

MAKOTO NAKURA

Marimbist

CONCERT REVIEWS

Some concertos are meant to be deep, probing dialogues between a solo instrument or two and an orchestra of one size or another. Others exist primarily as vehicles for a virtuoso, with the orchestra serving mainly as a backdrop.

Pierre Jalbert's Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra from 2005 definitely belongs in the latter category. Indeed, the four-movement, 26-minute piece puts the soloist so far out in front that the orchestra nearly disappears into the walls.

But you can't really blame Jalbert. He was, after all, writing a piece for the incredibly gifted Japanese marimbist Makoto Nakura, and the temptation to cram as many notes per square inch as possible into the solo part must have been overwhelming. And so Jalbert did — and Nakura got a dazzler of a solo vehicle in the deal, which he played Sunday night at Royce Hall with Jeffrey Kahane leading the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra in the piece's U.S. premiere.

In the opening movement, the pecking order was set as the orchestra provided little more than a drone underneath Nakura's rapid tremolos, which eventually exploded into brilliant flurries all over the instrument. He was at home with all the complex syncopation within the scherzo, with the orchestra limited to pizzicato.

Although high-powered technique is one thing, what makes Nakura something special is the staggeringly wide range of nuance and color that he could command at will from his collection of mallets. As difficult as it must have been to reach an emotional apex on an instrument with no sustainability, Nakura came very close in the climaxes of the slow movement — and actually pulled it off in a tremolo-laden solo arrangement of Schubert's "Ave Maria" as an encore.

He also knocked out "The Flight of the Bumble Bee" at a predictably supersonic speed.

—Richard S. Ginell, Los Angeles Times, December 15, 2008

Ah, the marimba! So exotic, so oddly sensual. So strikingly mysterious and so difficult to play. But on Sunday, at the Bridgehampton Presbyterian Church, the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival offered not one, but two chamber works that employed this large, awkwardly shaped instrument, which, in the nimble hands of Makoto Nakura, a marimbist of highest virtuosity, turned both works into singularly rapturous aural adventures.

—John Jonas Gruen, East Hampton Star, August 17, 2006

Although [Kevin Put's] Double Talk ends with a spirited conga like an orchestral dance composed by Leonard Bernstein, it leaves a lingering impression of the sheer virtuosity of Nakura's playing. There is a sense not just of a showcase for a brilliant player, but an emotional portrait of the abilities and personality of a soloist. When writing a concerto, any young composer might take heed of Bunch's evident awareness of the performer he is writing for, both as a musician and as a person.

—Benjamin Ivy, New Music Box, the Web Magazine

from the American Music Center, September 29, 2005

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Makoto Nakura started playing the marimba in his native Japan at the age of 8 and has collected a slew of honors during the course of his international career. Todd Palmer, an accomplished clarinet player, joined Nakura for several duets at Wednesday evening's Summer Serenade concert at Strathmore Hall Arts Center. Chased indoors by the rain, the musicians received superior acoustics in the wood-paneled music room.

Two pieces from Manuel de Falla's "El Amor Brujo," accented by Palmer's bright clarinet, were standouts, but the program's highlight was "De Kooning Movements," composed in 2001 by Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez for Nakura and Palmer. Competing lines for clarinet and marimba darted across each other in sharp counterpoint and hiccups of sound that ended in a raucous shriek. Every note of it aptly suggested the painter's controversial style.

"Triple Jump," by the young American composer Kenji Bunch, showcased Nakura's athletic playing style. The polyrhythms in the first movement advanced to rippling and skipping variations that sent Nakura swooping up and down the instrument, his mallets vibrating on the plates like the flashy sticks of a rock-and-roll drummer.

— L. Peat O'Neil, The Washington Post, July 11, 2003

"Mixing it up" could be the motto for Chicago Sinfonietta, the multi-ethnic midsize orchestra. Its season finale at Symphony Center Monday night, which showcased a soprano and a marimbist.

Few presenters would be presumptuous enough to group together Puccini arias, Dvorak's Slavonic Dances, Symphony in D by Jan Voreisek (a Bohemian composer active in early 19th-Century Vienna) and Paul Creston's Marimba Concerto, for these works have little in common except crowd-pleasing instincts. The Japanese marimbist Makoto Nakura surely warranted the inclusion of the revival of the Creston—a worthy vehicle for a rising star in his 30s.

Creston, a prolific self-taught New Yorker, wrote his concerto in 1940. It's a lively extravaganza, betraying a fondness for Impressionist touches. Nakura, switching between two and four mallets, was dazzling in his dexterity. The orchestra gave able if subdued accompaniment.

—Ted Shen, The Chicago Tribune, May 21, 2003

Maestro Raymond Harvey led the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra in yet another strong performance Friday night in its monthly Symphonic Series at Miller Auditorium.

Friday evening's program served as a case in point, ranging from prototypical classical selections with crystalline compositional architecture, to lush tone portraits, to exotic concertos for atypical solo instrument.

Guest artist Makoto Nakura performed a rousing rendition of Kevin Puts's 1997 Marimba Concerto. Michigan-born Puts, just 31 years old, composed the three-movement work in a quasi-classical mode favored by Mozart. The score was both harmonically lush and compositionally wonderfully designed. Puts made the orchestra and the marimba soloist equal partners, making for delightful music throughout.

Nakura's marimba took the form of a giant six- or seven-foot-long desk or table, behind which the slight young man seemed a musical alchemist, holding his numerous different-size mallets. At times using several mallets in each hand, Nakura became a virtual wizard on the marimba as the sticks and his hands blurred during intense passages. His playing was amazing, and the music totally enjoyable.

—C. J. Gianakaris, The Kalamazoo Gazette, March 23, 2003

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CD REVIEWS

BACH BEAT

This beguiling disk displays expanded possibilities for the marimba, played by someone who is obviously an accomplished and sensitive musician. Judging from this disk, I would place Makoto Nakura in the same rarified league as Evelyn Glennie for fine nuance and control of a percussion instrument.

—Michael Johnson, Concertonet.com, June 16, 2008

TRIPLE JUMP

If figure skaters could jump with the bounce and precision of Makoto Nakura's marimba mallets, triple jumps would be easy. Only at that level can contemporary music be played with such comfort.

Nakura not only shows off his daring skills but also the music of six composers who wrote music for him to play, including the likes of Osvaldo Golijov and Eastman School of Music's own Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez. The highlight is the final track, Kevin Puts' "And Legions Will Rise" for marimba, violin and clarinet. The glowing marimba melts into a covered clarinet line or singing violin melody; the three instruments compliment each other perfectly in Puts' creation.

—Anna Reguero, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, August 24, 2007

