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September 23, 2018, 2:22 PM

Violinist.com Interview with Richard Lin, Winner of the 2018 Indianapolis Violin Competition

To be honest, if you want to win a big international violin competition, Max Bruch's "Scottish Fantasy" is not necessarily the piece of music you pick to play in the Finals.

Sure, it's a virtuosic piece, but it's so familiar, so Romantic. If you really want to wow the judges, you might pick the edgier Bartok Concerto No. 2, or the emotionally gripping Shostakovich Concerto No. 1, or the technically and musically challenging Walton Violin Concerto. In fact, of the 38 violinists who came to vie for the Gold Medal during the 17-day [International Violin Competition of Indianapolis](#) in September, only one of them chose to play the "Scottish Fantasy" in the Finals: Richard Lin.



Richard Lin. Photo by Violinist.com.

Lin also happens to be the violinist who won the competition. He's the first to admit that he was not being strategic when he chose the "Scottish Fantasy" from the list of 21 works from which they could choose. He was being sentimental.

"After all these competitions that I've done - I played Brahms, Beethoven, Korngold, Wieniawski, so many different concerti - I've never seen Scottish Fantasy on the list," Lin said, speaking to me at the home of his host family in Indianapolis after his win. Lin, 27, was born in Arizona and raised in Taiwan. He has a bachelor's degree from the Curtis Institute, where he studied with Aaron Rosand, and a master's degree from The Juilliard School, where he studied with Lewis Kaplan. He came into the Indianapolis having won top prizes at the Hannover, Sendai, Singapore, Wieniawski, Shanghai and Michael Hill International Violin Competitions.

"The 'Scottish Fantasy' has always been my favorite, especially the melody in the third movement," Lin said. He first heard that melody in a 2002 Chinese movie called [Together](#), where it features in an emotionally moving scene between father and son. The movie itself tells the story of a violin prodigy who comes from a small village in China to the big city, where he faces cultural, personal and artistic challenges.

"That's the first time I heard that melody, and then I found out it was from Bruch's 'Scottish Fantasy.' I've been in love with that piece ever since then," Lin said. For this competition, "I decided I would rather choose something I really love. I didn't choose it because I wanted to win the competition, I chose it because it's my favorite melody, and nobody has played it in the competition before, so I wanted to be the first!"

There was another major reason why Lin wanted to play something close to his heart, rather than play something just to win. A little more than a year ago, Lin was lying in a hospital bed, wondering if he would ever play the violin again.

In May 2017 he was touring in China, with 23 concerts scheduled over the course of 31 days, in all different cities. Lin, along with another violinist and a pianist, would play a concert, drive to the next city, rehearse, play another concert, drive again. But after the third concert, while driving near Yantai in Shandong province, they were in a car accident when their driver, who was perhaps sleepy, drove straight into a slow-moving oil truck on the highway.

"It was like bumping into a wall," Lin said. "I was sleeping, with my earphones on, so I didn't hear anything, I didn't have any time to react." He awakened upon feeling the impact. "The first thing I heard was 'BOOM,' and then the car alarms, then I saw all the smoke. It was terrifying, like something out of a movie scene. And I couldn't move, I couldn't move at all. I could talk, but below the neck, I could not move. I thought I might never move again."

As it turned out, "the cervical spine was hurt, and I had a spinal shock. But luckily, I gradually got my senses back and after about five, 10 minutes, I could stand on my own. But then I started to feel the electric shock from my neck, through the whole arm. It was so, so painful, like constantly bumping into your funny bone. More painful than that, actually." They called an ambulance, put him on a stretcher, stabilized his neck and took him to a local hospital. The local hospital was not equipped to help his condition, so he took another two-hour ambulance ride to a hospital in a larger city.

"I laid there for 10 days, without getting up," Lin said. The pain was so great that he could not sleep, and his hands continued to hurt, despite injections aimed at treating the pain. "The days felt like years to me, because every moment I relived that scene, the impact of the car," Lin said. "And I also wondered, am I never going to play the violin again? It hurt so much." He worried about permanent damage in the

nerves connected to his muscles. After several weeks he flew back to Taiwan and got better medical care and advice. Doctors tested for damage and "luckily the only thing that was a little bit hurt was the sensation nerves." The nerves involved with muscle coordination and reaction were okay, though to this day he occasionally has some strange neural sensation.

"During that time I was laying on the bed, I thought, I really love music. I just don't know how I can live without playing the violin," he said. In his mind, he made a list: "If I ever get healthy again, I want to play these pieces!"

After the accident he did not play for a full two months while he dealt with the pain and nerve issues. Then he began practicing, and a month later, in August 2017, he played a recital. "The first recital I played after that incident, it was so emotional for me," Lin said.

Lin's love for the violin first blossomed at age four, when he started playing in Taiwan.

"My dad has been a huge classical music fan since he was a teenager, and he wanted my brother and I to learn instruments," Lin said. His parents were not trying to make their children into professional musicians, but simply trying to give them a broad education. "Asian parents tend to make their children learn many different skills to inspire their brain, so I had to learn how to draw, learn how to swim, learn how to play chess -- many things. Because of his fondness for classical music, my dad was extra-strict about my violin-playing, more so than in other areas."

Violin-playing was also the area where Lin showed the most talent and interest. He began with group lessons, taught by an amateur violin teacher, then in third grade he began studying with a classically-trained violin teacher and doing small local competitions. "I was just a very normal kid in Taiwan - I didn't think about being a professional violinist back then!"

But as time went on, it became clear that he consistently placed highly in the competitions, and then he started participating in bigger competitions. When he won first prize in the National Taiwan Music Competition at age 14, that was a turning point for Lin. He realized that he really did have talent, and he decided that it was time to get serious about cultivating it.

At the same time, he started to receive more advice from a wider circle of musicians and teachers, advising him to consider going to The Juilliard School in New York, or to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. "It was not until then that I learned the name 'Curtis,'" he said, "and that became my dream. I knew that it was tuition-free, and also I knew that my idol, Aaron Rosand, was teaching there."

How exactly did a teenager in Taiwan know about the American violinist [Aaron Rosand](#), who by then was nearly 80?

"As I said, my dad is a huge fan of classical music," Lin said. His dad, Rick Lin (Chia-Yen Lin), is not trained in music, but he is a business school graduate who owns a high-end stereo store. He also has a collection of thousands of CDs. "He's an audiophile, and a classical music-phile. He collected so many CDs!" Lin said. "When I was growing up, he would give me many versions of the piece I was going to play. If it was the Tchaikovsky, he probably had 30 recordings that he would ask me to compare, then report back to him. That was my training when I was little, instead of all 'Practice, practice, practice!' I would listen to recordings, then I would just practice maybe one or two hours."

"So I already knew Mr. Rosand by his recordings," Lin said. "My dad had 20 or 30 of his recordings, and I admired his playing very much. When I heard he was teaching there, Curtis immediately became my goal."

The first time he auditioned for Curtis at age 15, he made the final round but did not get in. In preparing for that audition, he realized that he had fallen into the local habit of only learning a few minutes of a piece, just for a competition, without learning the entire piece. "That was really bad, people never learned the piece as a whole, and we learned that three minutes (for the competition) in two years, something like that, we just prepared for one competition. So that really slowed down the progress."

He changed his mind-set and also started studying with [Gregory Lee](#), who now teaches at the University of Oklahoma. Lee was born in Australia to Taiwanese parents, educated at Juilliard and Michigan, and happened to be back in Taiwan, just when Lin needed a better teacher. When Lee decided to accept the job at the University of Oklahoma, Lin made the decision to come along.

"So in 2007, when I was 16, I moved to Oklahoma with Gregory," Lin said. "My dad thought it would be a great opportunity to get used to the environment and the language, and to concentrate more on music."

Lin stayed with a host family in Norman, Okla., where he went to public high school, played in the school orchestra and of course, practiced a lot.

"When I think about that year, it's full of great memories," Lin said. "That was the first time I'd been to a place that didn't have many Asians. My English wasn't that good, but people accepted me because I played violin so well and I tried so hard to learn English. Hopefully they could see I'm a kind person. So I blended in quite quickly, even without speaking fluent English. So that year was quite amazing for me."

And at the end of that year, he did get into Curtis, where he then studied with Aaron Rosand for five years.

"Mr. Rosand is just a great musician, such a great artist," Lin said. "He's been all over the world and performed so much repertoire, he never needs any music. He was in his 80s then, and he's in his 90s now. I was so amazed at every lesson, because whatever I brought to the lesson, he would always play it better than me, and without the music!" Lin laughed. "You play with him, you understand how he plays." Rosand also had some tricks up his sleeve -- "in old-school playing, they always change a little bit of something to make it work even better -- change a note, change a bowing, or missing a note, something like that -- but nobody can ever tell!" His Juilliard teacher, Lewis Kaplan, "is a very inspiring person, he is very supportive, he takes great care of his students."

In the time since Lin came to America to study, he also played in many competitions. Was the Indianapolis competition his last one?

"I am done. I'm 27," Lin said. "When I first applied this time, I already knew this would be the last -- or maybe the penultimate -- competition that I would do." This was actually the second time Lin had participated in the Indianapolis competition.

"Four years ago I was here, and I failed the first round," Lin said. "I learned from that experience. This time I prepared something I really love, and I did not play as cautiously. I just focused on my music and I tried not to be affected by other people. And this time I just got lucky and the jury happened to like my music. It all depends on the jury!"

For this competition, Lin played on a [Carlo Giuseppe Testore violin](#), circa 1700, borrowed from the Taiwanese Chi-Mei Foundation, which has been loaning Lin violins for the last decade. The Testore was once played by the great violin pedagogue Ivan Galamian.

"When I play on it, I think, one of the legendary mentors and pedagogues once played it, it's amazing," Lin said. And now that he has won the Gold Medal in the Indianapolis, Lin has the opportunity to play the [1683 Stradivari violin once played by Josef Gingold](#), also one of the 20th century's great violin pedagogues.

Lin highly recommends the Indianapolis competition. "It is among the top -- I would rank it in the top four. This is the only big international violin competition in America. There are so many big ones in Europe, but in America, this is the thing." The Indianapolis also offers more than prize money, it also provides laureates help with professional management and gives them attention and publicity through its live stream.

"Winning this competition was very important and very inspirational for me," Lin said. Going back to the car accident that affected him last year: "After the accident, I thought I couldn't play the violin, and I thought I might lose some of my technique or the things I used to be able to do on the violin." In recovering his physical ability to play, he also recovered his passion for the instrument. And if there was any lingering doubt about being able to play again, "I still got first prize here. Maybe (the accident) was a good thing. I was gradually losing my passion for playing music. If not for that car accident, maybe I would not have found the passion again, like I have now."

BELOW: Richard Lin's Preliminary Round in the Indianapolis competition, with pianist Akira Eguchi.

- Mozart: Sonata in E minor, K. 304 (beginning)
- Bach: *Adagio* (11:35) and *Fuga* (15:45) from Sonata No. 1 in G minor
- Milstein: Paganiniana Variations (22:30)
- Debussy: Beau soir (arr. Heifetz) (32:55)