



Archives

2009 Cleveland International Piano Competition blog entries from July 22–August 10 from clevelandclassical.wordpress.com

Contributors: Daniel Hathaway, Mike Telin, Lorraine Angus & Sam Hubish

Lots of Repertory for Rounds I and II

Posted on July 22, 2009

Whether you plan to follow the proceedings of the Cleveland International Piano Competition as an attendee, as a listener over WCLV, through CIPC's webcast or via written reports in the Plain Dealer or on ClevelandClassical.com's blog, be advised: a tsunami of piano music is about to wash over you in the next two weeks.

Today we'll take a look at the scheduled repertory for the first two rounds, when all 34 contestants will be performing. The playlist includes an impressive total of 145 works by 37 composers.

The rules for rounds one and two require candidates to choose pieces in each of five categories and spread them out over the course of their two performances in front of the jury. The categories: an original work or group of works from the Baroque period (no transcriptions allowed!); a Chopin etude; a Classical sonata (Schubert doesn't count); a work or group of works by Chopin, Brahms or Schumann (choose one); and a work or group of works composed by a single composer after 1950.

In the Baroque slot, the only composers to be favored with performances by the candidates are J. S. Bach, G. F. Handel and Domenico Scarlatti. Handel gets short shrift — only his Chaconne in g will get played this time around. Bach's in second place with eleven Preludes and Fugues from the Well Tempered Clavier (both books), three Partitas and two Toccatas. The clear numerical winner is Scarlatti — whose sonatas were Horowitz's favorite curtain raiser — with 24 unique sonatas out of the 600 or so he wrote to be represented in the competition. With that many to choose from, you'd not expect many duplications, and in fact only two have attracted more than one player (K. 17 will be played twice, K. 87 three times).

The Chopin Etude department will yield performances of 22 separate pieces from op. 10 and op. 25. Out of opus 10, no. 1 will be heard six times, no. 5 and no. 8 thrice each, and no. 10 twice. One contestant will offer all the op. 25 etudes in the fourth of the five required categories,

but seven pianists will interpret op. 25 no. 10 and five no. 11.

In classical sonata territory, the triumphant — the only — composers are Beethoven (12 separate sonatas) Haydn and Mozart (tied at 5 performances each). Beethoven's Op. 109 is the favorite by that composer with four scheduled performances. Three pianists each have opted for op. 2, no. 3, op. 81a ("Les Adieux") and op. 110, while two contestants have both signed up for op. 111. Mozart is represented by five different sonatas, however only two of Haydn's many pieces in the genre are in the works: Hob. 16 no. 20 will be played by two performers and no. 50 by three.

The required group of compositions by Chopin, Brahms and Schumann will inspire performances of numerous pieces. In Chopin's case, there are Mazurkas (2), Scherzos (3), Sonatas (2), Ballades (3) and Nocturnes (2), a fantasia, a rondo, a barcarolle and the Andante Spianato & Grand Polonaise, op. 22, as well as some of Liszt's transcriptions of Chopin's Chants Polonais (file that under Chopin or Liszt?).

Brahms gets airtime for three of his sonatas, four performances of his Paganini Variations and two readings of the Fantasies op. 116, while three pianists plan to entertain us with Schumann's Kreisleriana, and two each will offer up the Davidsbundlertänze, Carnaval, the Fantasiestücke and Fantasy in C, op. 17. Single performances of the Symphonic Etudes and Variations on a Theme of Clara Wieck round out the list.

Then, almost one by one, enters the after 1950 crowd: Adès, Babbitt, Bartok, Berio, Carter, Crum, Deutilleux, Ginastera, Gubaydulina, Kalabis, Kapustin, Karamanov, Kopelman, Leighton, Ligeti (4 different pieces), Messiaen, Nan, Perle, Radzinski, Ruiz, Schnitge, Sosjko, Takemitsu (same piece by two performers), Vine (ditto), Walker and Yun.

We'll do a similar survey for the third round once we know who's still on the island. Meanwhile, prepare to enjoy the flood of piano music that's about to flow from the Bolton Theatre at the Cleveland Play House! — Daniel Hathaway

Mike Telin contributed to this report.

The Contestants

Posted on July 24, 2009

In Wednesday's post, we took an analytical look at the repertory with which this year's contestants plan to dazzle us and win over the jury during the first two rounds. Today, we'll run some stats on the contestants themselves. Since pianists don't have world rankings like tennis players, batting averages like baseball players or other significant measurements of their status coming into a competition like this one, we'll go for a bit of a demographic overview instead.

Ages

The contest is open to pianists between 18 and 30. None of the contestants come in at the lowest end of that range; the youngest is Chun Wang (China) at 19. Two performers, Dmitri Levkovich (Canada) and Martina Filjak (Croatia) qualify as CIPC's senior citizens, each competing this year at the outer age limit of 30. In between, the age spread is evenly distributed with five 20 year-olds, four each at 25 and 26, three each at 21, 22 & 24 and pairs of competitors are 23, 27, 28 and 29

Birthplace

Korea ranks first as the birthplace of eight contestants. The US, Russia (including one candidate who lists his birthplace as the USSR), China and Ukraine gave rise to a quartet of native pianists each. All the rest represent unique points of origin: Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Poland, Turkmenistan, Venezuela and Vietnam. Life after birth is complicated. While most Russian- Korean- and United States-born players, as well as some Europeans, have stayed close to their native soil, there are some exotic combinations like the Ukrainian-born Canadian citizen and the Vietnamese born Australian citizen, both of whom live in the US, the Korean native/citizen who lives in Ireland and the Japanese native/citizen who lives in Russia. Then there are the dual citizens (one born in the US, who is a dual citizen of Australia, where he lives, and another who is a dual citizen in India but who lives in the US).

Studies

Many in our pool of contestants, especially the Russians, Chinese and Americans, stuck close to home for their professional training, but the Koreans were world travelers, choosing to study in Ireland, the US, Germany, Austria and Italy. The eighteen contestants who opted for training in the United States at one point or another largely migrated to the east coast for work in New York City (Juilliard, Manhattan School), Rochester (Eastman), Philadelphia (Curtis), and Boston (New England and Boston Conservato-

ries), though others found their way to schools in Texas and Kentucky. Two contestants studied in Cleveland: Dmitri Levkovich (Canada) earned three degrees and Marina Radiushina (USA) won her Artist Diploma at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Returnees

There are four familiar faces in the 2009 roster. Dmitri Levkovich was a semifinalist in the 2007 Cleveland Competition, at which Hoang Pham (Australia) won the Mozart Prize, and Istvan Lajko (Hungary) was a participant. Maria Masycheva (Russia) reached the semifinals in Cleveland in 2001.

Track Records

Even the youngest pianists are old hands at competitions, having placed or participated in a long list of piano scrimmages in all corners of the globe: the Cliburn in Fort Worth, the José Iturbi (both in Los Angeles and Valencia), the Tchaikovsky & Richter in Moscow, the Liszt in Utrecht, the Queen Elizabeth in Brussels, the Busoni in Bolzano, and contests in Paris, Sydney, Cologne, Geneva, Pretoria, Hannover, St. Petersburg, Barcelona, Seoul, Shanghai, New Orleans and Dublin, not to mention Andorra, San Marino and Sioux City. Readers who would like to explore the international phenomenon of music contests in great detail should visit the web site of the World Federation of Music Competitions.

Profiles

Individual profiles of the contestants are posted on CIPC's web site, along with photos and lists of the individual repertory choices each candidate has made. One contestant Erik Zuber (USA) has withdrawn, leaving thirty-three in the main draw at press time.

Sunday's post will take a look at the judges — the Jury and Junior Jury — for the 2009 competition. — Daniel Hathaway

Mike Telin contributed to this report.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the 2009 Juries

Posted on July 26, 2009

Don't expect instant results from the eight judges on the jury of the Cleveland International Piano Competition after each pianist finishes his or her set. Analogies to sports competitions like figure skating begin to break down a bit here. You won't know who's going to advance to the eight spots in the semifinals until the first two rounds are completed on August 2nd, but in the meanwhile,

lots of notes are going to be taken on all of the notes that are going to be played.

Cleveland's 2009 judges originally numbered nine, but one had to withdraw due to a family illness. The octet charged with adjudicating the performances of 32 contestants is a distinguished, international panel of pianists who have been around the block a number of times both as contestants themselves and as jurors at other competitions.



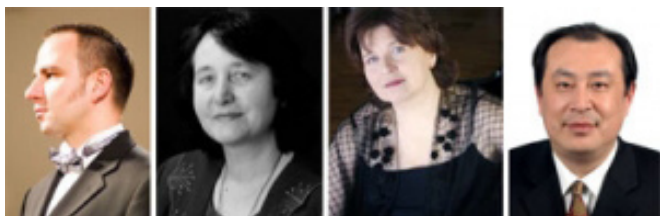
left-right: Frankl, Bonatta, Humpherys, Kang

Some highlights:

Peter Frankl (UK and Hungary) has been a frequent soloist with the Cleveland Orchestra since the Szell era. In addition to serving as head of the jury, he'll give a master class on August 7 at CIM. Andrea Bonatta (Italy) is a Brahms specialist and serves as the artistic director of the Busoni Competition in Bolzano and as a vice president of the World Federation of International Music Competitions.

Douglas Humpherys (US) is chair of piano at the Eastman School, won the gold medal in the first Gina Bachauer Competition and has been a juror at Bachauer and Hilton Head (as well as a member of the screening jury who selected the 35 pianists originally invited to Cleveland in 2009).

South Korea's Choong-Mo Kang is a Bach specialist who has served on juries worldwide. Serbian/Croatian jury member Dorian Leljak, who has taught at Yale, has a similar track record both as competitor and juror. Sontraud Speidel (Germany) studied with Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, and in addition to serving as juror for a long list of competitions, won a Boston Symphony prize for modern music.



left-right: Leljak, Speidel, Yoffe, Zhang

Dina Yoffe (Israel & Germany), who also served on the screening jury and will give a master class

on August 7, is a veteran juror in Cleveland, having sat on the panel in 2007. Zhang Jin (China) has prepared many students for world wide contests and has received several conservatory and government awards for pedagogy in China.

Shadowing the work of 'The Eight' will be 'The Seven' — a Junior Jury of young pianists from the region first established by executive director Karen Knowlton at the 2007 Cleveland International Piano Competition after seeing a similar program produce interesting results at a competition in Denmark. The second class of Junior Jurors includes Peter Douglas (16, Dalton High School), Margret Erlandsdottir (15, Hawken School), Linda He (14, Mayfield High School), Arianna Körting (14, West Geauga High School), David Mamedov (15, Mason High School), John Rady (17, Strongsville High School) and Roger Zou (14, Solon High School).

The jury is still out on whether the older or younger jurors will turn out to be the more formidable critics as the drama of competition unfolds. We'll find out soon.

In the meantime, Bulgarian pianist Evgeni Boshanov has withdrawn from the competition, leaving 32 performers to draw lots at the opening ceremonies Monday at 5 in Mixon Hall at CIM. — Daniel Hathaway

Arrival Day: They're here!

Posted July 28, 2009



When thirteen is your lucky number. Evgeny Brakhman (Russia) gets to put off his first round performance until Wednesday afternoon. Behind (L-R) WCLV's president, Robert Conrad, CIPC board president Rand Curtiss, jury chairman Peter Frankl and CIM president Joel Smirnoff. Photo: Sam Hubish

CIPC executive director Karen Knowlton looked relieved a few minutes after five o'clock on Monday when thirty-two of the thirty-three contestants were neatly arranged on chairs on the Mixon Hall stage at CIM, ready to draw for their slots in the competition schedule.

"I call this hell day", she admitted after being introduced by WCLV's Robert Conrad. The contest's beloved *materfamilias* reported only two glitches in a cliffhanger day when nearly three dozen pianists were scheduled to descend on Cleveland from multiple points of embarkation: one contestant was stranded in New York due to a flight cancellation and was being driven in by friends from Eastman, and jury chief Peter Frankl's luggage was apparently still in Helsinki. Not bad!

Following greetings from board president Rand Curtiss and CIM president Joel Smirnoff, Frankl gave the competitors a little motivational speech, pointing out that he had come in twelfth in the Queen Elizabeth competition half a century ago (Vladimir Ashkenazy was no. 1) and had walked the streets of Brussels thinking his career was over. "But I'm still here, and I'm still playing!" Other dignitaries on the stage were quick to point out that a few household names like Thibaudet and Hewitt didn't make it to the top in previous Cleveland contests either.



*Who's on first? Anna Shelest (USA) reacts to drawing the opening slot on day one.
Photo: Sam Hubish*

Then the drawing. Two members of the CIPC board had come up with a clever alternative to the usual numbers-in-the-fishbowl routine. Contestants were called up in alphabetical order to pluck white keys off a mockup of a piano keyboard. The numbers, underneath the keys, determined when they would play in the first round (and, in retrograde order, in the second). The lucky (or unlucky) number 1 was finally drawn by Anna Shelest (USA). The missing contestant, due to arrive late that evening, will be eternally grateful to Joel Smirnoff, acting as her proxy, for drawing a number in the teens.

After a well-provisioned reception, it was either off to practice or sleep —many contestants were recovering from overnight international flights. To sleep or perchance to dream.

The draw for rounds one and two is up on CIPC's web page. Here's the schedule for Tuesday, July 28. Come along to the Bolton Theatre at the Play House (\$10 per session), listen live on WCLV, 104.9 FM, or view the live web cast. We'll be back tonight and tomorrow morning to reflect on the first two sessions. — Daniel Hathaway

1:00 pm — Anna Shelest (USA): Chopin's Etude in B Minor, Op. 25, No. 10, Ligeti's Etude No. 10, (Der Zauberlehrling) & Beethoven's Sonata in E Major, Op. 109. 1:35 pm —Hoang Pham (Australia): J.S. Bach's Partita No. 4 in D Major, BWV 828 & Chopin's Scherzo No. 4 in E Major, Op. 54. 2:10 pm — Olga Kozlova (Russia): Domenico Scarlatti's Sonata in B flat Major, K. 202, Beethoven's Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111 & Chopin's Etude in A Minor, Op. 25, No. 11 ("Winter Wind"). 3:00 pm — Jae Weon Huh (Korea): Chopin's Etude in C Major, Op. 10, No. 1, Takemitsu's Rain Tree Sketch & Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57 (Appassionata). 3:35 pm — Yekwon Sunwoo (Korea): J.S. Bach's Prelude and Fugue in B flat Minor, WTC I: 22, Chopin's Etude in A Minor, Op. 25, No. 11 ("Winter Wind") & Beethoven's Sonata in E flat Major, Op. 81a, (Les Adieux). 4:10 pm — Kyoko Soejima (Japan): Mozart's Sonata in D Major, K. 576, Chopin's Etude in C Major, Op. 10, No. 1 & Andante Spianato and Grand Polonaise Brillante in E flat Major, Op. 22.

7:00 pm — Dmitri Levkovich (Canada): Domenico Scarlatti's Sonatas: K. 45 in D Major & K. 17 in F Major, Beethoven's Sonata in D Minor, Op. 31, No. 2 ("Tempest") & Chopin's Etude in G flat Major, Op. 10, No. 5 ("Black Key"). 7:35 pm — István Lajkó (Hungary): J.S. Bach's Toccata No. 5 in E Minor, BWV 914, Beethoven's Sonata in E Major, Op. 109 & Chopin's Etude in E flat Major, Op. 10, No. 11. 8:10 pm — Maria Masysheva

(Russia): J.S. Bach's Toccata in F Minor, BWV 910, Chopin's Etude in F Major, Op. 10, No. 8 & Gubaidullina's Chaconne. 8:55 pm — Sean Chen (USA): J.S. Bach's Prelude and Fugue in B Major, WTC II: 23, Beethoven's Sonata in E Major, Op. 109 & Chopin's Etude in C Minor, Op. 25, No. 12 ("Ocean"). 9:30 pm — Chun Wang (China): J.S. Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G Minor, WTC I: 16, Mozart's Sonata in B flat Major, K. 333 & Chopin's Etude in A flat Major, Op. 10, No. 10.

Top of the Draw: Round 1, Session 1

Posted July 28, 2009



This analogy is going to break down soon, but I'm discovering that the opening rounds of a tennis tournament and a piano competition have a lot in common. You get to witness the strengths and weaknesses of new players (he's going to have trouble with his serve; she's having problems balancing the voicing on this piano...) and you have the opportunity to see how grace operates under fire (who's going to clutch and double-fault at match point; who's going to lose control of the tempo in the final presto). And you get to hang out in a temporary village of enthusiasts that also resembles a medieval jousting tournament. As the crowd assembled at the Play House this afternoon, we saw a lot of people we knew we'd find here, and it was fun to catch up on inside talk.

Of course, one on one combat isn't the name of the game at the Cleveland International Piano Competition, so we'll let the comparison rest there. Still, after hearing six pianists in the very first round this afternoon, we've already identified some players we want to watch as the competition progresses, both to see if some hold on

to the very positive impression they gave today and to see if others can relax, open up and show themselves off to better advantage in their second appearance.

The standout on Monday afternoon was Kyoko Soejima (Japan), who grabbed our attention from the first notes of her stylish and smiling performance of Mozart's D Major Sonata, K. 576, and went on to make a fine impression with real, developed and audience ready performances of Chopin's Etude op. 10, no. 1 and the Andante Spianato and Grand Polonaise in E-flat. Hoang Pham (Australia) delivered a version of Bach's long Partita in D that was remarkable for its clarity and self-possession (if a bit quirky in matters of ornamentation and articulation) and gave a similarly crystal clear account of Chopin's Scherzo in E, op. 54. Olga Kozlova (Russia) hovered purposefully over the keyboard and brought amazing volumes of sound out of Steinway No. 2; it will be interesting to hear her in different repertory (her Beethoven Sonata op. 111 was hugely wrought, or should we say somewhat overwrought).

Anna Shelest, the lucky contestant who drew the opening slot in the first round, played a good set of Chopin, Ligeti & Beethoven op. 109, a bit overpedaled, perhaps through nerves. We want to hear her again. Yekwon Sunwoo (Korea) also seemed a bit tight, but demonstrated a fine sense of musicality in Beethoven's 'Les Adieux' Sonata. Jae Weon Huh (Korea) sounded young and less experienced in his first outing, producing a Beethoven 'Appassionata' Sonata which was intense but uncontrolled, but his choice of Takemitsu's impressionistic Rain Tree Sketch II in the first round made a nice contrast to all the Beethoven and Chopin.

Not much repertory is being repeated in this competition, so it was fun to hear two versions of Chopin's 'Winter Wind' Etude in the same afternoon. Olga Kozlova whipped up a Russian maelstrom, while Yekwon Sunwoo's hibernal breeze was more restrained.

Everybody here, of course, has fine piano chops. You don't get this far in your career if you don't. Past that, it's fun comparing playing styles (assisted by the new video projection above the stage which shows the players up close from four different angles). Some sit on the edge of the bench (there were two to choose from) and reach far forward. Some, like Olga Kozlova, sit close and hunch up over the keys. Some play flat fingered, others curved, some toward the front and some toward the back of the keys. And there will be 27 more to compare soon. —Daniel Hathaway

Program for July 29: Round One, Sessions Three and Four

Posted July 29, 2009

1:00 pm — Esther Park (USA): Schnittke's Improvisation & Fugue, Beethoven's Sonata in c, op. 111. 1:35 pm — Evgeny Brakhman (Russia): J.S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue in f, WTC I:12, Mozart's Sonata in C, K. 330 & Chopin's Etude in C, op. 10, no. 1. 2:10 pm — Pallavi Mahidhara (USA/India): J.S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue in C, WTC II, 1, Chopin's Etude in f, op. 10, no. 9 & Schumann's Fantasiestücke, op. 12. 3:00 pm — Zhang Zuo (China): Haydn's Sonata in G, Hob. XVI:40, Chopin's Etude in F, op. 10, no. 8 & Ginastera's Sonata No. 1, op. 22. 3:35 pm — Martina Filjak (Croatia): Haydn's Sonata in c, Hob. XVI:20, Berio's Wasserklavier, Feuerklavier & Luftklavier (Six Encores) & Chopin's Etude in b, op. 25, no. 10. 4:10 pm — Yunqing Zhou (China): J.S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue in B, WTC II:23, Chopin's Etude in C, op. 10, no. 1 & Brahms's Variations on a Theme by Paganini.

7:00 pm — Anzhelika Fuks (Ukraine): Sosjko's Sofija Kijevsjka, J. S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue in b-flat, WTC II:22 & Mozart's Sonata in E-flat, K. 282. 7:35 pm — Gerhard Vielhaber (Germany): Beethoven's Sonata in D, op. 10, no. 3 & Chopin's Etude in b, op. 25, no. 10. 8:10 pm — Michael Brown (USA): J.S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue in C, WTC II:1, Beethoven's Sonata in F, op. 54, Perle's Six Celebratory Inventions (excerpts) & Chopin's Etude in c, op. 10, no. 12 ('Revolutionary'). 8:55 pm — Kwan Yi (USA): Beethoven's Sonata in C, op. 2, no. 3 & Chopin's Etude in a, op. 10, no. 2. 9:30 pm — Kuok-Wai Lio (China): J.S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue in b, WTC II:24, Haydn's Sonata in E-flat, Hob. XVI:49 & Chopin's Etude in F, op. 10, no. 8.

More people to watch: Round 1, Session 2

Posted July 29, 2009



Tuesday night's draw, though determined by lottery, defied randomness and produced an interesting lineup of pianists beginning with one of the two oldest contestants, Dmitri Levkovich (30, Canada), then proceeding down the age ladder (27, 26, 20) to one of the youngest, Chun Wang

(19, China). These five are people to keep an eye on during the second round, and each for different reasons.

Levkovich was a semi-finalist in Cleveland's 2007 contest and he proceeded to completely own his 30 minute slot last night. You could tell that he was both a veteran and a candidate who was dedicated to winning this time around. Every moment of his Scarlatti (Sonatas K. 45 & 17), Beethoven (Sonata in d, op. 31, no. 2) and Chopin ('Black Key' Etude in G-flat, op. 10, no. 5) was planned and controlled to the last detail. Impressive.

Hungary's István Lajkó played a strong and clearly articulated set of Bach (Toccatto No. 5 in e), Beethoven (Sonata in E-flat, op. 109) and Chopin (Etude in E-flat, op. 10, no. 11), though his performance was a bit tightly wrapped and he lost some digital control toward the end. Let's see if he plays outside his personal box in the next round.

Maria Masycheva (Russia) returned to Cleveland, where she was a semifinalist in 2001, for Bach (Toccatto in f), Chopin (Etude in F, op. 10, no. 8, which should be subtitled 'Flying Fingers') and an angry-sounding soviet-era piece, the Chaconne by Sofia Gubaidullina. Her playing was stylish and seemingly effortless until the final work, when she put her whole body into the action. At 26, she's a veteran as well as a player with room to grow. Check her out in round two as well.

The evening ended with the lower end of the twenty-somethings. Just when the ears were beginning to get a bit weary, the USA's Sean Chen provided a stimulus package with expressive Bach (Prelude and Fugue in B, WTC II), lyrical and well-shaped Beethoven (Sonata in E, op. 109) and a thrilling voyage through Chopin's 'Ocean' Etude (op. 25, no. 12).

Occupying an even less promising time slot in the evening was China's Chun Wang, who walked onstage at 9:30 pm. Unassuming and daring to draw the audience in through subtlety and quiet elegance, he gave a lyrical performance of Bach's Prelude & Fugue in g, WTC I, followed by a handsomely shaped account of Mozart's Sonata in B-flat, K. 333 and a fine finale in Chopin's Etude in A-flat, op. 10, no. 10. The audience was riveted by the Mozart, giving Wang a lengthy round of applause immediately following the Sonata.

Repertory strategy becomes an interesting topic for discussion after last night's session. When you have only thirty minutes to tell us who you are, what pieces do you use to put yourself forward?

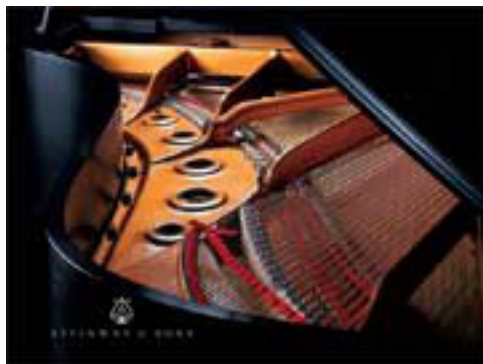
The great thing about the Cleveland Competition is the second chance everyone gets to do this all over again with different repertory in round two.

Chime in on this topic, dear readers. Let us know what you think as round one continues. It's only \$10 to witness each of today's sessions at the Play House and seats are available. If you can't make it down to 8500 Euclid, listen live to every note on WCLV, 104.9 FM. Or point your browser to CIPC's web site for the live webcast. Yesterday, several hundred people used that option, clicking in from the US, the UK, Japan, Korea, Canada, Mexico, Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine, Australia, Germany, China, Israel, Venezuela, Austria & Turkey. Cleveland International Competition indeed!

—Daniel Hathaway

A Special Afternoon: Round 1, Session 3

Posted July 29, 2009



Wednesday was one of those truly special occasions where from the very opening of the Schnittke Improvisation & Fugue you knew could settle into your seat for an afternoon of good music making. Everybody today came through with unique personalities.

Esther Park (USA) delivered a rousing performance of the Schnittke, though she also demonstrated her delicate side in a really beautiful performance of the slow movement of Beethoven's Sonata op. 111.

Evgeny Brakhman (Russia) made beautiful color changes in J.S. Bach's Prelude & Fugue in f, WTC I, but his personality really came through in Mozart's Sonata in C, K. 330. Here, he looked and sounded as though there were absolutely nothing in the world he would rather be doing than playing Mozart at that moment.

Pallavi Mahidhara (USA/India) was completely elegant in her Bach (Prelude & Fugue in C, WTC II) and Chopin (Etude in f, op. 10, no. 9), but we really got to know her in her outstanding perfor-

mance of Schumann's Fantasiestücke.

After intermission came 20-year old Zhang Zuo (China) to turn in the first performance of Haydn in the competition, showing a nice sense of line. She also did a wonderful rendition of Chopin's Etude in F, op. 10, no. 8, but her performance of Ginastera's first sonata was absolutely outstanding with a healthy tempo and evenness of sound in the slow movement from top to bottom of the keyboard. It won her the first callback bow of the contest (even though this isn't strictly allowed, the audience decided to do it anyway!) Overheard behind me: "I'm not really fond of pieces you can't sing, but that was a really good performance."

From the very first notes, Martina Filjak (Croatia) took a stylish approach to Haydn's Sonata in c minor. She showed wonderful control over the first of Luciano Berio's Encores (Wasserklavier), and turned in athletic performances of the other two (Feuerklavier, Luftklavier).

Last up was China's Yunqing Zhou with nice approaches to Bach (Prelude & Fugue in b, WTC II) and Chopin (Etude in C, op. 10, no. 1) and his performance of Brahms's Paganini Variations left you smiling at the end of a long afternoon. It was fun to watch and he invited you to take part in his world.

I don't want to go out on a limb and say that one player was better than another in the third session. They all had something to say, and that made for a truly enjoyable afternoon. It doesn't always happen this way.

—Mike Telin

Program for July 30: Round 1, Sessions 5 & 6

Posted July 30, 2009

1:00 pm — Sangyoung Kim (Korea): Haydn's Sonata in c, Hob. VXI:20, Chopin's Etude in g sharp, op. 25, no. 6 & Dutilleux's Choral & Variations (Sonata). 1:35 pm — Krithyan Benitez (Venezuela): J.S. Bach's Toccata in e, BWV 914, Chopin's Etude in C, op. 10, no. 1 & Beethoven's Sonata in E-flat, op. 81a (Les Adieux). 2:10 pm — Martin Labazevitch (USA): Haydn's Sonata in C, Hob. XVI:50, Radzynski's Mazurka (2008) & Chopin's Etude in b, op. 25, no. 10. 3:00 pm — Anna Bulkina (Russia): Scarlatti's Sonatas K. 11 in d and K. 239 in F & Brahms's Paganini Variations, op. 35. 3:35 pm — Edward Neeman (USA/Australia): Beethoven's Sonata in C, op. 2, no. 3, Babbitt's It Takes Twelve to Tango & Chopin's Etude in b, op. 25, no. 10.

7:00 pm — Marina Radiushina (USA) Beethoven's Sonata in a-flat, op. 110 & Chopin's Etude in a, op. 25, no. 11 ('Winter Wind'). 7:35 pm — Jun-Eun Lee (Korea): Yun's 5 Klavierstücke, Chopin's Etude in A-flat, op. 10, no. 10 & Beethoven's Sonata in E, op. 109. 8:10 pm — Alexander Osminin (Russia): Beethoven's Sonata in C, op. 2, no. 3 & Chopin's Etude in a, op. 25, no. 11 ('Winter Wind'). 8:55 pm — William Youn (Korea): Haydn's Sonata in C, Hob. XVI:50, Chopin's Etude in b, op. 25, no. 10 & Yun's 5 Klavierstücke. 9:30 pm — Soo-Yeon Ham (Korea): Scarlatti's Sonatas K. 208 in A & K. 209 in A, Haydn's Sonata in C, Hob. XVI:50 & Ligeti's Etude No. 6, Book I (Automne a Varsovie).

An Evening of Contrasts: Round 1, Session 4

Posted July 30, 2009



Tuesday evening's quintet of pianists inspired a variety of reactions in a tradition-heavy choice of repertory leavened by two post-1950 pieces and the different sounds of the contest's two Steinways. The stagehand was busy swapping out no. 1 (a mellow, bass rich New York instrument) with no. 2 (a brighter in the treble — and under some fingers rather steely — instrument made in Hamburg). It was interesting to see which piano each performer chose.

The evening began with Piano. No. 1 and Ukrainian pianist Anzhelika Fuks' presentation of Sosjko's Sofija Kijevsjka, an impressionistic soundscape that began with dramatic low notes and progressed to chord clusters and pointillism. (Anybody know anything about this composer and work? Please share!) Fuks' Bach (the b-flat minor Prelude & Fugue from WTC II) was momentarily derailed in the fugue by the first real memory slip we've heard so far. Mozart's Sonata in E-flat, K. 282 sounded subdued. Fuks, who has an impressive resume, seemed to be having an off night.

Gerhard Vielhaber (Germany, Piano No. 2) began with the strangely wonderful Beethoven

Sonata in D, op. 10, no 3, choosing not to dwell on its musical and formal curiosities but delivering a straightforward performance that made good sense and inspired a few shouts of 'bravo'. Chopin's Etude in b, op. 25, no. 10 is a big octave extravaganza that kept Vielhaber's hands full but not overwhelmed, and the lyrical middle section was handled beautifully.

Michael Brown (USA) wisely chose to play a well-organized mini-recital on Piano No. 1. Beginning with a singing performance of Bach's Prelude & Fugue in C (WTC II) featuring well articulated runs and an energetic fugue, he turned next to a healthy sounding reading of Beethoven's Sonata in F, op. 54 characterized by sureness of touch and voicing (great octaves!) and very little use of pedal. And now for something completely different: George Perle's Six Celebratory Inventions (marking milestones in the lives of fellow composers Ernest Krennek, Henri Dutilleux, Olivier Knussen, Gunther Schuller, Richard Swift & Leonard Bernstein). Amusing, witty and treacherous for the pianist, Brown played them lovingly and with astonishing accuracy and attention to dynamics. The finale to this tiny but impressive recital: Chopin's 'Revolutionary' Etude, op. 10, no. 12. My notes read simply 'Wow!'

After intermission and yet another switchover to Steinway No. 2, Kwan Yi (USA) and Kuok-Wai Lio (China) brought the evening to a conclusion with very different approaches to classical repertory.

Yi was a formidable machine, playing Beethoven's Sonata in C, op. 2, no. 3, and Chopin's Etude in a, op. 10, no. 2 (nonstop line in the right hand) with faultless technique, high energy and quirky body language.

A tall and gangly 20-year old, Lio was the picture of poetic elegance, sitting far back from the keyboard and choreographing every release (at one point, his left hand hovered in the air while the right delivered a mini-cadenza). He began with a sensitive, clear performance of Bach's Prelude & Fugue in b minor (WTC II) notable for some overarticulations in the fugue subject, followed by a nuanced and well-shaped reading of Haydn's Sonata in E-flat (Hob. XVI:49). He ended with a spacious and impressive trip through Chopin's Etude in F, op. 10, no. 8, beautifully presenting the left hand melody against faultless filigree in the right.

Each pianist's performance can be revisited thanks to a partnership between the Cleveland International Piano Competition and InstantEncore. Wednesday evening's session should be posted later today.

—Daniel Hathaway

Full of Surprises: Round 1, Session 5

July 30, 2009

One of the most interesting aspects of competitions is that you never know what to expect when you take your seat for a session.

Thursday afternoon, we heard contestants 23 through 27 out of 33, and there were surprises.

To our ears, Korean pianist Sangyoung Kim's performance of the Choral et Variations from the Dutilleux Sonata may have been the afternoon's surprising highlight. The most substantial work in the required 'Written after 1950' category, Kim expressively negotiated its opening theme, explored interesting color changes and was quite accurately all over the keyboard in the final toccata-like section. She began the set with Haydn's Sonata in c (Hob. XVI:20), paying good attention to detail, noticing important harmonic events and producing clear and expressive runs. Too bad that the slow movement and parts of the finale got muddled over by over use of pedal. Not surprisingly, the audience forgot to applaud. That's Haydn's fault for writing an ambiguous ending! Kim's second piece was Chopin's g-sharp Etude, a well-rendered rivulet of thirds.

Anna Bulkina (Russia) surprised us in another way by producing a formidable amount of piano sound in Brahms' Paganini Variations. Her specialty seems to be the big gesture, but she sounded much more musical in quieter variations where full-hands virtuosity wasn't required and she was free to express more of her inner self. Not that she wasn't capable of Brahms' technical demands — there were plenty of moments to admire in the less boisterous variations. Bulkina launched her set with two Scarlatti sonatas.

Venezuela's Krithyan Benitez went for the big gesture this afternoon rather than bothering too much with detail. As a result, counterpoint in his Bach Toccata (e minor) sounded a bit scattery, his right hand skipped over notes in the Chopin (Etude op. 10, no. 1), and his Beethoven (Sonata in E-flat, Les Adieux) totted up a surprising number of inaccuracies, but the Beethoven sounded appropriately valedictory.

Martin Labazevitch (USA) brought his big piano style (and his big hands) to Haydn (Sonata in C, Hob. XVI:50), producing nicely shaped runs but rebounding off the keys to create motives with surprising accents. His second piece, the Radzynski Mazurka (written for a piano competition), brought forth some smiles with its brooding, chromatic roulades over the kind of harmonies you hear when the orchestra strings are tuning

up. Chopin's Etude in b, op. 25, no. 10 ended Labazevitch's half hour on stage, treating us to a stormy opening and closing separated by a beautifully lyric interlude.

Edward Neenan (USA/Australia) began with Beethoven's Sonata in C, op. 2, no.3, surprising us with a pumped up version that sounded like something much later than Beethoven's opus 2. He had everything under his fingers, but the concept seemed out of scale with the material. Neenan surprised us with the choice of his second piece, Milton Babbitt's atonal 'It Takes Twelve to Tango' (twelve tones, get it?) Not particularly ingratiating (Babbitt never cared about being liked), the piece served as an refreshing entremets in the afternoon. Like Labazevitch, Neenan ended his set with op. 25, no. 10, literally launching an attack on the piece, then playing with so much rubato that a friend asked me if it was another version of the work. Additionally surprising: a huge pause before the slow section, then even more rubato!

Interestingly (surprisingly?) audience reactions this afternoon were varied. We heard admiring remarks about performances we found dubious or wrong-headed, and others seemed to discount performances we really liked. What did you think, listeners, whether live, on the radio or on the web? Please take a moment to comment below.

We'll see what further surprises are in store this evening, when the final five competitors in the first round show off their stuff.

—Daniel Hathaway

Getting to Know You (all 32 of you) — Round 1 ends



Photo: Sam Hubish

As of Thursday evening, all thirty-two contestants have had their first thirty minutes to introduce themselves musically to the two juries, the audience at the Bolton Theatre and, through WCLV

broadcasts and CIPC webcasts, to thousands more listeners and viewers in Northeast Ohio and around the world. And we're happy to note that as of midnight Thursday, more than 2000 people have read this blog's CIPC coverage.

The last five to be heard in the first round were Marina Radiushina (USA), Ju-Eun Lee (Korea), Alexander Osminin (Russia), William Youn (Korea) and Soo-Yeon Ham (Korea), and their playlists last night gave us two chances to hear Chopin's 'Winter Wind' Etude and Yun's 5 Klavierstücke in the same session.

Since there's no physical opponent in this contest, performers can be said to be contending against their repertory in putting their best fingers forward. In all six sessions, Beethoven has proven to be something of a stumbling block to everyone who chose his music over Haydn or Mozart in the required classical sonata category. The one size fits all approach doesn't really work with LVB, but some players have approached opus 2 with the same strategy they might use for opus 110.

Happily, last night's session opened with Marina Radiushina's interpretation of opus 110, a strong, colorful performance of arching lyricism, beautifully voiced and balanced. Ju-Eun Lee followed with a less idiomatic performance of opus 109 (some passages sounded more like Chopin, balances went awry and a memory glitch left a blemish on the 3rd movement). Alexander Osminin took us back to op. 2, no. 3 in a solid, restrained reading full of nuance and detail, scaled appropriately to the musical material.

Pianists who didn't choose Beethoven mostly went for Haydn. On Thursday evening, William Youn and Soo-Yeon Ham, both of Korea, chose the same piece, the Sonata in C, Hob. XVI:50, and were scheduled back to back. Youn's performance was 'big' Haydn featuring heightened articulation and strong rhythmic play. Ms. Ham's was a more intimate and delicate version, but both performers caught the composer's wit and humor in markedly different ways.

Chopin: the 'Winter Wind' Etude was positively chilling in Marina Radiushina's version. Alexander Osminin's interpretation bent the tempo here and there for expressive purposes. Ju-Eun Lee's account of op. 10, no. 10 might have paid more attention to inner voices, something William Youn's reading of op. 25, no. 10 (b minor) did very well in the slow section.

What have we left out? Soo-Yeon Ham's impressive and resonant performance of Ligeti's 'Au-

tomne a Varsovie' ended the evening on a fine note. Then there was the Yun, an academic work of a certain age which got two very different interpretations from Ju-Eun Lee (angular and edgy) and William Youn (lyrical and expressive).

So—sixteen hours of piano music are behind us and sixteen more to come as the contestants enter the second round on Friday afternoon. One friend asked, "are you ready for eight more days of this?" Bring it on! —Daniel Hathaway

Program for July 31: Round 2, Sessions 1 & 2

Posted July 31, 2009



1:00 pm – Anna Shelest (USA): Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E flat Minor, WTC I: 8, Chopin's Sonata No. 3 in B Minor, Op. 58. 1:40 pm – Hoang Pham (Australia): Beethoven's Sonata in E flat Major, Op. 7, Chopin's Etude in G flat Major, Op. 10, No. 5 (Black Key), Adès, Darknesse Visible (1992). 2:20 pm – Olga Kozlova (Russia): Schumann's Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17, Ligeti's Etude No. 13 (L'escalier du diable). 3:15 pm – Jae Weon Huh (Korea): Scarlatti's Sonata in F Major, K. 17, Schumann's Kreisleriana, Op. 16. 3:55 pm – Yekwon Sunwoo (Korea): Ligeti's Etude No. 10, (Der Zauberlehrling), Brahms's Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5. 4:35 pm – Kyoko Soejima (Japan): Bach's Partita No. 5 in G Major, BWV 829, Vine's Sonata No. 1 (1990).

7:00 pm – Dmitri Levkovich (Canada): Chopin's Barcarolle in F sharp Major, Op. 60 Scherzo No. 2 in B flat Minor, Op. 31, Vine's Sonata No. 1 (1990). 7:40 pm – István Lajkó (Hungary): Ligeti's Musica Ricercata, Nos. 1-3, 7-10 Etude No. 10, (Der Zauberlehrling) Chopin's Fantasy in F Minor, Op. 49 Waltz in A flat Major, Op. 42. 8:20 pm – Maria Masycheva (Russia): Haydn's Sonata in E Major, Hob. XVI: 31, Brahms's Seven Fantasies, Op. 116. 9:15 pm – Sean Chen (USA): Schumann's Kreisleriana, Op. 16, Carter's Caténaires (2006). 9:55 pm – Chun Wang (China): Schumann's Fantasy in C Major, Op. 17, Messiaen's Le loriot (Catalogue d'oiseaux, Book I: 2).

About those first impressions: Round 2, Session 1

Posted July 31, 2009



As we noted earlier, one of the abidingly wonderful aspects of CIPC is that everybody has a second chance to prove themselves. Now that we've reached the second round and returned to the top of the batting order, it's time to revisit our first impressions and see whether our original thoughts have changed after a second hearing. On Friday afternoon, the original six players lived to perform again.

Kyoko Soejima and Yekwon Sunwoo confirmed our original impressions, but in different ways. We were riveted by Soejima's stage presence and presentation of Mozart's Sonata in D and two Chopin works in Round 1. Her second visit to the stage for J.S. Bach's treacherous and infrequently played Partita in G kept her high in our estimation. Accurate, clean and stylish, this was the work of a pianist who thinks like a harpsichordist and achieves expression through articulation and subtle delays of attack rather than through rubato and other manipulations of tempo. The prelude was dashing and fast, the Allemande spacious, the Corrente sparkling, the Sarabande expressive through rhythmic control, the final Gigue playful with a strongly articulated subject and a neat traversal of the complicated counterpoint in the second strain. Her second piece was Carl Vine's Sonata (to be played again this evening by Dmitri Levkovich), which begins with bluesy chords, then becomes attractively bipolar as it takes the player through all sorts of technical vicissitudes (including a phenomenal presto section where the player's hands fly through the same note patterns two octaves apart). Soejima brought the piece off skilfully and dramatically, ending up looking like the dying swan on the treble end of the keyboard. Though she produced a lot of sound, the piano never sounded overburdened or harsh.

Yekwon Sunwoo made his first impression as a young player with much to say musically, but who

sounded a bit tight in Beethoven's 'Les Adieux' sonata. That feeling remains after today's performance of Ligeti (Etude No. 10) and Brahms (Sonata No. 3). The Ligeti was played with nice color and touch throughout, but tightness returned in the Brahms, which was harsh in its fortissimi and lacked a characteristically Brahmsian warmth of tone and expression. Tight also in the number of dropped notes (lots of them, particularly when Sunwoo reached for low bass keys).

Olga Kozlova gave what we thought was a hugely overwrought account of Beethoven's op. 111 Sonata in Round 1. Today, in Schumann's Fantasia in C, she reigned in her power and produced a more lyrical and more nuanced sound from Steinway No. 2. This was still bigger in concept than Schumann's material needed, but we were glad to hear Kozlova in different repertory. Her ascent of Ligeti's 'Devil's Stairway' (Etude No. 13) was thrilling and dramatic. At the end, she held the final chord with the damper pedal until all the sound had been drained from the piano, yet didn't break character for another long minute to allow a hearty round of applause.

We thought that Jae Weon Huh's first round Beethoven 'Appassionata' sonata was intense and uncontrolled. After a tiny Scarlatti sonata which was only there to satisfy a distribution requirement, he produced a performance of Schumann's 'Kreisleriana' which better demonstrated his talents. He played firmly into the keys, creating a rich and colorful sound which became strident only on a few occasions. Sometimes the bass line overpowered the rest of the texture, and his transitions between movements might have been more strategically thought out, but we thought much more highly of him after this afternoon.

We gave Anna Shelest, the lucky contestant who drew the No. 1 position, the benefit of nerves last Tuesday, but today's performance confirmed a few problems that persist. One is her rhythm, which distorted Bach's Prelude in E-flat (WTC I). The piece has a recurring pattern of chords in the left hand supporting a florid melody in the right. Shelest's persistent rubato gave the melody nothing to play against, and the piece was so full of special moments that none were remarkable. The texture of the fugue was blurred by pedal and that of the Chopin by a kind of rhythmic fog.

Hoang Pham, whose Bach Partita (No. 4 in D) we much admired for its clarity, began today with Beethoven's E-flat Sonata, op. 7. Unlike his Bach, his Beethoven was overplayed, resulting in bangy bass lines and rather unattractive fortissimo chords. When a 9-foot Steinway sounds distorted, you know something's afoot with the touch

of the player. Pham demonstrated a fine sense of touch with his crystalline reading of Thomas Adès's 'Darkness Visible', written in 1992 and based on a song by John Dowland. A sound piece which exploits some of the piano's special harmonic effects, 'Darkness' holds the audience in rapt attention to the end. Pham one upped Adès by holding the spell for an extra minute after the last sound had died away. Before the Adès, he flew through Chopin's 'Black Key' Etude, giving in again to a tendency toward harshness, but only at the very end.

More second impressions to come in just a couple of hours.

Program for August 1: Round 2, Sessions 3 & 4

Posted August 1, 2009

1:00 pm – Esther Park (USA): Scarlatti's Sonatas: K. 531 in E Major, K. 322 in A Major, K. 203 in E Minor, Chopin's Etude in C Major, Op. 10, No. 1, Brahms's Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 35. 1:40 pm – Evgeny Brakhman (Russia): Kopelman's "Everything Is Foreseen And Free Will Is Given" 2007, Brahms's Seven Fantasies, Op. 116. 2:20 pm – Pallavi Mahidhara (USA/India): Beethoven's Sonata in C Major, Op. 53 (Waldstein), Walker's Sonata No. 2. 3:15 pm – Zhang Zuo (China): Bach's Partita No. 1 in B flat Major, BWV 825, Schumann's Symphonic Etudes, Op. 13. 3:55 pm – Martina Filjak (Croatia): Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C sharp Major, WTC II,3, Brahms's Variations on a Theme by Paganini, Op. 35, Book II, Bartok's Out of Doors. 4:35 pm – Yunqing Zhou (China): Beethoven's Sonata in A flat Major, Op. 110, Kapustin's Eight Concert Etudes, Op. 40, Nos.1,4,6,7,3.

7:00 pm – Anzhelika Fuks (Ukraine): Chopin's Etude in E Major, Op. 10, No. 3, Chopin's Etude in B Minor, Op. 25, No. 10, Chopin-Liszt. Six chants polonaise, Op. 74 No. 1, 2, 6, Chopin's Nocturne in C Minor, Op. 48, No. 1, Chopin's Ballade No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 23. 7:40 pm – Gerhard Vielhaber (Germany): Bach's Partita No. 1 in B flat Major, BWV 825, Schumann's Fantasiestücke, Op. 12: No. 1-3, 5, Kalabis's Akzente, Op. 26 (1967): No. 4, 8. 8:20 pm – Michael Brown (USA): Schumann's Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6. 9:15 – Kwan Yi (USA): Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G Minor, WTC I: 2, Dutilleux's Le jeu des contraires (Trois Préludes, No. 3), Chopin's Ballade No. 3 in A flat Major, Op. 47 Scherzo No. 3 in C sharp Minor, Op. 39. 9:55 – Kuok-Wai Lio (China): Nan's Piano Suite "Chopin and the Cat" (2006) No. 1, 3, Schumann's Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6

Repertory as Destiny: Round 2, Session 2

Posted August 1, 2009

Suppose you have something around half an hour's time to show yourself off to an audience and jury in the best possible light. Perhaps you really have only five minutes to grab people's attention at the beginning, then you can spend the rest of your allotment making good on that first impression. How would you organize your time?

So far, there's been a clear demarcation between contestants who strategically managed their slots (mostly the older pianists) and those who just seemed to be filling the requirements with no particular plan. The first group treated the opportunity as though it were actually a mini-recital; the second as though they were playing for a jury in a conservatory.

Canadian pianist Dmitri Levkovich, who is 30, planned his two sessions down to the last detail. In Round 1, he warmed up both himself and the audience with two Scarlatti sonatas (a la Horowitz), played a substantial Beethoven sonata (op. 31, no. 2) and tied the whole package up with Chopin's 'Black Key' Etude. His Round 2 session (think of the intervening days as a long intermission) continued the program trajectory with Chopin's Barcarolle in F-sharp and Scherzo in b-flat and ended with the day's second thrilling performance of Vine's first Sonata.

Once again, Levkovich took the stage purposefully, went through the bare minimum of bench adjusting and pre-game meditation (this ritual drags on with some players), and took us along into The Levkovich Zone for a riveting 35-minute ride. We found ourselves forgetting to take notes. Everything was played with total control, but with a variety of color and flexibility. Levkovich drew attractive sounds out of the New York Steinway even when the music got edgy in the Vine piece. The latter was, if we can say this in 2009, a masculine approach, more sinewy than Kyoko Soejima's elegant reading this afternoon. Both were performances to treasure.

Now, about that repertory. Part of the process of good impression-making is choosing works that suit your personality. Every player who followed this evening had one (a personality), but did they show themselves off most effectively by what they chose to play (or by what their teachers put them up to?)

István Lajkó (Hungary) seemed oddly hedged in once again by the Classical repertory (this evening, Chopin's Fantasy in f and Waltz in A-flat, and in Round 1, Bach's Toccata in e, Beethoven's

Sonata op. 109 and Chopin's Etude op. 10, no. 11). On the other hand, his opening selections showed him to be a master of more modern music. He opened with seven extracts from Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata*, finding wit and humor in the composer's musings on tiny pieces of musical DNA and in the Etude No. 10 (*Der Zauberlehrling*, aka *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*). He presented all of these pieces winningly and in some cases demonstrated an astonishing ability to keep minimalist patterns going for hundreds of repetitions without glitches. This seems to be his native musical language and he's terrific at executing it.

Maria Masycheva (Russia) began with a hefty performance of Haydn's little Sonata in E (Hob. XVI:31) and then turned to Brahms' Seven Fantasies op. 116, a choice which eventually made her 35 minutes more tedious than enjoyable. This is uninspired Brahms (unlike op. 119) and we doubt that anyone could do much to make it palatable. Masycheva put her whole body into the task (often rising up off the bench), but to no avail.

Sean Chen (USA) brought us out of our late-evening stupor on Tuesday with some thrilling performances of Bach, Beethoven and Chopin. Whoever chose Schumann's *Kreisleriana* for him tonight did him no favors. Chen is probably too young to make complete sense out of Schumann's lengthy, eight-movement evocation of Kreisler, the fictional manic-depressive. This performance was the apotheosis of rubato, of ebbing and flowing, starting and stopping, and the piano spoke with a harshness we hadn't heard from Chen earlier. The final work was Elliott Carter's '*Caténaires*', a four-minute outburst commissioned by Pierre-Laurent Aimard, described by the composer as 'a fast one line piece with no chords'. Chen pulled it off effectively.

Schumann's Fantasy in C proved to be another infelicitous choice, this time for China's Chun Wang. On Tuesday night, we admired Wang's unassuming approach to Bach, Mozart and Chopin, which beguiled us through its subtle musicality. The Schumann Fantasy was another example of a big, rangy piece which hasn't yet been assimilated by a young performer. The pacing was strange, too many precious details were pointed up to give its multiple sections direction and flow, and big pauses interrupted the progress of a work that needs all the cohesion that can be imposed on it by outside forces. At one point, the performer took so long between movements that the audience applauded (thinking, perhaps hoping that the piece was over). Wang seemed uncomfortable throughout and began merely pounding his way through passages that needed long, controlled crescendos to give shape to

Schumann's odd fascination with repetitive rhythmic motives.

Wang's valedictory piece was '*Le Lorient*' (*Oriole*) from Messiaen's *Bird Catalog*, Book I. Soft chords led to avian outbursts of somewhat terrifying intensity (*Daphne Du Maurier* came to mind).

Don't forget that we invite comments on this blog. If you've been following along live, on WCLV or on the webcast, let us know your own opinions of the performances you've heard!

Noteworthy: Round 2 Session 3

Posted August 1, 2009



As they did on Wednesday afternoon, the performers in group number 3 treated us to a special afternoon of music making.

Esther Park (USA) opened the session with a lovely set of Scarlatti sonatas K 531, K 322, and K 203, performing all three with grace, and poise. It was too bad that her performances of the Chopin Etude in C Op. 10 #3 and the Brahms Variations on a Theme of Paganini did not fare nearly as well. Ms. Parks possesses outstanding technique, however too many missed notes crept into the Chopin, and while the Brahms had many lovely moments, during some of the louder, faster variations she had a tendency to apply too much pedal, causing a blurring of the sound.

As in round one, Evgeny Brakhman (Russia) sounded and looked as though he wanted to do nothing more than play the piano. He was in total control in the Brahms Seven Fantasies Op 116, often building phrases over long periods, as well as bringing a full color palette to the performance. In Kopelman's '*Everything is foreseen and free will is given*' we saw another side of him as a performer. During the first round, Mr. Brakhmann enthralled us with his magical playing of a Mozart sonata, but he is equally at home per-

forming a piece that emphasizes the percussive qualities of the piano.

Pallavi Mahidhara (USA), again used her unique sense of musical charm to deliver a beautiful performance of the Beethoven Sonata in C, Op 53 (Waldstein). She truly is an elegant performer who never seems to be concerned that things are not going to be perfect. George Walker's Sonata #2 (it was really great to hear his music) was performed with a beautiful sound and lyrical thoughtfulness.

Zhang Zuo (China) began her program with Bach's Partita No. 1 in B flat BWV 825, performing with clarity and an even sound. Schumann's Symphonic Etudes Op. 13 was voiced and paced beautifully, although too many times the loud sections became muddy. Ms. Zou is a fun performer with a hint of feistiness that works to her advantage.

Martina Filjak (Croatia), as on Tuesday, brought her full physical and pianistic athleticism to the stage. The highlight of her set was Bartok's 'Out of Doors', where, as in her previous performance of the Berio, she showed a real sense for 20th century music. Her dramatic reading of this piece not only included total command over rhythmic complexities, but included some hauntingly beautiful unisons in the slow section. This was an amazing performance, and Ms. Filjak was in total command of the piece. She began with a nice but pianistic version of Bach's Prelude & Fugue in C# (WTC II), and followed it with the second performance today of the Brahms Paganini Variations. Her performance was well paced, well thought out and the theme remained prominent in all the variations. She is a performer who is comfortable in all genres, although her true artistic talent comes through in modern works.

Ending the afternoon, Yunqing Zhou (China) once again invited us to be part of his world through an absolutely beautiful performance of Beethoven's Sonata op. 110. His sound remained full and healthy throughout. His final piece was Kapustin's Eight Concert Etudes. This jazzy, spirited piece began with some wonderful melodic sections a la Marilyn McPartland that explored many styles of jazz from straight ahead to stride. It was the perfect ending to the afternoon.

Program for August 2: Round 2, Sessions 5 & 6

Posted August 2, 2009

1:00 pm – Sangyoung Kim (Korea): Bach's Prelude and Fugue in F sharp Minor, WTC II: 14, Schumann's Carnaval, Op. 9. 1:40 pm –

Kristhyan Benitez (Venezuela): Schumann's Kreisleriana, Op. 16, Ruiz's Merengue (1994). 2:20 pm – Martin Labazevitch (USA): Scarlatti's Sonatas: K. 162 in E Major, K. 87 in B Minor, K. 125 in G Major, Chopin's Nocturne in E flat Major, Op. 55, No. 2 Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52. 3:15 pm – Anna Bulkina (Russia): Gubaydulina's Chaconne, Beethoven's Sonata in E flat Major, Op. 81a (Les Adieux), Chopin's Etude in A minor, Op. 25, No. 11 ("Winter Wind"). 3:55 pm – Edward Neeman (USA/Australia): Bach's Prelude and Fugue in F sharp Minor, WTC II: 14, Brahms's Sonata No. 1 in C Major, Op. 1.

7:00 pm – Marina Radiushina (USA): Leighton's Fantasia Contrappuntistica (Homage to Bach), Op. 24, Handel's Chaconne in G Major, HWV 435, Schumann's Variations on a Theme of Clara Wieck from Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 14. 7:40 pm – Ju-Eun Lee (Korea): Scarlatti's Sonatas: K. 119 in D Major, K. 96 in D Major, K. 394 in E Minor, Chopin's Sonata No. 2 in B flat Minor, Op. 35. 8:20 pm – Alexander Osminin (Russia): Scarlatti's Sonatas: K. 247 in C sharp Minor, K.118 in D, Karamanov's Rondo in E Minor, Schumann's Carnaval, Op. 9. 9:15 pm – William Youn (Korea): Scarlatti's Sonatas: K. 87 in B Minor, K. 436 in D Major, Brahms's Sonata No. 2 in F sharp Minor, Op. 2. 9:55 pm – Soo-Yeon Ham (Korea): Chopin's 12 Etudes, Op. 25.

Second Takes: Round 2, Session 4

Posted August 2, 2009



Our second date with Saturday evening's quintet of pianists revealed some shortcomings we hadn't noticed before, and one pianist quite happily presented a completely different personality from our first encounter on Wednesday evening.

Kwan Yi (USA) was all robotic energy three nights ago, plowing breathlessly through Beethoven and Chopin with admirable technique but not pausing to enjoy the sights along his musical journey. On

Saturday, he revealed his gentler, more expressive side with a ruminative performance of Bach's g minor Prelude and Fugue (WTC I) and a fine trek through Dutilleux's 'Le jeu des contraires' in which he demonstrated varieties of touch and an ability to draw a big sound out of the Hamburg Steinway without succumbing to harshness. An impressively clear performance of Chopin (Ballade No. 3 in A-flat and Scherzo No. 3 in c-sharp) also showed that he's able to be simultaneously dramatic and sensitive. Some of the quirky body language remains, but there was less of it (the Dutilleux ended with Yi frozen in a long pose facing the audience).

We called China's Kuok-Wai Lio 'the picture of poetic elegance' on Wednesday. On Saturday we realized that we had been influenced more by his choreography than his music making. He sits far back from the keyboard and while this allows him to make expressive motions with his arms, everything in his playing also comes from the arm — and subtlety of touch and coloration suffer. He began with two slight but amusing movements of Nan's 'Chopin and the Cat' then plunged without pause into Schumann's 'Davidsbündlertanz'. He got nearly all the notes, and nothing was really strange about the performance, but everything was also monochromatic, including his continuously pained facial expression.

Given a long Schumann work, and there are several on the menu in this competition, one wonders if it's more wrong-headed to take Lio's approach or that of Michael Brown (USA), who lavished attention on every note in his account of 'Davidsbündlertanze' on Saturday, producing a performance so full of color and nuance that it wearied the ear in a completely different way. On Wednesday, Brown had played an impressive mini-recital of Bach, Beethoven, Perle and Chopin. He wowed us on that occasion, but his choice of repertory on Saturday and his hyper detail-oriented performance of it gave us some second thoughts.

Anzhelika Fuks (Ukraine) seemed to be having an off night on Wednesday with subdued playing and a memory slip. Her session-opening program on Saturday (all-Chopin, with two Etudes, Liszt's arrangement of 'Six chants polonaise', a Nocturne and a Ballade) looked inviting and had some lovely moments with especially nice transitions between sections of pieces, but her memory again failed her at several points and brought some blurriness and confusion to her playing.

Gerhard Vielhaber (Germany) presented himself in Beethoven and Chopin on Wednesday to good effect. His choice of repertory and its execution

on Saturday produced some doubts in our ears. Vielhaber began with an ill-conceived reading of Bach's Partita No. 1 in B-flat inconsistent in its respect for formal balance (he took some repeats but omitted others and nixed the return of the menuet after the trio), devoid of articulation (playing whole movements staccato is an artistic cop-out) and inaccurate (the Gigue was simply a mess, with a big train wreck at the end of the first strain). He went on to extract four movements from Schumann's Fantasiestücke and two from Kalabis 'Akzente' which partially redeemed his performance on Saturday, but on the whole, this was not a well-thought out session at the keyboard.
—Daniel Hathaway

Confirmations: Round 2, Session 5

Posted August 2, 2009

Sangyoung Kim, Kristhyan Benitez, Martin Labazevitch, Anna Bulkina & Edward Neeman returned to the Bolton Theatre stage on Sunday afternoon for a second hearing. Although we can't say that we learned anything radically new about these five highly competent pianists, many of our first impressions were confirmed by hearing them in fresh repertory.

Sangyoung Kim (Korea) impressed us on Thursday afternoon with her Dutilleux Sonata. She presented only two works on Sunday: a Prelude & Fugue from Bach's Well Tempered Clavier (f-sharp, Book II) and Schumann's Carnival. Her Bach was nicely shaped, building to its harmonic climax with a long crescendo and announcing harmonic arrivals. As in the Dutilleux, Kim brought fine colors out of the Hamburg Steinway, taming its bright treble register and producing a performance of stylish beauty, reactive to quick changes of mood and bright with humor. She caught the grandeur of Schumann's piano writing in a way that has eluded previous contestants and brought the first set of the afternoon to a highly agreeable conclusion. Never mind a few klunkers.

Kristhyan Benitez (Venezuela) followed with passionately visceral and self-indulgent playthroughs of Schumann's Kreisleriana and Ruiz's Merengue. Despite his tendency to muscle his way through technically difficult passages and leave lots of notes on the floor at the end of his performances, he exudes personality and charms audiences. Today's crowd responded warmly to his dramatic vision of Schumann, which included histrionic reboundings off the keyboard. Benitez gains most of his contrasts through dynamics rather than changes of color and uses too much pedal. But he's very entertaining. The bouncy, bright and

rhythmically jangly Merengue, which dates from 1994, was the perfect Latin bravura ending to his Sunday set.

Martin Labazevitch (USA) began with rather serious performances of three Scarlatti sonatas (K. 162, 87 & 125). He doesn't let his hair down easily even in the presence of sunny, Italian music and in fact wagged a warning finger at the first sign of between-the-sonatas applause. His Chopin (Nocturne op. 55, no. 2 and Ballade (op. 52, no. 4) further advanced the idea that serious business was going on here. His playing was healthy, with a strong and nicely controlled tone which rarely changes color, but still sounds rich in climaxes. The Ballade had a fine sweep and grandeur to it. A little chuckle arose from the house when the video screen focused in tight on the Steinway logo during the last Scarlatti (a little message from our sponsor). And speaking of that screen, which offers the audience closeups of performers' faces, whatever is Labazevitch murmuring to himself as he plays? Inquiring minds want to know.

Gubaydulina's Chaconne made its second appearance in the Competition in the capable hands of Anna Bulkina (Russia), who made it sound like a bravura chaconne and discovered the lyricism in this striking Soviet-era piece, somehow making it sound less angry. At times, her spirited and well-thought out reading of Beethoven's 'Les Adieux' Sonata seemed a bit pressed rather than spacious. She seemed to be struggling a bit with the latest iteration of Chopin's 'Winter Wind' Etude, allowing the left hand tune to vanish from time to time. But all in all, this was an enjoyable opportunity to hear her again. Idea for the Competition: How about a special 'Winter Wind' award for the best performance of this much-played Etude?

Edward Neeman (USA/Australia) brought the afternoon to its conclusion with a very pianistic version of Bach's f-sharp Prelude & Fugue (WTC II) and a full-steam ahead reading of Brahms' C Major Sonata. The Bach prelude was introverted, with lots of expressive rubato (especially when a Neapolitan chord was in sight). His similarly lyrical conception of the fugue was more melodic than contrapuntal. Neeman's Brahms began big and continued on a grand scale. He put so much into this performance that he seemed to grow weary in the last movement, which presents the performer with flying chords and treacherous runs. Things got a bit sloppy as the finish line approached, but the audience sensed that something quite athletic had just taken place and gave Neeman a big round of applause.

—Daniel Hathaway

32 up and 32 down: Round 2, Session 6
Posted August 2, 2009

The first and last of the final five competitors to be heard for the second time on Sunday evening thoughtfully chose very interesting repertory, a boon for ears that were about to get a bit weary.

Marina Radiushina (USA) began with a bravura performance of Leighton's impassioned 'Fantasia Contrappuntistica (Homage to Bach)', went on to a beautiful and shamelessly pianistic reading of Handel's Chaconne in G and ended with a finely paced version of Schumann's austere Variations on a Theme of Clara Wieck. Elegant, graceful and demonstrating an excellent sense of style and technique, Radiushina made a fine impression.

Korea's Ju-Eun Lee began with Scarlatti sonatas. K. 119, 96 and 394 were nicely played with hyper bright articulation (a good thing because she used a lot of pedal), and when the audience got confused and wasn't sure the set was over, Lee demurely turned to the house and smiled. Applause. She wrapped up her part of the evening with Chopin's Sonata No. 2 in b-flat (the one with the famous funeral march) in a performance which might have benefited from more depth of tone and rhythmic coherence, but still left a good impression.

Unassuming and quiet at the keyboard, Russia's Alexander Osminin delivered expressive and super accurate versions of two Scarlatti sonatas (K. 247 and K. 118, including some tricky cross-hand action) before turning to Karamanov's charming Rondo in e minor, a capricious and tuneful little piece that gets boisterous in the middle before returning to the original material. Osminin's big work was Schumann's Carnival, distinguished from the very beginning for his adroit handling of repeated chords — he stays close to the keys and keeps the clanging to a bare minimum. What followed was a technically assured, colorful reading of Schumann's score which was impressive for its restraint but lacked nothing in terms of expression.

William Youn (Korea) produced quite different sounds in Brahms' Sonata op. 2, no. 2, unfortunately on the harsh and brittle side. He has a brilliant and flashy technique, but never quite got under the skin of Brahms the composer tonight. His opening Scarlatti sonatas were sensitive to counterpoint (K. 87) and dazzling in execution (K. 436).

Competitor No. 32, Soo-Yeon Ham (Korea), delivered a round's end bonus: all 12 of Chopin's Etudes, op. 25. Smiling throughout and looking

as though this were the easiest task in the world, Ms. Ham took us on an unusual tour through Chopin's imagination, reprising some études which have come up several times in these rounds, but which seemed like new friends heard in context. She played with complete conviction, technical assurance and mellow tone.

—Daniel Hathaway

Announcement of Semi-Finalists

Posted August 2, 2009

Tonight, following the conclusion of Round 2, the CIPC jury will vote, selecting 8 contestants to advance to the semi-final round. The announcement is expected around 11:00 pm Eastern. Check back later for the decision and the semi-final round schedule.

UPDATED

The Semi-Finalists in performance order:

Dmitri Levkovich
Evgeny Brakhman
Pallavi Mahidhara
Martina Filjak
Yunqing Zhou
Kuok-Wai Lio
William Youn
Soo-Yeon Ham

Program for August 4-5: Semi-Final Round

Posted August 3, 2009

Session 1

1:00 pm – Dmitri Levkovich
Haydn: Sonata in C Major, Hob. XVI: 48
Debussy: Pour le piano
Rachmaninoff: Preludes, Op. 32, (Nos. 4, 13, 5);
Sonata No. 2 in B flat Minor, Op. 36 (with elements from 1913 and 1931)
Intermission
2:15 pm – Evgeny Brakhman
Messiaen: Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu (Préludes, No. 6) Ile de feu I (Quatre études de rythme, No. 1)
Debussy: Pour les arpèges composés (Douze études, Book II: 11) L'Isle joyeuse
Rachmaninoff: Études-tableaux, Op. 33, Nos. 8, 2, 3; Op. 39, Nos. 1, 2, 9; Sonata No. 2 in B flat Minor, Op. 36 (1931)

Session 2

7:00 pm – Pallavi Mahidhara
Bach: French Suite No. 1 in D Minor, BWV 812
Debussy: Pour le piano
Liszt: Sonata in B Minor, S. 178
Intermission
8:15 pm – Martina Filjak

Ravel: Une barque sur l'océan (Miroirs, No. 3)
Scriabin: Nocturne for the left hand, Op. 9, No. 2
Beethoven: Sonata in B flat Major, Op. 106 (Hammerklavier)

Wednesday, August 5

Session 3

1:00 pm – Yunqing Zhou
Debussy: La Puerta del Vino, La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune, La danse de Puck, Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest (Préludes, Book II: 3, 7; Book I: 11, 7)
Liszt: Sonata in B Minor, S. 178
Bartok: Sonata (1926)
Intermission
2:15 pm – Kuok-Wai Lio
Schubert: Four Impromptus, D. 935
Debussy: L'Isle joyeuse
Kreisler/ Rachmaninoff: Liebesleid, Liebesfreud

Session 4

7:00 pm – William Youn
Fauré: Nocturne No. 6 in D flat Major, Op. 63
Schumann: Davidsbündlertänze, Op. 6
Liszt: Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude (Harmonies poétiques et religieuses, No. 3); Concert Paraphrase of Rigoletto (Verdi)
Intermission
8:15 pm – Soo-Yeon Ham
Chopin: Sonata No. 2 in B flat Minor, Op. 35
Ravel: Gaspard de la nuit
Liszt: Venezia e Napoli

And then there were eight: Semi-Final Round, Session 1

Posted August 4, 2009

The field is getting smaller, the audiences are getting larger and the performances are getting longer this week at the Bolton Theatre as we move into the four semi-final rounds.

In this leg of the competition, the requirements become simpler, with only two imperatives. Competitors must include a work or group of works by a French impressionist composer and a Romantic composer, then they can choose to play any other work of their choice. The French requirement is a vestige of CIPC's ancestor, the Casadesus Competition, and it brings an entirely new challenge into play.

As the original order of the draw is being preserved in the Semi-finals, Dmitri Levkovich of Canada and Evgeny Brakhman of Russia were the featured acts on Tuesday afternoon. Each player crammed as much music as possible into his 55-60 minute allotment.



Levkovich began his program with Haydn's Sonata in C, Hob. XVI:48 (for any of you who may have been wondering, "Hob." stands for Anthony van Hoboken, the Dutch scholar who catalogued all of Haydn's works like Köchel did for Mozart). This important sounding, two movement work inspired Levkovitch to deliver a performance full of pathos, flawlessly voiced runs and gentle lingerings on expressive notes.

His French work was Debussy's suite 'Pour le Piano', a delightful three-movement piece which packs a lot of Debussy into a short period of time. Here, Levkovitch seemed to be hurried, pressing the tempo in the opening 'Vif' to the point where spaciousness suffered and repeated chords scarcely had time to sound. The final chords were tossed off with dismissive élan. The Sarabande was appropriately stately and the non-stop Toccata thrilling.

Levkovich then turned to three Rachmaninoff Preludes from Opus 32 (4, 13 and 5 in that order). He romped through no. 4, attentive both to moods and transitions. No. 13 began with a lovely cantabile, moving through a murky middle section then on to a triumphant ending with huge and impressive arpeggios at the conclusion. No. 5, featuring a lyrical melody over a left hand ostinato, was just beautifully played.

After returning to the stage, Levkovitch turned to a work we would hear twice this afternoon: Rachmaninoff's Sonata No. 2 in b-flat minor. Levkovitch included elements of both the original (1913) and revised (1931) versions in a stormy and revelatory performance which delivered a huge range of emotion. The first movement was brooding and unsettled. The slow movement began with a simple little melody adorned with charming accompanimental filigrees that grew into something large very quickly. The last movement was simply ebullient, ending with a prodigious feat of pianism that earned Levkovich a mini-standing ovation.

Evgeny Brakhman played the later, 1931 version of the Rachmaninoff to end his set, immersing himself into the work as though he were actually improvising the material as he went along. Compelling and highly dramatic, his hefty and emotionally charged performance may not have given the work quite the profile and clarity of structure of the performance that had preceded, but it was entirely admirable in different ways.

Brakhman began with a Messiaen set: the strikingly titled 'Cloches d'angoisse et larmes d'adieu' ('Bells of anguish and tears of farewell') and the 'Ile de feu I' from the Four Etudes in Rhythm. This was a striking way to begin. He pulled the quasi-Romantic 'Cloches' off with aplomb, beautifully contrasting dark chords in the lower register with tinkling tears in the treble and producing big, rich textures in the middle. The 'Island of Fire' was a tiny burst of fierce energy. Brakhman has the habit of winding up for descents on the keyboard like John McEnroe coiling for a serve, and his mid-air attacks are dramatic, to say the least.



Staying in France, Brakhman turned to two Debussy works, 'Pour les arpèges composés' from the 12 Etudes, and L'Isle joyeuse. The arpeggios were firm, colorful and beautifully voiced. At one point, Brakhman seemed to glance winkingly at the audience as though amused by what he was playing. 'Isle' sounded episodic and perhaps even a bit heavy handed. But Brakhman is a very physical player who puts a lot of kinetic energy into the keys.

Before the Rachmaninoff Sonata, Brakhman played six of Rachmaninoff's Études-tableaux

(nos. 8, 2 & 3 from op. 33, and 1, 2 & 9 from op. 39) — a lot of Rachmaninoff at one sitting. But he commanded the music masterfully, taking us on a thrilling sonic tour of the composer's rich harmonic, melodic and imaginative world.

This could be a difficult afternoon for the jury — two temperamentally similar musicians of consummate interpretative skill going at their tasks in a markedly similar manner, but with subtle differences. Neither was better than the other this afternoon, merely different. — Daniel Hathaway

Ladies' Night: Semi-finals, Session 2

Posted August 4, 2009

Tuesday afternoon with Levkovich and Brakhman was a guy's session featuring two very fine, comparable performances. Tuesday evening was the women's turn, but what a contrast between the equally excellent pianists Pallavi Mahidhara (USA/India) and Martina Filjak (Croatia).

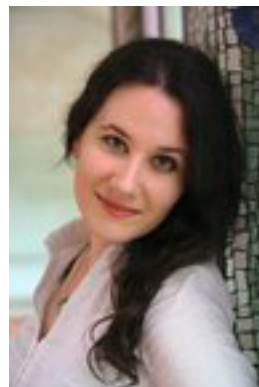


Mahidhara began with an exceedingly well-behaved reading of J.S. Bach's French Suite in d. Her foot never touched a pedal, articulation was carefully premeditated if not always idiomatic, repeats sported extra ornamentation, and the whole affair from prelude to gigue was virtually note perfect.

She proceeded on to the second performance today of Debussy's suite 'Pour le Piano', drawing elegant lines from the Hamburg Steinway. The first movement would have enjoyed a bit more room to breathe (and a little less pedal in spots). The Sarabande was tasteful and expressive, the Toccata well paced and excellently voiced.

Mahidhara ended with a curiously clinical account of Liszt's b minor Sonata. She has an uncanny ability to keep simultaneous lines in different registers separate and distinct, to create huge

contrasts from fiercely loud to almost inaudibly soft and to vary her touch from gossamer lightness to an intense heaviness. She brought amazing clarity to the final fugue, but in other sections of this rangy work, her articulation was uncharacteristically dry for Liszt. Mahidhara managed to tame the wild beast that is Liszt, but a lot of his over-the-top qualities got lost in the process.



Filjak made three arresting choices for her not-quite-an-hour-long appearance on the Bolton stage. She began with a richly textured and many hued voyage through Ravel's 'Une barque sur l'océan' from 'Miroirs', varying her touch to make a variety of liquid sounds including flippant little sprays of mist.

Next came an astonishing performance of Scriabin's 'Nocturne for the left hand'. Close your eyes and you'd never know that her right hand was resting on the piano bench. Filjak adroitly moved about the keyboard with extraordinary sensitivity and accuracy, giving a nuanced and colorful account of this hauntingly beautiful piece.

For her finale, Filjak chose Beethoven's wonderful but nearly intractable 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, op. 106, clearly articulating all the mercurial aspects of this strange piece. The first movement wasn't note perfect (who gets all those notes anyway?), but full of passion and temperament, navigating adroitly between the violent and the lyrical and pointing up Beethoven's odd accents. She brought out all the multiple phrasings of the motive in the Scherzo and expertly paced the lengthy and complex Adagio, maintaining interest and intensity. She began the finale haltingly as the music dictated, adding pearly runs and then heating it up to a frenzy as it morphed into a number of other ideas including a diabolical waltz and a fantastical fugue. This is Beethoven at his most volatile, and Filjak knew how to bring that out without losing sight of the underlying shape of this lengthy work.

Two different approaches tonight: one Apollonian, the other Dionysian. Each style had its fans

in tonight's large audience. If you were the jury, which would you prefer? — Daniel Hathaway

Now on to the Asians: Semi-finals, Session 3

Posted August 5, 2009

A random draw and a jury decision has produced the statistical improbability that two Chinese pianists are playing in the Semi-finals this afternoon, and two Koreans this evening.

Wednesday afternoon's session could be called the Triumph of Pianism. Yunqing Zhou and Kuok-Wai Lio are both 20 years old, both study at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and both display astonishing technical skill. Playing thousands of notes in the right places is not a problem for either of them. The maturity to plumb the depths of the music they play so skillfully may still be a few years out.



Zhou chose four Debussy *Préludes* for his opening French impressionist set. In 'La Puerta del Vino', he laid down a sensuous Habanera-style rhythm as the foundation for magically spread chords and explored varieties of color and touch. Carefully paced and articulated, 'La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune' started with impressionistic clusters onto which Zhou cast mysterious beams of cool light, using a brushing motion to color his cross-hand volleys. In 'La danse de Puck', he carefully considered the placement of every note in bringing that charmingly mischievous character to life. A warm wind blew through Zhou's mellow sounds in 'Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest', where he made nice distinctions between dry and blurry textures. All four Debussy pieces were gorgeously played.

Zhou's fantastic control showed up again in Liszt's b minor Sonata, which was super clear in rhythm and texture, though his tendency to race through the material denied it some of its demonic passion. But he clearly differentiated moods, colors and textures, and endowed each section of this episodic work with its own character and beauty. He demonstrated his attention to detail in his articulation of the fugue subject and the care with which he voiced the final bass note. But was a performance of such clarity and profile really in the spirit of Liszt?

A quite breathless flight through the Bartok Sonata of 1926 brought Zhou's set to a conclusion. Highly rhythmic and well accented, the first movement reminded us of Stravinsky's 'Sacre'. Here, Zhou demonstrated an amazing ability to take a bit of liberty in tempo then jump right back on the train. The slow movement was full of harshly written chords, beautiful in their starkness. The busy, chattery final movement tried to break into Hungarian folk tunes but fell back into jazz. Zhou put so much of himself into the performance that he nearly fell backward off the bench on the final release. This kind of physical involvement, not to mention his skillful fingers, earned him a big round of applause before intermission.



Kuok-Wai Lio took a completely different approach to Semi-finals repertory, inviting us into his salon for Schubert and Kreisler as arranged by Rachmaninoff, with an interlude for a substantial work by Debussy.

Lio, as we've mentioned before, sits well back from the keyboard with his arms extended straight in front of him. It's an interesting technique to watch — and to speculate about how he gets the kind of results he conjures out of the piano this way.

Whether or not Schubert's 'Four Impromptus' were a wise choice for this stage in the competition, or even for the opening of this set, Lio

teased some lovely details out of Schubert's frequently repetitive musical ideas. He tends to make most of his contrasts through dynamic rather than color changes, which can make things sound relatively the same for minutes on end. The fourth, Mazurka-like Impromptu was full of runs which Lio negotiated stylishly.

Lio performed Debussy's 'L'Isle joyeuse' skilfully, though with some awkward releases and a clanginess which made midrange chords poke out of the texture. We could have asked for more poetry and color to bring Debussy's music to life, but like so many comments that have been made both in this blog and in your responses, this is largely a matter of personal taste.

Back to salon music, Lio ended with Fritz Kreisler's 'Liebeslied' and 'Liebesfreud' as plumped up for the keyboard by Sergei Rachmaninoff. Once again, Lio's digital facility was legendary, though these two crowd-pleasing encores would seem to beg for more playfulness and spontaneity. No matter — they did indeed please the crowd this afternoon.

Ladies and gentlemen of the virtual jury, when picking the four finalists, would you come down on the side of rewarding age, experience and musical depth, or youth, promise and technical prowess (not to say that the older contestants lack anything in dexterity or the younger in artistry)? There's an interesting choice before you. Please tell us your thoughts (as some already have)

— Daniel Hathaway

A Korean Finale: Semi-Final Round, Session 4

Posted August 5, 2009

William Youn and Soo-Yeon Ham played the last notes in the Semi-finals on Wednesday evening — lots of them — and contrasts abounded.

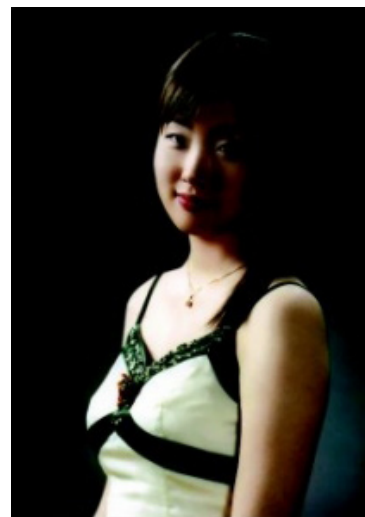
Youn made his final statements before the jury with Fauré's Nocturne in D-flat, Schumann's 'Davidsbündlertänze' and two Liszt pieces, 'Benediction de Dieu dans la solitude' and 'Concert Paraphrase of Rigoletto'.

His performances were markedly consistent with his appearances in the first two rounds. He has whole armories of technical weaponry to deploy and his playing style is striking and intense. But in anything above a mezzo forte, he can sound steely and harsh. His voicing can be inconsistent, allowing notes to pop out of the texture as they did in the ebb and flow of the Fauré. Too bad,



because there were some lovely movements in the Schumann when Youn relaxed and produced a gentler, kinder tone.

Soo-Yeon Ham's efficient and understated playing style conceals a wealth of technique. Her opener, Chopin's mercurial b minor Sonata, was well-paced and dramatic without becoming percussive. The funeral march set out at a stately pace and moved ahead with fine elasticity. Impressively, the final melismas flowed along seamlessly, unsullied by accents.



Ham then submerged herself in the shimmering, mysterious world of Ravel's 'Gaspard de la Nuit', perhaps bringing in the most characteristic performance of a French impressionist piece in the Semi-finals.

Her 32nd place in the draw guaranteed her the last word in all three rounds. At the end of the second, she charmed us with all twelve of Chopin's Etudes, op. 12. Tonight, she nearly pulled off another programming coup with Liszt's 'Venezia e Napoli', had Liszt had the good sense to cut his romp through Italian tunes down by half. As attractive as Ham's playing was, this one

went on too long and was approached too seriously.

Youn's two Liszt pieces were also a bit too earnest. OK, the 'Benédiction de Dieu' should be bathed in religious light of a posturing sort, but the paraphrase of Rigoletto is an encore, pure and simple. Pianists should look like they're having fun playing this stuff!

—Daniel Hathaway

Announcement of Finalists

Posted August 5, 2009

Stay tuned! Following tonight's session the four finalists will be announced from the stage of the Bolton Theatre by CIPC Executive Director Karen Knowlton. We're here and will post the results immediately! The announcement will be carried live on WCLV, 104.9 FM.

After tonight's performance and before the announcement please feel free to weigh in here and share your final four with us.

UPDATED The Finalists:

Dmitri Levkovich
Evgeny Brakhman
Martina Filjak
William Youn

Program for Final Round

Posted August 6, 2009

Friday, August 7, 7:00 pm

The Cleveland Orchestra, Jahja Ling, Conductor

Dmitri Levkovich
Rachmaninoff, Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18
Moderato
Adagio sostenuto
Allegro scherzando
Intermission

Evgeny Brakhman
Rachmaninoff, Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, Op. 30
Allegro ma non tanto
Intermezzo: Adagio
Finale: Alla breve

Saturday, August 8, 7:00 pm

The Cleveland Orchestra, Jahja Ling, Conductor

Martina Filjak

Rachmaninoff, Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18
Moderato
Adagio sostenuto
Allegro scherzando

Intermission

William Youn
Brahms, Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 15
Maestoso
Adagio
Rondo: Allegro non troppo

A Chat with Cleveland International Piano Competition Finalists Dmitri Levkovich & Evgeny Brakhman

Posted August 7, 2009

Yesterday CPIC kindly made the four finalists available for a photo op and interviews. We conversed in pairs to get to know the off-stage personalities of these gifted pianists. The following interview is reprinted from ClevelandClassical.com.

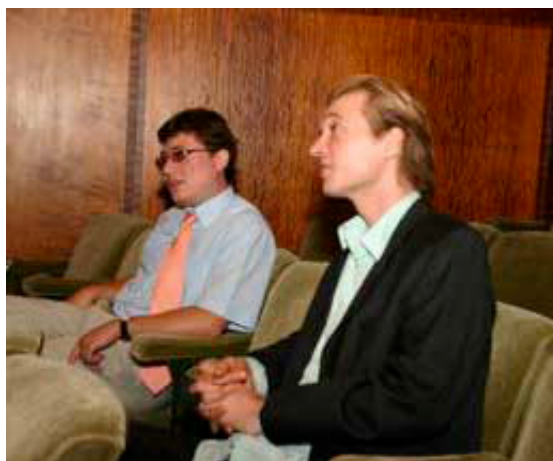


Photo: Sam Hubish

Dan Hathaway: You've known each other for a time.

Dmitri Levkovich: We met in Israel — two years ago?

Evgeny Brakhman: No, one year ago. I think in March.

Dan: I know nothing about the differences between Ukrainian and Russian. Are you able to communicate outside of English?

Dmitri: We both speak Russian. You see, we were born in the Soviet Union and Russian was the first language for everybody. I lived in Ukraine, but before 1990, Ukrainian was the secondary

language — it was taught one hour a day in our school. All the subjects were in Russian, all the books were in Russian. I don't think the people realized that this generation is so literary. Now they are trying to translate all the books into Ukrainian. It takes a long time.

Evgeny: But the difference is that you, a Ukrainian, can speak Russian, but I'm Russian and can't speak Ukrainian. That's the point!

Dan: I want to start by asking how you chose your repertory for the opening rounds.

Evgeny: We had, of course, some compulsory composers and styles, but we really had some freedom to choose — between Schumann, Brahms and Chopin as a romantic piece, for example. I have just learned the Brahms Fantasies two months ago and performed it in concerts in Russia and Germany, so it was very fresh and very lovely, and it was already learned in the fingers. As for the contemporary piece, it came from the Israeli competition, where I met a young lady, Aviya Kopelman, who had composed this beautiful piece, 'Everything is Foreseen, and Free Will is Given'. I apologize that the competition didn't publish the name of every piece, because it's a suite in ten parts with names like 'short chorale', 'metal', 'pop chorale', 'bridge', 'electro', 'chanson', 'distant sounds', 'power chords', and 'rock fugue' at the end. It helps to know the titles. I've played the Chopin Etudes for ages and it's really comfortable to begin with large-scale Bach. And the Mozart sonata is just marvelous — I've recorded it on EMI Classics. And Rachmaninoff is my favorite composer of the moment. Before, it was Scriabin.

Dmitri: There's a Beethoven prize in the competition. Two years ago I didn't have any Beethoven in my program, so I've changed that. Also, coming back to the same competition with the same repertory would be embarrassing, so I included new pieces in each round. Some of them I learned just two and a half months ago. It was a very busy year for me so there was no time to prepare way in advance. So I had a long discussion with my teacher, Sergei Babayan, about whether I should perform my own piano sonata as a piece written after 1950. He said, no, don't perform your own work, no matter how good it is — it's not fair to the other contestants. So I learned the Carl Vine Sonata. Babayan recorded it, and in my opinion — and Carl Vine's — his is the best recording of the piece. I heard it before I came to CIM and said, I have to study with this man. It took me ten years to get around to learning the piece. Now, because of the competition requirements, I was made to learn it, and

I'm so happy about it. It brings lots of variety to my repertory. I put too much Chopin in my program two years ago, when I didn't get into the finals, but I did get the Chopin prize. This year I included only two Chopin selections, so it's not overburdening.

Dan: Dmitri, you're an old hand at this competition. How is it different this time around?

Dmitri: Well, I turned thirty. I realized that there is no more procrastination for me (laughter). It's always been an important milestone in my mind, and when it hit, I realized that things will only come to me if I work ten times harder. So I'm just living a very masochistic lifestyle, performing as much as possible, and not giving myself a break. I think after this competition, I can finally take a few days off. I wish I could say a week, but no.

Evgeny: I will talk for him, because he will never tell you this himself. I think that tomorrow he will perform his fifteenth competition round in one month. He just won the José Iturbi competition in Los Angeles and a prize in Lisbon, and the Royal Competition also. He's a crazy man, a competition monster — the Terminator!

Dan: Well, you haven't done so badly yourself!

Evgeny: Last year, I won the Tivoli Competition in Denmark, and had the opportunity to perform with the Tivoli Orchestra in Rachmaninoff 2. My recitals included Italy, Germany and San Marino, and I explored many interesting places in Russia including the northernmost cities in Siberia. The interest in classical music in Russia has now been renewed, and I'm so happy about that.

Dmitri: And are the pianos better?

Evgeny: The pianos are better, the acoustic is better and the payment is better! And there's an opportunity for cooperation with marvelous chamber musicians.

Dan: How have you spent your time between the rounds?

Dmitri: Even though I always hope that I can relax, I can't. The stress goes on, even though this competition is very kind, giving two days to the performers between rounds. They even take a day off.... So it's fantastic that at least you can stay healthy here.

Evgeny: And we can spend all day at the Music Institute, not just two or three hours. That's unusual. I practice a lot and spend the rest of

the time walking, talking to friends I met here, I went once to the Botanical Garden, and I would like so much to see the art museum, and maybe the cemetery. I haven't wanted to do it before because I lost my father this year. I got off a plane in Israel and was informed that he had brain cancer. In one month, I lost him. Music helps me a lot.

Dan: We're really sorry to hear that.

Let's move on to ask what other kinds of music you play or listen to.

Evgeny: I like to play jazz music. My father played jazz too. He was an engineer, but an amateur jazz pianist who was one of the few in my city of Gorky. In the 50's, jazz was prohibited by the government. By the way, Gorky was renamed after the writer in the soviet era. Now we've come back to the historical name, Nizhny Novgorod. It's 400 kilometers from Moscow.

Dmitri: I love jazz, of course. I've even composed a few things in a jazz style. Evgeny and I are both fascinated with Scriabin's music, and for years I thought of all other music as secondary.

Dan: Your advanced degree is in composition — from Curtis.

Dmitri: Yes. But with all these piano competitions and recitals, auditions — there is simply no time. I started composing a symphony and I have material for three different movements, but there was no time to keep working on it.

Dan: One of the interesting things about this year is the video feeds of the competition. In fact, Dmitri, we heard from a former English teacher of yours in Toronto who's been following your performances on the web. Have either of you been paying attention to comments on the blogs?

Dmitri: I haven't yet. I'll enjoy it after the competition is done.

Evgeny: I did, and it was really a very interesting discussion of the semi-finals — just to know the opinion that we were both playing in an absolutely different way!

Dmitri Levkovich and Evgeny Brakhman play Rachmaninoff's 2nd and 3rd concertos with Jahja Ling and the Cleveland Orchestra on Friday evening at 7 in Severance Hall. Tickets: 216.231.1111

Levkovich and Brakhman go head to head with Rachmaninoff: Final Round, Part I

Posted August 8, 2009

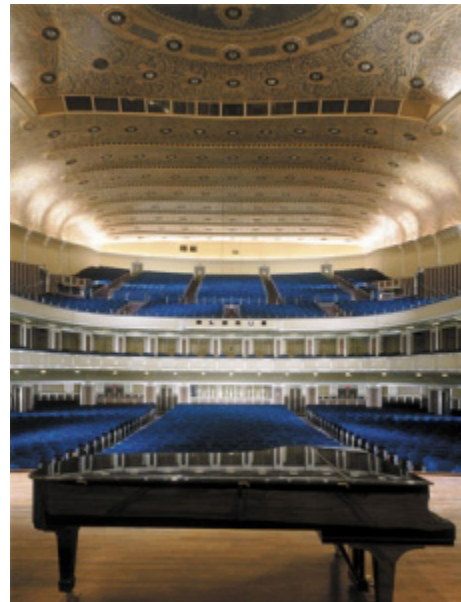


Photo: Roger Mastroianni

It's a dream come true for Rachmaninoff fans: three concertos (well, two different ones) performed on two adjacent evenings at Severance Hall — followed by a Brahms chaser.

Dmitri Levkovich (30, Canada) and Evgeny Brakhman (28, Russia) both speak Russian not only linguistically but musically. The first round of the CIPC Finals gave these fine young pianists the opportunity to show off their interpretive skills in collaboration with Jahja Ling and the Cleveland Orchestra.

In the orchestral hierarchy, concertos don't get much rehearsal time compared to symphonic works. In this case, there was even less time to be had: each of the two soloists spent about an hour with the orchestra earlier in the day, after a seance with Maestro Ling on Thursday to talk things through. Every detail can't have been worked out under those circumstances, but there are hundreds of recordings in circulation that have nothing on what we heard from these two pianists, who were obviously pumped for the occasion. It was quite an evening.

Levkovich's low number in the original draw (was that only twelve days ago?) brought him to the stage first for 'Rach 2'. From its dramatic beginning to its big, Hollywood tuneful finale, Dmitri Levkovich showed himself once again to be an elegant, thoughtful and technically brilliant pianist. He plays with a blissed-out expression on his face that tells you he's completely into what he's doing. He plays with a big sound which never

loses its clarity, crunches the numbers of rhythmically complex passages to come out right on the money, and massages the music expressively within the beat, the measure and the phrase without sounding self-indulgent.

No pianist gets through this piece — or the third concerto — without being covered by the orchestra at one point or another, and so it was this evening. But exuberance is written all over this work and the piano frequently plays a more accompanimental than solo role. Levkovich successfully emerged from the opulent orchestration when the piano had something important to say, helping heat up a fine accelerando at the end of the first movement, pointing up offbeat accents, stopping the show in the second movement with his fierce solo trills, and setting up a delightful scherzo-like interlude. The last movement fugato was marvelously articulated and perfectly coordinated with the orchestra. Then, of course, the Big Tune took over and swept everything along with it to the end. For all his fine work, Levkovich got a nearly unanimous standing ovation (and another round of applause from his balcony compatriots when he sat down to hear the second half).

'Rach 3' is far more of a showpiece, and it became an intensely physical one under the strong fingers of Evgeny Brakhman, who really set himself to the task.

Brakhman and the orchestra tussled a bit over balances at the beginning of the first movement, which built in volume and fervor very quickly, but they played well off each other in the rhythmically complex bridge section. The pianist dramatically nailed the difficult cadenza then changed character and voiced an absolutely ravishing pianissimo return of the original tune at the end. The violas got yet another opportunity to shine in the second movement and rose to the task. Brakhman chipped a high note at the climax of a phrase and played a few splattered chords later on, but his delicate filigree during the waltz passage was clean and colorful. The transition to the finale might have used five minutes' more rehearsal, but once the wild ride was underway, it continued unabated to the end, when Brakhman actually leapt to his feet on the release of the final chord. So did the audience, instantaneously.

Who was more true to the spirit of Rachmaninoff? Levkovich was more calculatedly elegant and conscious of shape and form (he's a composer, by the way), while Brakhman put himself more passionately out on the line, playing with emotional abandon. Was one artist 'better' at this than the other? It might be easier to talk about that question had they played on the same work on the

same program, as they did in the Semi-finals. In any event, the audience loved Levkovich but they adored Brakhman. What do our gentle readers think? Please comment!

But hold on — there are two more pianists waiting in the wings. On Saturday night, Martina Filjak gives us her version of Rachmaninoff's second concerto, and William Youn wraps up the whole competition with Brahms' first. More splendid playing to come, and, for those who might already have made up their minds, there could be some surprises in store. The audience gets to vote for its choice on Saturday via a clever, tear-off-the-corner ballot, but the winners will be picked by the Jury. The Jury is entirely made up of pianists, and they're looking for qualities we may not even be considering.

—Daniel Hathaway

A Chat with Finalists Martina Filjak and William Youn, who will play on Saturday evening

Posted August 8, 2009

Reprinted from ClevelandClassical.com



Photo: Sam Hubish

Dan Hathaway: Both of you attended the same piano academy at Lake Como. Did you know each other then?

Martina Filjak: Actually, before this year, we were both students at the same school in Hannover. Como is a very prestigious and well known place for a few lucky pianists who have been chosen to participate. The teachers and conditions are absolutely amazing, from the director of the academy, William Grant Naboré, to names like Dmitri Bashkirov, Boris Berman and Andreas Staier. We had a chance to meet all those people this year. They are all very special artists, I don't even want to say teachers, who have very specific, very clear, very personal ideas about music. If one is not strong enough, there is a danger of getting a non-coherent, pseudo-impression of too many different styles. Perhaps for me, look-

ing back at this year, the most important thing I learned was how to realize my own ideas, how to appreciate those of others without getting automatically influenced, and how to direct my personal energy in a way that works for me.

Dan: William, what was the structure of the academy like?

William Youn: There are seven students that are invited every year and there's a class every month from three to five days. The academy is in the middle of nowhere. It's beautiful, but not in one of the tourist areas. It's very nice.

Dan: Sort of like a monastery for pianists, perhaps.

William: Yes. The natural setting inspires me musically. You really can concentrate, but you don't want to live there.

Dan: Not much to do there but practice?

Martina: I think that's the point. That's why I also choose to live in Hannover, Germany, which is a little bit more central and makes it easy to travel. So really there's nothing to do but practice.

Dan: You also live in Germany, William?

William: Yes, I was also in Hannover, but I have lived in Munich for a year and a half.

Dan: Have you acquired a southern accent yet?

William: I was lucky that I was living in Hannover because they don't have any accent. But I think Munich is very sympathetic. I like it.

Dan: And the beer is good.

William: The beer is fantastic!

Dan: Let's talk a little bit about what has just happened in the competition. How did you pick your repertory for the first two rounds?

William: There are some requirements. It was kind of difficult to fit pieces into every category in the required time. So I was going back and forth. I changed my selections twice. Finally, I was happy with what I played because I felt that each program had its own character and I could show many sides of my playing. The Semi-final was probably the most suitable for me, because those were the pieces that I am very comfortable with.

Martina: As William said, we have to fit inside certain repertory requirements. For me, the most

important thing when I'm in a competition is to feel like I'm not in a competition, but to feel like I'm playing a concert. So I was trying to put some of my favorite concert repertory on the program, and I wanted to make a sort of reasonable recital with a head and a tail within the time limits. I adore the Haydn sonata that I played. I worship the Berio and Bartok pieces that I performed. So I consciously choose pieces with which I feel very comfortable and about which I have a strong personal emotion or opinion.

William: I felt that they were looking for somebody who was well rounded, not a specialist in baroque, classical, romantic or modern. And I think that's why the four finalists are quite mature, and have played many concerts before.

Dan: What was the favorite piece that you played?

William: I love everything I played. Actually, I am probably most looking forward to playing the Brahms concerto. It's special with this orchestra.

Dan: Have you both known the Cleveland Orchestra through recordings?

Martina: Absolutely. Cleveland is a city with very big cultural and historical traditions, and this orchestra is very, very famous. It's a great privilege, a great happiness to play with them.

William: Our director, William Grant Naboré, was a pupil of George Szell, so he learned the Brahms concerto with him. I love his recordings, everything that he did. Especially with the Cleveland sound, there was something very magnificent.

Dan: One of the innovations in this year's competition is the webcasts. Have friends and relatives been watching in on the Internet?

William: I was playing at night, so my friends in Germany had to stay up until 3 am! I have great friends who are very happy to watch. And, yes, I've had lots of feedback because of the internet. I've had e-mails from people that I don't even know.

Martina: Actually, I'm the opposite. I banned myself from visiting any web sites for ten days. This is the way for me to keep my inner peace because I have to feel like I'm playing a concert. Some people have been telling me that there are are blogs, but I think I'm going to read it after a few day's rest. On the Internet, people can post all sorts of comments anonymously, but as long as it's anonymous, it's meaningless. When somebody writes his name under a statement, sure,

fine, I accept that. Occasionally, because I have a computer in my room, I found that my hand was going in that direction, but I've managed so far.

Dan: Which leads me to my next question: how did you spend your time between the rounds?

Martina: I was very often watching cartoons and YouTube.

Dan: Something completely different!

Martina: I watched Tom & Jerry! And I have a very good book with me — Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'. It's the first time I've read it, and since the competition began, I'm about 2/3 of the way through it. Actually, I made the big mistake of seeing the movie before reading the book. You should never do that!

William: I've been to other competitions where I was restricting myself to a certain regimen, and it didn't really work, so I thought, be yourself and do whatever you feel like. I think it's been working very well. I've practiced a lot, I've jogged, I've gone out for a drink. I have a friend who studies here, so we went to a Korean restaurant.

Dan: How is the Korean food in Cleveland?

William: The food is very good. Very authentic.

Dan: Martina, there are a lot of Croatians in Cleveland. Have you made any contact?

Martina: Actually, my two biggest supporters from the audience during this competition were two very lovely Serbian ladies! I'm so grateful to them.

Dan: You've both been in lots of competitions. How does Cleveland measure up?

Martina: The organization is just perfect and all the people I've met in the audience were so kind and so warm. The Cleveland Institute of Music is so close to the place where we're living, and everyone can get a practice room for literally the whole day from 7am to 11pm. The food is served three times a day, so as a contestant one really doesn't have to do anything but just practice, rest and do their best. You don't have to worry about anything. That's great, just amazing.

William: You know, before I came to Cleveland, I had to decide: should I go or not go? Do I need another prize? I'm so glad I came, because it's been very wonderful to be here, and I feel like I've improved a lot. Musically and personally, I've learned a lot of things. I've met wonderful

people, I've had the most amazing host family, and as Martina says, it's probably been the most relaxed, warm and comfortable competition I've ever been to.

Dan: How much will you have to shift gears in moving from the solo to the concerto round?

Martina: To play with a good orchestra is such a pleasure. We're in the finals, and our qualities have been recognized so, only speaking for myself, I can just enjoy.

William: I think it's important to realize that they'll be judging not just on the interpretation and pianistic quality, but they will see it as a performance. So I want to play as if I'm playing a concert. I have been playing for the public. And with the orchestra you have to be a little louder! (laughter)

Dan: What's on your iPod?

Martina: I've got something called iRiver, which also can record. Apart from some classical music, I've got a lot of recordings of my rehearsals that I listen to obsessively, some audio books, some audio learning programs — psychology and visualization — and some pop music. Well, OK, not pop but rock. I have some Radiohead on my mp3 player. It's a cliché!

William: What's iPod? (laughter)

Martina: I saw you with one!

William: I didn't bring it this time. I have the Brahms concerto, with Clifford Curzon and George Szell, I have almost everything of Horowitz, Richter's recording of the Schumann Fantasie, Murray Parahia playing the Brahms quartet with the Amadeus Quartet — that's one of my favorites — Schumann songs by Peter Schreier, I have Barbara the chanson singer.

Dan: My last question: Suppose you weren't a musician. What would you be doing if you had to choose career path no. 2?

Martina: (thoughtful pause) What a sad thing to think about!

Dan: Let me put it a different way: What did your parents want you to do?

Martina: My parents are both pianists!

William: My parents are not musicians. When I was young, I remember we had only three LP's. They had the Schubert 'Arpeggione', the sound

track of 'Amadeus', and some Bach chorales, because my mother was singing in the church choir. They didn't want me to play the piano, because they didn't know how to support me. But one thing led to another, and I kind of knew that I wanted to play this instrument. If I wasn't a pianist, I don't think I would exist.

Martina Filjak will play Rachmaninoff's second concerto and William Youn will play Brahms no. 1 with the Cleveland Orchestra under Jahja Ling on Saturday night at 7 at Severance Hall in the last round of the competition finals. Tickets: 216.231.1111.

Filjak and Youn in the last Concertos at Severance: Final Round, Part II

Posted August 9, 2009



Photo: Roger Mastroianni

Inevitable comparisons: in a competition, you want to listen to every performance as if you're hearing both the piece and the performer for the first time, but with two versions of Rachmaninoff's second concerto scheduled on two adjacent nights, what's a listener to do but think about each of them in relation to the other. Both are still ringing in the ears.

Croatian pianist Martina Filjak made an immediate impression with her carefully wrought crescendo and intensifying coloration of the famous opening chords and bass punctuation that begin Rach 2. Same conductor, same orchestra, but when the other hundred or so musicians on the stage joined Filjak in her musical odyssey through this engaging score, it was clear that the soloist was seeing it through a different lens.

Her overview of the piece generally seemed to have more thrust and sweep than what we had heard on Friday in a differently excellent performance by Dmitri Levkovich. Filjak's also had more overtly emotional qualities. She found opportunities for tiny surges and delicious moments of expression, shining little spotlights on details

as she went along without distorting tempos or interrupting phrases. Jahja Ling took care to shush the fiddles from time to time, giving the piano a fighting chance of sounding through the wonderfully plummy string sound the Cleveland Orchestra adopted for the occasion. The brass completely obliterated Filjak's efforts at a couple of points, but who really cared when the sound was that magnificent?

Filjak went *molto rubato* in her first movement interlude, giving herself lots of space, then, as if to recover lost time, set up a thrilling *accelerando* to the end. The *Adagio* seemed a bit more expressively pliable on Saturday. Filjak played her one-line melody with extreme grace and elegant hand and arm movements. She played with even more feeling as the tonality changed. Filjak pressed forward to neatly set up the *scherzando*, she made dramatic backward releases away from the keyboard, and then established a new, dreamy-surgey mood before making an exquisite valedictory statement.

The final *Allegro Scherzando* began with some rhythmic dissonance between piano and winds, and the brass punctuated the opening statement just a nanosecond late, but the rest of the concerto played out in a spacious, suspenseful and brilliant manner. After the final, triumphal playing of the big, singable (and, thanks to Hollywood, textable) tune, a gradual standing ovation ran like *The Wave* through the large audience, bolstered tonight by a large contingent attending the very successful black-tie benefit 'Bravo Piano'.

Kudos to Korean pianist William Youn for halting the Rachmaninoff landslide by choosing Brahms' first concerto (a decision made long before anyone knew what would be on the menu for the Final Four). We love Rachmaninoff, but it was a relief to have another composer happening to occupy the final slot. Maestro Ling set up the concerto with a spacious and highly profiled exposition of the craggy, opening statement. Youn had to sit awhile before adding his voice to the texture, but when he did, his touch was assured and brilliant and he was completely in possession of the difficult notes he had to play. Youn seemed a little impatient with the pace Ling had established, pressing a bit to the end of phrases, and eventually articulating the main theme on its return in a slightly different way than we had heard it before. His tendency toward dramatic releases at the end of phrases sometimes produces unintended accents.

In the gorgeous *Adagio*, Youn expressively stretched the tempo and played with rich, strong chords over the long pedal point. In the *Rondo*,

he established a well-articulated and attractively accented theme and proceeded to explore the playful side of his keyboard personality. The cadenza was dramatic, with punched-up notes ringing brilliantly out of the texture, and Youn, Ling and the Orchestra brought Brahms thrillingly home to an immediate standing ovation and volleys of 'Bravos'. Another exceptional evening at Severance Hall.

[Editorial note: Owing to the chronology of the evening, in which the winners were to be announced shortly after the second performance, of course we wrote this report after we knew the results, but we've tried to forget that and stick strictly to the notes we made during the concert].

It took only about half an hour before executive director Karen Knowlton was able to announce the four winners. The Jury was back within twenty minutes, but it took a while to round up the finalists, who seemed to be lost somewhere in the madding crowd. Eventually all were gathered on stage and Knowlton suspensefully ran through the list in reverse order. Fourth place went to Russian contestant Evgeny Brakhman, third place to William Youn, second place to Canadian Dmitri Levkovich, and top prize to Martina Filjak.

Though the decision might have been surprising to some who heard only the final concertos or to those who were keeping an eye on the applause meter, we'll bet that the judges took the entire series of rounds into consideration in arriving at their ranking. 'Brava!' to Martina, and 'Bravos!' to Dmitri, William and Evgeny, for so many pieces so well played in the last two weeks. There are more prizes to come on Sunday afternoon.

—Daniel Hathaway

Martina Filjak brings home top prize (and more) as the 2009 Cleveland International Piano Competition ends with ovations

Posted August 10, 2009

Reprinted from ClevelandClassical.com

When Croatian pianist Martina Filjak made her fourth appearance on stage during the Sunday afternoon CIPC awards ceremony at Severance Hall, this time to claim her First Prize, she made a brief and touching speech, telling the large audience that winning in Cleveland represented great happiness and great responsibility. Growing up in difficult circumstances in a very troubled part of the world was not an easy road for her, but that she intended to work to become even better in the next two to three years through all the engagements the prize offered.

Filjak can be very happy with her accomplish-

ments in Cleveland, which included not only the top prize of \$50,000 with a number of career-advancing perks attached, but also the Junior Jury Prize (\$1,000), the Beethoven Prize (\$2,000), and one of two prizes for Contemporary Music (\$2,500).



*Martina Filjak in Rachmaninoff 2 with the Cleveland Orchestra, Jahja Ling, conducting
Photo: Roger Mastroianni*

No. 2, Canadian pianist Dmitri Levkovich (\$25,000), also received the Audience Award of \$1,000 and No. 4, Russian pianist Evgeny Brakhman (\$10,000), collected both the Mozart Prize (\$1,500) and the other half of the Contemporary Music Prize (\$2,500, whose sponsors admirably doubled the sum when the Jury chose to split the award). Korea's William Youn secured the third place award (\$15,000).

Additional awards were handed out to Hoang Pham (Australia) for the best performance of a Baroque work (Bach's D-major Partita, \$2,000), to Sean Chen (USA) for an American work (\$1,500) and to Soo Yeon Ham for a Chopin work (probably for her semi-final round performance of all 12 Etudes of op. 25)

Whether people were following the Competition either in person at the Bolton Theatre at the Play House or in Severance Hall, on the radio

or Internet via WCLV, 104.9 FM, through CIPC's web casts, by way of sound files posted on InstantEncore or through Donald Rosenberg's and ClevelandClassical.com's blogs, we're sure everyone chose — and subsequently revised — their own short list of favorite competitors as the two weeks went along. Probably everyone also rued the elimination of one or two of the 32 contestants as the rounds moved into semi-finals and finals. But from what we read and overheard, people were remarkably in tune with the Jury's choice of semifinalists, even though some might have ranked the Final Four differently after the concerto rounds with the Cleveland Orchestra on Friday and Saturday evenings.

In his brief remarks, jury chair Peter Frankl wished that eight finalists could have been chosen rather than four, but noted that he was 'satisfied generally' with the decision' as was 75% of the panel of judges, all of them pianists. The Junior Jury of seven high school pianists from the greater Cleveland area, who heard all the sessions and made up their own mind, agreed with their seniors in voting Martina Filjak their No. 1.

The Awards Ceremony and the Competition ended appropriately and harmoniously with music, as all four finalists took the audience on a retrospective of favorite semi-final round repertoire. Evgeny Brakhman dramatically revisited two of Rachmaninoff's *Études-tableaux*, William Youn deliciously rewarmed Liszt's *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*, Dmitri Levkovich played another mini-recital of charming Scarlatti (the Sonata in D, K. 45), soulful Rachmaninoff (the Prelude No. 13 in D-flat) and vibrant Chopin (the Scherzo No. 2 in b-flat). Finally Martina Filjak scored another in a series of programming coups by giving us a second opportunity to enjoy Scriabin's gorgeous Nocturne for the Left Hand and exciting recapitulations of Barcarolla, The Night's Music and The Chase from Bartok's *Out of Doors*. Diva that she is, she turned her final keyboard release into a bow.

People who attended every session of CIPC got an earful during these two weeks — roughly a total of 46 hours of piano music if played end-to-end.

But as fascinating as all the performances were, we were very much attracted to two sessions most listeners passed up. On the final Friday, jurors Peter Frankl and Dina Yoffe invited seven pianists who did not advance to the semifinals to play in public morning and afternoon master classes at CIM's Mixon Hall. Pianists spend hours alone in practice rooms with just a piano for company. Every now and again, they need an

opportunity to check out the musical validity of what they're playing. If you wanted insights into what the jury was looking for or found wanting — at least as expressed by two of the eight pairs of ears — here was your opportunity.

The stage was set with two side-by-side concert grand pianos. One by one, the young pianists played a movement or a big chunk of one of the works they would have offered in the semifinals had they advanced, and Frankl and Yoffe commented and made suggestions.

Since pianists are operating a machine that produces music by striking strings with felt tipped hammers, both Frankl and Yoffe made analogies to more innately expressive musical instruments and to the human voice, asking the players to mimic orchestral colors (Frankl: "now, the winds") and conjure up long musical phrases that had singing qualities (Yoffe: "When you play this phrase, send a love message"). Both pointed up possibilities for varying articulation and touch, and cautioned against using rubato that destroys tempo, playing without color ("even in pianissimi, you're playing for the last row in the hall") and misunderstanding styles and forms ("This Chopin sonata is really a classical piece").

Some pianists responded immediately to comments and suggestions, others less quickly or even less willingly (one argued passionately in favor of a concept which was clearly not working), and it was quite interesting to see how individual personalities came into play in their interpretations. But Frankl also left his morning subjects with the advice to be cautious about advice, and make up their own minds about things. Relating his experience with George Szell and the minuet in Mozart's K. 271 concerto, he noted that he had tried over and over to please Szell about a tiny detail of phrasing, and when Szell finally smiled in satisfaction, Frankl was happy that Szell was happy, "but it wasn't me. Remember, not every word is a bible". And Yoffe brought her subjects up short more than once with the interpretational warning, "Don't do it" (usually slowing down for passages or at cadences) "because everybody does it."

This was a learning experience all around — as was the whole, intense, two week immersion for competitors, Junior Jury and audiences alike. We need a break, but we also can't wait until 2011 to do this again.

—Daniel Hathaway

Interviews with previous first prize winners, Sergei Babayan and Antonio Pompa-Baldi, can be found in the Archives at ClevelandClassical.com.