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Youth Is Served Classically, With the Aid and Guidance of St. Luke's

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Daniel Bernard Roumain opened the show, playing his own works.



Julien August Leitner, 7, thanked the musicians of the Orchestra of St. Luke's after they performed his composition on Monday night.

Young composers in America are phantom figures. Music fans may hear or read about them on occasion, or perhaps make a sighting at a concert. But to the extent that it occurs, the phenomenon of young people expressing themselves by writing notated concert music is completely off the radar screen.

This cannot be good for the composers, or for classical music, one reason why the Young Composers Development Program of the Orchestra of St. Luke's seems absolutely essential.

This year, the program gave eight composers, ages 7 to 24, a chance to work with the composers Daniel Bernard Roumain and Joan Tower, and the musicians of the Orchestra of St. Luke's. On Monday night at the Schimmel Center for the Arts at Pace University, it was time to showcase the fruits of this year's class.

The evening opened with Mr. Roumain, wearing sneakers, his hair in long dreadlocks, sitting down at the piano to play two of his own "Hip-Hop Studies and Etudes." After receiving applause, Mr. Roumain, 33, grabbed a microphone and declared emphatically, almost defiantly, "I am a young composer!"

His example has clearly inspired the participants, who ranged widely in experience. Ozie Cargile II, 24, is a conservatory-trained composer whose work has been played by the Detroit Symphony. Vassili Makavos is a 16-year-old high school student with a wide array of musical interests. Julien August Leitner is a highly precocious 7-year-old from Portland, Ore., who was dressed in a suit and

tie and politely thanked the Orchestra of St. Luke's for the opportunity to hear his work performed.

Each piece was a vivid capsule of self-expression, often at impressive levels of accomplishment. "Kotka, Finland," by Daniel Aaron Barnidge, 22, used glassy harmonics in the strings and wispy piano figurations to convey a mood of icy stillness. "Distant Future Warning," by Kenny Grohowski, 22, insightfully combined dark Shostakovich-like harmonies with an edgy rhythmic drive. "Pint Sized Journey," by Aaron Paul Low, 23, played with genres and tried to work against the grain of a classical piano trio.

Each of the composers also spoke with Mr. Roumain from the stage, and what a breath of fresh air to hear them talk about their music.

David Harrington, 19, said he had written his piano quartet after waking from a nightmare. Mr. Makavos, who was not present, wrote in a program note that he had composed his "Opus 24" piano quintet "because of a bad friendship I had recently."

One imagines that a program like this will help demystify the work for other young students as well. The goal is obviously not that all of these composers go on to have major professional careers per se, but that they keep composing as part of their creative lives, and that the activity itself can be brought out of the shadows. On Monday night, at least, it seemed - excitingly - to be doing just that.