

Fireworks in the key of D Major: Cooper Violin Competition Finals (Jan. 10)

by Stephanie Manning



With light snow and a winter wind blowing outside Oberlin's Finney Chapel, the Final Round of the 2025 Cooper Competition — the January edition of the usual August event — looked a bit different this year. And yet, there was also a healthy sense of déjà vu.

The final three violinists, narrowed down from an initial field of nineteen, presented concertos by Brahms (once) and Tchaikovsky (twice) — coincidentally, the same program from 2022, the last time the competition was held for violin.

Joined by the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra and conductor Norman Huynh, this year's finalists delivered an impressive evening of performances on January 10.

First up was **Julia Xiaozhou Wang** (17, Nanjing, China) with a relatively straightforward interpretation of Brahms' *Concerto in D*, Op. 77. After the lengthy introduction, played sensitively by ProMusica, she attacked the opening with intensity, before smoothly lightening things up in her high register.

At times, Wang sounded somewhat hesitant or nervous, which cast a shadow over what was otherwise a passionate engagement with the music.

Still, she steadily pushed onwards, seizing onto the piece's most lively moments — particularly in the third movement — and focusing in for a beautiful first-movement cadenza. Her eventual



Second Prize win no doubt recognized her determination as well as her impressive performances in prior rounds.

The Brahms concerto requires quite a high level of playing from the orchestra, and ProMusica absolutely stepped up. The woodwind chorale that opens the second movement, featuring an elegant oboe solo from Donna Conaty, was a real joy.



The confident orchestral performances continued with Tchaikovsky's *Concerto in D*, Op. 35, the work of choice for the next two soloists. ProMusica created a fittingly regal sound in both renditions, once again highlighting the principal woodwind players in the middle movement.

Tiantian Lu (15, Ningbo, China) started things off, taking the piece at a measured pace with a focus on her lovely tone. In the outer movements, her slower tempo choices sometimes put her at odds with the orchestra, but she remained steadfast and assertive.

Lu shone the brightest in the piece's more delicate moments, as in the shimmering arpeggios of the first-movement cadenza and the lyrical lines of the *Canzonetta: Andante*, where she carefully shaped the resolution of each trill. Her efforts earned her Third Prize.

Edna Unseld (13, Zurich, Switzerland) truly had the last word. Calm and collected, she delivered a beautifully free-spirited Tchaikovsky, a nice balance to the other performance of the concerto that evening.

Even at her young age, Unseld possesses the qualities that makes the listener pay close attention. In the quiet moments, she treated every cadenza with reverence, while in the loud sections, she practically floated over the double-stops rather than digging into them.

After a bit of an unsteady beginning to the second movement, she regained composure quickly, segueing into a flying finale. Her brisk tempos sometimes made the ensemble shaky as she transitioned in and out of solos — but the overall effect was exhilarating. It was no surprise



to see her handed First Prize at the end of the evening, an exciting omen of opportunities to come.

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