

American Record Guide

PONCHIELLI: Piano Pieces

Ester Fusar Poli

Brilliant 96969—73 minutes

Amilcare Ponchielli (1834-86) is mainly known as a composer of operas, 12 in all, of which only *La Gioconda* enjoys some popularity. (We have reviewed 18 recordings of it, but only one of each of 3 others.) He also taught at the conservatory in Milan, where his students included Puccini and Mascagni. And he wrote more than 30 piano pieces, which languish in obscurity.

Here are 14 of them. They include a piano transcription of Ponchielli's most famous music, the 'Dance of the Hours' from *La Gioconda*, 3 polkas, 1 gavotte, 1 nocturne, 3 elegies, 1 funeral march, and 4 other pieces with titles such as 'Amicizia' (Friendship) and 'T'amero sempre' (I'll love you always). The slower pieces are like songs without words, the fast ones are danceable, and some contain dramatic episodes such as one might expect from an opera composer. Melodies and harmonies are pleasant, and textures airy. It all sounds very Italian, without any German heaviness, and seems to be well written for the instrument. There are no great technical demands, though sometimes there are outbursts of arpeggios and other filigree.

The young Italian pianist plays everything with meticulous articulation and excellent control of dynamics. The music sparkles under her hands like sunlight reflected in the Mediterranean (or the river Po—Ponchielli was North Italian). The

booklet shows a photograph of her but has no biography, nor is there one online. But I gather she studied with Roberto Prosseda, who also was the artistic producer of this enjoyable recording.

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