

CIPC Semi-Finalists show more of their musical personalities

by Daniel Hathaway



In altering the repertory requirements for the 2024 Cleveland International Piano Competition, the organizers made the rounds much more interesting for the attendees, but probably more complicated for the jury, who now had to compare wildly different apples to oranges.

Another change moved the chamber music round from the final to the semi-final round and reduced the players from a piano quintet to a piano trio (the instrumentalists here were violinist Maria Yudenich and cellist Gabriel Martins).

Here are our impressions of works we heard performed by the eight semi-finalists from August 1 through 4 (chamber music comments at the end).

The round began with a smashing program by **Maxim Lando** (21, USA), who played Florence Price's *Fantasie Nègre* No. 1 with commanding presence and an expansive color palette, never losing track of the African American theme. His nuanced performance of Mozart's *Fantasia in D Minor*, K. 397 featured magical soft playing that couldn't have been more of a contrast with Stravinsky's *Trois Mouvements de Petrouchka* that followed. In the *Russian Dance*, Lando he exhibited ample technique and rhythmic command, and played astonishing parallel chords. *Petrushka's Room* was beguilingly playful, and his powerful account of *The Shrovetide Fair* captured every aspect of that festive scene.

Antonio Chen Guang (29, China) wowed us with his control of dynamics and the relentless metronomic lines that underscored the jaggy chords of György Ligeti's "Fanfares" (*Études*, Book 1, No. 4.) His sound was beautifully controlled, as were the

soft repeated chords and lovely dynamic shifts in Lera Auerbach's "Chorale" (24 Preludes for Piano, No. 6).

Guang was on top of his game in Sergei Prokofiev Sonata No. 7 in B-flat, producing a beautiful dark, rich sound that turned explosive in the thunderous opening march and ended with a resounding staccato bass note. Long, intimate phrases created a splendid contrast in the Andante caloroso, and sharp, clear articulations distinguished the third movement, which was full of color and dynamic shifts.

Friday, August 2 began with an unusual program of music by George Walker and Lowell Liebermann curated and performed by **Jonathan Mamora** (29, United States). In its four movements, Walker's Sonata No. 2 in four movements showed Mamora's ample technique and rich sound, his syncopated, jazzy rhythms and crisp articulation, his strong lyrical phrasing, and his ability to juxtapose thunderous, well-voiced chords with long, legato lines.

Liebermann's Sonata No. 3, Op. 82, a physical work of many twists and turns, unfolds in four continuous movements (Inquieto, esitante — Con tutta forza; Dona Nobis Pacem; Lullabye; and Interlude: Movendo — Allegro). Mamora played fiendish technical passages with clean articulation, and emphasized the work's lyrical qualities right up to the concluding fast and furious Interlude: Movendo and the Allegro that takes over with a cascade of notes and hammering chords.

Zhu Wang (27, China) stepped off with an expressive performance of a rarity: one of the four little Duetti in two-part invention style that come bundled with J.S. Bach's German Organ Mass. Then he turned to three works that conjure images of opera and liturgical music.

We're at a bit at a loss to discuss Zhang Zhao's *Pi Huang (Moments from Beijing Opera)* because the originals are unfamiliar! But these impressions are jumpy, jocular, then slower, with a lyrical melody layered into the middle range. And off they go again, running, playing with chords and trillings all over the keyboard. Moments ends with a Western-sounding melody harmonized in 4ths. Liszt's reworking of Mozart's Lacrimosa from Requiem, S. 550, conflates the original Mozart with new material, adds a rumbling bass, and fills in the texture with chords before ending unconvincingly. Liszt's *Réminiscences de Norma*, S. 394 is pure bombast! Tunes presented in octaves are extended sentimentally with filler and twitterings. A cadenza plays with fragments, and moves forward to a peak and a major-key denouement. Wang's playing was virtuosic if not always tidy.

On August 3, **Evren Ozel** (25, United States) began with an elegant performance of Mozart not-so-well-known Fantasia in c, K. 475 — creating a rich, centered sound with clear articulations and phrasing and beautiful transitions. He went on to brilliantly

capture the spirit of Bartók's *Out of Doors* — by turns tranquil, playful, jovial, and powerful. He expertly balanced *The Night's Music* between his hands.

Mirabelle Kajenjeri (26, France), the sole female in the semi-finals, gave a superb performance of a single work, Frédéric Chopin's *Sonata No. 3 in b*. In the opening, *Allegro maestoso* she produced a rich sound with lovely phrasing and shape to the lines. Her *Scherzo: Molto vivace* featured clean technique. The opening of the *Largo* was grand and throughout she took time, never rushing. With her fingers floating across the keyboard she made easy work of Chopin's filigree in the *Finale: Presto non tanto*.

On Sunday, **Giuseppe Guarrera** (32, Italy) played a program full of Baroque music — or Baroque references — beginning with Handel's *Suite No. 2 in F*, where he created a transparent, sensitive *Adagio*, an *Allegro* with a clear sense of line, a second *Adagio* with a grand, beautiful sound, and a final *Allegro* (a fugue) with clean textures that never lost track of its theme. He stayed in the Baroque period for Domenico Scarlatti's *Sonata in e*, K. 394, making easy work of its scale passages and ornaments, and playing its tight trills with panache. Baroque references came in the form of György Ligeti *Musica Ricercata, No. 11* (“Homage to Girolamo Frescobaldi”), which he played with a steady tempo and a whole spectrum of dynamics. At the end, his quadruple pianissimo — with hands at the extreme ends of the keyboard — was magical. Guarrera finished big with J.S. Bach's *Chaconne in d*, as transformed by Federico Busoni. His colors were beautiful, his flourishes grand, and he put its many moods across brilliantly.

Zijian Wei (25, China), a highly communicative player, ended the Semi-Final round with a beautifully constructed program that combined two Mozart miniatures with a Chinese impressionist scene by Lu Wencheng and ended with Ravel's evocative *La Valse*. Mozart's mischievous *Adagio in b*, K. 540 opened delicately with well-balanced chords, good dynamic control, an attractive sound, and good sense of line. The composer obviously wanted to make you smile with his *Rondo in D*, K. 485, and Wei's playful touch and articulations made that happen. Wei's interpretation of Lu Wencheng's *Autumn Moon On A Calm Lake* captured the shimmering, glistening, and twinkling of its subject. The pianist went directly into the spectacular opening of the Ravel, painting its many colors with a broad brush and seemingly bringing everything he had to offer to this performance. It was simply amazing.

Chamber Music Round

Intended to give insights into how well the competitors play together with others — a major consideration in the forthcoming concertos with orchestra — the piano trio performances may have revealed more about how adaptable the keyboardists were to playing under fire with instrumentalists they'd never before collaborated with.

Another consideration, especially with piano trios, is who's in charge of the performance. Does the keyboardist lead his colleagues or follow them? How democratic is this process?

Three pianists — Maxim Lando, Jonathan Mamora, and Zhu Wang — chose Mendelssohn's first Trio, two opted for Brahms' first — Antonio Chen Guang and Giuseppe Guarrera — and two for his second trio — Evren Ozel and Mirabelle Kajenjeri — and only one competitor, Zijian Wei, chose Beethoven — his "Ghost" Trio. As should be expected with such excellent keyboardists, piano parts were dispatched efficiently and with easy mastery of difficult technical passages. In all performances violinist Maria Yudenich and cellist Gabriel Martins were flexible partners.

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