

CD REVIEW

Frédéric Chopin, *Ballades; Berceuse; Mazurkas*

Yundi Li *pf*

Deutsche Grammophon 4812443, 2016 (1 CD: 55 minutes)

For many years, Chopin's music has been the cornerstone of Yundi Li's repertoire. As the youngest first-prize winner of the International Chopin Piano Competition (and the first Chinese pianist to clinch this award), and as a jury member of the same competition 15 years later, Li has established himself as a Chopin specialist not only in his own country but also in the global concert stage. Since the release of his first all-Chopin album by the Deutsche Grammophon in 2002, Li has recorded many complete cycles of Chopin's piano works, including the scherzi and the impromptus (2004), the nocturnes (2010), and the preludes (2015). With this recording of the four ballades, Li takes a big step toward a more complete survey of Chopin's music.

In recent years, Li has often been compared with another superstar pianist, Lang Lang. Both are Chinese, and both were born in 1982, but here the similarities end. In an analysis of the public personas of the two pianists, Shzr Ee Tan associates Li with the 'literary' and Lang with the 'martial'; these two characteristics belong to a well-established dichotomy found in traditional Chinese aesthetics.¹ According to this critical reception, the 'martial' Lang brings an overwhelming sense of extravaganza to his performances, whereas the 'literary' Li possesses high proficiency in literature and art, mainly because of his reserved musical character and more inward mode of pianism.

On this album, Li's contained, structured and understated performances exemplify aspects of a 'literary style'. Although Chopin's ballades contain passages that embody the nineteenth-century virtuosic style, notably in their applause-seeking finales,² Li's renditions take a more introspective approach, highlighting the poetic quality of the works. In an age in which performers tend to show off their technical prowess, Li's tempos in these virtuosic passages are surprisingly slow. For example, in the First Ballade, op. 23, Li plays most of the virtuosic figurative passages and the waltz episode in a measured, safe manner. As a result, when the lyrical second theme returns as an impassioned fortissimo statement in the recapitulation (at bar 166), the emotional climax is underplayed. This also applies to the closing section, marked *Presto con fuoco* by the composer himself. Li emphasizes the melodic contour and brings out the inner voice,

¹ Shzr Ee Tan, 'New Chinese Masculinities on the Piano: Lang Lang and Li Yundi', in *Gender in Chinese Music*, ed. Rachel A. Harris, Rowan Pease and Shzr Ee Tan (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 132–51.

² Jim Samson, *Chopin: The Four Ballades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.

imbuing the passage with extra textual clarity. However, the emphatic ending sounds somewhat too controlled, even mannered.

This controlled style can be found in the other three ballades, too. In the Second Ballade, op. 38, Li plays the A-minor second theme (also marked *Presto con fuoco*) with lucid articulation and a thin texture, so that the bass and inner melodies can be heard clearly. The emotional contrast between the two themes is, once again, underplayed. In the Third Ballade, op. 47, the only tempo marking comes at the beginning: *Allegretto*. In his 'literary' performance, Li interprets this instruction literally. He plays with a consistent tempo throughout and proceeds from one section to another in a continuous and smooth manner; even the *accelerando* near the end is modest. This interpretation results in a particularly strong sense of structural coherence. Yet the passionate ending may sound too contained and careful: in the final bars, the right hand's downward runs barely form melodic lines and instead sound as a series of individual notes. Li had played the Fourth Ballade op. 52 in the Chopin Competition in 2000; recording the same piece 16 years later, he is now more than one minute slower. Among the four ballades, Li's tendency toward slower tempos works best in the Fourth, probably because of the emotional depth of the work, its contrapuntal intricacy and the unpredictability in its formal design.

Altogether, Li takes a reflective approach to the four ballades, strengthening structural coherence at the expense of extravagant drama. For ears accustomed to more impassioned renditions of these works, Li's account may sound plainspoken. However, for those who warm to a more 'literary' style, Li's approach may suit their taste. Li's constrained approach is also exemplified in his reading of the *Berceuse* op. 57. Beginning with a slow baseline tempo, he plays the piece in a quasi-metronomic way, only seldomly employing pronounced *accelerando* or *rubato*. Most pianists of the older generation, such as Alfred Cortot, Arthur Rubinstein and even Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, constantly used tempo modification at the *variante* (sectional) level in order to generate an ebb and flow and to highlight the structural organization of the work.³ Li, on the other hand, only occasionally uses localized *rubato* or agogic accents, and only then as a way to colour certain notes. Structural *rubato* is also kept to a minimum. He uses the sustaining pedal meticulously, resulting in a clean, lucid articulation. The *Berceuse* gives ample room for pianists to demonstrate their style of tempo modification and *rubato*. If, as Liszt once said, Chopin's *rubato* is 'wind playing in the leaves',⁴ Li's *rubato* in the *Berceuse* is a cool, smooth and continuous spring breeze. This assessment extends to Li's recording of the Four Mazurkas op. 17; here, too, he varies his tempo much less than many other performers do.⁵ Suffused with polished phrases and delicate details, Li's reading of the Four Mazurkas brings out the poetic character of these works, yet undermines their link to traditional folk dance.

³ See Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Cortot's *Berceuse*', *Music Analysis* 34/3 (2015): 335–63, for discussion of Cortot's performance of this piece.

⁴ A statement by Liszt when describing Chopin's style of *rubato*, quoted in Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher: As Seen by his Pupils* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 51.

⁵ Neta Spiro, Nicolas Gold, and John Rink, 'The Form of Performance: Analyzing Pattern Distribution in Select Recordings of Chopin's Mazurka Op. 24 No. 2', *Musicae Scientiae* 14/2 (2010): 23–55.

Overall, in this recording, Li fully demonstrates a new approach to Chopin's piano music, as described in the accompanying booklet: his goal is '[to] dismiss any notion of sentimentality, stressing the need for a Chopin pianist to avoid being either mannered or emphatic'. This might be a tenable conception of Chopin's musical style, but it is a conception that I do not espouse. It is the mannered and emphatic playing found in many of the greatest recordings of Chopin's music that captures the spirit of the composer, on the one hand, and captivates the audience, on the other. This album may mark a pivotal point in Li's musical career. Gone is the technically accomplished young Chinese cynosure who conquered Warsaw by his eloquent and genial playing. In front of us is a middle-aged and even more 'literary' musician who favours an understated – and perhaps artificial – approach to Chopin's music.

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