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These kids are reviving the heart and soul of classical music

ROBERT HARRIS

Published Tuesday, Jul. 30, 2013 04:01PM EDT

Last updated Tuesday, Jul. 30, 2013 04:04PM EDT

One of the anomalies of the “dying” art of classical music is that every year, music schools the world over graduate thousands of classical players, people in their teens and 20s who missed all the articles about the demise of the classics, and find themselves drawn to the delights and mysteries of this unique art.

And it’s not just the number of young people graduating from these schools; it’s the incredible quality of their playing that’s interesting. Talk to any music educator these days. They’ll tell you that today’s young players are more capable than ever before, more musical, broader in their tastes and scope, more powerful in their playing. Despite the fact that so few of them can get jobs in the world’s deeply tenured symphony orchestras, they keep coming, fresh with enthusiasm and love.

But the cream of the crop do succeed in the world of classical music, and in Canada, the cream of the crop make up each year’s National Youth Orchestra of Canada, a group of 100 or so musicians in their early 20s, selected from almost half a thousand annual applicants who work and perform together each summer. Over its 50-plus year run, the NYOC has supplied almost 30 per cent of all current members of Canadian symphony orchestras, as well as orchestras around the world. These

kids are good – really good.

That's what makes the annual summer concert of the NYOC inevitably one of the best of the year. It's just thrilling to hear music played so well, with the verve and caring that young people lavish on this music, drunk on its sheer power and excitement. And this year, we had an extra attraction, 19-year-old violinist Blake Pouliot, an amazing player seemingly destined to an international career on the level of another Canadian, James Ehnes.

Pouliot was soloist in the Sibelius Violin Concerto in D Minor, a work written in the early 20th century that is conservative in its harmonic language, but quite radical in its form and texture. Pouliot gave it an intensely theatrical reading, exploiting his own technical skill and the music's need for high dramatic contrast. It was a joy to watch this young player, easy and confident in his skill, just rear back and let the music leap out of his fiddle. And the NYOC provided deeply engaged accompaniment to Pouliot. Sometimes orchestras leave the real playing to the soloist in major concertos, content to provide the bare minimum of background, but the NYOC managed to be a real foil to Pouliot's dramatics, matching him intense phrase for intense phrase (well, almost).

It was in the rest of the program that the NYOC really shone. Conductor Alain Trudel, as is often the case with the NYOC, selected works that highlighted solo members of the orchestra, alone and in small groups, and the individual players of the ensemble were sensational. Tight, focused brass playing was the order of the day, liquid, lyrical winds, a beautifully meshed and blended string sound, powerful percussion – pound for pound, player for player, these kids are as good as you can hear in any professional orchestra. If there was any disappointment in the evening, it was the lack of truly coherent, well-paced, arcs of performance – and this wasn't the orchestra's fault. I thought, for example, that Trudel took unnecessarily quick tempi in the three sections of *La Mer*, which ended the program, robbing his players of an opportunity to languish in the fabulous and luxurious sonorities Claude Debussy fashioned in his famous piece. On the other hand, the Four Sea Interludes from Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* were beautifully presented, with their interesting sonorities and dark undercurrents both expertly rendered. Skill and musicality fused finely together.

I'll admit it – I'm a sucker for this orchestra, and have been since I heard flutist Leonie Wall play the solo parts in Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe Suite* (in 2001) as beautifully as I've ever heard anyone play them (Wall is now a member of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra). But Wall's playing is the rule, not the exception with this group. The National Youth Orchestra of Canada reminds us why we were drawn to classical music in the first place. They revive for us the heart and soul of this special art form, and present it with skill and the exuberant joy the young seem to have as their birthright.