

### **C. R. When and how did you meet Samson François?**

M. B. I first met him "musically" if I may say so: it was on the radio, I was 12 years old, I was already at the Paris Conservatory. My ear was irresistibly attracted by the sound of a piano playing Chopin, by the warmth and the radiant presence that came from it. I asked my mother, "Who is that playing?" and she said, "It's Samson François, a very great pianist. Who knows? Maybe you'll meet him one day. Her reflection struck me as a premonition. It was written! From then on, I became fascinated by his playing, I listened to his records over and over again, fascinated by his miraculous touch, I went to all his concerts, I collected his programs and his photos, I waited for a long time at the entrance of the artists to get an autograph and try to see him "up close", in short, I became a true "groupie"! We were extremely numerous and of all ages in this case, so much he was adored by the public. He was one of the few artists who spoke "to the heart of the people" and I have never known a classical pianist who was able to establish such a relationship with the audience, a relationship of love. People were emotional towards him, Samson was "different", he was "unique". And when he appeared in his red-lined cape and dark glasses, shrouded in mystery, we were all very impressed...how unattainable he seemed to me at the time!

After a few years he finally noticed my fervor and loyalty and one day he spoke to me and asked for my name to put on my program, so I got bold and told him that I was a pianist and that I would love to play something for him one day, would he accept? With his legendary kindness he replied, "But of course, I would be delighted!"

### **C. R. Your first lesson or first audition?**

M. B. Samson François did not have a home in Paris, between 2 concerts he lived in a villa near Menton but mostly lived in airports and planes! When he came to Paris, he stayed in a suite of a grand hotel in the 8th district, where he had a piano at his disposal and which was kept for him almost permanently, a bit like Coco Chanel who had her apartment at the Ritz.

So he said to me "Come such and such a day at such and such a time and you will play me something". You can imagine how happy I was! I went to his hotel on the day in question, with a Chopin nocturne under my arm, I gave my name to the receptionist and they asked me to wait. I waited...for a time that seemed like hours, then a person from the hotel came to tell me that, to his great regret, Mr. Samson François could not receive me as planned (I don't remember the reason, only my terrible disappointment) but that if I wanted to forgive him I would come back such and such a day at such and such a time, which I did, and even the scenario...hard to catch Samson François! But I hung on and the third time was the right one: while I had waited even longer than usual, suddenly I recognized the famous red cape in front of me.

Suddenly everything became magical, I entered a room where the piano was sitting and which was filled with orchids - a flower he loved and could not do without. I played him the nocturne in Db by Chopin and I had the joy of noticing that he was very moved. He told me right away that I had a lot of talent and that he recognized a "true nature" in me. He gave me some advice, among which was never to restrict this nature, that it was my most precious treasure. It was one of the most beautiful days of my life and I have never been able to play this nocturne afterwards without thinking of that memorable day.

### **C. R. Could you describe him (physique, temperament, character)?**

M. B. Samson François was a small, frail man with a vulnerable appearance. On the other hand, I was always struck by the contrast between his fragility and the Olympian

impression he gave when he was at the piano, on stage he suddenly appeared like a giant! He was an extremely refined man, sophisticated in his tastes, who could only conceive of living surrounded by luxury and comfort, beauty and harmony. He shunned conflict, outbursts and vulgarity. He was hyper-sensitive and could get sick over a small thing. He spoke little, cultivated mystery and his romantic aura. Although he was very cultured, he was not an intellectual but a deeply intuitive person who followed his instincts. He preserved himself and fiercely defended his freedom.

**C. R. One of his outstanding character traits?**

M. B. He was a being of boundless generosity, he loved to give, to offer, he offered chocolates to his impresari, to the sound engineers, to his tuner, he offered flowers and perfumes at the slightest pretext (or as soon as he had something to be forgiven!). His largesse was legendary. He had kept a child's soul. At the restaurant, he was so frugal that he ordered almost everything on the menu, just for the pleasure of it, even if he ate like a bird. Around him there was a magical, inspired atmosphere, he was one of the last great romantics, a great poet in life as in his art. The only thing about him that I saw him intransigent was that he always refused to offer tickets for his concerts, he was so generous, he absolutely wanted people to buy them!

**C. R. How would you describe your relationship with him?**

M. B. He took me under his wing. He often gave me advice between two recordings in the mythical Salle Wagram, where he recorded his records for Pathé-Marconi. He took advantage of this to have me do some tests and introduce me to the top of the musical world of the time. I believe that he was, against all odds, quite happy with this new master/disciple role where the "Pygmalion" dimension was not absent. But most importantly, he appreciated my musical nature. Our relationship was not the fruit of chance but the fruit of a meeting.

**C. R. His human aspect in relation to his students?**

M. B. Samson was an international concert performer who played all over the world, he didn't really have time to teach and didn't have any students other than Bruno Rigutto and myself, which we felt was a great privilege, so I can only speak from my experience. He was very attentive and always tried to give you confidence and to make you look good. He never pressed the negative and instead encouraged the positive and self-expression. At the piano I wanted to imitate him of course! And it was he himself who made me understand that I had to follow my own nature "it's the best way to imitate me". Besides, can one imitate the inimitable?

**C. R. His consideration of others, his bonds and his respect?**

M. B. He was extremely polite, not to mention chivalrous towards women! He liked to be surrounded but he remained elusive and had his own world. He was very discreet about himself and did not reveal much. As a public man, his advice was "answer journalists but never say anything personal". He could sometimes be tyrannical and handle emotional blackmail with great talent! Although often disconcerting, it was impossible to blame Samson for anything, he was forgiven everything and he always got what he wanted: I saw him convince his record company to grant him absolutely unbelievable advances on contracts! And then a few great piano notes made you forget everything!

**C. R. Could you define his approach to the instrument?**

M.B. He didn't like the notion of effort and shunned overly scholastic approaches that he felt were counterproductive. He only went to the piano when he felt like it; he confided to me that he never worked more than 4 hours a day, except when he was asked to perform the complete rhapsodies of Liszt in 12 days! He never worked in the morning because "the sound of the piano in the morning is not sound but noise". This detestation came from his childhood, during training courses with Alfred Cortot, who used to wake up his students in the morning at the crowing of the rooster to take them to see the sunrise before starting the morning piano exercises. A real trauma!

**C. R. How did he treat the technical aspect in class: what exercises, what studies, what advice for flexibility in general, control of the touch, agility of the fingers etc.?**

M. B. He was adept at the great repertoire even for the purely technical approach: Schumann's toccata, the studies of Chopin, Liszt and Debussy etc.

He was particularly sensitive to the touch of a pianist - just as he was particularly sensitive to the timbre of a voice. "Caressing the piano rather than hitting the notes." "The piano must sing, each finger is a voice," he said.

For him the left hand was as important as the right hand, if not more so. "Always keep in mind Chopin's motto: The left hand is your choirmaster.

He never worked with separate hands, it seemed to him an unbalanced and wrong approach, a bit like walking on one leg. It is true that he had an uncommon facility and that no score seemed particularly complicated to him.

He had an exceptional sense of phrasing. Although Samson was known to take liberties with the text, to the despair of his record companies, thanks to his unerring instinct he never made a musical mistake. One of his basic exercises "to get the piece in place" was to play it by systematically stopping at the end of each phrase before moving on to the next (an exercise I still employ today). "It is better to have false notes than false phrasing. How true!

**C. R. Did he give a particular program of study and practice?**

M. B. He was the gift personified and had a natural technique that allowed him to play everything without much work. However, he was not against doing scales and certain exercises (Czerny, Moszkowsky etc.) "to warm up the fingers, if that makes you feel better", but he advised changing them almost every day so as not to get bored! He preferred to explore the repertoire where he found "all the scales and exercises in addition to the music". This was a great advantage for me who didn't have much repertoire at the time.

**C. R. How did he treat the musical aspect in class: the theory of style, phrasing, legato playing, agogics, gradation of nuances, etc...**

M. B. He had a very sure instinct and did not mentalize anything, for him everything flowed naturally. He naively thought that this was the case for everyone! From then on, he never imagined he would have to explain music. He had prodigious hands, with large palms and wonderfully free fingers. His approach to piano playing was totally free, which gave him such a deep sound that "one had the impression that the piano had several floors" as one critic once said.

He had his own way of working the legato, borrowed from jazz: instead of voluntarily trying to play as tightly as possible by sticking his fingers to the keyboard, he would, on the

contrary, air his fingers by throwing them, which, against all odds, gave a wonderful legato! Just like the rubato that he played ... on the metronome! Paradoxical but effective in order not to touch the rhythmic structure of the work while giving free rein to his expression.

### **C. R. How did he pass on his knowledge?**

M. B. Samson François was a night owl, his lessons were not orthodox and you had to be ready to take a lesson at 2 am! This often happened after a concert, that's when he really started to live. In fact he was living in reverse!

### **C. R. Did he play a lot in class or did he talk a lot?**

M. B. Once he had listened to you attentively, he would simply sit down at the piano to "show you how it's done". Then he would ask you to play the passage again to make sure you understood what he was getting at. And he would do it again until he was convinced, he was very patient. The sessions could last 20 minutes or an hour. Incredibly, he would not consider charging for it!

### **C. R. What direction did he give?**

M. B. Samson was not a piano teacher as we usually think of him. His advice was that of an interpreter. He favored atmospheres favorable to creation and recommended above all to find the "spirit" of a work, the rest came from himself. Nothing could be further from the truth, as I have often experienced.

He did have a few concrete practices, such as never working for more than an hour at a time and taking a break for even a few minutes, or playing his pieces several times on the metronome on the eve of a concert (he was a master of rubato and knew the benefits of the metronome!) He also recommended not to listen too much to himself during the recording so as not to freeze the inspiration by seeking an improbable perfection.

### **C. R. Which composers did he study?**

M. B. While being from the outset a student apart, Samson François had studied at the Paris Conservatory and at the Ecole Normale. He had benefited from a traditional classical education by the greatest teachers and artists of the time, Marguerite Long and especially Alfred Cortot, who passed on to us this marvelous French school directly from Chopin. Although he was, by his own admission, a rebellious student, this teaching had formed him and he still had the fundamentals. He therefore recommended never to stray too far from the great classics in his daily life, insisting on Bach's preludes and fugues "one must always have a prelude and fugue on the fire", Mozart's and Beethoven's sonatas, the great romantic studies, Chopin, Liszt, etc., this was the basis from which one could, according to him, go on to all the repertoires. In addition, one summer he asked me to bring him the Schumann concerto, the children's scenes, Franck's Prelude, Choral and Fugue, Chopin's Funeral Sonata and Ravel's Scarbo from Gaspard de la nuit!

### **C. R. Which performers did he advise to listen to?**

M. B. His idols were Horowitz and...Art Tatum! He was fascinated by their virtuosity and originality. He was strongly influenced by jazz which, according to him, had taught him more than all his years at the conservatory! He would often meet up with his jazz friends and

spend entire nights improvising with them. He was very close to many of them and introduced me to the violinist Stephane Grappelli one day when he was performing at the Paris Hilton Hotel with his band: what a wonderful man and what an incomparable violinist!

Samson loved America where he had had great success and encouraged me to go when the pianist Byron Janis, who was a student of Vladimir Horowitz, invited me to come and work with him in New York. There I found some fabulous recordings of Horowitz that were not available in France, which I intended to give to Samson on my return, but he died at the same time. I kept them, they mean a lot to me.

**C. R. What advice did he give about daily work, about a career in general, about being a pianist?**

M. B. He used to say to me, "Never go to the piano to work, but as if you were meeting a friend. He didn't see his career as a "profession" per se, and he didn't see himself as a pianist, but as a poet who used the piano rather than the pen to express himself. For him, being an artist was a state, not a profession, even though he made a very good living playing. He never kept any of his concert programs, he was not interested in that. He preferred the ephemeral, fleeting side of the concert. "You don't need to have worked too hard on a piece to play it well, you just need to know it well enough but not too well to keep it fresh. You have to be surprised when you play it. He took all the risks, looking first and foremost for what he called "the blue note", that moment of grace that left an indelible memory and was worth an entire concert! We would listen to him without knowing "what was going to happen", it was breathtaking, magical, and that's what the public loved about him.

He was a bird on the wing, however, at the time of his career when I met him he was beginning to think about a different future and had conceived a rather original idea: being on tour in Turkey, he had been received there like a prince (an oriental prince, that is) and had been dazzled! The poem "L'invitation au voyage" (Invitation to a journey) represented his ideal of life (Baudelaire was his favorite poet) and he said he had met this ideal there. It is necessary to go back to a time when Turkey was undoubtedly rather different from what it is today, even decadent it still remained some splendors of the Ottoman empire. My mother being of Armenian origin, I had been lulled in my childhood by the stories of my grandmother who had known a mythical Turkey, a happy Turkey of which she kept a great nostalgia despite the genocide of which she and her family had been victims. Samson's project was to open a piano school in Turkey because "do you see me in 10 years time still walking the planet with an old Chopin ballad on my back? He did not see himself growing old and had a strong premonition of his imminent death, he often spoke about it.

**C. R. Did he recommend a particular piano to work on?**

M. B. I don't remember him owning a piano. Being very nomadic, he worked either on rented pianos or on magnificent concert pianos. I don't think he was a piano maniac like Michelangeli, for example, who demanded to travel with his piano and who tuned it himself. Samson was very well surrounded. The people of the profession, for whom he had the greatest respect, went out of their way for him like no other! Helmut Klem, his regular tuner in France, was a star in his field (a great man who knew all the great pianists of the 20th century, an encyclopedia all by himself! Everyone adored Samson and he always enjoyed a privileged treatment.

**C. R. What did he pass on to you that is essential?**

M. B. He was one of the most gifted, if not the most gifted, pianists of the 20th century and one of the last representatives of what can be considered the "golden age" of the piano. I am not sure that a Samson François would be possible today. Such a romantic and free approach to the instrument is almost unthinkable nowadays and might not even be understood. The values of our time are much more materialistic, we want the obvious, the tangible; fragility, the right to make mistakes are perceived as weaknesses whereas for Samson these elements are inherent and inseparable to the state of artist, even desirable. I am happy to have known through him this exceptional time of which I keep preciously the memory and which remains my reference.

**C. R. Did he play a lot in concert? What repertoire?**

M. B. Samson spent his time on airplanes and in concert. It was very rare that he went more than a week without playing in public. He had a vast repertoire, because even if deciphering was not his strong point, he learned very quickly, which allowed him to explore a lot of music. Moreover, he was extremely curious and all styles interested him. On the other hand, he was very selective in the choice of his programs, which he composed carefully. He used to say, and this had the value of advice: "The choice of a recital program is for 70% of its success: it must be conceived as a journey through the music where each step is a wonderful discovery. Of course he was known for his interpretations of romantic music, Chopin in particular, which he played like no other, as well as French music, but I think that if he had lived longer we would have heard him more often in Bach and Mozart.

**C. R. What is the lesson of his teaching?**

M. B. Cultivate your uniqueness. What could be more important for an artist, I would even say for each of us? And also to avoid intellectualizing music, not to become a "piano slave". After his death, the standards of the profession became much more "virtuoso", with emblematic figures such as Argerich and Pollini etc., and then the Russian and Asian waves. I was still very young when he passed away and naturally I was influenced by various and varied influences. After an incursion (for my part I would even say a descent) into this frantic competition of "always more virtuosity, pyrotechnics, perfection", having noticed that this state of mind was a source of extreme tension and did not succeed for me, I happily returned to my first loves and to my deepest nature, the one that allowed me to establish a privileged relationship with the Artist with a capital A that was Samson François.

**C. R. A poignant memory?**

M. B. I'm not giving away any secrets when I say that towards the end Samson had become quite uneven and very unpredictable in his performances. He was aware of this and had developed a great deal of apprehension about his states on the day of the concert. Often he would lie trembling at the bottom of his bed and would not be able to get up because of his great fear, convinced that he would not be able to "play". A great suffering.

**C. R. A more difficult memory?**

M. B. Certainly the announcement of his death. I was in New York at the time where I was working under the direction of Byron Janis, I learned the news in the newspaper. On my return to France we were to play together in concert the concerto for 2 pianos and percussion of Bartok, unfortunately this project never saw the light of day because he had disappeared in the meantime.

### **C. R. Did you exchange correspondence?**

M. B. Samson was the champion of little words, which he spread everywhere at night while everyone was sleeping! During my internship with him in Menton, I found them on the scores, on the piano, on the breakfast table, etc. They contained the instructions of the day, for example "start by playing 2 or 3". They contained the instructions of the day, as for example "start by playing 2 or 3 times the toccata of Schumann to train your fingers, then study a variation of Szymanowski (a Polish composer he was particularly fond of and that he made me discover) then...wait for my alarm clock!"