

Oberlin Cooper Piano Competition: ten pianists play full concertos (July 22)

by Daniel Hathaway with Daniel Hautzinger & Mike Telin



The ten young pianists who advanced to the Concerto Round in the Oberlin Cooper Piano Competition on Tuesday ranged in age from 13-18 and hailed from five countries. The contestants played complete concertos in Warner Concert Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory with a second pianist providing the orchestral accompaniment. The performances gave a taste of what the audience can expect on Friday evening at Severance Hall when three finalists perform with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra.

The repertory included concertos by Beethoven (Nos. 2 and 5), Rachmaninoff (Nos. 2 and 3), Chopin (Nos. 1 and 2), Prokofiev (No. 3) and Tchaikovsky (No. 2). The most popular work — and the only piece the judges and audience heard more than once — was Chopin's first concerto, which received three performances.

Sae Yoon Chon (18, Seoul, South Korea) led off the afternoon session with a strong performance of Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto (No. 5). Full of power and flair, his playing also had its moments of repose and some luscious details, like the slow movement trills.

Min Jun Lee (15, Seoul, South Korea) took on the challenge of Rachmaninoff's second concerto and did himself proud. Beginning with a dark, handsome tone, he changed up his touch to produce fine filigree later in the work. This was a good beginning for a piece he'll doubtless continue to get to know over many years.

Nicola Losito (18, Udine, Italy) showed fine musicality and a good sense of phrasing, producing classy and steady playing in Chopin's first concerto. Cool and collected, he seemed to be in complete control of his performance.

Zitong Wang (15, Inner Mongolia, China) approached Prokofiev's finger-tangling, intensely difficult third concerto with an assured technique and astonishing strength. It

was intriguing to hear the work with piano accompaniment, which made it sound like a duo-piano sonata.

The afternoon session concluded with a second performance of Chopin No. 1, this time by Allison To (13, Yorba Linda, California). She played with astonishing accuracy and facility for a player who was at the minimum age to qualify for the Cooper Competition. It will be interesting to follow her developing career.

Evren Ozel (15, Minneapolis, Minnesota) opened the evening session with a suave and distinctive reading of Chopin's second concerto. As he relaxed into the work, he demonstrated a fine sense of phrasing, touch and color.

Rachel Breen (17, Oakland, California) took on the biggest concerto challenge of the evening with Rachmaninoff's third. Though things didn't always go as she might have wished, she colored the individual chapters of this rhapsodic work masterfully and showed herself to be a pianist with a bright future.

Youlan Ji (15, Beijing, China) performed Beethoven's second concerto with her mother and first teacher as the orchestra. The two of them seemed to be having great fun in their bright, peppy reading of what was actually Beethoven's first attempt at a concerto.

Chopin's first concerto came around again in a colorful and fluent performance by Gyu Tae Ha (17, Uijeonbu, South Korea). His strength of tone would carry well over an orchestra, but his sense of intimacy also made you feel that you might be enjoying Chopin's details up close in a salon.

Tony Yike Yang (15, Toronto, Canada) brought the evening to a resounding conclusion with a performance of Tchaikovsky's first concerto characterized by massive but never strident tone, a technique capable of multiple shadings, and an acute sense of drama. A bit of showmanship was a welcome thing at the end of a long day.

Pianists Colette Valentine (University of Texas at Austin) and Elena Zyl (University of Dallas) alternated at the second Steinway, providing terrific support for nine of the contestants. A few of the solo pianists gave them a special nod after their performances — a graceful gesture that did not go unnoticed.

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