

Review: Oberlin Cooper Piano Competition: Finals at Severance Hall (July 25)



by Daniel Hathaway

Out of an initial field of 28 competitors in the Thomas and Evon Cooper Oberlin International Piano Competition, three young pianists, having survived semi-final, concerto final and recital final rounds at the Oberlin Conservatory earlier in the week, won the opportunity to appear on the stage of Severance Hall on Friday evening, July 25 to play concertos with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra.

The impressive audience that turned out to hear Sae Yoon Chon, Zitong Wang and Tony Yike Yang in concertos by Beethoven, Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky was full of young people — largely made up of friends, relatives and colleagues of the Cooper participants, no doubt. Palpable energy was in the air, and each of the three finalists was greeted with whoops and cheers both before and after they played.

18-year-old Sae Yoon Chon from Seoul, South Korea, led off the evening with Beethoven's fifth concerto, aka the "Emperor," playing on a Hamburg Steinway. Chon addressed his opening arpeggios and recitative-like flourishes with grace and confidence, after which The Cleveland Orchestra took over and provided a predictably magnificent introduction to what Beethoven would later develop from those initial gestures.

Chon's passagework was impressive. Nerves were probably responsible for a few blurry runs and errant notes in the fast movements. The *Adagio* was lovely, if a bit unsettled in tempo. A pianist with more years of experience might have found extra meaning in

Beethoven's suspenseful transition to the third movement *Rondo* at the end, but his playing in the finale had a delightful lilt and a strong finish. At the end, Chon first bowed to the orchestra in a winning gesture of respect.

After an intermission to change pianos to one of Steinway's New York instruments, 15-year-old Zitong Wang from Inner Mongolia, China, joined the orchestra for Prokofiev's third concerto, a piece that begins calmly with a clarinet duet, then takes off at a breathless pace and never looks back. The second movement theme and variations changes up the concerto's relentless rhythmic progress, only to burst forth again with boundless energy in the third.

Wang, who is currently studying at Curtis, sat well back from the keyboard and played with a poised elegance that belied her digital strength and agility. In her strong, incisive and accurate performance, she demonstrated impressive technique and interpretative skills for a pianist only in the second decade of her life and career. Her off-beat accents gave the finale extra pizzazz.



*Tony Yike Yang with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra.
(Photo: Roger Mastroianni)*

The evening ended with a performance of Tchaikovsky's first concerto by 15-year-old Tony Yike Yang of Toronto. Yang has an outgoing personality and he let it shine through the whole piece. His strength of tone, excellent technique — double octaves were stunning — and fine sense of drama and pacing contributed to a reading that had everyone on the edge of their seats. Yang too, it would seem — he came close to missing the bench once or twice after he had risen to put extra heft into a chord.

After half an hour's deliberation, the judges awarded Tony Yike Yang first prize, Zitong Wang second prize, and Sae Yoon Chon third prize, with checks and medals given out by the competition's patrons, Thomas and Evon Cooper.

Medals would also have been appropriate for Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra, who played as flawlessly and attentively for these three teenagers as they would have done for any visiting soloist. As WCLV's Robert Conrad noted at one point in the competition, there were cash prizes involved, but the real prize was the opportunity to perform with The Cleveland Orchestra. Priceless, as the Mastercard people would say.

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