

Fierce battles, elegant fighters

The young players who squared up to each other at Indiana's violin contest showed passion and power in their playing, but refinement won the day, says **Ariane Todes**

TWO TRIBES RUBBED SHOULDERS in downtown Indianapolis on the weekend of 25 September. Distinguished by their tattoos and ruddy complexions were the cage-fighting fans of the night's UFC 119 battle at Conesco Fieldhouse. Looking more delicate were the finalists and audience of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis gathered at the Hilbert Circle Theatre. But after two weeks of gruelling rounds that whittled forty contestants down to the six finalists who were to submit both a Classical and a 19th- or 20th-century concerto, the musical contest was every bit as fierce – in its own, refined, way.

Having a special Classical final is always going to sort the creative

musicians from those who live for the showpieces and highlight those who can communicate the most simple ideas directly and engagingly. For me it was the 20-year-old Benjamin Beilman who stood out in this regard. A student of Ida Kavafian at the Curtis Institute, he arrived fresh from winning the Montreal International Music Competition, and was the only player to make what was a sensible tactical choice of performing Haydn rather than Mozart. This was a joyful and spontaneous performance, colourful and outgoing, but intimate where necessary. Intonation may not have been flawless but this was made up for by Beilman's sense of communication.

Performing Mozart is also great for demonstrating players' sense of structure and timing, and how imaginatively they deal with simple repeated phrases. Beilman was certainly able to play with the music in this way, as was 23-year-old Clara-Jumi Kang, who gave a charming performance of Mozart no.5, characterising the music well and giving it a constant sense of direction, as well as taking charge of the orchestra when necessary. South Korean Soyoung Yoon, 25, also took the orchestra under control and gave a faultless, elegant performance, although one that lacked subtlety.

RUSSIAN ANDREY BARANOV, 24, and Hungarian Antal Szalai (the old hand at the age of 29), lookalikes of David Oistrakh and Michael Rabin respectively, both gave individual performances but imparted a sense that they were marking time with Mozart in anticipation of the next concerto final. But this may have led to false hope. There's always going to be an expectation, fair or not, that a Hungarian player will come from inside the Bartók sound world when performing the composer's Second Concerto, and I found Szalai's performance disappointing. He made a beautiful sound, and his clarity and use of contrast really spoke, particularly in the first-movement cadenza, but I found none of the night-music colours and profundity of Bartók's world or any sense of journey that I had expected.

One surprise of this round for me was 20-year-old Chinese player Haomin Xie, whose Mozart no.5 had distinguished itself for me as metronomic, unvaried and uncomfortable, making me wonder how he had got through to the final. But both colour and passion were revealed



Clara-Jumi Kang: a battle with the orchestra in the Beethoven Concerto

with his Tchaikovsky, even though it was still fairly regulated. He was also playing a different instrument for this round, and his step-change in subtlety offered a troubling suggestion that it really does matter what you play, after all.

Another surprise came with a lacklustre Sibelius Concerto from Beilman. His breezy stage presence, which had suited the Haydn so well, here betrayed a lack of gravitas in a performance of the work that had won him the Montreal contest, and the intervening weeks since that win had not been kind to his technical mastery of the piece. Technically, he was certainly surpassed by Yoon's dramatic, if sometimes aggressive, version of the same piece, which nevertheless lacked communicative power.

ALL OF WHICH LEFT a clear winner with Kang and her superlative Beethoven Concerto. Certainly the choice of repertoire worked well to frame her elegant playing, as opposed to the other works that all involved



a certain element of battle with the orchestra (which was nevertheless much better than in the Classical round, where some dodgy brass playing had me fighting off the giggles several times). What can in the wrong hands

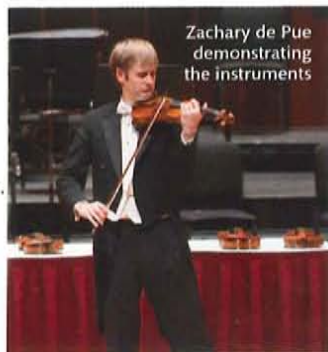
sound like endless passagework was beautifully articulated and paced; the first-movement cadenza was superbly voiced; the second movement imaginatively coloured; the third by turns muscular and delicate.

This was certainly the performance of a fully formed violinist ready to hit the international concert circuit running (even though Kang is still currently studying, with Nam Yun Kim at the Korean National University of Arts in South Korea). And that is the ultimate goal of this competition, which prides itself on the post-competition career support system given to its laureates – as testified by the burgeoning careers of recent winners Augustin Hadelich and Barnabás Kelemen. The jury certainly picked a winner here. ■

BLIND TEST IS A PARTIAL SUCCESS

CAN MODERN INSTRUMENTS compete with classic ones in a concert hall setting? That was the question behind an experiment conducted during the break for judgement at the final night of the competition. The results proved simultaneously profound yet quite meaningless.

Eight violins were brought out, of which we were told that four were unnamed modern instruments and four were great Cremonese instruments such as a 1714 Stradivari and a 1742 Guarneri 'del Gesù'. The instruments were played by Zachary de Pue, concertmaster of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, in pairs of modern and old, in random order. The audience was asked to raise a hand for which of the pair they preferred each time, and after another play-



through of that selection, they voted again for the ultimate winner.

The results provided grist to the mill of the Cremonese fanatic. Of the four pairs, three times the audience voted for the Cremonese one, and the ultimate winner was the wonderful 1715 'Titian' Stradivari. However, more interesting was the fact that rather than the audience being absolutely polarised with each vote, every one was very, very close, making one wonder if a general audience really can tell, or even needs to care. There were also certain methodological issues, for example with the fact that a random ordering had left the Cremonese instruments being played the second of the pair each time. Psychologically, that might increase the chances of people remembering and preferring the sound.

All in all, this was an interesting and entertaining diversion, but the findings were not enough to make makers, many of whom were at the event as part of the competition's special exhibition of modern instruments, hang up their tools.

INDIANAPOLIS WINNERS

FIRST PRIZE

Clara-Jumi Kang, 23, Germany/South Korea

SECOND PRIZE

Soyoung Yoon, 25, South Korea

THIRD PRIZE

Benjamin Beilman, 20, US