

Midwest Young Artists
Sunday, October 27
Pick-Staiger Concert Hall
Evanston



by Michael Cameron

In recent years we've seen that there is no corner of the standard orchestral canon that is beyond the reach of Midwest Young Artist's Symphony Orchestra. Dr. Allan Dennis has tackled Strauss' tone poems in the past, including *Don Juan* and *Ein Heldenleben*. Sunday night at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall at the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern School of Music, they offered up *Don Quixote*, one of the longest and most intricate of Strauss orchestra works.

The form is unusually episodic for Strauss, with an introduction, finale, and 10 variations sandwiched between. Subtitled "Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character", that mirror the actions and characters in Cervantes' immortal *Don Quixote*. Like the other tone poems of this period (around 1897), the music is rich with programmatic connotations. It boggles the mind to think of the intense preparation needed to pull this off, but the orchestra's hard work paid off handsomely, with ample guidance from Dennis and others in the MYA faculty.

This is dense and lengthy score, requiring excellence up and down every section. I've never seen so many musicians squeezed into this particular stage, with unusually large string sections and the full battery of percussion and winds called for by the composer. *Don Quixote* is also a concerto of sorts, with a solo cello part only a shade less central to the texture than most examples of the concerto form. The instrument is the embodiment of the Don himself, and as such gives vent to the mood swings and adventures of the protagonist. The soloist was Chris Gao, a winner of the Walgreen's Concerto Competition. Gao was superb throughout, playing the dramatic moments with verve and panache, and evoking a gorgeous lyricism when indicated by the story line. Concertmaster Rachel Stenzel and principal violist David Berghoff also had extensive solo passages, and were equally as compelling.

The opening prologue unfolded in a breezy, relaxed mood, with lovely oboe lyrical lines from principal oboist Mathew Harms and his entire viola section. Next up was *Don Quixote's* theme, stuffed with dreams of knightly glory. It's been noted that even the shape of his theme mirrors the Don's mental state (a quick ascending flourish followed by a slow decline). Tuba soloist Ben Smelser was compelling as the bumbling Sancho Panza. Bassoonists Marissa Takaki and Nina Laube and contrabassoonist Madison Cardenas excelled in a genuine workout, while the eighth variation featured some brilliant passagework by Stenzel and Berghoff. Principal bassist Jacob Nagler also contributed a delightfully nimble passage.

As brilliant and diverse as the orchestral color was, my favorite movement was the relatively monochromatic cello soliloquy accompanied primarily by the cello section. Gao's colleagues supported him with care and sensitivity, and Gao himself soared with a rich, well projected tone.

Abundant kudos to Dr. Dennis for leading his talented forces through this intricate and richly detailed score. It was remarkable to hear them navigate through this chromatic web with such sustained concentration, yet keeping to overall tenor light and graceful.

After this magnificent aural display, four jazz bands of varying ages took to the stage. Joe Policastro's Jazz Orchestra came out swinging with Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump", with solos from Declan O'Riley (vibes) and sax players Hans Allendorfer, Jared Munsterman, Carter

Pacis, and Eamon Gover. A brassy version of the dixieland classic “Basin Street Blues” featured trumpet players Branson Monsen, Brendan O'Brien, Charlie Clarke, and Alex Schneidman.

Chris Madsen led the other three groups, the youngest of which was the Jazz Ensemble. They gave a rollicking performance of Victor Lopez' “Sambeando” (featuring Blake Lesser on tenor sax and Graeme Gover on guitar and the Neal Hefti classic “Cute”, highlighted by the drumming of William Steck.

“Elvin’s Mambo” by Bob Mintzer and “La Nevada Blues” by Gil Evans (with it’s well realized rhythmic minefield) made a strong impression with Josh Wrobel on piano, Matt Baechlandt on tenor, Emiel DeJaegher on trumpet, and Danny Cohen on drums. The mambo showed off a great rhythm section and a soaring solo from Katie Lambert on trombone.

The concert’s final ensemble was the Big Band, who lead off with a sultry and sophisticated “Laura” with romantic improv from Michael Werner (trumpet), Patrick Stineman (piano) and Kevin Capinos (trombone). “Lil Darling” conjured a dance band winding down in the wee hours, Nick Alleyne’s trumpet leading the way. Ron Clayton’s version of Monk’s “Evidence” was a remarkable display of artistic maturity, its melodic and rhythmic angularity played with pinpoint accuracy and infectious swing. Guitarist Will Finnegan and alto sax player Nathan Weiskirch soloed well, as did a trio of trumpet players (Sam Veren, Michael Werner, and Nick Alleyne).

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About MYA: *Midwest Young Artists is a top rated youth music ensemble program and represents some of the best young musicians in the country. MYA currently reaches more than 1,000 students from 74 communities in the metropolitan Chicago area. Students have the opportunity to travel abroad and to perform in major venues throughout Chicago and around the world. MYA graduates are accepted at the most selective conservatories, universities and colleges in the country. Contact: www.mya.org, (847) 926-9898, email: mya@mya.org*