

## UNCANNY VOICES

*New CDs of Chopin, Thomas Larcher, and Bach.*

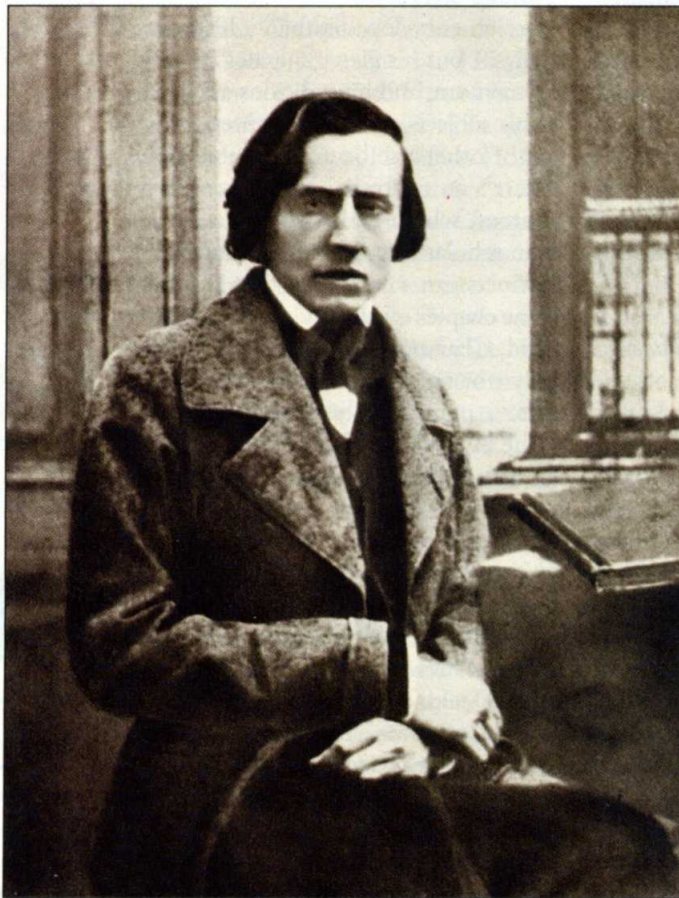
BY ALEX ROSS

A concert grand piano is a thousand-pound machine. To coax from its levers, hammers, and wires the illusion of singing voices is probably the greatest feat that a pianist can achieve, although fast-fingered stunts inevitably win the loudest ovations. The illusion is all the more impressive when it survives the atomization of digital recording, which, even after the bitty refinements of recent years, still seems more detached, more inanimate, than the analog process that came before.

The machine sings beautifully on "Chopin: Late Masterpieces," Stephen Hough's new recording for the Hyperion label. "Largo," "cantabile," and "sostenuto" are three markings that Chopin appends to the slow movement of the Third Piano Sonata—broad, singing, sustained. They imply that the movement is an homage to belcanto opera, and in particular to Bellini, whom Chopin knew and admired. Hough's playing of the opening melody suggests that he has thought hard about how it would sound if it were sung by a soprano: in place of the clean articulation that you find on most recordings, he adopts a free, flowing manner, so that one prominent motif—an eighth note followed by a sixteenth-note triplet—is rendered almost as a four-note turn, with the first note held a little longer than the others. The manner is at once regal and inward, as in Bellini's "Casta diva." When Hough reaches a high B, he slows for a moment, as a soprano would, for the sake of both expressivity

and caution. I've gone through various canonical Chopin recordings—including accounts of the Third Sonata by Alfred Cortot, Dinu Lipatti, and Arthur Schnabel—and found none on which the melody coalesces into such an acutely vocal shape.

Chopin's two-hundredth anniversary fell on March 1st, and commemorative



*On a new CD by Stephen Hough, Chopin becomes operatic.*

CDs have been piling up. All the notes glitter in place, but many of the disks overlook what Hough has called, on his delightful blog, Chopin's "shades, hints, suggestions, half-lights." The young Chinese pianist Yundi (formerly Yundi Li), in a survey of the complete Nocturnes, on EMI, plays elegantly and not without feeling, but fails to find a dis-

tinct character for each of the twenty-one pieces. Lang Lang, the other big Chinese virtuoso, galumphs through the two piano concertos on DG. For the same label, the young German-Japanese pianist Alice Sara Ott delivers weirdly ponderous versions of the Waltzes. (The great old Yellow Label seems to be concentrating these days on artists who photograph well.) There are also some prizes in the bunch: Nelson Freire's courtly, nuanced Nocturnes, on Decca; Alexandre Tharaud's gently eccentric "Journal Intime," on Virgin Classics; and ferocious 1959 and 1967 performances by Martha Argerich, which DG has redeemed itself by retrieving from radio archives.

Hyperion, the proudly independent British label, has turned out two major Chopin recordings in the past couple of years: not only Hough's "Late Masterpieces" survey but also Marc-André Hamelin's disk of the Second and Third Sonatas and other works. Neither pianist rivals Lang Lang in celebrity, but piano connoisseurs rank them high: Hough, British-born and Juilliard-trained, is known as a rare kind of visionary virtuoso, while Hamelin, a French-Canadian now based in Boston, is admired for his monstrously brilliant technique and his questing, deep-thinking approach. Hamelin, too, creates a richly singing sound in the Largo of the Third Sonata, but his aria has a darker cast, sorrowing rather than communing. A startling demonic energy bursts forth in the finale, where Hamelin matches Argerich in headlong force. At moments, his Chopin anticipates Bartók or even Ligeti: the salon dandy becomes a dreamer with a taste for violence.

What I cherish in Hough's playing is the sense that he is making up the music as he goes, even as he realizes the written score with uncommon precision. In his hands, the introduction to the Largo—a jagged descending figure, in sharp dotted rhythms—comes across

LEBRECHT

