



top story

A Grand Homecoming: Piano Star Returns 10 Years After Centralia College Graduation

Sold Out Show: Charlie Albright Returns for His Fifth Benefit Show at Corbet Theater

By Brian Mittge / For The Chronicle Apr 11, 2017



Pete Caster /

Charlie Albright performs at the Corbet Theatre on Saturday evening in Centralia. The concert, "An Evening With Charlie" was held to benefit Centralia College music scholarships and the Charlie Albright Piano Fund.

At one point during his sold-out concert Saturday evening, Charlie Albright put his hand up to shade his eyes from the stage lights and peered out over the capacity crowd in Centralia College's Corbet Theater.

"I think I know most of the people in the audience," Albright said to laughter from the 500-some members of the audience. It was one of many easygoing conversational breaks during an electrifying two-hour piano concert by an international musical sensation who seemed just as happy to be playing for a hometown audience as his old neighbors were to be listening to him.

Albright, a Centralia College alumnus, has become a jet-setting musician since leaving Centralia for Harvard University 10 years ago, but on Saturday he was just Charlie as he played a mix of classical music, jazz, improvisations and a little rock 'n' roll.

The show had a spontaneous and relaxed feel. Albright mentioned several times that he wanted to keep the concert fun. He seemed to be picking songs to perform that appealed to him at the moment, and he admitted early in the show that he wasn't even sure which songs the printed program actually listed.

In keeping with that theme, he noted that for years he has played improvisations during his shows. On the advice of several mentors, he has recently begun asking for a series of random notes from the audience that he could use as a inspiration for, he said, "a hopefully not-so-random piece of music."

The audience called out four notes — A, E flat, D sharp ("oh, the same one!" Charlie said about the two different names for the same note) and G flat — which Albright played slowly at first, gradually adding chords and flourishes to create a grand never-before-heard theme in minor, then major keys.

A giant screen behind the piano, fed by cameras located around and above the stage, gave attendees a close-up view of Albright's hands as they flew up and down the keyboard.

CD Release

Wearing a buttonless white jacket over a black shirt and pants, Albright took time between his songs to explain the pieces he was playing and why he chose them.

He began the concert with two short pieces by the 19th century Austrian composer Franz Schubert, the impromptus 2 and 3 from Opus 90.

Albright described these pieces as "simple yet deep," and noted that Saturday marked the global release date for his latest CD: "The Schubert Series — Live — Part 1." It's the first in a three-disc series recorded live during a series of all-Schubert concerts in Boston, and marks his first commercial CD since 2011's "Vivace."

Albright, playing all the songs by memory, clearly felt the music deeply. He leaned his head down to within inches of the keyboard at times. After many of the pieces, he seemed to have to pull himself free from the keys, flinging himself back onto the bench, drawing a deep breath and throwing up his arms as the final notes rang through the hall.

After one particularly energetic performance, a solo version of "Blue Danube Waltz," he patted his forehead with a handkerchief.

In introducing that song, Albright noted that he first heard that particular arrangement in Australia — then joked that the first time he heard the famous tune itself was on a "Tom and Jerry" cartoon.

A Donation of Talent

The concert was a benefit hosted by the Centralia College Foundation. Albright donated his time and talents to raise money for the college. The foundation netted about \$14,500 from the show, said Julia Johnson, who organized the event. About \$10,000 will go toward music scholarships in Albright's name that will be given out at Centralia College over the next few years, she said. The remaining \$4,500 will go toward maintenance of the college's Charlie Albright Piano, on which the namesake performed during the show.

This is the fifth benefit concert Albright has performed at Centralia College since he graduated in June 2007 as a Running Start student with both his Centralia High School diploma and Centralia College associate of science degree.

Albright told the crowd that he was pleased to be back performing at his alma mater.

"This school is like a gem in our community," Albright said. "It's wonderful there are so many people here helping this gem shine."

Albright kept the evening light and conversational. He acknowledged his family in the crowd, including his parents and his girlfriend, Stella. He also thanked the Centralia College Foundation's Johnson by name.

'When in Rome'

Albright introduced "La Campanella," an Italian violin concerto arranged for piano by Franz Liszt, by saying parts of the song explode like target shooting. It's a challenge to play, he admitted, with nearly instantaneous jumps between octaves.

"There's a lot of hope involved in this piece. A lot of hope," he said as the audience laughed. "It depends on how tired you are, how many notes you miss."

While comparing Centralia College favorably to the Lincoln Center in New York, Albright announced that he would take advantage of an opportunity to play something he could never get away with when performing at that famous venue.

"I saw this on the internet, and we all know you should try everything you see on the internet," Albright said before playing a quick-tempo boogie by Liberace, with frequent calls of "Hey" contributed by the audience.

Before performing his final piece, "Turkish March" ("Which you also probably heard on 'Tom and Jerry'"), Albright described it as "Mozart on steroids."

After a standing ovation and repeated calls for an encore, Albright returned to the stage with one more quip alluding to the musical freedom he felt in his home town.

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do," he said, then paused dramatically. "Or at least what you can get away with. Here's 'Great Balls of Fire.'"

He sat down at the Steinway and ripped through the 1957 Jerry Lee Lewis hit, ending "An Evening With Charlie" in thrilling style.

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Brian Mittge is a columnist for The Chronicle.