

MUSIC REVIEW

The Boston Globe

Teen talent, and angst, in 'From the Top'

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | May 25, 2007

The teetering state of musical education in this country is a well-known fact. And even if you're a kid who's lucky or privileged enough to get exposed to -- and excited by -- classical music, there's still a lot of social pressure against taking seriously something that's so uncool in the minds of your peers. I know an accordionist who jokes that it took years of therapy to recover from the taunting he endured as a student carrying an accordion on his back through the hallways of his high school. You can just imagine the scene.

"The classical image is that whoever's in orchestra right now is a geek or something" says 18-year-old Charles Yang, a shaggy-haired high school violinist from Austin, Texas, one of the bright talents of "From the Top," the self-produced public radio show spotlighting young musicians that is partnered locally with WGBH -FM (89.7). "I think we should do something about that, like Hendrix revolutionized the guitar."

If anyone could, it's Yang. In his spare time, he goes off-roading, sings in a band, and plays classical violin with the charisma of a rock star. His high school buddies had apparently never seen him play violin, and in one segment from an early episode of "From the Top: Live From Carnegie Hall" -- the show's new television series -- Yang's mom plays the friends a home video of her son tearing through the Tchaikovsky Concerto as a soloist in front of an orchestra. Yang hides his face in embarrassment, but his friends are absolutely stunned.

Capturing stories like that one, and bringing players like Yang into the public spotlight, has been one of the longtime missions of this excellent radio show. This season "From the Top" has expanded its franchise, with a half-hour television show that airs nationally on PBS, recorded in front of an audience at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall. This Sunday (at 5 p.m. on WGBH, Channel 2) the show will spotlight New England Conservatory's Youth Philharmonic Orchestra led by Benjamin Zander. Both the television and radio versions are affably hosted by Christopher O'Riley, a classical pianist who has been bridging worlds with his own performance career, recording intriguing versions of songs by Radiohead and Elliott Smith.

On Wednesday night, a modest crowd assembled for a taping of the radio show in Jordan Hall. Yang was back to play a showpiece by Henri Vieuxtemps and to briefly belt out a pop tune "American Idol"-style. Among the others featured were percussionist Molly Yeh, pianist Gen Tomuro, and the locally based Elysium String Quartet, a group of four teenagers that receives coaching at NEC. All the performers were supremely accomplished for musicians their age, and in between playing, they bantered with O'Riley about refreshingly high-schoolish topics from "senioritis" to cellphone calls in gym class.

Even the "From the Top" kids, who seem to inhabit an entirely different orbit from that of most American teenagers, still have to deal with typical teenage angst. Wednesday's show, which was focused on high school seniors and will air in the fall, reminded you of the cruel trials of that period and the way some kids will so obviously take flight as soon as they can cut free from stifling hyper-conformist environments. An endearingly sheepish 17-year-old cellist named Nico Olarte-Hayes told a poignant story about being rejected when he asked a girl in his class to his senior prom. Then he sat down and gave a beautifully soulful performance of the first movement from Debussy's Cello Sonata, full of playing rich in tone and wise beyond its years. Nico, it was -- quite obviously -- her loss.

The show's efforts to challenge the stereotype of the "orchestra geek" and to place inspiring young talent before a national audience are sorely needed. But a key element of the organization is what happens off the stage and screen. "From the Top" provides scholarships and sends its young stars into about 50 schools a year to play for students who are clearly not headed to Juilliard. Let's hope that as the franchise expands, those efforts can expand along with it. Music education can be a potent tool for self-empowerment, and the nonprofit that runs "From the Top" stands to have a greater social impact if it can reach and excite kids who have never heard a live classical performance. The task of finding the next Joshua Bell will take care of itself.

Jeremy Eichler can be reached at jeichler@globe.com. ■