— David Patrick Stearns
(http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/david_patrick_stearns)

Chamber Orchestra meets Beethoven in a wild-card concert

Updated: NOVEMBER 5, 2017 — 5:57 PM EST

Charles Albright plays with Chamber Orchestra Philadelphia in an all-Beethoven performance.

by **David Patrick Stearns**, Music Critic

✉ dstearns@phillynews.com (mailto:dstearns@phillynews.com)

Improvisation has been making its way back onto the classical music landscape over the past few decades — it was an Old World tradition at least until World War I — and created extra sparkle in an already-notable Beethoven program by Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia on Sunday at the Kimmel Center.

Young Juilliard School graduate Charlie Albright was both soloist in Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* and played an extended improvisation on the same composer's familiar "Fur Elise." Such a display still has novelty, though Albright didn't need it, so distinctive were his improvisational ideas and overall presence. Though the demure lyricism of "Fur Elise" is something one associates with music boxes, Albright took off from it in what turned into a tour of 19th-century pianism.

The chords became more dense and loaded with multiple meanings. The manner was more demonstrative, as if Beethoven suddenly skipped a generation into Chopin, then Liszt, and then turned Russian with Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. As clever as he sounds, Albright, in fact, gave the improvisation something I rarely witness in such settings: a highly personal emotional depth, as if he were expressing his inner self rather than simply exercising his powers of invention. For those of us still feeling scarred by the Philadelphia Orchestra's opening concert at Carnegie Hall — in which Lang Lang stomped all over a semi-improvised *Rhapsody in Blue* — this concert brought the art of classical-music improvisation to a new level.

Of course, Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* was bound to show a more filtered version of Albright — it's a tightly written concerto — though his personality was evident in his way of shaping a phrase with a kind of extravagance that had showmanship but never felt cheap. With a fresh, clean, crystalline sound, he played with a kind of ease and smoothness that refuses to airbrush the music, but animates it from within. You simply hear more Beethoven than usual and with a kind of rhythmic momentum that makes you listen more closely, no matter how familiar the music has become. And yes, he improvised the first-movement cadenza as Beethoven himself might have, with results that were impressive but hadn't the emotional impact of his "Fur Elise."

The other big discovery was guest conductor Sarah Ioannides, a Curtis Institute graduate and someone who has been working with regional orchestras from El Paso to Tacoma. However gracious her manner, she somehow induced Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia to play on a level that's been wanting since the departure of now-conductor-laureate Ignat Solzhenitsyn some years ago. The playing in this longish Beethoven program was vigorous, solid, and with an unusually vibrant sonority. Her programming ideas were provocative: She programmed a lot of early Beethoven that's worth an occasional hearing, such as the *Rondo for piano and orchestra,* as well as unfinished Beethoven, in an assemblage of his borderline-chaotic *Symphony No. 10*. Her rendering of that last piece was particularly notable: This is music with no real performance tradition, though you wouldn't have known that from what was heard on Sunday.

The program will be repeated at 7:30 p.m. Monday Nov. 6 at the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater. Information: 215-893-1999 or www.chamberorchestra.org

---

Published: November 5, 2017 — 5:57 PM EST