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DATEBOOK

'From the Top' gives the young brilliant and musical a safe place to shine

By Steven Winn
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If classical music is slowly fading away with its aging audience, nobody's broken the news to the participants and producers of "From the Top." The program, one of contemporary culture's feel-good success stories, is devoted to the talent, spirit and winning down-to-earthness of young musicians ages 9 to 18.

Week after week, on some 250 radio stations, student pianists, singers, string players, accordionists, tuba prodigies and other assorted virtuosos offer dazzling demonstrations of their musical prowess before a live audience. Then, under the affable questioning of host and marquee-name classical and crossover pianist Christopher O'Riley, they hang around to discuss sports, parents, friends, fears and, oh, what it feels like to start medical school at age 13 or how a robot one of the musicians had recently built in her spare time worked by remote control.

Taped and edited for later broadcast, "From the Top" is simultaneously staid and spontaneous, earnest, self-amused and charming. It airs locally at 9 a.m. Sunday mornings on KDFC (102.1 FM). According to the show's co-founder and producer, a puckish and grandfatherly Gerald Slavet, the Bay Area produces the biggest listener numbers for the show in the country. Distributed by Public Radio International, "From the Top" plays in the radio rating league (around 750,000 listeners) with "Car Talk" and "A Prairie Home Companion," the latter of which partially inspired the show.

On Saturday, at a sold-out Dinkelspiel Auditorium on the Stanford campus, show No. 134 in the 6-year-old program came together in energizing fashion. It won't reach the airwaves until April 23, but the event carried the charge of an opening night at Carnegie Hall crossed with a high school dance party. The audience was liberally sprinkled with children and cheering proud parents.

Slavet set the pointedly unstuffy tone, shaking his booty and long white beard around the stage at a recording of the James Brown song "I Feel Good." "We love every inch of this campus," he declared,



Photos by KIM KOMENICH / The Chronicle

"From the Top" provides a forum for student classical musicians ages 9 to 18 to present dazzling demonstrations of their musical talents.

after dancing his way among the chairs, music and microphone stands, "From the Top" signs and an old-fashioned radio console that crowded the stage around a grand piano. An audience sing-along of Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" cranked up the jolly mood another notch.

When the time came for the young musicians to start showing their stuff, no audience priming was required. First up was the Luna Trio (ages 12-14) from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, which swaggered through a movement from Dvořák's "Dumky" Trio with bracing confidence and supple muscularity. Then came a pair of solo magicians — both named Chen, as it happened, but unrelated. Seventeen-year-old pianist Sean Chen, of Oak Park in Southern California, fired off "Danse Russe" from Stravinsky's insanely difficult "Petrouchka" ballet transcriptions. Violinist Stella Chen, 13, of Palo Alto scampered through Fritz Kreisler's finger-bending "Tambourin Chinois," with O'Riley at the piano. O'Riley, as he often does, played one of his own warmly hazy transcriptions of a Radiohead piece midway through the evening.



Host Christopher O'Riley keeps the tone light-hearted.

From the Top: 9 a.m. Sundays on KDFC (102.1 FM). The program recorded over the weekend at Stanford will air April 23.

Kendra Berentsen, a precociously self-possessed 18-year-old from Portland, Ore., who has already mastered some of the airs of divadom along with a silvery soprano tone and faultless diction, sang the emotionally complex "Monica's Waltz" from Menotti's "The Medium." An all-girl string ensemble from San Anselmo, the San Domenico School's Orchestra da Camera, closed the evening with an arrangement of the Finale of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 9 in C Major (Op. 59, No. 3).

O'Riley, commuting from keyboard to interview station with a headset mike, supplied a practiced mix of wondrous admiration, respectful collegiality and schoolboy impishness in his duties as host. Dressed in a dark suit set off by a bright red shirt, he kidded the Luna Trio members about how long they had been together — "Before you could speak," he guessed — and played along with cellist Tessa Seymour's penchant for kissing famous string players (Yo-Yo Ma, Joshua Bell). Bell's cheek, we learned, is not as soft as Ma's. O'Riley was rewarded for his inquiry with a kiss of his own.

► "TOP": Page E2

Show champions demand of classical music

► "TOP"
From Page E1

Later on, he elicited from a sheepishly grinning Sean Chen the fact that pianist Arthur Rubinstein (for whom the "Petrouchka" transcriptions were made) found the pieces too difficult to perform. The two pianists then chatted about the virtues of messy bedrooms. O'Riley quizzed violinist Stella Chen about her four-wheel-drive robot — "Corinthian leather?" he asked — and moved on to younger brothers and badminton camp. With Berentsen, he talked about the mixed blessings of growing up in a musical family and her love of bluegrass. "It's so primitive," she exclaimed.

The topics and scripted skits (several of which tanked at Stanford) are worked out in lengthy interviews with the young musicians and in rehearsals before the taping. "All of the content comes from the kids," said O'Riley in a phone conversation Saturday morning. "The impetus of the show came in part from all the attention lavished on high school gymnasts and other athletes. High school musicians tend to labor away in obscurity. We thought they should have an outlet."

O'Riley, who began playing the piano at age 4 and started lessons at 7, said the audience-favorite device from "A Prairie Home Companion" was used in early shows. But any traces of competition were soon banished. "This is not 'Star Search,'" O'Riley pointed out. Instead, without being blatant or cloying about it, "From the Top" celebrates and champions the commitment that classical music demands and that the culture largely ignores. Recalling a student saxophonist who was regularly beaten up, O'Riley noted the value in finding other kids "who may



Photos by KIM KOMENICH / The Chronicle

Soprano Kendra Berentsen of Portland, Ore., rehearses as host Christopher O'Riley accompanies her.



Violinist Stella Chen of Palo Alto shows deft finger work.

or may not be as nerdy as you, but they certainly understand."

Backstage at Dinkelspiel, after the performance, a giddy, celebratory air prevailed. The performers, all wearing "From the Top" medals around their necks, hugged one another and gathered for photographs with their new friends.

Stella Chen, standing near a well-worked table of pastries and fruit, said she loved playing violin but hadn't settled on a career. "I want to be a doctor, a businesswoman and a violinist," she said.

Berentsen, exuding confidence as she tossed an unpeeled banana from one hand to another, discussed 4 a.m. rehearsals before a big competition and mused on life as an engineer at age 35. "I don't always just love music," she allowed, "but I know if I didn't go for it, I couldn't look back and be happy about what I'd done."

Sean Chen, who is applying to the county's top music conservatories, had a drooler disposition. The "Petrouchka" piece had first appealed to him, he said, when a friend told him you would get tendonitis learning to play it.

Slavet and several other Boston "From the Top" staffers looked on contentedly. Conjuring this sort of musical atmosphere and offstage chemistry doesn't come cheaply. The budget for each show, which often involves flying the performers to recording sites around the country, is \$50,000. But the producers, who also run education programs and are about to launch a 13-part television series with WGBH in Boston, are true believers. Slavet remembered a flute player who also loved hockey and "felt like he was some kind of schizophrenic. That's the kid we're there for, to show him and the audience that real people with real lives and lots of interests can make beautiful music."

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