

Maurizio Pollini's concert in the Washington area on Wednesday May 17th repeated the program he played in Chicago on Sunday the 14th. The first half was all Chopin: two pairs of Nocturnes, Opp. 55 and 48, the first Ballade, and Polonaise f# minor, Op. 44. The Nocturnes were gorgeous. Pollini especially brought out the contrapuntal harmonies in two of them – not a feature normally associated with Romantic piano music, but actually Chopin used quite a bit of counterpoint in his works (Bach was a great influence on him), but his being different from the Baroque, it is often butchered by performers and goes unrecognized by most listeners. The Ballade was very good, perhaps a shade too slow in spots. The Polonaise was just OK – wonderful opening and middle section, which is called a mazurka but actually by rhythm and tempo is a kujawiak. But parts of the ending, which repeats the opening, were played too fast. After all, this form evolved from the folk dance called 'chodzony', but in spots Pollini's rendition was more akin to 'biegany.'

The second half was all Liszt, and not my kind of music. It opened with four miniatures from late in the composer's life, dark and gloomy pieces. I had not heard this music before and have very little desire to hear it again. The close was the Sonata in b minor – a piece which I don't much like, finding it episodic and disjointed, a series of musical non-sequiturs. Despite what the WashPost critic says, I did not find that this performance rescued the piece. This program was far removed from Liszt's wonderful piano music of the rhapsodies, etudes, waltzes, consolations, etc.

We got four encores. First was a Debussy Prelude, 'The Flooded Cathedral', brilliantly played. Then a Chopin Nocturne and the Revolutionary Etude, both done to absolute perfection. Finally, the last of the Op. 28 Preludes, the one Schumann called 'cannons hidden in flowers.' Done well, but in spots could have used a little more firepower – it was not quite angry enough. Maybe he was getting tired.

Still, on balance, a very satisfying experience.

Here is a review:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/18/AR2006051802226.html>

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From: O'Brien-Trefil, Wanda T.  
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Subject: RE: Pollini concert

Dr. Tom DeLeo, my Advanced Music Theory prof at University of Maryland (who had two Ph.D. degrees, in Mathematics and Music Theory) referred to Chopin as the second greatest contrapunctalist after Bach. When examining the way Chopin wrote his musical scores, they are often clearly written in 3 or 4 layers, being stemmed up or down accordingly to distinguish the horizontal lines from each other. Dr. DeLeo's point was that only through the study of Music Theory and clear understanding of the contrapunctal structure of Chopin's works, will performers perform the music with the intricacy and subtlety that Chopin intended.

All in all, Maurizio Pollini is one of my most favorite interpreters of Chopin.

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