

Marie-Catherine

GIROD

By Richard Masters

While visiting Europe in October of 2022, I interviewed French pianist Marie-Catherine Girod. Girod (b. 1949) is little-known in the United States, but in France she is a respected pedagogue and performer and notably one of the most recorded pianists of her generation. A student of Jules Gentil, Paul Badura-Skoda and Gyorgy Sebök, Girod carved out a niche for herself as a specialist in French repertoire of the late-Romantic era, exploring long-forgotten works by composers like Gabriel Dupont, Gustave Samazeuilh, Pierre de Bréville, Ernest Chausson, Vincent d'Indy, Louis Aubert and a host of others. She has also recorded much standard repertoire, including the complete piano works of Felix Mendelssohn, the complete sonatas of Carl Maria von Weber and music by Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Chopin and Franck. Her discs have won the coveted Diapason d'or two times, and she has also won the Grand prix de l'Académie nationale du disque français. She has appeared at major festivals including La Roque-d'Anthéron, the Moulin d'Andé in Normandy, and the Husum Festival in Germany. Girod currently teaches at the École Normale de Musique in Paris, the conservatory founded by Alfred Cortot in 1919.

After an intense two-hour lesson on César Franck's Prélude, aria et final, we sat down in the lovely Salle Pierre Petit of the École Normale de Musique to chat about her career and her thoughts on teaching. The interview was conducted in English and has been edited for length and clarity.

Richard Masters: Can you tell us a bit about your early piano studies? You were born in Peyrehorade in the south of France and studied at the University of Bordeaux as a child.

Marie-Catherine Girod: My teacher in Bordeaux was Madame Irène Caumon, an exceptional woman and teacher. She was a prizewinner at the Paris Conservatoire, a member of Marguerite Long's class. Between the ages of 7 and 10, she was like a mother to me. I was in her home every day—four hours, five hours, playing on her big Gaveau piano. She was like a Russian teacher! [Laughs] She was a genius.

From 11 to 16, I also studied with Jules Gentil at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris, where I won a first prize in piano and in chamber music. I then studied with Gentil at the École Normale for a year after graduating from the Conservatoire. I was very happy in his class, but I had the impression that Madame Caumon was my real teacher at this time. [Girod continued her studies with Caumon until age 16.] Gentil had an *idée fixe* [demonstrates a dropped wrist, wiggling the finger in the keyboard after depressing the key and moving the elbow about]. It was perhaps very interesting, but I don't use this technique when I play now; you cannot play fast when you play that way, it is impossible. It is not about the elbow, but rather the arm and then wrist. The wrist is most important, and the first *phalange* on the finger. Of course, the elbow is there, but if you wave it about, eh! When I was young, everything on the piano came easy to me. I played well,



so Gentil did not insist on all of his technical ideas. If you did not play well, you had to do as he asked.

RM: It sounds like Gentil taught outside of the “French tradition.”

M-C G: The French tradition—you know, everybody thinks about it as just fingers [holds hands up and wiggles fingers]. OK, that was true perhaps of Margu rite Long and Jean Doyen, they played like that. By the time I was a student, good French playing, we said, was like Russian playing. Gentil was actually very interested in Heinrich Neuhaus’s book [*The Art of Piano Playing*], he had it translated into French. Neuhaus was the teacher of Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter. The first time I heard Gilels in concert, when I was 14 or 15, and I understood that I have everything to learn. For the first time, I heard someone who made... many, many, many different sounds and who played *without moving*. He played *Petrouchka*, and the second sonata of Weber, I have never forgotten the beginning of the Weber. Years later when I recorded the sonata, I still remembered his sound. Gilels played *Jeux d’eau* by Ravel as an encore. I’m French, I studied *Jeux d’eau* with a French teacher, but this was different: He played perhaps staccato a bit, it was absolutely like crystal. It was then I understood, piano is not so easy.

RM: You went very far outside the French school in working with Paul Badura-Skoda.

M-C G: I met Paul Badura-Skoda when he was on the jury of the Margu rite Long competition. He was interested in me and invited me to participate in a master class he held in Italy. I studied with him for four or five years, and I learned a lot with Paul. The repertory we studied together, I don’t play now; I learned a lot of Schubert, Beethoven, Mozart, a little Bach. Absolutely not Mendelssohn or Weber! After four or five years, I felt that I had lost all my technique. He was a genius, you understand, but if I tried to play like him, it was very *sec* [dry]. I was very uncomfortable, very unhappy. We remained good friends, but I understood that this repertory was not mine

RM: This was when you went to Gyorgy Seb k?

M-C G: Meeting Seb k was for me (and maybe a little bit for him!) like a *coup de foudre* [love at first sight]. He had everything I wanted, he played the piano like a god. I learned so much from him in three or four years. At this time he didn’t play, he just spoke. “Why do you want to do that? How will you achieve what you want?” He was insistent on legato [demonstrates a ringing, *cantabile* sound played with careful legato and relaxed physical gestures], and also...[plays a bit of Mozartian passagework slowly, emphasizing every other note, then playing as written with much sparkle and evenness]. Probably for me, he was the most important person in my development, as a man, as a teacher and as a pianist.

I understood after working with him that I had to find my place as a pianist, that I had to find my repertory. There are many pianists; we can all do different things. I like French music and read many scores and began to understand that I had to play different [less common] music.

RM: What advice would you give to young pianists who find themselves at a crossroads like that?

M-C G: Students must understand that there is not a place for everyone. Of course, if you win the Tchaikovsky competition, you will have concerts and records, but *one* person wins. It is a hard life; you might have six months without concerts, but you still must practice every day. You have to live all your life with music, not just playing, but you must PRACTICE YOUR PIANO, every day. It’s not so easy. [Laughs] Seb k told me something important: “Marie-Catherine, you are very gifted. You must stay positive, even if you do not have concerts. Like me.” He himself was not playing many concerts at that time. He was known as a famous teacher, he taught in Bloomington [at Indiana University], but he was not known as a performer. I heard him play the second concerto of Bart k in the Salle Pleyel [a 2,000-seat hall in Paris], there were only 200 people in the audience. His words were very important for me, because sometimes I had very few concerts; I had no agent, I played my repertoire.

RM: You not only played unusual repertoire, you recorded it!

M-C G: Yes, for a long time I was not performing very much, but I recorded a lot. A record has a long life. A concert, you play, you are reviewed or not and then it's finished. It's not necessarily what I was dreaming for when I was young; at that time I wanted to play a lot and maybe record a few times. I recorded Gabriel Dupont's *La maison dans les dunes* many years ago. Do you know when I first had a chance to perform the entire cycle? It was four years ago! [Laughs] I played extracts of course, in programs of French music, one or two Dupont. I told my friend, a festival producer, that before I died, I wanted to play all of the Dupont *Maison dans les Dunes*. ["The House in the Dunes" is a 50-minute solo piano cycle written in 1910. Girod's 1997 recording won a *Diapason d'or*.] At the moment, I have the opposite problem from what I used to have: I am going to play Fanny Mendelssohn's cycle *Das Jahr* next week in the Salle Cortot. I very much want to record it, but no one wants it!

RM: Do you always choose the repertoire you record, or does the record company suggest what they want?

M-C G: I decide what to record. Sometimes, it is at the suggestion of a friend. The musicologist Michel Fleury, who is absolutely obsessed with English music, at his suggestion I recorded the four sonatas of Arnold Bax. They are very difficult! I only played the Bax second sonata twice in concert and once the [York] Bowen preludes. I prefer Bowen. It's a problem, you cannot propose that sort of piece for concerts. If I have to propose a cycle, I propose Dupont or Fanny Mendelssohn. I cannot remember all of the music I've played; I learn it, I record it, then it's gone. For one recording, the family of Pierre-Octave Ferroud asked me to record his piano music. It is so difficult, and it is a good record, but I don't know that I like the music very much. [Girod won the Grand Prix du disque français for this recording.]

I knew Madame [Geneviève] Joy, who was [Henri] Dutilleux's wife. That led to a big opportunity for me, to prepare the record [of the Dutilleux piano sonata] with Dutilleux; I learned the sonata with Dutilleux himself, over a long time. Dutilleux asked me to learn the first sonata of André Jolivet to pair with



the sonata because it was written at the same time.

RM: Around 1945?

M-C G: Yes! I prefer the second Jolivet sonata, but Dutilleux asked for the first, so... The original record was only those two pieces, and the Georges Auric sonata was added for the CD issue. Working with composers can be difficult; when I performed the Dutilleux Sonata in Italy with the composer in the audience, my God, Dutilleux said "Marie-Catherine, it was not quite the same as your record, it was a little bit slower in these places," then two days later sent a letter, "Marie-Catherine, it was quite good, but please..." Ennnnh! [Laughs]

MARIE-CATHERINE GIROD

RM: Do you have a favorite recording that you've made?

M-C G: The complete Felix Mendelssohn piano works. Also the Dupont, of course. Many of the recordings are out-of-print now, but most of them are online. [Most can be found on Amazon and YouTube.]

RM: Why the Mendelssohn?

M-C G: I have played Mendelssohn since I was 12 years old. My first competition, I played the *Variations sérieuses*. His music is very easy for me; it is bright, very light, *très élégant*.

RM: Can you discuss your most recent recording project, *Regards de Femmes*, an entire CD of music by female composers?

M-C G: I did not focus previously on women composers, but I played a recital at the Festival de la Roque d'Anthéron featuring all-women composers in 2020. The festival producer René Martin liked the program very much and offered to record it, specifying that he wanted at least 15 female composers. The CD ultimately had 17 composers, mostly short pieces. [Composers represented include Louise Farrenc, Cécile Chaminade, Amy Beach, Mel Bonis and Lili Boulanger, among others.] In recording, I would play an entire set of pieces by the composer, then we would select the best from the set. I will soon play a concert in Germany at Husum, an entire program of women composers. Perhaps next year I will play the Fanny Mendelssohn [*Das Jahr*]. I just played a very long piece by Florentine Mulsant. She is a very good composer, from the Schola Cantorum.

RM: Are any of the composers or pieces on this album particularly special to you?

M-C G: Jeanne Barbillion and my beloved Fanny Mendelssohn. [Barbillion (1895–1992) was a pianist, violinist and composer, a student of Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum. Her music is written in a late-Romantic vein, clearly coming out of the French tradition of Fauré, Debussy and Ravel. Girod recorded *Provence*, a set of two short pieces composed by Barbillion in 1926.]

RM: There seems to be a long tradition of successful female pianists in France, is that true also of female composers, do they have the same opportunities as their male counterparts?

M-C G: Yes, I think so, they have equal opportunities here. Regarding pianists, when I was young, they used to say “She plays like a man!” This was supposed to be a compliment, meaning I could play fast, play strong. “Playing like a woman” meant playing [makes little delicate sounds and gestures daintily], *c'est ridicule*.

RM: Do you have any upcoming projects?

M-C G: Every year I say, “Ok, now I will stop playing.” Year after year though: “This concert was very good, so I will keep going.” I want to record the Fanny Mendelssohn. If I find a label, perhaps after that, in one or two years, I will retire. It's very difficult to play piano every day. I need now more time to learn; I'm not young, I need time. When I was young, in three days I learned the Sonata of Berg, now I cannot.

RM: I'm sure that many readers would be interested to know how you practice music that is new to you; if you're tackling a piece like the difficult Samazeuilh *Chant*

Marie-Catherine Girod Selected Discography

Georges Auric: *Sonate pour piano* (Solstice; YouTube)

York Bowen: *24 Preludes in all major and minor keys* (3D Classics; YouTube)

Frédéric Chopin: *Four Impromptus*; *Complete Rondos* (YouTube)

Gabriel Dupont: *La Maison dans les dunes* (Mirare; YouTube)

Henri Dutilleux: *Sonate pour piano* (Solstice; YouTube)

Felix Mendelssohn: *Complete Piano Works* (Saphir Productions; Amazon Music; YouTube)

Rachmaninoff: *Sonata no. 2 in B-flat Major, op. 36* (Solstice; YouTube)

Gustave Samazeuilh: *La chant de la mer* (Mirare; YouTube)

Various: *Regards de Femmes* (Mirare)

de la mer, how do you approach the learning process?

M-C G: To begin, I read the score on the table, like a book, without playing. Then I work through the piece in a very slow tempo. This method is valid for any new piece that I learn.

RM: Do you warm up at all before beginning work on repertoire?

M-C G: Absolutely not. I can start by playing a whole program in tempo, or by working slowly, it doesn't matter. It depends on my mood.

RM: Teaching has been a very important part of your career. What is your approach to teaching your students at the École Normale?

M-C G: When I teach, I know what I want, but I also know that not everyone has the same abilities. If I have someone very gifted, I don't speak too much about technique, unless I see something I can fix; if something is missing, I try to explain. But, when you teach, the people in front of you are never the same: They do not have the same hands, the same brain and, most importantly, the same ears. If you want to change something, you can look, but if you *hear*, that's better. If you hear, you can *do*. They have to understand how to play and how to teach. If you move too much, it's not good, if you don't move enough, it's not good. I try to find with them the sound and the legato. It takes a very long time to play very legato.

RM: Do you approach technique through repertoire or exercises?

M-C G: Through standard repertoire. I never teach my repertory; for a competition or something, they don't need that. If they ask me, of course I am happy to teach it, but otherwise, standard repertoire. The students must play one Classical piece, one Romantic piece, one study, one concerto; I try to find repertoire that fits them.

RM: If you had a student who had a specific technical problem, would you say, "We're going to study this Moszkowski or Chopin étude to fix this issue"?

M-C G: For me, Chopin comes after. Here, they ask for Chopin studies too soon. You should play Czerny, Cramer and Moszkowski Op. 72, all before Chopin. This year, the school

understood, and for the first-year students, they required "Chopin OR Moszkowski." I never practiced Chopin studies before I was 15 or 16, and then *carefully*. They are the most difficult things in the world. I cannot play all of them. Even when I was young, I never played the *tierces* [double-thirds] etude very well, sixths yes, octaves very well, but not thirds. Now everyone plays the complete opus for international competitions, very fast, very loud. If you want to be a good pianist, of course, you must practice Chopin all the days of your life. If you don't know how to play legato in Chopin, you are not a pianist. But, it's very difficult.

Technique is more and more incredible with young people. You know, I remember very well, when I was young, I said: "I am a pianist." When I was about 30, I said: "I am a musician." It's not the same. Probably too late, I understood that it was more important to try to play music, instead of just the piano. I found solutions by the piano, not by my ears. To have a beautiful line for the sound, for singing, that came a little bit late. I hope now it's OK. When I was 16, I played the Sonata of Liszt. My favorite moment was the octaves at the end! After I met Sebök I understood that there are many notes that come before that! Now I cannot play the octaves at the end but play very well the rest of the sonata! [Laughs]

[At this point, the natural light in the large Second Empire-style room began to dim as the sun set outside.]

RM: You have had a long day, so I think that is a good place to end. Thank you again for sharing your thoughts with us.

M-C G: Merci.

AMT

Richard Masters is an associate professor of piano and collaborative piano at Virginia Tech. He is a graduate of CU Boulder, Juilliard and Eastman. Research interests include British piano music, accompanying and vocal pedagogy and historical vocal performance practice.

