

Review

Cleveland International Piano Competition: Round One, Session Two (July 31)

by Daniel Hathaway



Four contestants played in the second session of the first round of the Cleveland International Piano Competition in Gartner Auditorium of the Cleveland Museum of Art on Wednesday evening, continuing the impressive level of playing we heard from the first five earlier in the day — and raising the proverbial bar even higher.

Qi Xu (18, China) gave a fluent and winning mini-recital of four works to begin the evening. His shapely playing of J.S. Bach's b-minor *Prelude and Fugue (WTC II)* had a sense of purpose and destination; the fugue subject was beautifully and consistently articulated every time it came around. Chopin's *Etude in C, op. 10/1* was bright and even-handed, but the highlight was a lucid and finely-paced version of Beethoven's tricky op. 110 sonata, in which Xu created masterful transitions and skillfully sculpted climaxes. His *sotto voce* sections were lovely. Elliott Carter's perpetual motion *Caténaires* (2006) was a deftly-managed toccata with steady rhythm and well-layered secondary themes.

Astonishing fingerwork marked 22-year-old Chinese pianist Gehui Xu's lively but rather breathless performances of J.S. Bach's c minor *Partita* and Haydn's C-major Sonata (Hob. XVI:48). She can play cleanly at very fast tempos, as she proved in Bach's *Andante* (in the opening *Sinfonia*), *Rondeau* and *Capriccio*, but somewhat at the expense of expressiveness (by contrast, her *Allemande* was on the slow side). The *Andante con espressione* that opens the two-movement Haydn sonata was nicely relaxed, while the concluding *Rondo* went supersonic, resulting in a few tangles toward the end.

A tendency toward breathless playing also characterized the first part of Jiayan Sun's set. The 23-year-old Chinese pianist began with four admittedly white-knuckle pieces from Ligeti's *Musica Ricercata* (nos. 3, 4, 6 and 10). By turns a spirited romp, a maudlin waltz, a steely toccata and a crazed boogie-woogie, the four movements received an admirably clean if compressed reading from Sun, who yielded to the temptation to overplay only at the very end. Midway through Brahms's *Seven Fantasies, op. 116*, he suddenly relaxed, began breathing audibly and found his lyrical, expressive groove in a long stretch of sensitive, well-layered playing.

There's nothing like ending big. 20-year-old Russian pianist Arseny Tarasevich-Nikolaev, brought charisma and a stunningly natural technique to Haydn's large c-minor sonata (Hob. XVI:20) and Chopin's *Etude in D-flat, op. 25/8* and *Ballade No. 2 in F, op. 38*. He impressed with his fine, even tone, strong, clear runs and expressive sense of drama in the Haydn, but played amazingly in the Chopin, perfectly wedding technique to musical values. The *Ballade* was particularly memorable, beginning lyrically then exploding in a burst of well-controlled energy.

Nine contestants heard, nineteen yet to hear for the first time. Can't wait!

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