

[Jon Manasse](#), clarinet, and [Jon Nakamatsu](#), piano

Wednesday, May 5, 2010

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

Grand Duo Concertante in Eb Major, Op. 48, J. 204

Allegro con fuoco

Andante con moto

Rondo

Felix Bartholdy-Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Andante and Rondo Capriccioso in E Major, Op. 14 (For Piano Solo) (1830)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1987)

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in Eb Major, Op. 120 No. 2 (1894)

Allegro amabile

Allegro appassionato

Andante con moto; Allegro

Paquito D'Rivera

Lecuonerias from "The Cape Cod Files"

for solo clarinet; commissioned for the Manasse/Nakamatsu Duo by the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival, 2009

Maurice Ravel

Pièce en forme de Habanera (transcr. for clarinet and piano by Gaston Hamelin)

John Novacek (b. 1964)

Four Rags for Two Jons

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

Grand Duo Concertante in Eb Major, Op. 48, J. 204 (1816)

Critics have not been kind to Weber's chamber music. Although it has its admirers, and many virtues that are apparent from even a casual listening, dour critics seem unwilling to forgive Weber for being principally an opera composer, as though hanging around with divas and set designers and stage directors and librettists somehow made a musician disreputable. Weber's *Grand Duo Concertante* does have a diva-like intensity about it. The clarinetist is front and foremost, and the instrument is taken from its lowest to highest notes, with plenty of histrionics along the way. The piano is the pit orchestra, the prompter, the conductor, the impresario urging it all forward.

This means we can enjoy the *Grand Duo Concertante* as a guilty pleasure. The clarinet, expanded in Weber's time to encompass more notes and to be able to play smoothly through scale passages, had developed from a band instrument into a serious orchestral contender. (We forget that Mozart and Beethoven were taken to task for including this wood-band instrument in their symphonies.)

Weber completed the opening *Allegro con fuoco* in 1816; he had already composed the middle movement *Adagio* and the finale *Rondo* in 1815. Consider that this music was 80 years old when Mühlfeld played it for Brahms! The opening movement has a strong opening, and a soulful second subject, a really respectable sonata-allegro and a showpiece for the clarinet. In the second movement the piano recedes somewhat to the background and the clarinet is able to show its emotional range, all very much like an opera singer's cavatina. The *Rondo* in 6/8 time is cheerful and full of difficult passage work, a good example of a German composer emulating an envied Italian master. The ghost of Rossini smiles over this movement.

Felix Bartholdy-Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Andante and Rondo Capriccioso in E Major, Op. 14 (For Piano Solo) (1830)

Felix Bartholdy-Mendelssohn was the greatest child prodigy in music since Mozart, but he parted ways with his fellow Romantics fairly early in his adult life, preferring elegance and perfection to the extremes of expression of the likes of Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner. (He once described a Berlioz orchestral score as a "filthy smear."). In his quest for classical elegance, Mendelssohn often shied away from virtuosity for its own sake. Soloists occasionally asked Mendelssohn if he could please make his piano parts in chamber music a little more difficult and flashy. Where Chopin excelled in the moonlit world of nocturnes and the sad whimsies of his mazurkas, Mendelssohn crafted book after book of miniatures called "Songs Without Words," the pinnacle of Victorian parlor music. His oratorios became the great padded sofas of English choral music.

Standing outside the stereotype of Mendelssohn piano music are a small group of masterworks that exploit the Romantic piano and its capabilities. One of the best of them is the *Rondo Capriccioso in E, Op. 24*, of 1830. Its eight densely-packed pages show Mendelssohn as a true successor to Viennese masters in the *Rondo* form, in which an opening theme alternates with episodes of varying moods and harmonies. The opening *Andante* in E Major gives way to a *Presto* that dips into the darker world of E Minor. Later, when the work finds its way back into the major, it is propelled by brilliant, chromatic arpeggiated passages, dramatically alternating *forte* and *piano*. The "big" sound Mendelssohn creates, and the unexpected turns of invention, earn the piece its "capriccioso" name. Recent studies of Mendelssohn have established that the

composer actually pieced together an Etude in E Minor from 1828 with a new E Major introduction, creating this virtuoso piece for a young lady pianist named Delphine von Schauroth, with whom Mendelssohn was playing duets. Mendelssohn so successfully “pre-echoes” his Rondo in the introduction that it all seems composed in a single burst of inspiration. Who knows how the history of music might have turned out if Mendelssohn had more young lady pianists in his life, and less religion.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1987)

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano in Eb Major, Op. 120 No. 2 (1894)

Musical friendships with great performers brought out the best in Brahms, a confirmed bachelor who channeled all his energies into his art. His decades-long friendships with pianist-composer Clara Schumann, and with virtuoso violinist Joseph Joachim, provided him with honest critics as well as devoted chamber music partners. By the early 1890s, Brahms was a wreck of his former self and knew that his creative life was coming to an end. Death and estrangement narrowed the circle of his friends and despite his legendary status in his adopted Vienna, Brahms seemed one of the loneliest of all artists.

A new friendship and musical collaboration produced the last great flowering of Brahms' chamber music, and the unlikely inspiration was a younger man who played the clarinet. Or should we say, blazed the trail to show what the clarinet was actually capable of doing. Brahms took note of the remarkable playing of clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907) during the premiere of Brahms' Fourth Symphony, and then heard Mühlfeld as soloist in Weber's Clarinet Concerto. The men became friendly, and Brahms commenced the writing of a trio (Op. 114), a quintet (Op 115), and the two sonatas for clarinet and piano, Op. 120. These were the swan songs for Brahms, the last of his 24 chamber works.

The Eb Sonata which we hear tonight is the second in the set, and it is obvious from the start that the piece is not a virtuoso showpiece for the clarinet. This is pure music, pure architecture, and instead of the multicolor palette of the orchestra, Brahms paints in autumnal hues, the clarinet's ascending and descending lines weaving amid a solid, Brahmsian structure. Listening, we do not think of solo versus accompaniment: it is all one thing, a singing voice breathing amid the choral flow and contrapuntal movement of the pianists' ten fingers. Both players must be virtuosi, but all is in service of the music.

The Eb sonata begins quietly, with a sense of nobility, and perhaps with a sense of passionate friendship between the two soloistic parts, the “amabile” of the tempo indication meaning mood as well as speed. The second movement is a fierce scherzo in Eb minor, and despite the utter darkness of this tonality, the clarinet has an Orphic calm as it floats over a chromatic, churning Styx. In the B Major Trio section the clouds part, and all brightens, followed by the inevitable return to the Eb Minor opening section, Brahms; a last nod to the tradition of Haydn and Beethoven. The finale is a set of variations on a theme in 6/8 time. The fifth variation, *Vivace*, revisits the gloomy realm of Eb Minor, but for the coda, Brahms returns to the major and ends his final chamber work as though there many more still to come.

Paquito D’Rivera (1948-)

Lecuonerias from “The Cape Cod Files” (Solo Clarinet)

Commissioned for the Manasse/Nakamatsu Duo by the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival, 2009 Child prodigy, Cuban exile, composer and jazz clarinetist, Paquito d’Rivera is one of the world’s most-recorded Latin jazz artists. He has won Grammy Awards in both the Classical and Latin Jazz categories. He is an artist-in-residence at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. This selection from d’Rivera’s 2009 work is based on improvisations from melodies by Cuban composer and pianist Ernesto Lecuona.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Pièce en forme de Habanera (Transcr. for Clarinet and Piano by Gaston Hamelin)

Maurice Ravel’s 1907 *Pièce en forme de Habanera* was originally a virtuoso *vocalise* (a song without words) for bass voice and piano. The sinuous and sensual Habanera has been a French obsession ever since Bizet composed his famous Habanera in *Carmen*, and Ravel’s piece is almost as indestructible as Bizet’s. It has been arranged for cello, for saxophone, and for many other instruments. Tonight, the clarinet has an equal right to pretend to be Spanish.

John Novacek (b. 1964)

Four Rags for Two Jons

Concert pianist and composer John Novacek has made a speciality of neo-ragtime music, adopted by performers as diverse as The Three Tenors and Diana Ross. Critic Dan Leeson wrote in the *San Francisco Classical Voice* about a performance of this work: “Yet it was the concert’s final work that resulted in the most explosive audience reaction. ... a kaleidoscope of styles that required blazing techniques from both performers. ... The technique displayed by both men was like a fireworks display.”

--Program notes for the May 5, 2010 program by Brett Rutherford