

Cooper International Competition for Violin: Concerto Finale (Aug. 10)

By Daniel Hathaway



Monday evening's Cooper International Competition for violin concerto finals in Oberlin's Warner Concert Hall marked the culmination of a week's worth of public playing that took the measure of an impressive group of young musicians in solo recitals.

Now, joined onstage by conductor David Danzmayr and the Columbus ProMusica Chamber Orchestra, the three performers who had risen to the top would demonstrate their ability to put full concertos across. Grace under pressure, a spirit of collaboration, and a deep feeling for the music were among

the requirements.

Elizabeth Poppy-Song, (center) age 16, from the United States, led off with a beautiful opening statement of the lyrical theme in Sergei Prokofiev's *Concerto No. 2 in G minor*, and gradually and with great control shifted the music into a more spirited mood. She maintained good coordination with Danzmyr and the orchestra as the first movement alternated between technical and lyric passages and culminated in an exciting pizzicato ending.

In the Andante, Poppy-Song played long, flowing but focused lines over short notes in the winds and made a flawless transition back to the opening theme.

She brought a full tone to the Allegretto, digging into the notes of the Iberian-flavored dance. Crisp castanets accented the rhythms as the violinist gave life to all the finale's tempo and mood changes. Conductor David Danzmayr kept soloist and orchestra in close contact with each other.

Mingzhe Ye (right), age 16 (China), got the first crack at the Tchaikovsky concerto, making an ear-catching entrance that sang through the full sound of the orchestra. His tone was big but flexible and visited a range of colors. All his phrases had both intent and direction and his well-paced cadenza was full of personality.

Long lines and a beautiful, lyric tone characterized his playing in the Canzonetta, setting up a breathless performance of the finale in which Ye appeared to be daring the orchestra to keep up with him. They did, but he kept everyone on the edge of their seats. To their credit, Danzmayr and the orchestra miraculously met up every time the main theme came back.

After a brief intermission that gave everyone an opportunity to exhale, **Minji Choi** (left), age 16, from the United States, achieved a top-notch, yet refreshingly relaxed version of the Tchaikovsky with plenty of room for nuance and introspection. Her interaction with the orchestra allowed for real, singing pianissimos, and her well-paced cadenza was charismatic.

Choi conceived of the second movement as an intimate, lyrical song, which contrasted well with her fiery approach to the finale. A steady tempo created space for splendid articulations and wide dynamic contrasts, and though she blended well with her colleagues, her solo line was never covered by the orchestra.

Judging from the performances by this trio of young artists, the future of violin playing is in excellent hands.

Following a break for deliberations, the jury awarded the three top prizes in the 2026 Cooper Violin Competition:

Mingzhe Ye — first place.

Elizabeth Poppy Song — second place

Minji Choi — third place.

A total of over \$40,000 in cash and prizes was awarded during the competition

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