

Review

**Cleveland International Piano Competition:
Semi-Final Round, Day One (August 6)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Before beginning the Semi-Final Round which would bring eight pianists to the Gartner Auditorium stage in afternoon and evening sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday, CIPC executive director Pierre van der Westhuizen invited the audience to treat the one-hour performances as actual concerts and “applaud and cheer” when they felt so moved, an invitation that produced interesting and varied results from the sizeable crowd.

Ruoyu Huang (24, China, left) was first to perform on Tuesday afternoon, beginning with French music — two Debussy Preludes and Ravel's *La Valse* — then went on to Schumann's *Davidstänztänze* and Balakirev's *Islamey*. Debussy's *Minstrels* and *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* presented Huang with the opportunity to paint two different impressionistic scenes that might have been even more vivid had he brought out color and rhythm in the first and played with more sweep and legato in the second. His gloriously virtuosic reading of *La Valse* was suitably decadent with dramatic ebb and flow and his Schumann visited every emotional level from the dreamy to the passionate. His *pianissimo* playing was lovely. Festive and characteristic, Huang's performance of the Balakirev — an unabashed show-piece without a lot of musical content — was a flight of sheer pianism.



Jin Uk Kim (29, South Korea) began with a well-profiled, nicely-structured reading of Leon Kirchner's *Interlude II*, following it with a big-handed, weighty performance of Scriabin's third sonata, which drew applause after its second movement. He ended the set with six of Liszt's *Grandes études de Paganini*, impressing with his sure touch and even tone even in highly athletic runs. But all six of these over-the-top pieces — usually played singly, often as encores — were way too much for one sitting and satiety set in early on even as the tireless performer continued to pull off one dazzling digital feat after another.



On Tuesday evening, Jiayan Sun (23, China) led off with Schumann's *Fantasia in C*, a distinguished performance that brought clarity and lucidity to a piece that frequently hovers in a musical miasma. Sun knows exactly what to bring to the surface and what to push to the middleground and background; he lets the music breathe and controls its progress beautifully. Perhaps the last movement needed more forward movement, but his concept was otherwise thoroughly convincing. Two Lisztian pieces that behaved like fragments followed; he played the fourth Mephisto Waltz (subtitled “a little atonal bagatelle”) and *En Rêve* with dry wit. Three Debussy Preludes (*Bruyères*, *Général Lavine – eccentric* and *Feux d'artifice*) were replete with color and rich with surprises. He finished with a rhythmically compelling and vivid reading of Bartók's *Out of Doors* suite, a delightful finale to an impressive mini-recital.



Arseny Tarasevich-Nikolaev (20, Russia) ended the evening with another superb and completely confident performance, this time of Scriabin, Ravel and Rachmaninoff. He wears his formidable technique lightly and isn't afraid to lead off with subdued repertoire that sneaks up on you before he unleashes his full interpretational power. Scriabin's *Five Preludes* and fourth sonata, as well as the glassy, murky textures of the first two movements of Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit* served that purpose, while the third movement, *Scarbo*, became a vehicle for more showmanship and an opportunity for Tarasevich-Nikolaev to develop enormous, roiling textures full of dark color and deep strength. The concluding Rachmaninoff set began with a flexible and playful *Polka de W.R.* (the composer's father's initials), a gentle *Prelude No. 5* (op. 23) and a bravura performance of the fifth prelude from op. 32 featuring masterful repeated chords. A brooding reading of No. 3 and a huge performance of No. 6 from the *Moments Musicaux*, op. 16 with an even bigger ending in the second piece continued to confirm this pianist's remarkable skill and musicianship. He's one of the few players in this competition who can draw *fortissimos* from the piano that have solidity and weight without harshness.

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