

Cooper International Piano Competition: final round with Jahja Ling & The Cleveland Orchestra (July 22)

by Daniel Hathaway



In a savvy move, The Cleveland Orchestra wrapped the final round of Oberlin's Thomas & Evon Cooper International Piano Competition into its Summers@Severance series this year. As a result, a large audience turned out on Friday evening, July 22 to hear Nathan Lee, Evren Ozel, and Ryota Yamazaki play concertos by Rachmaninoff and Beethoven with Jahja Ling and the orchestra. Though the evening was sultry, the party setup on the front terrace gave the proceedings a

celebratory air.

Sure, there are cash prizes at stake for the final three pianists (they already won a four-year sojourn at the Oberlin Conservatory by advancing to the finals), but as the credit card commercials would put it, "Playing with The Cleveland Orchestra: Priceless!" Happily, each of the three strong finalists this year deserved that honor.



14-year-old Nathan Lee, from Sammamish, Washington, had played an impressive recital round at Oberlin on Wednesday evening enroute to Severance Hall, for which he won the Audience Prize. Though he initially seemed a bit star-struck by his surroundings on Friday evening, he found his voice as a soloist midway through the first movement of Rachmaninoff's second concerto, delivering a strong, captivating account of one of the most heart-on-the-sleeve works in the repertoire.

Keeping closely (but not always perfectly) in touch with Ling and the Orchestra, the diminutive pianist produced a full, handsome tone that carried through all but the richest orchestral textures. The audience gave Lee a spontaneous outburst of applause after the first movement which he charmingly acknowledged with a bow (he inspired a terrific ovation at the end as well).



17-year-old Evren Ozel, from Minneapolis, learned Beethoven's fourth concerto expressly for this competition, and the results of his preparation were impressive. His interpretation shone both with technical poise and poetry — basking in the moment of performing on the Severance Hall stage with his excellent colleagues.

Ozel's conversations with the orchestra in the second movement recitative were tersely philosophical, and he played the final movement rondo with lilting charm. His concerto choice was risky but admirable. This is not one of those fast-and-loud-wins-the-prize works, but one that holds a mirror up to the innate musicality of the person at the keyboard. On Friday, Ozel's reflection positively glowed.



After intermission, Ryota Yamazaki, 17, from Koriyama, Japan, gave the second performance of Rachmaninoff's second. Was he feeling any pressure? Yamazaki mopped his brow and blotted his fingers throughout the piece, but when his hands touched the keys, his flawless technique produced some fine pianistic fireworks.

Belying his physical slightness, the pianist drew a big tone out of the Steinway, but some near-misses at cadential points and other piano/orchestral junctures suggested that Yamazaki wasn't paying close enough attention to Ling and the Orchestra. A couple of extra-dramatic pauses before he continued on with his solos interrupted the flow of an otherwise eloquent performance which was recognized by a hearty ovation from the audience.



Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra gave generous musical support to all three pianists over the course of the evening, smoothing over a few rough patches and allowing each competitor to have their best possible moment in the spotlight.

Later in the evening, the jury announced its decision, awarding Ryota Yamazaki first place, Evren Ozel second place, and Nathan Lee third place. Prizes were bestowed by

the generous donors, Thomas and Evon Cooper, who will be supporting the careers of burgeoning violinists in next summer's competition.

Photos by Roger Mastroianni.

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