

Cooper International Violin Competition gets underway in Oberlin this weekend

by Mike Telin



Later this week, 22 young violinists representing seven countries will arrive in Oberlin to participate in the third edition of the [Cooper International Violin Competition](#). Events begin with the semi-final round on Saturday, July 25 at 1:30 pm in Warner Concert Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory, and continue into next week when three finalists will play concertos with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra in

Severance Hall on Friday, July 31 at 8:00 pm. (See our concert listings for details about the semi-final, concerto and recital rounds that will determine who plays in the finals.)

“The level of playing of the applicants has always been extremely high, but this year the field is pretty incredible,” competition co-director David Bowlin said during a telephone conversation. “To get to play with The Cleveland Orchestra is an extraordinary opportunity and everyone knows that, so the degree of interest in the Competition is very high.” Additionally, the winner will also receive a cash prize of \$10,000.

What advice does Bowlin have for the young violinists who range in age from thirteen to eighteen? “I think the best attitude young players can have toward any competition is to treat it as a learning experience. I’d tell them ‘you’re not going to win all of the competitions that you enter. More to the point is that you are going to learn. You’re going to meet people, and learn from them. You’ll hear other young people who are doing what you’re doing. You’ll also meet experienced judges who will provide you with helpful feedback, and that’s what’s most important.’”



Bowlin said he feels that the Cooper Competition does a good job of presenting itself as an educational experience with its master classes and the students' interaction with the judges. "We make that an important part of why they come to the Cooper, beyond the possibility of playing with TCO and winning the monetary prizes."

And what will the jury be listening for throughout the competition? "It's about musical maturity beyond just technical ability. We're not only looking for someone who plays well technically, but someone who also understands the music, and what it's emotional content can communicate."

Conversations with Competitors

Maya Anjali Buchanan



I reached 15-year-old Maya Anjali Buchanan by telephone at the Aspen Festival in Colorado where she is studying with Paul Kantor.

"I used to go to the Cleveland Institute of Music a lot to study with him when he was teaching there. This summer I'm in a violin octet, so I have rehearsals, coachings, and studio class once a week where Mr. Kantor's students perform and everyone makes suggestions. I'm also practicing a lot."

During the school year, she travels from her home in Rapid City, South Dakota to Chicago, where she is an Academy Fellow at the Music Institute of Chicago in the studio of Almita and Roland Vamos. "Usually one of my parents goes with me. If I'm there for only a couple of days, my dad goes with me, but when I'm there for a longer period, like a week, my mom will go."

"At the Institute we have orchestra, theory classes, and enrichment, which is basically master classes and lectures. We also have chamber music. I play in the Omorfia Piano Trio. I love playing chamber music. The group also went to the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition, which was really fun."

In addition to being a prizewinner at many competitions, she was also featured in 2013 on NPR's *From The Top*. "That was such a great experience. Everyone was so nice. It was held at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. We all went to the [National Music Museum](#) and saw the collection of old instruments. We got to play some of them too."

Why does she compete? "It's really good experience and the criticism from the judges is always very helpful. There's also the exposure that you get if you do well, which is always a nice bonus, but I do enjoy getting feedback from everyone. The prize money is always helpful but the opportunity to perform with The Cleveland Orchestra is fantastic."

"There are a couple of things I am looking forward to. A lot of my friends from the Music Institute are also going to be at the Competition, and that will make it a lot of fun. They are my best friends, and we'll all be there to support each other. And again, I think the learning aspect of it will be great. But it really is mainly those two points. I just want to grow and get better, which is the reason that I do everything that I do. I also love Cleveland, and of course I would love to play with The Cleveland Orchestra. That would be great."

Regarding her competition repertoire, Maya said one piece she really loves is the Tchaikovsky concerto. "It's such a great piece, but I also love the Wieniawski *Faust Fantaisie*. It's a newer piece for me, and I'm still discovering things about it. That may be why I'm enjoying it so much."

How does Maya fit in her academic studies? "My dad home schools me, but we have been trying some online schools too, and that has worked out pretty well. I needed more structure with my academics, and the online part really helped. It makes me complete things on time at the risk of getting an F." Her favorite subject? Biology. "Both of my parents are doctors, so that might be part of the reason."

How does she like living on a ranch in the Black Hills National Forest? "It's gorgeous. I basically live in the middle of nowhere, but that's great. It's in the middle of the woods and it's surrounded by all of this beauty."

Joshua and Nicholas Brown

I reached 15-year-old Joshua Brown and his 18-year-old brother Nicholas at their home in Gurnee, Illinois.

Both are students of Almita and Roland Vamos at the Music Institute of Chicago where they are Rachel Barton Pine Scholarship Fellows. Each year the MIC Academy selects two students for that scholarship who are recognized for talent, positive attitude, and financial need.

Their sister Isabel is also a violin student at MIC. “With three violinists in the same family it always sounds a like a conservatory around the house,” Nicholas joked. “We all started at a pretty early age. I was three and Josh and Isabella both started at two.” Are their parents musicians? “No, not at all. Dad plays a little guitar but that’s basically it.”



Joshua Brown



Nicholas Brown

What do they enjoy about attending MIC? “It’s nice to meet other kids who have the same passions and aspirations,” Joshua said. “I just want to have a career playing the violin, whether it’s in an orchestra or as a soloist. As long as I can remember that’s what I wanted to do.”

Nicholas agreed. “Like Josh said, it’s really great being around all the other kids who share the same interests. I also like the fact that it is a small school, which makes it a very supportive environment. And you can develop a personal relationship with all of the mentors, whereas at a larger school you can end up getting lost in the mix.”

Each week the three siblings make the trip south to Chicago on Fridays for private lessons with the Vamoses. On Saturdays they attend the academy, where they study music theory, play in orchestra, and participate in master classes.

The brothers also enjoy playing chamber music. Joshua is a member of the Fortis Piano Quartet. “I think performing chamber music is a little less stressful than solo playing because you have three or four members, sometimes more, in a group. It’s also fun to play with friends.”

Nicholas is a member of the Premiere String Quartet. “At the beginning of the year they placed people into chamber music groups, and I really like being in a quartet. Throughout the year there are also competitions we can enter, and they also set you up with gigs, which is great.”

What do they enjoy about competing? “It’s fun for me to play pieces when I am nervous, because when you’re able to play under stress, and you play well. It’s very satisfying,” Joshua said. “I enjoy using competitions as goals to work toward,” added Nicholas. “I feel like I work through repertoire faster, and bring it to a different level than if I were just learning it on its own. If I have a competition I’m working toward, I have more of a short-term reason to bring the repertoire up to a higher level.”

Both look forward to competing in the Cooper for an opportunity to perform with The Cleveland Orchestra. “The prize money is great, but playing with The Cleveland Orchestra would be a dream come true,” Nicholas said. “As a classical musician, playing with an orchestra is something to aspire to. We don’t often get that chance except through a competition. And playing with an orchestra is important to your growth as a musician.”

As with any competition, repertoire choices are made in order to meet the stated criteria of the competition. But do they have any favorite pieces? “I’ve been playing the Waxman *Carmen Fantasie* for a while,” Joshua said. “I’ve performed it a lot and I really like it, so I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to play it again.” Nicholas pointed out that some of his selections came from suggestions from his teacher. “Others I’ve been playing for a while,” he said, “like the Ysaÿe third sonata. It’s one of my favorite pieces and I was happy to have the opportunity to use it for this competition.”

For the concerto round, Joshua has chosen Shostakovich’s first concerto, while Nicholas has selected the Tchaikovsky. “It is true that there are countless interpretations of the Tchaikovsky, and people are very passionate about their favorite. The only thing I can do is to figure out the interpretation that I want, and play it as convincingly as possible — and hope people like it.”

In order to juggle their music studies with academics, Joshua and Nicholas are home schooled. Nicholas enjoys art and literature, while Joshua enjoys math and reading.

What do they do when they have the time to relax and kick back a little? “I like to watch and play basketball, and spend time with friends and family,” Joshua said. “I like to draw,” Nicholas added. “I also like to run and do outdoor activities in general.”

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