

Midwest Young Artists Symphony Orchestra, Dr. Allan Dennis, conductor

Pick-Stagier Concert Hall, Evanston, Illinois

March 1, 2015

by Michael Cameron

All day Sunday at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston, seven ensembles from Midwest Young Artists in three separate concerts provided a marathon of music making for parents and supporters of the prestigious music academy based in Fort Sheridan. I was fortunate to hear the final concert by the Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Dr. Allan Dennis, featuring the overall winners of the 2015 Walgreens Competition.

The theme of the concert was “Ignite Your Passion”, and the two young winners were fine exemplars of the power of music to fuel the creative energies of budding artists. The first of the two vehicles was Keiko Abe’s Prism Rhapsody for Marimba and Orchestra, played with flair, style, and pinpoint accuracy by the outstanding percussionist Daniel Hallet.

Abe is a living legend among marimba players. Not only has she worked tirelessly to expand the repertoire, she has also collaborated with the Yamaha Corporation in the design of the modern five octave instrument. She is also a composer of note, and the Prism Rhapsody (her most enduring work) was one of the first works scored for marimba and orchestra.

The score unfolded with cinematic bravura, and under Dennis’ colorful reading one could easily imagine an adaptation as a film score. It’s a credit to both conductor and composer that even when the orchestration swelled to massive walls of sound, the soloist was still clearly audible. Hallet’s playing was a marvel, negotiating the complex score from memory and zipping up and down the five octave with nimble athleticism.

If the marimba concerto was a novelty to most in the audience and orchestra, Dvorak’s Cello Concerto is as standard a work as any in the repertoire. Once again the balance between ensemble and soloist was impeccable, a fortunate occurrence since there was so much to enjoy in the performance of Daniel Kaler, overall winner of the competition. His tone in the lyrical sections was warm and luminous, while faster passages were dispatched with certainty and vigor. Should they both choose music as their vocation, both he and Hallet have bright futures.

Khachaturian’s ballet *Gayane* is known to the general public for a single number, the ever-popular “Sabre Dance”. There are a few other excerpts from his suite that get an occasional hearing, including “Dance of the Young Maidens.” The orchestra gave it a lively reading, with oboist Megan Anderson and flutist Riley Bernardi deserving special kudos for their playful opening duo. Anderson was also a standout in her tender opening solo in the lovely Lullaby. The Sabre Dance was a bit slower than many accounts, but

there was still ample forward momentum as well as inner detail that sometimes gets lost when orchestras push the tempo excessively.

Dr. Dennis doesn't pull any punches with respect to choices of repertoire, and Richard Strauss' "Till Eulenspielgels lustige Streiche" might appear to be far beyond the capabilities of most pre-college age students. Thanks in large part to several outstanding principal players, the youngsters pulled off a truly inspiring performance.

The genesis of the tone poem was a planned opera based on the crude and occasionally brutal pranks of Till, a genuine historical person dating from the 14th century bent on exacting revenge on repressive clergy and class conscious bourgeoisie. It has been a concert favorite for top orchestras since its debut in Munich in 1895, and was given its American premier by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Theodore Thomas later the same year. While Strauss did not provide a program, perhaps as a way to keep listener's ears focused on the music rather than written notes, it's not hard glean the general gist, especially when presented with a performance as colorful and neatly delineated as the one Sunday night.

The violins gave a graceful reading of the opening theme, and principal horn player Nathan Goldin's incantation of the jaunty second theme was right on the money. This was merely the first of many fine horn passages throughout the tone poem, setting the stage for a series of highjinks that culminated in the protagonist's untimely demise.

The woodwind's cantankerous dissonances midway through the work (Till's mockery of pastors and intellectuals?) was delicious, and the low strings delivered a variation on the first theme with pinpoint accuracy and airy lightness.

E♭ clarinetist Torin Bakke's marvelous, virtuosic shrieks as the prancer's end approached were full of appropriately angry defiance, and concertmaster Aidan Perreault zipped through his virtuosic solo measures with ease.

But this was one of those memorable affairs that make a reviewer's job difficult for fear of neglecting to praise so many worthy participants. Ultimately it was a grand group success, pulled off by a talented and diligent orchestra under expert guidance. No doubt this came as no surprise to the supporters of MYA, and they responded with well-earned enthusiasm.