Program for June 12, 2003, 7 P.M., Langroise Recital Hall.
John Salmon and Arthur Houle, piano soloists

Sonata in B Minor — Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Arthur Houle, piano

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Intermission

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Sonata No. 2 in E Major, Op. 54 (composed 1989) — Nikolai Kapustin (born 1937)

Allegro molto
Scherzo: Allegro assai
Largo
Perpetuum mobile: Allegro vivace

John Salmon, piano

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Liszt Sonata program notes

by Arthur Houle

(principal source: "Liszt: Sonata in B Minor" by Kenneth Hamilton, Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Franz Liszt's "Sonata in B Minor" is one of the most musically and technically difficult works ever written for the piano. Written in 1852-53, it features dramatic "orchestral" writing and torrential octaves mixed with exquisite lyrical passages. To build up his technique Liszt had a special practice piano with added lead weights for a heavier action. He also made trill exercises the mainstay of his technical regimen. Dr. Houle has followed suit, also practicing on a special hard action piano and, as his students can attest, devising gruesome trill exercises in preparation for this work. (This is not necessarily recommended for every piano student. If not done carefully and gradually, it could lead to hand injury.)

Many have theorized that Liszt had some programmatic idea(s) in mind when he wrote the work. The opening is similar to Wagner's motive depicting anger in his "Ring of the Nibelungen" opera cycle. Peter Raabe calls it Liszt's musical autobiography, an accounting of

his triumphs and disappointments, loves and hates. Tibor Szász calls it a struggle between God and Lucifer for the soul of man and claims it was based on the Bible and Milton's "Paradise Lost." Betrand Ott calls it a depiction of Goethe's "Faust" story. (There are thematic similarities with Liszt's "Faust" symphony. Moreover, the repeated note theme resembles Alkan's "Grande Sonata 'Quasi Faust.'" Many feel this motive does have the character of the devil.) Paul Merrick calls is a religious tract. Surprisingly, Liszt denied any specific programmatic content. However, he did call the principal repeated note motive "hammer strokes." He also asserted that the first loud octave theme (immediately following the introduction) was akin to the defiant mood of Beethoven's "Coriolan Overture." The soft octaves at the very opening are generally thought to be like string pizzicatos; however, Liszt called them "muffled timpani-strokes," reinforcing that this is really an "orchestral" work at heart.

The entire work is a metamorphosis of only a few motives. So-called "thematic transformation" is not new to Liszt, however. Theorist Leonard Meyer has illustrated how the motives within movements (and even between the movements) of many great works are interrelated. This sonata departs from tradition in that there are no breaks between movements. Theorists are not even in complete agreement as to where the "movements" are or exactly where the sonata sections (introduction, 1st theme, 2nd theme, development, recapitulation and coda) begin and end. Listen for the wonderfully unexpected scherzo-like fughetta section that serves to delay the recapitulation. It is clear that Liszt was paying homage to Schubert's "Wanderer Fantasy," which also has seamless movements and is grandly "orchestral" in scope and timbre. Liszt was also influenced by Schumann's great "Fantasy in C Major," the late sonatas of Beethoven, and the works of Berlioz.

Students of Liszt attest that he rolled chords more often than indicated and, for expressiveness, did not always synchronize the right hand with the left hand (much as a singer would do with an accompanist -- akin to "back phrasing" in jazz singers of today). Liszt at times disliked the brashness of the high register and would, as a result, use soft pedal. There is much confusion about two of Liszt's "shorthand" indications: "8 bassa" means to play a single note an octave below the note indicated, and "8" written alone under a note means to play an octave doubling (the note written with the note an octave lower). Many recordings reflect an erroneous interpretation of these marks. Liszt enthusiasts may consult the "Liszt Pädagogium" for information about testimonials from Liszt's students as to how he played his works. For example, we know that Liszt played the "Allegro energico" (starting at measure 8) at 72 to the half note, the "Grandioso" theme (m. 105) at 66 to the half note, and the scherzo-like fughetta theme (m. 460) at 80 to the half note.

Wagner was a great fan of this work; Brahms was not quite as enthusiastic. Interestingly, Artur Schnabel did play it a few times in his youth. The sonata was almost universally panned by the critics of Liszt's day but has gained acceptance today as one the greatest masterpieces ever written.

Program Notes by John Salmon for Kapustin Sonata:

Nikolai Kapustin is probably unknown to most people in the United States. He is notoriously reclusive and self-effacing and eschews that most banal of all modern “necessary evils” -- self-promotion. It’s not surprising, then, that his music is not yet published here. It was only through Steven Osborne’s CD (on the Hyperion label) that I became acquainted with this brilliant composer. Marc-André Hamelin and Nikolai Petrov have also recorded Kapustin’s music.

Kapustin had a rigorously classical training at the Moscow Conservatory where he studied piano with Alexander Goldenweiser. He ingested Prokofiev, Rachmaninov and Scriabin and played Chopin études. Meanwhile, Kapustin also pursued a career as a jazz pianist, eventually touring with Oleg Lundstrem's Jazz Orchestra. His compositions reflect that background, coming close to sounding like what Rachmaninov would have sounded like had he been born Oscar Peterson. Far from being a mere influence or occasional reference (as one finds in the music of, say, Copland or Ravel), jazz is at the very heart of Kapustin's musical language.

Kapustin's Second Piano Sonata, written in 1989, is a perfect example of that synthesis of styles. While no actual improvisation "chops" are necessary, a good sense of swing is an indispensable skill for the interpreter of this work. But if you haven't perfected your thirds or swift scalar passages, you had also better stay away!

Opus 54's first movement, Allegro molto, covers every modulation and jazz chord known to mankind, sometimes in the space of just a few measures. The harmonies are dense yet the textures are supremely pianistic. I hear the tunefulness of Keith Jarrett, a certain Broadway-finale flair, and stride straight out of Erroll Garner. A playful and rubato coda stops the momentum just long enough to provide repose before all hell breaks loose in the second movement, Allegro assai, which takes the form of a rollicking dodecaphonic blues. (Imagine Anton Webern meeting James Brown: "Achtung: Hot tub!").

In Largo, some may hear lounge-lizard harmonies. It's true that the lazy tempo and abundance of major-seventh chords may suggest clouds of cigarette smoke and the clinks of glasses -- not my favorite ambiance (well, at least not the cigarette smoke...) or musical style. But the movement is totally redeemed by the entrance of a rhythm section, about two minutes in. I hear Chick Corea and Maria Schneider -- hip voicings and grooves; no polyester suits here. (Does my admission of non-sympathy for the A sections make me less than an effective performer of the work? Must an actor like the person he portrays??)

The last movement, Perpetuum mobile: Allegro vivace, is a tour de force. Think "hillbilly on steroids" and you'll have an image of what happens musically -- but don't spend too much time pondering that image or the brief, frantically paced piece will leave you in the dust. Kapustin achieves this breathlessness partially through a meter that is surely the longest meter in music history: 4/4, 7/8, 4/4, 5/8. The whole piece is put together from a consistent alternation of these time signatures. The hurried effect -- a 4/4 measure followed by a measure with some of the eighth notes deleted -- is brilliantly achieved. I must say that, recently, especially in my old age, I have more and more days like this phrasing, moments when I run about prestissimo, followed by an even quicker pace -- because the old, quick pace just can't accommodate everything I must do or say. Before you tell me to see a therapist or read a self-help book (haven't got time! sorry!), just consider that it was that pace that allowed me to learn the Kapustin Sonata at all.

Arthur Houle biography:

An exponent of both classical and jazz improvising, Dr. Houle is in frequent demand to present workshops on creativity for students, teachers and the public.

Houle holds degrees from the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, New England Conservatory and the University of Iowa. His lifelong enthusiasm for chamber music has led to collaborations with artists such as Louis Lowenstein, Dennis Parker, Paul Olefsky, and Benny Kim. He has performed extensively with the New England-based Copley Chamber Players and the Albertson

College Langroise Trio. His Carnegie Weill Hall debut with cellist Dennis Parker was critically acclaimed.

Houle was the only pianist to be invited to perform twice (to critical acclaim) for the 1995 International Chopin Music Festival. He has given coast-to-coast lecture/recitals and master classes on the music of Chopin at institutions such as Eastman School of Music, Dartmouth College, New England Conservatory, Longy School of Music and for various teacher organizations such as the College Music Society. He also gave a live, two-hour interview/performance on Chopin for "Eklektikos" on NPR's KUT-Austin. His "Chopin Nocturnes" CD features performances with authentic variants along with original variants as Chopin might have done. Another CD features jazz and classical music of contemporary composer Marjorie Burgess, performed by Houle in conjunction with colleagues at Albertson College and elsewhere. Both CD's have earned critical acclaim and are available from Caldwell Fine Arts.

Houle's Cowboy Jazz, a collection of original piano solos for intermediate level students, was recently published by the Letterpress Musical Library.

Houle has written for Clavier, Piano Today, Piano Quarterly, American Record Guide, North Dakota Music Educator, Arkansas Music Educator Journal ("Segue"), and the IMEA's Idaho Music Notes. He has also been a frequent contributor to Piano & Keyboard.

Houle studied piano with Maria Clodes Jaguaribe, Kenneth Amada and Leonard Shure. His chamber music coaches included Eugene Lehner, Colin Carr, Benjamin Zander and Victor Rosenbaum.

Houle has taught at the New England and Boston Conservatories, the Dana Hall School of Music (MA), and the Universities of Iowa, North Dakota and Texas-Austin. He is currently associate professor of piano at the Albertson College of Idaho.

John Salmon biography:

Pianist JOHN SALMON has distinguished himself on both sides of the Atlantic, as both a classical and jazz artist.

In the United States, he has given recitals for the Dame Myra Hess Series in Chicago, the Discovery Series in Indianapolis, the Van Cliburn Foundation in Fort Worth, and a Busoni Gala at Symphony Space in New York, as well as at the Spoleto Festival of Charleston. He has also appeared as recitalist at many colleges and universities across the United States, including Tulane, Vanderbilt, Cincinnati College Conservatory, and San Francisco State University. He has appeared as soloist with numerous symphony orchestras, including those of Asheville NC, Battle Creek MI, Beaumont TX, Dallas TX, Lake Placid NY, Muskegon MI, Shreveport LA, and York PA. His broad repertoire covers the classics--Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms--though his interest in modern music is equally strong. He commissioned The water is a fire by Steve Hicken, a work that Salmon premiered in the United States in 1991 on National Public Radio's "Performance Today." In addition, he has broadcast over WFMT radio in Chicago and performed a recital for a PBS television broadcast sponsored by The Beethoven Foundation. Other special performances have included an all-Liszt recital for the American Liszt Society in Mexico City and a gala concerto appearance with the Hendersonville (North Carolina) Symphony celebrating its 25th anniversary. Salmon has also concertized in Central America, Canada, and throughout Europe. He has recorded for Spanish National Radio, Radio Suisse Romande, RAI Italian Radio, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and has appeared with the Haydn Orchestra in Italy and the Sinfónica Bética in Spain, and at the International Bartók Festival in Hungary.

As a jazz pianist and composer, Salmon has toured Europe with his jazz trio and performed with the jazz quintet SPECTRUM, a group praised for its "amazing collection of straight-ahead jazz, whirl of changing meters, even boogie-woogie and old rock in swinging and tightly ordered music making" (Cue Magazine). Salmon's versatility often produces striking juxtapositions. In one season, Salmon performed the Mozart Concerto, K. 488, with the Asheville Symphony on a Saturday night, then performed the next afternoon with SPECTRUM as part of the Carolina Jazz Showcase Festival. The local press called the group "the hands-down, thumbs-up favorite" of the Festival.

In recent years, Salmon has become increasingly involved with American composer and jazz artist, Dave Brubeck. In May 1994, Salmon helped award Brubeck an honorary doctorate from Gerhard Mercator University in Duisburg, Germany; in October 1996, he helped award Dave and Iola Brubeck the Achievement in the Arts award from Northwood University. His articles on Brubeck have appeared in American Music Teacher and The Chronicle of Higher Education. He is editor of Brubeck's piano volumes Nocturnes (Warner Bros. Publications, 1997) and Two-Part Adventures (Warner Bros., 1999). Brubeck has dedicated two piano pieces to Salmon, The Salmon Strikes and Bach Again. Salmon has recorded a CD of Brubeck's solo piano works on the Phoenix label. John Salmon's Brubeck CD is available by visiting the following web site:

http://www.phoenixcd.com

As guest lecturer, Salmon has appeared in St. Louis for the College Music Society ("The Piano Sonatas of Carl Loewe"), in Miami for the Music Teachers National Association ("What Brubeck Got from Milhaud"), at Boston Conservatory ("September 1828"), and at The Juilliard School ("Beethoven's Shadow"). He has been guest artist and speaker for the Minnesota Music Teachers Association Convention, as well as the Interlochen (Michigan) annual Piano Festival. He is a frequent clinician in Spain, most recently having taught a jazz-piano seminar at the University of Valencia. Salmon also served as contributing editor to Piano & Keyboard and has written articles on a wide variety of subjects. His book The Piano Sonatas of Carl Loewe was published by Peter Lang Publishing in November 1996.

Salmon's multifaceted career includes the directorship of Focus on Piano Literature, an annual symposium he founded at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Since its inception in 1990, the symposium has garnered widespread recognition and a devoted following across the United States. It has been praised in Piano Quarterly, Clavier, American Music Teacher, and Piano & Keyboard, and excerpts from concerts have been broadcast on National Public Radio.

John Salmon has been a member of the faculty of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro since 1989. He holds the Doctor of Musical Arts degree from The University of Texas at Austin; the Master of Music degree from The Juilliard School; the Solistendiplom from the Hochschule für Musik, Freiburg im Breisgau; and the Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Arts (philosophy) from Texas Christian University. His awards include the Premio Jaén, the Gina Bachauer Award from Juilliard, a fellowship from the Beethoven Foundation, and prizes from the Busoni Competition and University of Maryland Competition.