

Review

**Cleveland International Piano Competition:
Round One, Session Six (August 3)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Five pianists appeared on the Gartner Auditorium stage on Friday evening to complete the initial parade of twenty-eight competitors and bring the first round of the Cleveland International Piano Competition to a very interesting conclusion.

26-year-old Wenbin Jin from China brought the two sides of Robert Schumann's personality — the passionate represented by Florestan, the poetic by Eusebius — to life with an evocative performance of the *Fantasiestücke*, op. 12. His admirable playing (both poetic and passionate) was mitigated by his tendency to play repeated material in exactly the same way —

lingering on the first notes of phrases, pausing before the last, applying *rubato* in identical spots — so that his expressiveness sounded formulaic rather than spontaneous. His grand conception of *Ende vom Lied* was appropriately valedictory.

U.S. pianist Cahill Smith, 27, began his set with a strong, straightforward performance of J.S. Bach's a minor fantasia and fugue that had a fine sense of shape and destiny. He began the fugue subject *sotto voce* — a nice touch — and refreshingly varied his articulation. His wonderfully-conceived and executed playing of Mozart's D Major sonata (K. 311) was interrupted by the hiccups of two memory slips, possibly because of the large number of false cadences the mischievous composer slipped into the narrative, but Smith recovered admirably.

Kwan Yi (28, from the U.S.) brought sureness of touch and weighty *fortes* to his confident playing of Henri Dutilleux's *Le jeu des contraires* (Prelude No. 3). He followed with Brahms's *Seven Fantasies*, op. 116, producing by turns dreamy and stormy textures. But as the set of capriccios and intermezzos unfolded, one lost track of the special moments in the score — there were so many of them in Yi's playing and all of them seemed so precious that ultimately nothing seemed remarkable anymore. The pianist's habit of grunting before big chords was distracting.

French pianist François Dumont, 28, led off with a strong and arresting performance of J.S. Bach's third English suite, notable for its contrasts in dynamics and articulation and elegant in its ornamentation. His playing of Mozart's eighth sonata (K. 310) had character and profile even in its more aggressive moments. Dumont has a deep pocket of effects to

bring to his interpretations and he used a lot of them on Friday evening, including at one point a masterful, long crescendo that beautifully underscored the destination of the music.

Being last up in a round or a session isn't the best position to make a good impression, but German pianist Miao Huang, 29, blew away all the gathering clouds of ear fatigue with brilliant performances of Mozart, Corigliano and Chopin. Not bothering to mess around with the height of the bench nor given to ceiling-staring, Huang strode out, sat down and immediately put her hands on the keys for a thrilling and near-perfect performance of Mozart's D-major sonata, K. 311. Her playing of John Corigliano's hypnotic *Fantasia on an Ostinato* was full of drama and suspense; when the theme from Beethoven's seventh symphony finally assembled itself out of atomized musical particles, you suddenly realized that it had been there on a subliminal level all along. She used her final two minutes to breeze through Chopin's fluttery g-sharp Etude (op. 25/6) with a touch so light you forgot that hammers were striking strings.

At the end of round one, it was clear that this is the most accomplished and musically savvy group of contestants in recent memory. Round two will either confirm first impressions or show different sides of twenty-eight fine pianists.

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