

Virtu(al)oso Piano Competition: A Conversation with Anna Han

by Daniel Hathaway



American pianist Anna Han, 24, was born in Mesa, Arizona, earned her bachelor's and master's degrees at Juilliard, and has won top prizes in the 2016 Gina Bachauer and 2019 Hilton Head competitions. A keen chamber music player, she is a founding member of the Munin Piano Trio, and has recorded for the Steinway label.

I caught up with Han in Cleveland, where she was hanging out after having recorded her two rounds at the Steinway Gallery. I started by asking her what her life has been like since the pandemic hit in March.

“I’ve spent the last six years in New York City, where I gave a concert with my trio on March 1. At that point, none of us had any concept of what this would turn into. I had a two week residency in Canada that was to start a couple of weeks later, but when that was cancelled, I ended up moving back to Arizona at the end of the month.”

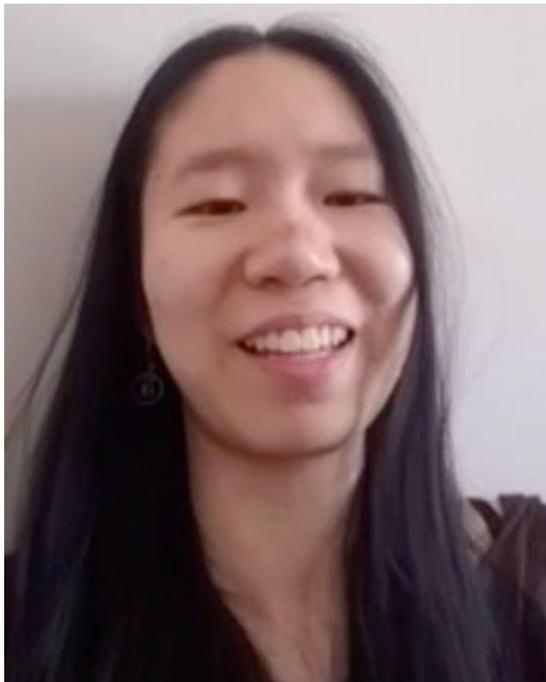
At home in the West, Han settled into a very different style of life. “I had all these pressure-cooker things lined up, and suddenly I didn’t. So I started learning new music, cooking, baking, learning how to knit and bind scores, reading, and talking to people I hadn’t connected with in a long time,” she said. “If it weren’t for the reasons behind it, this could have been a healthy sabbatical for a lot of us!”

Meanwhile, the good news is that Han’s family are fine. “My mom works at a hospital, so I’m a bit worried about her because Arizona’s not doing well.” The pianist is looking forward to the day when some activities will resume, including engagements that have been put off. “The residency I was going to be doing in

Canada was postponed, so ideally I'll be going to Nova Scotia and staying for a few months. It seems like a pretty ideal place to hide out."

Han said that pre-recording her repertoire for Piano Cleveland's Virtu(*al*)oso competition was an interesting experience. "Normally when you do a competition you have an extreme sense of it being live. But if you record your rounds, part of your brain realizes it's live, but the rest of your consciousness is telling you that you can stop at any time — that it's just a practice run. But the people who arranged it took really wonderful care of us and made it as comfortable a situation as it could be."

Anna Han's performances will be heard during the 6th Session of the First Round on Tuesday, August 4. "I chose pieces I really enjoy playing, including a couple I had been working on that I hadn't performed a hundred times before," she said.



"Time constraints do influence your program more than you realize. I knew I wanted to play the first Brahms sonata in the second round, so I needed to find pieces that complemented it across the board," she said, and has paired that work with a C.P.E. Bach *Rondo*. Her First Round choices include three Schumann Romances, a Shostakovich Prelude and Fugue, and a movement of Prokofiev's Sixth Sonata.

"The rounds are pretty short, and in a competition you try to choose works that show different sides of who you are as a musician and of the repertoire in general. You also try to pick pieces that aren't going to be heard all the time. I love it when competitions don't require Chopin Etudes."

Anna Han thought for a long minute when I posed the question of what three guests she'd invite to guarantee a great dinner party conversation. She finally settled on Mark Twain ("he's funny"), Sandra Day O'Connor ("it would be interesting to hear from a woman who has broken so many boundaries") and somebody from 2,000 years ago, perhaps someone who had worked for an Egyptian Pharaoh ("who would tell me things the history books don't"). And ideally, she'd make it a cooking party where the guests would choose the menu.

Cooking reminded me to ask about her baking experiences during the quarantine. "I was talking to a friend in Germany when all of this first started, and while we ran out

of toilet paper in the States, they ran out of flour.” Did she have any problem getting hold of yeast? “No, because I started making sourdough a while ago, something that makes yeast unnecessary, but requires patience. I read that some people make their kids learn to feed the starter as practice before letting them have a pet.”

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