



CHOPIN

Barcarolle in F sharp; Polonaise-Fantaisie in A flat, Op. 61; 3 Waltzes, Op. 64; Mazurkas, Opp. 59, 63 & Op. Posth. 68/4; 2 Nocturnes, Op. 62
Maurizio Pollini (piano)
DG 479 6127 54:37 mins

Whether or not the incomplete Mazurka in F minor, Op. 68 No. 4 actually was Chopin's last work, its mood of gentle yet grave melancholy and its understated ending make for a moving conclusion to Maurizio Pollini's latest album. The Italian pianist has turned to that elusive idea of 'late style' with a programme of music from the last four years of the composer's life: Chopin looks out at us with grim weariness from the 1849 (the year he died) daguerrotype printed in the booklet. If this slight piece is a soft echo of a dance, the two groups of Mazurkas – Op. 59 and Op. 63 – vividly demonstrate the emotional range with which Chopin imbued this traditional Polish form, from the contented lilt of the A flat major, Op. 59 No. 2 to the poetic intensity of the C sharp minor, Op. 63 No. 3. All the Pollini hallmarks are here too: chiselled structure, aristocratic demeanour and lucid lines. It's a serious approach, which isn't to the detriment of these miniatures. He also judges the rubato and tempos beautifully, and draws a cool, liquid tone from his Steinway that sparkles in the Minute Waltz and sings in the two Nocturnes, Op. 62. If there's a quibble, it's with the two longer works: the Barcarolle and Polonaise-Fantaisie. Here the piano sound is a little muddy in the middle registers, and the music seems to call for more than the detachment with which it's approached. *Rebecca Franks*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



CHOPIN

Nocturnes – selection; Mazurkas, Op. 17/2 & Op. 63/2; Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op. 61; Impromptu No. 3, Op. 51; Waltz, Op. 69/1
David Fray (piano)
Erato 9029589647 68:24 mins

At first glance there seems no obvious rationale governing this collection

of pieces dotted at random through Chopin's life. The liner note suggests that they should be perceived as falling into five sections, each held together by stylistic echoes and unexpected associations, but that is a fanciful view. My own feeling is that what David Fray presents is one single composite fantasy, with a powerful touch of grandeur – in the Polonaise-Fantaisie – in the middle. There is none of the anguish, the heroism, or even the occasional bits of ugliness which also characterise Chopin's oeuvre. It's an hour of easy-listening, but at such a stratospheric level of artistry that one is dazzled from first note to last.

Fray uses plenty of pedal, but one is struck by his bright, clean sound, and by the way he lets each piece unfold; the ornamentation is leisurely and pellucid, every note in every arpeggiation fastidiously placed, and his singing line is a delight. In his hands the great C minor Nocturne becomes dreamily declamatory, with a lovely control of contrasting sonorities. Some pieces – notably the C sharp minor Nocturne – emerge with unusual intimacy, and he often waits until a coda before letting loose the emotion; the close of the F minor Op. 55 Nocturne, when the melody dissolves into rapid figurations, goes like a breath of wind. He himself has described the late F minor Mazurka as being like a message left in the sand, and that is how it comes over: with just a hint of a question. *Michael Church*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



KAPRÁLOVÁ

Complete piano music
Giorgio Koukl (piano)
Grand Piano GP708 65:27 mins

Once remembered mainly as the dedicatee of Martinů's Fifth String Quartet, Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915-1940) has emerged from the shadows of the men in her brief but intense life as one of the leading Czech composers of her day. Born in Brno, she was surrounded by pupils of Janáček, including her father Václav Kaprál, Ludvík Kundera (father of the novelist Milan Kundera) and the great pianist Rudolf Firkušný. Moving to Paris to study with Martinů, she became his lover and both their musical outputs bear testimony to the bittersweet turbulence of the relationship, which ended in April 1940 when she married

Jiří Mucha (himself son of the famous Art Nouveau painter Alphonse Mucha). Seven weeks later she was dead from tuberculosis, and Martinů was fleeing Vichy France for America.

So it is not hard to understand how her fascinating yet tragic biography has obscured the quality of her own musical achievements (which include becoming probably the first woman to conduct the BBC Symphony Orchestra). Giorgio Koukl's survey of her complete solo piano music spans the years 1933 to 1940 and includes world premiere recordings, among them of her final piano work, an unpublished Dance reconstructed by Koukl; intriguingly, it seems to pre-echo the spirit of Martinů's Etudes and Polkas. The masterpieces here are the *April Preludes* and *Variations du le Carillon de l'église St Etienne-du-Mont*, but it is good to hear them in context of works all reflecting Kaprálová's early emotional and pianistic maturity. Koukl's project is admirably conceived and performed, yet some of this music still awaits a player able to fully match Kaprálová's flair. *John Allison*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



FANNY MENDELSSOHN

12 Piano Pieces; Four Roman Pieces
Solveig Wikman (piano)
Sterling CDS 1699 73:38 mins

A few bars of this music and you know you're listening to Mendelssohn. But you might not realise, at first, which one. This is Fanny Mendelssohn Bartholdy, married name Hensel, enjoying a too-rare CD to herself. Her style is akin to Felix's: the 12 *Clavierstücke* are effectively songs without words and the hallmarks are similar: the windswept yet poised sense of élan, the harmonic clarity, the surging textures, the apparently effortless flow of melody and tenderness without (too much) sentimentality.

Fanny and Felix were at first very close – but as Felix became an international celebrity, Fanny was supposedly being a housewife, making music constantly, yet really known only by the cognoscenti. Her husband favoured publishing her compositions; her brother did not. The set of 12 piano pieces dedicated to Felix in 1843 have still only been partially published. Influenced by the atmosphere of Italy following

an extended trip there, highlights include a vivid Neapolitan-style number, a whirling tarantella and a gorgeously lyrical *adagio*. The *Four Roman Pieces* were inspired by the capital and ultimately bid the city a sorrowful farewell.

These pieces undoubtedly deserve strong advocacy, and Solveig Wikman, a passionate devotee of Hensel, plays them with much affection and unflinching spirit. The unconventional piano does not always help, though – it is a Bechstein model E, date not given – and the tone, though characterful, is not always as even as one might wish; sometimes melodies are subsumed under busy textures and the sense of perspective does not emerge as fully as it might. The recorded sound is also a little bit brittle. Nevertheless, it is a highly worthwhile release.

Jessica Duchon
PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



MENDELSSOHN

Sonatas Nos 1-6; Nine Pieces Without Opus Numbers
Anders Eidsten Dahl (organ)
Lawo LWC1108 105:76 mins (2 discs)

Though not a complete survey of Mendelssohn's organ works, Anders

BACKGROUND TO...



Kenneth Leighton

(1929-88)
Born in Yorkshire, Leighton's gift for music was soon

recognised, and he became a chorister at Wakefield Cathedral. While still at school he composed several pieces, including the first to be published, a Sonata. Leighton won a scholarship to study classics at Oxford, and simultaneously studied composition under the organist Bernard Rose at Queen's College. In 1951 he won the Mendelssohn Scholarship, enabling him to study under Petrossi in Rome. He spent most of his adult life teaching at Edinburgh University.