



Midwest Young Artists Symphony Orchestra
Young Scholars from the Lang Lang International Music Foundation
International Summer Music Summit
Dr. Allan Dennis, conductor

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Jay Pritzker Pavillion, Millennium Park

by Michael Cameron

Conductor Allan Dennis and his Midwest Young Artists Symphony Orchestra have ample experience partnering with young soloists in concerto performances, with 20 years worth of concerts accompanying winners from the Walgreens Competition, one of the most prestigious contests of its kind. Those winners have been featured in many concerts with the orchestra at Northwestern University's Pick Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston, with a mix of string and wind players, as well as percussionists, singers and pianists. More recently, MYA has teamed with the Lang Lang International Music Foundation to provide concerto opportunities for many of its young virtuosos, seven of whom performed Sunday afternoon at the Jay Pritzker Pavillion in Millennium Park in downtown Chicago.

The orchestra itself has built a reputation for superb performances that rival those of ensembles populated by mature professionals, and hearing them collaborate with outstanding musical prodigies made one feel genuine hope for the future of musical standards in this country. Anyone who happened upon the outdoor concert by accident could be forgiven for assuming that the performers were fully formed professionals.

In order to give opportunities to as many pianists as possible, Dr. Dennis programmed two entire concertos, but with different soloists in each movement. It is tempting to think that our musical academies churn out young pianists by the bushel, all hewing to the same, "average" interpretations of the classics. What I found most rewarding about this concert was the variety of personalities that came through, no doubt reflecting various

teaching philosophies and the differing cultural backgrounds each pianist brought to the concert grand.

First up was Avery Gagliano, a remarkably mature artist from Washington, DC with many appearances with symphony orchestras already under her belt. She launched into the opening Allegro maestoso of Liszt's Concerto No. 1 with complete confidence and poise, showing no signs of being intimidated by the sense of occasion. Especially impressive was her natural understanding of romantic era rubato and her ability to tease out the lyricism so essential in the concerto.

Among the most impressive soloists of the day was Indonesia native Janice Carissa, currently a student at Curtis Institute of Music under the guidance of legendary pedagogues Gary Graffman and Robert McDonald. She has also amassed an impressive resume for someone of her age, with solo turns with the Philadelphia Orchestra and several other ensembles, as well as an appearance at the Weill Recital Hall of Carnegie Hall. Her reading of the second movement Adagio of the Liszt Concerto was richly textured and colorful, with an innate lyricism and idiomatic flair.

Hong Kong native Matthew Chan showed signs of discomfort at the opening of the Allegretto vivace, but he soon settled into a groove, dispatching some of the concerto's most difficult passages with flair and panache. Also hailing from Hong Kong, Sheri Lun tackled the bruising finale with pinpoint clarity and convincing bravura, while the lighter moments danced with an impish joy that brought the audience to their feet after the final bars.

If anything Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 (premiered in 1921 across the street from Millennium Park by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and conductor Frederick Stock) is an even bigger challenge to conquer than the Liszt, and the three soloists didn't disappoint. Before the soloist entered in the first movement, the audience was treated to some lovely clarinet duos by.....? It's hard to imagine any 12 year old being up to the formidable challenges of the first movement of this concerto, but 15 year old Juilliard Pre-College student Maxim Lando launched into the opening bars with panache, excelling in the fiendishly difficult perpetual motion passages.

The second movement's theme and variations are a mini-concerto of their own, and San Francisco Pre-College student Elliot Wu handled its twists and turns with assured confidence. Exuberant one moment, calm and introspective the next, Wu's had the goods to deliver a professional and confident performance.

Seasoned concert goers know better than to equate physical size with sound production, but the strapping Clayton Stephenson coaxed the biggest and boldest sound of any of the soloists. It was easy to understand why this promising young virtuoso won the Jury Discretionary Award at the 2015 Van Cliburn International Junior Piano Competition and the Juilliard Pre-College Piano Competition whole concerto. He boasted all of the requisite subtleties needed to make the movement sing, but it was his infectious dynamism that had the Pritzker audience eating out of his hand.

For a concert opener, Dr. Dennis led his orchestra through a radiant reading of Leonard Bernstein's Overture to Candide. Its colors ran the full gamut from sparkling to lugubrious, and it's final, amusing snap was a sheer delight. The remarkable accomplishments of the pianists seemed almost magical at times, so it was appropriate that Dennis choose Dukas' Sorcerer's Apprentice as the afternoon's finale. Violist Sofiya Kyrylyuk was just one of many young artists that made the familiar score seem fresh.