

## Cooper Violin Finals at Severance Hall (July 21)

by Daniel Hathaway



On Friday evening, July 21, Severance Hall was the final destination for Christina Jihee Nam, Qing Yu Chen, and Johan Dalene, the three young violinists left standing in Oberlin's Thomas and Evon Cooper International Violin Competition. Their efforts over the last week won them the signal honor of playing concertos with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra.

Having first survived the semifinal round at the Oberlin Conservatory that trimmed the pack from 23 to 10, then the concerto round last Tuesday that reduced their number to 6, Nam, Chen, and Dalene successfully navigated their way through the recital round on Wednesday evening, then moved on to Cleveland for seances with Ling and rehearsals with the Orchestra.

The finalists had already established their impressive technical bonafides and revealed their interpretational skills both to the jury and the Oberlin audiences, so the agenda for the three teenagers on Friday evening was a bit different. Performing with The Cleveland Orchestra, renowned worldwide for its ability to play like a huge chamber ensemble, would be a test of the violinist's ability to play well with others — a very different challenge than they would meet alone in a practice room or even onstage with a pianist.

The raw material for Friday's round was provided by Tchaikovsky (his only concerto) and Prokofiev (the second of his two). The latter is a well-known, frequently-played warhorse, the former a work especially favored by student

violinists that pops up with some regularity. Because of the vagaries of competitions, the Severance Hall audience would hear two performances of the Tchaikovsky on Friday — had the jury’s vote come out differently, it could have been three. Although encountering the same work twice in an evening doesn’t make for much musical contrast, it certainly allows both jury and audience a fascinating opportunity to compare performers’ musical decisions.



Christina Jihee Nam, 14, from West Chester, Ohio began the evening with the first Tchaikovsky performance. Confident in her technique and playing with consistently alluring tone, Nam breezed through the concerto and its many challenges with ease, but flew at an altitude high enough that its topography smoothed into a landscape with few hills and valleys.

Nam created special moments through her phrasing in the slow movement, and her finale was full of energy and forward motion.



17-year-old New Yorker Qing Yu Chen was the picture of composure as she intoned the somber opening line of Prokofiev’s Second Concerto, and as the work went on to zig and zag between contrasting emotional states and textures, she was attentive to each of its abrupt transmutations.

Chen played the second movement theme with attractive

lyricism against the ticking pizzicatos of the strings, and except for some moments in the last movement where the violinist and the orchestra didn’t precisely line up, she maintained a fine sense of rhythmic energy.



After his jaw-dropping performance of the Tchaikovsky concerto at Oberlin on Tuesday, all ears were on 16-year-old Swedish violinist Johan Dalene after intermission on Friday evening. His winning smile lit up the stage even before he played a note, and his stylish interpretation of the concerto cast beams of illumination into corners of the piece that seemed to come to life for the first time.

Drawing everyone present — conductor, orchestra, and audience — into the experience, Dalene sculpted the kind of hypermusical performance of the Tchaikovsky that the piece deserves but rarely receives. Probably no one in the audience took a breath during the closing bars of the finale, when the young violinist stayed in perfect sync with the orchestra like a finely-tuned machine.

A standing ovation was both unanimous and spontaneous. While Dalene gave Ling a big hug and acknowledged the Orchestra with whom he had so closely collaborated, many of us turned to each other and exclaimed, “That’s the best performance of this piece I’ve ever heard.”

*Photos by Roger Mastroianni.*

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