

Chopin – Nocturnes (Yundi) [2010]

Written by bluesever

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Nocturne N° 01 in B flat minor, Op.9 n°1 Nocturne N° 02 in E flat, Op.9 n°2 Nocturne N° 03 in B, Op.9 n°3 Nocturne N° 04 in F, Op.15 n°1 Nocturne N° 05 in F sharp, Op.15 n°2 Nocturne N° 06 in G minor, Op.15 n°3 Nocturne N° 07 in C sharp minor, Op.27 n°1 Nocturne N° 08 in D flat, Op.27 n°2 Nocturne N° 09 in B, Op.32 n°1 Nocturne N° 10 in A flat, Op.32 n°2 Nocturne N° 11 in G minor, Op.37 n°1 Nocturne N° 12 in G, Op.37 n°2 Nocturne No.13 in C minor, Op.48 No.1 Nocturne No.14 in F sharp minor, Op.48 No.2 Nocturne No.15 in F minor, Op.55 No.1 Nocturne No.16 in E flat, Op.55 No.2 Nocturne No.17 in B, Op.62 No.1 Nocturne No.18 in E, Op.62 No.2 Nocturne No.19 in E minor, Op.72 No.1 (posth.) Nocturne No.20 in C sharp minor, Op.posth. Nocturne No.21 in C minor Op. posth. Yundi – piano

Chinese pianist Yundi Li has not only switched his label from Deutsche Grammophon to EMI, but he has changed his name and become simply Yundi. He has not changed his favorite composer; three of his six DG discs featured Chopin's music and this two-disc set contains all the Polish Romantic's nocturnes, and he has not changed his modus operandi of super virtuosity coupled with poetic sensitivity. This should be an unbeatable combination in Chopin, and in many ways, it is. Yundi's impeccable technique, pearly tone, and sculpted phrasing suit the music down to the ground, and the sheer sensual beauty of his performances is astounding. Unfortunately, on EMI as earlier on DG, it is Yundi's poetic sensitivity that gets him into trouble. While his performances clearly trace the rise and fall of heartfelt emotions, one gets the unsettling sense that those emotions are Yundi's and not Chopin's. To a certain extent, all performers project their own emotions in performing Romantic music, but here, Chopin's music seems less like a medium through which the pianist expresses himself and more like a mirror in which the pianist admires himself. The beauty of Yundi's playing will be enough, or even more than enough for some listeners. EMI's digital sound is warmer and deeper than DG's, though not nearly as clean and crisp. --- James Leonard, Rovi

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The pianist formerly known as Yundi Li now reappears as Yundi, and with a new label behind him. On the basis of his strong, incisive Chopin Scherzi for DG, I had high hopes for his EMI debut consisting of all 20 Chopin Nocturnes. To be sure, Yundi's technique is beyond cavil, and everything sounds uniformly pretty and tasteful. But not much else. The fault partially lies with overly resonant engineering that places the piano at a distance in a kind of sonic halo, smoothing out the registers and the dynamics and blurring slow-moving sustained music such as Op. 62 No. 1's long trills. It's as if the piano had been transformed into an angelic harp. As a result, the notes emerge all at the same timbral and emotional level, with little sense of the music's harmonic tension and contrapuntal interest.

When Yundi's not bland (which is most of the time), he's prosaic, as the square, lethargic Op. 55 No. 2 and tensionless Op. 32 No. 2 selections bear out. And there are fussy moments, such as how Op. 27 No. 1's climax dissipates due to Yundi's tapered phrasing. Compare Yundi's Nocturnes to Nelson Freire's equally beautiful yet infinitely more detailed and musically deeper interpretations—or listen to Rubinstein, Pires, or Ashkenazy—to hear what's really in this music. File this one in your collection's New Age section. --- Jed Distler, classicstoday.com

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