

Review

## Pianist Carmen Knoll Dazzles Audience

17-year-old musician, who performed all-Chopin concert Sunday, is clearly headed toward a brilliant career.

By [William Barnewitz](#) - Feb 10th, 2015 04:30 pm *Sign-up for the Urban Milwaukee Dial eNews*



Carmen Knoll. Photo by Sarah Sobojinski.

Following her 2014 PianoArts North American Competition first-prize victory, 17-year-old pianist **Carmen Knoll** returned to Milwaukee for a recital on Sunday at the Polish Center of Wisconsin, which proved to be the perfect spot for a program focused entirely on the music of one of Poland's greatest cultural heroes, **Fryderyk (Frédéric) Chopin**. The high-vaulted room with wooden floors, plaster walls, and a long row of windows nicely reflected the wide range of sound that Ms. Knoll masterfully produced at the Steinway. With nearly 300 people in attendance, the Polish Center gave Ms. Knoll a comfortable and welcoming stage upon which she could succeed—and succeed she did.

Young musicians are rarely in possession of complete instrumental facility, and even less likely to exhibit the artistic nuance required for a program as demanding as the one Knoll presented. Chopin is chockfull of the sorts of technical demands and finger fireworks that would make a dozen extra digits seem handy. The performer also needs to bring a musical maturity that comprehends the mercurial romantic gestures infusing Chopin's music: sudden bursts of passion followed by lilting rubati, breaking away into dizzying explosions of notes that come and go with barely contained mania. Knoll seemed fully in control for every demand she faced in Chopin's spectacular music.

The program opened with Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Opus 23. Ms. Knoll produced a wide palette of tone colors, and played with power, masterful technique, and stylistic grace. This was a perfect introduction for her; the audience became putty in her hands.

Her second selection was the Étude in C-sharp minor, Opus 10, No. 4. Etudes are meant to be not only good music, but also technical studies, which, in most cases, push the performer toward physical challenges that make the musician grow as an artist. Knoll chose a tempo that sent her fingers flying across the keyboard so quickly you half expected to see smoke rising from the keyboard. It was a dazzling display.

Knoll's third piece was the Scherzo No. 4 in E major, Opus 54, where grace, poise, and energy continued to be the hallmarks of her production.

After the first intermission, she returned with the urgent and dramatic Nocturne No. 13 in C minor, Opus 48, No. 1 and the dreamier Polonaise-fantaisie in A-flat major, Opus 61. Chopin's music is expressive and conveys a new musical language, different from the formal forms of Beethoven, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. It is amazing to consider that Chopin's genius was fully formed when he was a young man of 19 or 20, and equally stunning to observe the talent, skill, and maturity in Ms. Knoll.

During the second intermission, pianist **Stefanie Jacob** and local music scholars **Steven Basson** and **Michael Barndt** formed a discussion panel to offer valuable musical perspectives — on the great joy of studying Chopin, Chopin's under-appreciated genius, and listening for the soul of the music, not just the virtuosity.

The last piece on the program was the Sonata in B minor, Opus 58, No. 3. By the end of this recital, I was reduced to insights such as "Whoa!" and "Holy cats!" Knoll was that good, playing the fiery sections with ferocity and the melancholy passages with believable pathos. She demonstrated a liquid legato and a clear, precise staccato and covered the dynamic range from a haunting pianissimo to a booming fortissimo. Most importantly, as Barndt asked us to consider, Knoll brought us the soul of Chopin, not just the virtuosity. Nothing was missing, and hearing such mastery from someone so young was a joy.

When Chopin's remains were buried in Paris in 1849, Chopin's sister, Ludwika, took her brother's heart with her back to Warsaw to be entombed in a pillar in the Church of the Holy Cross. Those in attendance at the Polish Center of Wisconsin felt the heart of Chopin through the

beautiful playing of Carmen Knoll. Her recital was an opportunity to hear someone who is brimming with talent and well on her way toward a brilliant career.