



Lang Lang International Music Foundation
Midwest Young Artists Conservatory Symphony Orchestra
Allen Dennis, conductor
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by Michael Cameron

The collaboration between the Midwest Young Artists Conservatory and the Lang Lang International Music Foundation has been, to understate the point, a fruitful one. Much more than a mere competition that serves to whittle down a troop of budding pianists to a handful who can play a Rachmaninov concerto faster and cleaner than the rest, the foundation seeks to bridge

cultures and develop pathways for musical exchange between nations.

While the performances by the nine supremely gifted young pianists at MYA's Lang Lang Young Scholars concert were without exception extraordinary, the stories coaxed out of them by conductor Dr. Allan Dennis were as moving as the music they made. The international cadre of youngsters had just completed a week long residency in the Chicago area, hosted by area families. After a week of chamber music collaborations, coachings, and immersion in local culture with host families serving as guides, each musician performed a movement of a concerto with the MYA Symphony Orchestra Sunday evening in the Pritzker Pavilion at Millennium Park.

The forecast for the outdoor event wasn't promising, but the storms held off long enough for the concert to proceed without a hitch, and a few thousand spectators were treated to concert that included a sneak peak at some rising stars of the concert grand.

After a rousing orchestral introduction in the form of Von Suppe's crowd pleasing *Light Cavalry Overture*, 13-year-old Russian Vavara Kutusova gave a shapely, graceful performance of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 9. She applied a delicate touch to the composer's lyrical lines, and the cadenza was smartly paced, punctuated at times by a firm left hand. The youngest of the bunch was 10-year-old Hong Kong native Peter Leung. As his small frame cheerfully hopped on the piano bench it was hard to imagine that he could deliver a convincing account of the first movement of Beethoven's mighty Piano Concerto No. 1. Deliver he did, with note perfect execution and a cogent sensibility, reflecting impressive natural gifts and the sure hands of his teachers and coaches.

13-year-old Jenny Kong, also hailing from Hong Kong, gave a sterling account of the finale of Beethoven's third piano concerto. Her touch was generally light and clean, but she was able to coax heroic, big boned chordal passages when the score demanded. California native Elizabeth Zeitz choose Mendelssohn's fiendishly difficult Concerto No. 1 for her competition piece, and she tore into the opening pages with a blistering tempo that seemed to tempt the fates. Not only was she up to the challenge, she was well-equipped to tease out the composer's admonition to perform the movement "con fuoco". The poignancy she found in the slower passages showed that there is more in her arsenal than sheer chops.

Sometimes a romantic slow movement can prove a stiffer challenge for young musicians than quick ones, since mastery of rubato usually requires years of experience to nurture and blossom. 15-year-old Chelsea Guo, from Juilliard's Pre-College Division, seemed right at home in the second movement Larghetto from Chopin's Concerto No. 2. She negotiated Chopin's arabesques with unforced elegance, displaying a genuine gift for lyrical finesse.

16-year-old Boston native Amir Siraj was next up with the first movement of Franz Liszt's first piano concerto. There was no shortage of power and precision in the infamous, blistering double octaves, and both soloist and Maestro Dennis handled the frequent tempo changes with ease. The oldest one of the bunch was 17-year-old Eden Chen, playing the first movement of the uber-popular Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2. This has been a calling card for many a Russian pianist, and Chen exhibited all the dexterity and dynamism required for a truly compelling reading.

Raymond Feng was up next with another warhorse of the literature, the Grieg Concerto in A minor. The 14-year-old handled the giant chords with ease, and elsewhere traced the singing lines with shapely nobility. It was a reunion of sorts for local girl Kimberly Han, who had earlier played the first movement of Prokofiev's third concerto with MYA as a result of a first prize in the Walgreens competition. Her account was just as persuasive and idiomatic as I remember from the concert in February, and etched with steely precision and forward thrust.

A festive account of Berlioz' Roman Carnival Overture closed the terrific concert, and no doubt the young players in the orchestra and at the keyboard created memories that will last a lifetime.