

MYA April 24, 2016 - Pick-Staiger Concert Hall

The final spring concerts for Midwest Young Artists are always emotional affairs, with artistic director Dr. Allan Dennis bidding farewell to his senior class, many of whom have been a part of MYA for five years or more. At the Symphony Orchestra concert Sunday at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall at Northwestern University, the event was even more personal than usual, thanks to a solo appearance by Carrie Dennis, violist and daughter of the conductor.

To say that papa Dennis has reason for pride is an understatement. A 1995 alum of MYA herself, the violist was appointed Associate Principal of the Philadelphia Orchestra after graduating from the prestigious Curtis Institute, and soon after became Solo Violist of the Berlin Philharmonic, arguably the most illustrious ensemble of its kind on the planet. She returned stateside in 2008 to take the principal chair of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the behest of maestro Esa-Pekka Salonen.

Bartok's Viola Concerto, commissioned by legendary violist William Primrose, is seen by some as the weaker sibling to his other concertos. This assessment is made in part because he left the work unfinished at his death, though it was eventually completed by his close friend and former pupil Tibor Serly in 1949. This version was then significantly revised by son Peter Bartok and violist Paul Neubauer in 1995, the edition used in this concert.

From the opening pages it was clear that this was a performance to be reckoned with, both father and daughter bringing a determined common purpose to the thorny score. The opening unaccompanied lyrical line was lovingly traced before a quick transition to agitated figures traded back and forth with the alert orchestra. Ms. Dennis threw herself in the performance with utter commitment, digging into the angular lines with riveting intensity, but never letting her interpretation turn ragged or overindulgent. One minute she was negotiating leaps and double stops with pinpoint accuracy, and the next pulling her multi-hued sound back to a whisper.

If the finale betrays the influence of Serly as much as Bartok himself, in Ms. Dennis' hands there was no hint of diminished inspiration. This movement brims with folk song (the last time Bartok would mine this particular source), and orchestra and soloist gave a scintillating reading, from the illusion of the droning bagpipes to the last scalar flourishes. It was a bravura performance all around, and exhibit A of the essential role Midwest Young Artists plays in the Chicago area cultural and educational landscape.

The concert opened with a memorable account of Beethoven's Leonore Overture No. 3, a work originally intended to open the opera Fidelio. But even during its construction it was understood by the composer to work better as a stand-alone concert work. The slow introduction was a marvel of restraint, marked by simple lovely octave passages in woodwinds and upper strings, with delicate arpeggios intoned with ease by principal flutist Lucy Wu. Dr. Dennis chose a zippy tempo for the main allegro, and his forces played with fire and conviction. Trumpet player Hannah Nussbaum provided a gleaming solo from backstage, meant in the opera Fidelio to signal the arrival of a minister from the capital to inspect the prison which is unjustly holding Florestan. The superb upper strings dug into the rapid fire scales that begin the coda, and the orchestra brought the heroic work to a rousing completion.

Dr. Dennis is fond of picking orchestra standards that will push his young musicians to explore their limits, a strategy that paid handsome dividends in this concert thanks to a vivid reading of Stravinsky's Firebird Suite. Hushed rumbles in lower strings and low brass set the stage in the forbidding opening introduction, and bassoonist Sarah Gibes and clarinetist Torin Bakke lead their sections in setting the mood. Horn player Lindsay Aaronson contributed many fine solo turns, while the oboe solos were expertly rendered by Lucy Chavez.

Chavez and Gibes shone once again in the Lullaby, and the final pages were brought home with brilliant intensity by the crack percussion section, bass drum featured most prominently. The parents in the audience gave the ensemble a richly deserved standing ovation, and another fine class of talented seniors bid farewell to MYA and entered a new phase of promise and independence.