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The Young and the Classical

"From the Top," a lighthearted national radio show spotlighting budding musicians, comes to the Kimmel Center.

By Peter Dobrin

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The cellist's talent jumps off the fingerboard in a piece by Piazzolla, but this Masterman senior can also do a mean beatbox.

The clarinetist, 18, dreams of a job in the Metropolitan Opera orchestra, but doesn't turn up his nose at klezmer.

And sure, the 16-year-old violinist with the formidable name of Fabiola Kim played with the Seoul Philharmonic at an age when some children are casting off their training wheels. To her friends, though, she's just Farrah.

Here, on the stage of the Kimmel Center's Verizon Hall Tuesday night, is the face of classical music - at least the young, unpretentious faces curated by *From the Top*, the national radio show that came to Philadelphia for the second time to tape a show.

In its eighth season, distributed by NPR to about 250 radio stations nationwide, *From the Top* is a lighthearted and gentle showcase of classical kids. They banter with the host, pianist Christopher O'Riley, "a man who loves Stravinsky almost as much as he loves *South Park*," in the words of the announcer. Guests tell funny tales. And they just happen to be so obsessed with Orff and moved by Mozart that they pine for their instruments when separated from them by vacation.

It's no *American Idol*. No one gets voted off - in fact there's no competition at all, at least during the show, which travels the country to plumb new settings and indigenous talent.

Tuesday's 90 minutes in Verizon will be edited to 59 minutes for radio airing Saturday, June 9, at 12:30 p.m. on WRTI-FM (90.1). The Boston-based radio producers worked with Settlement Music School and Temple University's Preparatory Division to identify local musicians.

Why Philadelphia?

"Philadelphia is one of the great places to live if you're a classical musician," O'Riley told the cheerful Kimmel audience of about 1,300 that eavesdropped on the taping.

But *From the Top* somehow managed to slip in and out of town without noticing a major aspect of its host city. Not a single one of the 42 young musicians on stage Tuesday night was African American. Seven student soloists were presented, not one of them black; the 35-piece Youth Chamber Orchestra of the Temple Prep Division performed, not one member black. This in a city where four in 10 residents are African American.

From the Top music producer Tom Vignieri, the show's talent scout, says that diversity is important to them, and that a forthcoming 13-part TV version of the show starting on PBS this month has African American representation.

But in Philadelphia, he says, the show presented the talent chosen for it by Settlement and Temple. "We are always seeking to cast our net as wide as possible, and in this case it was a matter of the kids being put forward."

For their part, Temple and Settlement leaders say they selected an African American soprano, but the show said no.

"She was a lovely person and a nice singer, but she would not have been able to hold her own in that particular environment," Vignieri said. "The decision was made on artistic merit."

Said Robert Capanna, Settlement's executive director:

"It was my feeling that she was fit for the show. It was their feeling she wasn't. It's their show."

But focusing on what was there rather than what wasn't, this *From the Top* was good clean fun. It's anything but wall-to-wall classical performance. Generally movements of pieces, not entire works, are performed. Caeli Veronica Smith, a ninth grader at Masterman, is the show's regular "roving reporter," and for this episode she interviewed Luis Biava, conductor of the Temple Prep orchestra. There's plenty of horseplay, carefully scripted though it may be.

Host O'Riley got into a text-messaging race with violinist Kim, who lives in Englewood Cliffs, N.J., but studies at Temple Prep with Philadelphia Orchestra principal violist Choong-Jin "C.J." Chang. The three young players of the Gray Charitable Trust Piano Trio (how's that for a sexy name?) put aside their instruments to croon to their girlfriends in the audience.

Pianist Peter Dugan, 18, a senior at St. Joseph's Preparatory School, impersonated Woody Allen in a short monologue that somehow involved a moose and the West Side Highway.

The compulsory rubber chicken made an appearance.

But either in contrast to these absurd moments or despite them, the actual music soared and carried the show.

In the middle of a stage darkened except for soft light at the center, violinist Kim took on Kreisler's

arrangement of *The Devil's Trill* by Tartini, and you had to root for her. Every few bars, her bow would lay into the strings so hard it released a puff of rosin dust into the air.

Dugan, the St. Joe's pianist, was a little guy with a huge presence, moving artfully at the keyboard to Piazzolla's "La muerte del Angel" for piano trio. Even without the visuals, he can swing.

Clarinetist Jay Dubin, 18, from Lawrenceville, N.J., played Brahms, but it was his explanation of why he wanted to be in the pit of the Met that was most compelling.

It has less to do with the clarinet solos, he said, than with the feeling of being a part of something as magical as opera, which he first experienced on a school trip to hear *La Bohème*.

"It completely blew me away," he said.


If it's true that youth grants greatest credibility to its peers, somewhere out there a teenager is downloading Puccini.

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