

After the Cooper Competition: catching up with Sophia Shuya Liu (age 14)

by Mike Telin



History was made on August 4, when for the first time in the history of the Cooper Competition for Piano, the top prize was awarded to two participants. Pyotr Akulov and Sophia Shuya Liu were named co-champions following their concerto performances with David Robertson and The Cleveland Orchestra that Friday evening.

Not one to rest, Sophia Shuya Liu presented a recital in Philadelphia the day after the competition as part of the Philadelphia Young Pianists Academy. I reached her by phone at her home in Montréal.

Mike Telin: The recital in Philadelphia went well?

Sophia Shuya Liu: It went very well. My teacher was also there, so it was really an amazing event. It was just so fantastic to perform in front of an audience the night after my concert with The Cleveland Orchestra.

MT: I was just looking at your program that I found online.

SL: I played basically the same pieces as I did during the first round of the competition, just so I didn't have to practice an extra program. I did add one more piece, the Chopin *Sonata No. 2*, which I deeply love.

MT: Congratulations on your win. What was it like when they announced the third prize winner and then said no second prize, two first prizes?

SL: I thought Pyotr played extraordinarily well. And although I was quite satisfied with the way I played, I think he was really impressive in the way he coordinated with the orchestra. So, honestly, I didn't care too much who actually would have won, but this title was the best thing I could have asked for. I was just happy.

MT: You were in total command of Saint-Saëns' Concerto No. 2. Is it one you've played for a while?

SL: Yes. I played it at a festival with an orchestra in Colombia when I was ten years old, so I have experience with this concerto. And I've been practicing it ever since, so I think it's really connected to me.

MT: I love the piece, but what about it do you like?

SL: First of all, I love French music and I think a lot of people associate French music with only Debussy and Ravel, which I understand. But I think Saint-Saëns is a very special composer with the way he combines the romanticism of Chopin with this impressionistic style to his music. And I think it's that combination that makes him stand out. He's actually one of my favorite composers, and I think this concerto is really a masterpiece.

MT: I agree. You looked like you were having a good time with The Cleveland Orchestra.

SL: It was amazing — like a dream because who would have thought I would have been able to perform with this world-class orchestra? I mean, it was such an honor. And honestly, I was just doing my best with the music and doing my best to be with the orchestra making music together. So it was absolutely fantastic.

MT: And David Robertson is an excellent conductor.

SL: Yes, of course. I love his personality, and I love the way he speaks. I love the way he organizes the music — I think he's an amazing person.

MT: He looked like he was having a lot of fun with all three of you. I'd like to ask about your teacher Dang Thai Son — you've been studying with him since you were nine. Why did you seek him and why have you stayed with him for five years?

SL: He's an amazing teacher to begin with — everybody's trying to study with him. And he's an amazing pianist. As soon as I started studying with him, I realized that me and my parents made a great decision because he has so much to share and he's so passionate as a

teacher. This is why I decided to stay with him, and I still have so much to learn from him.

MT: He certainly has good students. You started studying piano when?

SL: I started when I was four.

MT: And what made you and your parents decide to move to Canada?

SL: Honestly, I'm not sure, because in the beginning I just played for fun, and I wasn't sure if I was capable of becoming a musician. But then my parents discovered Professor Dang. They heard that he's an amazing professor, so that's why we moved to Canada, just to study with him. And then now we realize that we really made a great decision.

MT: Are your parents musicians?

SL: My mom is not a musician, but my dad, he was a conductor and a violinist, so he kind of guides me with practicing. He knows a lot and has a lot of experiences — I think that's an advantage for me.

MT: I take it you want to be a pianist as a profession.

SL: Yes, I do.

MT: Do you play chamber music?

SL: I've actually never played chamber music although I've always wanted to. I guess I haven't really found the chance yet, but I think chamber music is really cool.

Performing as a soloist, you have a lot of freedom in terms of interpretation, but I think performing with either chamber musicians or an orchestra requires a lot of collaboration, which I think is a very important skill to have as a musician. And I think that playing with other people gives you the ability to connect with other musicians, which I think is really great.

MT: You have been quite successful in a number of competitions — what do you learn from entering them?

SL: I think entering competitions is a way to train yourself to have a good emotional quality, because a lot of people are worried and nervous. But I think it's important to just focus on the music you're playing. Because if you care too much about the results or

what other people might think of you, that disturbs the way you express yourself. So I think it's important to just let your music come out and let that be the only thing that you worry about.

MT: I was reading that you are also a composer.

SL: I've composed, I don't know, 20-something works. It's not a lot, but to create a brand new piece of music is just amazing. As pianists, we play the works of other composers and we have to respect the originality of the composer or the piece.

But composing is just amazing, and I personally love any sort of creation. I love writing stories. I love writing poems. And that's why I also love writing music — I'm combining my musical skills with my ability to write and create. I think composing is so cool, and I just let my imagination take me wherever it wants.

MT: You'll have to start programming your own pieces soon — seriously. I also read that you enjoy visiting historical sites.

SL: I like exploring music history — I think history in general is pretty interesting. I like visiting museums to check out objects from the past or paintings — because they're so closely related to music, they really help me gain more imagination. I like reading books about history and visiting historical sites because I think it's a really fun thing to do.

MT: I love visiting historical sites myself. What are your plans for the rest of the summer?

SL: I got back to Montréal last night, but I'm flying to Vancouver this afternoon. Then I'll be in China and Japan for a vacation.

MT: I'm glad you said vacation.

SL: I'll still practice, but I'll be able to relax and just do stuff.

MT: Well, Sophia, thank you so much. Congratulations on the Cooper — have fun and safe travels.

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