

Excerpts originally appeared in Issues 39:1 (Sept/Oct 2015) and 39:3 (Jan/Feb 2016)

of

FANFARE The Magazine for serious CD collectors, USA

John Bell Young :

At the very top of my list is a recording of ballades by Chopin, Faure, and Brahms, exquisitely realized by the Swiss pianist, Jean François Antonioli. Indeed, for their integrity, nuance, elegance, and not least, quiescence, **these are readings that are difficult to match, or even compare to the those of the greatest pianists, such as Michelangeli, Moravec, or even Cortot.**

Antonioli, whose playing is so very elegant in every conceivable category, still gives me goose bumps. **His approach to music-making brings to mind that of Dinu Lipatti, Wilhelm Kempff, and Maria Tipo rolled into one, and is no less satisfying.** Indeed, there is a disembodied quality to it all that makes one forget there is a living, breathing person behind it, sitting ever so studiously at the keyboard.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to describe Jean-Francois Antonioli as the pianistic equivalent of the French baritone Charles Panzera, or on the American side, the soprano Benita Valente. There is a phonemic quality about every emerging note and every phrase, as if we were listening in on a private conversation. **This is without question among the most endearing recitals on CD to have emerged in decades, and certainly among the best of the year. No collection can afford to be without it.** John Bell Young

Radu Lelutiu :

What is important, [...] is that **Antonioli's playing is consistently fascinating and, at times, phenomenal.** There is a sovereign sense of purpose and direction in every phrase, yet ripe richness in each detail and an almost palpable sense of vertical balance. The tone is never brittle, yet everything resonates in deep, primary colors. What's more, throughout this recital Antonioli manages to hold the listener's attention, challenge expectations, and persuasively argue his personal insights regarding this oft-recorded repertoire. Put simply, **this is a master pianist in full flight.**

Huntley Dent :

Clearly **Antonioli aspires to an elite level of cultivation. In these thoroughly engrossing readings of Chopin, Brahms, and Fauré he comes as close as anyone I've heard on the current scene to reaching his goal.** Each piece is played with total assurance—you become aware of that from the first measures of the Chopin G-Minor Ballade. **There's a certain measured authority at times that verges on Arrau...**

Myron Silberstein :

I preface my review [...] to emphasize the magnitude of Antonioli's accomplishment with these two recordings. His playing is technically adept, musically sensitive, and stylistically apt, and that alone is commendable. It is also insightful and unique, without being at all idiosyncratic. In more than a few passages, Antonioli gives attention to an inner voice I had not considered previously or shapes a phrase in a way I had not imagined—and always in ways that feel true to the spirit of the piece. **I have not been as taken with a recording of Chopin's Ballades, Fantaisie, or Barcarolle since**

Krystian Zimerman's 1988 Deutsche Grammophon album. And the Chopin Preludes, Brahms Ballades, and Fauré Ballade are similarly impressive.

Antonioli delivers elegant, Kempffian performances of the Brahms Ballades. Highlights include Antonioli's hushed, somber approach to the opening section of the First Ballade and his independent shaping of the staccato left-hand phrases in its central section; the hypnotic steadiness of the Second Ballade's first theme, in which Antonioli's expression centers around shifts in color rather than rubato; the deeply subdued, exquisitely voiced middle section of the Third Ballade; and the sensitivity to dissonance in the middle section of the Fourth Ballade. Antonioli's conception of these four pieces is highly intimate; their drama is always present but never overt.

Antonioli's performance of the Barcarolle is one of the most ecstatic I have heard. He brings a flirtatious lilt to the repeated bass figuration and grants it an equal partnership with the right hand in developing crescendos; his filigree passagework is unfailingly spontaneous sounding; and he embraces Chopin's tempo changes with uninhibited enthusiasm. The Barcarolle may be Antonioli's most successful performance on these two discs.

Both discs boast a clear, resonant sound. Highest recommendation.

Dave Saemann :

Jean-François Antonioli has waited until his mid-50s to record the Preludes. He brings considerable maturity and insight to the cycle, both as a pianist and as a man. Antonioli possesses a light touch that is highly appropriate to Chopin, who played softly. **Antonioli's sound reminds me of that of the late Aldo Ciccolini.**

Here is Chopin playing in which I believe the composer would recognize his own sensibility. **Other pianists may wait until middle age to record these works, but there is no guarantee that their achievement will be as substantial, unless they are artists of Antonioli's caliber.**