

The Washington Post  
February 6, 2015

## Music

# Aldo Ciccolini, 89 Virtuoso pianist shed light on the underappreciated

by [Anne Midgette](#)

Aldo Ciccolini, a pianist who combined virtuosity with elegant reserve and over more than six decades of performing drew acclaim for his interpretations of underappreciated compositions and composers, died at his home in Asnieres-sur-Seine, outside Paris. He was 89.

His manager, the pianist Paul Blacher, announced the death to Agence France-Presse without revealing the cause. He said Mr. Ciccolini died late Jan. 31 or early Feb. 1.

Mr. Ciccolini was born in Italy but, as he said in an interview with *Le Figaro* two years ago, “I feel I definitely have a French soul.”

He arrived in Paris in 1949 for the prestigious Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud piano competition — he was one of two winners that year — and stayed on to study with Long, Alfred Cortot and Yves Nat. Mr. Ciccolini made France his permanent home, taking citizenship in 1969. The next year, he began an 18-year tenure as professor at the Conservatoire de Paris, where his students included pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet and the future conductor Fabio Luisi.

His turn to teaching may have been one reason he was somewhat underappreciated in the United States, where he never received quite the acclaim of some flashier soloists. Another is his choice of repertoire: He was rare among concert pianists for focusing on quirky corners.

His 1960s recordings of [Erik Satie](#) (1866-1925) helped bolster that composer’s reputation; other recordings in his impressive catalogue featured the little-known French composer [Déodat de Séverac](#), piano music by the Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini and works by the Czech composer Leoš Janáček.

Hungarian composer Franz Liszt was another staple of Mr. Ciccolini’s repertoire — often less-performed works, such as the collection “[Harmonies poetiques et religieuses](#),” which he offered as one entire recital program. Not that he wasn’t perfectly capable of taking on the demanding war horses; concertos by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Camille Saint-Saëns were all in his arsenal.

Mr. Ciccolini was a contained and sometimes understated performer. In the *Le Figaro* interview, he defined interpretation as “humility in the face of the text.” His devotion to the piano (usually a Fazioli) led some to regard him as a kind of priest of music.

Yet he also brought to his playing a quality that more than one critic described as “Mediterranean warmth,” and, often, a sense of the antic. His Satie is perfectly clear, yet robust and a touch smoky; his Claude Debussy, luminous and open, without contrived mystery. “We pianists need to tell a story,” he said.

Aldo Ciccolini was born in Naples on Aug. 15, 1925. His father, a typographer, supported his son’s precocious talent early on. After hearing the 3-year-old Aldo copying his sisters’ piano lessons, he asked him, “Are you ready to sacrifice your life to music?”

After intensive private studies, Aldo entered the Naples Conservatory at age 9, thanks to a special dispensation from its director.

During World War II, his family home was bombed by Allied planes. Later, Mr. Ciccolini played for American soldiers and in bars to support his family. He was able to pick back up, however, by the time his mother entered him in the Long competition.

In the wake of that victory, he made significant debuts in New York and London and started the steady rise to international fame. Although his greatest acclaim came as a soloist, he was also a noted musical partner to opera singers, including Nicolai Gedda and [Elisabeth Schwarzkopf](#), and the violinist Jacques Thibaud.

“Ciccolini avoids standard clichés, and his is one of the finest lyric talents of the piano today,” *Washington Post* music critic Joseph McLellan wrote in 1983 when Mr. Ciccolini performed a program at the University of Maryland that included works by Maurice Ravel and Franz Schubert. “He makes it easy to forget that the piano is essentially a mechanical contraption, capable of doing very complex things and splendid in its dynamic range, but limited in expressive possibilities. He makes the piano breathe like a human voice — like a variety of human voices.”

In his 80s, Mr. Ciccolini engaged in a kind of comeback with a string of performances and new recordings. In 2010, he gave a concert for his 85th birthday, while EMI released a 56-CD set of his complete recordings. He performed nearly until his death.

He never married and had no immediate survivors.

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