

Cooper International Competition: conversations with Thomas Cooper & 2011 first prize-winner Sirena Huang

by Mike Telin and Samantha Spaccasi



For the past seven summers, young musicians have traveled to the Oberlin College campus to compete in the [Thomas and Evon Cooper International Competition](#).

On Saturday, July 15 at 1:30 pm in Warner Concert Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory, 24 young violinists representing eight U.S. States and eight countries will begin their quest for the \$20,000 grand prize as well as the

opportunity to perform full concertos with The Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of Jahja Ling in Severance Hall on Friday, July 21 at 7:30 pm. (See our [concert listings](#) for details about the semi-final, concerto and recital rounds that will determine who plays in the finals.)

First held in 2010, the Competition, which alternates annually between piano and violin, is open to musicians between the ages of 13 and 18. “I feel like we’ve been identifying future stars early in their careers,” Competition Director and Jury Chair Greg Fulkerson said during an interview. “And the fact that many of the laureates have done so well is gratifying.”

Pianist George Li, who at age 14 won first prize at the Inaugural Competition has gone on to win the silver medal at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 2015. He was the recipient of the 2016 Avery Fisher Career Grant, and yesterday it was announced that he has been singled out for the 2017 Arthur Waser Prize which includes an award of 25,000 Swiss Francs, and a debut with the Lucerne Symphony Orchestra.

Violinist Sirena Huang captured the Competition's first prize in 2011 at age 17. In February of this year, she was awarded first prize at the first-ever Elmar Oliveria International Violin Competition. We'll hear more about Huang's accomplishments later in this article.

"All of the success that many of the laureates have achieved makes me feel pretty good," Competition sponsor Thomas Cooper said during a recent telephone conversation. Cooper said that he and his wife Evon hoped the annual event would become a premier international competition for high school age musicians. "That's what it was designed to be," he said, although he gave full credit for the idea of creating it to Oberlin College and Conservatory. "They came to us and said that they thought a competition designed for this age-group would be a great idea. 'We know that you and Evon are interested in classical music, and would we be interested in supporting it?' We both said, Yes."

Cooper noted that the opportunity to perform with The Cleveland Orchestra has been a big draw for the competition. "That was our hope when we formed the partnership with the Orchestra," he said. "We deliberately tried to make it that way."

As always, the Coopers will be present at this year's event and while they look forward to hearing the performances, they also enjoy being its festival atmosphere. "One of the things we like to see is the camaraderie that takes place between the musicians. And the masterclasses that happen throughout the competition. We're always happy to see how many of them stick around — even as kids get eliminated — and continue to participate and interact with the others, which I think is very positive and important."



Since winning the Cooper Competition in 2011, violinist Sirena Huang has had a remarkable career. From 2011-2014, she was the Hartford Symphony Orchestra's first Artist-in-Residence, and she has been a featured soloist with the New York Philharmonic, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, among many others.

2017 has been a banner year for Huang. In February she won first prize at the inaugural Elmer Oliveria International Competition. "It was an incredible experience, as I had the chance to meet many inspirational musicians and learn more about myself as an artist," she said in an email. In March, Huang won the New York Concert Artists Worldwide Debut Audition, becoming

a member of the NYCA. This year, she will perform in Berlin, Florida, France, Boston, and New York.

Huang, who studied at Juilliard, is a former student of Sylvia Rosenberg as well as Itzhak Perlman. “Studying with Perlman was amazing,” she said. “He’s one of the most easygoing, down-to-earth people I know. He helped me with everything that happens onstage. For example, he told me that when I’m nervous, I should always let the music be my distraction. It’s so simple, yet helpful and profound.”

She took those musical and life lessons to the 2011 Cooper Competition. “In the final round, I played Mendelssohn’s *Violin Concerto*, and that was something I’ll never forget,” she said. “It was the first time I played with The Cleveland Orchestra. In the first rehearsal, from the first measure, I was taken aback by the amazing sound the ensemble produced.” She was awed by Jahja Ling’s skill as a musician. “He gave us so much energy. Being on stage with him and the famous Cleveland Orchestra was a dream come true. I felt so happy that it didn’t matter to me what the results of the Competition were. I had everything I wanted right then and there.”



The 23-year old recalled her first-ever competition, discussing how anxieties kept her from playing honestly — a stark juxtaposition from how she felt performing at the Cooper. “I was more nervous than ever, in fear of being judged for every note and motion I made,” she said. “I wanted to please all the jurors and consequently, I couldn’t be myself. But I’ve learned that because music is subjective, there will always be people that like your music, and people that don’t. With that, I’m able to see past the stress and confinements of a competition. I can take light in other’s judgements and confidently deliver my message to my audience.”

The violinist offered some advice to this year’s Cooper participants. “It’s important to keep an open mind and to be prepared for any outcome, as art is incredibly subjective,” she said. “When I enter a competition, not only do I have the opportunity to perform, but more importantly, I also have a chance to understand and improve myself.” Through participating in competitions, Huang learned that the preparation process is most beneficial for her, because “the improvements I make are what stay with me through the years. This process has impacted me as a musician and person.”

Cooper 2011 photos by Roger Mastroianni.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 14, 2017.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)