

The stuff that dreams are made of: Tenth Quadrennial International Violin Competition of Indianapolis

By Hilary Stroh, 27 September 2018 – Bachtrack.com

Jostling alongside a Cookie Convention, Jazz Fest and Irish Fest, the city of Indianapolis also played host this past week to the six young finalists of the [International Violin Competition](#). The only overlap that I could see between such disparate gatherings was a plethora of violin-shaped cookie-cutters, for sale at the concession-stand, an ironic counterpoint to an event which aims to seek out anything but cookie-cutter talent. Held every four years since it was inaugurated as a 'one-off event' by that most influential of emigré European violin-masters in America, Josef Gingold, its success made it a civic tradition and an international institution, indeed, the magnet event in North America for global talent.



Richard Lin © Denis Ryan Kelly Jr

The 2018 Tenth Quadrennial, as it was billed, has been marked by celebration: a celebration of the past 54 Laureates whose careers the competition has so generously helped to launch over the years; and a celebration of the present, strikingly captured in the commemorative paper cut-out artwork by Mayuko Fujino, depicting colourful flowers and birds fantastically emerging from this extraordinary wooden instrument.

Fujino seeks to depict “where the dreams come from”, and I could think of no more suitable aesthetic foil for an event where life-dreams, in some cases, come true.

The competition seems notable for its imaginative approach. There is a generous accommodation of music and art, of professionals, pre-professionals and amateurs; alongside, takes place a juried exhibition of student art in which young people from Indiana visualize the beauty of violins and, of the 26,000 entries, 30 winners are chosen. It is just such an initiative that should please those most concerned about arts education: anything that breaks down divisions between types of creative talent is a richly positive thing.

What else is distinctive about this competition? The word that kept recurring, when talking with organizers, was ‘fairness’. In the spirit of the founder, they try to attenuate some of the rawness by calling those involved ‘participants’ not ‘competitors’. This principle is also captured in the scoring procedure, a system in which they take pride; overseen by a computer engineer, it processes scores to the same statistical distribution, thereby, hoping to cut down on the politics of competitive egos and vested interests.

Still, however fair and humane, talking with participants themselves, you realize just how overwhelming the whole experience is, when the stakes are so high – musically, of course; instrumentally (laureates are offered loan of the Gingold Strad, among other instruments); and financially (\$250,000 in prize money distributed in an ample array of categories). Richard Lin, the eventual winner, felt the “world was watching”; indeed, the competition was being live-streamed on the internet, with social media users registering their opinions long before the jury were done deliberating. The finals, divided between classical and romantic concertos, are each worth

statistically 25% of the total; for those of us joining then, what we saw counted for but half of the whole. We are not privy to all that the jury heard.



Risa Hokamura © Denis Ryan Kelly Jr

The East Coast Chamber Orchestra, a collective of friends, arrived on stage at the Schrott Center for the Arts, to adjust our sensibilities with the first movement from Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*. The ECCO, most of whom remain standing, are a formidably dynamic ensemble, and their very personality made it incumbent upon the soloists to treat them as chamber music equals, something that Lin, Luke Hsu, and Anna Lee did most effectively. The first night we heard Mozart's *Violin Concerto no. 5 in A major* three times, and thus had ample chance to directly compare styles. Lin's Mozart was refined and elaborately sensitive: his sweet, high notes spiritually-infused, the Rondo delicately playful. Risa

Hokamura, at age 17 the youngest finalist, brought an earthier Mozart into being, and a quite wonderfully executed cadenza, although a memory lapse in the *Adagio* and some technical glitches were unfortunate. Ioana Cristina Goicea's Mozart was robustly forthright; lacking in the salon manners of Lin's, it was nonetheless a fit with the spunky ECCO.

On the second night, Shannon Lee and Hsu both performed Mozart's *Violin Concerto no. 3 in G major*; the former organically paced if in need of more assertion over the orchestra. The latter's was stylized and richly expressive. The orchestra clearly enjoyed playing with him, and he with them (he turned to them both in the opening and closing sections). It was possible that he over-egged the drama too much (that's according to taste); I personally enjoy a bit of performative flamboyance, others may have found it overly-scripted. Anna Lee found a sweet spot of grace without excess stylization in the *Violin Concerto no. 1 in B flat major*.



Luke Hsu © Denis Ryan Kelly Jr

If Mozart lays all bare, as it were, a Kreisler morceau is the chance to express, in concentrated form, some sheer panache. All were orchestrated by a former Laureate – Jaako Kuusisto – another example of the veritable musical genealogy forged by this competition. Lin's *Tambourin chinois* was feathery light, if a little lacking in ballast; he tends to 'good boy' playing and may need to delve into earthier and bolder soundscapes as he develops. Hokamura's *Tambourin* was aptly fast and furious, but Hsu's was best of all: superbly stylish, devilishly fun. Goicea's *La Gitana* utterly caught the sultry spirit of the thing; Shannon Lee's somewhat less

so. Anna Lee's *Caprice viennois* caught its melancholy, but was not lackadaisically tipsy in that sort of shabby-genteel old world style that the piece requires.

The Hilbert Circle Theatre was the venue for the heavy-weight Romantic/post-Romantic concertos, under the baton of Leonard Slatkin and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. Lin confessed to never having come across the Bruch *Scottish Fantasy* as a competition offering before, so seized upon this as his first opportunity to play a favourite piece. He played with conviction – lovely high notes shimmering with vibrato, and a sustained ending to the *Andante* which was beautiful. He is still developing his sense of the work, and more could be made of its Scottish folksiness.

Hokamura carried off Tchaikovsky's concerto in her unselfconsciously spontaneous fashion: there is nothing mannered about her playing, and this very lack of self-performance, though in some respects a drawback, allows the score to speak to us in interesting new ways. Hsu's Tchaikovsky was a more showy affair, and very comfortable technically. Anna Lee, with her warmly humane musicianship and unhurried, even regal elegance (that striking 'floating' bow lift), played Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E minor*. A genuine delight in making music was especially palpable in the finale.

Two less trodden paths were opened up by Goicea with a rigorously intense performance of Shostakovich's *Violin Concerto no. 1 in A minor*, (boasting a dazzling cadenza), and Shannon Lee playing Walton's concerto; she didn't always quite pursue the lush strangeness of the work, but there were lovely lyrical and mysterious passages.



Anna Lee © Denis Ryan Kelly Jr

The jury kept themselves to themselves, although it came down to me that they were looking for a mature player, which I took to be one who was ready to be launched on their career. A certain buzz had surrounded Lin all week, and so it wasn't a surprise to find him the overall prize-winner: his time had clearly come. A veteran high-achiever of the competition circuit, in an interview I conducted with him before the results, he clearly hadn't thought ahead to what winning might be like – it would merely be an extension of the chance to do what he was already doing, on a larger scale.

The choice of Hokamura in second place revealed a different line of thinking. There is no doubting her lively talent and independence of spirit; she doesn't play from any text-book but her own. She still has technical and artistic issues to resolve – neither night was perfectly tidy and a critic might cavil at a certain lack of communicative ease – she does not play to the gallery, as it were, and often closes her eyes in a sort of introspective relationship with the music itself. But absolutely, a vote for burgeoning talent. Hsu came third, which will no doubt be disappointing to him, and Anna Lee fourth (I did wonder about the placing of these two; I found their musicianship over the two nights consistently mature; she, at least, was awarded best classical concerto). Goicea and Shannon Lee took fifth and sixth respectively. It's a cliché to say that these six fine players are all winners, but in a sense they are: each laureate is actively cultivated and promoted, and what each of them do with all this, how they transform their violinistic dreams, will be an exciting prospect to witness.

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