



# Los Altos Town Crier

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## El Camino Youth Symphony dazzles

*By Keith Kreitman, Special to the Town Crier*

When I opened the program at the season premier of the El Camino Youth Symphony in Spangenberg Theatre at Palo Alto's Gunn High School, I was struck by the audacity of music director Dr. Camilla Kolchinsky's programming for this orchestra of middle and high school students.

The first piece was the Brahms Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68, one of the monumental pillars of Western serious music, and the players sat there, wrapped in black formals, confident and secure in what they were about to undertake.

And, as we say in athletics, they did it without even breaking a sweat. Soon after they began, I was adrift in wonderment at how Kolchinsky and these students have rewritten performance expectations for the young. When I was in high school in the midcentury, no one would have dreamed that such a work could be within their technical reach, let alone their interpretive maturity. That was college music school stuff.

By the end of this one-hour work, there were tears in these jaded eyes at the sheer beauty of the experience. Watching the confidence and aplomb of these teenagers humbled me. The performance was flawless. I could not detect a single weakness in the company of performers, and the French horn section, the nemesis of all symphony orchestras, youth or adult, was superb.

There was even a principal clarinetist, Dustin Hu, who could have played circles around me during my own professional symphony orchestra career.

Then, Kolchinsky brought on two young winners of the orchestra's concerto competition. Wilbur Wang, a 16-year-old high school senior, strode out with a confidence that belied his age, sat down at the piano and, with no pretense or efforts at flash, ripped off the first movement of the technically demanding Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor of Saint-Saens.

Not to be outdone, freshman violinist Joy Lin mounted the stage, in shy contrast, however, and proceeded to technically dazzle the audience with the first movement of the finger-busting Khachaturian Concerto for Violin and Orchestra.

This concert feast for the ears concluded with dessert, the fun "Espania, Rhapsody for Orchestra" by Emmanuel Chabrier, a more open work that depends upon all sections executing somewhat complicated syncopated rhythms flawlessly.

The real wonder, of course, is how 11 years ago Kolchinsky, one of the first women to have been permitted to conduct major symphonic groups in the Soviet Union, took what was then a somewhat ragtag collection of youngsters and gradually molded it into the wonder it is today.

And, she did this facing the loss of all of her mature players every year to high school graduation. So, each year she needs to draw new talent from the junior orchestras and ensembles in the organization.

Despite that, she has raised the quality of performance in increments with each concert over the years. When I first began reviewing the group six years ago, I was asked by the executive director to rate the orchestra in relation to the other youth orchestras in the Bay Area. On a scale of 10, I rated it a 7.5.

Now it has achieved that perfect 10. Want to try for an 11?

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