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El Camino Youth Symphony, Chloe Pang dazzle on George Gershwin's

Oakland Tribune, Mar 29, 2007 by Keith Kreitman

IMAGINE a youth orchestra just about filling the 2,300-plus seats in Cupertino's Flint Center.

I wonder whether even the San Francisco Symphony ever hit that mark in its many visits to Flint. Last week, the El Camino Youth Symphony did just that.

After performing in church sanctuaries and high school and college auditoriums, the group moved up for the first time into a venue worthy of the power it is capable of generating.

And, power it delivered in a flawless reading of Tchaikovsky's "Symphony No. 5, Opus 64 in E minor."

Who, in my high school days in the early 1940s, would have even thought that possible by a bunch of teenagers ages 12 to 18? At that age, I probably wouldn't have even made it past the auditions with a bunch like this.

I believe it is nationally unique that the San Francisco South Peninsula is home to three of the best youth symphonies in this country, one of which may even be world-class.

I had early doubts that the El Camino Youth Symphony -- which had long been in the shadows of the older California Youth Symphony -- would make it. But that was before a musical powerhouse named Camilla Kolchinsky, hit the scene.

So it has been a special thrill for me to watch Kolchinsky, incrementally, from a valley of mediocrity, year by year push the orchestra up the side of that artistic mountain until it is only a few more pushes to the pinnacle.

And, on the way up, it has gathered an armload of world-class soloists who accepted these youngsters as peers: The concertmasters of three of the world's greatest symphonies, Chicago (Robert Chen), Philadelphia (David Kim) and San Francisco (Alexander Barantshik); world-class pianists Jon Nakamatsu, Vladimir Viardo, Barbara Nissman and Rueibin Chen; cellist Michail Gelfandbein and violinists Philip Quint and Bin Huang.

The moral? Don't underestimate the power of women conductors, especially knowing that Kolchinsky overcame the prejudice toward women conductors and the domination of a

repressive government in the Soviet Union to become one of its first women conductors to lead some of its major musical organizations.

And, also, don't sell the kids short, either. They weren't exactly dragging their feet or pushing back. Nowhere will you find more dedicated, disciplined and mature teenagers. Of course, there are also their families and friends who unfailingly stand behind and support them all the way.

Also, there is executive director Cathy Spieth, who has worked her heart out keeping the organization financially and administratively afloat along with the volunteer parents who were there to fill the necessary unpaid support roles.

Now to the two extraordinary young soloists on the program. First was 13-year-old Alexi Kenney, associate concertmaster of this 110- piece senior orchestra, who won the orchestra's solo competition.

"Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso" by Camille Saint-Saens is a technically showy piece. Alexi performed it flawlessly and with great panache. If he possesses the interpretative guns to handle the great concerti and solo works of the great masters, there is no stopping his march to fame.

On the other hand, there is no question about 15-year-old pianist Chloe Pang. Let me express how I felt about her performance of "Rhapsody in Blue," written in 1924 by George Gershwin for piano and jazz band.

I heard Ferde Grofe's 1942 version for piano and symphony orchestra -- the one performed by Pang -- that same year, introduced by Gershwin's friend and most active proponent, Oscar Levant. And, many times since, I have heard it in interpretations ranging from jazzy to key-pounding classical -- in just about every interpretation imaginable. I thought.

And, now, without detracting from the original concept, Pang has introduced something new: an overlay of elegance. Her finger control on the keys is so sensitive and expressive and her timing and pauses so artistically controlled, that it may only be described as exquisite. You can't imagine exquisite jazz music?

Then you haven't heard Chloe Pang.

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