

Virtu(al)oso Piano Competition: Final Rounds (August 7 & 8)

by Daniel Hathaway

The pianists who remained on the bench after the rather brutal cut on Wednesday evening in Cleveland Piano's Virtu(al)oso Competition (the field was reduced from 30 to 6) played virtual 30- to 35-minute programs in the Final Round on Friday and Saturday, pre-recorded at international Steinway locations at the same time as their First Round performances. Here are some impressions.

Friday, August 7 — Session 1



Tamila Salimdjanova (28, Uzbekistan) brought two works to the session: Debussy's *Estampes* and Prokofiev's *Sonata No. 7*. She gave the three-movement Debussy ("Pagodes," "La soirée dans Grenade" and "Jardins sous la pluie") a fluent performance, but the scenes offer more color possibilities than she exploited, and an abundance of dynamic details that went overlooked.

Salimdjanova played the Prokofiev masterfully, but the outer movements needed more sheer brutality to reflect the Sonata's Stalinist context and to offset the sentimental slow movement.



Arseniy Gusev (21, Russia) assembled an interesting mélange of German and Russian works. His clear, transparent playing of J.S. Bach's *Ricercar a 6* from *A Musical Offering* belied the work's thick, complex textures, and his pacing revealed its architecture. Nice changes of articulation set off the middle section. Warm sonorities and expressive surges characterized

Medtner's *Sonata Triad*, Op. 11, No. 1, Scriabin's 9th and 11th Etudes from Op. 8 contrasted storminess and pathos, and Gusev's strong, angular gestures were perfect for the fugue from Hindemith's *Sonata No. 3*. The pianist ended with Gusev: his own *Toccata No. 1* from a set of three is based on a clever, persistent motive. The work features a cross-hand section that was fun to watch on up-close video, and runs out of steam at the end before two big, dismissive chords.



Madoka Fukami (32, Japan) launched her set with Debussy's busy, non-stop *Etude No. 7*, moving on to Toshi Ichianagi's brief "Cloud in the Distance" from *Cloud Atlas* (the composer was once married to Yoko Ono). You have to wonder if playing all 12 of Chopin's Op. 25 Etudes end-to-end is as musically interesting as it is a technique-revealing exercise, but Fukami has the chops to bring them off. And can you have a piano

competition without "Winter Wind?"

Saturday, August 8 — Session 2



Byeol Kim (31, South Korea) led off with Mendelssohn's *Fantasia in f-sharp*, understated at first, but then tending toward the Lisztian when dynamics and tempos heated up. Her large-scaled interpretation of the 1931 rewrite of Rachmaninoff's *Sonata No. 2* led to some over-playing, and she interrupted the flow by taking lengthy pauses between sections (one, where the composer wrote "attaca subito"

lasted nearly five seconds). Kim ended with William Bolcom's "The Serpent's Kiss" from *The Garden of Eden*, where a fast tempo and aggressive approach masked the piece's ragtime origins.



Martin James Bartlett (24, United Kingdom) began with a sensitive account of J.S. Bach's *Ich ruf' zu dir*, one of the few among Busoni's ten chorale prelude arrangements that preserves the simplicity of the original. The first movement of Beethoven's E-flat Sonata, Op 31, No. 3, was delightfully witty and Haydnesque, the second more serious and weighty, with dry articulation and little pedal. He achieved a nice

balance between drama and lyricism in Granados' "El Amor y la Muerte," and ended with a rather gentle performance of Scriabin's *Sonata No. 4*, which required more dynamic contrasts and color changes to set it apart from the rest.



Lovre Marušić (27, Croatia) channelled Horowitz with his curtain-raiser: Scarlatti's E-Major Sonata, K. 380, delightfully played, featured subtle bending of rhythms and fine dynamic nuances. He played Schumann's *Kreisleriana* without repeats in order to fit this sprawling work into the allotted time, pacing it masterfully and painting its colors in vivid hues, while preserving its

essential eccentricity. Marušić likes to play hunched over the keyboard, offering a visual representation of his intense concentration.

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