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## Jon Nakamatsu at Piano Summer

*by* **Leslie Gerber**

It seems that everybody in music knows Jon Nakamatsu's story. Fifteen years ago he was a part-time pianist whose day job was teaching German in a high school. Then came his gold medal in the Van Cliburn Competition. Today his day job is playing the piano, and he was brought to the PianoSummer Festival at SUNY New Paltz as a guest artist this weekend. Unfortunately I couldn't get to his master class on Friday. However, he played a solo recital at the college's McKenna Theatre Saturday night, July 23, and convincingly demonstrated the reasons for his successful career.

Nakamatsu chose to open his recital with an unusual item, the "Gavotte et six doubles" from Rameau's *Suite in A Minor*. I can't remember the last time I heard a pianist playing Rameau. With his lush tone and romantic inclinations, Nakamatsu's playing of Rameau wasn't entirely stylish. But its chaste beauty was affecting, and he gratified me tremendously by playing tastefully and elaborately embellished repeats of all sections.

Brahms's *Piano Sonata No. 1, in C, Op. 1*, is also pretty unusual. Aside from Julius Katchen's complete Brahms recordings, the only major pianists I have heard play it on recordings are Malcolm Frager and Sviatoslav Richter. It's a dauntingly difficult piece, and perhaps not the most gratifying music in the world to play. But it is major if early Brahms, and there are good reasons why the composer chose to publish it as his Op. 1.

Nakamatsu's playing of the first movement emphasized the block chords and color of the music. It seemed a bit short on kinetic energy to me, but the way he played was obviously a deliberate interpretive choice and not some deficiency. After a touchingly intimate Andante, Nakamatsu played the Scherzo with lots of power and momentum, building to a rousing conclusion. The Finale was as speedy and energetic as the music demanded, with perfect execution of the difficult octaves and skips.

The remainder of the program was all Liszt, selections from Year 2 of *Années de Pèlerinage*. In the "Three Sonnets of Petrarch," the emphasis was on relaxed lyricism and beautiful sound, the frills and furbelows of Liszt's writing played as the decorations they should be instead of a focus of attention. Nakamatsu also played *Après un lecture de Dante* (also known as the "Dante Sonata") with lots of color and pianistic resource, but not even this kind of poetic performance can convince me that this work isn't overwhelmed by bombast.

As a very welcome encore, Nakamatsu played Chopin's *Fantaisie-Improptu* with the kind of freedom and poetry that brings this potential finger-buster to life.

Overall, this was a memorable concert, especially notable for the kind of beautiful and varied tonal color I found missing in Roberto Plano's concert of the previous weekend. Nakamatsu will be repeating this program at Maverick Concerts on Sunday, August 7.

**Leslie Gerber lives in Woodstock, New York. He has been reviewing professionally since 1966, for such venues as *Performance Today*, *Fanfare*, and Amazon.com. He also publishes the Parnassus Records label.**