!" Oddly enough, he never spoke to me about details of pedalling, color or interpretation. I remember only that he liked to hear certain notes vibrate longer than they were written, usually at cadences.

CT/ We haven't been able to touch on your long concert career [which is highlighted in nine columns in George Kehler's The Piano in Concert, 1982]; or your reputation as a Beethoven player even in Germany in the 1920s; or your recordings. I think your Schumann Humoreske and your Fauré recording are particularly fine.

PL/ Thank you. I have listened again to the Fauré First Barcarolle and I find that it is too fast. Maybe I was too much "in form" at the time. The facility that makes for a good technique can also be a danger for all pianists. Our ear becomes too used to speed, and we hear things differently than our audiences do. And eventually this conditions audiences to be interested only in fast fingers, not in the music....

Dr. Charles Timbrell is Associate Professor of Piano at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and has performed widely in the U.S. and Europe.