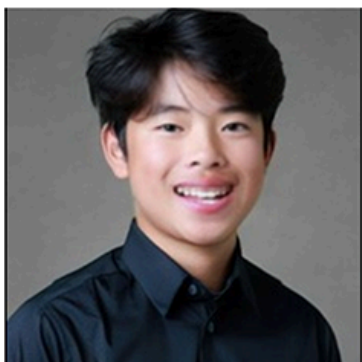


James Stroud Classical Guitar Competition: next generation shines in the final round (June 9)

by Max Newman



Every year, the James Stroud Classical Guitar Competition provides audiences with a look at some of the most talented young musicians aged 13-18 that our nation has to offer. And the competition's fifth edition did not disappoint.

On the evening of June 9 at the Cleveland Institute of Music's Mixon Hall, the competition's four finalists went toe-to-toe over the course of an hour that was as much a joyous celebration of music as it was an entertaining competition.

Although Californian Elle Davisson, a 16-year-old native of the Bay Area,

eventually came out on top with the grand prize, all the performers showcased astonishing skill and should come away feeling proud.

The evening was the culmination of a lengthy application process and several judged rounds, where fifteen semifinalists turned into four finalists (who coincidentally were all from California). For those on stage, it had certainly been quite a journey, and they made the most of this opportunity. Each competitor demonstrated composure beyond their years, in addition to showing off their own unique skill sets and strengths. If there was any anxiety under the bright lights that evening, it wasn't visible during any of their sets.

Preston Hong (15) was the first performer on the night, and it was delightful to listen to his sumptuous, glassy tone, which he maintained while playing at a blistering pace. In

Joaquín Rodrigo's *Junto al Generalife*, he showcased both of these strengths, with his mesmeric playing absolutely doing the piece justice.

Hilbert Chen (15) was also able to play rapidly-moving pieces with frightening accuracy. Chen had a fantastic grasp on the dissonant, giving chords a brilliant sense of surprise. He took the audience on a winding adventure, which notably included Atanas Ourkouzounov's *Sonata No. 1*. Aside from its intriguing melodic progression, the piece also features a slapped-string section, a technique that Chen impressively nailed.

Micah Montgomery (14) played on the heartstrings of the audience with a stunning tone and a brilliant understanding of the feelings embedded into the pieces he was playing. A prime example of this was his rendition of Astor Piazzolla's *Primavera Porteña*. Each chord he played felt deafening in the best way — he knew exactly how to raise each moment of each piece onto its own, fitting pedestal.

But 16-year-old Elle Davisson could do a little bit of everything. A picture of calm, she played with a mind-boggling level of dexterity and an emotional subtlety beyond her years.

One of the most striking aspects of her performance was the wide range of feelings expressed in her repertoire: J.S. Bach's *Lute Suite in e* was contemplative and brooding, Heitor Villa-Lobos's *Etude No. 2* was rapid and bouncy, and Joaquín Rodrigo's *Sonata Giocosa* began with a melancholic first movement before bursting suddenly into an in-your-face second movement.

Most of all, these pieces showed Davisson's versatility. She could stretch the littlest things to their furthest reaches, and didn't stumble in the face of the technically challenging.

The evening concluded with a touching speech by competition founder James Stroud. After talking about his own origins, he emphasized the high level of talent in the competition finals. He said he wished he could give the win to all four competitors.

The 2024 James Stroud Classical Guitar Competition was indeed a competition. But more than anything, it was a festival of music and a joyous celebration of the evening's performers.

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