

Maurizio Pollini: Chopin Birthday Recital, Royal Festival Hall, London

Reviewed by Jessica Duchon

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One composer; two bicentenaries: Chopin's birthday is disputed. Some anoraks favour 22 February, others insist on 1 March, so the Royal Festival Hall marked both. Maurizio Pollini's capacity-crowded Chopin recital was the second part of the Polska! year that has cunningly branded together the country and its leading composer.

Pollini, now 68, is the Italian arch-aristocrat of the piano, disciple of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli; he shot to fame winning the Chopin Competition exactly 50 years ago. Back then, impersonal "perfection" was the music world's ideal. He epitomises this approach; it's both a high aim and a bit of a drawback. Pollini is no spinner of sensual fantasy worlds. But he uses his palette of stainless-steel shades to convey unshakeable faith in the music's muscles, sinews and skeleton.

His stage manner remained self-effacing despite the welcoming ovation, but he soon settled into an account of the 24 Preludes that progressed in a single arc with few breaks. The emphasis lay on Chopin's Bach-influenced counterpoint and its inextricable connection with the music's structure. All the meaning was centred in the inner voices and the solid bass line; melodies hovered over harmonic sea-changes, the music's effect rather than its cause. Yet Pollini never played safe: the manic tempi for the G major and B flat minor preludes, for instance, would be impetuous for a pianist half his age. Moments of hypnotic profundity intervened – the sombre C minor prelude, the sliver of perfect A major, the beloved "Raindrop". The second half hotted up with the dazzling Ballade No 1. The two Nocturnes of Op 27 seemed alter egos to one another – the second was the evening's most exquisite moment and the most Italianate, rich with the sonorities of bel canto opera. The official closing item was eight Etudes from Op 25. Pollini recorded the complete Etudes early in his career and tonight the wild octaves of No 10, the whirling "winter wind" of No 11 and the heady waves of the final C minor study proved the worth of living with such music for five decades.

By the time he reached his three encores, a barnstorming "Revolutionary" Etude, a tender Mazurka and the Scherzo No 3, despite a yen for more colour and imagination, I could have listened to him all night.