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PONCHIELLI La Gioconda: Dance of the Hours. Il primo affetto. Amicizia. T'amerò sempre. Tutti ebbri. Elegia, Add 9. Improvviso. Notturmo. Gavotte Poudrée. Elegia, op. 92. Saltellina-polka. Elegia funebre in onore di Felice Frasi. La staffetta di Gambolò. Marcia funebre per i funerali di Francesco Lucca • Ester Fusar Poli (pn) • BRILLIANT 96969 (73:25)

Amilcare Ponchielli (1834–1886) is almost exclusively known for one work, the opera *La Gioconda*. He wrote nine other operas, none of which have entered the repertoire, and he also ventured well beyond the opera stage. There was a great deal of band music (he conducted the municipal bands of Piacenza and Cremona), songs, chamber music, and solo piano music. Ponchielli was an important teacher at the Milan Conservatory (Puccini and Mascagni were two of his students) and a major figure in Italian music in the generation after Verdi. (Ponchielli was 21 years younger than Verdi, although he died at 51, some 15 years before Verdi.) I have not encountered a recording of Ponchielli's piano music before and found much pleasure in this collection from Ester Fusar Poli.

There are no undiscovered masterpieces on this disc. What there is, however, is a collection of attractive piano music, ably played by Poli. Many of these works are salon pieces, brief and tuneful. Some are more extended essays, such as the 16-minute *Marcia funebre per i funerali di Francesco Lucca*. Lucca was a Cremonese publisher, and the march was written to accompany his funeral cortège. It may be the most significant of the commemorative pieces he wrote, but the lovely shorter elegies included on this disc are indicative of Ponchielli's effectiveness in composing meditative, reflective music to honor those who died.

The program assembled by Poli nicely balances Ponchielli's lighter, even witty, side with the more serious. *Tutti ebbri*, for instance, translates as "all are drunk," and is a joyous celebration. *T'amerò sempre* (I will always love you) is just what its title would lead you to expect, an attractive love song. The program opens with a piano transcription of Ponchielli's most popular work, the "Dance of the Hours," a ballet from *La Gioconda*. The informative but not always well-focused program notes do not indicate whether this is the composer's transcription or someone else's.

Overall, this is an enjoyable collection, aided by Ponchielli's strong melodic gift and the pianist's affectionate playing. There is undeniable charm in many pieces, and Poli exhibits a strong feeling for it. The recorded sound is fine. Henry Fogel