

Jay Harvey Upstage

Sunday, September 14, 2014

The first two afternoons of the semifinals: IVCI participants offer premieres of the commissioned work



"I had my fiddle under my chin the whole time I was writing the piece," Ellen Taaffe Zwilich told a roomful of composition students at Butler University Thursday afternoon.

The composer of "Fantasy for Solo Violin," the commissioned work in the 2014 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, added she was looking forward to the rare opportunity to get 16 world premieres within four days. Having begun her professional career in the 1960s as a violinist, Zwilich the composer has often spotlighted violins in her work, but never before as exclusively as in this one-movement unaccompanied piece.

The four performances of "Fantasy" that I heard Friday and Saturday to a considerable extent said something about the musical personalities of Nancy Zhou, Yu-Chien Tsang, Jinjoo Cho, and Stephen Waarts. But they may have just spoken to young artists' interpretation of a piece with no performance tradition behind it. They got to play Pygmalion and bring to life material that was only potentially breathing and beautiful — despite the creator's credentials and the august occasion that matched the violinists with the work.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, commissioned composer



Nancy Zhou

Nancy Zhou got the honor of the true premiere, being first in the semifinalist performing order. My impression of her interpretation as analytical may reflect my initial exposure to the work as well. Zwilich's "Fantasy" uses a wide range of violin techniques with an economy that bespeaks a composer on intimate terms with the instrument. Zhou's performance emphasized the distinct character of brief episodes that offered hints of the march, the blues, and country fiddling. It was a plain exposition, but no less enthralling for that. It took its time, coming in at about 7 minutes.

Yu-Chien Tseng's 5-minute performance was considerably more dramatic, making of the soaring gestures in the early measures something designed to grab the attention and hold it. The bluesy figures were a little fiercer, and the work seemed both more brisk and a little more loose-jointed — a positive thing, on the whole, given the piece's title. Fantasies, after all, don't stay in any one place for long.

On Saturday afternoon, Jinjoo Cho wrenched "Fantasy" out of conventional notions with a bold *marcato* opening. The expression was outsized throughout, bringing another side of Zwilich to the fore. Cho's spicy

performance even approximated a screaming rock guitar solo at certain points, a personal touch that was not as unsuitable as it may sound. Full-bore energy, with some charming offhand moments in pizzicato passages, was the hallmark of her interpretation. In duration, Cho split the difference with her predecessors, taking about 6 minutes.



Jinjoo Cho

Another 5-minute sojourn concluded the afternoon recitals Saturday. Stephen Waarts favored a flowing, lyrical version of "Fantasy." We heard a wittier interpretation of the piece, acutely attentive to pauses and changes of expressive direction. It was something of a pleasant surprise to find such a songlike quality brought to the fore.

As for the part of the recital where the violinists' selections separate them more distinctly from one another:

The required Beethoven sonata (choice among nine of the 10 he wrote, the pinnacle of the "Kreutzer" remaining unscaled) gave us two performances of No. 8 in G major, op. 30. Tseng's quickly seemed to find the heart of Beethoven in this repertoire. I liked his classical concept, a sense of restraint that suggested power in reserve, making all the more significant the accents and outbursts characteristic of the composer. There was nothing unfeeling in Tseng's interpretation, but he kept everything under lively control.

The other No. 8 was Waart's. It was also tasteful and ardent. Tempos were well-judged and the momentum was unstinting. The minuet movement seemed slower than customary, but it never dragged. His playing was more outspoken about the contrasts the work presents, especially in the first movement, and his phrasing was invariably shapely, with appropriate dynamic contours.

Cho played Beethoven's Sonata No. 1 in D major, op. 12, buoyed by the estimable partnership of Rohan De Silva. Emotional engagement with the music seemed strong, so much so that it may have nurtured a concluding fortissimo flourish to the first movement that verged on harshness. Nonetheless, a thoughtful approach prevailed, with sculpted phrasing and careful attention to the music's classical-period roots.

Zhou played the often glowering yet energetic Sonata No. 4 in A minor, op. 23. Her tone sounded veiled, however, and she was below pitch several times in the opening Presto. She attained more clarity in Richard Strauss' Sonata in E-flat major, op. 18. The work is kind of "Ein Heldenleben" for the violin in its vaunting expressiveness, urged on by the demanding piano part, dashing played here by Nelson Padgett. Zhou was in her element, as she was also attuned to the music's ripe lyricism — that peculiar Straussian quality one might almost call anticipatory nostalgia.

For her display piece, Zhou went for the inward-looking Ysaye Sonata No. 6 for Solo Violin, negotiating its peaks and valleys — those roaring G-string figures! — expertly, and ascending to a triumphant conclusion.

Waarts presented Bartok's Sonata for Solo Violin, a four-movement masterpiece notable in this performance for its brilliance and a transparency that invited the listener into its thickets rather than seeking to be merely imposing. For sheer illumination of difficult material, this performance was the highlight of his recital.

Other fancy playing over the two days involved virtuoso reworkings of music from Bizet's "Carmen."

Not surprising in a composer best known for his movie scores, Franz Waxman dwells upon the dark and light dramatic elements of the original, while Pablo de Sarasate pursues a path constantly loyal to violinistic splendor. Cho played the former; Tseng, the latter. Both accounts were flashy and dependably exciting.



Stephen Waarts



Yu-Chien Tseng

Other accompanied sonatas besides the Strauss included two readings of Maurice Ravel's Sonata in G major. Tseng's performance presented a supple, swaying feeling in the first movement, a seductive yet slightly anxious account of the second-movement "Blues," and a finale whose vigor was clouded by some scratchiness. Waarts' performance was cleverly varied, with explosive pizzicato accents in "Blues" and (in the opening movement especially) a convincing way of hanging on to anything lyrical, as if in tribute to the composer's cool sentimentality.

Finally, Cho interpreted Prokofiev's Sonata No. 1 in F minor, taking the broadest possible view. The intensity of the second movement was almost devastating. The work's frequent brooding quality was fully indulged in, but the glumness was never haphazardly applied. She gave the passage often described as "wind whistling over the graves" a delicacy that made it all the more haunting.

Tomorrow evening's post will cover another quarter of the semifinal round: four recitals heard Sunday and Monday afternoons.