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Chopin 24 *Préludes*; *Nocturnes*; *Mazurkas*; *Scherzo*  
Maurizio Pollini *pf*  
Deutsche Grammophon 477-9530, 2012 (1 CD: 59 minutes).

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Maurizio Pollini has been viewed by many as the pianistic gold standard: technical command and fluency beyond imagining, ironclad memory, a huge repertoire from a variety of different styles, and unbelievable accuracy. His prize-winning early-1970s Deutsche Grammophon recording of Chopin's two books of études has been the admiration, obsession, and (ultimately) the despair of legions of piano students, generation after generation, and many believe it has never been surpassed. Small wonder that even as an eighteen-year-old participant in the Warsaw International Chopin Competition in 1960, his playing moved judge Artur Schnabel to make the much-quoted observation, 'That boy can play the piano better than any of us jurors'.

Chopin's music has been a cornerstone of Pollini's performing and recording repertoire since early on, yet his aesthetic is definitively modernist: emotionally restrained (maugre the technical fireworks), lean, architectural, and – to risk a freighted word – objective. What is more, from an interpretive perspective it is never really shocking; Pollini does what one would expect (better, often faster, certainly more accurately and dependably), and seemingly with enough technique in reserve as to suggest he never even approaches his limits. This drives pianists unfortunate enough to be human to madness.

Yet one thinks of Charles Hallé's assessment of a Chopin passage played by Anton Rubinstein, the dominant pianistic lion of the late nineteenth century: 'Clever, but not Chopinesque'.<sup>1</sup> Even leaving aside the documented aspects of Chopin's own characteristic and universally celebrated pianism that are not to be found in Pollini's playing – a predominance of *piano* and *pianissimo* playing, a wide palette of articulations, rubatos both agogic and soloistic (the latter sometimes called 'contrametric' or 'divided-hand' rubato) and an interpretive caprice that made every performance markedly unique – Pollini's Chopin, as an exemplar of the international style of recent decades, is unlikely to offend anyone. He plays Chopin 'the way Chopin is played' – in other words, with more accuracy and control than one would imagine to be possible, but still squarely within the modern piano tradition in which *everything* is played. The CD booklet, tellingly, quotes a phrase from *The Guardian* about how 'the pianist's refusal to emote exposes tremendous depths of feeling'. So if Pollini is an interpretive endpoint, one would have to say that it is the endpoint on a path that very many pianists seek to travel.

So it says something that, for his seventieth birthday, Pollini decided to record a selection of Chopin works he had already (for the most part) put down on disc. The heart of the recording is the *Préludes*, op. 28: one for each major and minor key, 24 compositional studies in *chopinisme*, a wide-ranging sampler of the composer's moods, styles and idioms. In addition, Pollini offers new recordings of two of the most famous nocturnes, a famous opus of mazurkas, and a scherzo: a not atypical

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<sup>1</sup> James Huneker, *Chopin: The Man and His Music* (1909; New York: Dover, 1966): 54.

Chopin collection. And while the first expectation might be that this is one more 'My Favourite Chopin' anthology by a famous pianist, we might hope that it is in these preludes that Pollini will choose to widen his interpretive view.

Quite the contrary. With allowances for the different acoustic and piano sound, the preludes sound like outtakes from the recording sessions of his 1975 recording – the little ornamental inflections of the Prelude no. 2 in A Minor,<sup>2</sup> for example, seem identical. And while a return to the beloved repertoire of a pianist's professional flowering might promise more loving, thoughtful tempi (I am thinking, here, of the old saw about young pianists showing off their technique, middle-aged pianists demonstrating what deep musicians they are, and older pianists listening for the inner voices), Pollini seems to be making even quicker work of the preludes than he did four decades ago. In several cases, there is more depth to be heard in the earlier recording: the funereal keening of the B section of the C Minor Prelude is one such example, and the capricious scampering of the Prelude in C Sharp Minor another. The B Minor Prelude is one of several cases where the slower tempo of the earlier recording enabled the young Pollini to do more with voicing and melodic profile; in the recent recording, it is not clear what might compensate for the de-emphasis on those elements. There is no indication, in sum, that the pianist has done any real rethinking, unless it was to decide that the opus would benefit from a more *pro forma* reading, and to my ear the earlier recording is unquestionably the more personal and thoughtful one.

If Pollini's newer reading of the op. 28 Preludes gives no hint as to why he should have rerecorded them, we might hope for a different result from the op. 27 Nocturnes. That the nocturne genre was most closely associated with Chopin's essential genius was a point agreed upon by Huneker, by Chopin's grand-student and devotee Jean Kleczyński, and by most other observers, and it is inarguable that in these works Chopin's *fioriture* and cantabile writing reach their apex. At least with op. 27 no. 2, however, Pollini's earlier interpretation<sup>3</sup> again has more to offer: despite a brittle recording aesthetic, Pollini shaped the voices in Chopin's operatic duet to flirt as one hopes the imaginary singers might have done, and his phrasing was limpid and sincere; the newer version is merely a piano piece. Sadly, in neither recording of the Nocturne in C Sharp Minor, op. 27 no. 1 – 'a masterpiece ... the great essay in the form' according to James Huneker<sup>4</sup> – does Pollini find any way to surprise or delight.

Pollini has not previously recorded any mazurkas, so to do so at age 70 is to make a statement, as if questions will be answered and we will learn something about why this most catholic, encyclopaedic, and technically irreproachable pianist held off until now. No such epiphany awaits: op. 27 no. 1 in C Minor is flaccid and uninteresting, and the pianist does not even seem much interested in Chopin's meticulous articulation indications; it is uniformly sweet, in a bland sort of way, but entirely uncharacteristic. Op. 30 no. 2 in B Minor is predictably dramatic but neither personal nor enlightening, and no. 3 in D Flat Major is just conventional – maddeningly conventional. Rhythmic inflections are neither characteristically Polish nor personally

<sup>2</sup> Frédéric Chopin, *Préludes, op. 28*, Maurizio Pollini (piano), Deutsche Grammophon 2530-550, 1975, LP.

<sup>3</sup> Frédéric Chopin, *Nocturnes*, Maurizio Pollini, Deutsche Grammophon 4775718, 2005, CD.

<sup>4</sup> Huneker, *Chopin: The Man and His Music*, 145.

Pollinian; rather, they follow a conventional series of tempo modifications that take no particular account of Chopin's careful notational cues, including *con anima* in the B section, accents that have (in Chopin) clear agogic implications, the rhythm  $\text{♩}$  to contrast with  $\text{♩}$ , and various other indications of rhythmic complexity. No. 4 in C Sharp Minor continues the pattern: Pollini goes through the motions, but this is a very foreign language that he seems not to care about learning. Why he would choose, then, at this level of maturity, to record an opus of Chopin's mazurkas remains an unanswered question.

To conclude, it seems instructive to return to the quotation from *The Guardian* about 'the pianist's refusal to emote'. It is not a matter of *emoting*, it seems foolish to have to say; it is a matter of *interpreting*. One can overact Shakespeare, but it is hard to imagine a literalist interpretation of the Bard's poetry that would 'let it speak for itself', as is somewhat idiotically said of music, which in fact requires performers' conceptual input for full realization. I am well aware, be it said, of the apparent *lèse-majesté* of my taking one of the great modern pianistic techniques to task for perfunctory readings in a recording that should be summative, mature and valedictory. Yet, his Chopin recital is not only disappointing; it isn't even clear what the goal might have been in producing it in the first place. There are no new insights to be gained, and it is, paradoxically, the earlier readings that are the more mature, insightful and penetrating.

Jonathan D. Bellman  
 University of Northern Colorado  
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Handel (arr. Felix Mendelssohn) *Acis and Galatea*  
 Jeni Bern (Galatea) *soprano* Benjamin Hulett (Acis) *tenor*  
 Nathan Vale (Damon) *tenor*  
 Brindley Sherratt (Polyphemus) *bass*  
 Stephen Darlington *conductor*  
 Christ Church Cathedral Choir and Oxford Philomusica  
 Nimbus 6201, 2013 (1 CD: DDD: 76 minutes).

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Felix Mendelssohn's arrangement of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* is a curious work. In 1828 Karl Friedrich Zelter asked his former pupil to arrange Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum* (HWV 283) and *Acis and Galatea* (HWV 49a) for the Berlin Singakademie, whose focus was the study and performance of music from the past. The Singakademie under Zelter's direction performed Mendelssohn's *Acis* arrangement on 13 January 1831 while he was away in Italy. Despite numerous opportunities, Mendelssohn himself never performed his arrangement, choosing instead to use excerpts from Mozart's 1788 arrangement of *Acis and Galatea* for an 1836 Leipzig performance. He wrote to his friend Devrient that, 'In the score of "Acis" I have found, amongst many good things, several which I could not now endorse, and want to correct before it can pass into other hands, because I consider this matter of re-instrumenting as requiring the utmost