stylized dances (*Deuxième valse*, *Callirhoë – Air de Ballet*, *Valse romantique*), works in the 'songs without words' vein (*Solitude*, *Souvenance*), emotionally charged late-Romantic effusions (*Etude pathétique*, *Elévation*), a barcarolle (*Pecheurs de nuit*), and Spanish-inflected music (*La lisonjera*).

Jacobs' playing is admirable throughout. He effectively demonstrates that there is more variety to Chaminade's piano music than has been generally acknowledged, emphasizing in turn delicacy, exuberance, lyricism, brilliance, serenity, vitality, passion and playfulness. The Scherzo in C major momentarily lacks the desired rhythmic fluidity, but this is a minor criticism. In his pithy, well-written liner notes – given in English, French and German – Calum MacDonald finds similarities to the piano music of a number of well-established composers, including Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Debussy, Brahms and Fauré. We might add Mussorgsky (*Callirhoë – Air de Ballet* has much in common with 'The Ballet of Unhatched Chicks' from *Pictures at an Exhibition*) and even Beethoven (*Automne* is reminiscent of the 'Pathétique' Sonata). More importantly, however, these recordings highlight virtues particularly characteristic of Chaminade's piano music, including her crystalline textures, highly appealing melodies, fluid transitions and inventive accompaniments. As MacDonald asserts, the reputation of Chaminade 'almost certainly calls out for upward revision'. He need not have been so tentative. This disc goes a long way towards making his point.

Steven Baur
Dalhousie University

Liszt

Dante Sonata
Petrarch Sonnets 47, 104 and 123
Mephisto Waltz No. 1
Impromptu (Nocturne)
Valse-Impromptu
Song transcriptions:
Frühlingsnacht (Schumann)
Widmung (Schumann)
Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2

Jon Nakamatsu *pf*

Harmonia mundi HMU907409 (76 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translation included.

Liszt has enjoyed something of a recording revival in the last 20 years, through the rehabilitative efforts of Alfred Brendel, the Naxos phenomenon and the emergence of comprehensive or complete series (with Leslie Howard's complete Liszt recording for Hyperion leading the way) and a steady trickle of one-off piano recitals by distinguished pianists such as Polini (DG: 1990) Perahia (Sony: 1991) and Zimerman (DG: 1992), followed by a new generation – most notably

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Andsnes (EMI: 2001), Nakamatsu (2006, the present CD under review) and Volodos (Sony: 2007).

Jon Nakamatsu came into the limelight after winning the Van Cliburn competition in 1997, and since then he has only grown in stature. He already has an impressive and diverse portfolio of recordings, from American music (Bolcom, Foss and, most recently, Gershwin) through rarities such as Wölfl (HMU907324, 2003: a superb and revelatory performance of a forgotten contemporary of Beethoven) to the core repertoire of high Romanticism: Chopin, Brahms, Liszt and Rachmaninoff. Each of his albums (apart from the post-competition debut) is dedicated to one composer. This strategy allows him to build up multiple and distinct musical profiles, all of which necessitate a careful choice of repertoire that will convince us of the complete identity merge between pianist and composer.

With this album, Nakamatsu follows the rule of presenting mostly favourite works with one well-known centrepiece. However, he allows a few more lesser-known works than is common, and places them in an intriguing context. In fact, the choices and placement of specific works reveal a conscious and ambitious attempt to create a coherent artistic experience through a curiously symmetric and conceptually interwoven programme. This is how the programme is presented visually (font sizes and types are approximate):

1. *Après Une Lecture du Dante*

   Fantasia Quasi Sonata

   Petrarch Sonnets

2. Sonetto 47 Del Petrarca

3. Sonetto 104 Del Petrarca

4. Sonetto 123 Del Petrarca

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5. *Mephisto Waltz No.1*

6. *Impromptu* (Nocturne)

7. *Valse-Impromptu*

   Song Transcriptions

8. Frühlingsnacht (Schumann-Liszt)

9. Widmung (Schumann-Liszt)

10. *Hungarian Rhapsody No.2*

At first impression, the division seems to be simply between the works from the *Années de pèlerinage II: Italie* (Dante and Petrarch) and assorted short works of lighter genres. On closer inspection, there are smaller units that reflect on each

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other symmetrically: the Dante–Mephisto–Hungarian Rhapsody are the three larger-scale works of this album. In between, the Petrarch 'Sonnets' – essentially free transcriptions of three lieder by Liszt – are reflected by the Schumann transcriptions at the other end. Tracks 5–7 are the central unit of waltzes and impromptus, with a tone poem at the beginning (Mephisto I), a wistful and lyrical piece in the middle (Impromptu) and a bravura piece in a popular style at the end (Valse-impromptu): this also reflects how the programme works as a whole.

Tracks 6–7 and 8–9 also constitute 'chronological pairs': (1) Impromptu (1872) and Valse-Impromptu (1850–52); (2) *Frühlingsnacht* (1872) and *Widmung* (1848 rev. 1860s). This affords only a brief excursion beyond Liszt's Weimar years (another rule which Nakamatsu follows), but happily it also affords an interesting and focused perspective on Liszt's stylistic development. Liszt returned to Schumann in the 1860s and 70s not to 'improve' on his work, but to commemorate him, perhaps as an act of belated reconciliation and regret at past follies.[1] The Impromptu (Nocturne) is an even more wistful memory, opening with a phrase that clearly harks back to his most famous nocturne, *Liebesträume* No. 3, whose accompanying poem, *O Lieb, so lang du lieben kannst*, exhorts us to love as much as we can in this short life. But the strange modulations and a new world of tonality that immediately follow suggests a past lost forever. The chronological effect works the other way too: the Valse-Impromptu has an archetypical middle theme that would be transformed (either consciously or not) into the middle theme of the Mephisto Waltz – a breathtaking leap in just one decade from the post-Biedermeier salon to a mystical, almost Scriabinesque transformation of waltz topics in Mephisto (see below). For all that, I cannot hear the Valse-impromptu as simply 'salon music at its most refined' as the sleeve notes suggest; it is less innocent than that (Exx. 1 and 2).

Nakamatsu is a thoughtful artist with an impressive palette of sonorities and an expressive range. He can sustain very long lines and climaxes effortlessly, and create the most heartrending lyrical moments. He has the most fabulous rubato and sense of timing, which serves him well both in the 'dances' (which are hardly that in the conventional sense) and the songs. The choice of many song transcriptions cannot have been accidental: his tone is as warm and as close to a human voice as can be achieved on the piano.

This quality is fully revealed in the three *Petrarch Sonnets*. Nakamatsu's phrasings breathe, and he never tries to be cool, clever or chic with this music.[2] His pianism is rather completely sincere and sympathetic with a high Romantic ethos which, frankly, is quite rare. I love the Perahia recording (Sony: 1991), which in some way set the gold standard for crispness and lyricism in Liszt playing. I also love the modern edge Andsnes brings into the Mephisto pieces in his Liszt album (EMI, 2001). But what Nakamatsu is trying to do is harder: he is not bringing into this music a cutting-edge pianistic style or trying to make Liszt's Romanticism 'palatable' for our age, but rather seeks to rediscover and make us

[1] We have Liszt's own words from 1875 to support this. See Christopher H. Gibbs and Dana Gooley (eds), *Franz Liszt and his World* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006): 406.

[2] I have a small quibble here though: these three works do not work as effectively outside the context of the *Années II*. As songs they had a different order, key and therefore developmental logic. I wish we had a full recording of the Italian cycle, but then this is enough to be thankful for.

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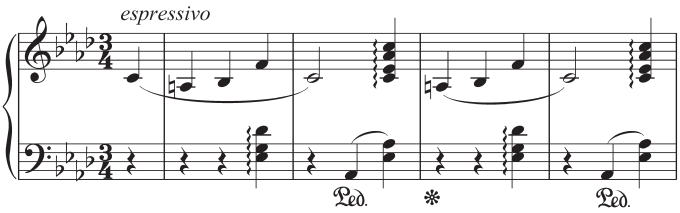
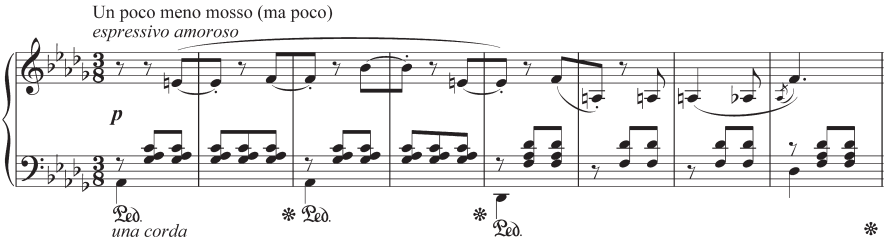
Ex. 1 Second theme from the Valse-Impromptu



Ex.2 Second theme from the Mephisto Waltz



understand Liszt's Romanticism, with its literary allusions and constant mixture of high and low culture, the sacred and the profane. The Rhapsody belongs with Dante, the high-brow lieder with salon pieces: they are all part of Liszt's world and they would have been performed in a single evening in his time.

I do wonder, though, about the Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2. Firstly, there is nothing straightforward about its inclusion in this album. The common context for this piece would be a 'best of Liszt' album (this is not the case here), a collection of rhapsodies[3] or an album in the virtuoso manner of a Horowitz or Volodos (*definitely* not the case here). Have we finally reached the point, then, where we can forget about the cultural biases that dogged the reception of this piece and just listen to it as 'normal' music, hear it played outside the protective context of anthology or the traditional context of showmanship? I think 'we' have, a long time ago: the recording industry is finally catching up, and Nakamatsu is to be praised for this choice.

More problematically, I am not sure about Nakamatsu's interpretation here. The phrasing is playful, the evocation of cimbalom percussiveness well done, the style is right; but a sound that is always gorgeous and never rough and a playing that is always controlled cannot be exactly right for this music. Personally, I miss the exhilarating craziness of Cziffra (EMI: 1975) or daemonic exuberance of Horowitz (RCA Victor: 1953/1991). So, am I defeating my own argument about taking this work out of the realm of showmanship? I am not sure. Szidon (DG: 1973) manages to create one of the most impressive build-ups of the final *friska* section, by simply reading it as a long and unrelenting momentum as Liszt (I believe) intended, against the ingrained performance practice of 'playfully' slowing down and speeding up, which Nakamatsu also indulges in. All that said, Nakamatsu's is a fine playing of the rhapsody and, as argued previously, the inclusion of the work is truly heartening. He may be a 'thinking' pianist but

[3] See Brendel's 1968 Vanguard recording, Szidon's 1973 Deutsche Gramophone and Sziffra's 1975 EMI.

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he also has a developed sense of fun and a commendable disregard for modernist hang-ups about what is good and worthy, putting his trust instead in Liszt.

There can be no doubts about his playing of the Dante sonata. This piece is famously difficult, but prosaic technical difficulties are not an issue for pianists of Nakamatsu's stature. Rather, it is the ability to transcend the percussiveness of the score (chords and octaves predominate the piece with hardly a legato melody in the traditional sense) and make listeners believe they are hearing an orchestra rather than a piano. Nakamatsu's flexible phrasing, touch, pedalling and clear voicing is exactly right in producing the fullest possible gamut of orchestral sounds on a piano. This performance is also highly sensitive to Liszt's reading of Hugo's poem and reveals its many references, for example the allusion to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* overture in bars 77 onwards. Most impressively of all, he meets Liszt's challenge of reconciling fantasy with sonata, indulging the irresistible surface events while sustaining very long phrases. In the end, one is left with memories of achingly beautiful moments, like the sensual phrasing and sound of the *più tosto ritenuto e rubato* (bars 157 onwards, where Liszt instructs to play *dolcissimo con amore*). I suspect – without intending to diminish him in the slightest – that the sheer beauty of the sound has also something to do with the Harmonia Mundi recording techniques and the contribution of Brad Michel, the sound engineer.

The same musical qualities create a formidable and satisfying Mephisto Waltz No. 1. As in the Dante, the notoriety this piece acquired for its devilish technical difficulties obscured the fact that it is a highly accomplished and complex tone poem for piano, based on Lenau's *Faust*. Nakamatsu shows here the same poetic understanding and sensitive reading as in the Dante. Here too he is at his very best in the playing of high drama and the most delicate Lisztian 'love topics'. His rendering of the seduction scene in the second part (the *amoroso* theme) is one of the most erotically charged depictions of dark eyes and lust I have ever heard, and, like its equivalent 'love theme' in the Dante, it is characterised by an inimitable sound and freedom of phrasing. Needless to say, the virtuoso first and third parts are executed with élan, and Nakamatsu is particularly good in sustaining the unresolved harmonic tension of the final part, despite the constant change in texture and character. As in the second rhapsody, though, his playing stops short of spilling into wild abandon and revealing the true madness of the lovers' obsession and the evil that goads them on. To my mind, the insane virtuosity of this music is part of its poetics: it is not enough to conquer its difficulties and play brilliantly, beautifully and passionately. With so much technical security, I wish Nakamatsu would have pushed his pianism even further, to the point of danger and true Dionysian frenzy. But perhaps I protest too much. Hardly anyone plays to breaking point nowadays, and Nakamatsu is very clear about his aesthetic boundaries. Indeed, within these boundaries there are no limits to what he can do. Don't take my word for it: just get to this wonderful CD.

Shay Loya
Durham University

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