

Oberlin's Cooper International Competition features young pianists in 2016

by Mike Telin



Since its inauguration in 2010, the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Competition has established an impressive track record for identifying young pianists with potential. That year 14 year-old American pianist George Li took home the top prize. Since then, Li has quickly established himself as a young pianist to watch on the international concert scene. In 2015, Li won 2nd prize at the XV International Tchaikovsky Competition.

In 2012, 16-year-old Italian Leonardo Colafelice won the top honors, and he too quickly cultivated an impressive career. In 2014 the first prize was awarded to 15 year-old Canadian Tony Yike Yang (left, with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra), who at the

age of 16 won the fifth prize at the International Chopin Piano Competition, making him the youngest prizewinner in the history of that competition.

On July 16 at 9:30 am in Oberlin Conservatory's Warner Concert Hall, thirty 13-18 year-old pianists representing 8 countries, 14 U.S. states, and the District of Columbia will begin their quest for this year's top prize of \$20,000. On Friday, July 22 the three finalists will perform complete concertos with The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall under the direction of Jahja Ling. All Oberlin performances are free and open to the public. Details about each round can be found at the [Cooper Competition website](#). The competition's Recital round at Oberlin and Concerto Finals at Severance Hall will again be broadcast live by Cleveland's classical station WCLV 104.9 FM.

Each year the competition alternates annually between piano and violin, and this year's competition will mark only the fourth time it has been held for pianists. When asked

about the success the first three winners have enjoyed, competition director and Oberlin Conservatory faculty member Robert Shannon (below) quickly responded: “When I think about that it makes me feel warm and fuzzy. I couldn’t be more happy. This past year Tony Yike Yang and Zitong Wang, the second place winner in 2014, came back for one of our Lake Como Residencies. They both played really well and have improved so much.”



Beginning this year, cash prizes for the Competition have doubled. “Prizes at youth competitions all over have grown, and Mr. Cooper thought that ours should too,” Shannon noted. In addition to the \$20,000 first prize, \$10,000 and \$5,000 cash prizes will be awarded for second and third place. Each finalist’s prize package will also include a full four-year tuition scholarship to attend the [Oberlin Conservatory of Music](#). The fourth- through sixth-place winners will each receive cash awards of \$1,500, and an Audience Prize of \$500 will be presented at the conclusion of the Recital Final round in Oberlin on Wednesday, July 20. Shannon said he is very pleased that the cash prizes will help to advance the careers of the winners. “They’ll probably use the money for college or to continue their studies in some way — like paying their way to the Chopin competition in Warsaw or the Van Cliburn. I’m sure it will be spent in a good way.”

Another first for the Competition is that this year’s finals will be part of The Cleveland Orchestra’s popular Summers@Severance series. “Being part of that series is a very nice thing. We’ve always had enthusiastic audiences at the finals, and I hope that this year it will be even bigger,” Shannon said. “I can’t say enough good things about The Cleveland Orchestra. They play their hearts out for the kids. It’s so obvious that they care, and we appreciate that so much.”

The 2016 Competition jury will comprise Oberlin professors Alvin Chow, Angela Cheng, Monique Duphil, Robert Shannon, Peter Takács, and Matti Raekallio. International jurors will include Dag Achatz, Swedish soloist, recording artist, and composer; Uzbek-born American pianist Stanislav Ioudenitch, gold medalist of the 11th Van Cliburn Competition; Lisa Nakamichi, founding artistic director of the Aloha International Piano Festival; and Wu Ying, professor and department head at the Central Conservatory of Music in China.

This year 93 pianists applied for the Competition. “The 30 that we chose are on average the highest level we have ever had,” Shannon said. “For the second time in a row the winner of the Japanese National Competition will be competing, and Ryota Yamazaki is just one of many formidable contestants that we have this year.”

Shannon pointed out that the Cooper is all about education. Contestants who don’t advance remain part of the Competition by taking part in master classes and by performing during the honors recital held in Oberlin on Thursday, July 21. “They want to play and to learn, and the Honors Recital has for a long time been one of the absolute highlights of the competition. They are playing what the judges think are their best pieces. They’re totally relaxed, and invariably they all play better than they did in the competition itself. I would encourage anybody who wants to hear something amazing to come to that concert.”



In 2014 the fifth prize and the audience prize were awarded to Evren Ozel (above), who will return to the Competition this year. “I was extremely honored to win the audience prize,” the 17 year-old said during a telephone conversation from his home in Minneapolis. “I enjoy doing competitions because it’s a way to bring a large amount of

repertoire to the highest level that you can. I like Oberlin very much and I love the Cooper Competition, so I thought it would be really fun to come back.”

How has Ozel changed as a musician since his last appearance? “That’s a tough question, but I would say that I’ve become more diligent when it comes to focusing on creating the right sound and making sure that there is always a nice shape and continuous musical lines. It takes time to develop that way of thinking — going beyond just playing all of the right notes. At the same time you don’t want to sound like you’re forcing yourself on the music.”

Like many aspiring young musicians, Ozel made the decision to leave home to attend an arts school. “Going to the Walnut Hill School was a good decision for me,” he said. It’s a boarding school in Natick, Massachusetts, and although it’s not really living on my own because I’m in a dorm, I’m constantly in an environment where there is a lot of passion and that’s what I like that about it. And I really like my teacher, Wha Kyung Byun, at the New England Conservatory Preparatory School. She’s helped me grow a lot as a musician.”



Ozel, who will be entering his senior year in the fall, said that he’s always been inspired by other great players. “Even when I was still in school in Minnesota, in my studio I was surrounded by people who played very well — and that’s always great to be around. Seeing people everyday who share the same interests, I feel like I fit in. It’s a great community for me, and I really like that.”

In addition to solo and concerto repertoire, Ozel also enjoys playing chamber music. “Every semester at Walnut Hill I have a chamber group. I also do a little bit of chamber music at NEC — this past year I was part of a piano/cello duo, and that was very fun.”

Some of Ozel’s recent accomplishments include attending the Oxford Philomusica Piano Festival and Academy, where he performed in master classes with Ferenc Rados, Menahem Pressler, and András Schiff. He has received merit scholarships from the Chopin Foundation of the U.S. Earlier this year he became a National YoungArts Winner, and won the first prize in the Boston Symphony Orchestra Concerto Competition.

When asked about his repertoire selection for the Cooper, Ozel said, “They are all pieces that I love, especially Beethoven’s fourth piano concerto.”

Although Evren Ozel may be enjoying semi-independence at Walnut Hill, he is grateful to have the continued support of his mother and father. “They are always very encouraging, and I’m so happy that they will be coming to Oberlin with me.”

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