

# La Crosse Symphony Orchestra

March 18, 2023 – 7:30 pm

**MENDELSSOHN**

AND THE

**RICHARD RECORD RISING STARS CONCERTO COMPETITION**

*Finals Competition – Celebrating 24 Years*

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*These program notes are designed for Rising Stars everywhere!! It is instructive to read just how composers and artists – who are now famous – began their musical development at a young age. Just as enlightening is to read about the background of this year's Rising Stars and their own development. It will be a fine concert.*

## **Piano Finalist: Deling Chen**

Deling Chen is a 16-year-old pianist from St. Paul, Minnesota. She is a 10th grade student at St. Paul Academy and Summit School. Studying piano since the age of 4, she is currently a student of the nationally distinguished artist/teacher, Dr. Jo Anne Link, of Crocus Hill Studios in St. Paul. Having joined the studio just this past year, Deling has become a leader in the studio's powerful Premier Class. She has also just begun to make inroads into important regional competitions. Recently, Deling was named a finalist in the St. Paul Piano Teachers Concerto Competition (2022), as well as the Rising Stars Concerto Competition of the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra. Tonight's performance will be her concerto debut with a professional orchestra. Deling uses her sense of emotional depth and musical artistry to bring Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 1* to life. Her favorite pianist is Krystian Zimerman and her favorite musical period is the Romantic Era. In addition to playing the piano, she is an ardent debater who has competed at the state and national levels as well as a baker, and entrepreneur.

## **Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, Op. 15 *Allegro con brio***

*Ludwig van Beethoven (b. Bonn, Germany, December 16, 1770; d. Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827)*

Ludwig van Beethoven was a pianist; however, as a young man he gave violin lessons and played viola in the court and theater orchestras. "He first played piano in public when he was 7; by the time he was 11 he was something of a local celebrity," writes Michael Steinberg in *A Listener's Guide to the Concerto*.

"Just before Beethoven's twenty-second birthday, he first made his mark as a concert pianist," continues Steinberg. By all accounts Beethoven was a thrilling performer, at least while he could still hear. At age 44, now deaf, he made his last public appearance as a pianist in the first performance of the *Archduke Trio*.

Young pianists have been following in the footsteps of the youthful Beethoven ever since. The famous pianist Arthur Schnitker (1887 – 1982), who performed regularly in the United States and made many recordings, writes in his autobiography, *My Young Years*, about his first public performance which provides a good story for any ambitious youthful pianist. Rubinstein's mentor, Hungarian violinist, conductor, composer, and teacher Joseph Joachim, wanted to present Rubinstein as piano soloist with a European orchestra. Rubinstein was just 12 years old.

Rubinstein's own piano teacher gave him last-minute instructions in performance etiquette, which put some fear into little Rubinstein's heart. Rubinstein continues describing the last-minute guidance he received in his autobiography, *My Young Years*, "When you come out on the stage, make a deep bow to the public, then a shorter one to the orchestra. Fix your piano stool so as to gain perfect control of movement. Don't look at the audience.

Concentrate on what you are going to play before giving the conductor the sign to begin. Watch your pedal; don't make faces; don't sing while you are playing; never change your fingering – it might get you into trouble!"

Rubinstein describes his feelings after that first very successful performance saying, "I welcomed the stimulus that this concert gave me, and life became more attractive. I began practicing better and concentrating more on my piano lessons. In fact, it was decided the next year that I would give a concert featuring two concertos with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra." Rubinstein was now 13 years old.

Beethoven wrote the *Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major* in 1795 and played it in Vienna in December of that year at a concert organized by his teacher and mentor, Joseph Haydn. While this was termed his first piano concerto, he had actually written several other, more youthful works – the first one when he was only 13 years old, continues Steinberg. Beethoven was 25 years old when this piano concerto – which we will hear tonight – was written. He dedicated the work to a young lady, a gifted amateur, who took piano lessons from him.

According to the first page of the *Edition Eulenburg* pocket score of this work, "The original manuscript, in which, according to Beethoven's habit, the solo part is not fully carried out, but left for completion at the time of publication, is to be found in the musical section of the Prussian State Library in Berlin."

Rubinstein made an excellent recording of Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under conductor Erich Leinsdorf.

Another pianist, who also recorded Beethoven *Piano Concerto No. 1*, has instructive thoughts about a music career. Leon Fleisher, pianist and world-renowned soloist (1928 – 2020), discusses worthwhile musical experiences. Born in San Francisco, Fleisher began playing piano at the age of 4, and started studying with famous pianist, Artur Schnabel, at age 9. Schnabel was particularly well known for his musical interpretations of the five concertos of Beethoven, which he recorded with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra.

Fleisher writes in his autobiography, *My Nine Lives*, that on his twelfth birthday he received a recording of his teacher, Schnabel, performing a Brahms piano concerto with an orchestra under "the brilliant Hungarian conductor, George Szell." He continues, "From the moment I first heard this recording, I dreamed of soloing with a full orchestra, with George Szell conducting, just like my teacher had done. Dreaming helps! My visions were fulfilled! Szell and I even recorded concertos together, including the Beethoven *First Piano Concerto* with The Cleveland Orchestra in 1961."

"I love music. Something about it is sustaining and worthwhile," he continues in *My Nine Lives*. After Fleisher suffered a catastrophe to his right hand, he was no longer able to play the piano – although after years of reflection, he ultimately was able to perform some piano concertos written for the left hand. Finding success at this level when there are challenges, takes a certain mindset, a certain resilience. Yet, he investigated other careers available in the music world. Fleisher became a conductor and developed as a teacher, learning to use words to communicate the truths in the pieces he loved. He concludes, "My experience in music became richer the more I explored other ways of relating to it."

There is a lesson to be learned here. Just as Beethoven became deaf and was unable to hear his own music but wrote his most fabulous works when he was not able to hear anything, Fleisher picked up the pieces after his right hand gave out and continued on with his career in music.

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## **Violoncello Finalist: Titus Gunderson**

Titus Gunderson is a 17-year-old high school senior at Rural Virtual Academy of Medford, Wisconsin. In 2011, his family moved to Holmen, Wisconsin. While attending one of his cousin's cello recitals, he became interested in

playing the cello himself. His grandmother gifted him with a month of cello lessons with Sister Marcella Steffes at Viterbo University, and he continued to study with Sister Marcella for several years. In 2014, he was invited to attend the La Crosse Area Youth Symphony Orchestra's (LYSO) "bring a friend day." He had a fun time and immediately joined their Philharmonic orchestra. Playing with LYSO has afforded him many great opportunities such as playing with the La Crosse Symphony Orchestra at the side-by-side concert as well as two different string quartets. He is proud to have been principal cellist in LYSO and to have won their concerto competition in 2021. He currently studies with Derek Clark, former principal cellist of the LSO and a member of the cello faculty at UW-L. Titus hopes to study music in college and pursue a career in this field.

## **Violoncello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33 *Allegro non troppo*** **Camille Saint-Saëns (b. Paris, France, October 9, 1835; d. Algiers, Algeria, December 16, 1921)**

Camille Saint-Saëns composed his *Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33 for Violoncello and Orchestra* in 1872, when he was 37 years old. He wrote this work for the French cellist, viola da gamba player, and instrument maker Auguste Tolbecque.

Saint-Saëns keeps the cello soloist in the dramatic and musical foreground, while the orchestra offers a shimmering backdrop. The music is tremendously demanding for soloists, especially in the fast third section. This difficulty has not stopped the concerto from becoming a favorite performance work of the great virtuoso cellists.

The master of cellists for anyone to learn the work from his recordings is Mstislav Rostropovich (1927 – 2007). In fact, it was in the summer of 1940 that the 13-year-old Rostropovich made his professional debut, playing this Saint-Saëns concerto.

Later, one of Rostropovich's own students, Alla Vasilyeva, stated that he gave her this concerto by Saint-Saëns to learn. She is quoted by author Elizabeth Wilson in her biography *Rostropovich*, "The work was like a ray of light bursting into my school life. I adored my mentor and idol's interpretation. I went to all of his concerts, avidly lapping up everything he did. I sat in a kind of trance, following all his movements, watching his bow strokes, observing how he distributed the bow, how he phrased with the bow and colored with the left hand. Then I would come to my lessons with him having at least in part assimilated my observations, transforming them into technical 'cellistic' terms."

Ms. Wilson also writes about a meeting Rostropovich had much later with the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich. The composer stated that this Saint-Saëns cello concerto was "the best in terms of structure, duration, and orchestral balance. The French composer skillfully uses the cello's register and dynamic range to perfection, always allowing it to project over the orchestra without requiring the cellist to force the sound."

Besides cello music (including other cello concertos as well), an interesting part of young Rostropovich's own training exercises was to play cello transcriptions of Chopin's *Piano Études*. "As a cello teacher himself, however, Rostropovich wished to stimulate his pupils' interest in music by sight-reading," continues Wilson. "Indeed, Rostropovich valued sight-reading as a test of intuition, musical maturity, and of the pupil's spontaneous approach to the instrument."

Wilson continues, "In 1956, Rostropovich made his first coast-to-coast tour of the USA and his American orchestral debut where he performed the Saint-Saëns *Cello Concerto No. 1* with orchestra." *The New York Times* writes, "In the big Romantic showpieces — including the Saint-Saëns — he dazzled listeners with both his richly personalized interpretations and a majestic warmth of tone." Rostropovich recorded the Saint-Saëns *Cello Concerto No. 1* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini.

Janos Starker, who also recorded the Saint-Saëns *Cello Concerto No. 1*, found the piece to have energy that flows. Starker is a world-renowned cellist and ultimately became professor of cello at Indiana University – Bloomington. He writes in his autobiography, *Starker*, that he has assisted thousands in finding rewarding lives in the world of music. "Whether we are touring the world performing solo or performing in our own regional orchestras and teaching studios, it requires a strong ego to believe in – and enjoy – one's own life, the life of a professional musician, where we love to spend most of our waking hours."

Starker continues, “I have always been preoccupied with the idea that the energy spent to supply the physical needs of playing an instrument should be minimal and thereby allow the mental and emotional faculties to function freely for the sake of communicating the musical message. ‘Relaxed’ playing is in reality the even distribution of muscle tension. Though we are playing an instrument while making music, the playing requires power and precludes relaxation.”

Janos Starker recorded the Saint-Saëns *Cello Concerto No. 1* with the London Symphony Orchestra under conductor Antal Dorati.

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## **Violin Finalist: Ava Kenney**

Ava Kenney, 17, of Madison, began her musical studies through Suzuki Strings of Madison and currently studies with Eugene Purdue, faculty member at UW-Madison. She made her solo orchestral debuts with the Madison Symphony Orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra, Middleton Community Orchestra, and the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestra (WYSO). Ava has also been featured on NPR's *From the Top* and WPR's *Midday Show*. Ava is in her eighth season with the Wisconsin Youth Symphony where she also enjoys performing chamber music in the WYSO Honors String Quartet. She has spent her summers at Colburn's Sounding Point Academy, Center Stage Strings, Bowdoin International Music Festival, Northwestern Summer Violin Institute, and Heifetz International Music Institute. Ava also enjoys composing, exploring new and underrepresented music, and performing outreach concerts with family and friends.

## ***Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47 Allegro, ma non tanto***

***Jean Sibelius (b. Hämeenlinna, Finland, December 8, 1865; d. Ainola, Järvenpää, Finland, September 20, 1957)***

Jean Sibelius had early and successful chamber music experiences playing piano trios with his siblings. His sister usually played the piano, and his younger brother played the cello, while the youthful Jean played the violin. “Later he played second violin in quasi-professional string quartets and a piano quintet,” writes Tomi Mäkelä (translated by Steven Lindberg) in his biography *Jean Sibelius*.

Sibelius is reported to have said on September 18, 1902, that he had ‘wonderful themes for a violin concerto!’ Originally composed in 1904, the concerto was revised in 1905. Mäkelä continues, “While composing the work, Sibelius was in contact with the former concertmaster of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, Willy Burmester who provided technical assistance.

Yet, it was Sibelius’ experience as a violinist that was important to the development of the violin concerto. It is a bravura virtuoso concerto,” continues Mäkelä. “In fact, the concerto’s virtuosity is unconventional.” Mäkelä concludes, “The final version was premiered at the Berlin Philharmonic by Carl Halir under conductor Richard Strauss on October 19, 1905.” The *Sibelius Concerto* has such a wealth of unusual thematic material, for the violin and the orchestra – what an outstanding introduction and presentation under such capable hands as Richard Strauss and the Berlin Philharmonic!!

A soloist in the Sibelius *Violin Concerto*, well-known violinist Isaac Stern, gives some very good advice for aspiring musicians in his autobiography, *My First 79 Years*. He writes, “To be a musician in the service of music is not a job; it is a way of life. Two things are necessary for a life in music: a clear idea of what you want to be, and the arrogance to pursue it. You must believe it yourself and make that immediately clear to everyone – ‘I’m going to play!!’ The art of making music is a highly personal affair. To abide by the strict disciplines of music and, accepting those limitations, develop an individual voice; to become perceptive and honest; and above all, to recognize how to convince the listener ... THAT is the mark of musical artistry.”

Stern elaborates, "It is this passion for music – how it was brought to realization in me, and my lifelong effort to share it with others – that I'm trying to convey in my performances and writings." Stern made a wonderful recording of the Sibelius *Violin Concerto* with the Philadelphia Orchestra under conductor Eugene Ormandy.

On the other hand, it has often been said that Jascha Heifetz "owned" the Sibelius' *Violin Concerto*. The power of his virtuosity and precision cannot be denied. A fine recording is available with Jascha Heifetz playing this concerto under Walter Hendl conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Heifetz, born in Russia, was a virtuoso since childhood. Before Jascha was 2 years old, his father (a fine violinist) bought him a small violin, and taught him bowing and simple fingering. Young Jascha became a student of Leopold Auer, violinist, academic, conductor, composer, and instructor. Heifetz was a child prodigy, making his public debut at age 7, playing the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto*. Fritz Kreisler, another leading violinist of the twentieth century, said after hearing Heifetz's debut, "We might as well take our fiddles and break them across our knees."

In 1914 at age 13, Heifetz performed with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Arthur Nikisch. The conductor said he had never heard such an excellent violinist. Heifetz moved, while still a teenager, to the United States, where his Carnegie Hall debut was rapturously received – he was 16 years old!

Heifetz had a long and successful performing career, later switching his focus to teaching. After an only partially successful operation on his right shoulder in 1972, Heifetz ceased giving concerts and making records. Heifetz then taught the violin extensively, holding master classes first at UCLA, then at the University of Southern California. Additionally, he held classes in his private studio at home in Beverly Hills. Multi-talented, Heifetz also played and composed for the piano.

## **Additional Prize Winners**

**Winner of the John Bolstad Award – Qing Ng (Madison, Wisconsin) Saint-Saëns *Violin Concerto No. 3, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt***

**Winner of the Bill Koutsky Award – Vladimir Tsiper (Eagan, Minnesota) Saint-Saëns *Violin Concerto No. 3, 1<sup>st</sup> mvt***