

CIPC Finals: Chamber Music Round with the Escher Quartet (August 3 & 4)

by Daniel Hathaway



Why put international piano competition finalists through a chamber music test between their solo and concerto rounds? Because there's no better indicator of musicianship than one's ability to function in a team. And since pianists tend to spend long hours all by themselves in practice rooms, collaborating in chamber music with other musicians is a healthy,

socializing activity that can produce wonderful results. *(Photo: Yaron Kohlberg welcomes the audience on August 3.)*

Thus it was that over the course of two evenings, the four finalists in the 2021 Cleveland International Piano Competition joined the Escher String Quartet onstage at Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art to perform their choice of works from a list of five piano quintets.

On Tuesday, Byeol Kim chose César Franck's *Piano Quintet in f*. Yedam Kim followed with Robert Schumann's *Piano Quintet in E-flat*. On Wednesday, both Lovre Marušić and Martín García García selected Shostakovich's *Piano Quintet in g*. (Dvořák No. 2 and Brahms, the other possibilities, went unclaimed.)

That made things interesting for the audience and jury on the one hand, and for the Escher on the other. With different repertoire, you can find yourself comparing *pommes* (the very Gallic Franck) with *Apfelsinen* (the quintessentially Germanic

Schumann). In the case of the Shostakovich, with two performances of the same work back to back, you have more direct points of comparison — but for the pianists' collaborators there's the added challenge of keeping two different interpretations straight.



Camille Saint-Saëns was the pianist at the premiere of the Franck Quintet in 1879, and Byeol Kim proved a worthy successor on Tuesday, trading broad, dramatic phrases back and forth with the Escher Quartet and joining them in sonorous, punctuating climaxes.

Written in Franck's signature, cyclic style, the work's motifs come back a number of times during the three movements, which should cement its musical content in the listener's memory, but — no reflection on its expert performance here — the work is curiously evanescent. By the end of intermission, it had disappeared like smoke.



Schumann's Quintet found the composer at the top of his game in 1842. The work is tightly written and was brilliantly performed by Yedam Kim and the Escher on a mere two hours' of rehearsal. The pianist told this publication in an interview that she had to memorize it for a previous competition, which showed in her total command of the solo part and her understanding of how she fit into the architecture of the piece.

The musicians took the breathtaking scherzo right out to the edge of danger without falling off the cliff. The finale, a fugue that has much in common with the last movement of Mozart's 41st Symphony, was strong and exciting.



On Wednesday, the two pianists managed to craft very different performances of the Shostakovich Quintet. Lovre Marušić's take on the work was more cerebral — as if he viewed the work from an elevation of 5,000 feet — but exquisitely clear, each note carefully placed and voiced for its context.

Martín García García plunged in head first and totally committed to his role, investing the piano part with strong emotions, even when the composer's feelings didn't feel completely genuine — where Shostakovich manufactured moments of happiness in a general context of bleakness and despair.

The pianist brought the Escher along with him on his eventful journey through the piece, with its creepy second-movement fugue, its don't-blink-or-you'll-miss-it scherzo, its odd, stripped-down intermezzo, and its unconvincingly sunny finale.



In an unusual move, García García played from a small laptop rather than a digital tablet, enlisting the aid of an assistant who poked at a key to change pages on the display.

All four pianists demonstrated strong collaborative skills which bode well for their performances on Friday and Saturday with an orchestra celebrated for playing like a big chamber ensemble. Bring the concertos on!

Photos by Gregory Wilson & Bryan Clark.

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