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WEB EXTRA CONCERT REVIEW

From the top, young musicians hit the right notes

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BY BARBARA ZUCK

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One of the most anticipated events on the classical music calendar this season was not an orchestra concert, opera or guest appearance by a famous singer or pianist. It was, in fact, a 90-minute program by performers all 18 years or younger whose names wouldn't ring a bell beyond the small circles of their families, friends and school-mates.

The hit NPR radio show *From the Top* was taped live at the Southern Theatre last night before a crowded house of enthusiastic listeners. They sat patiently through some pre-concert "audience training," laughed at the sometimes corny jokes but most of all cheered the talented young musicians who took the stage and amazed with performances that rivaled those from true professionals.

The show's host, pianist Christopher O'Riley, was on hand for the live taping, reading from a script that allowed for fairly lengthy interviews with each of the 5 "acts," a lot of concocted humor and the occasional foray into the uncharted territory of improvised exchanges.

From the gifted 13-year-old cellist Coleman Itzkoff from Cincinnati, for instance, we learned what can happen when a fart machine (yes, you read that correctly) is hidden under the conductor's score. From the 18-year-old pianist Stephanie Chan, who traveled here all the way from Houston, we learned that because people thought she was too "nice," she tackled the aggressive music of one of Prokofiev's war sonatas; she demonstrated her transformation in the finale of the *Sonata No. 6*.

Westerville violinist Siwoo Kim, who is concertmaster of the Columbus Symphony Youth Orchestra, played Khachaturian's well-known Sabre Dance in an arrangement by Heifetz with considerable flare, only to be "rewarded" by having to sit through a taped interview with his violin teacher, the renown Almita Vamos.

Towards the end, the program suddenly lurched into a musical version of the TV game show *Family Feud*, pitting two string quartets against each other instead of families. With the four Central Ohio boys in the string quartet opus. competing against four young ladies from Pennsylvania in the ensemble Seraphina, the fun hit a peak, as did the music-making. Seraphina -- which is comprised of two sets of sisters -- played the second movement of Shostakovich's *String Quartet No. 8 in C Minor*, and then opus. countered with the finale from Beethoven's *String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3*.

Two very different works and two very different performances but both remarkably accomplished. The members of Seraphina are a bit younger and include 15-year-old violinist Caeli Smith, who serves as *From the Top's* "roving reporter," and her 17-year-old sister Madeline, an outstanding violist. The other violinist and the cellist are the twin sisters Sabrina and Genevieve Tabby. The four

ladies later closed the show with a nifty encore, Gwyneth Walker's *Don't Step on My Toes* (which, by the way, you can also see them play on YouTube).

Of course opus., comes with a local following, and took the edge in audience appreciation. The group -- violinists Jeffrey Myers and James Rubino, violist Reuben Payne and cellist Matthew Kufchak -- recently won third prize in the Saint Paul Chamber Music Competition and Kufchak is the recipient of *From the Top's* \$10,000 Jack Kent Cooke Young Artist Award.

The boys' quartet, all graduating seniors going onto college in the fall, also had a great time onstage. They play standing (save the cellist, of course) and clearly have an understanding of the theatricality of live music-making.

Part *American Idol*, part *Grand Ole Opry* and part conservatory recital, the hourlong *From the Top* has proven a huge hit for NPR -- to the point that it's spinning itself off into a 30-minute TV show. Music lovers will want to catch the first edition June 2, when none other than opus. will be part of the inaugural TV broadcast. The program can be seen on WOSU-TV (Channel 34). The radio program taped last night at the Southern will be heard on at 6 p.m. June 24 on WOSU-FM (89.7).

The breezy scripts and the live audience help make *From the Top* an appealing mix. But the heart of the program is the kids, whose poise, focus and talent prove mindboggling week after week.

bzuck@dispatch.com

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