



Charisma, talent send young pianist Michael Brown on his way

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Music schools graduate hundreds of talented performers every year.

Some of these gifted young artists don't even attempt a career as a performer, but for those who are willing to brave the stiff competition and the near certainty of disappointment, what makes the difference between failure and success?

That's one of the questions answered by Concert Artists Guild. This international New York-based organization holds an intensely stiff annual competition. Prizewinners are rewarded with management support to help them build sustainable careers, assisting them with everything from concert bookings to publicity photograph sessions and concert etiquette.

Pianist Michael Brown was the 2010 winner of this competition when he was just 22, and I was lucky enough to be in New York to see the jaw-dropping performance that won him first prize and his subsequent affiliation with CAG.

Brown's tangible charisma is matched with a monumental talent. You can hear and see him for yourself Saturday night, when he'll be in Harrisburg to play music by Schubert, Beethoven and Chopin.

Market Square Concerts has a longtime relationship with CAG as one of the presenting organizations committed to bringing its young artists to Harrisburg, often at a reasonable fee. Several CAG artists have performed in Harrisburg with this chamber music-presenting organization at the start of what then became successful careers.

Besides his piano virtuosity, Brown also is a prolific composer, but he will not play any of his own compositions at his Harrisburg recital. I tracked him down in New York last week, just after he'd completed a performance showcase and been a part of a young performers career advancement workshop at the national Performing Arts Presenters conference.

He seemed more interested in talking about the music he'll play Saturday night than his big CAG award, although he did say that winning or losing any competition is always a learning experience — a healthy, humble approach to success and failure for all of us.



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Michael Brown

As for that program, he linked the three works through their early 19th-century roots in early romanticism, meaning a passionate, expressive, emotionally engaged style that's easy to love and effortlessly enjoyable for audience members.

Pianists who have the technical ability to play works such as the ones on Brown's program face considerable frustrations and rewards in preparing the music for performance, he explained. Different artists often have radically different approaches to the same music. Their struggle extends to pondering each phrase, to determine how to get the music "to say what I want it to say," in Brown's words. "It's exciting and scary as hell."

For example, Brown called the Schubert sonata he'll perform from memory "wildly virtuosic," with lots of hand crossing and other awkward technical demands.

The other two works come from the same year, 1825, when Chopin was 15 years old and just beginning to show his amazing compositional ability. That same year, Schubert, whose brilliant D major sonata Brown will perform, was close to the end of his life. He died at age 31.

As for the Beethoven sonata No. 15 rounding out the program, it's known as the "Pastoral." Brown said that this is not the stormy, heroic, shocking Beethoven of much of his later work. This sonata is "lilting," with the suggestion of shepherds, peasants and country dancing, contrasting in many ways with the other two works on the program.

"I love to perform and compose," Brown said. "The two activities feed off and enhance each other." He also enjoys collaborating with other musicians to play chamber music. With the experience of live performance "you learn about yourself, what people respond to, how my fingers respond to different pianos, the mystery of what the concert hall is like."

Brown is grateful to the audience for just being there, he continued, and for that one person who says, "I love what you did with that Schubert sonata." You might be that person after Saturday's recital.

IF YOU GO:

Market Square Concerts presents pianist Michael Brown, 8 p.m. Saturday, Whitaker Center, 222 Market St., Harrisburg. Tickets: 717-214-ARTS, \$30, \$25 seniors, \$5 college students, free for school students. Info: 717-221-9599.

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