

## Cleveland International Piano Competition: Round 1, Sessions 3 & 4 (July 26)

by Daniel Hathaway



One of the more attractive aspects of the Cleveland International Piano competition is that all competitors get to play two rounds before eliminations begin. So if your first round program didn't go as well as you hoped, you have a second opportunity to make a positive impression.

Of course, if your playing in the first round was spectacular, you'll need to match or try to surpass that benchmark

in the second — or at least reveal some other aspect of your musical personality. Here we go with *our* first impressions of the third and fourth batch of pianists who played on Tuesday, July 26. Splendid technique was everywhere to be seen, and interpretations ranged from the lyrical to the brawny.

Sara Daneshpour (29, USA) opened the session with a well-articulated reading of J.S. Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in g-sharp* (WTC I), making a dramatic *rallentando* at the end of the fugue. Fluent runs and crisp phrase releases marked her performance of Haydn's *Sonata in F*. Her idiomatic account of Ravel's atmospheric "Ondine" (*Gaspard de la nuit*) twinkled like the sparkles on her gown. Playing Prokofiev's *Toccata in d* with a bright tone, she brought her segment to a thrilling conclusion.

Joo Hyeon Park, 28, from South Korea, stuck to the classics for his first round. His use of the pedal blurred some of the first movement of Beethoven's *Op. 109 Sonata*, and a markedly slow tempo in the third movement restricted its flow and sense of line. His tone in the finale turned aggressive, at the expense of clarity in his left-hand runs. Park's playing in Chopin's *Op. 10, No. 8 Etude* was fluent, and he ended with a full-sounding traversal of No. 5 of Rachmaninoff's *Études-tableaux*, *Op. 39*.

Serious and business-like, 29-year-old Russian pianist Aleksandr Shaikin brought a change of tone to the first session with his dark-hued, expressive performance of Beethoven's Op. 110 sonata. He seemed to anticipate its abrupt mood changes rather than being surprised by them (thus not surprising the listener). Big, flashy arpeggios marked his similarly dark reading of Chopin's "Ocean" Etude (Op. 15, No. 12). Then Shaikin changed things up completely with a tender performance of Arvo Pärt's tiny *Variations for the Healing of Arinushka*. For his finale, he chugged through Prokofiev's d-minor Toccata with an engaging sense of style. A nicely-varied mini-recital.

Another Russian contestant, 27-year-old Samson Tsoy, garnered attention at the beginning of his interesting set with his dark, starkly rhythmic reading of Sofia Gubaidulina's *Chaconne*, distinguished by a wild staccato fugue, bursts of thunder, and a big ominous crescendo. As a palate-cleanser, Tsoy offered a spirited, controlled, but flashy-when-it-needed-to-be performance of Haydn's A-Major Sonata. His improvisatory-sounding account of Beethoven's rarely-heard Op. 77 *Fantasia* mixed drama with humor. He hopped onto the bench even before applause had subsided for a dark-toned and perfectly managed interpretation of Chopin's "Ocean" Etude.

19-year-old Yuanfan Yang (United Kingdom) won CIPC's Young Artist Competition a year ago. Returning to Cleveland to join an older crowd of contestants, he began his set with an expressive reading of Bach's b-flat minor Prelude and Fugue (WTC I). His colorful tone was on the dark side, and he brought his experience as a composer to bear on the fugue, subtly inflecting its subject and keeping its contrapuntal strands transparent. After a nicely-paced account of Chopin's f-minor Fantasy (structurally clear, with fine rubatos), Yang closed his set with *Donner und Blitzen* — or rather with Liszt's *Fantasy and Fugue on the Theme B-A-C-H*. Though thrillingly loud, his tone never grew harsh.

Tuesday's evening session began with American pianist Vijay Venkatesh (25), who produced fine, singing lines in J.S. Bach's WTC II C-Major Prelude and Fugue (he actually seemed to be vocalizing while he played). Elegant voicing and immaculate cross-hand melodies distinguished his lyrical reading of Schubert's first Impromptu, and his gentle playing of Kenji Bunch's jumpy-jazzy *Premonitions* provided a nice contrast. Venkatesh ended his set with Chopin. The "Ocean" Etude was calm on the surface but eventful in the bass. Terraced dynamics and a wide palette of colors marked his beautifully-shaped performance of the Op. 10, No. 1 Etude. Throughout the set, the pianist wore an engaging smile.

20-year-old Italian pianist Leonardo Colafelice was the second contestant to return to Cleveland after recent competition victories here (he won the Thomas and Evon Cooper contest in 2014). He began with an motoric reading of Bach's d-minor Prelude and

Fugue (WTC I), blurring its texture with pedal in midstream. F. Yusupov's *Subconscious Labyrinths* veers between brutality and lyricism, and Colafelice covered both bases. Two Chopin works — the Etude Op. 10, No. 7 and the fourth scherzo from Op. 54 — received disjunct, heavy-handed treatment. In No. 6 of Rachmaninoff's *Études-tableaux*, Op. 39, Colafelice roared in the bass and flailed away in the treble register, producing a lot of noise.

Yu Tong Sun (20, from China) brought a full measure of power to his performances of Ligeti's "L'escalier du diable" and Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata. His Ligeti bordered on the aggressive, his Beethoven on the willful. Big unnecessary pauses, extreme contrasts, and eccentric tempos nearly deconstructed the Sonata. Sun's flashy fingerwork in the (Prestissimo!) finale was dazzling, but his sonic levels were Lisztian.

After lovely, lyrical — and romanticized — performances of Domenico Scarlatti's Sonatas K. 466 and 455, Ukrainian pianist Dinara Klinton, 27, showed off her impressive digital technique in Chopin's Etudes Op. 25, No. 7, and Op. 10, No. 2. Then she flexed her muscles in an assertive performance of Andrew Rosenblatt's *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* (1988). She contrasted her more extroverted playing with lyricism in Rosenblatt's bluesy passages.

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