

Konrad Binienda with the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra, Stuart Malina, Conductor

A Rising Star and a Constellation Shaped Like an Orchestra

People go to concerts to be entertained, which does not need to imply the light-hearted frivolous association with the word “entertainment.” “Enjoying an opportunity to be momentarily distracted from the routine world around us” does not need to imply “American Idol” is a better way of doing it than a performance of Hamlet. For some people, yes: that is why we have the choice, finding what suits us.

Many people enjoy going to concerts to hear old favorites again. Sometimes, people like to discover something new. Even in approaching old favorites, there’s a chance to hear something new, perhaps a different interpretation or maybe a better performance than the last one.

For symphony goers, people often go to hear the soloist. The orchestra is there all the time, I guess, but usually the soloist is in town just this once. Sometimes it’s a star attraction; sometimes it’s the repertoire. Every now and then, there’s a gimmick, because, frankly, a name you don’t know isn’t going to attract the kind of traffic the orchestra needs to fill the hall.

With the fees the major artists command today, small wonder such stellar names as Yevgenny Kissin, Itzhak Perlman or Renee Fleming rarely appear on our local orchestra’s stages (the York Symphony, during their 75th Anniversary Season being the lucky – and amazing – exception with Joshua Bell and Sarah Chang still to come in a celebration that’s already heard Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and Christopher O’Riley). To do a rehearsal and two performances – or in Lancaster, four or five – requires more time from a soloist’s schedule than their managers are willing to commit.

But even a great star needs to get started somewhere.

And one way of being noticed is to win competitions, especially those tied to performances and contracts. So, out on the long road to stardom - in most cases - a young artist sweats away hoping to win a competition or two, then plays in small towns hoping to gain applause and experience, critical accolades and professional connections that will result in a performance in one of the big cities when the Big Break occurs and some critic gives them a rave review: suddenly, they have arrived, even if those of us listening tend to forget how many years it took to be ‘discovered.’ Like Pluto, it was there long before Gustav Holst didn’t include it in his suite, “The Planets.” It hadn’t been discovered yet (and a recent conclave of scientists gave it the ultimate bad review and voted to retract its planetship).

I’ve told the story so often, lately, everyone will soon be able to join in on the punchline, but back in 1969, I attended a Harrisburg Symphony concert with a young student from the Juilliard School of Music playing the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto and playing it very

well. He'd recently won a competition, but conductor Edwin McArthur had been bringing in a lot of young talent from Juilliard which was not going over well with some of the ladies in the audience sitting in front of me. They wanted to hear the Big Names, the superstars of the day.

"Why are we always getting these students?" she whined. "Why aren't we hearing Heifetz or Francescatti. I mean, whoever heard of..." – (she looked down at her program to find the young man's name) – "Pinchas Zukerman?!"

Whether Konrad Binienda, the pianist who won the "Rising Stars Competition" sponsored by Messiah College and the Harrisburg Symphony last year, ever reaches the stratospheric level of Pinchas Zukerman is not for us to know at this point. There are lots of things that can happen between here and there, but the possibility exists, if the opportunities fall into place at the right times. He played Chopin's E Minor Piano Concerto with the orchestra at this past weekend's concerts, and frankly I've heard many well-known pianists play this with a lot less conviction and enjoyment in their playing than he did. Considering he's a freshman at Harvard (and facing his first exams later this week), you would be expecting to be lenient on a performer who hasn't developed the maturity and experience to match the masters.

Getting ready for my pre-concert talk, I ran into him (quite literally) backstage and realized he was not going to be sitting off in a corner trying to control his nerves. Everybody has ways of being nervous: even Artur Rubinstein, one of the greatest pianists who ever lived, said he often needed to be pushed out on-stage before a performance because his nerves were so bad, and it was only the sound of the applause that got him past the lonely terrors artists often experience in those empty moments backstage.

It can be the longest walk in the world, the distance from the stage door to the piano when you're making your debut. Too many things can surface in your mind in those few seconds.

When he walked out on stage, Binienda reminded me of Van Cliburn – lanky and a little awkward perhaps, not exactly striding to the piano but not exactly shy about it. His posture at the piano would win points if they awarded prizes for that, too. Once he started to play, any sense of lanky awkwardness dissolved in the music. There was a calm sense of self-confidence without the least bit of arrogance, as if he'd proven it to himself long ago and it didn't matter whether he proved it to us or not. Everything became the music.

It was easy to forget you were listening to a teenager who was playing this piece, every note of it memorized and not a memory slip along the way. Whether it was 40 minutes or longer, I have no idea: it could've been ten. It was amazing to discover afterward he had never played the whole concerto with an orchestra before!

I have to admit I'm no fan of Chopin's E Minor Concerto (though I do love the F Minor). Whether Binienda convinced me to reconsider this or not, the point is his performance of it got past my prejudices about the piece enough I was able to enjoy it thoroughly, and that's no mean accomplishment.

There were things in the phrasing that surprised me: maturity? You don't learn that sort of thing from imitating recordings, you play that way because you understand the music. Fast fingers? Sure, even though once in a while, I might think some of the more treacherous ornaments that Chopin writes – you have to fit like 49 notes into two beats and still keep it sounding “delicate” (which is one reason why most pianists stretch the beats so much, just to fit in all those little notes) – could have been a little cleaner or maybe not as strictly in tempo. But I never heard a sour note in either performance – no jumping up to hit that E and landing on an F or a D by accident. And while Chopin himself had a “small sound” even given the piano of his day and may have had that in mind when he was balancing the solo part against the orchestra, Binienda always managed the right balance, particularly when both hands were playing simultaneously at the extremes of the keyboard, very difficult to maintain.

Not many pianists get to realize even this much of a dream: born in Poland and raised on Chopin's music, here he is, the same age when Chopin wrote and performed this music, playing it for a live audience (and having written a concerto of his own, besides). But it's quite possible, ten years down the road, he may not have time in his schedule to play in Harrisburg again (certainly his fee will be higher, then), but at least this time, no one in the audience was complaining, “whoever heard of... Konrad Binienda?”

Dick Strawser