

National Piano and Violin Competition

Six musicians, six concertos in the finals

REVIEW/CONCERT

ARTIST FINALS
Victoria Concert Hall/
Last Saturday & Sunday

Chang Tou Liang

The biennial National Piano and Violin Competition (NPVC) is Singapore's highest platform for finding talent in the two most popular Western classical instruments played here.

The competition has been run by the Singapore Symphony Group since 2017 and continues to deliver high standards in its four age categories.

The finals of the Artist category (young professionals and tertiary-level students) culminated in performances of six concertos with the NPVC Orchestra.

This ensemble was essentially a pared-down Singapore Symphony Orchestra led by British conductor Peter Stark, principal guest conductor of the Singapore National Youth Orchestra.

Last Saturday's evening belonged to the piano, opening with Zheng Mingen (China, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory) in Chopin's First Piano Concerto. Hers was a totally confident showing, filled with virtuosic flair in outer movements and arch-lyricism in the slow central Romanze, which served as a nocturne-like interlude.

There was much to admire in this eloquent and passionate performance that wore its 40-minute duration well.

Tew Jing Jong (Malaysia, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts) gave a crisply articulated account of Beethoven's diminutive Second Piano Concerto, one which fully understood classical proportions yet strained to break free of its constraints.

Emblematic of music's transition into the Romantic era, his reading exuded and balanced silky elegance

and muscular grit to just the right degree.

Seth Tan Xun Yu (Singapore, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory) was up to the big-boned challenges of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto. He projected sound and song well, but suffered a memory lapse in the slow movement, becoming a bundle of nerves after that.

Despite rallying valiantly for the mercurial finale, there was a touch of hit and miss overall.

Tew was deservedly awarded the first prize by an international jury, while Zheng and Tan placed second and third respectively.

The Violin Artist Final took place on Sunday afternoon, when there were two different performances of Tchaikovsky's warhorse Violin Concerto, reflecting the soloists' different personalities.

Lau Joey (Singapore, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory) took a more visceral approach, with an impetus on the Russian's music to dance and make merry. Her tone was also rich and voluminous.

Animated and free-spirited, this also entailed a sense of risk-taking.

By comparison, Yuchen Zhang (China, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory) who followed reflected more on the music's cerebral qualities.

His playing could be exciting at times, but it was discipline and decorum that seemed paramount. While Lau is the more arresting of the two in a live performance, Zhang would be a safer bet in a recording studio.

No first prize was awarded in this category. Zhang won second place, while Lau shared third position with Tan Mun Hon, who performed Wieniawski's Second Violin Concerto with much spirit and lyricism.

That Tan is only 14, attending Tanjong Katong Secondary School and having lessons privately, is remarkable in itself.

Big futures await all six young musicians and this competition is merely a platform to identify and hopefully nurture them well.

Bold performances from young winners

REVIEW/CONCERT

PRIZE WINNERS' CONCERT
Victoria Concert Hall/Sunday

Mervin Beng

The prize winners' concert of the National Piano and Violin Competition (NPVC) celebrates the winners of the four categories of the piano and violin sections, giving those who did not attend the judging rounds a chance, albeit brief and incomplete, to hear the winners in performance.

In the previous competition in 2017, the two youngest winners were revelations – clearly eclipsing their older counterparts.

The violin section saw just one first prize awarded, in the Junior category (11 years and below). Only second prizes were awarded in the Artist (25 years and below), Senior (21 years and below) and Intermediate (15 years and below) categories.

Each of the second-prize violinists did commendably. Artist category winner Yuchen Zhang played the third movement of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto with strong tone and solid fingerwork, although his excessive variations in tempo must have made the NPVC Orchestra and conductor Peter Stark's work that much more challenging.

Senior category winner Dai Ailin performed Wang Chenwei's set piece *Thaipusam*. Although not trained in the carnatic violin tradition, Dai performed Wang's intriguing composition with spirit and great aplomb.

Intermediate category winner Javan See Kaiyi's performance of the Allegro from Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 3 was secure.

In contrast to Zhang's Tchaikovsky, his tempo for the Mozart was metronomically steady, arguably a touch wooden.

All the notes were nicely in place, but See, and especially his piano accompanist, seemed in an awful rush to get through the music.

First prizes were awarded in all

the piano categories. Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts student Tew Jing Jong, winner of the Artist category, seemed unable to get beyond second gear in his playing of the first movement of Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto. Technically tidy and musically sound, his was an inoffensive but uninspiring performance.

Senior category winner Wang Huang Hao Jia, who played Wang Chenwei's set piece *Mid-Autumn Festival*, was far more impressive.

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music student fully mastered the technical demands of the work, which was reminiscent of a Debussy etude. Unfortunately, the piece did not show off a broader spectrum of Wang's talents.

Brahms' Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79 No. 1 is a work which Intermediate category winner Justin Low Renkai clearly has strong affinity with. He communicated strongly through his playing, showing real character, supported by sound technique and good musicality.

The evening's order of performance saw the youngest musicians performing last.

Winner of the Violin Junior category Cheng Wang Hoi, Jacob Reuben played the first movement of Saint-Saens' Violin Concerto No. 3.

One would have thought that this work was not ideal for such a young violinist, but Cheng proved otherwise. His intonation was superb and his control was excellent.

Piano Junior category winner Casey Li WeiXi topped off the concert with the most well-rounded and mature performance of the night.

She played Chopin's *Bolero*, Op. 19, which once again seemed like a work beyond her age and stature, but she did so with great poise and persuasiveness.

Jury member Singapore violinist Kam Ning's commentary was spot on: "The Junior contestants are especially bold and musical and I hope to hear them again when they're older."

At this year's NPVC winners' concert, the youngest stars once again shone the brightest.