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Won-Jin Jo's Grand Kennedy Center Debut

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Everything about clarinetist Won-Jin Jo's recital at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater on Saturday evening was remarkable: the fact that his spectacular technical facility was upstaged only by his artistic sensitivity; that the piece for solo clarinet he premiered promises to be a delightful addition to the repertoire; and that his accompanist, Noreen Cassidy-Polera, was as fine a collaborator as I've heard in years. Add to the list another fact, that cellist Patrick Jee, who joined the ensemble for the concluding Brahms Clarinet Trio, would, himself, have been worth the trip.

It was all quite an accomplishment for Jo, who, at 18, is a Harvard freshman.

The Korean Concert Society, which over the years has brought many fine young performers to Washington, presented Jo's performance.

Though the program was full of astonishingly virtuosic demands, it all came out sounding musical and thoughtful, even Paul Jean- Jean's showy Variations on "Carnival of Venice," where cascades of runs straddle the instrument's registers so quickly that the effect is of the clarinet producing its own harmony. Jo managed to make this sound easy and, though he seemed to breathe a sign of relief at the end of every piece, his control and poise were never in doubt.

Jo made some of his most powerful statements through pianissimos of considerable intensity. The opening three Gershwin Preludes spoke eloquently in the quietest moments, particularly at the ends of the first and third movements, and the Poulenc Sonata, rhythmically incisive and jaunty, also was notable for its gorgeous legato passages and the opportunities Jo found for soft intimacy.

"Jacqueline" Jeeyoung Kim's "Wanderlust for Solo Clarinet" is a most attractive work. In three short and contrasting movements (the whole piece takes a little more than five minutes to play) she explores a number of moods and employs techniques such as flutter-tonguing and pitch-bending with taste and evident purpose.

The concert ended with a lyrical performance of the Brahms Clarinet Trio that sounded almost like a cello concerto with clarinet obligato. It was nice that way.

-- Joan Reinthaler