

'From the Top' is a hit with local audience

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The National Music Museum (NMM) kicked off its 40th anniversary celebrations in September with the help of some extremely gifted teenagers.

On the afternoon of Sept. 15, NPR's syndicated program "From the Top" did a taping in the Aalfs Auditorium using several instruments borrowed from the museum.

"The show is really a perfect fit for us," said Cleveland Johnson, Ph.D., director of the NMM, prior to the taping. "It's something fun for us to offer to our friends and members of the community and the region ... but at the same time, it's a national show, so it also gets our name out there to three-quarters of a million listeners in the entire nation."

Hosted by pianist Christopher O'Riley, "From the Top" features advanced musicians who are under the age of 18, and allows them the opportunity to display their performing skills, as well as the non-musical aspects of their lives.

"They're just kids like any other kids," Johnson said. "They like to play video games, they like to hang out with their friends, they like sleeping late on the weekends. At the same time, they practice four hours a day and they can play amazing, complicated classical music to a degree that most of us can only dream of."

The program featured eight performers:

- Maya Anjali Buchanan, 13-year-old violinist from Rapid City;
- Henry Johnston, 16-year-old guitar player from St. Paul;
- Evan Lee, 15-year-old pianist from Brooklyn, NY;
- Jon Corin, 18-year-old saxophone player from Sarasota, FL; and
- The Luna String



Young performer Henry Johnston conducts a sound check of his guitar during rehearsal in Aalfs Auditorium on the USD campus in September.

(Photo courtesy of the National Music Museum)

Quartet, which features Anna Humphrey, 17-year-old violinist from Rogers, MN; Emma Richman, 15-year-old violinist from Minneapolis; Alexandra Sophocleus, 18-year-old violist from Minneapolis; and Nora Doyle, 17-year-old cellist from Minneapolis.

During the taping, Buchanan discussed life with her family, who operate a ranch where they raise steer.

"Even though we live on the ranch, we're a classical music family," Buchanan said. "My sister is a violinist and my brother is a violist, and sometimes we play together."

"I love the contrast between your life in the Black Hills and your life studying classical music," said Christopher O'Riley, classical pianist and host of "From the Top." "For example, you do a lot of traveling just to study the violin."

Buchanan said she flies to Texas on a regular basis to study with Paul Kantor.

"One day at the Suzuki Institute of Dallas where I have my lessons, I just found an open room where an old guitar teacher (used to teach)," Buchanan said. "It was just an empty room, so I just decided it would be my studio, so I just put my name up and turned it into my studio."

She then put a lesson sign-up sheet outside, and now she has a 7-year-old student.

During the show, Buchanan played the first movement of Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 5 in F Major.

She was accompanied by O'Riley on one of two of the NMM's historic grand pianos that were featured in the show.

The taping came about last winter when Johnson was in New York meeting with the vice president of IMG, a major international arts management company.

During the meeting, it was suggested to Johnson that he reach out to "From the Top."

"I sent an e-mail to the producer when I was still in New York," Johnson said. "It was late Saturday night, probably about 10:30, and I just fired off a message."

By the time he checked his e-mail at 8 the next morning, there already was a response.

It turns out that South Dakota was on the program's "bucket list."

"Like so often in my experiences here for the last 10 months, even though people haven't heard about us often, it doesn't take a whole lot to get their attention," Johnson said. "That's one of the fun things about this job."

The Vermillion episode of "From the Top" was aired nationally the week of Oct. 21.

The episode is now available online at <http://www.fromthetop.org/content/show-276-vermillion-south-dakota>.

LOCAL

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"We try to find stuff that we can do that resonates with us, but at the same time, we can handle," Brian said. "Songs with a female, strong vocal ... Mary's got that ... songs with a high, clear lead vocal - Monte's got that."

Brian added that songs that feature acoustic guitar with electric guitar also fit well with Monte's instrumental contributions to the band.

"We try to really craft where we play certain songs in the night," Mary said. "We get louder as the night goes on. We save certain songs for the end - 'Piece of My Heart,' and 'You Shook Me All Night Long,' are usually toward the end. Those are really wailin' rock and roll songs."

"You can't spend that dollar up front," Brian said.

"We try to do a mix of songs that people recognize and like," Monte said, "and we like to throw some in there that we like that maybe people haven't ever heard before, but when they do hear them, they think those are pretty cool songs. I think it's fun to include songs like that."

Mary said she and other band members also craft their playlists not simply for the audience, but the venue. For example, the band often plays in a dance hall in Sioux Falls.

"We know that we have to play dance songs in that place," she said.

"There are learning curves to every place we play. We eventually learn the type of crowd that is attracted to the various places we play, and the type of music they like the best."

"Down in Sioux City, at a place we play, they really like our blues stuff," Mary said. "So whenever

we return there, we just pull out of all our blues songs, and play as much of that music as we can. And, in some places, funky stuff goes over real well, and in other places, it doesn't."

The four musicians' goal is to entertain, but they can't say their audiences are the main benefactors of their efforts. Mary, Brian, Kevin, and Monte each find the art of making good music together to be extremely rewarding.

"I think one of the coolest things for me is, when we've all decided to learn a song, and I've learned the part, and sometimes they are just weird, dumb-sounding parts," Brian said. "But when we all come together to practice it, everybody is playing these disparate little pieces that coalesce into a great music. That's still really cool to me."

"It's always amazing. We'll e-mail each other, and ask one another about different songs and whether we should play them," Mary said. "Then we'll all come together, and none of us worked tons on that music, but we'll decide to play one of those songs, and it's like, wow!"

"It's creating. I just love creating stuff. It's kind of magical," she said. "It doesn't always have to be in front of an audience. We were talking about how just in our basement it's fun to create this music and to be amazed at how it all comes together."

"There's that point when you're playing live, and everybody has got the jam down, and it's really coming together," Kevin said. "And the audience is really digging it, and it's just like everybody is one with the universe. It's a pretty good feeling ... it's one of the best feelings in the world."

"It's singular. You're in that moment, and if you're not in the moment,

you're going to screw up, and that happens to me on a regular basis," Brian said, laughing, "because I'll start thinking of something else. But when you're in that zone and you're playing the music, you can't be anywhere except right there, and that's one of the neat things about it."

"That's hard to do, when you're doing something for four hours. When you listen to a band in concert, they don't play for four hours - they have to be in that zone for about an hour," Monte said. "I think you can stay in that zone, I think, for an hour, or maybe even two, but for four hours - things happen and distractions come up, and it's hard to do that."

"I really enjoy, though, that kind of emotional outlet and expression that comes through music to the audience - that connection that you make with it," Mary said. "It's very passionate, with an emotional kind of release. It's a whole atmosphere that you create. Music just surrounds you, and I don't think of anything else. I don't think of any of the day-to-day responsibilities."

The end result is an adrenalin rush that keeps the band members going strong until the last song, and beyond.

"It doesn't seem like four hours passes by. It takes us about 90 minutes to set up, and 45 minutes to tear down, and then driving home - if we play in Sioux Falls or Sioux City, it will be 4 a.m. or 5 a.m. before we're back home," Mary said. "And then, when we get home, we're still all wound up."

Upcoming performances for Mrs. Begley and the Boys include Nov. 23 at Maya Jane's in Vermillion, and Rounding Third in Yankton on Dec. 21. The group is also scheduled to play New Year's Eve at Randolph, NE, and in Mitchell on Jan. 11.

COLVIN

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She asked what's at the site of the eating establishment today. The audience informed her a building there now houses a plumber and a beauty shop.

Every Wednesday, her dad used to take Colvin and her siblings to Bill's Tip Top Cafe to eat. A bank

is now located where the cafe was once.

"We would always get a steak sandwich, which was a steak, French fries, bread and salad," Colvin said. "My dad always said the definition of a salad at Bill's Tip Top Cafe was a quarter of a head of iceberg lettuce with some orange stuff poured on top."

She asked of the fate of Jacobson's Bakery, and learned that it, too, no longer was open.

"You can see it all has to

do with food," Colvin said. She added, though, that she would be stopping by the United Church of Christ, Congregational, where she sang her first solo in the junior choir during a Christmas service.

And, Colvin said, she would stop by Jolley Elementary School. "It's the incidents on the Jolley School playground I remember the best - the cuts and bruises and scrapes and all the fun we had."



Through Time...


Cleveland Johnson, Ph.D., is appointed director of the NMM. His first official day is Nov. 1, 2012..

The NMM collections are featured prominently in DK Publishing's book, "Music: The Definitive Visual History," which is published in October 2013. It features more than 100 instruments from the museum, and is produced in association with the Smithsonian.



Some of the information for this timeline was taken from the NMM's official Web site, <http://orgs.usd.edu/nmm/>, and the book "The Shrine to Music Museum: A Pictorial Souvenir."

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