

### The Cooper International Piano Competition: a conversation with winner Tony Yike Yang

By Mike Telin



Last weekend, fifteen year-old Tony Yike Yang from Toronto played Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto at Severance Hall with The Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of Jahja Ling on his way to winning the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition. As first-prize winner, Yang was awarded \$10,000 and a full four-year scholarship to the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. We spoke to him recently about his experience in the competition, his life as a young pianist, and his aspirations for the future.

*Mike Telin: First, congratulations on winning the Cooper. What was it like to play with The Cleveland Orchestra?*

Tony Yike Yang: It was so much fun. I was actually a little bit nervous before the rehearsal, because I wasn't sure if we were going to be together. But the orchestra is amazing, and Jahja Ling, the conductor, is so good with these things. When they first played, it was so soothing. They just bring you into the music, so you forget about everything. So I wasn't nervous when I played for the competition at Severance Hall. They're just so good.

*MT: Did you meet Jahja Ling prior to the rehearsal?*

TYY: We had about forty minutes to meet with him. We discussed our interpretations and worked on collaborating with the orchestra.

*MT: Did he give you any specific advice?*

TYY: Watch the conductor [laughs]. Just flow with the music and keep steady.

*MT: What did you learn through the experience of the competition?*

TYY: To get a lot of rest. I played last in the last three rounds, and they were all late at night. I took long naps during the afternoon. I think that's what I learned the most. Be rested, and don't practice so much when you get there. You should have it ready before you get there. Take your time, just think about the music and don't over-practice.

MT: *Why did you choose Tchaikovsky?*

TYY: It's really grand. Considering that it was in such a beautiful hall with such a big orchestra, I thought Tchaikovsky would work really well. I've always wanted to play it since it's such a major piece. The contrasts are amazing. It's so well-written. The orchestra parts and piano parts really have dialogue and fit well with each other.



*Tony Yike Yang with Jahja Ling and  
The Cleveland Orchestra.  
Photo by Roger Mastroianni.*

MT: *How long have you been working on it?*

TYY: It's been kind of an on-and-off thing. Total, maybe four months. I was busy for the past few months, because I've been recording for preliminary rounds of competitions, preparing my Juilliard pre-college audition, which required more solo pieces. I really worked on the concerto in the last few months and a month during Christmas break.

MT: *With whom do you study at the Young Artists Performance Academy of the Glenn Gould School?*

TYY: James Anagnoson [Dean of the Glenn Gould School].

MT: *How long have you been there?*

TYY: I've been there I think six years. It's also my last year. I'm going to Juilliard pre-college this coming September.

MT: *When did you begin playing piano?*

TYY: When I was five.

MT: *Why do you enjoy it?*

TYY: It brings something special to life. It's so amazing, the different sounds the piano can make. It's so lively and contains so many emotions and feelings.

MT: *Are your parents going to New York with you when you go to Juilliard?*

TYY: We're thinking about not moving to New York and staying in Toronto and going every weekend because Toronto is pretty nice.

MT: *Are your parents musicians and do you have any siblings?*

TYY: My mom played the piano, she actually graduated from a conservatory in China. She teaches piano. We have an examination system here, so she teaches for that. My dad doesn't know anything about music. I don't have any siblings.

MT: *I'm assuming you want to be a professional pianist.*

TYY: Yes. I would really like to do a mixture of chamber music, things with orchestra, and solo performance as well. Maybe also accompany voice. I think it's good to have a mixture. Also, maybe a mixture of genres. Minor in jazz or something, maybe. I think it's good to have a good mixture of genres so your playing contains diversity. Your interpretation can be accepted by many people. That's important.

MT: *Were you involved in any of the master classes during competition?*

TYY: I had one lesson with Professor Dan Zhaoyi from the Shenzhen Arts School. But that was it.

MT: *Do you have a favorite composer?*

TYY: That's so difficult. I like a bunch of composers. Recently I've been focusing a lot on Chopin. Chopin is really, really difficult to play well and put your own self in it. The way he writes connects to people differently.

MT: *What do you do in your spare time?*

TYY: I really like to play video games. Hang out with friends and go to a park or watch movies. Sometimes, I get to swim or play badminton. I haven't really played basketball or volleyball because of hand issues and the possibility of injuries.

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