



CHOPIN

Complete Nocturnes

Bernard d'Ascoli (piano)

Athene 23201 104:37 mins (2 discs) £ £

Complete Preludes; Nocturne, Op. 48 No. 1; Ballade, Op. 52; Scherzo, Op. 31

Llyr Williams (piano)

Quartz QTZ 2040 71:47 mins £ £

If one polarizes different approaches to performing Chopin's Nocturnes, with Artur Rubinstein's elegance as one ideal and the intense dramatic undercurrents of Maria João Pires as another, Bernard d'Ascoli's approach sits firmly at Pires's end of the spectrum. His are deeply probing, exploratory, at times unsettling performances, yet they undoubtedly carry an underlying authority and conviction that is persuasive even – perhaps especially – when they challenge preconceived notions.

D'Ascoli prefers a full-bodied gutsy sonority to a more obvious caressing beauty, and his approach can be dangerously brusque or volatile. In some Nocturnes – the famous E flat

major, Op. 9 No. 2, for example, which is hardly 'espressivo' or 'dolce' – he shuns surface seductiveness and tonal nuance, yet he retains an imperious sense of line and his direct style of playing is compelling.

Overall, d'Ascoli's bold playing is better suited to the more complex, later Nocturnes (his limited range of *pianissimo* is an issue in some of the earlier ones) and Chopin's two Op. 48 Nocturnes in particular are outstanding. D'Ascoli's rubato – often intense, sometimes counterintuitive – lies at the heart of his music-making, and makes his Chopin alive and self-renewing.

I wish I could be as enthusiastic about Llyr Williams's first commercial disc, also of Chopin. The first impression is the spongy recorded sound – deriving, less successfully, from the same venue as d'Ascoli's Nocturnes. But more seriously, the final impression is that Williams offers little characterisation or imaginative flair in this repertoire. No. 4 of the Preludes is lyrically stiff, No. 8 marred by emergency pedalling, and the virtuoso No. 16 little more than a dutiful run-through. I was also less than convinced by some of his interpretative decisions. Why the heavy *rit* at the end of No. 14? Why so reticent with the glorious tolling A flats at the end of No. 17? Turn to either Pires or Sokolov, and you hear a totally different level of musicianship and pianistic class. And I'm afraid Williams was ill-advised to record Chopin's F minor Ballade, one of his most demanding and elusive masterpieces. A unusually sedate

Second Scherzo rounds off a disc that comes as a let-down given Williams's growing reputation. One can only assume this disc doesn't show him at his best, and I hope future projects will reveal the full scope of his potential. *Tim Parry*

PERFORMANCE (D'ASCOLI) ★★★★★

SOUND ★★★★★

PERFORMANCE (WILLIAMS) ★★

SOUND ★★★

BENCHMARK Nocturnes: Pires DG 447 0962;

Preludes: Sokolov Naïve OP 30336

• BBC Music Direct (Athene) £13.99 inc. p&p

• BBC Music Direct (Quartz) £11.99 inc. p&p