



MOZART **Piano Concerto No. 23**, K 4881. BEETHOVEN **Piano Concerto No. 5**, “Emperor”<sup>2</sup> — Maurizio Pollini (pn); Karl Böhm, cond; Vienna P — ST. LAURENT STUDIO 1574 (Download: 63:24) Live: Vienna <sup>1</sup>5/17/1977; <sup>2</sup>5/28/1978

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SCHUMANN **Allegro in b**, op. 8. *Davidsbundlertänze*. CHOPIN **2 Nocturnes**, op. 62. *Barcarolle. Berceuse. Polonaise in A1*, op. 53, “Heroic.” *Études*, op. 25/1 and 12. **Scherzo No. 3** — Maurizio Pollini (pn) — ST. LAURENT STUDIO 1578 (Download: 81:01) Live: Salzburg 8/24/1986

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These two releases constitute Vols. 1 and 2 of St. Laurent Studio’s new series devoted to live performance by Maurizio Pollini. Because he started recording soon after winning the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 1960, Pollini’s discography presumably includes every piece he wanted to commit to disc before his death in March 2024 at 82. Despite a healthy presence on YouTube, however, there is little in the way of concert performances on boutique labels, which makes these two releases significant. The repertoire duplicates his official DG recordings, so the issue is how different Pollini was in concert.

My experience is that he could be very different. A live setting brought out more brio and boldness in his delivery. Some of this might have been a practical matter—he needed to fill Carnegie Hall, where I heard him several times, with a sound that would be unnecessarily big in the studio. However the balance was achieved between temperament and practicality, there was rarely any evidence to the audience of the coolness that Pollini’s critics complained of (I never heard that quality in his playing, including his studio work).

To begin with the concerto disc, both works were recorded by DG under the same conductor, Karl Böhm, leading the Vienna Philharmonic. Except for two Mozart concertos (Nos. 19 and 23) from the Seventies, Pollini waited until 2006 and 2008 to record four more, conducting the Vienna Philharmonic from the keyboard. Apropos Piano Concerto No. 23, K 488, Böhm was a Mozart specialist, known for being less stodgy and more alert than an older generation, but the orchestral part here is still rich and Romantic by Neville Marriner standards before one even entertains the HIP revolution. Pollin is fully in sympathy; he’s quite traditional compared with Murray Perahia, Mitsuko Uchida or even Rudolf Serkin.

The result is a full-bodied sound and a scale verging on Beethoven. But on its own terms, Pollini’s playing is elegant and very musical; the best comparison in the same style is Clifford

Curzon with Josef Krip and the London Symphony (Decca). Our concern here is comparing Pollini with himself. The three movements of K. 488 have almost the same timing in the DG performance as this live one from 1977. Böhm remains unchanged, meaning that he is tasteful and reliable. Pollini plays with a few degrees more force and authority, crossing the line into pure Beethoven in the first movement. The *Adagio* is less studied and more inflected than in the studio, which makes for an improvement. For DG the finale was sleepy and borderline dull. Here everything picks up, and we get vivacious playing from both pianist and orchestra. The recorded sound is closer on the piano but also on the important woodwind parts, which stand out more than in the studio version.

Pollini hasn't always been fortunate in Beethoven's piano concertos, a surprise given his mastery in the sonatas. He made two complete cycles for DG, the first from the Seventies with Böhm and Eugen Jochum (who stepped in to lead the two early concertos after Böhm's death in 1981), the second with Claudio Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic, live in 1992. I only know the Abbado set, which is as close to routine as artists of this caliber can get (polite reviewers called it "objective"). The "Emperor" Concerto under Böhm was a high point, however, with fully committed and exciting playing from Pollini and the VPO. The vigor of Böhm's conducting made age fall away; so does his sensitivity in the slow movement. I only find some passages in the finale a little detached.

Turning to this 1978 live performance, Böhm seems even more determined to prove that his energy hasn't flagged—he gives extra oomph to the orchestral *tuttis* in the first movement. Pollini is also more energized, although his softer passagework remains the same. It's the bold *fortes* and thundering *fortissimos* that launch his reading into orbit. The piano is miked larger than life, which adds to the excitement.

The orchestral playing in the slow movement is as poetic as before but with more emphasis in crescendos, which gives the music the body it needs. Pollini follows suit with a lovely balance between lyrical poise and momentum. He is one of the few pianists who can play the opening of the finale in one breath, as if its demands are effortless. An abundance of ebullient, brilliant playing is present to the end. In all, the "Emperor" poses a greater improvement over its DG counterparts than the Mozart concerto does, but the brio in the finale of the Mozart is notable enough that both performances should be sought out. The "Emperor" Concerto on its own is one of the best I've ever encountered.

The solo recital from 1986 derives from the Salzburg Festival. It is almost unnecessary to compare Pollini's live Schumann and Chopin with their DG counterparts. He was a great exponent of both composers in any setting. The studio version of the *Davidsbundlertänze* wouldn't arrive until 15 years later and is my reference recording. Pollini's beautiful Salzburg performance, despite the distance in years, is very similar. He does "play out" more in the exuberant Florestan music, but the softer, reflective Eusebius music is done sensitively. What is so striking in both performances is how instinctively Pollini fuses every desirable element, from the most cultivated phrasing and nuance of touch to heroic boldness and a rich sonority.

The Schumann half of the recital begins with the Allegro in B Minor, op. 8, a substantial, dramatic piece at nine minutes. It receives a performance with something of the grandeur and Romantic passion of Rachmaninoff (a composer Pollini never recorded).

In contrast, the Chopin group, plus three encores, after intermission goes some way to showing that Pollini was less intimate in recital than on disc. There's a forcefulness in the two Nocturnes, op. 62 that some may not want, although one is never in doubt about Pollini's affinity with the music. Riveting the listener with the Barcarolle's dramatic climax can't be objected to, however, and Pollini gives the piece his all. You can't tear your attention away. As to scale and force, the other Chopin pieces come and go. The Berceuse sounds too blunt and public, while Scherzo No. 3, the last of the encores, feels just right as a grandstand gesture to send the audience home with a thrill. Anyone who doesn't buy that Pollini could be excitable will be put on notice.

I was especially gratified by his no-holds-barred way with the "Heroic" Polonaise. Pollini's complete Polonaises for DG would be a must-listen if you can tolerate the hard, glassy sound that DG inflicted on it. The other two encores are the first and last Étude in the op. 25 set, and they are overdone by the standards of Pollini's classic studio recording. Still, few pianists can exhibit the sheer bravura that he puts into tempestuous Étude No. 12.

If St. Laurent Studio can find more live performances to match these two initial volumes, Pollini devotees and general listeners alike will find many rewards. Proprietor Yves St-Laurent doesn't reveal his sources; you can hear YouTube versions of the concertos but without the excellent remastering heard here. The label's releases supply basic documentation but no program notes. Brief applause is included at the end of major works.

Availability of St Laurent Studio recordings has changed in the past year. CDs and downloads are now found only on the label's website ([www.78experience.com](http://www.78experience.com)), as listed in the headnote.

### Huntley Dent

