



Concert Review
Midwest Young Artists
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20 Years of Prestige: Review of the October 28 Midwest Young Artists Concert by Michael Cameron

It seems like Midwest Young Artists burst onto the Chicago area music scene only a few years, but anyone walking into their Fort Sheridan complex on any given Saturday (with its bustle of hundreds of students, parents, and faculty) might well surmise that an organization of these standards must have taken generations to build. In fact, only a few short years after its inception they had devised a winning blueprint for high-level musical training for young Chicago area students, and within a decade they were established as the premier one-stop institution for the best in performing arts education. It's hard to believe that 20 years have passed since its inception, and Dr. Allan Dennis celebrated the occasion with a program dubbed "20 Years of Prestige".

The progeny of the many of the area's musical heavyweights occupy prominent spots in MYA's ensembles, yet the school welcomes students of all backgrounds, as long as they embrace Dr. Allan Dennis' oft-stated values of work ethic, character, and leadership. The concert I attended at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston featured three jazz ensembles and the Symphony Orchestra in a program that, not surprisingly, was ambitiously imagined and compellingly realized.

Chris Madsen led three jazz ensembles that featured musicians of varying age and levels of experience, but the same palpable thrill of discovery was apparent up and down the line. Greg Yasinsky's "That's How We Roll" and Armando Rivera's "Armando's Hideaway" were the opening numbers for the young Jazz Ensemble, and soloists Luis Salazar, Mikaela Ritchie, William Kendall, Josh Wrobel, and Josh Klein contributed invigorating solos.

The Jazz Orchestra more than did justice to Lee Morgan's classic "The Sidewinder", complete with solos from pianist Nick Kosarek, Grace Cusick, and Joe Azzaro. Quincy Jones' "Jessica's Day" moved with an easy groove, with stylish contributions from Colleen Cusick, Daniel Nibeck, and Alex Cruz. Ray Wetzel's "Intermission Riff" boasted fine solos from Eugene Yakubovich and Raef Sengupta,

The more seasoned Big Band finished the first half with Jerome Richardson/Thad Jones' "Groove Merchant" and Gil Evan's arrangement of Delibes' "The Maids of Cadiz". Six saxophones set the tone in the former, while trumpeter Aidan Lombard lent his silky, mellow tone to the latter.

Long ago I stopped being surprised when informed of the challenging repertoire chosen by Dr. Dennis for his Symphony Orchestra. Over the years they have tackled a hefty chunk of the standard repertoire, from the symphonies of Brahms, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, to works by Strauss and Bartok that are usually thought to be the sole province of professional orchestras. If a few of these scores led to momentary panic from the musicians upon first glance, the maestro consistently lead them through the thickets, stressing personal responsibility for their individual parts, and ultimately guiding them to performances that were memorable and satisfying for MYA's dedicated supporters.

The 10th Symphony of Dmitri Shostokovich is still one more project that logic dictates would be out of reach for pre-college age players. MYA's Symphony Orchestra has performed literature with similar technical challenges, but this touchstone of mid-century symphonic literature would seem to require a world-weary, pessimistic view of authority and humanity, points of view that are (hopefully) far removed from the lives of MYA students.

During the period of this work's genesis in the early 1950's, the composer was still reeling from his second denunciation from Stalin. He lost his position with the Moscow Conservatory, and his public duties included the creation of patriotic music and film scores, music that he hope would eventually restore his earlier lofty status. After the death of Stalin in 1953, there was enough of a cultural thaw in the Soviet Union that the premier of his 10th Symphony was given over to the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the nation's finest.

The composer never lets the listener doubt his frame of mind in each of the four movements, and Dr. Dennis and his forces gave potent, characterful readings, from the brooding opening pages to the brutal but triumphant chest-thumping in the final minute.

The lower strings set the mood at the outset with dark legato musings, establishing the appropriate gloomy mood. Flutist Kathryn Chiodo and clarinetist Theodore Mavrakis contributed expressively spun solos, and the brass provided bold punctuations in the central climaxes of the movement. The second was a breathless, seething cauldron of activity from beginning to end, and all participants threw themselves into the task with relish.

The third movement was notable for the endearing conversational exchanges between oboist Elliot Lichtenberg and bassoonist Marissa Takaki, with singing interjections added by concertmaster Genevieve Smelser. The broadly lyrical phrases of the violins and cellos were a highlight of the finale, while the timpani drove the orchestra to the exhilarating final pages. It was a grand ending to a formidable undertaking, and the grateful audience responded with well-earned gratitude.

About MYA: Midwest Young Artists is the top rated youth music ensemble programs in the Midwest and represents some of the best young musicians in the country. The program offers exceptional training in jazz, choral, chamber and orchestral instruction. MYA currently reaches more than 1,000 students from 74 communities in the metropolitan Chicago area with eight youth orchestras, more than 65 chamber music ensembles, three choral groups, an all-inclusive jazz program, early childhood education, and classes in music theory and history. 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.

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