

# Pollini—The Prodigy Has Reached Maturity

By JOHN ROCKWELL

**M**aurizio Pollini, the Italian pianist who will give a recital Saturday night at Carnegie Hall, has had an unusual career—and an instructive one. He was born in 1942 in Milan, the son of an architect whose best-known project was the Olivetti factory near Milan.

The first 18 years of his life fulfilled the pattern of the flashy young prodigy, the kind who sweeps through contests and then embarks on a manic international career. Pollini had his first lessons when he was 5, and made public appearances from the age of 11—although not a steady diet of them, since his parents wanted to relieve him of the pressures of being a wunderkind, and were financially secure enough to resist those pressures.

Still, at 14 he played the complete Chopin Etudes in public, and the next year he won second prize in a Geneva competition. From then on, it was all firsts. At 17 he won the Pozzoli Competition in Seregno and the next year, in 1960, he won the First Grand Prize at the prestigious International Chopin Competition in Warsaw. He was the youngest of the 89 contestants, and the vote of the judges was reportedly unanimous; among those judges were Arthur Schnitzler, Dimitri Kabalevsky, Witold Malcuzyński and Nadia Boulanger. EMI, the British recording giant that is Angel in this country, was already dickering with him, and shortly after his victory he signed formally with them, as well as with Sol Hurok, who was clearly prepared to launch him with a grandiose tour of the United States. Pollini flew immediately to London for recording sessions, and the first result of those sessions, the Chopin Concerto No. 1, is still available on Seraphim. It's a lovely, surprisingly limpid performance, full of tough, clear

Prokofiev, Schoenberg and Luigi Nono. You may not rush out to buy his recording of the complete piano music of Schoenberg (although you might be pleasantly surprised if you did). The point is that the sort of musical intelligence that involves itself with Schoenberg's music is of a different—and more interesting—order than the sort that remains content to wallow in the Romantics.

Not that all of Pollini's records are equally successful, or at least immediately appealing. Probably the most difficult to approach are his Schubert and Schumann discs. The playing is certainly commanding. But it lacks quite remarkably the gentle lyricism and manly warmth we have come through traditional interpretations to associate with these composers. Still—especially if you have room in your collection for more than one recording of basic works—Pollini's accounts of the "Wanderer" Fantasy, the Schumann Fantasy in C and their attendant sonatas are striking indeed, possessed of an almost demonic fierceness.

The largest name in the Pollini discography is, of course, Chopin. He may have once been unwilling to be typecast as a Chopin specialist. But now he has clearly avoided that tag, and seems content to gradually fill out the complete Chopin canon for DG. So far the Etudes, Preludes and—a couple of months ago—the Polonaises have appeared. When the Etudes disk came out in 1973, it was greeted as one of the most important Chopin recordings of recent years, and justifiably so. These technical-poetic exercises had rarely received performances of such sovereign command, and all of Pollini's precise personality was incorporated in them (the Op. 25 Etudes are on Saturday's program). This is not Chopin playing for those who prefer extroverted display in this music, nor will it appeal automatically to admirers of Dina Lipatti's dreamier, more introvert-

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personality yet more poetic than he's sometimes been since. Pollini seemed poised to conquer the world, but instead he disappeared.

Well, perhaps not entirely; Pollini, for all his apparent shyness, is no Howard Hughes. But what makes his career instructive to other young virtuosos is that Pollini resisted the temptation to become typecast as a Chopin specialist or indeed any kind of specialist. At just the moment when the blandishments for a heady international career were most tempting he withdrew for further study with Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. He also strengthened his friendship with Rubinstein, studied conducting and pursued his interest in philosophy and chess. It was only five years later that he picked up his career in earnest again. He didn't make his New York debut until 1968, and he didn't resume making records (this time with Deutsche Grammophon) until the early 1970's. He is still not a household word in America, although this season, in addition to his recital, he played with the New York Philharmonic, and next season he is reportedly planning two recitals here.

Pollini's mature pianism doesn't easily conform to the expected traditions, and as such isn't likely to win a ready audience of devotees in this country. If you consider Michelangeli (and Arturo Toscanini, too), Italy seems to have a penchant for producing distinguished, even legendary musicians who hold themselves aloof from accepted traditions. For all his virtuosity, Pollini doesn't fit into the Slavic-Romantic school of heart-on-sleeve emotionalism; he is too cool and reserved for that. Yet his sound is too hard-edged and modern to represent a viable continuation of Germanic classicism. He is closest to the modern, linear, no-nonsense school of young virtuosos, yet even here his sensitivity, maturity and breadth of interests make him very much his own man.

The basic characteristics of Pollini's style, as heard on records, are coolness, intensity and virtuosity. He is not a colorist, in the sense of a lavish range of variety, yet his tone is always controlled and to the point (the greater mellowness on the Seraphim Concerto versus the DG discs makes one wonder to what extent tone on records is a function of recording philosophy, however). The phrasing is basically linear, yet there is always a subtle rubato at work. Sometimes one misses the extensiveness and generosity of spirit of the more romantically inclined older pianists. But Pollini is always interesting, and often enough his sheer dexterity and the nature of his personality combine for playing that need bow to no one for fiery excitement—listen to the motoric octaves in the Op. 53 Polonaise on his new recording of the Chopin Polonaises if you need confirmation.

The first thing that strikes one about Pollini's current discography is its range. He embraces everybody, it seems, from Mozart and Beethoven through Schubert and Schumann to Chopin and beyond them to Stravinsky,

ed style—although it is certainly closer to Lipatti than, say, Horowitz. Pollini's Preludes record is almost as striking but the new disc of the Polonaises is more striking still. The martial fervor and wistful Romanticism are not so much ignored as filtered through a modern sensibility, and that technical prowess is continually astonishing.

Pollini's Mozart and Beethoven recall Toscanini's, and as such will annoy people who cling to strict German tradition. His new Mozart Concertos recording, with Karl Böhm, is nonetheless coolly elegant Mozart of the highest order. The Beethoven Sonatas disc is full of hard, grim energy, and the brand-new recording of the Beethoven Fourth Concerto, again with Böhm and the Vienna Philharmonic, is a particularly lucid, classical account of that masterpiece.

Of all of Pollini's recordings of 20th-century repertory, his account of Stravinsky's Three Movements from "Petrouchka" and the Prokofiev Sonata No. 7—his first disc for DG—is likely to win the widest audience. These are both virtuoso pieces of the most demanding sort, and Pollini tears into them with a burning exactitude that is something to hear. The Nono record—which seems to be officially out of print, although it's still listed in the Schwann Catalogue and may be in some stores—is one of the finer examples of that fascinating genre of intellectually vigorous yet emotionally communicative contemporary Italian music. Pollini's part in this swirling, highly colorful blend of piano, electric sound, soprano and symphony orchestra is less obviously central to what one hears in a conventional concerto, but the piece itself is highly recommended and his participation in the project—along with his old friend Claudio Abbado, who conducts—is another indication of his musical adventuresomeness.

Pollini's record of Schoenberg's piano music is not necessarily superior to Paul Jacobs's warmly received, less expensive version on Nonesuch. But in its precise, fleet and intensely musical way, Pollini makes a moving case for this music as part of the mainstream of the Western tradition. ■

**BEETHOVEN:** Concerto No. 4, Vienna Philharmonic, Karl Böhm, Cond. DG 2530 791. Sonatas Nos. 30 and 31. DG 2530 645. **CHOPIN:** Concerto No. 1, Philharmonia Orchestra, Paul Klezák, Cond. Seraphim 60064. Etudes. DG 2530 291. Polonaises. DG 2530 459. Preludes. DG 2530 550. **MOZART:** Concertos, K.488 and 459, Vienna Philharmonic, Böhm, Cond. DG 2530 716. **NONO:** "Come una oia de fuerza y luz." Slava Tashova, soprano; electronic sound; Bavarian Radio Orchestra, Claudio Abbado, Cond. DG 2530 454. **SCHOENBERG:** Piano Music. DG 2530 531. **SCHUBERT:** "Wanderer" Fantasy; Sonata in A minor, D945. DG 2530 472. **SCHUMANN:** Fantasy in C; Sonata in F sharp minor, Op. 11. DG 2530 378. **STRAVINSKY:** Three Movements from "Petrouchka." Prokofiev: Sonata No. 7 DG 2530 235.