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KIPC 2014 Daily Updates

By Rae de Lisle - Head of Piano/Senior Lecturer University of Auckland

Kerikeri International Piano Competition Day 3 - Final - Sunday 6th July 2014

The packed Kerikeri Turner Centre was filled with the buzz of excitement before the final afternoon of the prestigious Kerikeri International Piano Competition. The stage was set for four outstanding soloist to present their hour-long programme to the three international adjudicators, Christopher Elton from the UK, Natasha Vlassenko from Australia and Terence Dennis from Dunedin.

The first of the finalists was 18 year-old Sylvia Jiang, form Auckland, who is shortly to embark on further study at the Juilliard School of Music in New York.

Sylvia’s final programme began with Bach and then guided us through Haydn, Ken Young and Liszt. The Liszt Dante Sonata is a familiar piece in international competitions, and having heard it twice already this week, it was refreshing to hear her version which was filled with imagination and artistry, and one that fulfilled many of the ideas that Natasha Vlassenko had alluded to in this morning’s masterclass. Sylvia has a brilliant future ahead of her and her performances over the last three days have been outstanding.

The second player, 19-year-old Ayesha Gough is a young pianist of enormous potential. She has an attractive stage personality that immediately engages the audience. She is not afraid to take risks, and although this at times leads to some mishaps, here is a young woman with an individual voice. We had already been captivated on Saturday by her Schubert Grazer Fantasie and Liszt Miserere du Trovatore. Today’s programme too gave us plenty for discussion. The Tchaikovsky Dumka was full of pathos and nostalgia, and the Carl Vine Sonata No 1 was delivered with breakneck speeds and fiery rhythms. Rather more controversial was her Beethoven Op 111, which had excessive contrasts of speed and dynamics that at times obscured the true Beethoven spirit. However, hers was perhaps the most interesting talent of the afternoon.

The third pianist was Australian Alex Raineri. His is a reliable pianism that generates respect, and throughout the competition his performances were of a consistently high standard. His Bach was intelligent and thoughtful, and his Beethoven Op. 81a drew orchestral sounds from the Steinway. This performance gained him the prize for the Best Classical Sonata, at times a little too predictable, but always true to the score. His Granados “Lover and the Nightingale” was evocative and beautifully crafted, and the audience were certainly ready to hear his showmanship and explosive trills in the de Falla Ritual Fire Dance. Highlights from his programmes in both days were his outstanding Berg Sonata, and his Messiaen Le Loriot from the final round.

The final pianist Xuan He completed the four-hour concert marathon with music by Haydn, Schumann and Stravinsky. The clarity of the Haydn was welcome after so many notes in the previous performances, and Xuan captured the essence of Haydn and brought an impish quality to its last movement. However, the monumental Schumann Fantasie was not as successful; the constantly changing moods of Florestan and Eusebius that Schumann demands seemed illusive for this young man, and the excessively slow tempi made the piece too drawn out. The virtuoso playing in Stravinsky’s Petrushka fared better, but its fair to say that today’s performance from this talented young pianist didn’t fulfill the promise shown in the earlier rounds.

And so to the prizes.
The Peoples’ Choice award went to Lucy Zeng from Auckland, the Encouragement Award to Australian Daniel Le, the Best Sonata award to Alex Raineri and the new Michael Hill Award for the best New Zealander to Sylvia Jiang.

Fourth prize was Xuan He from China, third to Ayesha Gough, second Sylvia Jiang from Auckland and the Winner- Alex Raineri from Brisbane.

Adjudicator Christopher Elton wished all performers and the competition best wishes for an exciting future. This brought to an end an outstanding event, which was a huge success with audience, competitors, and adjudicators. Bravo Kerikeri!

- Rae de Lisle - Head of Piano/Senior Lecturer University of Auckland

Kerikeri International Piano Competition Day 2 - Saturday 5th July 2014

As we began the second day of the competition the gentleman next to me said: “This is the fun part.” And fun it was. Competitions are not for the faint hearted and the wide range of music played by 14 outstanding young pianists drew a large crowd to The Centre at Kerikeri. All competitors have played the classical sonata round and Saturday’s music was a free choice of 30-40 minutes of music. There was plenty of Bach, Chopin Liszt, Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, but also some more unusual fare, where competitors found music new to even seasoned concert goers. One of the more innovative choices was a movement from the densely textured Charles Ives Piano Sonata No. 2, Concord Mass played by American Cole Matthew Anderson. The audience didn’t know what to expect when Cole arrived on stage with a narrow block of wood, 38cm long, which he then placed inside the piano. The overhead screen came into its own here enabling us all to see the pianist using the wooden block to play clusters of notes while playing a melody in the left hand. An interesting start to the day, leaving the audience gasping at the extraordinary feat of memory required for such complex writing.

Another unusual choice was Sabina Im’s, Musica Nara, a colourful piece by Japanese composer Tokuyama, providing an atmospheric start to her programme. So many of the pianists found it easier to express themselves in Saturday’s free-choice programme; Siyuan Li had great fun with the outrageous Volodos Turkish March which brings virtuoso technique to Mozart’s Rondo Alla Turca, Daniel Lee enjoyed the jazzy rhythms in Toccata DNA by Australian composer Kieran-Harvey, and Ayesha Gough introduced us to a rarely heard dramatic Liszt transcription: Miserere du Trovatore.

There were many highlights in programmes that didn’t make the final four. Bradley Wood’s Liszt Ballade showed him to be a pianist of special qualities, Vivian Cheng brought enviable lightness and colour to Debussy’s Poissons d’Or, and both Jane Nayoung Koo and Lucy Zeng unveiled some beautiful Scarlatti sonatas. The last two programmes from Sylvia Jiang and Jane Nayoung Koo provided less challenging listening with Chopin, Debussy, Ravel and Prokofiev and drew enthusiastic bravos from the audience.

There was much virtuoso playing, and we heard thousands of notes. However, virtuosity can sound empty unless it is coupled with musical shape, spacing and inner meaning. No doubt this played a part in the decision of the three international adjudicators, Christopher Elton, Natasha Vlassenko and Terence Dennis.

Adjudicator Christopher Elton from the Royal Academy in London stressed to all performers that they had all given us immense pleasure. The decision for the finalists was unanimous among the jury, we in the audience were happy with their choice. The four finalists nominated are Xuan He from China, Alex Raineri and Ayesha Gough from Australia and New Zealand’s Sylvia Jiang.
All had played consistently interesting programmes: Xuan He gave us an impressive Dante Sonata which made us listen, weaving through the narrative of the piece with drama, poetry and stillness. Alex Ranieri excelled in the Berg Sonata, which was crafted with clarity of counterpoint, a strong direction and an impressive climax. Ayesha Gough has star quality: she is not afraid to take risks and brought authority and brilliance to each piece in her imaginative programme. The youngest competitor Sylvia Jiang has a seemingly fearless technique and also an inner conviction, which marks her out as a New Zealander to watch. Sunday’s final is sure to be a stunning occasion as these four exceptional young musicians bring their talents to a further programme, starting at 1.30 in The Centre. Meanwhile those not selected for the final, and three young Kerikeri pianists will receive words of wisdom in masterclasses from outstanding teachers Natasha Vlassenko and Christopher Elton beginning at 9.30.

- Rae de Lisle - Head of Piano/Senior Lecturer University of Auckland

The piano’s best sounds of the day have come from the Mozart and Haydn sonatas of Sylvia Jiang, Jane Nayoung Koo and Lucy Zeng. Each found their own scintillating sounds to bring to the Mozart-Haydn world, and each had in their playing a freshness that brought the music to life. My personal favourite of the day was Jane’s Mozart Sonata in D major K 311, which shone with colour, poise and sparkling articulation. I look forward with great excitement to Saturday’s recital round with its great variety of repertoire and styles. Don’t miss it!

- Rae de Lisle - Head of Piano/Senior Lecturer University of Auckland

Kerikeri International Piano Competition - Friday (Morning) 4th July

Sonata Round

The most challenging round of the Kerikeri Piano Competition is always the sonata round. The morning’s programme featured four of the greatest sonatas in the piano repertoire.

Cole Anderson from the USA began with the monumental Schubert C minor sonata D958, one of the longest of the classical sonatas. This was a studious performance: Cole was more at home with the lyricism of the second subject than with the dark turbulent C minor character, which proved rather illusive at 9.30am. His immaculate playing was at its best in the nimble fingered lightness of the final movement.

The second pianist Sabina Im from Australia captured a serene Beethoven Op.109, which was well structured and cleanly executed, but needed further inner tension and sonority to reveal the humanity of this masterwork. Chinese pianist Siyuan Li revealed more connection with the drama of the first movement of Beethoven Op 111, producing a bigger sound than the previous two pianists, although the excitement also invaded the second movement, which would have been more effective at a slightly slower tempo.

Bradley Wood from Christchurch showed his love of Beethoven in the
Appassionata sonata, and although not quite polished, his sincerity and sound quality were warmly greeted by the audience.

The final performance of the morning was from Australian Daniel Le, whose sparkling performance of Haydn’s A flat sonata was played with elegance and a strong feeling for harmonic direction. An enjoyable end to a morning featuring a variety of pianism.

- Rae de Lisle - Head of Piano/Senior Lecturer University of Auckland

**Kerikeri International Piano Competition - Thursday 3rd July**

The opening speech by New Zealand’s foremost pianist and Patron of the Competition, Michael Houstoun set the tone for what is sure to be a quality event. He reminded us that through listening to music we can experience something which is “absolutely real and utterly mysterious”. He went on: “Music has the special power to introduce us to ourselves and to life itself in such a way that we do not question it, even though we have no idea how it works.”

This is the challenge that faces the 14 competitors. not just to play the notes but to bring something of humanity to the listener. We can expect to be excited, moved and inspired by the playing of these young talented pianists.

The opening recital by adjudicator Natasha Vlassenko gave us the chance to reflect, and to experience an intimacy of music making in a programme of Beethoven and Chopin. We were drawn into her sound world through the stillness of the Moonlight sonata and the poetry of Chopin’s Raindrop prelude. No doubt there will be fireworks in the playing of many of the young performers, but tonight it was clear that thoughtfulness and sensitivity of understanding are rare qualities.

- Rae de Lisle - Head of Piano/Senior Lecturer University of Auckland