

Jay Harvey Upstage

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Commissioned piece vies with evergreens in IVCI semifinal round

Public interest in the [International Violin Competition of Indianapolis](#) naturally intensifies when the semifinal round takes the stage. It's a natural result of the narrowing field, when a vicarious spirit of competition begins to vie in audiences' hearts with the artistic merits of what they're hearing.

Those merits have a way of coming to the fore in the semis, especially with the added novelty of the chance to compare interpretations of a new piece. For the 2018 IVCI, that piece is [William Bolcom's](#) Suite No. 3 for Solo Violin, a special commission in the tradition of the contest's nine predecessors, each of which was graced by a different world premiere in 16 performances. (To celebrate its 10th running, the IVCI has issued a compact disc of the nine pieces, as performed by 2014 gold medalist [Jinjo Cho](#).)

An unusual feature of the new work is a movement the composer has designated as optional. Of the eight semifinal recitals at the [Indiana History Center](#) played so far, I've heard half of them. Only one included "Accretive Variations," as Bolcom titles the suite's fourth movement. The composer told me here Friday that the optional designation is not a version of aleatoric thinking, in which a piece of music is equally valid within two or more choices available to the performer.

No, it's a matter of length, he said, and his willingness to accommodate the designated 75-minute span allowed to semifinalists. Other repertoire choices available to the contestants can put the squeeze on that maximum length. If his work survives on concert stages beyond this competition, Bolcom made clear to me, he expects "Accretive Variations" always to be among complete performances of the suite.



Richard Lin: Charisma to burn

I was grateful to hear the whole piece in Saturday afternoon's first recital. [Richard Lin](#) played it with the same elan he gave to the six required movements. The emotional and technical expansiveness of this Third Suite is considerable. The breadth of expression is compactly presented, considering the work's 12- to 15-minute length. More important, the variations movement — built upon a deliberately banal theme — sends up the whole idea of variations structure somewhat. And the tune's simplicity helps the suite link to Bolcom's robust sense of humor and the welcoming attitude his work has long displayed toward all kinds of music.

"Blake used his whole culture, past and present, high-flown and vernacular, as sources for his many poetic styles," Bolcom wrote in program notes for the Naxos recording of his monumental "[Songs of Innocence and of Experience](#)," a celebration of the English poet's all-encompassing vision. The sentence could pretty much sum up Bolcom, too: refreshing the heritage seems more important to him than either turning it upside down or venerating it, particularly a narrowly conceived "classical" part of it.

He has a frank love of the naive as well as the sophisticated, an affinity expressed in the different ways each of the new suite's movements addresses the breadth of fiddling, from Bach to salon music. Songs of innocence and experience pervade Bolcom's work: What might better be a "Graceful Ghost" (a rag that's Bolcom's most famous short piece) than a haunting blend of those polarities? One of his significant song cycles, "Open House," celebrates the poetry of Theodore Roethke, whose verse ranges from nature mysticism to near baby talk, sometimes in startling combination. Graceful ghosts are all over the place in Bolcom's music.

Lin displayed a sure sense of direction and just the right amount of irony to confirm that the Bolcom Third Suite is a piquant addition to the IVCI 's distinguished history of commissioned works.

Moreover, it was a treat to hear from him a different virtuoso arrangement of themes from Bizet's "Carmen" than the usual Waxman and Sarasate versions. Jenő Hubay's "Fantaisie Brillante" made for a dazzling, seductive conclusion to his recital. And his Ravel Sonata found new aspects of the blues idiom in the second movement, ending with a sexy shimmy (a musical effect, not something in the violinist's body language, I hasten to add!).

Other highlights from the two afternoons of semifinals I've heard:



*Fumika Mohri: Taming
Beethoven's monster.*

***Fumika Mohri's** stunning presentation Saturday of Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata (No. 9 in A major, op. 47), a work often avoided in this competition's semifinal round. It asks quite a bit of the pianist to set the tone, and the grandeur of the piano part asks quite a bit of the violinist as well, insofar as he or she has to display a vigorous personality to avoid being overshadowed. At first, Thomas Hoppe's approach seemed rather mannered, striving for dominance in expression; gradually, I warmed to it. It became evident how much it was in sympathy and support with Mohri's playing. That particularly characterized the variations movement, after which the Presto finale sent everyone off to intermission with hearts racing.

***Saki Tozawa's** shrewd and passionate account Friday of Francis Poulenc's Sonata, with Hoppe at the piano. She seems to have internalized the fragile lyricism of second movement thoroughly, so that its lightweight nature did not become frothy. As for the finale, there can't be too many instances of a movement being headed "Presto tragico," but here is its perfect representation. Both performers conveyed the feeling of tragedy in a lightly ironic manner, as if some self-regarding hero were conferring tragic stature upon himself after a hasty, frenetic career.

*The keen rapport of Rohan De Silva with **Gyehee Kim** in Fauré's' Sonata No. 1 in A major. The work's range of emotion and conceptual breadth were addressed at every point by these polished duo partners. The heart-on-sleeve expressiveness and brio of another French composer, Saint-Saens, in "Introduction and Rondo Capriccio," proved to be an ideal follow-up to the Fauré sonata, thus giving the recital the kind of flashy brilliance that people have a right to expect by this stage of the IVCI.