

Cooper International Piano Competition Recital Finals

By Daniel Hautzinger



L-R: Finalists Sae Yoon Chon, Zitong Wang, Tony Yike Yang

On July 23 in Oberlin Conservatory's Warner Concert Hall, six young pianists vied to win a chance to play a concerto with The Cleveland Orchestra and for cash prizes as part of the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition. The competitors were already assured a monetary reward, having survived three elimination rounds that culled an original field of 28 young musicians ranging in age from thirteen to eighteen.

The pianists were required to perform a 30 minute solo recital for this latest round, which was broadcast live on WCLV. At the end of the night, the judges advanced Sae Yoon Chon of Seoul, South Korea, Zitong Wang of Inner Mongolia China, and Tony Yike Yang of Toronto. Those three will perform with The Cleveland Orchestra on July 24 at Severance Hall for the final round of the competition, where the \$10,000 first prize will be decided.

The other three competitors all received a \$1,000 prize, while Evren Ozel of Minneapolis was also awarded the \$500 Audience Prize. Gyu Tae Ha of Uijeongbu, South Korea placed fourth, Ozel, fifth, and Min Jun Lee of Seoul, sixth.

Each competitor shone in a different, essential aspect of pianism. The eighteen year-old Sae Yoon Chon, who advanced to the finals, exhibited a vast range of dynamics as well as fine control in Liszt's *Rhapsodie Espagnole*. The "Allegro" first movement of Haydn's Sonata no. 59 in E-flat had a mercurial playfulness and easy flow. Chon also must be

credited for tackling a relatively obscure, difficult-to-interpret piece, the “Choral et Variations” from Henri Dutilleux’s 1948 Piano Sonata.



Fifteen year-old Min Jun Lee, who placed sixth, astounded with his incredible technical ability in Prokofiev’s *Suggestion Diabolique*. Liszt’s *Après une lecture du Dante* “*Fantasia quasi Sonata*” abounds in virtuosic impossibilities that Lee tackled without breaking a sweat.

Rock-steady tempos that never fluctuated despite technical difficulties that might slow others down may have helped fifteen year-old Zitong Wang, the only female competitor in this round, gain a place in the finals. The tempestuous sections of Brahms’s Second Sonata and Tchaikovsky’s *Theme and Variations, op. 19, no. 6*, were particularly effective in her hands, while the nonstop Scherzo from Mendelssohn’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was impressive.



The fifteen year-old Audience Prize winner and fifth placer Evren Ozel spun lyrical phrases, displaying exceptional musicality and fluid grace in Ravel’s “Ondine” from *Gaspard de la nuit* and Chopin’s *Barcarolle*. His reading of “Ondine” was especially astonishing for his age.



Gyu Tae Ha, the seventeen year-old who as fourth prize winner barely missed getting into the finals, wove cohesive narratives out of his repertoire. Chopin's *Nocturne in D-flat, op. 27, no. 2* shimmered with magical colors and delicate repose, and Ha brought vibrant contrasts to Liszt's flamboyant *Mephisto Waltz no. 1*.

Fifteen year-old Tony Yike Yang closed the night and advanced to the finals. His histrionic flair and massive, exciting sound made for a complete performance, especially in the effulgent *Sonetto 104 del Petrarca* of Liszt and bipolar first movement of Beethoven's *Tempest Sonata*.

The Cooper concludes Friday at Severance Hall with performances of Beethoven's Fifth Concerto by Sae Yoon Chon, Prokofiev's Third by Zitong Wang, and Tchaikovsky's First by Tony Yike Yang.

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