

## Midwest Young Artists – Be Romantic Concert

### Walgreens Concerto Competition Winners at Harris Theater

**Review by: Michael Cameron**

Midwest Young Artists is highly esteemed in our region for concerts in major professional venues, presented at an artistic level far above anything one should expect from pre-college students. These occasions are the fruit of apprenticeships at the school between the finest students and teachers in the area. MYA's reach also extends to related musical events, including the recent Chicago Bass Festival at Ravinia and the Walgreens Concerto Competition, one of the nation's most prestigious events of its kind. The three winners who took the stage Saturday at Harris Theater showed exceptional maturity, skill, and poise, helped in no small way by the support and guidance of Allan Dennis with the MYA Concert and Symphony Orchestras. The program had a pronounced Russian flavor, all of which required a technical expertise and idiomatic understanding that never flagged.

More than anything Shostakovich's popular Festival Overture shows the composer's ability to radically alter his style to fit a particular occasion. The introduction was a gleaming extended fanfare, followed by nimble scurrying in the woodwind sections of the Concert Orchestra and soaring lyricism in the violins and cellos. Faure's Sicilienne from *Pelleas and Melisande* was graceful, flowing and amiable, an understated evocation of this drama of star-crossed lovers.

The first of the soloists was Christopher Gao in a propulsive reading of Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme. The theme moved with a quick lilt and a keen attention to the demands of the melodic line, while the second

variation featured an exceptionally nimble bow arm. Occasional impatience in the faster tempos was the only minor drawback, a common malady with young players that will no doubt clear up. His presentation of a clear and ringing sound, expressive detail, and consistency of intonation was notable for someone of his age. This was probably the quickest Rococo I've heard, but his choices seemed perfectly sound and natural.

Violinist Laura Park was the open division overall winner, and amply justified the judges' decision in her deeply felt rendition of the first movement of Jean Sibelius' Violin Concerto.

In covering competitions such as this, we marvel at the talent and discipline of the winners, predicting future musical success, assuming of course (stated or otherwise) that some continued growth is essential. Yet not only are Park's technical skills fully formed, but in measure after measure she shows extraordinary maturity, interpretive insight, passion, nuance, and many more superlatives I would gladly innumerate if I had the space. I had to keep reminding myself that I was watching an 11th grader instead of a touring Orchestra Hall soloist fronting for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

I don't envy any violinist having to follow that performance (these folks are too young for contracts and clauses that might prevent this!), but Alan Snow gave a vivid and compelling account of Saint-Saen's Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso. His agility in all registers was of the highest order, and he had a keen stylistic grasp of the idiom. The work's climaxes were especially gripping, lending the performance a firm structural footing.

The concert ended with seven selections from Serge Prokofiev's ballet Romeo

and Juliet, compiled from all three suites. From the dissonant, nerve-jangling opening bars, Dennis and the Symphony Orchestra painted a vivid portrait, with a deep, biting sound in the strings and sonorous outcries in the brass. The impish mood swings of The Child Juliet were neatly dispatched, and Masks was an amiable stroll. Aubade was a light-footed dance with a gleaming trumpet chorus in the center.

Folk Dance was a brisk whirlwind, while Friar Lawrence was painted in dark-hued but varied colors. The program ended with a heart-felt, tragic reading of Romeo at the Grave of Juliet, the low brass carrying much of heavy lifting. These fine young players hopefully won't feel the sting of tragedy for many years, but their love of the music and dedication to this difficult score made for a truly moving evening of music. - Michael Cameron