

Entertainment

Christopher O'Riley interviews Travis Johnson at a *From the Top* taping in Huntsville, Ala.

DAVID BALSOM: FROM THE TOP



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CLASSICAL

Public Radio gives youths top billing

By CHARLES WARD

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"That's not classical music. That's *From the Top*."

Pianist Christopher O'Riley has a twinkle in his voice as he relates, on a promo video, the experience of a friend who went to an auto parts store and heard "two old geezers" listening to the popular public radio show featuring talented young classical musicians from across the United States.

That's his goal as host of *From the Top*. Everyone knows who the high school basketball and football stars are. O'Riley says he wants Americans to meet some of their best young players, singers and composers.

Houstonians can experience *From the Top* and its *Tonight Show*-format tonight when Houston Grand Opera and KUHF-FM co-host a taping in the Wortham Theater Center.

Guests will include members of HGO high school vocal programs and the HGO Children's Chorus, plus instrumentalists from Nebraska and Illinois. After all the individual segments, O'Riley makes his conducting debut in the grand finale, an arrangement of two scenes from Engelbert Humperdinck's popular opera *Hansel and Gretel*. The instrumentalists featured during the taping will be the accompanists.

HGO has helped by getting together the finale of the program as well as HGO Studio soprano Rebekah Camm and the Three Genies, who sang with her in the January production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. They revive a scene.

The episode will air May 4.

Begun in 1997 at Jordan Hall of Boston's New England Conservatory of Music, *From the Top* has exploded into a nationwide phenomena for young musicians who are comfortable with playing and chatting about their passion for music. It now airs on TV as well.

O'Riley and the production staff tape 20 on-site programs each season and create six other studio programs with such themes as follow-ups on previous guests, like the female tuba player who became the tubist of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Competition to get on *From the Top* is fierce, O'Riley says, a concert pianist who plays a wide range of music including his arrangements of music by Radiohead and other bands from the popular music scene. (He's premiered all of those settings on *From the Top*.)

Nearly 2,000 children ages 8-18 go online annually to download the application for the show or a *From*

RESOURCES

FROM THE TOP

Live taping of popular NPR show

- **When:** 7:30 tonight

- **Where:** Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

- **Tickets:** \$19.50; 713-228-6737

the Top scholarship.

The aspiring performers fill out the usual questions about experience but also answer probes such as, "What is the strangest thing about you?"

Music producer Tom Vignieri vets the tapes. He then does extensive follow-ups on potential guests, including conversations. By the time O'Riley reads summary notes about the performers and meets them at a pizza party the day before the taping, he knows a lot about the kids he'll be interviewing and possibly playing with as accompanist.

Variety is essential, O'Riley says.

"A lot of kids are very serious about their music and don't feel like making jokes. Some are convivial and want to wisecrack. We try to make a balance in that regard as well."

The day before is devoted to meeting, greeting, rehearsing and noting any problems that might need attention (often the kids' teachers accompany their students, O'Riley says).

The "day of" starts with a sound check and a run-through, including the interview part of the show. That process gives the kids a sense of what they'll face in front of a live audience and gets them "ready to take it up a notch," O'Riley says.

All the preparation allows O'Riley and the staff to make the young musicians as comfortable as possible.

"Kids know the show very well. They look forward to this as a venue and an arena of expression that people from previous generations never had," he says.

For O'Riley switching roles in one show is a challenge.

"I think there's nothing more difficult about playing and talking (back-to-back).

"It's something I deal with more efficaciously seeing that these kids take to it like ducks to water."

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I listen to this show on KMFA in Austin; it's great. Good to know that so many talented kids are in our country pursuing their musical dreams.

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