

The Oregonian

## A Mensch Who Thrills

February 20, 2008

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Is it possible to dislike Jon Kimura Parker? I propose that it is not. Virtuoso musicians tend to be unapproachable -- some seem to live within the velvet ropes of celebrity, others have all the social graces of the late chess great Bobby Fischer, and even the nice ones just inhabit a different, more rarified realm than most of us. But Parker is a mensch.

At the Newmark Theatre Monday night, where he appeared courtesy of Portland Piano International, he strode onto the stage with his typical smile and before taking his place at the keyboard, sat on the edge of the piano bench to talk for a bit. Before embarking on Robert Schumann's "Carnaval," he recalled that as a young man growing up in Vancouver, B.C., he heard the piece many times in recital, and that try as he might to follow, he would often lose track of where he was among Schumann's myriad characters and allusions. Heads nodded in the audience: yeah, man, we've been there. Our fellow Northwesterner then encouraged listeners to turn to the program notes, and gave a few tips to help us stay on track.

Then he did what distinguishes him from the rest of us -- he actually played the sprawling, mercurial masterpiece, giving a blisteringly energetic performance. From movement to movement, each of which lasted only a minute or so, he danced and raced across the keyboard, changing colors like a chameleon. His playing throughout the concert was clean but not fastidiously so, striking a balance between muscularity and precision. He used awe-inspiring power to fill the room with sound, but he also played with extraordinary delicacy; in the concert's opening piece, Alexina Louie's "Scenes from a Jade Terrace," he carefully evoked the sound of bells and zither.

The blockbuster of the evening was Parker's own piano reduction of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." The piece itself was fascinating; the "Rite" has been arranged for four pianos and for two, but 10 fingers on a single keyboard seems like impossibly sparse resources for a work that strains entire orchestras. Without the instrumental color of the original, other features, especially rhythmic figures and melodic turns, emerged in high relief.

Simply on the level of virtuoso display, Parker's performance was astonishing, a thrill ride alternating mesmerizing harmonic tricks with primal, pounding power chords that threatened to splinter the keyboard. When Parker came out for a fourth curtain call afterward, I began to feel guilty for participating in the riotous ovation. Don't feel pressured to do an encore, man! You'll hurt yourself.