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BRAHMS: CLARINET SONATAS

Jon Manasse, clarinetist; Jon Nakamatsu, pianist. Harmonia Mundi HMU 907430; CD.

IN an otherwise humdrum orchestral performance for American Ballet Theater a few years back, a clarinet solo wafted from the pit and riveted a listener's (er, viewer's) attention. The player, a glance at the program showed, was Jon Manasse, already valued for his other freelance work in New York.

But Mr. Manasse was known fondly for larger solo stints as well, and here he takes center stage in two peaks of the clarinet literature, Brahms's Op. 120 Sonatas, in F minor and in E flat. Again the results are compelling.

Brahms wrote these works, along with a trio and a quintet, late in life under the influence of the young clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld. Warm, ripe and prevailingly mellow, they all testify eloquently to Mühlfeld's lyrical gifts as well as to his virtuosity, and they have continued to challenge the depth and versatility of clarinetists ever since. Mr. Manasse meets the call with deft technique, exquisite sensitivity and smooth, flowing tone.

In any Brahms work with piano the term accompaniment is of limited usefulness, so inventive and assertive is the composer's writing for the instrument. Especially in the scherzolike Appassionato movement of the E flat Sonata but in other movements as well, the clarinet and the piano are thoroughly, sensuously intertwined in a subtly shifting balance.

So Jon Nakamatsu's contribution is just as important as Mr. Manasse's, and their partnership is complete. In the middle of that Appassionato, the pianist takes the lead with something like one of those ineffable late Brahms piano pieces, and Mr. Nakamatsu's playing is as meltingly beautiful as Mr. Manasse's. Elsewhere Mr. Nakamatsu's pianism is playful, sturdy or pushy, as appropriate.

The recorded sound is also crucial to the balance of the piano and clarinet, and Harmonia Mundi's production is impeccable, capturing such disparate instruments in full color and a lifelike perspective. JAMES R. OESTREICH