

31 young pianists arrive this week for Oberlin Cooper Competition

by Daniel Hathaway



(Photo: the semifinalists in 2016.)

Piano professor Robert Shannon is eagerly waiting to welcome this year's participants in the Thomas & Evon Cooper Piano Competition to the Oberlin campus later this week. "This year the lineup is stronger than ever," Shannon said in a recent telephone conversation. "There're some impressive people, and the overall level is consistently high."

The biennial piano contest, which alternates with a violin competition, will be fueled by 31 young players from seven different countries (see the roster of competitors and their repertoire [here](#)). The 13-18 year-olds have been selected from a field of some 90 applicants who have been drawn to the Cooper event through its reputation alone. "We don't actively recruit," Shannon said. "We just publish the announcement and we're well enough known by now that it just happens. The first year we held the Cooper we had something like 140 pianists apply, but then I think people figured out how challenging it was going to be. We've stabilized now at about 90 applicants."

This year's competitors include eleven U.S. citizens, seven from China, five from Canada, three from South Korea, two each from Finland and Taiwan, and one from Norway. The 2018 yield has been complicated by political developments. "We admitted

a whole bunch of Russians, but they couldn't get visas because of all the expulsions of consular officials," Shannon said.

The current contest is also interesting because of the near-coincidence of the Cleveland International Piano Competition for Young Artists and the Cooper. "A couple of people are in both of them," Shannon noted. Returning to the Cleveland area after winning prizes in May are 14-year-old Yunchan Lim and 16-year-old JiWon Yang, both of South Korea, who each came in second in the CIPC Junior and Senior Divisions, respectively. A second article will feature a conversation with the sole Ohio competitor, 14-year-old Kasey Shao of Cincinnati.



Shannon noted that another interesting development is the makeup of this year's jury. "Besides Oberlin faculty members, it's mostly made up of performers and competition winners, as opposed to past years when we had a lot of distinguished pedagogues. I think that everybody teaches a little bit, but these people made their marks first as performers."

The Cooper Piano Competition gets underway on Saturday morning, July 14, when the first of two Semifinal Rounds begins in Warner Concert Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory. Round two begins on Monday morning, July 16. The remaining 10 competitors will play full concertos with collaborative pianists on Tuesday, July 17, which will determine the six who will advance to the Recital Finals on Wednesday evening, July 18. After each pianist plays a 30-minute recital, the jury will announce the three finalists who will play concertos with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall on Friday evening, July 20. An honors recital by selected pianists who didn't make it to the finals will be held in Warner Concert Hall on Thursday evening, July 19.

In addition to speculating about which three players will eventually stride onto the Severance Hall stage, it's fun to guess which concertos they'll bring with them — a topic which will prove to be of some interest to Jahja Ling and the Orchestra's music librarians as well. Competitors had their choice among 22 concertos by Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Grieg, Liszt, Mozart, Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff, Saint-Saëns, and Tchaikovsky, but "there are some pieces that never seem to make it to the finals," Shannon said. "We've never had a Liszt concerto, or a Grieg, and never a Beethoven

1 or 3. This year's list of possibilities is heavy on the two Chopin concertos and Prokofiev 3. I still have really wonderful memories of last summer's violin competition when we had an unbelievable Tchaikovsky performance. I hope for a similar level of talent this year."

I ended our conversation by asking Robert Shannon how, as a member of the jury, he keeps his ears fresh after so many days and hours packed with piano music. "I've spent my whole life trying to play the piano better, and when I hear these kids sit down and effortlessly run through their pieces, I get really excited. I'm someone who loves talent, and I never have any trouble staying fresh when that shows up. I hope people will take the opportunity to hear some really fantastic young talents."



All events in Warner Concert Hall are free and will be live streamed [here](#) (check our Concert Listings for the schedule). WCLV, 104.9 FM and [wclv.com](#) will live broadcast the Wednesday evening Recital Finals and the Final Round at Severance Hall on Friday evening (tickets for the performances with The Cleveland Orchestra can be reserved [online](#).)

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