

Classical showcase

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You might call it the classical music version of "American Idol." And it's coming to Music Hall Tuesday when the nationally syndicated public radio show "From the Top" tapes a show in Cincinnati.

No, there won't be any caustic judges, a screaming teen audience or Internet voting; just the rising stars of the classical music world, an appreciative radio audience of 700,000 and local fans celebrating the teen spirit.

It will also be a showcase for the rest of the country to hear Cincinnati-based classical talent. It promises to be a Music Hall performance where one may hear Bach, Radiohead or Mozart played on steel drums.

"From the Top," syndicated by Public Radio International, has become the fastest-growing show in public radio history. It draws 700,000 listeners a week on 250 stations after debuting seven years ago. It has been heard at 9 a.m. Saturdays on WGUC-FM (90.9) since early 2002.

The premise of "From the Top" is simple: Try to make heroes of teens who play classical music just as our culture makes a hero of a Kelly Clarkson or Ruben Studdard.

"What really comes across is the show gives listeners -- familiar with classical music or not -- the idea that the next generation of young people isn't going to hell in a handbasket," said Christopher O'Riley, host of the show and a renowned concert pianist in his own right.

Fans of the show think it accomplishes the mission.

"It's the most fitting thing on radio to attract a young audience to music. It's brilliant," said Kurt Sassmannshaus, founder of the Starling Chamber Orchestra, which will perform on the show.

"It's so important to show these kids -- who work so hard at what they do -- the moment they put the violin down they are as much a teenager as everybody else."

Indeed, the show works because it lets kids be kids, letting them get off that prodigy pedestal. The charm of O'Riley is his breezy banter with the teens. They

may chat about skateboarding during a break before doing a kick flip into Mozart.

The Chicago-born O'Riley has become one of the most popular guest pianists with orchestras around the country and has an acclaimed recording career. On the show he often accompanies the kids, but also has a knack for staying out of the way and letting them strut their stuff.

"From the Top" came here after a lobbying effort from WGUC and other local arts supporters. But that doesn't guarantee that local artists will be featured, as the show usually brings performers from a broad region during its road trips.

WGUC officials encouraged local groups and teens to send in submissions. "Producers were flooded with submissions and said they were blown away by the quality of talent they heard out of Cincinnati," WGUC spokeswoman Coleen Tracey said.

She said four of the five segments will feature Cincinnati talent, a rare local showing on the program.

"I got an e-mail back from producers a couple days after I sent in our CD. I have rarely been as surprised in my life," said Bruce Weil, the Clark Montessori music teacher who founded the school's steel drum music program.

His surprise was that for the first time "From the Top" chose to feature a steel drum band performing classical music. Clark has one of the most comprehensive high school steel drum programs in the country with a band for each grade. Weil actually formed a steel drum ensemble last summer specifically to record a submission for the show. He called the student group "Well-Tempered Pans."

"'Well-tempered' refers to the process of tempering a pan over a flame in the process of making a steel drum," Weil explained. "And it refers to the clavier in the Baroque era and a series of pieces that Bach wrote -- 'The Well-Tempered Clavier.'"

Weil says steel drums and classical music aren't as much a stretch as one would think, noting that when Trinidad musicians started experimenting in the '40s with abandoned oil drums after the war, among the first music they played was the classics.

"It was an effort on the part of the Caribbean folks to try to legitimize their instrument worldwide," Weil said.

Weil's students are veterans of performing because of the Clark program, and he says with a laugh that they probably aren't as impressed as he is that they have

been selected for O'Riley's show.

"I said, 'Do you guys realize you will be playing for 700,000 people on the radio?' I don't think that's what matters to them. One of the seniors said, 'I just like to play.' I love that attitude, not really focusing on the notoriety or the impressiveness of the events. An adult might be more aware of that and be a little nervous."

The show will also draw some deserving national attention to the Cincinnati-based Starling Chamber Orchestra, one of the country's most acclaimed teenage string ensembles. The prestigious group draws students from around the country competing to be admitted.

Other local solo performers on the bill are Cameron Logan (piano), 17, of North Bend and Jeremy Collins (guitar), 17, of Montgomery.

O'Riley agrees the impulse of the show is to make the music more accessible by showing listeners what teenagers can do and that sends a powerful message to young and old.

"It's a way to experience new music in a format tailor-made for the American audience. They realize (the music) doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out."

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