

Oberlin Cooper Competition: six violinists play recitals (July 19)

by Samantha Spaccasi with Daniel Hathaway



The stakes were high on Wednesday evening in Oberlin's Warner Concert Hall as the Recital Round of the Cooper International Violin Competition began. Of the ten participants in the Concerto Round, six would move on to the next phase

— the Recital Round — which would determine the three who will be heading to Severance Hall on Friday, June 21 to perform with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra. The concert, emceed by Robert Conrad, was broadcast live on WCLV 104.9 and wclv.org.

The six young competitors each performed a 30-minute recital chosen by the jury from their repertory lists.

Bend, Oregon native Kiarra Saito-Beckman, 18, opened the program with a nicely-paced, stylish interpretation of Kreisler's *Recitativo and Scherzo-Caprice*. The violinist sounded considerably more confident than during the concerto round, resulting in a playful, relaxed performance of the Adagio from Mozart's *Concerto No. 5 in A* marked by an artistic cadenza. Saito-Beckman did take the Andante from Bach's *Sonata No. 2 in A* a little too seriously, resulting in stretched passages. The 18-year-old faced Paganini's *Caprice No. 5* with grace, a controlled bow arm and melodious style during the perpetual motion sections. The violinist closed her performance with Waxman's *Carmen Fantasie*, displaying clean playing and vivid tone color. Pianist Elizabeth DeMio was her capable collaborator.

Maya Anjali Buchanan, 17, from Rapid City, South Dakota was next, performing with Evan Solomon. Buchanan again placed herself in the center of the stage, where communication with the pianist was difficult. The musician offered a skilled, sweet interpretation of the Moderato nobile from Korngold's *Concerto in D*, though she often seemed disconnected from the audience and music. Her phrasing was particularly

charming in the Largo from Bach's *Sonata No. 3 in C*, which she played with liquid flow and poise, never appearing stiff or nervous. Throughout Wieniawski's *Fantasia Brillante*, Buchanan sounded especially rich in the high register, playing its angelic harmonics passionately and bringing out the mood changes clearly and with intelligence.

The work of Paganini returned to Warner as New York City's Qing Yu Chen performed *Caprice No. 24*. Her interpretation was energetic though sometimes robotic. Joined by pianist Akiko Chiba, the 17-year-old took on Saint-Saëns' *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* robustly, playing with depth and laser focus. Although the Adagio from Mozart's *Concerto No. 5 in A* needed more passion, what went missing in the Mozart returned during Sarasate's *Caprice Basque*. A reinvigorated Chen offered an athletic, stylish performance, nailing the technical elements of the piece with flair.

Johan Dalene, 16, from Sweden, gave the most energetic and joyful performance of the evening. His renditions of the Andante and Allegro from Bach's *Sonata No. 2 in A* featured strong articulations and great dynamic contrasts. His interpretation of Beethoven's *Sonata No. 1 in D*, Allegro con brio was bright and laden with passion. His expressive face showed that he was thrilled to be on stage. Dalene performed Sibelius' *Souvenir* with the profound emotion of someone much older, and he made an exciting narrative out of Waxman's *Carmen Fantasie*, marked by great style and gusto. An especially sweet moment came when he gave pianist DeMio a warm hug at the end. It seemed as though they had been playing partners for years.

Christina Jihee Nam, 14, from West Chester, Ohio, was also accompanied by DeMio in works by Beethoven, Saint-Saëns, and another round of the *Carmen Fantasie*. Nam's slightly prosaic performance of the Allegro from Beethoven's *Sonata No. 4 in A* would have benefitted from more dynamic contrasts. In Saint-Saëns' *Havanaise*, Nam demonstrated controlled bow work and good intonation, but her playing would have been enhanced with more varied tone color and vibrato. She showcased fine phrasing in *Carmen Fantasie*, though at times she struggled with the tempo in the faster sections.

Closing out the Recital Round was Zachary Brandon, 18, with pianist Eric Malson. The Battle Creek, Michigan native showed a lush tone in the Presto from Beethoven's *Sonata No. 4 in A*. Nice phrasing and good dynamics distinguished his interpretation of the Andante cantabile movement from Mozart's *Concerto No. 4 in D*, but Brandon didn't venture deeply into the music. His performance of Paganini's *Caprice No. 24* began lyrically and gracefully, but seemed to lose energy towards the end. His performance of Saint-Saëns' *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* enjoyed great moments of refinement and elegance.

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