



Midwest Young Artists Conservatory Symphony Orchestra
Dr. Allan Dennis, conductor
Pick-Staiger Concert Hall
Evanston
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by Michael Cameron

Sunday at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston, the Midwest Young Artists Conservatory Symphony Orchestra once again delivered the goods with a compelling program of fiercely challenging repertoire, while giving a richly deserved platform to pair of exciting young virtuosos.

With Dr. Allan Dennis on the podium, the orchestra's captivating performance of Stravinsky's ballet-burlesque *Petroushka* defied expectations of what is possible with a student ensemble. The orchestra had earlier tackled the other two revolutionary Stravinsky ballets (*Firebird* and *The Rite of Spring*), so it shouldn't have been a surprise that they could deliver a confident performance of music of such difficulty, sophistication, and concentration.

Stravinsky had already begun preliminary work on the *The Rite of Spring* when discussions with ballet impresario Diaghilev sent him in another direction, to a story of a straw and sawdust-stuffed puppet suddenly come to life. The character of *Petroushka* was described by the composer as "the immortal and unhappy hero of every fair in all countries", and his depiction of the adventures of the title character remains a favorite among dance troupes the world over.

For their previous concert, Dr. Dennis delivered on a richly hued, detailed performance of Rachmaninoff's *Second Symphony*, a sprawling work that is famously taxing of string sections. The challenges in *Petroushka* come from other sources, including complex tempo changes, odd metric structures, and an abundance of virtuosic passages for woodwinds, brass, and percussion. This work tests the adage that a chain is only as strong as it's weakest link, and time and again the players rose to the occasion with characterful solo turns and tightly

rehearsed section playing. Dr. Dennis deftly guided the students through Stravinsky's maze of odd meters and quicksilver tempo changes. Balances were carefully gauged, and the characters and situations of the timeless story came to life in a vivid procession of tableaux.

Throughout the ballet, the woodwinds were uniformly superb in both solo and ensemble passages, beginning with flutist Jonathan Wu's agile fanfares in the festive opening sequence, with principal violist Peter Dudek leading his section in swirling accompanying figures. First stand players Hannah Nussbaum (trumpet) Ruchira Ray (clarinet), Timothy Zhang (oboe), and Sara Mouscher (piccolo) provided just a few of the many highlights in the ballet's first part.

Percussion sections are often the unsung heroes in 20th century repertoire, but Stravinsky's brilliant orchestration (snare drum scene connections, abrupt timpani interruptions, etc.) often puts these back row workhorses through their paces. Brass section playing excelled throughout, propelled by the strong leadership of Nussbaum, Christopher Martin (horn), and Eleanor Lerrick (tuba). Concertmaster Anna Stenzel's ostinato passages in the Russian Dance were taut and lively, while the grumblings of the bassoon and contrabassoon lines at the appearance of the Charlatan were played with relish by Sarah Gibes and Nick Nocita.

The program also included vital performances by two winners of the 2016 Walgreens Competition. The overall winner in piano in the MYAC Senior Division was George Dalianis, a 10th grader from Maine South High School in Park Ridge. Dalianis choose an evergreen warhorse for his appearance, the first movement of Edvard Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor. Countless recorded and live performances of this beloved work linger the memory, but his youthful vigor and formidable technical command left a strong impression. The pianist exhibited a firm hand in the rapid octave passages, and he coaxed a spontaneous lyricism in shaping the concert's famous tunes.

The Brahms Violin Concerto is not a common choice for entrants in youth competitions, owing perhaps to the length and intensity of the opening movement and the belief among many that any reasonably probing account could only flow from the hands of an artist with at least a few years of professional experience. But Karisa Chiu is no ordinary young violinist, and her reading of the monumental concerto was persuasive from start to finish. The senior from Palatine was the String Category Winner in the Open Senior division in the competition, and it was clear from the opening bravura passages that she had paid enough dues to earn her appearance with the MYAC Orchestra. Her attention to every musical and technical detail was uncanny, yet she never wavered in her commitment to conveying the overarching structure.