

Cooper Piano Competition: Final Round with The Cleveland Orchestra (Aug. 4)

by Daniel Hathaway



Thanks to our not-so-friendly coronavirus, the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition has been on hiatus for five years. It returned, fresh and energized, last week in Oberlin and Cleveland, fielding what many considered the most impressive group of young pianists in the history of the contest — which was inaugurated in 2011. *(Photo: the finalists with the Coopers and Oberlin Conservatory Dean William Quillen.)*

The week began with nineteen competitors who had made it to the semifinals in Oberlin. Three remained after the piano-with-piano concerto round on Wednesday and would go on to play concertos with David Robertson and The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Music Center on Friday evening.



Although the Friday event was a competition round, it could have stood alone as a memorable concert experience. Undoubtedly inspired by the grandeur of the venue and their distinguished onstage colleagues, Pyotr Akulov (16, Russia), Sophia Shuya Liu (14, Montréal), and Taige Wang (13, New York) rose to the level of seasoned professionals in concertos by Liszt, Saint-Saëns, and Rachmaninoff. *(Photo: The Jury)*



Beginning with his volcanic opening gesture in Liszt's First Concerto, Akulov's playing was big in every dimension. I wrote that his performance in the previous round was laced through with fierce drama and torrential virtuosity, and that he was given to gazing into the heavens as if communing directly with the Abbé Liszt. Maybe he was, for his performance was inspired. The presence of The Cleveland Orchestra gave him wonderful sonorities to play against, which only enhanced the handsome tone he produced.



Of her performance of Saint-Saëns' *Concerto No. 2 in g* in the piano-with-piano round, I wrote that Sophia Shuya Liu created "a lovely, ruminative opening cadenza, capturing the improvisatory feeling of the movement. A zesty scherzando and a thrilling presto followed." All of that held true in her final round, but in the meantime, something transformational took place, and her strength, stamina, and interpretive skills blossomed into an even more impressive showing on Friday.



Similarly, in that previous round, I wrote that Taige Wang "gave an incisive, witty reading of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. His playing was amazing — strong, virtuosic, and appropriately mischievous, bringing instantaneous mood changes to each new variation. The famous lyrical variation pulled at your heartstrings."

None of that changed on Friday except that Wang had a conductor and an ultra-responsive orchestra to play off of. He enjoyed every minute of that give and take, producing a performance of uncommon sophistication and wit that brought down the house amid applause and cheers. When Wang was called back for more bows, Robertson took his hand and raised it like a referee declaring the winner in a prize fight.

Robertson and the Orchestra deserved their own ovation for treating this evening's performances as seriously as they would for any world-class soloists. And speaking of ovations, the evening's concertmaster was Peter Otto, who earlier in the week was named concertmaster of the Nashville Symphony beginning in January. When he first appeared onstage, his Cleveland Orchestra colleagues saluted him with a rousing stamping of feet.



After nearly an hour of deliberation, the jury and contestants assembled onstage and Thomas Cooper surprised everyone by bestowing first prizes on both Pyotr Akulov and Sophia Shuya Liu.

Later, Taige Wang surprised everyone again by donating his prize money to the Oberlin Summer Piano Festival. In this excerpt from an email to Oberlin summer programs manager Anna Hoffmann and piano professor Robert Shannon, he wrote

I never cared or worried about what place I would be. The only thing I took seriously was playing well so I could keep my teachers' reputation. I did it! I am very happy and proud of myself.

Mr. and Mrs. Cooper set a very good example for me to give back to our community, and to distribute effort to help others. So, I decided to donate all my prize money to next year's Oberlin Summer Piano Festival to award the students who win the festival competition to honor my teacher Yoheved Kapinsky and William Grant Nabore. Without their guidance — not only on music but also how to be a good person — I would never [have] had this achievement.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com August 8, 2023

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