

The joy of youth

Guelph's Sarah Kramer places second at Elora Festival's Young Performers Competition

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ELORA

The amber lights and vaulted ceilings of St. John's Church were deceptively mellow Wednesday night, refusing to betray the intensity of competition they would soon house.

Of 48 applicants, seven musicians between the ages of 17 and 27 were featured in the final round of the Elora Festival's TD Canada Trust Young Performers Competition; two pianists, two flutists, two vocalists (soprano and counter-tenor) and a harpist.

The succession of ambitious musical personalities competing in talent-show format gave great entertainment value. As noted by judges, the high-calibre and professionalism of the performers was an exciting illustration of this area's thriving pool of young talent.

The panel of adjudicators included Rick Phillips, former host/producer of CBC's "Sound Advice"; Howard Dyck, host of CBC's "Choral Concert" and "Saturday Afternoon at the Opera"; and Lynn Janes, conductor of the Toronto Mendelssohn Youth Choir. They faced a difficult task as finalists competed for prizes of \$3,000, \$2,000 and \$1,000.

Flutist Alberta Brown was the winner, which guarantees her a future performance at the Elora Festival.

Brown performed movements from Bach's "Sonata in E major BWV 1035" and Henri Dutilleux's "Sonatine" with dexterity and insightful expression. Already winner of the 2006 Hart House Orchestra Concerto Competition and the President's Trophy at the Toronto Kiwanis Music Festival, her top placement in the Young Performers Competition is but another step in an already exciting career.

Soprano Sarah Kramer of Guelph took second place with her rich voice and coy delivery of songs ranging from Britten to Debussy to Rodrigo.

Her infectious onstage presence was the embodiment of total confidence, already clearly established by the second work in her set -- an engaging performance of Mozart's "Una Donna a Quindici Anni" from "Così fan tutte." The 27-year-old Kramer stood out for her seamless combination of charisma and sheer musical talent.

Third place went to the final performer of the evening, pianist Alexander Seredenko.

After nearly two hours of sitting in church pews, a lesser performer would certainly have made a tedious close to an exceptional evening, but Seredenko defied the odds. With dazzling dead-on technical accuracy and penetrating clarity, his performance of Alan Richardson's arrangement of Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise," and especially his "Scherzo No. 1 in B minor, Op. 20" by Chopin, might have convinced me to stay another two hours, even sitting on the floor.

I obviously wasn't the only one expecting a higher placement for Seredenko; the young pianist was voted recipient of the Kathleen Deters Audience Favourite Award, and I think many were surprised to see him place third.

Every performer demonstrated exceptional virtuosic technique and emotional sensitivity, so the deciding criteria seemed to boil down to performing flare. The winning competitors successfully melded their own personalities with technique, branding their performances with unforgettable style.

The Young Performers Competition is really a unique experience among the Elora Festival offerings. The staggering proficiency of such young performers is an inspiration, obliquely urging budding musicians to do the right thing, and practise those arpeggios before it's too late.

Music reviewer Dawn Stevenson lives in Guelph.

looking ahead

Trinity in the Barn:

As part of a North American tour, the Choir of Trinity College will make its Canadian debut in the Gambrel Barn with a program of Baltic and British music featuring English composers Britten, Walton, Purcell and Parry, and the contemporary Latvian composer, Uģis Praulins.

when: tonight at 8

where: Gambrel Barn, Elora

tickets: \$38

Destino

Three celebrated young classically trained talents with varied musical backgrounds, including opera, gospel, R&B, soul, jazz, musical theatre and pop,

have come together as Destino. From Carnegie Hall and a performance for the Pope to a Number 1 radio single, this trio of tenors offers pop with an opera flair . . . or is that opera with a popular flair?

when: 8 p.m. Friday, Aug. 1

where: Gambrel Barn, Elora

tickets: \$38

For more information, visit www.elorafestival.com or phone 519-846-0331.