

World-renowned pianist Maurizio Pollini (1942-2024)

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On March 23, Maurizio Pollini, one of the most important pianists and artistic personalities of the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century, passed away at the age of 82. For the past half-century, he had been a fixture in musical life and was beloved by concert audiences, especially in Europe and Japan.

Pollini's piano work was distinguished by a lucid, warm tone and a great sensitivity and depth that were all the more moving and powerful because often understated. A highly cultured, quiet and modest man, there was something noble, even pure, about his performing as well as his personality. Pollini never sought to impress with his phenomenal technique or to sound original, yet his performances conveyed an aura of freshness and were unique, even when he played very well-known works.

Never sentimental, Pollini was renowned especially for his interpretations of Chopin, the German romantic composers Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann, as well as of the great classical works of Ludwig van Beethoven, Bach and Mozart. More so than most of his peers, Pollini also performed regularly and with great enthusiasm the works of contemporary composers such as Pierre Boulez and Luigi Nono, as well as Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Arnold Schönberg and Karl-Heinz Stockhausen.

Pollini was born during World War II in 1942 in Milan. His father, Gino Pollini, was an accomplished modernist architect. Both of his parents were passionate amateur musicians. In interviews, he would later describe a household filled with music and intellectual and artistic discussion.

The atmosphere was no doubt also significantly shaped by the horrific experience of the war, and the widespread striving for a better future, free from fascism and bloodshed. An anti-fascist resistance movement had begun to develop in Italy in the years leading up to Pollini's birth, and in 1943-1945, Italy was the site of mass resistance and several general strikes, including in Milan.

In the 1946 elections, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) received 19 percent of the votes and in 1948, 31 percent. It was only the betrayal of Stalinism that headed off a social revolution in Italy, preventing a full reckoning by the working class with the capitalist order and fascism. The PCI joined the bourgeois government immediately after the war, and its longtime leader Palmiro Togliatti, in his capacity as justice minister, pushed through a sweeping amnesty for crimes committed by the Mussolini fascist dictatorship.

In the postwar period, Milan—where Pollini lived until the end of his life—was home to one of the most extraordinary musical scenes in the world. In a 2014 discussion with filmmaker Bruno Monsiegeon, Pollini recalled, "All the great pianists came to play in Milan." Among them were Arthur Schnitzler, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli,

Clara Haskil, Wilhelm Backhaus and Alfred Cortot. At the famous La Scala opera house, Arturo Toscanini, though no longer the chief conductor, regularly performed after its reopening in 1946, along with singers such as Maria Callas.

Pollini began playing the piano as a child and performed publicly at a young age. In 1960, aged only 18, he became the first Italian winner of the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw. Rubinstein, then the head of the jury for the final round, famously told his fellow jury members that, "technically, he already plays better than all of us." Indeed, the exceptional technical level of Pollini's performances would set new standards in the recordings of the works of Chopin, Schubert and many other composers.

Pollini's response to his victory at the competition already showed the thoughtfulness and utter devotion to his development as a musician that would become key hallmarks of his career. Instead of touring concert halls throughout the world with a repertoire dominated by Chopin, Pollini decided to take a break from concertizing to expand his repertoire, to continue his studies with Michelangeli, and to mature as a musician.

When he re-entered concert life, he did so amidst the mass radicalization and politicization of the 1960s under the impact of the Vietnam War and mass struggles by the working class in Europe and America.

Pollini indicated in an interview that until the mid-1960s he was "politically neutral," and that his own political ideas were not very clear when he joined the PCI later in that decade. As he later recalled, "To be a left-winger in Italy at the time was a form of protesting against the horrible right-wing. It [the Italian right] has remained this horrible, if it has not become even worse." Pollini was also vocal about his opposition to the Vietnam War. At least once this led to a scandal, when he began a Chopin recital with a political statement denouncing renewed bombings of civilians by the US military earlier that day. Despite loud protests from the audience, Pollini insisted on reading his statement, and the concert eventually had to be called off.

Recalling the atmosphere in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pollini later explained, "The idea that music was a right for everyone was very strong then." Paolo Grassi, then artistic director of La Scala, organized free concerts for students and workers. Pollini and his close friend and musical partner Claudio Abbado would regularly perform at these concerts. They also organized concerts at factories, neighborhoods and universities, always free of charge. Their programs featured the great works of classical music as well as contemporary works by their mutual friend, the composer Nono, and by Schönberg, Webern and others. In 2014 he reflected, "They were important because of the ideals which inspired them as much as because of their

musical quality.”

Pollini’s turn to the PCI reflected the left-wing shift among significant sections of the intelligentsia at the time, who were seeking a way to oppose the right and imperialist war. At the same time, he is an example of the ultimately politically destructive and disorienting influence of Stalinism on social and cultural life.

Having played a key role in the postwar restabilization of capitalism in Europe, and in Italy in particular, the PCI supported the Stalinists’ crushing of the Hungarian revolution of 1956. In 1968, it condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush the Prague Spring, a fact that Pollini later said helped motivate his decision to join the party.

However, to the extent that the PCI criticized the policies of the Soviet bureaucracy, it did so not because of their counter-revolutionary and nationalist character, but by adapting to the moods prevailing in sections of the middle class. It limited the criticism of Stalinism to democratic questions, presenting the role of the Kremlin as a particular dictatorial aberration of the “Soviet” Communist Party only. At the same time, just as the Kremlin bureaucracy, the PCI pursued a fundamentally nationalist orientation, and rejected a revolutionary mobilization of the working class in the capitalist countries like Italy or Chile against imperialist war and fascism. Over the coming years, the PCI, like the Stalinist bureaucracy and parties as a whole, would move further and further to the right, playing a central role in enabling the attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class over the past several decades, which have taken a particularly savage form in Italy.

Like many of his generation, Pollini never came to grips with the counterrevolutionary nature and origins of Stalinism, and grew disillusioned with the politics that dominated the left. Nevertheless, his outlook and work as a musician remained shaped by a deeply democratic and humanistic approach to art and society. Pollini was clearly disappointed that the “musical experiments” with free concerts for workers and students did not have a palpable, lasting impact on Italian music life. “Our ideal,” he concluded, “had not materialized.” But he never renounced the underlying conceptions by which he and Abbado had been animated. He remained a bitter opponent of the Italian right and denounced cuts to culture and social programs under Silvio Berlusconi.

A similar quiet stubbornness and adherence to principle distinguished Pollini’s approach to the musical repertoire. He was extremely selective about the works he played and the musicians he partnered with. Pollini was determined to play only works that he felt he had a special connection with and that—as he put it—he “could defend in front of myself.” This meant that he eschewed significant portions of the piano repertoire—including, for instance, the works of Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky. He was perfectly happy, he said, to hear those works being performed by others, but did not feel that they were for him to play. His performances with singers were also relatively rare, but included notable recordings of Schubert’s *Winterreise* with the legendary baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and concerts with the young soprano Anna Prohaska.

The works that he did play often accompanied him for decades. He observed, “As your relationship with the music gets stronger, so does your motivation for playing it and finding different sounds. If you have the idea that you can find a colour that is better for one composer or another, even if it’s an illusion, this generates enormous pleasure.”

His interpretations of Chopin are a case in point. While he became famous for his perfectionism and—as some contended—his “cool”

interpretations of the works of the great Romantic composers, Pollini’s playing of Chopin visibly changed and matured over the decades. By the time of his recordings in the 2000s, his sound had grown warmer and, as he himself observed it, his playing had become “freer,” without losing any of its earlier precision and concern for structure and a non-sentimental approach.

Pollini’s career was also distinguished by his collaboration with conductor Abbado, which lasted half a century, until the latter’s death in 2014. The two recorded large portions of the piano concerto repertoire, including all of Beethoven’s five piano concertos and Brahms’ two concertos for piano. A close collaboration also developed with Boulez and Nono, who composed several works for Pollini. Though disappointed that their works remain relatively rarely performed in concert halls today, Pollini invariably included them in his own recitals.

Despite growing health problems and frailty, Pollini continued to perform some of the most physically and emotionally demanding works in music history well into his old age. In the last 15 years of his life, he produced an astounding recording of Brahms’s piano concertos under the baton of Christian Thielemann, several new recordings of some of Beethoven’s most important and difficult sonatas, as well as new recordings of the works of Chopin. He also performed several times with his son, the pianist and conductor Daniele Pollini.

In a measure of his stature, within hours of the news of Pollini’s death, musicians from around the world issued statements honoring his legacy. Whatever Pollini’s own disappointment with what he perceived as a limited impact of his views on contemporary music and on the need to democratize access to art, his playing, as well as his artistic, intellectual and political integrity, had a lasting impact on generations of musicians and concertgoers, and will find growing appreciation in a new period of radicalization and social upheaval.

Select notable performances and recordings by Maurizio Pollini

Bach’s Well-Tempered Piano

Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 23 under the baton of Karl Böhm

Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas op. 109, 110 and 111

Franz Schubert’s B-flat major sonata (D. 960)

Chopin’s Nocturnes

Luigi Nono’s “... sofferte onde serene ...”



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