

Feature Article by [John Bell Young](#)

Interview with Pianist Jean-François Antonioli

A protégé of Carlo Zecchi and Pierre Sancan, Swiss pianist Jean-François Antonioli has recorded more than 20 compact discs, including Debussy's 24 Préludes, works by Busoni and Joachim Raff, and Frank Martin's works for piano and orchestra. The latter, which was his first recording, was awarded the Grand Prix du Disque de l'Académie Charles Cros in 1986, and was subsequently selected by 50 leading critics from all over the world, for the IRCA (International Records Critics Award) in New York, as one of the 20 best recordings of the year. He has performed at major venues in Europe, Canada, Israel, and the United States, including the festivals at Monteux-Vevey, Lucerne, and the Birmingham Festival of the Arts. He made his United States debut in 1991 with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. He teaches piano at the HEMU Vaud Valais Fribourg, Haute Ecole de Lausanne; he has also given master classes throughout the world since 1986, and regularly serves as a jury member for many prestigious national and international piano competitions.

As a conductor, Antonioli was the principal guest conductor of the Timisoara Philharmonic Orchestra (Romaia) with which he toured several European countries as well as Brazil. He has often performed the complete concerto cycles of Mozart, Bach, Haydn, and Chopin in the double capacity of conductor and soloist. In April 1995, at the Atheneum of Bucharest, UNESCO and the Rumanian Education Ministry awarded him the Dinu Lipatti Medal "as a token of highest appreciation."

A champion of 20th-century and contemporary music, Antonioli has given premieres of works by Honneger, Lipatti, Perrin, Balissat, Fries, Metianu, Scolari, Derbès, and Kovach. He gave the first European performance of Henri Dutilleux's *Le Jeu des Contraires* (1989), and has made several world-premiere recordings of the music of Honegger, Martin, Cras, Perrin, Busoni, Chalier, Gaudibert, and others. The German documentary film maker Walter Wehmeyer made two films about Antonioli, *Hearing Vocation* (2000) and *Listening Eyes* (2002), which concerned his relationship with the Timisoara Philharmonic. Jean-François Antonioli is a full member of the Central European Academy of Science and Art.

What sets your interpretation of the Chopin Preludes apart from most is the intimacy of your readings. There is not a moment of bluster or bravado, no matter how virtuosic things become. In your view, is affective quiescence an element indispensable in all of Chopin's music, and if so, why?

As you know, Chopin was not fond of big audiences; he performed rarely, and in private concert halls more than in public ones; he had nothing of a sportsman about him (unlike some performers nowadays) and was not looking for platform success. Some famous witnesses of the time (such as Berlioz, Liszt, Sand) describe his unique way of creating an atmosphere, if he could find his so-called "blue note." There is also Chopin's famous remark to Liszt, which Liszt recalls in his biography of Chopin: "I am not suited to giving concerts, the audience intimidates me, I feel suffocated by these hurried breaths, paralyzed by these inquisitive looks, dumb in front of these foreign faces; but you are led to it, for if you cannot win your audience, you have what you need to knock it out." That does not mean that he fails either to convey a sense of violence in his music,

such as in the Scherzo No. 1, or to require real strength, such as in the Scherzo No. 3 (dedicated to his pupil Adolf Gutmann, whose powerful playing and good health impressed Chopin). As a Chopin performer, I am looking for singing tone where it is needed—so-called cantabile playing, in which the sound evolves like a voice. This concerns the art of differentiated touch as well as the music's visionary dimensions. It is important to observe Chopin's original pedaling with great care, as well as the balance between harmony and counterpoint, rhythmic subtlety, and the preservation of the music's formal classical structure, no matter what the suppleness of inflection. Relevant to his aesthetic was his interest in art: Chopin was Delacroix's friend and admired the latter's visionary talent. But according to Sand's daughter, Solange, he also admired Delacroix's rival, Ingres, for the classical dimensions he brought to his paintings. He kept his admiration for Ingres a secret from Delacroix, and dared not admit it. In this research I feel somehow connected to a family of performers that includes Ivan Moravec, Mieczysław Horszowski, Dinu Lipatti, Wilhelm Kempff, and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, all of whom are artists I love and admire.

Roland Barthes once described the voice and musical approach of the celebrated French baryton-Martin Charles Panzera as phonemic, praising his exquisite shaping not only of the words of a song, but also the smallest motivic units. In many ways, your approach to music-making brings Panzera to mind. Such attention to detail can only be the result of substantive analysis of a text and a tremendous amount of work. What are your thoughts, then, on the relation of music to language?

How strange that you mention Barthes and Panzera! Barthes is one of my favorite writers. Panzera gave master classes in the 1940s and 50s, which at that time were famous, in the same school where I have been active and teaching for 30 years. In fact, in 1983 Henri Dutilleux told me that Panzera was one of the greatest artists he ever met. In a text published by Einaudi Edition in 1976 in Turin (in Italy, where I spend my free time) entitled *Ecoute*, Barthes distinguishes *Mot et Musique* (Word and Music), as the equivalent of signified and signifier. Referring to Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of linguistics, he put it this way: "The way you pronounce does not mean how you articulate." The title of Barthes's essay "Le Grain de la Voix," which was published alongside his other essays in *Image/Music/Text*, is certainly no accident! Returning to the phonemic dimensions of music, when Debussy writes on the same low B \flat in *Ariettes Oubliées*, "Les roses étaient toutes rouges et les lierres étaient tout noirs" (All the roses were red and the ivy black), he was clearly expecting singers to use micro intonations (almost quarter-tones). What determined these nuances were the differences among the phonemes, as well as pronunciation, as well as the time it took to convey these. Nowadays, French speakers and even French people (!) rarely vocalize the difference between the "e, es, é, aient." This enormously significant and fundamental aspect of the French language is vanishing. In the context of instrumental music—where there are no words being sung, and where a pianist, for example, must imagine and convey a "speaking tone"—Alfred Cortot's artistry is impossible to surpass.

It is often said that all a pianist needs is a good piano technician, and that good tone production is assured by virtue of a well-tuned instrument. I do not agree with this. I think the pianist also needs to work on intonation, which among other things is the way we organize the voicing and identify the hierarchy of pitches in each chord. For example, one knows how the interval of a third can disturb a melodic line if it is not precisely proportioned. Only the Russian school routinely refers to *intonatsia* (intonation), which refers to far more complex expressive issues. In teaching it, I often demonstrate—with examples of sound production—how certain pianists leave the impression, due to their inadequate playing, that the piano is out of tune, no matter that the work of the piano technician was professionally impeccable; on the other hand, on a piano that has not been recently tuned, I can show that certain relationships in sound and tone, so long as they are imaginatively calibrated, can create the illusion that the instrument has been satisfactorily tuned.

Yes, intonatsia is certainly something that has been neglected in piano teaching in the West, especially in the United States. Nearly 20 years ago, I wrote and presented a paper on this very subject, entitled “Intonatsia and the Politics of Expression,” at the World Piano Pedagogy Conference in Fort Worth. It has since become a rather popular essay. In fact, when I was a student of the great Russian pianist Margarita Fyodorova in Moscow, she also weighed in frequently on intonatsia, emphasizing its importance. For her, there was no underestimating the value of prosody in relation to Chopin’s compositional language. Among these elements, for example, is his consistent reliance on the affective character of the trochee, that is, a discreet syllabic emphasis on the first particle of a binary motive (DAY-ya). This musical figure of speech is symbolically representative of the Polish language, and frequently modifies upbeat to downbeat relationships in his music, such as the opening of the B-Minor Sonata, where the opening upbeat ought be given slightly more emphasis in relation to the ensuing downbeat. What are your thoughts on this phenomenon, and Chopin’s implicit appropriation of poetic feel to inform his music? In your view, is there anything to it substantially, and if not, why?

I think that musicians are deeply influenced by their mother tongue, not only as a consequence of a way of thinking (the ancient Greek word “logos,” for example, means “parole,” that is, the spoken word; in linguistics, that in turn refers to a speech act), but also by virtue of the frequent use of idioms, as well as the rhythm of a language. For example, Hungarians put the accents invariably on the first syllable, French on the last most of the time, Italians on the antepenultimate frequently, while in Russian words or verbs change according to the case or the conjugation. I can read in eight languages and speak six fluently; as a passionate student of languages, I observed that Chopin sometimes “speaks” Polish (especially in the Mazurkas), other times French (as in the Prelude No. 17, where you could almost place words taken from Gounod’s Faust, namely, “Dites-lui que je l’aime...”) but also Italian (as in the Barcarolle, where all the vowels are emphasized).

For you, is there any difference performing Chopin’s music in concert from a recording session? Can you describe those differences, if any?

In concert, we are supposed to recreate music. It is an utterly different process. A recording is supposed to withstand a repeated listening, but a concert is happening hic et nunc (here and now). Or as Jean Cocteau used to say: “Certains soirs le public a du talent” (On some evenings, the audience has talent). It would be far from artistic to remain satisfied with a prefabricated journey! Kierkegaard tried to deal with this issue in *The Repetition*, where he opined that it is impossible to live the same experience twice, even if Aristotle recommends paying attention to the persistence of a perception. Chopin himself made some important variations in the performance of his own music. According to Charles Hallé, “At his last public concert in Paris ... in 1848 ... he played the latter part of his ‘Barcarolle’ from the point where it demands the utmost energy, in the most opposite style, pianissimo, but with such wonderful nuances, that one remained in doubt if this new reading were not preferable to the accustomed one. Nobody but Chopin could have accomplished such a feat.”

*What you just said puts me very much in mind of Barthes’s essay, in *Mythologies*, on Greta Garbo, where he wrote that “the face of Garbo is a concept; that of Audrey Hepburn is an event.” Now you have long been a professor of piano in Switzerland, and also in the master classes, in which areas of musical interpretation, in Chopin’s music especially, have you found students most wanting and challenged?*

I have been lucky to teach some wonderful talents, such as Ju-Ying Song, who is well known in New York as a concert pianist and is on the piano faculty of Mannes, as well as a “Leadership and Innovation” teacher at Juilliard. She was the first student in my studio who I felt was particularly

promising and who I was certain would rise to prominence. Among my other students who have gone on to unusual success, there is Bruno Vlahek, a young Croatian pianist and composer and winner of the Ricardo Vines competition in Spain, and more recently Oxana Shevchenko, a Russian of great talent, who won the Scottish Piano Competition in Glasgow. When Leon Fleisher came to Lausanne to give master classes at our school, he told me how impressed he was by her performance of Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata. During these years of teaching in the Lausanne HEMU, I had pianists coming from nearly 30 different countries. Teaching master classes in various parts of the world, as distant as Thailand, I could also appreciate several traditions, even if the tendency is clearly towards a globalized teaching. Thanks to Ju-Ying Song, who invited me to teach master classes in the Paris Piano Program at the Salle Cortot (École Normale de Paris), I had the pleasure of teaching young American pianists from the most important schools, such as Julliard and Mannes, and also from the leading conservatories in Boston, Cleveland, and Philadelphia. They were often very open-minded. But I must say that apart from a few who were remarkably taught by great personalities, some were not so familiar with Chopin's idiosyncratic style. Rather, several of these pianists attempted to reproduce famous recorded performances!

You were a student of the great Pierre Sancan in Paris. By coincidence, our colleague, Alain Lefevre, who also studied with him, has just released his own recording of the Preludes. While your individual visions of these works are very different, both are enormously sophisticated and compelling. All these years later, what do you think that says about Sancan's approach to teaching?

Sancan was a marvelous teacher; he wanted each of his students to become autonomous. I think that was his principal goal. He was not particularly teaching the taste (or his taste); he was convinced that our natural touch was an expression of our own sensitivity. He wanted us to stay faithful to the score, because he hated affected playing. He was constantly repeating one remark by his teacher, Yves Nat: "There is no sin in Beethoven." He was highly competent where technical skills were concerned, and could solve any problem; he knew perfectly all the laws governing the musculature and psyche that influenced it. He attached a great deal of importance to fingerings and pedaling, and to the steady evolution of harmonic conflicts in a composition. He cultivated a broad view of music, for he was not only a pianist, but also a composer (he won the Grand Prix de Rome in 1943), as well as a conductor. In fact, Charles Munch asked him to be his assistant at the helm of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire Orchestra, which would become later the Orchestre de Paris. For all these reasons, it is not surprising to find such contrasting personalities as Jean-Bernard Pommier, Abdel Rahman El Bacha, and Jean-Philippe Collard among his pupils. I must add that he conveyed his vivacious enthusiasm to each of us, and a very positive energy.

Is there anything that you emphasize above all when teaching, and do you enjoy it?

I enjoy teaching very much, especially with receptive students who are willing to dedicate hours in order to come close to the essence of music. Apart from all the elements described above with regard to Pierre Sancan, I often explain that each work is similar to a living organism. It has its own biology, and we must try to perceive its metabolism. During a stage performance, our own metabolism (our heartbeat, breathing, inner tension, and so on) becomes the work, which is fully revealed only through all these indispensable factors. On the other hand, I also try to emphasize the importance of the listening process, which is very complex. It's essential to understand the specific world of each composer, from many points of view, in order to avoid any denaturation. Most of the time, originality is just a more accurate reading of the score, which is supported by invaluable information, such as that elaborated in the books of one of my closest friends, the musicologist Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger. In one recently published book of interviews, Paul Badura-Skoda described him as a genius. Eigeldinger's books have been translated into many languages, and I owe a great deal to his work!

You have enjoyed a stellar career as a conductor as well, particularly with the Timisoara Philharmonic Orchestra in Romania. For many years I studied music and music-making with a conductor, which was the most enlightening experience of all; I never learned quite so much about listening and interpretation from even the most celebrated piano pedagogues or concert artists as I did with him. To what degree has conducting affected your interpretation of piano music, and would you say that your skills in one area substantially influence those in the other?

My becoming a conductor was entirely fortuitous. I was rarely satisfied with routine collaborations. Certainly, I was lucky to have been associated and to perform with many wonderful conductors. But I wanted to consolidate, in a single vision, all the parts of the Mozart concerti. As in the case of many of my colleagues, that was the beginning. I eventually performed the 27 concerti and conducted all of his concertante works as well. These are an amazing body of work, which Busoni recommended to one of my teachers, Carlo Zecchi. Then, I broadened my repertoire, conducting symphonic works such as Mahler's First Symphony, Bruckner's Sixth Symphony, Sibelius's Fourth Symphony, and even Glazunov's Sixth Symphony, the symphonies of Dukas, Franck, and Chausson, contemporary music, and so on! This compelled me to think a great deal about rhythmical relationships, as well as voicing, colors, space, and perception psychology. This undoubtedly enriched my musical consciousness.

You have served on the juries of a number of prominent international piano competitions. In trying to assess the value of these contests in the early 21st century, I've asked a number of our colleagues to weigh in on their value and efficacy. In your view, have competitions worn out their welcome?

Although I sometimes serve on the juries of competitions, I feel sad about this system; it strives towards a certain aspect of perfection in performance, which often is empty. As the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut once said: "Never has so much been spoken about culture, and never has there been so little art..." In his memoirs, published in 1944, Piero Coppola complained that the ambition of musicians had become increasingly more sportive. Today, prize winners are more and more politically correct; after the fashion-design era, the competition ethos has become the music world's equivalent of pret-a-porter (ready-to-wear). However, there are a few competitions that occasionally reveal great talents such as Radu Lupu or Murray Perahia; I wonder what the circumstances were that led to that? Perhaps the key is populating a jury with real artists, who are not simply looking for competitors whose way of playing conforms to their own.

That is certainly so. As Constance Keene put it, a competition is only as good as its jury. That said, what would you advise young pianists eager to cultivate their careers to pursue instead of contests?


In his late years, Mieczysław Horszowski once expressed a utopian thought on France-Musique, in response to Claude Hermann: "Young musicians will be free if they will renounce taking part in competitions. Otherwise, they will all play the same repertoire in the same way." That is more or less what I did; I had a career thanks to my first recordings, which received excellent notices. My first recording was awarded the Grand Prix du Disque de l'Académie Charles Cros in Paris, which until then the Académie had never done for a debut. Subsequently I was nominated on two occasions for the IRCA (International Records Critics Award). That was for Frank Martin's complete works for piano and orchestra, and then the Debussy Préludes Book II, first in New York in 1985 and a year later in Helsinki in 1986. Not least, several prominent conductors encouraged me, including Mario Venzago, who offered me three engagements with his orchestra after having attended only one of my recitals. To a degree even more so than in the past, I believe we need to hear more from authentic artists, who are capable of revealing the spiritual content of music. As André Malraux said, "Le 21ème siècle sera spirituel ou il ne sera pas" (The 21st century will be spiritual or it will not be at all).


With regard to recording, do you envision any particular projects, and if so, whose music would you most like to survey? Do you have any plans to perform in the USA?

I have been listening to several of my recordings that were made during live broadcasts. Perhaps some of them could be published on CD, such as Enescu's Piano Sonata No. 1, op. 24, which I performed at the Vevey-Montreux International Festival in 1989. I also recorded several Mozart concerti with excellent conductors (such as Lawrence Foster, Armin Jordan, Milan Horvat, and Marcello Viotti); these, too, could be released on CD. With regard to my past studio recordings, I can see a CD culled from these and dedicated entirely to Scarlatti sonatas. Actually I have just finished translating from Italian into French Giorgio Pestelli's critically acclaimed book, which he wrote in 1967. Pestelli is a distinguished Italian musicologist and also a friend, whose research on Scarlatti was innovative and introduced new ideas about the composer's music. I'd also like to record an all-Fauré recital; in 2007, following a great deal of research, I devoted an entire evening to Fauré's music. This recital followed a conference about the composer by the world's leading authority on Fauré, Jean-Michel Nectoux, who graciously accepted my invitation to attend the recital. At the moment I have no plans to perform in the USA. I recall with pleasure my debut with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. in 1991. It was a great success that was favorably reviewed in the Washington Post and other papers. That concert, which was organized in commemoration of the anniversary of the Swiss Confederation, was an expression of friendship between our two countries. We gave the performance at Wolf Trap for an audience of some 10,000 people! Later, Martha Casals Istomin invited me to give a few master classes at the Manhattan School of Music, but for various reasons which had nothing to do with Mrs. Istomin that engagement never materialized.

That is a great pity! Perhaps one or more of our Fanfare readers who have university or conservatory affiliations here in the USA will have the presence of mind to invite you again to perform and teach at our leading institutions. Now, if you had to describe your approach to making music in a few words, and its purpose, what would you say?

It is very hard to speak about one's own music-making; it reflects who we are in the core of our being. A certain way of being in this world, and the Grain of the Voice....

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