

Midwest Young Artists – “Top Flight”

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One can hardly blame Dr. Allan Dennis and the Midwest Young Artists for featuring prominent alumni in soloist roles in their concert programs. Given the willingness of these artists (stemming from fond memories, no doubt) and the number of top-flight musicians to finish their program, it can't require much cajoling to convince first-rate virtuosos to grace the stage with MYA's Symphony Orchestra as expert accompanists. Their concert Saturday at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston featured one of their more acclaimed graduates, violinist Jeremy Black, in the Tchaikovsky Concerto in D Major. After a formative period with MYA in the group's early years, the Evanston native continued his studies at Case Western Reserve, the Cleveland Institute of Music, and the University of Michigan. He is now a member of the Pittsburgh Symphony and is renowned locally as the concertmaster of the Grant Park Symphony.

I have heard him many times in that capacity, in solo passages that were invariably idiomatic and musically intelligent. Those same attributes were on display in abundance in the Tchaikovsky concerto, one of the literature's toughest tests of interpretive savvy, technical prowess, and raw endurance. He met the challenges head on, allowing the listener to forget the high hurdles and simply revel in one of concerto literature's grandest pleasures.

Tchaikovsky is viewed as the Romantic composer par excellence, but he also revered Mozart and eagerly absorbed classical influence. This element of the Russian master was

the side Black seemed eager to pursue, especially in the sprawling first movement. His tone was warm and vibrant, but not overly sentimental or self-indulgent. Tempos were a hair on the brisk side, but more importantly he didn't excessively push and pull at the pace in a manner that might compromise structural clarity. There was no shortage of genuine emotion, most notable in the touching final lyrical section after the cadenza. I've always been reluctant to embrace the modern ban on applause between movements, favoring the less formal approach in vogue during the times in which many of the classics were conceived. The Tchaikovsky concerto serves as a notable exhibit A. The audience burst into applause after the first movement, and I was one of them.

Black's command of color was such that each of the many distinct melodic or figurative passages unfolded with individual characteristic attributes. The slow movement also unfolded at a sensible tempo, but there was more rhythmic flexibility at points during which there was little orchestral activity. The violinist took advantage of the opportunity for sweeping lyricism, spinning a steady stream of long, creamy legato lines. The orchestra was supportive, but Dennis always kept the volume below the soloist.

The third movement raced forward with irresistible momentum, the soloist sporting masterful control in every register and at every dynamic. It was a rousing conclusion to an utterly compelling performance. Let's hope the Grant Park Orchestra management gives Black more turns in the spotlight in future seasons.

The other half of the program was devoted to another Romantic favorite, Brahms Symphony No. 1. Here the sheer size of Dennis' string sections paid handsome dividends. Each movement was suffused with a dark, weighty string sound, a potency completely in line with the prevailing mood of the composer's first attempt at the genre. Tempos were generally unhurried and deliberate, especially in the first movement. The second movement included fine solos by oboist Lauren Williams, flutist Evan Fotjik, concertmaster Tylee Lin, and horn player Zachary Popp.

The finale was a showcase for a number of the orchestra's sections, most notably the trombone choir. The climaxes were tightly regulated, and the young musicians handled the many tempo changes with a maturity far beyond their years.

-Michael Cameron