

**26e CONCOURS INTERNATIONAL DE MUSIQUE DE MONTREAL (1996)/26th
MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL MUSIC COMPETITION (1996)**

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The 26th Montreal International Music Competition, devoted to the piano this year, came to a close on June 4 with the usual flurry of excitement, elation, and disappointment that accompany events of this kind. As always, feelings ran high as members of the audience (this one included) had very definite ideas as to who the winners should be, and moreover, who should and should not have been in the finals.

As many of you know, this Competition is one of the annual highlights on the Canadian musical scene. Founded by Florent Marcil, the first competition took place in May-June 1965 (they are always held at the end of May-beginning of June). Because of its stringent admission standards, programme requirements and stature of the members of the jury, the competition has become one of the most prestigious of its kind, and for some, ranks with the best, such as the Queen Elizabeth in Belgium and the Tchaikovsky in Moscow. Like Belgium, the Montreal Competition operates on a four year cycle with one year devoted to the violin, one to the piano, and one to the voice consecutively, followed by a year of planning. Then the cycle begins all over again. In 1966, it was accepted as a member of the the *Federation des concours internationaux de musique* in Geneva, and like all major music competitions, it launches the top prize winner into a fast track international career of concerts and recording assignments. To date, Canada has produced two first prize winners, both pianists: Angela Cheng in 1988, and Richard Raymond in 1992.

This year the Competition took place between May 27 and June 6. In keeping with its established format, it consisted of three rounds: the first was on May 27-29; the second on May 31-June 1; and the third or final on June 3-4. The gala concert featuring the winners was held on June 6 and the "Peoples' Choice" was heard in a special concert on June 8. Voting by members of the audience for the candidate of their choice is a recent development.

The adjudicators were: Idil Biret from Turkey, (not a household name this side of the Atlantic, but something of a phenomenon in her country); Sergei L.

Dorensky from Russia; Marc Durand from Canada (Montreal to be exact); Valentin Gheorghiu from Romania; Israela Margalit from Israel; and Julian Martin from the United States. The orchestra, required for the final round and the two concerts, was the Orchestre metropolitain (the other Montreal orchestra), under Raffi Armenian.

28 contestants, ranging in ages from 18 (a South Korean) to 29 (30 is the ceiling) came from 13 countries to compete for the \$42,000 in prize monies. Four each came from Russia, South Korea, the United States and Canada. The Canadians were: Stephen Ham (22), Jennifer Jongsun Lim (20), Nari Matsuura (25), and Li Wang (22). Italy sent three, the Ukraine two, and Australia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Germany, China, the Philippines and Poland each sent one.

Repertoire ranged from Bach to the present, and is like a refresher course in piano literature. While there are mandatory requirements in each round, candidates are also free to choose pieces that, judging from the programme, come primarily from the repertoire of the great keyboard composers of the 19th and 20th centuries such as Brahms, Chopin, Debussy, Liszt, Paganini-Liszt, Prokofiev, Rachmaninov, Schumann and Scriabin.

The first round is divided into 3 categories and the candidate has about 30-40 minutes to prove his/her mettle. He or she must perform pieces in all categories. The first category consists of a compulsory Bach Prelude and Fugue. Typical of the second category pieces are such works as Chopin's *Etudes*, opp. 10 and 25 and Rachmaninov's *Etudes-tableaux*, opp. 33 and 39. Third category pieces, like Ravel's *Scarbo*, are the longest, but must not exceed twelve minutes. The pieces may be performed in any order. All, except one, played five pieces: a Bach, three pieces from the second category, and a third category work.

Twelve pianists advanced to the second round: three Russians, two Americans, two Ukrainians, the Australian, a Canadian (Li Wang), an Italian, the Pole and the 18-year old South Korean. At this stage, each

candidate has about an hour to prove himself/herself as a recitalist, as it were. He or she must perform works in four categories: a compulsory Beethoven sonata; a piece by a composer from his country (the Canadian played a piece by father Y.-Q. Yang); one or two works from the established repertoire and the "imposed piece". The "imposed piece" is one written especially for the competition by a Canadian and is usually quite difficult. This year it was the seven minute long *La Cloche du Temple* by Serge Provest. As is customary, it was given to the candidates about a month before the competition.

Six made it into the finals, where each was required to perform a Mozart concerto and one other concerto, or work for piano and orchestra, of choice. The other concerto is usually one of the major 19th or 20th century works, such as the Prokofiev *Concerto No. 3 in C major, op. 26* or the Tchaikovsky *B Flat Minor Concerto, op. 23*. In this round, the candidate must prove himself as a soloist as opposed to a recitalist.

As always, each competition has its upsets and surprises and this one was no different. Members of the audience openly expressed dissatisfaction with the judges' decisions (by booing) as, for the second consecutive year, no one won the \$18,000 Grand Prize, the Grand Prix Florent Marcil. Vitaly Samoshko (22) from the Ukraine received the \$10,000 second prize; the Australian, Duncan Gifford (23), came in third with \$6,000; the Russian, Anton Mordasov (24) fourth with \$3,000; and Valeria Resian (25), also from Russia, and the only woman among the finalists, placed fifth with \$2,000. She was also the winner of the \$1,000 Public's Prize, the Prix Fiducie Desjardins. Tied for sixth was the 18-year old South Korean, Yung Wook Yoo and Poland's Wojciech Switala (28) with \$1,500 each. The sight-impaired (blind from birth) Italian, Luigi Cartia (29), was awarded \$1,000 for the best interpretation of the imposed piece: the only one to play this difficult piece from memory! He studied it with the help of his mother, note by note, as there was not enough time to transcribe it into braille. An extraordinary accomplishment!

Each competition also leaves one with some lasting thoughts and unique experiences. I was able to get (I won't say how) Idil Biret's autograph on a copy of her recording of the Chopin *Etudes, opp. 10 and 25* that I own. I wonder at what I see as a trend to

hammer away at the piano, playing everything fortissimo and prestissimo, and I will always wonder about the judging. While I more or less agreed with the choice of finalists, here is how I (admittedly an amateur) would have ranked them: first place to Switala, a truly polished and elegant performer; second to Resian, a very intense player who really shone in the finals; third to young Yoo, who at 18 played with the maturity of one much older; fourth to Samoshko, who had something to say but said it too harshly too much of the time; fifth to Gifford, who is at somewhat of a disadvantage (I missed his second round performance, reportedly his best); and sixth to Mordasov, the "Thunderer", who "bulldozed" his way through his entire programme. Finally, I will always remember Cartia's courage and the hard work and dedication of those 28 young people, in whose hands the world is a far better and more beautiful place.

