

Princeton Town Topics
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Greater Princeton Youth Orchestra Celebrates Sister City Pettoranello

By Nancy Plum

The Greater Princeton Youth Orchestra celebrated Princeton's relationship with sister city Pettoranello this past weekend with a concert in Richardson Auditorium featuring all of the orchestra's ensembles. Saturday night's performance also showcased one of their own young violinists playing a not-often heard but elegant concerto movement.

The Youth Orchestra is one of the community's oldest arts organizations, currently celebrating its 47th year. For the past eight years, the orchestra's annual spring concert has been sponsored by the Princeton Pettoranello Sister City Foundation, founded in the early 1990s by descendants of the original Pettoranello stonecutters who came here to help build Princeton University. The Foundation brought conductor Fernando Raucci to Princeton to lead the Youth Orchestra in the 1990s, solidifying a partnership between the Foundation and the ensemble which has resulted in joint concerts and tours.

Besides Mr. Raucci, there are three other conductors within the orchestra directing the younger and specialty ensembles. Kawika Kahalehoe conducts one of GPYO's newer ensembles, the Preparatory Wind Ensemble. Comprised of twelve youngsters playing flute, oboe, clarinet, saxophone, trombone, and euphonium, the wind ensemble was joined by a percussionist to perform two pieces for wind band. From the outset, percussionist Justin Yun showed a great sense of rhythm on the snare drum, key to the success of Mr. Kahalehoe's arrangement of Vaclav Nelhybel's Festivo. Nice clarinet solos from David Fan and Lloyd Lewis also added to both this piece and Mr. Kahalehoe's arrangement of a Shostakovich folk dance.

The GPYO Preparatory String Ensemble was conducted by Elizabeth Hostetter, who selected two excerpts from Mozart's Eine Kleine Nachtmusik for her young players. The ensemble of thirty string players actually had quite a ringing sound in Richardson, managing well the differences in melodic material and dynamics. The GPYO Wind Symphony, conducted by Adam Wharshafsky, demonstrated a full and rich sound, building a crescendo well in the excerpt from Wagner's Lohengrin. In this and several other pieces with the Concert and Symphony Orchestras, oboist Laura Resnick showed excellent solo capabilities.

Judging from the profiles of the graduating seniors, Mr. Raucci is a tough taskmaster, both challenging and scaring the players into doing their best. Mr. Raucci led the Concert Orchestra in the difficult but lively Johann Strauss overture to Die Fledermaus. The string sections in this orchestra are rather small, given how many students would probably like to participate, indicating Mr. Raucci's selectiveness in building the orchestra membership.

The Symphonic Orchestra is the premiere ensemble within the GPYO organization, and Mr. Raucci demonstrated their ability to play full out in the three Romantic works selected for this ensemble. Brahms' Academic Festival Overture was a fitting choice for this time of year, no doubt a tribute to the graduating seniors of the orchestra, and Mr. Raucci maintained a precise and clean sound with this piece.

Roy Xiao, usually playing second chair violin for the orchestra, was the featured soloist in the second adagio movement of Max Bruch's Concerto for Violin in g minor. Mr. Xiao, a junior at Montgomery High School in Skillman, showed his sensitivity to this period of music by beginning to vibrate the string of his violin before putting the bow to it, creating a very sweet and Romantic tone. Bruch composed much of this solo line for the middle register of the violin, and Mr. Xiao's playing blended very well with the upper winds. Although this concerto is not as well known as others in the repertory, this was a very appealing movement and the players supported the soloist well.

Mr. Raucci admittedly saved the most difficult for last. Tchaikovsky composed Capriccio Italien based on his impressions of Italy (although parts sound almost mariachi), and the one movement work contains very tricky transitions. The instruments of the Symphonic Orchestra played well together in pairs, most notably trumpeters Brian Olson and Paul Sabbarese and oboists Laura Resnick and Andrea Nowalk. Ms. Resnick (playing the English horn) and bassoonist Greg Rewoldt created a very nice duet, and Mr. Raucci brought the orchestra well through an especially challenging ending to the piece.

Like a number of musical ensembles aimed at the youth in the Princeton community, the Greater Princeton Youth Orchestra has a well established system of bringing new talent in and graduating their players with a sense of accomplishment and a solid appreciation for the arts. GPYO performed a number of concerts this past season, demonstrating its commitment to the region as well as Princeton's sister city in Italy.