A String of Success

The big competition with the low profile celebrates 40 years

BY ANDREW DOMINO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN LACKO

2013 Silver Medalist Ariel Horowitz, seen here during her Stulberg competition performance, has gone on to perform around the world.
The Stulberg International String Competition may be Kalamazoo’s best-known event you’ve never heard of, but to musicians it’s a different story. “If you walk down the halls at Juilliard (School) and say the name ‘Stulberg,’ people will recognize it,” says Margaret Hamilton, executive director of the competition. “A friend of mine says we’re just like the Gilmore (International Keyboard Festival), only shorter and with strings.”
The Stulberg International String Competition, which takes place May 16 at the Dalton Center Recital Hall on Western Michigan University’s campus, is an annual competition of string instrument performance by artists under age 20. The Stulberg celebrates its 40th competition this year, making it approximately two decades or more older than most of its competitors. Each year the competition draws young performers from around the world to play violin, viola, cello or double bass before a panel of judges and take part in master classes.

It’s a competition that has seen its share of future luminaries such as violinists Joshua Bell and Hal Grossman, bassist Nicholas Santangelo Schwartz and cellists Joel Noyes, Joshua Roman and Tony Ross, a Kalamazoo native.

“It’s for developing skills,” Ross says. “For younger players, it’s a huge notch in your belt.”

Bach and the Big Names

The idea for the Stulberg International String Competition arose in 1975 as a way to memorialize Julius Stulberg, a Western Michigan University music professor who conducted the university’s symphony for nearly three decades before his death in 1974.

“He was so focused on kids succeeding,” says Julius’ daughter Mira Stulberg Halpert. She helped her siblings and her mother, Esther, get the event off the ground in its early days, and the first competition was held on Feb. 21, 1976. Though she lives in Florida now, Halpert says she still returns to Kalamazoo to attend the competition.

“I have a huge amount of pride in it,” Halpert says. “It’s a living tribute to both my parents.”

For the 2015 competition, a record 140 applicants submitted audition videos online. From these, 12 semifinalists were chosen to come to Kalamazoo to compete in May. Each semifinalist will play before a panel of three judges, who will narrow the field down to six. Those six perform in the evening portion of the competition, from which the top three are named. The gold, silver and bronze medals each come with a cash prize and an opportunity for the winner to play with a local orchestra. First place is a performance with either the Kalamazoo or Grand Rapids Symphony Orchestra.

The festival continues the next day, when the judges lead master classes for other young musicians who auditioned for the chance to learn from a professional player. While they may not be Stulberg competitors, many of these young people are looking for feedback on their playing.

“I let them know what I enjoyed about their playing,” says Rachel Barton Pine, who took home medals in 1986 and 1990 and judged the competition in 2012. “I tell them what they did well so they continue to hone whatever that is.”

The semifinalists chosen to compete in this year’s Stulberg are mostly from the East and West coasts, but there is one semifinalist from British Columbia and another from the suburbs of Chicago. Each competitor is required to play a piece composed by Bach, because his work is often meant to be performed unaccompanied by any other instruments, says Executive Director Hamilton. Competitors also play a standard concerto performance from classical music’s “classical era” such as a work by Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven.

“They’re staples of the repertoire,” Hamilton says. “(Performers) will be playing those pieces the rest of their professional lives.”

Pine, the former competitor and judge, compared these young musicians to figure skaters in competition, saying judges want to see a performance with a minimum of errors as well as one that is “interesting” to listen to.

“You look for a certain base level of proficiency but also who grabs me, who would I actually buy a ticket to go and hear, not as a judge but just as a music lover,” Pine explains.

Rock Stars

Even though the Stulberg competition is for young musicians, it’s not an event overlooked later in their careers, Hamilton says. Many medal winners have continued playing as adults, in orchestras or as teachers, and include their Stulberg performances on their resumes.

Bell, the violinist who took the bronze medal in 1980 at age 12 and returned for the gold in 1981, released his first CD when he was 18. He remains a touring violinist and music director of the Academy of St Martin
in the Fields, an orchestra based in London. He also plays on movie soundtracks.

“He’s reached rock star status,” Hamilton says. “People think, ‘If Josh Bell got his start here, maybe I could too.’”

Bell’s mother, Shirley, stayed in touch with Esther Stulberg after Bell moved on to other competitions. She worked with young musicians through Indiana University, where her son is a senior lecturer (when he’s not on tour), and says she recommended that many of her students try out for the Stulberg.

“Josh came back the next year because he had such a good experience,” she says. “To get that kind of acknowledgment as a young performer, I think that really helps build confidence.”

About the Stulberg

What: Stulberg International String Competition

When: Saturday, May 16, with semifinal performances 9 a.m.–4 p.m. and finalist concert at 8 p.m.

Where: Dalton Center Recital Hall, Western Michigan University

How much: Semifinal performances, free; finalist concert, $20, or $5 for students

For more info: (269) 343-2776 or www.stulberg.org

Professional musicians serve as judges each year and lead master classes. The 2015 judges are violinist Sarah Chang; Heidi Castleman, a professor of viola at the Juilliard School; and Eric Kim, professor of cello at Indiana University.

Although students who study with one of the year’s judges are disqualified from entering that year’s competition, many judges are impressed with the competition and recommend to their own students that they audition in later years.

“It’s the experience of participating — seeing your peers, getting to hear them, getting to meet them,” Pine says. “If you’re on a certain track (as a musician), it’s one of the go-to contests.”

Haupert says she likes to stay in touch with past semifinalists, usually by Facebook or email. They send her their concert schedules, thank-you notes and sometimes even wedding announcements.

“The Stulberg is not their first competition, but it’s usually their most memorable,” she says. “We see it as

(continued on page 42)
less of a competition and more of a learning experience.”

Low Profile, High Hopes

Nevertheless the Stulberg may be the international competition with the lowest profile here and elsewhere among the general public. Even though Julius Stulberg’s reputation brought many noteworthy judges and participants to Kalamazoo in the first few years of the competition and it built a reputation as one of the few music competitions aimed at teenage players, it is less well-known outside the music world, says Stulberg’s daughter.

Halpert says there’s been an effort in the past few years to boost the competition’s public presence. Hiring Hamilton as the organization’s executive director in 2013 was a step in that direction. She spent 25 years at WMU, in the School of Music and College of Fine Arts, before taking on her role with the Stulberg. She’s the first full-time employee of the organization and has been building its online presence and connecting with former participants as well as parents and teachers of current music students.

“We’re seeing a resurgence in young people who start playing musical instruments,” Halpert says. “I’d love to have the world take notice.”