

**Review****Cleveland International Piano Competition:  
Final rounds with The Cleveland Orchestra (August 9 & 10)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Roger Mastroianni's photo captured the mood of expectation as the final four pianists in the Cleveland International Piano Competition waited their turns to perform concertos with Stefan Sanderling and The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall on Friday and Saturday evenings — the last stop on the way to the top.

Two of the contestants chose Tchaikovsky's first concerto, performances which were wisely distributed between the two evenings. François Dumont was up first on Friday, Jiayan Sun first on Saturday, and if cataloging the differences between their interpretations didn't amount to comparing apples to oranges, it was at least an exercise in distinguishing between McIntoshes and

Galas. Both performers brought abundant technique, fine musicianship and a clear game plan to their tasks. Choosing between them was a matter of taste, and a task we were happy to leave to the jury.

On Friday, François Dumont played with consistent strength and utter confidence, bringing a muscular tone to *tuttis* that clearly penetrated and sometimes even overbalanced the orchestra (though it was fun to finally hear some passages that are normally only a visual experience). Though Sanderling and Dumont were slightly out of phase for a few moments near the beginning, orchestra and pianist soon got on the same train and produced a thrilling account of Tchaikovsky 1.

On Saturday, Jiayan Sun gave us a nuanced view of the piece, varying his touch to produce colorful strength of tone one moment and delicate filigree the next and exploring a wide range of dynamics. Sun's was a highly kinetic performance, with considerable body movement and armsmanship. A few fast passages nearly got away from him, but he reined his ponies in just in time.

Arseny Tarasevich-Nikolaev followed Tchaikovsky on Saturday evening with Rachmaninoff's second concerto — a piece the composer himself played in Severance Hall in 1923 and 1942. Though tonight's contestant had only played it once before with an orchestra,

his performance was skillfully controlled and masterful, his tone rich and dark. Tarasovich-Nikolaev was intent on keeping things moving in the opening movement, but was beautifully relaxed and self-possessed in the last (*Allegro scherzando*), not allowing himself to wallow in its big tune. The performance lacked only the patina of age and experience.

Second to play on Saturday was Stanislav Khristenko, who brought an individual take on Brahms's first concerto to the Severance Hall stage. Notably slow tempos in the first two movements gave him lots of room to emote, sometimes at the expense of musical structure and flow, but his playing was rich, sonorous and expressive, and he brought the concerto home with bursts of magnificent playing in the final *Rondo*.

Certainly all four players could have used more exposure to the orchestra than they got in 65 minutes each of rehearsal time, but that's not far from the industry standard for concerto put-togethers. All could have benefitted from a more responsive presence on the podium, and vague signals from the conductor made even The Cleveland Orchestra sound uncharacteristically ragged from time to time.

Though the jury would consider all the performances that went before as well as the final concertos, it would still be a thorny task to rank these four pianists — who came to this moment through a winnowing process that was itself difficult because of the remarkably high quality of the twenty-eight contestants in this year's draw.

*Photo by Roger Mastroianni.*

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