Chopin Nocturnes

Comparative Survey

34 complete sets plus individual selections evaluated December, 2012

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Chopin Nocturnes
Recommended Recordings

Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording

Ivan Moravec
Newly re-mastered for superb sound, these performances have been a benchmark recording for connoisseurs since their first release in 1965. Taken from two recording sessions just months apart, one in New York on a Steinway, one in Vienna on a Bösendorfer, the best performances were then selected for release. A true delight for the pianophile! 2-CD set: Supraphon 40972

Alternative Perspectives: Sweet Dreams or Night Tremors?

Pascal Amoyel
Gentle and dreamy, there’s an authentic Chopinesque spirit here that will transport you to another time and place. The recording perspective is intimate; turn it up for full immersion, or turn it down for that perfect nighttime ambiance. Calliope 93512

Claudio Arrau
Set in dark tones and deep sonority, these are veritable sculptures in sound. In Arrau’s hands these miniatures become tragic sagas laden with weeping emotion, and the tension and release of the experience can be transformative for the listener. He certainly makes every other version sound like mere ear candy. Philips 2-CD 454694 (now available as a mid-price issue)
Budget Picks

No need to sacrifice on quality here, these are all very fine sets now available at incredible prices. Ideal for gift giving or adding to your collection since each individual performance brings new perspectives to these enchanting works.

- **Ashkenazy** (Double Decca 452579, paired with Four Ballades, about $12.50)
- **Barenboim** (Deutsche Gramophone 2CD 453022, about $12.50)
- **Rubinstein** (1965 version, RCA 63049 (2), ~ $19.99)

Survey Results

The A-list: For Listening Enjoyment
The ones I'll be pulling off the shelf for enjoyment:
Amoyel, Ashkenazy, Barenboim, Katz, Leonskaja, Moravec, Wasowski.

The B-list: For Study Purposes
Interesting alternative perspectives: Arrau, Rubinstein (RCA 1965), Simon.
Good performances with marginal sound quality: Feltsman, Lypany, Weissenberg.

The C-list: Marginal Keepers
Some individual performances may be good and worth re-listening:
Freire, Yundi Li, Pires, Pollini, Dang Thai Son, Stott, Tipo.

The D-list: Rejects
These are on my Spring Cleaning list:
Reference Recordings by Individual Nocturne

1. Pires
2. Moravec
3. Ashkenazy
4. Moravec
5. Rubinstein ‘65
6. Arrau
7. Arrau
   Medium tempo: Barenboim (live in Warsaw)  
   Slow tempo: Moravec [7:11]
9. Barenboim
10. Amoyel
11. Barenboim
12. Moravec
13. Rubinstein ‘65
14. Wasowskki
15. Bolet
16. Rosenberger
17. Amoyel
18. Katz
19. Moravec
20. Amoyel
21. Barenboim
What the Critics Have Said

Moravec is most often cited as the favored recording, followed in order by Rubinstein (RCA, 1965) and Ashkenazy. The Penguin Guide has long favored the Rubinstein RCA 1965, but recently awarded a rosette to the re-mastered 1937 EMI set with Rubinstein. They rave about the re-mastered sound, saying that Andrew Walter has done a miraculous job and provided a “real and vivid piano tone.” Even so, to my ears it is virtually unlistenable, with a thin and glaring sound, and some upper tones that actually hurt my ears! Clearly the last choice I’d go to for my listening enjoyment. Even putting sound issues aside, there’s not much of anything positive to learn from a study point of view; the renditions are clunky and pedestrian at best. This makes me seriously question the methodology of the Penguin Guide.

The NPR Guide also recommends the Rubinstein 1965 version. But I tend to agree with Donald Vroon, longtime editor of the American Record Guide, that Rubinstein “won wide approval partly because his interpretations are so neutral and unlikely to offend.” He goes on to point out that “Chopin was an arch-romantic: nervous, moody, introspective, delicate, sensitive, melancholy. Rubinstein was none of those things and had no sympathy for people like that.” Mr. Vroon and all of the reviewers for the ARG endorsed the Moravec recording.

Fanfare’s reviewers seemed to be evenly split between Moravec and Rubinstein, while Ovation gave top honors to Arrau. Gramophone’s Recommended Recordings (British) favors the Ashkenazy. Fono Forum (German) praises the Barenboim, which I found consistently satisfying and with a few Nocturnes near-reference quality, yet this set has received little or no press in the U.S. Classica (French) gave a perfect 10/10 rating and “choc de la musique” for the set by Pascal Amoyel, calling it a “revelation.” In conjunction with the 2010 International Chopin Competition in Warsaw, the Chopin Society sponsored a jury of pianists and music journalists who awarded a “Grand Prix du Disque” to the Amoyel set. As you see from my top recommendations, I also highly enjoyed the set, and found it especially intimate and close to how I imagine Chopin probably played the works.

That’s what the critics have said. As far as I have ever read, nobody has explained the parameters of performance that they favor or disavow, so to just make an opinion based on a paragraph or two of vague observations isn’t really helpful. That’s why I always enjoyed the American Record Guide’s overviews, when all of their reviewers huddled together to discuss particular works. But oftentimes they tended to make recommendations based on what they could come to consensus on, which meant shared experience of a particular recording. The pragmatic reality of it is that they hadn’t all heard the same recordings to form the basis of their opinions. Though it can be exhausting by its sheer density of information, I’m hoping that my methodology will offer insights into differing psychologies of players and listeners, and help to more clearly identify recordings that might appeal to each individual reader.
Overview of the Artists

34 complete sets were evaluated, and dozens of individual performances, all noted in the appendix following the Interpretive Analysis section. Here are some overall impressions...

Amoyel. These are gentle and dreamy renditions. Amoyel never whips up a froth even in those few places where it might seem suitable. At low volume listening these are perfect for some cultured ambience while reading or working. But turn up the volume (a little more than usual as these are recorded at a lower level) and you find yourself transported to another time and place altogether. I’d say, sort of a hybrid in style between the gentle and elegant Pires and the timeless espiranto of Moravec. I find it almost irrelevant to nit-pit details when it seems the spirit of Chopin himself is in the room with me.

Arrau. Really emphasizes the Nocturne as meaning “the dark night of our troubled souls.” In Arrau’s hands, these are not bedtime lullabies. I find the emotional intensity too much to handle more than a few Nocturnes at a time. One French reviewer made the interesting comment that because of their weight and solidity Arrau’s interpretations were like “sculptures in sound.”

Ashkenazy. The reasons why this didn’t place among my top three recommendations are different from the reasons other critics have cited. Almost unanimously, other critics or commentaries in piano forums praise his fine pianism, but find his interpretations lacking in emotional expression. My reaction is just the opposite: I find his emotional range sometimes a bit too raw and lacking elegance and a little restraint from his virtuosic outpourings. I suppose one could argue that his Nocturne No. 19 (E-minor) is not as doleful or forlorn as some, and that this might be viewed as lacking emotional depth, but I hear emotions that have run out of control, making him miss the subtle, more introspective nuances in the rush of surging pathos. If you’ve ever seen him perform in concert, you know he is not emotionally detached. Anyway, now that this set is available at a budget price and coupled with the Four Ballades for under $12 that’s recommendation enough. For me, his Nocturne No.3 is my reference standard for this trickiest of all Nocturnes (along with No. 16) and that alone makes it well worth having this set!

Barenboim. Other than the German press which has long praised these recordings, I guess I’m the only one in America that enjoys Barenboim’s Chopin. My notes show these verdicts: one “not bad,” fifteen “good-very good,” and five “excellent.” The sound is also quite nice. I enjoy putting on the set and listening from start to finish. It’s not as transcendent as Moravec or as dreamy as Amoyel, but it is consistently communicative. Barenboim’s new live recital from Warsaw includes a reference rendition of the D-flat, Opus 27. I can’t imagine anyone hearing that, and not being moved by how the melody sings so fervently. Forget all these trendy hyper-marketed pianists, this is real art, my friends. The set is now available at a budget price (2 CD set for about $12).

Bolet. His F-minor No. 15 is probably my reference for this work, and that’s because Bolet knew this work best of all and often played it as an encore (I heard him play it as an encore at the Lobero Theater in Santa Barbara in 1976, and again at Herkulessaal in Munich in 1986). However, on this recording (from the 1987 time period) he had returned to playing on Baldwins after nearly a decade performing and recording on Bechsteins. Whereas his earlier style on the Baldwin was to produce a deep anchoring bass tone and project the melody over the inner figurations (in a manner similar to Rubinstein), his period playing on Bechsteins made him almost obsessed with exploring the pianissimo range of interpretation, and later on he had his Baldwins regulated with a much, much lighter action in order to do this. After hearing him live, I’d have to say these later recordings catch
him in a rather self-conscious mode of playing, and other than the F-minor, the playing does not flow naturally.

**Feltsman.** This was a mixed set: my notes have a couple of “no” verdicts, but also three very rare “wow” verdicts with everything else being good or at least interesting. I consider this set invaluable for the serious student as there are so many interesting and compelling moments. However, it doesn’t make my enjoyment list because the sound is really not even close to ideal, or even competitive against other top recordings. The venue is a concert hall with a lot of ambience, and the mics are way too distant to convey the kind of intimacy that a Nocturne suggests. Because of this distance there is really no bass warmth at all, and a kind of greyness of tone prevails. Lastly, the piano sounds like a run-of-the-mill New York Steinway with a somewhat metallic edge in the mid-bass. But the interpretations deserve much better than this! Somebody needs to put him in a studio with a finely-prepped Hamburg Steinway and re-do the whole set. One of my “no” verdicts was for No. 16 which displayed no soaring ecstasy or distinction between the different complexly interweaving textures, but this might work itself out with Feltsman doing nothing different other than having a better piano in a more suitable acoustic.

**Francois.** A mixed set. The famous D-flat Opus 27 is probably the best of the set, because it was a work he knew best and played as an encore. I would also swear this performance is from a different recording session because the sound is quite different from all the others. His penchant for eccentric narcissistic indulgence is kept at a minimum in this set from 1966; only the tricky Nocturne No. 3 sees any distracting mannerisms. Otherwise, mostly enjoyable from start to finish.

**Freire.** I’ve never met him or heard him live, but he has obviously made friends everywhere in the music world, and seems to be enjoying a resurgent career. I want to like this set, but it’s an extremely competitive field with offerings from many great masters. In my notes I find verdicts on individual Nocturnes range from “not bad” to “pretty good” to one “very good.” I can’t pinpoint exactly what the issue is, but I perceive a sort of emotional veil, and physiological reticence which keeps all of the renderings within a certain narrowly-confined range of expression. I just want to hear him dig in with some more passion in at least a few climatic moments. I will say this: he has said in interviews that he idolizes Guiomar Novaes’ playing, and in some ways their playing is very similar; neither one really project a melody from the keybed, and there is always a surface level of “cultivation” that seems to prohibit overt emotional drama. Even so, Novaes was often able to achieve a sort of transporting dreamy state, and that is something I didn’t really hear with Freire.

**Leonskaja.** This didn’t receive glowing reviews when it was released so I never bothered to add it to my collection until I found that it is now available at a budget price. I was actually surprised at how much I enjoyed it. There were no single “reference” performances that stood out, but all of them were either “good” or “very good” and a couple of them showed imaginative solutions to some long-standing interpretative “problems” (the pedaling in No. 15, for example). Teldec was making some superb piano recordings in this time period, and the luminous piano tone is enough of a pleasure that I enjoy putting this CD on as I’m working in my study.

**Yundi Li.** Nicely done; sensitive and expressive, and always well-balanced, but the music never moves beyond a certain surface sheen, and as lovely as that is, the experience is just not as transfixing as my top recommendations, Moravec, Amoyel or Wasowski. By the way, his live Beijing concert is atrocious. All of the reasons why someone would like his studio version are completely missing here: no polish, no lovely tone, no sensitivity to phrasing or dynamic nuance. Not just the Nocturnes, but nearly everything on the program is some of the worst Chopin playing I’ve heard in decades.
**Lympany.** If the sound hadn’t been so dated I would move these performances up to my enjoyment category. I only have the old LP, and haven’t heard the new CD transfer on Dutton Labs 9715. Perhaps a later update on that. Most Americans don’t know anything about Moura Lympany, but I’m telling you this is an impressive set. Nos. 6 and 12 are among my reference renditions for those works, and the D-flat Opus 27 is the best (by far) of the pianists attempting to keep it under five minute (in accordance with Chopin’s tempo markings).

**Moravec.** Simply in a class of its own. If you already own this set on the earlier Supraphon issue or the Nonesuch version, donate that set to some worthy piano lover in your life, and get the new set on Supraphon re-mastered from the original Connoisseur Society master tapes. The improvement in sound is incredible. If you own the “big-boned” versions of the Nocturnes (Arrau, Ohlsson, Ashkenazy, Rubinstein), you should have a version in your library that offers a more intimate—and probably more authentically Chopinesque—point of view. While the Amoyel certainly satisfies that need, Moravec’ sense of color and pedaling are a marvel. Moravec reconfirms to me the reason why I love the piano as an artistic-expressive medium.

**Ohlsson.** I like Ohlsson for the big works, such as the B-minor Scherzo which I heard on a video from the Chopin Competition Laureates Recital. That is top-drawer drama (and he plays on a robust Hamburg Steinway that suits his playing style better than the Bösendorfer, or that wheezy old Mason & Hamlin he sometimes uses). But for the Nocturnes, I have to confess that I could hardly sit through these roughhewn aberrations. They singularly lack in pianissimo refinement, and are full of overly-literal Urtext reading in phrasing, yet the corresponding pedaling is often ignored. The combination of the two contribute to some very disruptive passages that render the entire conception musically ineffectual. In my notes, the verdicts on each Nocturne were as follows: two “good,” two “decent,” five “so-so,” eleven “no,” and one “WTF??” I can certainly understand why neither of his recordings of the Nocturnes (EMI or Arabesque) get mentioned as top choices among critics or in the piano forums.

**Perlemuter.** I’m sure he was a fine Chopinest in his day, but this 1984 recording does not show him at his best. I know from a recording made in 1955 of Schumann works (incl. Fantasy Opus 17) that his fingerwork was deft, and full of color, and the music always had a joyful spring to it. Here he just sounds tired and a bit fumble-fingered, and the poorly-voiced Steinway in a bathroom acoustic only contributes an unpleasant metallic edge to the sound.

**Pires.** Available now as a DG Duo selling for under $12, and as such, may be a good budget recommendation as a gift for a piano student. The renderings capture the intimate side of these works quite well, and none of them fall below a level of finely cultivated playing. Her Nocturne No. 1 is one of my favorites of all the versions I evaluated.

**Rubinstein.** I recommend only the 1965 RCA version. The sound of the earliest 1936 version on EMI is so glaring it hurts my ears. And besides, he hadn’t developed a lifetime of experience in playing these works, and he sounds simple, and undisciplined here. The 1949 version (now on Naxos) also sounds pretty bad, with a thin, tizzy piano tone that nobody would recognize as the Rubinstein we heard in concert. His left hand is erratic and scrambles to just get the notes, like he had been doing too much partying in Hollywood and not enough time practicing. Even though the 1965 version is the one with the magical touches, there are just enough frustrating inconsistencies to compromise my listening enjoyment. But important enough that every serious pianist should be familiar with these.

**Dang Thai Son.** Winner of the 1980 Chopin Competition (the one Argerich walked out on) Son has developed a devoted following over the years. Despite his physical playing style (with a lot of jerking
The balance of musical textures is always well-refined. I'm not so sure that his tendency to play leading melodic lines with a flat hand results in the best tone color, and he tends to use a lot of finger legato in the left hand figurations thereby reducing the harmonic foundation other pianists achieve with traditional pedaling. But these are the things that give him a subtle distinctiveness. The overall approach is for smoothness and balance, without harshness of tone. In this general stylist camp I'd also put Pires and Yundi Li, both of which seem to have more color and expressive depth than Son (though he does have a few standout renderings, as you will see below).

**Weissenberg.** With his daunting and stoic appearance and steely-fingered technique, I wouldn't have expected Weissenberg to be so convincing in the Chopin Nocturnes. I heard him live twice and he never cracked a hint of a smile either time. But there's a surprising degree of warmth and tenderness (in the strong, silent, manly way) and there's not a bad one in the bunch. The famous D-flat, Opus 27 is full of poetic expression. As good as the EMI studio set is the live recital on Hanssler is even better (though the sound is not as good as the EMI). I've enjoyed listening to the recital, though I have to say it is not for background listening, these are riveting performances that command one's attention.

**Wild.** I practically wore out my old LPs of Wild's Demonic Liszt, the Reader’s Digest recordings, and his Odeon Liszt recital. But in later years none of the recording companies did him justice. Unfortunately, being a happy extrovert, he didn't really concern himself with what they did in the studio, and all of his later recordings for Etcetera, Chesky, and Ivory Classics are flawed in one fundamental way: They seem to have all been produced by people who were really specialists in jazz and pop music, and none of them had the experience for proper classical recording. The Chopin Nocturnes sound like a pop recording with the microphones way too close to the strings and hammers. How can the melody soar out of the piano and create a dimensional soundfield if the microphones are so close? The other thing is that even factoring out the sound (to me unlistenable) Wild’s approach was too relaxed and contented to really plumb the depths of these works. They are not just pretty tunes; there's a lot of melancholy and even torment in these works. Not a good match for Wild. I gave him these verdicts: one “pretty good,” three “OK,” and sixteen “No.”
Putting the Critic to the Test

Whenever I do these extensive comparative surveys it usually takes about a full week of dedicated time listening and writing. After reviewing 34 complete sets and dozens of individual performances, then going back and re-listening to many of them for more detailed assessment, I was living and breathing nothing but Chopin Nocturnes for a full week. It was full immersion, and nearly every waking moment of the day I was hearing fragments of Chopin Nocturnes replaying in my head. So, it was only natural that after I had finalized all my reviews I took the score to the piano and tried to apply some of the wisdom I had accumulated. Would I be able to avoid the clumsy pedaling of so-and-so performer, or duplicate the soaring melody of this artist? What I learned is that, as the old saying goes, it’s all “easier said than done!”

More specifically, I took a serious stab at bringing the tricky Nocturne No. 3 (Opus 9, No.3) to a reasonable level of artistic expression. The reason why I chose this work is that it had one of the lowest rates of successful rendering among the 34 versions I evaluated, and I had never myself played it before. This is how I came to realize that certain technical configurations may be negotiated with more innate ability by one pianist than another, while the next Nocturne with a different set of technical requirements may see the opposite result between pianists. But Nos. 3 and 16 seemed to be the two most difficult to get just right.

With the Chopin Nocturnes the very first thing the pianist will need to determine is the level of *pianissimo threshold* on the piano they are playing. With a very fine pianissimo threshold the pianist can use a wider range of dynamics in giving contour to the melody. If the pianissimo threshold is not so good, then the pianist has fewer levels of dynamics to employ before unpleasant tonal qualities begin to immerse. Moravec can explore so many layers of dynamics in the melodic range, even to a pianissimo level, because the pianos he plays allow the left hand figurations to be kept at an even softer dynamic level.

The next thing the pianist needs to determine is *melodic projection*. Most full-size concert grands project better than smaller grands, because the middle range of the piano sits on the sweet spot of a wider and longer soundboard where the vibrations swing with more latitude. The best (but not all) Steinways are famous for being able to float a melody “out of the box.” That is, because of this increased vertical dispersion of soundwaves, there is more dimensionality to the soundfield. On smaller grands, the melody and accompaniment all stay on the same dimensional plane. Steinway is also famous for its range of tonal modulation, that is, the range of different tone colors that are possible. (It is the balance of fundamental tone with varying harmonic overtones that determines tone color). On a piano with superior dynamic threshold, but less ability to float the melody out of the box, a successful performer would emphasize the subtle layers of dynamics to give character to each line, and this is exactly what Moravec does on his Bösendorfer. On a piano with good, but not superb, dynamic sensitivity, but with superior melodic projection, a successful performer would let the melody soar above the accompaniment, as Barenboim does on his Hamburg Steinway in his Warsaw recital.

The next thing the pianist needs to determine is *finger or pedal legato*. This, of course, cannot be determined without first knowing the conditions discussed above—dynamic threshold and melodic projection—and how they relate to the particular piano and acoustic at hand. This proved to be a big issue in this survey. I know in listening and comparing performances, I tended to criticize a few pianists (Dang Thai Son, in particular) for using fastidious finger legato in the left hand figurations instead of the more traditional use of pedal. The advantage of finger legato for left hand passages is, of course, clarity, but this also renders a dryness of tone since fewer interacting overtones are present.
employed. The advantage of finger legato for right hand melody is that it is easier for the ear to hear the sustain of the melody against the accompaniment when both are not blended together by pedal. However, I feel the disadvantages of this approach outweigh the positives. Whenever I hear sparing use of the pedal, I inevitably hear barren stretches of accompanying figurations without harmonic foundation. The way Chopin writes most of these passages is that the lower bass note anchors the harmonic foundation for the entire measure, and if the pedal doesn’t catch and hold this, then this foundation is lost. Of course, even using pedal, one can downplay this anchoring bass tone for a more “elegant” tonal balance, or one can really emphasize these notes for extra richness and depth (like Rubinstein and Arrau).

The basic issue of how much to pedal is complicated by the fact that Chopin writes some incredibly long pedal marks. It is obvious that he wanted a wash of harmonics as a foundation above which the melody would soar, and that the individual notes in the left hand are not intended to be etched with clarity for individual emphasis. But those long pedal marks are just not practical on modern pianos. The resulting wash of sonority would be just too muddy. Therefore, the question of pedaling becomes an art in itself.

Now, here’s how each of those three performance considerations played out as I tried my hand at the third Nocturne. First off, and I’m not making excuses, just dealing with the realities at hand, my 7’5” Kawai imposes severe limitations as regards the first two parameters. That is, with this particular piano relative to the room it is in, even with the soft pedal deployed, the best dynamic threshold I can achieve is about a mezzo-piano. If I try for a lower dynamic table I risk getting drop-outs or uneven dynamic continuity. That means that the melodic range must then be projected more firmly than I’d want ideally, and on this piano that means just louder, but without “floating outside of the box” like on a good Steinway. At this level it is hard to convey a sense of intimacy. Beyond that, with a dynamic threshold being somewhat high, that means that the long pedal marks suggested by Chopin produces too much build-up of sonority when the melody has to be projected that much over the left hand. On a Hamburg Steinway D, the floating melody provides a three-dimensional texture, with the accompaniment hovering close to the soundboard and the melodic projection rising above. As I said, this phenomenon is most associated with the best (but not all) Steinways, and to a lesser degree, any good concert grand with a large aural canvas.

In the past I’ve taught on different pianos, including a 7’4” Bösendorfer, and a 6’3” Bechstein, both of which had much superior pianissimo threshold compared to my Kawai, or other pianos I’ve used such as a Steinway B. On the pianos with a finely-calibrated pianissimo threshold, it is easy to play the left-hand figurations in these Nocturnes with consistent control and dynamic nuance, and thus to create a sense of intimate scale, but neither the Bosey nor Bechy projected outside of the box. Even though it was easy to control the desired balance between the left hand and right hand, the resulting sound was always on the same dimensional plane, and all of it painted with the same basic color. This is what makes Moravec stand out even amongst other famous pianists, he is able differentiate three or four layers of textures and all very close to the dynamic threshold. Yet, while I admire that approach (and could listen enchanted for hours), the sound I hear in my own head is closer to the sound that Barenboim got from the finely-prepped Hamburg Steinway he played at his 70th Birthday Recital in Warsaw, Poland. The left hand has maybe two simple dynamic levels, the bass anchor and the inner figurations, and is not infinitely layered like with Moravec on his Bösendorfer, but the right hand melody soars up and out of the box and hovers, suspended in the acoustic like a solo singer with a beautiful voice. But that’s not what I can get out of my piano.

So how to make the most out of what I’ve got? Let’s look at measures 32-48 because they are some of the easiest measures of the piece and allow one to focus on the issues of melodic projection and
pedaling. Judging by the way the hand positions fall in the left hand I would assume that pedaling twice per measure would work best. There are a few measures where solid pedaling through the measure is feasible but then that sets up too much contrast in sonority to the surrounding measures which really need to be cleared mid-measure. Now the trick is, ideally, on a fine piano with sensitive pedals and a little ambience from a large room, the pedaling needn’t clear all the harmony, but with a ⅔ pedal motion some of the bass anchor at the beginning of the measure should remain. Not only that but a piano with some degree of internal resonance (or a more ambient concert hall) helps in places like the final note of measure 32, which would otherwise be cut off abruptly with the pedal change at the beginning of measure 33.

Okay, let’s take that much to start with. On my piano, in my room, there is no natural ambience or internal resonance that helps blend sounds, so the difference between pedaling and not pedaling is at its most extreme. One good thing is that on my piano when I pump the pedal for a quick clearing, most of the anchoring bass tone remains. Although less the case on pianos with weaker bass sections (including the historic Pleyels I’ve played) Chopin writes the left hand figurations with enough spread that some pedal overhang is likely to occur and is desirable. If the figurations were compacted within a closer range then all the tones would clear at about the same rate.

Let’s look at measure 32. The lone F-sharp at the end of the measure sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb. Full-measure pedaling is out of the question, and mid-measure pedaling which works well in many other cases leaves the upper G and F-sharps subject to abrupt cut-off. Traditional finger legato technique is impossible with such a spread. So I needed to get very creative and do some cheating. Yes, I’d prefer to play in a more natural and legitimate manner, but the resulting sound is the most important goal here. Therefore, I do some re-distribution of notes between the hands, taking the upper G and F-sharp of the left hand with the right hand. This allows me to sculpt the inner phrase with a sighing sub-phrase as implied by Chopin writing the lower G and F-sharp with quarter note upper stems. Now, with that kind of fingering I could play the measure legato without any pedal if I wanted to, yet I still pedal in order to preserve the continuity of sonority of the surrounding measures.
Now let’s look at measure 39. I discovered this was a problem measure during my evaluations, when a surprising amount of performers had a disruption of continuity from the surrounding measures. The right hand has staccato notes held within a phrase mark, which would imply a non-legato or detaché articulation in keeping with the scherzando indication at the beginning of the work. That’s fine, but the left hand should sound exactly like all the other measures around it with the same figurations. But the normal half measure pedaling doesn’t work because then half of the right hand figuration is caught with one pedal and the rest with the next pedal, obviously a lack of continuity. Finger legato is not possible without huge Cliburn-size hands, which means most pianists will let go of the lower F-sharp before the mid-measure pedal clearing because their hand is moving out of range to get the next notes. What the listener hears (who doesn’t care about the pianist’s problems!) is that in every preceding measure the bass anchor supports the music a certain way, and now all of a sudden the bass note is dropped right away, as if a hole in the fabric of the sonority. Of course, most listeners only pick up such details subliminally, but even subtle moments of discontinuity can disrupt the immersion into the music. At first I tried another re-distribution trick by picking up the A-sharp on the third beat with the right hand (awkward but doable) so that the left hand could hold onto the F-sharp anchoring bass, and avoiding any muddying use of pedal at all. But once again, I found that even in those few instances when I could achieve a finger legato, the lack of resonance without the pedal was too disruptive of the continuity. Therefore, you see the meticulous pedaling I use, which relies on my piano to retain some of that anchoring bass tone (F-sharp) while I do a couple of quick half-pedal pumpings, then have the left hand retains the chordal outline of the last three notes. It all comes together easily enough once you’ve done it a few times. The result is proper characterization of the playful ascending right hand phrase, and reasonable textural clarity without compromising sonorous continuity.

Measure 43 is actually not as tricky as measure 39. Part of the reason is that the right hand is spread further apart from the left hand that it was in measure 39, and even with sloppy pedaling the ear will still hear the line distinctly enough from the lower accompaniment. What I do (Urtext fans, close your eyes!) is to drop the anchoring bass tone an octave lower (but played gently) because on my piano even more of the anchoring harmony is maintained with the octave lower tone than the Urtext tone as I thin out the pedaling in the rest of the measure. You see I use a solid half pedaling in the second half of the measure, because depending on where the music is set on the keyboard, pedal pumping in itself can create a kind undulating sound. In measure 33 the pumping is not audible; in measure 43 it proved just a little distracting. Again, you see the use of the old harpsichordist’s trick of holding onto chordal outlines (harpsichordists do this all the time because they have no pedal).
Measure 47 is another tricky one for pedaling. Many pianists in the survey were sloppy with the pedaling here, and only three actually shaped the right hand so that you could hear the slight emphasis on the B to A-sharp that Chopin intended (by giving them separate stems). In order for that to be registered clearly by the listener you cannot use any obfuscatory pedaling at all. But retaining the chordal outline in the left hand works fine. I had to make a conscious effort to let go of the E-sharp with the thumb so that only the A-sharp resolves across the bar line to the G-sharp. You also see I put a fermata with a grace-note flag on it; this is just my sign for a very tiny lingering tenuto.

One final note on this Nocturne: I had to play over and over again the first few measures with just my right hand in order to align my playing with the actual speech level (threshold of articulation) of my piano. This is where many pianists didn’t get the feel right in conveying the proper interpretation of scherzando here. Unlike the word scherzo, which usually means a joke or prank (well, not judging by Chopin’s Scherzi!), scherzando means “gentle play” or “frolic” as when a grandfather swings his granddaughter in his arms (or whatever analogy you prefer). At issue here is how emphatic to be with the dotted rhythms and the pizzicato. I found the best results with a slightly rounded dotted rhythm, but on a different piano in a concert hall I might very well opt for a crisper rendering.

Verdict? I doubt I’ll ever match my top picks for this Nocturne, notably Ashkenazy, who also has such a marvelously euphoric ending. But with a less critical audience than myself, I suppose it will pass muster.
Chopin Nocturnes: Interpretive Analysis

As a young piano student, and even up through my years in conservatory, I always considered the Nocturnes pretty boring fare compared to the more assertive Etudes, Sonatas and Ballades. But, the older I got, the more these little gems insinuated their way into my life and my playing repertoire, to the point where if someone came to my house now and asked me to play some Chopin, I’d probably play one of the Nocturnes. To me (and many others, as well) the Nocturnes are quintessential Chopin. While there are many lovely singular performances, works with which artists have a special affinity, there are surprisingly few complete sets that are consistently satisfying in every Nocturne. I believe the reason is very much in line with what many young piano students incorrectly assume: that these are technically simple works which don’t warrant much serious attention. Many figured they may be passable fare sandwiched between more showy works, to sort of spread out the demands on the performer’s stamina. Or, better yet, just leave them to the amateurs to play at home. Of course, such an attitude now would be anathema to my musical sensitivity. But, even today, I doubt Pollini and Ashkenazy and the other concert artists give equal preparation-time to the Nocturnes compared to the Etudes, because everybody knows the pianists in the audience will be watching like vultures on the Etudes, and probably only half awake on the Nocturnes. There’s a misconception that these are simple enough works that you can kind of relax and simply play from the heart and everything will fall into place. Not so.

In reality, these expressive gems are deceptively difficult when you look to get that last 2-3% of refinement out of them. Even the tiniest miscalculation can be deleterious to the shape of the line, whereas in the presto finale of the B-minor sonata, you can pretty much put the pedal to the metal and nobody will hear if the fourth finger was slightly out of dynamic continuity with the rest of the hand. Some may feel that my hyper-critical evaluations are rather harsh regarding some cherished artists and favored recordings. But I see anything less than a full glass as an unnecessary compromise, and hearing the music at its fullest expression is the reward for anyone who cares about the validity of artistic edification in our lives. Why debate half-full and half-empty when there are so many glasses full and overflowing?

Before I even begin discussing the subtleties of interpretation, I want to make clear one of my overriding views regarding these works, and whether you agree or not, you will have to keep this a priori precondition in mind. That is, I firmly believe that the piano tone and quality of the piano reproduction in your listening environment is integral to the overall experience, or more so, than whichever tiny details of rubato, or pedaling, or technical fluency you wish to discuss. Chopin would be beyond amusement to consider that there are fanatic collectors who listen to scratchy old Moissewitch recording fifty or sixty times to divine every last detail of the rubato. They certainly aren’t listening for the tonal qualities, as that is impossible to determine. The two earlier versions of Rubinstein’s recordings of the Nocturnes bare absolutely no resemblance to the tone I heard in concert and which he was famous for. Sensitive artists strive to create a beautiful tone, with many subtleties of dynamics and pedal nuance. Therefore, I have no tolerance for antiquated recordings which do not give an accurate sense of the pianist’s tone color. Although interesting from a studying point of view, I’d never put on one of those old recordings when I want to just sit back in bask in the beauty of these creations. And that is their purpose. I’m also fussy about piano voicing and tuning, and have heard quite a few recordings in this survey which fall short of ideal. Live concerts are one thing, but my thought is, if you go to the bother of making a studio recording, get a good piano that is properly tuned and serviced!!

You’ve already seen that as far as a complete set is concerned, I find the Moravec the most rewarding listening experience. But I’ve also made note of which performers were “best” for each individual
Nocturne. Moravec still gets the most votes of any contender, but there are singular performances from other artists which were also impressive. I’ve made tapes of “dream compilations” of the Etudes, Preludes, and other works, but they are always completely unsatisfying because of the often jarring juxtaposition of the sound. Even when decibel levels have been carefully matched, the sound of the different pianos, the type of acoustic venue, and the manner of recording (close mics, distant mics, or the often disconcerting blend of using both close and distant microphones) – it’s just too jarring to the senses to enjoy the roughshod change of gears. Therefore, what I have done recently, is to group favorite recordings of the same artist playing pieces of a similar relative expressive range. With Askenazy, I might pick his three best Nocturnes, and put those together with some Preludes or more expressive Etudes, so I get only my favorite performances without the distraction and negativity that come from renderings that I find less appealing.

I was wondering why there were so few complete sets that I could honestly enjoy from start to finish. It was easy enough to find some that from start to finish had no redeeming musical value, but that’s another story. The more perplexing question is why would I love how an artist plays one Nocturne, and yet not care for the way they play the others? Well, these are the questions that occupy my time, maybe others don’t have such angst in their lives. Anyway, I may ponder this question for years, but as of now I’d say there are probably two issues at play here: One, personal affinity, and the other simple lack of serendipity. As for the first, some individual selections are doubtless going to find deeper resonance in the artists than others; we all have our favorite sonatas and etudes and nocturnes. Those are the ones they play more often and give more of themselves to. This has also been a major argument against doing complete sets of anything, whether Chopin Nocturnes, Beethoven Sonatas, or Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier. In times past, famous pianists seemed to stake claim to certain pieces that were considered their specialty, a select Nocturne or two, or a few of the Beethoven Sonatas. What they chose to play was as much a statement about their personality as how they played it. Cortot, for example, only regularly played a half dozen of the 21 Nocturnes in concert or on recording. Very few played complete cycles of anything.

The second issue is that, as I said, the tiniest details in this music are actually very exposed to the listener, such that even the slightest inconsistencies in articulation, tone, pedaling, dynamic balance, rhythm and rubato, or over-arching projection of the line can make a big difference in how authentic and natural the performance seems to be. To be honest (and I know firsthand), something that seems effective when you play it, may not always translate to the listener as intended. I’m sure the artists are sometimes surprised when they listen to their own recordings, and I know that the dissatisfaction they feel often propels them to have another go at it and re-record the works later on.

As may be clear, I don’t believe in recording complete sets just for the sake of completion, though it does make it easy to access them in my library. I’ve thought of someday recording my own favorites, though after what I just wrote above, it seems more daunting than ever to expect that perfect moment of serendipity. You will be able to access my playing samples of the Nocturnes in the piano review section that is coming soon, but I just recorded those here at home and do not consider them definitive. In my perfect dream world I would require a perfectly prepped piano in a sympathetic acoustic, and voiced just the way I like by the world famous technician, Peter Salisbury. Though I am fond of the new Bösendorfer 280, the new Bechstein D-282, and the newest Hamburg Steinways (now with Sitka spruce) I think I might try the Nocturnes on the Grotrian 277, which has a lovely lyrical quality, and would in itself offer something a little different than we usually hear. As I discussed before, picking a different “ideal” piano for each separate Nocturne would be too jarring a listening experience, though it might be fun to pick one piece and play it on several pianos, in the same acoustic, just to see the effect different pianos can have. Interestingly, Moravec’s set was recorded on both a New York Steinway and a Bösendorfer, which are really about as different as you
can get in pianos, yet he sounds very similar on both because his playing seems to adapt to an astonishing degree in order to achieve the desired result he hears in his head.

For now, I'll just sit back and enjoy other artists, artists who, in fleeting moments of serendipity have flirted with perfection. We are indeed fortunate to have access to all of this beauty, to just sit back and enjoy from our listening seats whenever the mood strikes us.

When played just right, like only a real master can do, these pieces can be very transporting, and take us away from listening to a pianist playing pleasant music, to a timeless world of untapped emotional and spiritual expression. Chopin had his larger-than-life musical creations, the B-minor Scherzo or the Winterwind Etude - those are forces of nature - and more externally imposed stimulants to the senses. The Nocturnes are much more internal, and much more like Chopin the person: moody and melancholy. These are not idle daydreams, or gentle nighttime lullabies, they really probe deeply into the human subconscious. In the Nocturnes I believe we find the sum expression of Chopin's soul.

1. **Nocturne in B-flat minor, Opus 9, No. 1.**

For most listeners tempo is the big issue between different performers, and most complain that tempos are generally too fast. I play it slower myself, similar to Pires, but one of my favorites is Moravec who moves along at a surprisingly brisk pace. The real issue is whether the music sounds relaxed, or if any tension is conveyed. Moravec never dawdles, yet the tone is so silky and delicate, and the left hand so smooth, that there are no bumps or edges. He tends to elide phrases quite often, but you never feel that one phrase has been cut short by the start of the next, because each phrase rises and tapers to a natural conclusion. I'm not sure why performance traditions have favored a quicker tempo, because I see no ill-effect in anchoring the harmonic progression more clearly and taking longer breaths between phrases. As with any of these works, subtle degrees can have a big impact. Two performers who convey more tension than I'd like (and that translates the work into active drama rather than passive reminiscence) are Ashkenazy and Pollini. Between the two, Askenazy has a lovely rubato, and a warmer tone, enough that the work is still very moving. But Pollini seems to walk a straight and narrow path, and rides atop the ceaseless agitato of the left hand like a perpetual motion from purgatory. In the final assessment, does the music gently pull one along as its story unfolds, or does it push and poke at the listener to keep up? Does the music transport the listener to a far and distant place (perhaps the inner recesses of forgotten experiences) or does the listener feel harassed and cajoled along in a force outside their own volition?

Regarding the criterion described above....

The Best Realized Renditions: Maria João Pires and Ivan Moravec.
The Least Successful Performances: Arthur Rubinstein (EMI version) and Maurizio Pollini.

2. **Nocturne in E-flat, Opus 9, No. 2.**

This is one of the most loved—and most abused—of Chopin's works. It's got to be one of the most used pieces for piano salesmen demonstrating their wares, and it always sounds the same: the right hand louder than the left to show the "lovely singing tone," (you have to picture the flash of the dentally whitened teeth as they say that) and the left hand chords clunk along without nuance at the
same pace. But, I've also endured many other forms of torture: I've heard it played by a trio of street musician on the pan-pipes, I've heard it on an entertainment show on television played by Richard Clayderman on his tinkly white baby grand, I've heard it on a pipe organ, as encores by concert flutists, and violinists, and of course, various New Age renditions. Even as I listen to serious concert artists in this survey, it is hard for me to hear past so much accumulated resentment and resistance to its true expressive potential. One that drives me crazy is to hear the left hand chords plunk along like obedient drones, with no voicing or lingering moments to emphasize a harmonic change. And I'd give anything for an errant Paderewski-like rolled chord or something. So now you know where I'm coming from, and I pray your point of origin is less cynical. Nevertheless, there were a few performances that got past my guarded gate. One of the more interesting performances is by Vladimir Feltman who uses as a basis for his rendering some of the emendations, flourishes and even cadenzas which Chopin wrote in some of his pupil’s music scores. We have to remember that the youthful Chopin (I believe he was about 19 years old when the Opus 9 Nocturnes were written) was ever so much the popular improviser, who dazzled his audiences with his brilliant, and highly ornamental music style. Just look at the finale of the Andante Spianato e Grande Polonaise, Opus 22. In later years, his style became more sparse, with each voicing and harmony carefully scrutinized. But for this Nocturne, I find Feltman’s performance completely authentic. The important thing though, is that even without the interesting embellishments, his performance is already very expressive and nuanced, and easily among the better renditions in the survey. So, here are the two things that absolutely must pass muster for me to consider it a successful performance: the right hand melody can't be projected at the same dynamic level throughout, as lovely as that may be, it really should have more dynamic range, just as it would be inflected by a bel canto singer. Second, those left hand chords – you’ve really got to do something to give them shape and expressive meaning – not just a steady drone of 1-2-3 chords. So, here's who made the tough critic happy, and who gets the gong...

Most successful performances ☑:  Moravec, Feltman.
Least successful performances ☐:  Hewitt, Ohlsson ('78)

3. Nocturne in B, Opus 9, No. 3.

If you read the section Putting the Critic to the Test above, you will know this is the Nocturne I challenged myself to learn after I completed my comparative survey. Although I'm now more sympathetic to the problems that the pianists face, it's still no excuse not to strive for the absolute best performance. I figure if you are going to make a commercial recording, you better have something worthwhile to contribute, because recordings are numerous and that makes this a crowded and highly competitive field. I evaluated 37 versions of this piece and just about half of those received a “good” or better verdict from me. But it was the other half that really got poor grades, with some of my most emphatically negative reactions. The primary issue is how to interpret Chopin’s marking, scherzando, which means gentle playing or frolicking. Not the kind of indicator one would expect in a Nocturne. My thinking is that it probably is more like a memory of play, as when an elderly grandfather thinks back with a smile to the first time he swung his granddaughter around in his arms. Only a few attempted a vivid, jaunty and spritely rendering, and to my mind only Abbey Simon has managed to pull this off successfully. Others, round out the dotted rhythms, and go easy on the detaché articulations. My overall favorite for this work is Ashkenazy. He manages to get the perfect balance between the two approaches, and conveys a gentle, wistful sort of reminiscence. All the tricky transitions are handled with perfect naturalness, and nothing is tossed off without meaning. Nobody has matched Ashkenazy in the final measures. They can sound rather odd and even contrived when they aren't done just right, but his rendering conveys a wonderful
sense of euphoria which dissolves into pure bliss with the final note. I can’t believe people think Ashkenazy is a mere technician. His performance is obviously very deeply felt.

Given these performance parameters, here are my picks and pans:

Picks: Ashkenazy best, then Arrau, Feltsman, Abbey Simon.
Pans: Tipo worst; then Ohlsson (’94), Margalit, Perlemuter, Rev.

4. Nocturne in F, Opus 15, No.1

This was the one Nocturne I reluctantly learned in music conservatory. But at least it had the exciting middle part! Thirty-some years later my take on this work is a little different! Now, I can only tolerate the central outburst if it is clearly wrought and given some dynamic shape. If it’s just a blur of noise like so many recordings I evaluated in this survey, it really spoils the effectiveness of the interpretation for me. I can count on one hand those pianists who give clear shape and contour to the left hand fury in the central episode. Some were so blurred with pedal I couldn’t even tell what the tonal center was. This is especially problematic on pianos with a fulsome mid-bass, such as Steinway, and less of a problem on pianos with a lighter mid-bass balance such as Bechstein, Blüthner, Bösendorfer, Schimmel or Yamaha.

![Fig. 5 measures 25-26 con fuoco, cogently shaped or a blur of pedal?](image)

But, for me, I was also just as disappointed by how few could really bring off the seemingly simple opening page. It’s a single tone melody in the prime region of the piano, and it should sing with both beauty and graceful elegance. But far too many pianists were too heavy in the left hand - the incessant triplet chord figurations droning on and on without shape or nuance - and the melody was too reticent, and never soared. I tried it on my piano and found it is indeed difficult to get a good balance. But I’m working with a 7’4” Kawai, a piano which doesn’t have the best pianissimo threshold to keep the left hand under control, and the melodic range can sound forced if I push too far above the level of the left hand. But these guys are playing on Steinway concert grands, so what’s the excuse?

![Fig. 6 measures 9-12, make sure the left hand doesn’t drown out the delicatissimo!](image)
To recap, the two performance parameters I look for in this Nocturne are: proper balance of hands (and singing melody), and clarity and shape in the middle con fuoco outburst. Here are my picks n’ pans.

**Picks:** Moravec. (Amoyel, Arrau, Lmpany)

**Pans:** Margalit. (Licad)

### 5. Nocturne in F-sharp, Opus 15, No. 2

I have to confess: this is another one that I never cared for – that is until I found the right performances in this survey. The problem for me was that it just sounded like amorphous noodling. I couldn’t perceive any shape or form or underlying rhythm, and still don’t in many of the performances I evaluated. But the best ones convey a subtle but discernible underlying pulse, and shape all the florid arabesques and *leggiero* embellishments to fit within the forward flow, and not constantly drag the music to its knees. All that to say I guess I prefer a tighter ship (with minimal self-indulgence), but maybe there are listeners who relish the more loosey-goosey approach, I don’t know. But now you know what my stated preferences are.

![Fig. 7](image1) **measures 8-9, some pianists had up to three expressive fermatas in just two measures!**

As for the Doppio movimento section I’m looking for a pianist who can unravel all the multiple layers in the texture. Just in the right hand there are three layers, the top and bottom parts echo each other in octaves, but one with a more emphatic dotted rhythm, and then there are inner textures that can be either harmonic filler or punctuation depending how they are played. The left hand should also, ideally, have two separately nuanced textures: the tenor chords, and the slurred bass tones. A few made a mess of this section entirely, most were at least representative of the overall outline, but only a few could decipher all the layers and make them come to life with natural expressiveness. I tend to be rather critical of Rubinstein in many instances, but for whatever reason, perhaps that he played it more often, he really has a handle on how this piece works.

![Fig. 8](image2) **measures 25-27, five layers of texture here, many pianists are just a frantic jumble**
6. Nocturne in G minor, Opus 15, No.3

Another one that is trickier than it seems. As with the Nocturne in D-flat, Opus 27, the tempo Chopin wrote seems almost ludicrous. At the tempo he indicates, a dotted half at 60, or one second per measure, the mood of the piece is far removed from the typical Nocturne profile, and the Lento languido marking seems completely contradictory to the metronome mark. At this speed the result goes even beyond a vigorous, up-beat Mazurka (which the left hand rhythms somewhat suggest) and really sounds like a giddy, frolicking scherzo. I’m coming to the opinion that something is seriously wrong with these tempo markings; they are completely inexplicable. But having said that, playing the work at the more traditional tempo based on Lento languido indication, there are some serious problems that challenge the interpreter, such that many of the versions I evaluated sounded awkward and unconvincing. The problem is the long sustained melodic notes that are tied together for more than three full measures before they arrive at the phrase-connected note of resolution. During the evaluations I was bothered by how many pianists couldn’t strike a balance between the hands, or somehow work out the pedaling so that the sustained melody would still be apparent over the left hand chordal punctuations. When I it tried it at my piano I realized this writing challenges the sustain level of even the finest concert grand pianos. It couldn’t have possibly worked on Chopin’s old Pleyel piano. I even tried it at more of an andante moderato and still the sustained notes would die before reaching their destinations. Only at the crazy metronome mark does it even become remotely possible, but then the work is no longer a Nocturne. Chopin writes phrase marks and staccato marks in the left hand, yet indicates for the pedal to be held for three full measures. Well, the best pianists, on the best pianos, somehow manage to pull it all off, the left hand punctuations are sort of like a gentle pulsing that re-energizes the sustained note. Arrau made it all seem perfectly natural, and he was also very magical in the sotto voce section beginning at measure 51.

![Fig. 9 measures 1-7, long sustained notes with the “reverse waltz” left hand chords](image)

Most successful performances ☺: Arrau. (Amoyel, Barenboim, Lympamy)
Least successful performances ☹: Engerer

7. Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Opus 27, No.1

Judging by how often it appears in individual performances, and how often there are postings and commentaries on YouTube, I’d say this is probably the third most popular Nocturne, after Nos. 2 and 8. Among pianists, I’d say it ranks second in popularity after the companion D-flat, from the same
opus. The two from this opus provide a good contrast in mood, the D-flat being euphoric, and hopeful, this one being very brooding and ruminative. The first puzzler for me was to figure out why some performances were “communicative” right from the very first measure, while others that were seemingly well-played didn’t take me beyond just notes played on a piano. What accounted for this very difference in perception? The differences in touch didn’t seem to be that significant, they were all smooth and legato. The relative degree of balance between the hands (how much the right hand “melody” was projected over the accompaniment) didn’t seem to affect how communicative the rendering was. Tempo wasn’t the biggest issue, though it did play a role. The range of timings was significant, from 4:34 for Yundi Li to 7:51 for Wasowski. The Wasowski did seem a little indulgent in its use of rubato and agogics, yet it was still communicative and musical. Most of the renderings under the five-minute mark seemed a little pushed to me, but the best ones were still able to convey the appropriate musical mood, with Feltsman at 4:38 probably the best. Many of the best performances clustered around an apparent sweet spot of about five-and-a-half minutes (three of my favorites were Arrau at 5:28, Moravec at 5:25, and Dang Thai Son at 5:39), but there were plenty of versions in this time range which were not at all effective. Olshansky at 6:38 conveyed a bleak, almost despondent mood which immediately drew me into its grey world, and the anguished central piu mosso section, the subsequent return to the bleakness, then the final fight for redemption in the resolution to C-sharp major, showed an overall arch and depth that made the somewhat longer journey musically potent. Others that stretched over six minutes just seemed too mono-static and lacking in latent and subliminal turbulence.

All that to demonstrate my conclusion that tempo alone was not really the biggest factor in whether or not a performance was “communicative.” The meaning of “communicative” itself would seem to warrant a separate essay. But as I said, the performances that were not communicative seemed reduced to mere notes. Why? The clue came from all my notes concerning performances I found to be the least effective, all of which had issues with poor pedaling that left “barren patches upon the musical landscape,” as I wrote. But to merely cite pedaling would not get to the real issue. For the non-pianists this may seem a bit complicated, but there are degrees of pedaling: full pedaling which lets off all the dampers so that all the strings resonate, half pedaling which usually just allows the most recently played notes to continue to vibrate (and this probably closest to the sound I get on playing historic Pleyels) and spot pedaling aided by finger legato which conveys a smooth legato but with less “harmonic haze.” Besides that, there is the issue of the piano’s internal resonance (what the German’s call Bodenresonanz) and the acoustics of the recording venue. Of these factors, pedaling and internal resonance seemed to make the biggest difference in whether or not the rendering was communicative. Okay, imagine this: an eight-voice a capella group is rehearsing a number by Hildegard von Bingen in your living room. With carpeting, drapes and plush furniture the intimate sized room allows you to hear each voice distinctly, and you can determine that everybody in the group has a nice voice, and they blend and balance well as an ensemble. But something of the transporting mystery and ecstatic euphoria of the message is missing. Now, you follow the group to their mid-afternoon performance at the local cathedral. Now, the message of the music is realized, the music soars into the infinite (as opposed to confined space of your living room) and the music “communicates.”

The versions of the Chopin I evaluated that don’t pedal properly, or let the piano’s internal cavity resonate (to expand the acoustic space of the instrument) are like the singers in your living room. Without the expansive soundfield, the notes are too dry, too “centered” in the here and now. Earl Wild was the least communicative because his clear pedaling and blithe disregard for emotional despondency make the music sound like a contented stroll in the park. The close microphone placement and dry acoustic only exacerbate the interpretative shortcomings. Then there is Garrick
Ohlsson, who wasn’t so bad in the earlier EMI version, but whose later version for Arabesque has inexplicable non-legato pedaling in measures 53-63 which totally breaks the spell and reduces the music to mere scampering piano notes. The score is marked *sotto voce*, with plenty of pedal, we certainly don’t want to hear each left hand note in sharp relief. Going back to the start, my view is that the constant mono-dynamic configuration of the left hand represents an unchanging emotional state over which the rueful right hand "melodic contour" glides ineffectually and without solace. The middle section *piu mosso* sees a flurry of mixed emotions, agitated, ecstatic, fearful, and angry, and it all culminates in the so-called curse (or lover’s scorn) with the kind of declamatory passage seldom seen in Chopin. Then, the vividness of the regretted memory subsiding, the emotional numbness returns, *con duolo*, a conciliatory “duet” in thirds like the two quarrelling lovers have embraced in forgiveness, and the ultimate resolution to a quiet and contented C-sharp major finish. Quite the emotional journey! That’s why I give highest marks to Arrau in this Nocturne, as he often taps into the “open wound” rawness of the emotional experience.

![Fig. 10 measure 83 - the "lover’s curse" - a rare, angry declamatory passage from Chopin.](image)

Most successful performances ☺: Arrau. (Moravec, Olshansky)
Least successful performances ☹: Ohlsson (’94). (Janis, Wild)

8. **Nocturne in D-flat, Opus 27, No.2.**

After the Nocturne No. 2 in E-flat, this is the most often performed among the Nocturnes. The primary interpretive issue with this piece is tempo. There has been much debate about how accurate Chopin’s metronome markings are given the crazy outcome if taken seriously. This work, for example, would have to clock in at about 3:05 without fermatas or ritardando at the end, or with expressive liberties about 3:30 at most. That is obviously absurd (and unplayable). At that tempo the music would sound like frantic keystone cops music and show no resemblance to a nocturne, or the indications *Lento sostenuto e dolce*. If you think that maybe the dot is a spurious fleck of ink and that he meant 50 beats per quarter note, that gets us closer to a workable 4:40 mark, but that just wouldn't make any sense given the 6/8 tempo. 50 beats per dotted eighth also makes no sense, because that rhythm is not employed melodically or structurally, so you can’t argue that the 3:30 should be doubled to 7:00. The only plausible theories are that the number 50 is wrong, or (less plausible) he misread the metronome. Therefore, I’m open to a considerable range of tempi, as long as it sounds neither harried like Pollini’s rushed live performance, nor bland and semi-comatose like Michel Block (the kind of playing that would make me ignore or even dislike this music). In short, it must sound like a Nocturne and convey the appropriate mood of a *Lento sostenuto*, but be awake and not already asleep.

Well, tempo may be the primary distinction between interpretations, but there are two other aspects of playing style that I believe also make for major differences, and may account for why some listeners prefer one artist over another. Melodic projection is one. Personally, I like to hear the
melody soar above the accompaniment, and ideally not just louder, but with a good piano that floats the melodic line “outside the box.” But some pianists force the projection beyond a pleasant tone quality, and others find a “sweet spot” dynamically and stay there without variation for most of the piece. Others, like Moravec, believe that an insinuated melodic line is more potent expressively, and creates the kind of intimacy that a Nocturne would suggest. Whether soaring above the piano, or recessed like an intimate whisper, I believe color and variation of touch create more layers, and potentially more “depth” to the reading. Lastly, some pianists firmly anchor the bass foundation as the harmonies change over the measures, others believe that any heavy bass at all is anathema to proper Chopin style. I’ve actually heard the $fz$ bass accents in measures 41-43 played with recessed dynamics below the level of the inner figurations (the rendering was compelling anyway, but very different from how most would play it). Personally, I believe a firm harmonic underpinning allows the melody to soar in better relief against the flowing inner figurations.

Other issues concern erratic tempo flow in the left hand (beyond allowance for rubato), insensitive pedaling (leaving gaps in the harmonic rhythm), and, very infrequently, questions of technical fluency.

Let’s look at two compelling interpretations, which nonetheless are flawed in different ways, and thus, did not make my final approbation as best performances. They are Claudio Arrau and Artur Rubinstein. First off, I’m happy to have them in my collection, where they will remain for future listening, because there are elements of each performance which are not duplicated by any other artists. If you, like me, derive enjoyment from these these two artists, try to balance those positive aspects against the criticisms I raise here.

First off, with Rubinstein I’m talking about the 1965 version for RCA, that’s the one with the magic. I’d ask if you want the good news first or the bad, but it’s really more a question of good and not-so-good. But the not-so-good is all the more frustrating because the performance could otherwise be counted among the greats. So, the high points are: Lovely melodic tone, round and smooth, totally unforced, with good clarity. Octaves marked con forza (measure 18) firm without harshness, the reflective passage ms. 50-52 nicely done (though with a variant using a high A-flat that I haven’t heard anyone else play), measures 66-68 with the three-tiered dynamic in the right hand are better than all but a few, and then the ending which, contrary to every other version, actually employs a subtle crescendo as it ascends to the top. The upper register then has a halo of Bodenresonanz (soundboard resonance) that is almost ethereal, and not the damped, dead sound often heard. Of course this goes against what Chopin wrote, but I always say that the composers indicate dynamics and phrasing based on general preference, not absolute edict, because there is no way to foresee every circumstance of performance. Okay, those are the things that will bring me back to listen to this again. Now for the things that will probably irk me just as much next time I listen: Starting in the first measure, something about the matter-of-fact launch at full tempo seems impatient, and certainly does not convey the appropriate Lento sostenuto indication. His starting tempo, while seemingly brisk, is not reflected in the overall timing of the performance at 6:11. Others who play faster and clock in under five minutes seem more relaxed. The next issue occurs in the very next measure. Rubinstein changes pedal on the fifth beat! Who does that? First off, Chopin marks a long unbroken pedal from the start to measure four. Rubi himself observes such long markings later in the score. Even if one were to feel the need to clear the pedal sonority, one would do it on the fourth beat, not the fifth beat. The result is a gap, or hole, in the harmonic foundation, and it disrupts from the flow of the music. I literally gasped in disbelief the first time I heard it. Okay, we’re two for two so far, but then a few measures without any gaffes. In measure 9 we hear another awkward pedal shift, clearing the sonority before the D-flat instead of concurrent with the melodic note. I’m wondering if he had sore feet or something. Then things go well until measure 22, where the tempo
suddenly surges forward with the same impatience that started the work. By measure 24 the core tempo has been resumed. Measures, 29, 30, 63, 64, and 71 all see awkward pedal changes that leave gaps in the harmonic foundation. The frustrating thing is that these are not interpretive choices, because he plays similar or even identical passages with appropriate pedaling. I’m guessing these were merely lapses in concentration, yet I find it hard to believe any seasoned artist would not hear what was happening. But I can imagine the quandary of the record producer: how would you tell one of the most famous pianists in the world that his pedaling needs some attention?!

Next up, Arrau. I’ll spare you the measure by measure because here the issue is more about psychology. Arrau’s conceptualization of the Nocturnes is much darker and more tormented than about any other version I evaluated, and some listeners really relate to this extra emotional intensity. As I said in the introduction, these works are more than sentimental bedtime serenades. But Arrau takes the *profundus* to an entirely different realm, and personally, I can’t take more than a few of them at a time, the way he plays them. Yet invariably, in direct comparison he makes many other performers seem like they are serving out mere ear candy. Stylistically his playing is very simple and direct, he anchors the bass foundation firmly, and never sacrifices clarity of harmonic foundation, even if it means slightly slower tempi. Oftentimes this directness means that inner details are completely overlooked in favor of the “emotional outline” of the phrase. One example would be in measures 23-24 where Chopin has written two notes of the accompanying left hand figuration with their own upward stems and connecting phrase mark. Pianists give varying amount amounts of emphasis on these sub-phrases, but Arrau just passes right over such “trifling” details. One can often hear Arrau’s ragged breathing, short and shallow and halting, like a person in pain. He is doubtless reacting to the emotional turmoil he is creating. The buildup leading to the climax and resolution at the downbeat of measure 46 has never been so arduous a battle of pathos and seething emotion [Fig. 11]. I don’t know about you, but by the end of the piece, I need a break!

![Fig. 11 Arrau creates a heightened sense of emotional turmoil leading to the resolution at measure 46.](image)

Here is a summary of impressions...

**69 versions compared.** Slowest is Moravec at 7:31. Fastest is Pollini (live version) at 4:24.

**Best performances at traditional (slowish) tempo.** The three that I consider reference recordings for this works are: Moravec, Rosenberger, and Barenboim (the live version from the 2010 Warsaw recital). Each of these is quite distinctive and emphasizes a different perspective. The Moravec is the slowest on record - though he does not sound at all somnambulant like Michel Block (7:02). Moravec plays on a Bösendorfer with an incredible pianissimo threshold. Moravec never forcefully projects the melody, something that is rather at odds with most Chopin performance traditions, but instead allows the melody to just hover with a gossamer lightness, and recede down to very soft pianissimos, yet never losing clarity or balance of hands. The overall effect is simply transporting. I believe that despite Chopin’s metronome markings being much faster, if the composer could have heard how effective it could be on the right (modern) piano, with a sensitive
and nuanced performer, he would have been equally mesmerized. Rosenberger also plays on a Bösendorfer but projects the melody in a more traditional manner, thus taking full advantage of the beautiful tone. This is, simply put, gorgeous and rapturous playing. Barenboim’s live recital version is probably closest in concept to how I would play it, that is, project the melody, etch the changing harmonic contours and anchor the bass foundation. He also has the advantage of one of those rare Hamburg Steinways which can float the melody “outside the box” and thus create a beguiling three-dimensional texture. If the ambient noise of the venue and audience were toned down a bit I’d have put this on my desert island list. Those are the three that I will go to when I want to bathe in the aural beauty of this work. However, there are many other notable performances that I have enjoyed during this survey: Backhaus (1953), Cziffra (believe it or not!), Feltsman, Francois, Pikulski and Weissenberg. As mentioned above, the Arrau and Rubinstein (’65) have their compelling moments, but also negative aspects which (for me) compromise the enjoyment.

Best performances attempting Chopin’s (faster) metronome mark. The trick with playing this piece under five minutes is to not make it sound hurried or frantic. Easier said than done. Pollini pushed himself too far in his live version (4:24) and finds himself frantically grabbing for notes (though he never misses!) and having to adjust the tempo in several places.

One of the trickier spots is measure 52 [Fig. 12], with 48 notes in the right hand to be played in about a second-and-a-half. Argerich tosses it off like child’s play – a delicious dose of musical whipped cream! - but elsewhere she misses opportunities to savor the flavor. In the final analysis the clear winner for cogent musical sensitivity and unhurried ease is Moura Lympany. Who would have thought? She clocks in at 4:32. Pollini’s studio version for DG (2005) is much more composed than the frantic live version. That extra half minute allows him to settle in at just the right, natural pace (4:53). Another one that sounds effortless and quite refined in tone is the 2010 Chopin Competition winner, Yulianna Avdeeva. There has been some negative commentary on YouTube about her Chopin lacking depth, but virtually any of the performances under five minutes are not going to have the depth of the more languorous versions, or if you compare them to deeper toned pianists such as Arrau or Rubinstein. In any case, I thought her renderings more refined (and more “Chopinesque”) that many of the competition bangers out there.

Least successful performances. Three versions stood out with the distinction of having irritated me. Józef Hofmann’s 1935 live concert version is certainly unique, but it’s not always to the service of Chopin. Throughout he sounds like he is just having fun and playing around - measure 32, for example, has a right hand figurations marked as a legato phrase which he plays with an impish pizzicato, followed by leggierissimo figurations played detaché when the ascending sixths clearly fit a sequence of legato sixths. This is just salon silliness at its worst. I would have expected such playing from de Pachmann, but it turns out de Pachmann’s two versions (1916 and 1925) are both well-behaved, and sensitively rendered. By the way, Hofmann’s later version (1942) also has some impishness, but with overall less fooling around and more musical sensitivity. The BBC live concert
of Cherkassky also displays some eccentric touches that seem more Cherkassky than Chopin. Lastly, Rubinstein's 1949 version (recorded in Hollywood) seems erstwhile in intention but demonstrates painful lapses in technical fluency, erratic flow of the left hand, and abrupt pedaling which leaves holes in the fabric of the music. A fourth contender might be the indulgent Michel Block, whose playing is so bland and without dynamic contour that it sounds semi-comatose and almost makes me dislike this music.

Most successful performances ☀: Barenboim (Warsaw). (Moravec, Rosenberger, Lympany)
Least successful performances ☩: Hofmann ('36). (Rubinstein '49, Cherkassky, Block)

9. Nocturne in B, Opus 32, No. 1

I have to confess that going into this extensive survey, this was one of my least favorite Nocturnes. I'm not going to go into a dissertation-length analysis here, but simply say that I find it less distinctive than any of the preceding Nocturnes, I hear ideas recycled from earlier Nocturnes, and I find the whole final third of the Nocturne just amorphous noodling. Therefore, it really takes an exceptional rendering for me to find this work compelling. Barenboim was the first I heard that made the piece click for me, and later I heard Leonskaja who plays in a similar manner. Once my resistance was cracked, I enjoyed other perspectives, notably the more delicate “Chopinesque” rendering by Amoyal, and the highly expressive Dang Thai Son. The worst performances were those that took my indifference to a level of active dislike, and that was the brusque Biret, and to a lesser degree of offensiveness, the boring Rev. It's really amazing the very thin line that defines the threshold point between the successful performances and those that are less so, but I'm glad to have found a few versions that I can enjoy. The two I keep going back to are Barenboim (more depth and darker, it brings to mind the darker colors and twilight hues of the German Romanticist, Caspar Friedrich, or even some of the Hudson Valley works of Bierstadt or Cole) and Dang Thai Son (lighter and brighter, it brings to mind the happier and contented moods of French painter, Edgar Degas).

Most successful performances ☀: Barenboim. (Amoyal, Leonskaja, Dang Thai Son)
Least successful performances ☩: Biret. (Rev)

10. Nocturne in A-flat, Opus 32, No.2

Compositionally I'm much more comfortable with this than I am of the preceding Nocturne, both of the same opus. Nevertheless, this work is very easy to ruin with clunky and insensitive left hand figures. Simply because the left hand triplets of the same repeating pattern can become like pedaling on a stationary bicycle, I look for every opportunity for sensible application of rubato and expressive shaping.

Fig. 13 Measure 5 has a typical bel canto gesture which works best with flexibility of tempo
A good place to start is in places like measure 5 where the right hand melody could expand a little to accommodate the soaring upward leap. The key issues are: nuanced left hand (no silly spinning wheel thrumming) and judicious rubato. The perfect contrast is between Amoyel who was very fluid, and Engerer who was very clunky. I fault Ohlsson for insensitive left hand in the central episode, where he just booms out the bass beyond all sense of proportion and balance.

Most successful performances ☺: Amoyel. (Freire)
Least successful performances ☹: Engerer. (Ohlsson ‘94, Vasary)

11. Nocturne in G minor, Opus 37, No. 1

This is a Nocturne that I really enjoy when done properly, and quite dislike when not done well. The difference is primarily in tempo. At too slow a pace the work becomes like a parody of ballet movements done in slow motion. I don’t think I heard anybody actually play it too fast. But a decisive and flowing tempo doesn’t mean an inflexible tempo, and therein is the defining line between my sitting through another version (take a number) and enjoying the experience. Barenboim does best with the chordal central episode, subtly shaping the voicing and dynamic contour, and his piano is also very nicely voiced.

Most successful performances ☺: Barenboim. (Ashkenazy, Leonskaja)
Least successful performances ☹: Ohlsson (’94). (Block, Stott)

12. Nocturne in G, Opus 37, No. 2

The big issue here is tempo. Andantino normally means a relaxed – but not slow - walking tempo. But with the 6/8 meter, and the long flowing phrase marks, I sort of feel that each rising and falling phrase should mimic relaxed breathing, the rising of the phrase like the intake of breath, and the falling like the exhaling of breath, then just a hint of a rest before taking in a new breath. Anyway, the performances that I consider most effective all fit that profile, while slower performances seem clunky and emphasize the vertical dispensation of the right-hand sixths. Very few play with a natural fluidity that is also smooth and nuanced. Moravec is the undisputed champion here. He makes it all sound so completely effortless – like breathing. Lympnany was also very impressive. Amoyel is not as breezy as Moravec or Lympnany, but is smooth and finely nuanced. Hewitt tries for a brisk tempo but only sounds frantic and beyond her comfort zone technically. Ciccolini sounds stiff – almost arthritic - while Wild is flat-footed and doesn’t render the natural rise and fall of the phrases. Novaes, unfortunately, exhibits a combination of all these bad traits. Incidentally, I don’t know if anybody else notices this, but measure 32 and corresponding places sound a lot like a summer camp song I heard as a young child: Jesus Loves All the Little Children of the World. Whether by tempo or
inflection, some performers brought out this connection more than others. Given that such external associations are disruptive of my immersion into the music, I gave higher marks to those performers who did not prompt such a negative connotation!

Most successful performances ⧫: Moravec. (Amoyel, Lympany)
Least successful performances ⧫: Novaes. (Ciccolini, Hewitt, Wild)

13. Nocturne in C minor, Opus 48, No.1

This Nocturne is clearly a favorite among a “vocal minority” of pianists/listeners. They may not be in the majority, but they are very passionate and share their enthusiasm with many posts on YouTube. When I was younger, I too played this work, because it is one of the most dramatic and gives the pianists something to sink their teeth into. But now, some thirty years after I last played it, I find that I am rather fussy about how it is played. I found very few renditions in this survey which seemed to hold together its various contrasting sections. Let’s look at the four primary sections, each quite different in texture and mood. The opening measures 1-24 have slow, steady chords in the left hand which in a faster tempo would be like a march in cut-time. But at this slow tempo, in minor key, the effect is very solemn. The right hand seems almost stoic and pesante at times, but frequent florid embellishments give it a lighter, soaring sense of pathos. The key issues for me are: pedaling, bass balance, and internal resonance. Chopin indicates the pedal should connect the lower bass octave with the upper tenor chord, but some pianist chop off the bass octave as soon as their paws land on the upper chord. The result is choppy and disjointed. They believe they are doing the right thing by observing Chopin's staccato marks. Actually I don’t mind if the two are not actually connected as long as each tone registers sufficiently and the gap in between is not too abrupt. Internal resonance means the entire soundboard is vibrating, and the aural canvas is like a big pipe organ, rather than a small 8-rank portif organ in a tiny 12x24 chapel. To achieve this one mustn’t gently stroke the tops of the keys, pressing the key only so far as to set the hammer in motion, but play deeply, to the keybed, so that the key connecting to its resting place itself creates a subtle but deep resonance to the tone.

I have to confess that for the way this particular piece is configured, very few New York Steinways seem as well-integrated in the bass as the Hamburg Steinways. The New Yorkers (with wedge-shaped hammers) have almost too much forward augmentation in the double and triple wrapped mid-bass strings (the upper note of the octave) while the lowest notes falling within the range of the single wrapped strings have an almost garish, pinched harmonic character. On the Hamburgs (with round headed hammers), the upper and lower tones of the bass octaves blend into a more homogenous whole. Not only that, but the best Hamburgs (Barenboim has a good one) have an incredibly deep and round sonority on those low D and C octaves, which reinforces to the listener that sense of solemn profundity. The best version of this opening section was by Artur Rubinstein who plays it simply and unaffectedly, and sets the right tone from the start.

The next section is lovely in concept, with beatific rolled chords, but extremely awkward to play. I mean, I’m evaluating some of the greatest pianist of the recording era and I hear all kinds of problems here. To be honest, I didn’t hear one version that was 100% satisfactory to me. What I really want to hear here is that the top tone sings and connects to its neighbor. All the details about which rolled notes come before or after are irrelevant to me. Sing that top melody! I hear so many miscalculations and near drop-outs that put holes in the melodic contour in every measure. Yes, I know it’s difficult, but with some creative working it is possible. Pollini is so clear here one could perfectly transcribe his performance by ear. But all that hard work and he doesn’t sing the melody!
Without a singing melody it’s just a bunch of dull chords. The best versions of this difficult section were by Abbey Simon, Andre Watts, and Andrzej Wasowski. Thank you! Valentina Lisitsa almost pulled it off but her balletic choreography gets in the way of “connecting the dots” and she has a few miscalculations in both versions (YouTube on Gerd Finkenstein’s Hamburg Steinway, and the live London recital on CD, played on a Bösendorfer Imperial). Speaking of balletic choreography, I had to smile at the one comment somebody made on YouTube: “I want to be touched by those hands!”

The next section, measures 38-48 has the harmonic outline in full chords offset by turbulent double octaves rumbling underneath. Many versions lose me here. I can’t abide a machine gun volley of clattering octaves, especially if played dryly and without pedal to contribute resonance. That’s just too aggressive and bludgeoning. Only a very few actually maintained the continuity of the full chords, and toned down the double octave noise. Watts is actually very good here. The cascading octaves in measures 46-48 shouldn’t sound staccato and clattery, nor should they be a pedaled blur of noise. In keeping with the chorale-like setting from whence this evolved, I believe a round and noble rendering gives the best musical continuity. I also prefer to hear a decisive resolution on the low C octave, middle of measure 48, before observing the accelerando to the doppio movimento section. Ashkekazy has just the right agogic here to form a seamless elision of the two ideas.

The next section, doppio movimento (suddenly faster) was the downfall of many pianists. Martha Argerich, who had done fairly well in the first half, just goes ape shit here (of course, her fans love it), but given the density of the chordal textures, I doubt Chopin had this kind of crazed tempo in mind. It is easy to get carried away with surging emotion and push on while only half articulating ideas. Even if the pianist gets all the notes right, issues of balance, contour and pedaling may suffer. Perlemuter, who starts out well enough, gets worked up enough that by measure 70 he is frantically grabbing for the lower laying bass octaves and his pedaling clips off the notes without registering the proper foundational outline.

Measure 75, just before the three final chords is often played with a slow release of the pedal so that by the time the right hand ascends to its peak on C, the bass sonority is cleared and just the lone hi C sounds in desolation. I’m okay with that, but Chopin indicates that the pedal should be cleared on the sixth sixteenth note (or the first inharmonic note). What I don’t care for is pianists who abruptly drop out the bass sonority; the sudden change in sonority detracts from the importance of hearing the right hand ascend toward that final note of peroration. Therefore, a more gradual release is preferred. Remember, on Chopin’s piano, the low C would not have near the lingering sustain and resonance of a modern concert grand. What I used to do when I played this was to release the pedal between the fourth and sixth note, but retain the outline of a C-G-C chord in the tenor (neither major nor minor, but harmonically open or “hollow”) and gradually release those three notes from the bottom up, so that all supporting sonority dissipates as the right hand ascends to its final note. (They call this technique “ghosting”). I didn’t hear anybody do this in the survey, but I still think it
works effectively. On smaller grands with minimal bass sonority I might also use the sostenuto pedal to insure that all sonority doesn’t completely dissipate. Having this low C un-dampered allows more color and resonance in smaller instruments, but you wouldn’t want—or need—to do this on a full-size concert grand. Remember, pianos of Chopin’s day had much less sustain, but also a much higher degree of internal resonance; another reason why absolute adherence to Urtext reading often produces unmusical results.

So, putting it all together, you can see below who I thought pulled it off best, and who didn’t do so well. Rubinstein takes honors in both categories: his ’37 version insensitively tosses off many phrases with flippant disregard for the serious mood of the piece; his ’65 version is noble and deeply felt without frantic hysteria. Ohlsson is way out in left field in this one, earning a rare “WTF?!” in my notes. His rubato drags and lurches, his right hand figures are often spastic and there is no continuity or flow. His EMI version isn’t as bad overall, but still suffers from abrupt pedaling. I haven’t always been a fan of Watts’ Chopin, but I must say he seems to have a real affinity for the overarching storyline of this Nocturne. The tone and projection are very nice, but the recording itself is less than ideal, being somewhat dull and muted in the mid-range. I got the best results by turning down my subwoofer, and turning up the volume on the main speakers – this gave more presence and I felt more connection with what he was doing. Finally, though flawed in certain details that I’ve discussed, Arrau is molto passione here, deeply experiential, but without any manic distortions. This 6:22 rendering is practically a meal in itself, meaning there is a lot to digest emotionally. If you play it at low levels it sort of passes by like most of the other versions, but if you turn it up to more realistic levels so that you actually hear the depth of his tone, this is potent stuff.

Most successful performances ☺: Rubinstein (’65). (Katz, Watts)
Least successful performances ☹: Rubinstein (’37). (Cherkassky, Ohlsson ’78, Ohlsson ’94)


This is a work which has much beautiful writing, but the three different sections often don’t seem to fit together. The beginning has a melancholy melody over gentle rippling triplet figurations, the extended middle section has some unusual rhythmic figures with non-metric quintuplets which often sound awkward, and the final section completely changes the mood of the beginning where after a string of trills the music finally floats off on a note of euphoria. Very few navigate these changes and make a convincing whole. Nobody conveys the bittersweet longing as well as Andrzej Wasowski, and his transitions seem to make sense. Moravec is also very good, but his melodic projection is much more restrained and remains somewhat more inward compared to Wasowski’s soaring ardor. Probably the worst is Rubinstein’s ’49 Hollywood version, which is too fast, has insensitive left hand phrasing and forces the melodic projection too much (because of the poor recording sound some of the upper notes hurt my ears!). Timings range from 6:26 to 8:05. I believe too quick a tempo and the left hand figurations don’t register their subtle sigh motive. Yundi Li is one of the few to play at a pretty quick clip and still get some sensitivity in the left hand. Unfortunately he doesn’t project the melody and the whole rendering is one-dimensional in tone and rather flat emotionally. Peter Serkin clocks in the slowest timing, and does pretty well in managing the transitions, but I’ve always found a certain degree of coolness in his Chopin, and for me, it just doesn’t engage as much as more personal accounts by Wasowski and Moravec.

Most successful performances ☺: Wasowski. (Moravec)
Least successful performances ☹: Rubinstein ’49. (Barenboim, Engerer)

15. Nocturne in F minor, Opus 55, No.1
This is always well received by audiences. It has a slow, ruminative melody that is more melancholy than funereal (like the C minor No. 13 can seem) it has a bit of dramatic movement in the *piu mosso* triplet unisons beginning in measure 48, and a nice bit of fluffery in the feather-light right-hand figurations that are like sunlight evaporating the morning dew off the flowers. There’s a little bit of everything here, and none of the material is stretched beyond the interest of the listener. So, Chopin did good, and listeners like it - too bad so many pianists don’t seem to get it. I’ve come to realize that a lot of sloppy pedaling can be overlooked in big dramatic works like the sonatas, but in texturally transparent miniatures such as the Nocturnes, pedaling can really make or break the effectiveness of the rendition. There really should be a mandatory semester long course in pedaling for every university or conservatory piano performance major. So, issue number one is pedaling.

Once again we find the somewhat confusing and contradictory indications by Chopin, that is, staccato marks on all the left hand bass notes and tenor chords, but pedaling indicated to connect the bass note to the tenor chord. When Brahms writes staccato marks and pedal together we know that he means the hands should be lifted off the keys and no attempt at finger legato should be made, he wants a more vigorous and sonorous sound. With Chopin it’s hard for me to reconcile, even considering that I’ve played on vintage Pleyels, and heard others play on them. It’s a bit of a puzzler. The best suggestion I have (and this goes for articulation in Bach, clear through to impressionistic works by Debussy) is to imagine how the work would be orchestrated. If what you are doing at the piano would sound unnatural and unconvincing in an orchestral adaptation, then you should probably rethink your approach. The worst pedaling are those who like Francois, connect the bass note to the staccato tenor note and then let both terminate abruptly. It sounds like a bubble pop or a drunkard’s hiccup. Nobody would ever orchestrate this passage in such a manner. Not even a Klezmer band fooling around. The next worst are those who give a dabble of pedal on each note, just enough to register a tenuto, but nothing is really connected. This sounds like Kung Fu Panda Bear trying to stealthily tip toe in the dark. It just doesn’t fit the mood of what the right hand is doing.

Speaking of the right hand, pianists can give a different impression depending on how crisply they render the dotted rhythm. I hear it played well either way, with crisp dotted sixteenth or a more rounded quasi triplet, it all depends on the overall conception of melodic arch, tempo and pedaling. As for pedaling I believe the most successful, those that don’t draw attention to their quirky pedaling – are those who connect the tenor chords to the following bass tone, clear the sonority and begin the next harmonic progression. This gives a steady flow of harmonic progression and doesn’t detract from the message of the right hand.

As for the *piu mosso* triplets (the section measures 48-56), I think some pianists make too much of a mountain out of a mole hill here, and overdo the drama. Some almost make the passage sound like an angry outburst. I hear it as more of a sense of determination, tempered by noble restraint. Either way, I didn’t downgrade anybody in this section, because the music seems resilient enough to withstand quite a range of interpretation. The final section sees quite a range of interpretation in
how soon the and to what degree the stretto builds up speed. Pedaling also plays a role; more pedal gives a solid anchoring foundation and euphoric blossoming of harmony, less pedal gives a more tingly, sparkling and effervescent quality to the right hand (not marked leggierissimo, but that’s how most see it). Basically, I liked just about everybody’s ending; it’s such a delightful conclusion to a work that starts out so melancholy, it’s hard to not like it. In conclusion, pedaling is the big issue, then tempo, not too slow and dragging, or not to self-consciously trying to not be too slow.

Most successful performances ☑: Bolet. (Freire, Leonskaja)
Least successful performances ❌: Wild. (Francois)

16. Nocturne in E-flat, Opus 55, No.2

There is a coterie of aficionados who see this Holy Grail of Nocturnes as something of a litmus test for the pianist’s claim to legitimate Chopin interpretation. I’ll say right up front this is not one I have ever played or will ever play, as I find it very strange and completely lacking compositional bearing. That’s not to say I don’t enjoy hearing other people play it. But it almost seems a precursor to some of Skryabin’s strange, amorphous explorations that have neither firm structural outline, nor clear harmonic progression. In this Nocturne it’s like multiple points of elision one after the other, with each line left hanging or unresolved. I hear soaring ecstasy, made all the more potent because it never really achieves a point of resolution, as if the striving for transcendence has become a near-delirious madness. There is exaltation and suppressed tragedy all rising and falling in a complex tapestry of emotionally volatility. Maybe it’s because I never experienced such a state that I can’t identify with it. I’ve experienced sadness and tragedy, and also euphoria and ecstasy, but never have I had these feelings all at the same time. Obviously, other listeners do not react the same way as I do, so I’ve purposely kept any criticisms to a minimum in this Nocturne. The only real basis for differentiating which performances I considered the most or least effective were: smoothness of texture and pedaling (we don’t need disjointed choppiness on top of everything else that is happening) and the moments of soaring ecstasy should really be given free range to soar with the fullest degree of expression. Therefore, the most disjointed and chaotic was Horowitz, and the smoothest, most soaring, and most luminous of tonal beauty was Rosenberger. I welcome insights from other readers on this.

Most successful performances ☑: Rosenberger. (Amoyel, Leonskaja)
Least successful performances ❌: Horowitz.

17. Nocturne in B, Opus 62, No.1

Similar to my take on the Nocturne No. 5 (F-sharp major, Opus 15) I believe that the pianist’s interpretive emphasis should be more on carefully nuanced dynamic expression than on excessive rubato. It is too easy to make this work sound like a young sapling willow swaying in the breeze, such that it never seems to get to an upright center. If the tempo is slow enough to start then additional tampering with rubato or agogics only disrupts the forward flow. If the tempo is too brisk then there is a risk of missing the nostalgic glow of the piece. Of course, there is always the issue of basic tonal balance and how much the melody is projected over the left hand. I find Moravec really too reticent here, while Amoyel is gentle and Chopinesque but clearly sings the melody of the accompaniment. One tricky moment of elision occurs in measure 10, where one phrase ends and the others begins. If played in exact rhythm it seems an unsatisfactory resolution to the ear, so some performers treat the last two eights as a triplet, with the resolution taking two of the three units, and the new phrase taking the pick up on the third unit. Of course, one could always do what Francois does and just bulldoze right through it so fast that the ear doesn’t even register that anything is amiss. I would have called it genius if he had done it more gracefully and with some sense of tonal
balance. Another spot comes at measure 25 with the long florid run in the right hand. The question here is how hard to land on the fz beginning measure 27. The harder you land the longer you have to wait for the sonority to settle before starting the new phrase. Too much dalliance here can be disruptive to the flow. I prefer renderings which are a little lighter on the run (similar to the C-sharp minor Nocturne No. 20) because I see this as more of a big long sigh than as anything of true dramatic importance. Rubinstein does well in this Nocturne for the same reason he does well in the Nocturne No.5, but I do prefer the more delicate tone of Amoyel. Freire is more like Amoyel, Leonskaja more solidly-toned like Barenboim and Rubinstein. Katz also has a nice tone, but it's the same flavor throughout. Once again, Horowitz mangles everything, and Arrau is just too pained and arduous, as if carrying the burden of the cross.

Most successful performances ☺: Amoyel. (Freire, Leonskaja)
Least successful performances ☹: Horowitz. (Weissenberg)

18. Nocturne in E, Opus 62, No. 2. In Memoriam: Jean Bauby

I have to say I never paid this one much attention until I read the story by Jean Bauby, and learned of the true story behind it (check it out on Wikipedia). Now, I try to imagine what it would be like to be completely paralyzed, with the blinking of my left eye the only movement I can make in my entire body. My only solace to pass the endless hours in this prison is to escape to memories of playing on the beach, and the sound of this Nocturne wafting into my consciousness from a radio or some imagined recess of memory. With that in mind, I have a very low tolerance for crass and insensitive renderings. Usually I can tell by the first line whether a pianist has a limpid and relaxed fluidity, or whether they are stiff and stodgy. The left hand chords simply cannot go on and on at a steady pace, each evenly voiced without variance or nuance. By relaxed and flowing in motion I don't mean to imply a lightweight touch. Lightweight can work, but so can a deep, keybed tone, it all depends on that very subtle distinction between stiff and regimental, or relaxed and more approximate.

![Fig.17](https://example.com/fig17.png)

**Agitato not Furioso!**

Sometimes, a good start can unravel in the central episode (beginning measure 32 with the more active sixteenth notes in the left hand). I heard many pianists lose that relaxed quality and become a little stiffer and stressed. The increased motion shouldn’t be interpreted as agitation, I view it more as flowing water. At least until measure 40, everything should remain flowing and relaxed, and even when Chopin does write *agitato* [fig. 17], this is conveyed mostly by the syncopated inner chords, a kind of breathless flutter of the heart, and the melodic contour should never become harsh. A few pianists just blow everything out of proportion here (Ohlsson’s ’94 recording is like a tidal wave of fury!). On the other extreme, a few who favored extra slow tempos to begin with, refuse any increase in the heart rate in this central episode, and weigh down the proceedings with heavy voicing of the syncopated chords, and it sounds more like bad Brahms than good Chopin. Lastly, the very last measure can sometimes be unconvincing (just like some don’t quite get the ending of Liszt's *Valle d'Oberman* right). The trick is to not draw out the diminuendo too much – the piano only has so
long a sustain, especially at the pianissimo level. The versions I give highest marks to do everything right: relaxed and naturally flowing, never stressed or harsh, and bring it all to a sweet and blissful conclusion. The least successful renderings were all the result of extreme tempos. Rubinstein’s ’49 version is all bright eyed and bushy-tailed, skipping along the yellow brick road, and whistling while he works (that’s the effect of Hollywood). Given that most versions clocked in around 5:30, Pletnev is hardly in the same solar system as the rest of us; his 7:11 timing is even stranger than Richter’s D.960 experiment in endurance.

Most successful performances ☑: Katz. (Freire, Leonskaja, Wasowski)
Least successful performances ☑: Pletnev. (Margalit, Ohlsson ’94, Richter ’72, Rubinstein ’49)

**19. Nocturne in E minor, Opus, 72, No.1**

This is a popular Nocturne for intermediate-level pianists to learn (Heck, even Seven-of-Nine learned this one). But as with the opening of the Moonlight Sonata, lack of technical difficulty doesn’t mean the music is simple in its artistic expression. The doleful melody is beautifully set over a smoothly flowing left hand pattern, the phrases rising and falling like gentle waves on the ocean.

![Fig.18 Barenboim's hazy half pedal sotto voce works perfectly here.](image)

A somewhat confusing term, aspiratamente, appears at measure 23 [fig. 18], and given that the piece is already of a smooth and flowing character, the only other meaning would be breathy or breathless. I like what Barenboim does here: he suddenly pulls back the melodic projection to a more sotto voce mono-dynamic stasis, using a haze of half pedal, and it provides an effective contrast to the normal projection. It pulls us out of the active drama into a momentary inward reflection, or perhaps, a breathy whispered secret, or hidden desire? Measures 31-37 see increased motion in the right hand figurations, and many pianists see this as a clue for more dramatic license. I don’t believe a whipped up frenzy of froth dignifies the emotional depth of the rest of the piece, so beyond a certain allowance I start downgrading when pianists begin to distort the flow of the line so that the right hand can show off a little. Lastly, I don’t care for pianists who ride the train right up to an abrupt station stop. Bring us in gently, please! Moravec is simply beyond reproach, a masterful rendering from start to finish. Amoyel’s inflections are somewhat different than the others, but very communicative. Barenboim I already cited as having interesting insights, and Freire’s account is also sensitively rendered. The worst was Rubinstein’s ’37 version that I think must have been rushed in order to fit it on one side of a 78 rpm recording. From the first measure he is off at a full gallop, the melody is forced and the phrasing choppy and insensitive. He does redeem himself in his more mature ’65 recording for RCA. Arrau? Well…. I can’t really say that it is flawed, but at this plodding tempo, all deep-toned and serious, let’s just say it sounds a lot like Bruckner with arpeggios!

Most successful performances ☑: Moravec. (Amoyel, Barenboim, Freire)
Least successful performances ☑: Rubinstein ’37. (Arrau, Pollini, Vasary)
20. Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Opus Posth.

This is a lovely work, the quintessential Nocturne, but most of the older sets (Moravec, Rubinstein, Francois) only included the standard Nocturnes 1-19. Now, everybody includes the two “bonus” works. In any case, most pianists do a fair job with the main part of the Nocturne, but it is the introduction that often bothers me.

Chopin doesn't give us any pedal indications here, so a surprising number of pianists use little or no pedal. Some observe the rests literally, others pedal right over them. Neither approach seems natural to me. If I imagine this as a quiet chorale organ piece, the rests show me where to lift my hands and reposition so the next two can be connected, but I don’t leave a gaping hole between chords. If I imagine the passage played by a string quartet, I hear a change in bowing to demarcate the different sub-phrases, and possibly a subtle break after the first chord, gently tapered rather than abruptly released, to represent a halting sense of trepidation – but in no case a gaping hole in the phrase. If I imagine a singer, I hear a long note and a quick breath, but not a short note and a long breath. In other words, I can’t envision any scenario where a short chord and long rest would sound natural. Therefore, I tend to give higher marks for those pianists who observe the rest, but taper the release of the chord so it’s not an abrupt cut-off. Sans guillotine monsieurs! As for melodic projection, Barenboim and Leonskaja play with solidity and body and float the melody out of the box, Katz is more inward, withdrawn and protective of his sensitivity. Amoyel projects, but very delicately. Arrau is once again very serious, and compelling in his way, but sometimes not as smooth in delivery as my favored performers. Ohlsson is way too forced and emphatic; it’s almost as if he is being reactionary to traditional sensibility and trying to rough things up a bit.

Most successful performances ☺: Amoyel. (Barenboim, Katz, Leonskaja)
Least successful performances ☹: Ohlsson ’94


There is not a lot of performance tradition on this one, so tempo and inflections are all over the place. The stories range from sad tales of loss to giddy dances that cast their fate to the winds. To be honest, not many of them seem very convincing to me, and I see this as a very minor work from Chopin. But Barenboim made the most of it, and I actually enjoyed the music. Arrau, also earned my respect, coming right after his Sunday morning sermon of Bruckner (No. 19), wrung a lot of sage wisdom out of this little nugget.

Most successful performances ☺: Barenboim. (Arrau)
Least successful performances ☹: Margalit
## Comparative Survey: December, 2012

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