

Chopin

New

Four Scherzos – No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20; No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 31; No. 3 in C sharp minor, Op. 39; No. 4 in E, Op. 54. Three Impromptus – No. 1 in A flat, Op. 29; No. 2 in F sharp, Op. 36; No. 3 in G flat, Op. 51. Fantaisie-Impromptu in C sharp minor, Op. 66.

Bernard d'Ascoli (piano)

Athene Minerva 23024 (full price, 57 minutes).

Website www.divine-art.com. Producer Joanna Leach.

Engineer Mike Beville. Date 2004.

Feb. 2006

Chopin Complete Nocturnes.

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Athene Minerva 23201 (medium price, two discs, 1 hour 45 minutes). Website www.divine-art.com.

Producer Joanna Leach. Engineer Mike Beville. Date 2004.

This is the third recording of the Chopin *Nocturnes* that I have reviewed in the three most recent issues of *IRA* – a veritable plethora, even for pieces as well known and loved as these. Fortunately the present version is of considerable interest, as it presents a personal and individual view of the *Nocturnes* that also remains a 'central' one. Bernard d'Ascoli has a sound that is clear, liquescent and very appropriate to Chopin. He includes the two early *Nocturnes* Nos. 20 and 21, but they are sensibly placed at the end of the second disc, which not only reflects their numeration but means that they can be heard immediately after No. 19 in E minor, Op. 72 No. 1, which is likewise a youthful work published posthumously.

During the lovely B flat minor *Nocturne*, Op. 9 No. 1 (first in the published order) I was initially concerned about some audible 'splits' where the left hand comes fractionally before the right, but was relieved to find that this never becomes intrusive as the cycle

unfolds. In fact, d'Ascoli employs it rather less than certain other pianists who consider it an idiomatic feature of Chopin-playing. The climax of the middle section almost exceeds the bounds of the piece, but this is a rare misjudgement and he compensates with a magical *pianissimo* at the echo effect in Chopin's D flat major 'horn call'. In the E flat *Nocturne*, Op. 9 No. 2 d'Ascoli introduces several of the composer's own melodic variants, confirming it as a pianistic Bellini aria. This doesn't quite withstand repeated listening, though at first it does bring some freshness to a piece that is almost overly familiar.

The sequence proceeds with many incidental pleasures *en route*. d'Ascoli is very sentient to the acoustical construction of Chopin's textures, and he knows how to balance the right and left hands so that they blend into an overall sonority, as in the A flat major, Op. 32 No. 2. On the other hand, in the G major, Op. 37 No. 2 he is able to alternately emphasize the higher or lower harmonics of its shifting *chiaroscuro*. These performances are very 'shaped' and d'Ascoli's use of *rubato* is noticeable, though never excessive. What justifies it is that he expands or contracts the pulse in a way that supports the contours of a phrase. In pieces that contain contrasting agitated sections, whether in the middle (Op. 9 No. 3, Op. 15 No. 1) or at the end (Op. 32 No. 1), d'Ascoli projects 'the nightmare within the nocturne' while conserving pianistic and textural clarity.

D'Ascoli's literate, beautifully expressed booklet note (very well translated by Eleanor Harris) finds exactly the right balance between technical and expressive comments. He is a pianist who sounds at one with the instrument, and conveys the feeling that this really is his music. He plays it in a natural, instinctive way that sheds particular light on a self-generating, freely associative piece like the E flat, Op. 55 No. 2, which he describes as a 'never-ending melody, here reaching its apogee'. This is a release whose totality upholds the distinction of its individual parts, and for anyone who loves the *Nocturnes* it is well worth adding to the versions, either classic or more recent, in your own collection.

Stephen Pruslin

Since winning the Barcelona Competition in 1978, the blind French pianist Bernard d'Ascoli has had an active career, performing throughout Europe, the US, Canada, Japan and Australia, and with such leading conductors as Järvi, Litton, Sanderling and Svetlanov. His recordings have been regrettably few, however, though they have included impressive accounts of the Liszt Sonata, Schumann's *Carnaval* and Chopin's four *Ballades*. Recently he has added Schumann's Piano Quintet and the present Chopin disc; and a complete set of Chopin's *Nocturnes* will follow.

He obviously has a strong affinity for Chopin's music and much of the playing on this disc – especially of the *Scherzos* – reminded me of Rubinstein's and Ax's. He shares their directness of approach, firm rhythm, tonal refinement and judicious use of *rubato*. Textures are clear, melodies are shaped with a singer's sense of line, and inner voices are handled with subtlety. The expressive qualities of the music speak more spontaneously than in Pollini's very polished but, to me, overly cool accounts.

D'Ascoli's well-rounded technique meets every demand of the *Scherzos*, from the spiky brilliance of No. 1 to the bravura octaves of No. 3 and the light filigree of No. 4. Although he provides plenty of drive and drama when needed (especially in Nos. 2 and 3), I find that he makes a lasting impression in the more lyrical moments. The breadth and colour he brings to those passages in Nos. 3 and 4 is exceptional, and it's done with dignity and inner strength, with no hint of sentimentality or fussiness. He also has a fine sense of structure, pacing the transition passages notably well, especially those that lead into the codas. The *Impromptus* round out this impressive disc with an ideal combination of flexibility and elegance, the variety of sound and mood in No. 2 being especially notable. I eagerly await this pianist's account of the *Nocturnes*.

Charles Timbrell