

Concerto Round at the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition, Tuesday, July 17

by Mike Telin



The 2018 Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition got underway on Saturday morning, July 14, when thirty-one young pianists played the first of two Semifinal Rounds in Warner Concert Hall at the

Oberlin Conservatory. On Sunday evening the field was narrowed to fifteen.

On Tuesday, July 17, the remaining ten competitors played full concertos, and without a doubt, this was the strongest field of young pianists the Competition has put forward to date. Each of the gentlemen brought solid technique and musical flair to their performances.

Session One at 2:00 pm

Ryan Zhu (age 14, from Vancouver, Canada) set a high bar for technical proficiency and confidence during his muscular playing of Liszt's *Concerto No. 1* in E-flat. He brought a big sound — and a few nicked notes — to the opening Allegro maestoso, although he played the many Lisztian flourishes with crystalline care. After a lovely Quasi Adagio, the Allegretto vivace — Allegro animato and Allegro marziale animato were indeed animated. The work's concluding downward chromatic octaves were grand. Throughout, Zhu kept in close contact with his collaborator Colette Valentine.

Over the years of covering competitions you become used to hearing multiple interpretations of a single work played in succession. Many times that experience can become monotonous. Thankfully that was not the case with the three ensuing performances of Chopin's *Concerto No. 1* in e.

Bo Zhang (17, Hangzhou, China) took an introspective approach to the Concerto, playing the many technical passages during the Allegro maestoso with ease, although the overall tempo was on the slower side. He brought wonderful phrasing to the Romanze – Larghetto, and the concluding Rondo – Vivace was spirited.

The most lucid performance came from **William Yang** (17, Natick, Massachusetts) who chose a faster tempo for the Allegro maestoso. Throughout, he effortlessly strung together each of the melodic motifs with Chopin's familiar pianistic filigree, creating long phrases that held your attention. His Romanze – Larghetto was like an opera aria, and he tossed off the humorous theme of Rondo – Vivace with flair.

Kai-Min Chang (17, Changhua County, Taiwan) opened the Allegro maestoso with a tempo that split the difference between those that preceded. He also chose to emphasize the episodic nature of the movement, creating a different mood with each return of the theme. His phrasing during the Romanze – Larghetto was lovely, and he always moved the Rondo – Vivace forward, playing with a big, bold sound.

Pianist Elena Zyl was an astute collaborator during all three performances, supporting the individual qualities of each interpretation.

The session concluded with two takes on Tchaikovsky's *Concerto No. 1* in b-flat.

First up was **Tony Yun** (17, Toronto, Canada). The opening first movement theme was grand and his spirited approach was technically secure — he tossed off the witty passages with ease. The cadenza was terrific. His Andantino semplice – Prestissimo – Tempo I was expansive and the faster middle section jolly. Yun was quick out of the blocks for the concluding Allegro con fuoco – Molto meno mosso – Allegro vivo. While his performance was impressive, the tempo in the finale never allowed Tchaikovsky's music to breathe.

William Chen's (15, New York, New York) playing during the opening of the concerto was majestic. He chose a tempo that allowed him to push forward and then relax without distorting the musical lines. His cadenza was exciting. The middle movement was truly beautiful, and the fast section zipped by stylishly. The concluding Allegro con fuoco – Molto meno mosso – Allegro vivo was defined by well voiced, long lines that had purpose.

Collaborator Colette Valentine brought Tchaikovsky's colorful orchestral score to life during both performances.

Session Two at 7:00 pm

The evening began with more Chopin, this time the *Concerto No. 2* in f played by **Yunchan Lim** (14, Siheung-si, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea). Lim joined together each motive in the Maestoso with relaxed flourishes. The second movement, Larghetto, was nicely paced while the concluding Allegro vivace was playful from beginning to end. He and Colette Valentine made a good team.

Yangrui Cai (17, Guangzhou, China) was tastefully explosive during his first entrance in Prokofiev's *Concerto No. 3* in C. His clean lines captured the movement's many moods. Cai produced a huge sound during the Tema con variazioni — the jazzy third variation was particularly impressive. The pianist brought the same big sound to the Allegro, ma non troppo. His ample technique served him well during the battle between the soloist and orchestra that dominates the coda. The collaboration between Cai and Elena Zyl was great.

The second performance of Chopin's *Concerto No. 2* was played by **Tyler Kim** (15, Temecula, California). Producing long phrases and a full, unblemished tone, Kim hung onto every line during the Maestoso. His inner-opera singer was evident during the Larghetto and he was never hurried in the Allegro vivace. The coda breezed to the end. Again Colette Valentine was the consummate partner.

The finale performer of the day was **Anton Mejias** (17, Helsinki, Finland) who took on Rachmaninoff's *Concerto No. 3*. Arms outstretched and slightly leaning back, his phrasing of the opening octaves were well-balanced. He played effortlessly during the movement's many transitions and mood shifts, his tone always singing. The cadenza was powerful and well-paced. His relaxed playing during the Intermezzo: Adagio was a pleasure to hear, and he was in complete technical and musical control during the Finale: Alla breve. It takes time to grow into this concerto, and the talented Mejias is off to a wonderful start. Hat's off to Elena Zyl who brilliantly handled Rachmaninoff's difficult orchestral writing.

Six of these performers will advance to the Recital Finals in Oberlin on Wednesday, July 18. The Cooper Competition culminates in the Concerto Finals on Friday, July 20, as three finalists perform complete concertos with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall in Cleveland. One finalist will emerge as the 2018 Cooper champion—with a grand prize of \$20,000.

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