

## Six play Cooper Piano Competition Recital Round at Oberlin (July 18)

by Daniel Hathaway



Although they didn't have to pass through trials by silence, water, and fire like Papageno, the six young pianists remaining in the draw on Wednesday evening, July 18 at the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition reached the recital round by surviving earlier sessions that had trimmed the original 31 performers down to 16, then to 10. With no questions

remaining about their technical aptitude, it was up to these six to prove their musical and interpretive mettle and their ability to communicate their ideas to the jury in 30-minute solo programs. All of the pianists were impressive, but some were standouts.



14-year-old Ryan Zhu from Canada heralded the beginning of Chopin's *Nocturne No. 16* by letting a high B-flat hang in the air for a long moment. He continued with a fluent but rhythmically mannered reading of the right-hand-dominant piece. Zhu's Presto from

Beethoven's Sonata No. 7 and Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* could have used some more breathing room, but his tendency toward energized tempos made the Allegro non troppo from Brahms' Second Sonata exciting, if a bit aggressive. He ended with Prokofiev's *Toccata*, Op. 11 in a performance whose energy never flagged, and he managed to save enough juice for a grand accelerando and glissando at the end.



William Yang, 17, from Massachusetts, created high dynamic contrasts from the explosive to the barely audible in the Allegro assai from Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata. A bit too much pedal obscured textures toward the end. His surging octave passages in Chopin's *Nocturne No. 13* took over at one point, bringing attention to themselves. Yang's reading of Scriabin's *Fantaisie in b*

was strong and confident, but needed more shape to put its narrative across.



Kai-Min Chang, 17, from Taiwan, chose to perform on the second of Warner Concert Hall's two Steinways. He played the syncopated chords and daunting octave runs in the Allegro Vivace of Beethoven's *Sonata*, Op. 31, No. 1 with robust tone and fluency. Chang launched Chopin's *Barcarolle*, Op. 60 with a booming octave in the

bass and largely passed up the opportunity to create a poetic, undulating soundscape. Chang's *tour de force* was Stravinsky's *Trois mouvements de Pétrouchka*, where he became an amazing ersatz orchestra, producing a whole range of brilliant color.



The most riveting performance and the most interesting program of the evening came from 17-year-old Tony Siqui Yun of Toronto, Canada. He brought off the first movement of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata with flair and a canny sense of timing. Chopin's *Nocturne No. 17* was ruminative and poetic, with a few punctuating outbursts.

Yun ended with a spectacular performance of Guido Agosti's arrangement of three movements from Stravinsky's *The Firebird Suite* (dedicated to Busoni). Both exciting and precise, Yun's playing featured expert layering, especially in the Berceuse, fine transitions, and a clear sense of harmonic structure.



15-year old William Chen from New York was the second player charged with the only piece that received two performances on Wednesday, the opening movement of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata. As fate would have it, his reading followed right on the heels of Yun's, but though more controlled, it enjoyed the same sense of flair. His transition into the

recapitulation was inspired. Chen prefaced the Beethoven with an understated and beautifully voiced Scarlatti Sonata (in d, K. 213), and followed it with Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan*, which he played with unerringly fine touch and tone. He ended his set magnificently with Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, demonstrating that he's a pianist who can play big, loud, and dazzling without pummeling the keys and making the hammers ring.



The recital round ended with a curious assemblage of works performed by 14-year old Yunchan Lim from South Korea. He followed his sparkling, well-controlled reading of Mozart's *Sonata in D*, K. 311 with a spooky performance of Debussy's *Ondine*. But the largest hunk of music was Chopin's *Variations on "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's Don Giovanni*. Perhaps one of the most shamelessly extravagant showpieces of the 19th century, it can be great fun, and Lim dispatched it with cool mastery. He paced the long introduction with such suspense that heads in the audience turned when Mozart's tune finally appeared in its naked simplicity. And he allowed the succeeding variations to build to such a climax that the applause was thunderous.

For the first time, Oberlin has put performances of the Cooper Competition online for extended viewing on YouTube. Click [here](#) to watch individual videos of all six performers in Wednesday evening's recital round.

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