

After the Cooper Competition: thoughts from Pyotr Akulov (age 16)

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.

I reached Pyotr Akulov by Zoom outside of Düsseldorf, Germany.

Mike Telin: Good afternoon and thank you for taking the time to talk.

Pyotr Akulov: Thank you for your invitation.

MT: You're in Germany right now — are you performing?

PA: No, I am just recovering from the competition, resting, and preparing to fly home to Moscow.

MT: I'm glad you're resting. You deserve it, which brings me to say congratulations, you played wonderfully.

PA: Thank you very much for your kind words.

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

PA: I can't deny that I was full of emotions. It was a really exciting moment and a huge surprise — the tie for the first time in the history of the Cooper Competition was a real shock, but in a positive way. I am so proud to win it, but I'm extremely happy to share the prize with Sophia. She demonstrated intelligence and lovely playing with her Saint-Saëns in the final round. So I think this was the best possible decision, and I'm really happy with the result.

MT: You also won the audience prize.

PA: I appreciate that because it's probably the clearest way to feel the audience's support. I felt the huge energy from the hall, and I was really happy to get such a warm reception.

MT: Why did you choose the Lizst to showcase your talents in front of the world?

PA: I can say something about that because Lizst's First Piano Concerto is one of my favorite pieces of music — I truly admire it. And I chose this composition because of the responsibility and honor of performing with Maestro David Robertson and The Cleveland Orchestra, one of the best orchestras in the world. I have a lot of experience playing this concerto, so it was well-prepared and the best way to appreciate the power of the orchestra. It was a huge pleasure to perform in Severance Hall — I'm really grateful to the Cooper Competition for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

MT: You enjoyed playing with the Orchestra, and did you enjoy the rehearsal?

PA: It was absolutely miraculous. The rehearsal was interesting because I was kind of nervous, but I felt the huge support from the musicians and the conductor as well. Maestro Robertson was helping all of us finalists and I'm really thankful for that. This combination doesn't happen every day, so I was really glad to have the opportunity.

MT: I noticed that you have done a number of competitions and been successful at them. Why do you choose to compete?

PA: I know some pianists do not really like the process of competing — they think that it has nothing in common with the real performance. I'm not one of these pianists because for me, the competition is a celebration — like a huge, fun event where you can just enjoy the process of performing for an intelligent audience of jury members and international professors. It's always an honor to be there.

But you also meet some wonderful participants who are all really friendly. So it brings only positive vibes for me. I have never felt the insane pressure — I have always felt the ecstatic feeling of performing. And the prizes and the results were not the motivating

thing for me. The main thing is the feedback from the respected judges and the opportunity to perform in the best halls, such as Severance Hall.

MT: I understand you do not come from a musical family, yet for some reason you started playing the piano very early. What was it about the instrument that made you say, “I need to do this”?

PA: Actually, even today I feel like a child. I just want to sit and play because the sound and design of the instrument is so attractive — I have always had a huge interest in the instrument. And I don't know, maybe music is just something I've had in my head and like many people, I have always wanted to perform — the piano is just the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the performance.

Right now, I truly appreciate some orchestral music or some things written for choir, but back then, piano was probably the simplest way to start learning and exploring the classical music world. And I'm really happy that I haven't changed instruments since.

MT: How has your teacher, Maxim Zheleznov at the Gnnessin school in Moscow, helped you improve as a pianist?

PA: I've been studying with him for the last eight years. We met for the first time in 2015 and since then, he's really helped me to understand the music better. He's a master when it comes to technique issues. And in general, he's an incredible musician and a huge Liszt admirer. So the opportunity to study the Concerto with him was a huge gift for me, and I'm really happy.

MT: I take it you want to have a career as a pianist.

PA: I really hope to become a pianist, I mean, performer — it is what every artist taking part in the competition wants.

MT: I'm sure you will succeed. When you're not playing the piano, how do you spend your time?

PA: I do a lot of different things. I am trying to rest a little bit right now. But I enjoy doing all the nice stuff I can, like eating ice cream with my friends. I'm reading some books and I'm trying to learn German, but actually it's not quite working for me. It's really hard. But in general, when I am at home, I do various things. I like playing chess or just hanging out with friends, so my life is quite normal outside the piano.

MT: Good. And chess, do you play this version called speed chess or something like that?

PA: I've never heard the title of speed chess, but I definitely play online. This is an activity I enjoy because it's like the mix of just scrolling your phone and playing an incredible game. I feel like a huge gambler when I play — it's really irritating to lose and very ecstatic to win. So there's a lot at stake in every game.

MT: That's wonderful. I ask about speed chess only because there is this cellist Zlatomir Fung, who won the Tchaikovsky competition — I was just talking to him a few weeks ago and he plays this super fast version of chess.

PA: Yes, of course. It's called bullet chess and you just have like one minute. It's thrilling to play really fast games — it's about the reaction time and how you recover from mistakes.

MT: Exactly. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

PA: I would like to say how incredible it was at Oberlin Conservatory, because it's important to tell people what a marvelous place it is. It delighted me with the relaxed and inspiring atmosphere. Convenient practicing rooms with fantastic grand pianos which was a real pleasure for all participants.

It's impossible not to mention a venue such as Warner Concert Hall, because the first rounds took place there. It is a very cozy place with interesting acoustics which turned out to be really suitable for my solo program. I'm really grateful for everything Oberlin Conservatory has done with all these summer programs and the Cooper Competition.

MT: Well, I thank you very much for taking the time to talk and again congratulations. I'm certain that we will meet again in the future. So take care, enjoy the rest of your time in Germany and have safe travels back to Moscow.

PA: Thank you very much.

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