

Review**Cleveland International Piano Competition:
Round One, Session Four (August 1)**

by Daniel Hathaway



On Thursday evening, 21-year-old Gerard Aimontche from Russia led off the session with music by J.S. Bach and Chopin. His intimate reading of the *Prelude in a* (WTC II) with its subtle crescendos and diminuendos starkly contrasted with a vigorous and highly articulated fugue. His performances of Chopin's e minor Etude (op. 25/5), b minor Scherzo (op. 54/4) and the A-flat Polonaise (op. 53) revealed his prodigious technique as well as his high level of musical sensitivity. His even playing in the Scherzo linked its disparate elements together and he capped it off with a brilliant *coda*. His Polonaise was proud and spirited. His left hand octaves in the mid-section were formidable. Aimontche is a player to keep track of as his interpretive powers mature.

US pianist Ben Kim, 30, began his set boldly with Frederick Rzewski's evocative *Dream* (2013), playing its insistent trills, forearm clusters and catalogue of nocturnal events with a keen ear for suspense and surprise. He deftly brought out the bass line and left hand theme that frequently go AWOL in Chopin's F Major Etude (op. 10/8), maintained tight rhythms and nailed the tricky ending. He ended his set with a strong, clean and finely-inflected reading of Mozart's F Major Sonata K. 332, playing staccato runs with weight and creating lovely phrases that feathered off on the ends. He tossed off the wild passagework in the finale fluently and immaculately. A nearly perfect set played with poise and authority.

The last two contestants of the evening put themselves out for display in big works. Polish pianist Julia Kociuban, 21, played little ones by Bach and Chopin on the way to Grażyna Bacewicz's thorny second sonata from 1953, a piece that linked up nicely with Chopin's "Torrent" Etude (op. 10/4). Fierce and mercurial at the beginning, bleakly lyrical in its middle movement, with a clanging toccata for its finale, it posed any number of challenges for Kociuban in terms of pacing, technique and rhythmic control, all of which she dispatched handily. Her own personality came through clearly in all her pieces, including the a minor Bach prelude and fugue (WTC II) with which she began. Energetic lines and suave syncopations in the prelude and a strong, well-articulated fugue promised a distinguished half-hour of playing, and she delivered.

Latvian pianist Andrejs Osokins, 28, ended the evening with a single work, Schumann's *Fantasie in C, op. 17*, conceiving the piece on a large scale and playing with fulsome tone. It's difficult to make the *Fantasie* sound coherent (it has the quality of a big, sprawling improvisation) and Osokins's emphasis on its grand pauses didn't work in its favor. He has the chops to play this repertoire with the requisite Schumannian grandeur, but this performance was marred by inconsistent dotted rhythms in the second movement and his tendency to overplay in large climaxes, making hammers ring on the strings. We look forward to hearing him again in different pieces in round two.

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