

**CIPC Young Artists:
Junior Division, Semifinal Round (May 18)**

by Daniel Hathaway



For those who advanced to the semifinal round, the performance order remained the same as in the original draw.

ZIAOXUAN LI

First to play was Ziaoxuan Li (13, China), with a portfolio of pieces by J.S. Bach (*Prelude & Fugue in B-flat* from *WTC I*), Robert Schumann (*Kinderszenen*) and Rodion Shchedrin (“Invention in Two Parts” and “Basso Ostinato” from *Polyphonic Notebook*).

Playing with almost staccato touch, Li conceived of the Bach prelude as a virtuosic cadenza with free rhythm. His articulation and pacing of the fugue brought out its playful qualities.

Schumann’s “Scenes from Childhood” are charming, innocent little vignettes that Li played fluently but made a bit too much of. Laying on rubato, he altered the shape of simple melodic lines (in pieces like “Dreams,” some notes almost grew fermatas), while other movements took on an almost Lisztian weight.

Shchedrin’s two polyphonic essays gave Li plenty of opportunity to show off his strength and keyboard agility, and he served up a lot of both. The first is a little garden where tritones flourish, the second a darkly witty series of arresting musical gestures over a recurring bass figure. Li attacked both pieces with aggressive gusto — and with enough sheer muscle to generate some unlovely sounds.

Li is interesting to watch. His windups before beginning a piece and his releases seem almost choreographed and don’t have much connection to the music. He could add a lot

to his stage presence with an occasional smile, and the audience might appreciate more than a nod from the bench when they applaud at the end of a piece.

ELLIOT WUU

15-year-old American pianist Elliot Wu stuck close to the piano canon with works by J.S. Bach (the e-minor prelude and fugue from *WTC I*), Beethoven (the *32 Variations in c*, WoO 80) and Chopin (the oddly joined-at-the-hip *Andante spianato et Grande polonaise brillante*, op. 22).

Wuu's Bach prelude was graceful and poignant and he made a very natural transition into its faster section. The fugue was lickety-split in tempo, but clean and even in rhythm.

Beethoven's attractive variations (why didn't the composer like them enough to give them an opus number?) are really a big chaconne. Wu played them with unerring rhythm and fine sensitivity of touch, and connected them with good attention to the architecture of the whole piece. He voiced the few very soft variations beautifully. This was a completely mature performance.

Expressive and elegant, Wu's first Chopin piece featured a nicely varied treatment of the repeated chord sequence toward the end. His polonaise was poised and proud, though clouded at times with too much pedal. In both pieces, he played with color and weight and achieved a big volume of sound without harshness of tone.

LEONID NEDIAK

At 12, Canadian pianist Leonid Nediak was one of the two youngest contestants in the draw. Though he crept onstage timidly, once he was seated at the piano Nediak became thoroughly self-possessed. Facial expressions of sheer bliss were in evidence as he played music by J.S. Bach, Chopin and Rachmaninoff.

Nediak led off with everybody's first foray into *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the C-Major prelude and fugue. Playing straightforwardly, he made only subtle dynamic changes in the prelude to underline important harmonic arrivals. He played the fugue cleanly, though with an odd hiccup in the middle of the subject.

Nediak's assured performance of Chopin's *Ballade No. 1 in g*, op. 23 featured bursts of strength and fury — as well as a few nicked notes and missed bass pitches. His otherwise impressive playing of the ensuing *Polonaise in f-sharp*, op. 44 was episodic, with some layering issues and erratic rhythms.

Leonid Nediak took the final work, Rachmaninoff's "Alla Marcia" (*Prelude in g*, op. 23), at a brisk tempo, playing on the front edge of the beat. As in the Chopin, the top line sometimes got lost as deeper layers of the music came to the fore, but it's easy to predict

that as he adds a few years of experience and a few pounds of weight, Nediak will be a pianistic force to be reckoned with. All the seeds are planted.

MAXIM LANDO

12-year-old American pianist Maxim Lando began the evening semifinal round on Monday with only two works, J.S. Bach's E-Major prelude & fugue from *WTC I*, and Schumann's sprawly *Carnaval*, op. 9.

Lando adopted a quick tempo for the Bach prelude, playing with more pedal than necessary, but gracefully tucking in all its fast runs. Though expressive, at times the tempo of the fugue wandered slightly from the underlying beat.

Schumann's *Carnaval* ("Masked Ball") — 21 little pieces that encode references to Carnival characters and to his friends — is a hefty assignment for a young player, and Maxim Lando deserves a big pat on the back for his remarkably lucid traversal of its many moods and textures. His bravura opening statement led to a cheerful waltz and subsequent movements that were in turn piquant, lyrical, playful and lively. Varying his touch to suit the moment, he produced a variety of colorful, evocative images as the piece unfolded.

No pianist gets through *Carnaval* unscathed, but Maxim Lando emerged at the end with fewer abrasions and contusions than many performers twice or three times his age. He was brave to take it on, and his spirit burned bright straight through to the end.

JAE HONG PARK

South Korean pianist Jae Hong Park, 15, brought music by J.S. Bach, Debussy and Schubert to his semifinal round.

Dramatic in his stage presence, Park adopted a tortured facial expression throughout Bach's B-flat minor prelude, though he played it straightforwardly and without lifting his hands off the keys. More attention to arrival points would have pointed up the architecture of the fugue.

Park's facial contortions also accompanied Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin," though his playing of this lovely music was touching and lyrical.

The big work on Park's playlist was Schubert's C-Major *Fantasie*, nicknamed "The Wanderer" after the song it's based on, but that's just as apt a description of the loose structure of the piece. Park played its opening gestures cleanly and rhythmically, and the ensuing section gently, with lovely nuances. His playing gradually caught fire in the arresting cadenza-like passages that lead to the fugue. Park switched on his auxiliary

power for the fugue in a weighty, visceral performance that gave it a feeling of high drama.

WILLIAM YANG

13-year-old American pianist William Yang almost snuck onstage to end the semifinal round. Entering upstage of the piano, he settled onto the bench for compelling readings of two works each by J.S. Bach and Chopin.

Yang chose contrasting pairs of *WTC* preludes and fugues to begin. The G-Major prelude sped by in a near-blur (a bit fast to take in all the details, but Yang didn't drop a note). His staccato articulation of the fugue — and its *sotto voce* ending — was unusual but it worked. By contrast, the B-minor prelude and fugue were slower than you usually hear them. In the prelude, Yang chose to stress the bass line, which he played with detached articulation. A big half-cadence led to a large crescendo in the second half. The lengthy fugue was even slower, making trills sound like written-out notes. Yang stressed the sighing motive of the subject almost to the detriment of the musical line.

Two similarly contrasting Chopin pieces followed. Yang's reading of the *Ballade No. 3 in A-flat*, Op. 47, was clean, graceful and nuanced. He played colorful, rich *fortes* and brought out inner voices that often go unheard. In the *Ballade No. 4 in F-minor*, Op. 52, Yang made splendid transitions from the tender to the explosive and back again. In both Chopin works, William Yang found different colors in each range of the piano and maintained those hues through all dynamic levels. A fine ending to the Junior Division semifinal round.

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