

**Review****Cleveland International Piano Competition:  
Round Two, Session Two (August 3)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Saturday afternoon's session (the longest of the round with six players) opened with a meditative reading of J.S. Bach's *Prelude in b-flat* (WTC I) by Nino Kotrikadze, followed by a deliberate and well-articulated fugue. The rest of her program was devoted to a vivid excursion through the many vicissitudes of Schumann's *Kreisleriana*. Both dramatic and poetic moments were given an attractive haze of pedal (the composer would have approved), and Kotrikadze made major events of its climaxes. Her tendency to play big added color and passion to Schumann's already eventful narrative, though a few outbursts of sound seemed out of scale. She played some furious passagework late in the piece with impressive technique.

Qi Xu is only 18 and small in stature but he plays with mature authority and command. He has an excellent feel for musical architecture and brought clarity of touch and a sure sense of rhythm to his performance, but while his technique is up to the task, his tone at this point in his career seemed a bit underpowered for Brahms's third sonata, the single work on his second round playlist. Lines sounded thin at the treble end of the keyboard, though his left hand was strong at the bass end. All his performance needed to be completely satisfying was more weight of sound.

Gehui Xu (no relation) followed with impressive readings of music by Chopin, Schumann and Babajanian. Her Etude in C (Opus 10/1) was a model of poise and balance. Her *Symphonic Etudes* showcased her full tone and clear handling of textures as she neatly managed Schumann's quixotic surges and pointed up his signature dotted rhythms. Arno Babajanian's frankly noisy *Poem* from 1966 was rife with big octave runs contrasting with quiet chords, scampering figures, a nattering cell phone (unintentional) and vigorous, toccata-like gestures featuring clusters of notes with offbeat accents. Xu put the piece across with such commitment that applause broke out before the last note had faded.

Another impressive set followed as Jiayan Sun took on two *Art of Fugue* movements, Chopin's e minor Etude (op. 25/5) and Beethoven's last piano sonata. His Bach was frankly pianistic and his articulations in *Contrapunctus I* worked nicely. *Contrapunctus IX* took off at a dizzying clip (this is one that the Swingle Singers like to scat) but Sun's

fingers never tangled. His Chopin featured a fine transition from its yippy opening figures to its relaxed middle section — and back again. But Sun's outstanding performance was in Beethoven's Op. 111, distinguished for its pacing and volatility in the first movement and for its smoothly-managed transitions from the arietta theme to its variations in the second. Not an easy task, but Sun did it with classy musicality. Less musical was his habit of sniffing before phrases, something that detracts from his otherwise excellent playing.

No sooner had we put our sox back on after Arseny Tarasevich-Nikolaev's first round performance, than he blew them off again with stunning performances of J.S. Bach's G Major *Partita* and four of Kapustin's eight *Concert Etudes* (op. 40 from 1984). Brilliant runs — more gestures than melodic entities — marked the *Preambulum* of the Bach, followed by a suave *Allemande*, a bright, cheerful *Corrente*, a genial *Sarabande* and graceful *Minuetto*. Tarasevich-Nikolaev crowned the set with a spirited *Passepied* and a well-controlled (not fast but festive) *Gigue*. Then he served up brilliant readings of Kapustin's jazzy-bluesy *Concert Etudes* nos. 1, 2, 6 and 7. Tarasevich-Nikolaev has a prodigious technique but keeps his body quiet — it's all in the hands and forearms. His ability to make a big, bright, weighty sound without banging is a treasure.

That was a tough act to follow, but Annika Treutler closed the afternoon with distinction in performances of Lachenmann's *Five variations on a theme of Franz Schubert* and Schumann's *Fantasie in C*. Lachenmann took her all over the keyboard while Schumann required her to explore many musical moods. Her playing was robust yet lucid and brought a lengthy session and day to a satisfying conclusion.

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