

Super-talented youth sparkle in From the Top program

by James Bash on May 7, 2012

Some of the most impressive young musicians from around the nation made a strong case for themselves in the From the Top program that took place on Sunday afternoon (May 6) at the Newmark Theatre. This popular radio program, which was sponsored by Portland Piano International, featured solos, duets, and trios that were beguilingly played by teenagers who ranged in age from 13 to 18 years old. Their performances and interviews with host Christopher O'Riley are scheduled to be broadcast nationally during the week of June 25th. Portland's All Classical 89.9 FM KQAC will air the show at 5 pm on Saturday, June 30th.

The program started with an engaging performance by violinist Simone Porter (age 15) of the third movement of Edvard Grieg's Third Violin Sonata. She coaxed a lively array of sounds from her violin, which was built in 1742, and was quite dazzling except for an odd transitional passage that sounded awkward. Porter is a native of Seattle, but she now lives in Los Angeles where she studies with Robert Lipsett at the Colburn Academy. O'Riley provided astute accompaniment.

Portland's own Ruta Kuzmickas performed Frédéric Chopin's Waltz in A-flat Major (Op. 34, No. 1) with an extraordinary sensibility that is far beyond her 16 years. Playing with elegance and panache, Kuzmickas made the piece look much easier than it is.

The second movement of Johannes Brahms's Horn Trio in E-flat Major received a thrilling interpretation by the Juilliard Horn Trio, which consists of three 18-year-olds: violinist Jisoo Kim (from Palisades Park, New Jersey), pianist T. J. Tario (from Honolulu, Hawaii), and horn player Roy Femenella (from Brooklyn, New York). All of them are members of Juilliard's Pre-College program.

For the unusual side of the program, Noah McKee (age 17) played Fritz Kreisler's "Tambourin Chinois" in an arrangement by George Hamilton Green. Wielding his mallets deftly, McKee evoked a stream of tremolos that made this piece absolutely intriguing. It seemed that he got slightly out of sync with O'Reiley who accompanied him at the piano.

Alison Chang (age 17) and her sister Serina (age 14) ended the program with a vivacious performance of Percy Grainger's "Fantasy on George Gershwin's Porgy & Bess" for two pianos. The duo really brought out several wonderful themes from the opera like "Bess, You Is My Woman," "I've got plenty of nuttin," and "I'm on my way." Calling themselves the "Gemini Shortcake Duo," the Chang girls really knocked the piece out of the park.

The only strange thing about the program was O'Riley, who seemed to be very tired. Perhaps he was suffering from jet lag, but his interview style and his playing (especially his own arrangement of a Joni Mitchell tune) were very subdued. Hopefully, he will rebound for the next show.