

CIPC Finals zero in on top four pianists at Severance (Aug. 9-10)

by Daniel Hathaway



By the time that Evren Ozel, Maxim Lando, Zijian Wei, and Giuseppe Guarrera played concertos with conductor Ruth Reinhardt and The Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Music Center last weekend, their places in the winners' circle of the Cleveland International Piano Competition were already determined.

It only remained to be revealed which of the generous cash prizes (ranging from \$75,000 to \$10,000) they would take home.

Given the quality of the competitors' playing to this point, the jury had some tough choices to make.

First up on Friday evening with Beethoven's fourth concerto was 25-year-old competition veteran **Evren Ozel** from the United States. We remember first hearing



him at the age of 15 at the Cooper International Competition in Oberlin, and then at the Cleveland Competition a year later. His impressive performances then pointed to a bright future, and his playing last weekend confirmed that he has continued to grow and mature.

For competition purposes, Ozel might have chosen a flashier piece than Beethoven's fourth, but his elegant reading of this intimate and emotionally complex concerto revealed his excellent taste and intellectual curiosity.

The work is a conversation between piano and orchestra rather than a struggle for domination, and from the perfectly voiced, sensitive opening clear through to the witty finale, Ozel played with a luxurious sound, and an expansive color palette and dynamic range. Always keeping in close contact, Reinhardt and the Orchestra responded with beautiful long, relaxed lines. Fine wind solos and other magical details ensued as Ozel's shapely phrases and nuances were matched by his fellow instrumentalists.

When the conversation became heated in the second movement recitative, Ozel and the orchestra switched roles dramatically, then the pianist made a delightful transition into the third movement rondo. From that point on to the end, there was nothing for the listener to do but sit back and enjoy Ozel's response to Beethoven's genius in manipulating musical material.



21-year-old **Maxim Lando** (USA) closed out Friday evening with an edgy account of Brahms' second concerto, heralded with a gorgeous opening horn solo by Nathaniel Silberschlag and followed by a bombastic solo piano statement that introduced the ample technique that served Lando well throughout the piece. He went on to serve up some attractive color

changes although not at so many different dynamic levels.

Richard Weiss opened the third movement with a beautifully lush cello solo, inspiring Lando to explore more of his sensitive side, but in the fourth movement finale, the pianist pumped up volume and intensity as often as possible, even stomping his foot on the stage floor during big attacks (and indulging himself in a few too many theatrical releases that nearly took him off the bench).

Reinhardt wisely kept things under control, never allowing Lando to get too far ahead of himself. It will be fun to watch this young pianist as his career develops.

Rachmaninoff reigned on Saturday, with performances of his second and third concertos by **Giuseppe Guerrera** (32, Italy) and **Zijian Wei** (25, China). It's worth noting here that the CIPC management took some pains to prevent duplication of concertos in the final round, for which audiences and Orchestra were probably grateful, if not so much the jury.



Guerrera is an elegant player whose thoughtful opening in “Rach 2” grew beautifully from triple piano to a grand, rich sound. His phrasing was as wonderful as the balance between his hands, and his lines matched up beautifully with the Orchestra’s phrasing. He has the rare ability to play softly and intimately while still making himself heard above the thick textures of Rachminoff’s orchestration.

On the podium, Ruth Reinhardt was a splendid collaborator who drew countless details and nuances from The Cleveland Orchestra after only a tête-à-tête with the soloist and a one-hour rehearsal.

The second movement was graced by a beautiful opening and a clarinet solo from Afendi Yusuf, and relaxed lyrical lines from Guerrera, who perfectly outlined the Orchestra’s melodic lines with finely-voiced chords and provided an expansive cadenza.

The finale was brisk but nicely paced, and the sound was magnificent. Reinhardt did a formidable job of holding everything together.



Zijian Wei launched “Rach 3” with a long, expansive line that captured and held your attention from the start. He produced cascades of notes with seeming simplicity and excellent coordination with the Orchestra and built up a terrific cadenza full of dynamic contrasts.

The Intermezzo was well-paced, with plenty of room to breathe and grow, the waltz section ear-catching.

Soloist and Orchestra made a fine transition into the Finale, and once

there, all of Wei’s clean piano lines had purpose and direction. The Orchestra simply sounded spectacular, and Wei not only communicated with his musical colleagues, but with the audience as well, putting the finishing touches on a brilliant performance.

He also got a laugh near the end when an ill-fated upward gesture sent his eyeglasses flying. A nearby violinist returned them after the performance.



After a final jury seance, rankings for the 2024 competition were announced: Fourth Prize went to **Giuseppe Guarrera**, Third Prize to **Maxim Lando**, Second Prize to **Evren Ozel**, and First Prize to **Zijian Wei**.

These special prizes were awarded as well:

Baroque Prize: **Evren Ozel**

Beethoven Prize: **Giuseppe Guarrera**

Cairns Family American Prize: **Jonathan Mamora**

ChamberFest Cleveland Prize: **Zijian Wei**

Chopin Prize: **Antonio Chen Guang**

Concerto Round Audience Prize: **Zijian Wei**

Female Composer Prize **Zhu Wang**

G. Henle Verlag Urtext Prize: **Zijian Wei**

Junior Jury Prize: **Zijian Wei**

Mozart Prize: **Zihao Wu**

Playoff Audience Prize **Maxim Lando & Zhu Wang**

Tomorrow we interview each of the four finalists.

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