

Cleveland International Piano Competition: Round 2, Sessions 3 & 4 (July 29)

by Daniel Hathaway



Friday's second round sessions confirmed and built on first impressions, as well as giving some new insights into the playing of eleven talented pianists.

Sara Daneshpour (29, USA)

The major work on Sara Daneshpour's second round mini-recital was the last — Pierre Boulez's *Incises*, a 1994 quasi-toccata that contrasts dramatic gestures with transparent filigree, amid passages of aggressive repeated notes,

sudden surges, and layered effects using the sostenuto pedal. In 10 minutes worth of non-stop playing, Daneshpour demonstrated her strong affinity for contemporary music in her masterful command of a thorny piece.

She began with two Domenico Scarlatti sonatas: a graceful reading of K. 27 in b minor and a lickety-split performance of K. 212 in A, somewhat at the expense of clarity and evenness, but she subtly underlined the surprising modulation into its middle section.

A Chopin pair followed. Daneshpour made attractive dynamic contrasts during her cheerful playing of the Etude Op. 10, No. 8, then took us on a relaxing gondola excursion with the Barcarolle, Op. 60. As the waves lapped gently at the gunwales, she changed color and touch for the *sotto voce* middle section and built a nice, bright climax before ending with a graceful coda.

Joo Hyeon Park (28, South Korea)

Chopin's second Sonata formed the centerpiece of Joo Hyeon Park's vigorous second round performance, his best playing coming in the fourth movement where he produced a lovely, atmospheric miasma of sound. Elsewhere, *fortes* were overpowering — he made the Steinway's hammers ring — and lyrical passages needed shape and direction.

The third movement funeral march started slow, but got even slower. The melody in the contrasting lyrical section had nowhere to bloom.

Park began his set with a strongly-accented, staccato reading of Domenico Scarlatti's Sonata K. 84 only slightly longer than the "Minute" Waltz, continuing after the Chopin with an agreeable performance of Takemitsu's *Rain Tree Sketch II*. He ended his second round with an incisive trip through Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 8*. Here again, he went for big in the *forte* passages, but the results were more loud than full. By contrast, his upward runs later in the piece were alluringly graceful.

Aleksandr Shaikin (29, Russia)

Only two works appeared on Aleksandr Shaikin's second-round playlist. The big one was Robert Schumann's rangy *Humoreske*, Op. 20, which took up most of his allotted thirty minutes. After a dreamy introduction, Shaikin took us on an eventful journey through the mercurial piece, playing with incisive rhythm and masterful articulation. He has a way of approaching the keyboard that produces a healthy, clear sound that can be both muscular and poetic. Shaikin's dotted rhythms (a Schumann hallmark) were strong, his slow arpeggios lovely. One impressive section involved detached runs in parallel thirds that the pianist brought off with particular flair. His controlled, thoughtful playing captured the essence of each of Schumann's successive musical ruminations.

Shaikin began with a dark-toned, even reading of J.S. Bach's WTC II F-Major Prelude, then he played its fugue staccato, almost scherzo-like, achieving admirable clarity.

Samson Tsoy (27, Russia)

Schumann also provided Samon Tsoy with his big work, the *Sonata No. 1 in f-sharp*. He began with a strong, dark tone and well-placed dotted rhythms and made subtle tempo changes in the fast section of the first movement. He played the cross-hand melody in the slow movement like a colloquy between two singers, and produced a substantial sound in the Scherzo, ending that with a dramatic *recitative* in the bass register. Tsoy adroitly changed touch and tone in the last movement fugue from craggy to filmy, and played its dramatic series of chord progressions with a real sense purpose.

Tsoy began his set with a diaphanous, poignant reading of Scriabin's album-leaf, Op. 45, No. 1, moving on to J.S. Bach's WTC I Prelude and Fugue in G. Though he controlled it well, much detail went missing in the Prelude because of Tsoy's ultra-fast tempo. Clean counterpoint and a bravura ending marked his performance of the fugue.

Throughout his segment, Tsoy was the picture of concentration, hovering intently over the keyboard and making a variety of interesting facial expressions. His lips constantly quivering, Tsoy seemed to be silently singing along. He's fun to watch.

Yuanfan Yang (19, United Kingdom)

Though a composer himself, Yuanfan Yang chose British composer Philip Cashian's *Landscape* to fulfil his contemporary requirement. A study in timbre and density, the short piece begins atmospherically but suddenly turns fierce. Yang made excellent and extreme contrasts, but never forced his tone.

His poised performance of Beethoven's Op. 7 Sonata began with even runs and well-gauged sforzandos and continued with a fine sense of pacing and a steady bass ostinato in the slow movement. Yang achieved fine thematic contrasts and a good sense of line in the Scherzo, and his finale was light and lovely — except when he brought out the Beauty and the Beast contrast between a bass-treble dialogue. He brought the main theme back sneakily (well, Beethoven did, but Yang agreed), bringing the work to a soft landing.

Yang closed the session and the afternoon with a beautifully reined-in reading of Chopin's "Winter Wind" Etude with a glistering ending but a huge coda. Self-assured and composed throughout, Yang sometimes went so far as to allow himself a raised eyebrow or a faint smile.

Vijay Venkatesh (25, USA)

Two works made up Vijay Venkatesh's second round program, which began the evening lineup. He delivered Liszt's 12th Hungarian Rhapsody with passion and flair, its rumbly bass roulades answered by fluty treble figures. The charming dance segment displayed his fine sense of layering.

Beethoven's rather enigmatic last sonata, Op. 111, began measuredly, then turned stormy. Long, nicely-moving lines with several varieties of swinging dotted rhythms graced the second movement, along with a mesmerizing treble-end passage, eloquent trills, and a beautifully-shaped crescendo that built into powerful intensity. A long goodbye, but finely managed by this sensitive musician. Venkatesh greeted the warm applause with his customary, wall-to-wall smile.

Leonardo Colafelice (20, Italy)

A striking stage presence because of his mannerisms — vocalizing, conducting himself, making elaborate windups and releases — Leonardo Colafelice plays with extremes in dynamics and interpretation, as he showed in Beethoven's "Les Adieux" Sonata. Explosive rather than ebullient after the sad opening theme, Colafelice produced ringing hammers and virtuosic runs — but not always tidy ones — as the movement went on. He started the second movement dead slow and *sotto voce*, suddenly transitioning to a spiky staccato touch in the bass. Another explosion heralded the finale, where he played with bright tone and exaggerated accents, tearing through the piece with outsized gestures and abundant rubato.

Colafelice's performance of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* as arranged by Pletnev was as exciting as it was sometimes messy, with a big, brash *kopek*, heavy dancing teacups and choppy melodic lines.

Yutong Sun (20, China)

Idiosyncratic in his interpretations and supersized in his execution, Yutong Sun delivered thought-provoking performances of music by Chopin, Handel, and Bartók on Friday evening.

Abundant rubato and fluctuating tempos obscured the musical form in Chopin's Op. 23 Ballade, and a not-so-tidy right hand line fuzzed up the Op. 10, No. 1 Etude.

Sun's singled out some segments of Handel's G-Major *Chaconne*, usually conceived as a continuous set of variations, for special treatment, playing some very slowly and some with thundering virtuosity, some with flexible rhythm and some metronomically, and with big pauses in between.

He ended with the Bartók Sonata, heavy, noisy and extreme in every direction. Even the normally charming folk elements took on extra weight.

Dinara Klinton (27, Ukraine)

For an unusual opener, Dinara Klinton chose Taneyev's g-sharp Prelude and Fugue, beginning the prelude mysteriously, building to an expressive climax, then pulling things back to a calm conclusion. She built the fugue, with its curious subject (five notes up and down, then a leap) to an even bigger climax and nimbly put across its surprise ending.

Beethoven's Op. 78 Sonata is not so dramatic as its sisters, but Klinton played its opening movement with fluent, expressive runs and made good contrasts in the second.

Chopin's Op. 48, No. 2 Nocturne received gentle treatment in Klinton's hands in contrast to the Scherzo No. 3 of Op. 39, which she played with big, sweeping gestures and an abundance of power. The chorale tune might have been more noble and lyrical, but her performance drew bravos from the crowd.

Jong Hai Park (25, South Korea)

Due of scheduling considerations, Jong Hai Park got bounced from his first round position and ended up pulling the graveyard shift on Friday evening. That turned out to be a boon for the audience, who were treated to masterful, well-balanced performances of Bach, Chopin, Takemitsu, and Beethoven at the end of a long day.

If Park's concept of Bach's e-minor toccata was a bit Romantic, his handsome, dark tone lent *gravitas* to the improvisatory passages, and his varied articulation in the fugues (legato and slow for the first, staccato and fast for the second) guaranteed interest and variety.

Park achieved a good balance between hands in Chopin's Op. 10, No. 1 Etude, and his playing of Takemitsu's *Rain Tree Sketch No. 2* did appropriate justice to the piece.

His most distinguished playing came in Beethoven's "Appassionata," where Park was completely in control of the piece's narrative without ever sounding scripted or overthought. He made sharp contrasts and constructed well-planned *fortes* in the first movement, and played with healthy tone and clear lines in the second. Park's fine mix of mystery and passion, and his sense of when to turn his dazzling virtuosity on and off served both himself and Beethoven splendidly.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 30, 2016.

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