Piano Competition Produces Winners

For the past several months, Philharmonic staff members have pored over audition videos submitted by piano students from around the state. They carefully selected ten finalists to play before a select panel of judges—pianists Donna Lee and Robert Frankenberry and our own Eric Benjamin—and on March 23, those chosen gathered for the final round.

In the hall at the Performing Arts Center, with the Steinway set center stage, students appeared one at a time and were greeted by Robert Vandall, renowned local composer of piano music for students, who would be accompanying them on one of his own compositions. Bob spoke to the students with a reassuring and helpful tone. “My job is to follow you,” he would tell them as he guided them to the piano, allowing them a few minutes to warm up and to adjust the bench height to their liking.

The two performed one of Bob’s concerti with just a few on-lookers—family members, judges, Karen Vandall turning pages for her husband—and not one student showed signs of stage fright. Not one forgot the music he or she had so carefully memorized, and not one among even the youngest failed to dazzle with his or her confidence and poise.

Though each was accomplished, there were winners. In the Concertino Division, judges selected 10-year-old Asya Akkus from Brooklyn, Ohio whose teacher is Ella Karasik. And in the Concerto Division, they selected 15-year-old Yun Cao, student of Jin Yu, from Hudson. Runners-up were Samantha Ma from Akron and Alison Xin of Solon.

From time to time, we are allowed the privilege of acknowledging and performing with local talent, and the experience never fails to be a source of pride—to be on stage with remarkable musicians who call the Tuscarawas Valley home. On April 20, we’ll not only get to recognize Robert Vandall, but we’ll also get to perform his compositions, orchestrated by Maestro Benjamin, with the winners of our concerto competition.

We’ll celebrate work from masters such as Haydn and Shostakovich; we’ll welcome Steinway Artist Donna Lee; and we’ll proudly celebrate our own local master, Robert Vandall. It will surely be a proud moment for us all.

(photos: Asya Akkus, top; and Yun Cao, bottom)
ROBERT AND KAREN VANDALL have made New Philadelphia their home, living adjacent to the dairy farm where Karen grew up and operating a piano studio. They began their married lives in Illinois where Bob held a tenured position at Lincoln Land Community College, but they decided their two sons, now adults, should grow up around extended family living in Ohio. “We decided to start a piano studio, which in essence, meant starting all over again from nothing,” Bob said. “We did it for the boys, and we got what we wanted.”

As the studio developed, Bob found time to write music as a form of self-expression. “This bit of self-therapy became writing music for students, and my hobby snowballed into another profession,” he said. Here, Bob fills us in on his life as a notable composer and educator.

• You are known locally as a piano teacher but internationally as a composer. How do you divide your time between the two roles?
  For a long time I thought of myself as a teacher who composed, but as I am teaching less and less, I guess I think of myself as a composer more. My publisher has put me on a regular schedule, and this makes me feel like a composer.

• What, beyond the technique of learning to play the piano, do you hope to inspire in young musicians?
  We want the students to do more than just play notes. The real emotion and feeling of the piece needs to come across to the audience so that they are swept along by what they hear. THIS is music. This is what I hope students will get from their music.

• When you compose, do you try to think like a student?
  Yes, yes, and yes. I am ALWAYS thinking like a student and like his teacher. The piece must feel good in the hands, be logical in its form and music theory, and sound good so that teachers will WANT to teach it, students will WANT to learn it, and parents and audiences will ENJOY hearing it.

• As a pianist, when you play for your own enjoyment, who are some of your favorite composers?
  I love how Beethoven develops his motifs and themes, and I love the French composers, Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc. I especially love Gershwin and enjoy playing his own arrangements of his songs. I would love to have the time to learn Rhapsody in Blue and the Concerto in F. Even the I Got Rhythm Variations! Karen and I played Percy Grainger’s Fantasy on Porgy and Bess many years ago. I loved it!

• What are some of your most memorable musical influences when you were a child?
  I remember going to Cleveland Orchestra student programs when I was a kid. I got to hear that great orchestra, directed by Robert Shaw. I remember jumping out of my skin when Stravinsky’s Firebird got to the Infernal Dance. I also heard live Glenn Gould and Roslyn Turek. My teacher, Arthur Reginald was a tremendous influence. I studied with him for my three high school years. I would not have won the Conservatory Scholarship without his teaching!
WHAT IS THE MAY FESTIVAL?

The Tuscarawas Philharmonic introduced the May Festival in 2012 as a way to unite fine arts programs in schools with local arts organizations, demonstrating the great wealth of talent in the Tuscarawas Valley and the link between arts in schools and in the community.

This year, we have once again gathered a list of events taking place in the Valley throughout the month of May and listed them all in one place in what becomes a powerful tool, a reminder of a budding and even thriving arts community. There are art exhibits, theater performances both community based and beyond, dance studio recitals, community band performances and school band, choir and orchestra concerts. For example, on May 16 alone, three area schools will perform spring concerts, and “Beauty and the Beast” will appear at the Kent State Tuscarawas Performing Arts Center.

To cap off the festival of events, the Philharmonic will assemble an honor band made up of high school students from around the area to perform with us on June 1.

This year’s festival is made possible by the support of Dover Chemical Corporation.
The Tuscarawas Philharmonic wraps up the May Festival—our community-wide celebration of arts and culture—with a program of festive music. We’ll mark the bicentennial of the great German composer Richard Wagner and tap toes to classic band music performed by the May Festival Honors Wind Ensemble. Last season, the orchestra treated its audience to *Pines of Rome* from Ottorino Respighi’s spectacular trilogy, bringing them spontaneously to their feet in a roaring ovation. The Philharmonic will finish its tour of Rome with *Feste Romane*, the final—and if possible, even more electrifying—installment of that work.

Selections for antiphonal brass choirs by Giovanni Gabrieli  
Wagner: *Rienzi Overture*  
Selections featuring the May Festival Honors Band  
Respighi: *Feste Romane*

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**OUR ANNUAL AUCTION BEGINS APRIL 14TH!**

The Tuscarawas Philharmonic online auction opens for bidding on April 14, 2013 at 1:00 PM.

Our goal this year is to raise $3,000 to support the Tuscarawas Philharmonic, Chorus, and Children’s Chorus. We need your support! This is an exciting way to have a great time helping us, and at the same time have a chance to win interesting and fun items!

We’ll be adding new items to our auction for you to preview as the auction date approaches. Check back often to see what’s new. Feel free to place a “watch” on your favorites, so that you’ll know as soon as bidding begins!

**JUST SOME OF THE ITEMS UP FOR BIDDING:**

- CLEVELAND INDIANS TICKETS  
- A HOT-AIR BALLOON RIDE  
- GIFT BASKETS  
- DINNER AT YOUR FAVORITE RESTAURANT  
- ORIGINAL ARTWORK  
- VACATION PACKAGES

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Tuscarawas Philharmonic • P.O. Box 406 • New Philadelphia, OH 44663 • 330.364.1843  
www.TuscarawasPhilharmonic.org • State of the Art editor: Robyn Martins  
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