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Symphony in C backs soloists at Kimmel Center

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By DAVE ALLEN

Thursday night's concert at the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater promised "Rising Stars" from the roster of Philadelphia's Astral Artists, backed by Camden's Symphony in C at the baton of Rossen Milanov. The program's consistently high caliber seems proof enough: They've risen, and they've arrived.

Astral's three featured soloists -- **harpist Bridget Kibbey**, soprano Angela Meade and pianist Di Wu -- have earned accolades on other stages: in solo recitals, chamber music concerts and, in Meade's case, in some of the most famous opera houses in the country. Astral, an organization devoted to developing young classical artists, provided the performers with the important, but very different, challenge of working with an orchestra. This feat requires balance and flexibility in addition to masterful technique, and all three soloists ably demonstrated those qualities.

Kibbey's poise heightened the tension of Sebastian Currier's "Broken Minuets," a fractured take on Baroque music which received its United States premiere Thursday. Her playing was firm and assured, and Currier's writing for harp worked against the instrument's swooning, rippling stereotypes.

In a hazy and ethereal soundscape, the murmuring dialogue between Kibbey and the all-string ensemble occasionally gave way to riotous outbursts. Milanov kept his gestures small, but elicited quick and pointed reactions, especially in the rapid-fire pizzicato at the start of the third movement and in the waves of tremolando that swept across the ensemble like a sudden storm. Kibbey complemented the orchestra's dark but richly colored sound, making a case for the vitality of contemporary music in the hands of young performers.

The luster continued in Meade's smooth, compelling rendition of Richard Strauss' "Four Last Songs." Wide leaps, even into the uppermost parts of her range, were handled cleanly and sounded effortless. Though she was occasionally

drowned out in her low range by the super-saturated orchestra sound, the audibility of every single word is ultimately less important than fine shaping and navigating a phrase's high and lows, and Meade showed mastery in both regards.

She put forth a beaming, flowering sound with tastefully deployed vibrato, and peaked with the orchestra at all the right moments, particularly in a tremendous swell at the word "thousandfold" in the third song, "Beim Schlafengehen." The orchestra provided excellent support for Meade's charmed singing, with notable solos by concertmistress Robyn Bollinger and first horn Audrey Flores and an overall warm, plush sound.

Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto brought the concert to a close, and Di Wu's account of the solo part was certainly the evening's most demanding and most labor-intensive. Wu's performance was solid and undoubtedly passionate, but her ardor occasionally threw off her unity with the orchestra.

The allegro first movement began shakily -- the result of too much tempo flexibility by Wu and not enough by Milanov and the orchestra players -- but both were on much more solid footing in the tremendously moving adagio and the dizzying finale.

A great performance of such a technically difficult piece should make the listener forget how many notes the soloist is playing. Wu achieved this, but the number of accents was harder to ignore. Too many sforzando attacks were hammered, leading to a lot of low-register thuds.

In contrast, Wu's high register playing was light and graceful, with an ease and delineation that almost sounded strummed, and her speed and power in cascading from the top of the keyboard to the bottom was staggering. Despite the early slips in timing, the orchestra provided capable accompaniment. The principal winds folded their solos nicely into Wu's sound during the adagio, and the whole ensemble maintained a very Russian sense of weight in the finale, though a few triplets in the strings spilled forth before falling into place.