

Johan Dalene takes first prize at Cooper International Competition

by Mike Telin



On Friday evening, July 21 at Severance Hall, violinist Johan Dalene, 16, from Sweden, was named first place winner in Oberlin's Thomas and Evon Cooper International Competition following his stellar performance of the Tchaikovsky Concerto with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra. Two American competitors — Christina Jihee Nam, 14, who also played the Tchaikovsky, and Qing Yu Chen, 17, who was featured in Prokofiev's Second Concerto — shared second place.

Dalene, who had already captured the Audience Prize of \$500 following Wednesday's Recital Round, takes home \$20,000 in cash. Nam and Chen receive \$7,500 each. All three were also offered full-tuition scholarships to the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, pending admission.

Oberlin's press release quoted jury chair and competition director Gregory Fulkerson, who probably spoke for most of the audience: "I saw the best Tchaikovsky Concerto that I've ever heard. I've been waiting 60 years to hear someone take the Tchaikovsky Concerto and understand the score so profoundly that he can take it to the world and interpret it in precisely the way the composer intended. It was simply spectacular."

His performance, which came at the end of the evening, immediately brought the Severance Hall audience to its feet amid thunderous applause. "It was an amazing feeling," the engaging young violinist said by telephone this morning. "I was very happy that it went well. I just tried to enjoy the performance, and it's such a dream to play with

The Cleveland Orchestra and Jahja Ling. So I was just very happy, and it was a lot of fun.”

Dalene, who hails from Norrköping, a city 160 km southwest of Stockholm, seemed perfectly relaxed on stage during his performance. “Of course, before a big concert you’re always very nervous and excited, but it did feel very good. I’ve played this piece a lot and I know it well, so yes, I felt comfortable, and just tried to enjoy it as much as possible. Again, it was such a dream.”

Fulkerson also noted in the Oberlin release that Dalene had been the dominant force throughout the week-long competition. “I think I’ll be OK in saying that he was the unanimous choice in every round.”

“It was a very great experience in all of the rounds,” Dalene said, “and each time I moved on to the next one, I felt more and more comfortable. It was pretty big you know, coming from Sweden to the U.S. — and this is my first time in the States. But I think it’s very important in music competitions to forget that it’s a competition — just think of each round as another concert, and be happy and enjoy it.”

Dalene comes from a musical family. “My mom’s a pianist and my dad’s a cellist, so there has always been music in my house.” Asked about what he does when he’s not playing the violin, the 16-year-old said, “I really like to play soccer — I think that’s what it’s called in the U.S. — but I also like hanging out with friends, watching a movie, and just relaxing. It’s important to do that between your practice times.”

Now that the Cooper has come to a conclusion, what are Johan Dalene’s immediate plans? “I’m actually going to New York now for some days off with my parents,” he said. “I’m really looking forward to that.”

Photo by Roger Mastroianni.

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