

Classical Concerto Finals: Playing Conductorless with ECCO



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Published: **September 18, 2014** at 3:04 PM [UTC]

The stage was set for the Classical Finals round Thursday night, when a stagehand walked across the floor and removed the music stand that had been set out for the conductor.

That's because there is no conductor for the East Coast Chamber Orchestra (ECCO), the group accompanying the six finalists in their performances of Mozart Concertos Wednesday and Thursday. The lively, self-directed ensemble proved a great choice for the task, as their structure demanded that each soloist bring a certain presence and level of leadership to the job. At the same time, having such a sure, competent and frankly cheerful back-up band seem to help put each violinist at ease.

Tessa Lark, 25, of the United States started the evening by playing Mozart's Concerto No. 5 in A major, the same piece that all three finalists would play Thursday night.



Photo by [Denis Kelly](#)

Tessa's version was energetic and individual, while still adhering much to the urtext. When ECCO played its orchestral tuttis, she joined right in, completely melting into the orchestra until it came time to stand out as the soloist. (On that topic: considering how many accomplished soloists are in ECCO, they do not sound like a choir of sopranos. They absolutely blend as one voice.)

I did not recognize her cadenzas; later she told me that she wrote them herself. She wrote the first-movement cadenza in 2009 and the rest of the cadenzas in 2012, making some revisions to the second-movement cadenza during yesterday's rehearsal. "Some day, the goal is improvisation!" she said.

Her second movement was straightforward in sound and tone, and during that cadenza I felt for a moment that she'd managed to make all the molecules slow down in the room. The last movement was a raucous ride, with its "Turkish" stomp in the middle, with joyful interaction between soloist and orchestra. Tessa was playing on a 1675 Tononi, on loan from the Ravinia Festival.

Next came Jinjoo Cho, 26, of South Korea. This concerto contains a lot of repeating phrases and toward the beginning she slipped into wrong version in a different key, but then recovered quite quickly. ECCO was with her the whole way, even mirroring her gestures.



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Jinjoo used the traditional Joachim cadenzas, with a shortened version of the second movement one. Her playing warmed up as she went on and in the last movement she and the orchestra had worked in some nice ideas after the cadenza. Before she bowed to the audience, she applauded her collaborators.

Ji Yoon Lee, 22, of South Korea brought out the tension and harmonic pull of the second movement. She also played the traditional Joachim cadenzas, also shortening the second-movement cadenza. Her playing seemed to gain strength in last movement, which she took at full speed and seemed to want to play faster. Ji Yoon played on a 1730 Petrus Guarnerius, on loan from the Deutsche Stiftung Musikleben.



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Tomorrow night Ji Young Lim, 19, and Yoo Jin Jang, 23, will play Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 4 in D; and Dami Kim, 25, will play Mozart's Concerto No. 5 in A. All are from South Korea. You can listen to these performances on the [live-streaming](#) or [archived performances](#).

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Before the concert was a discussion about "Creating an Artistic Identity," with Cleveland Institute president Joel Smirnoff, who answered questions from IVCI Executive Director Glen Kwok.



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Smirnoff said that when one is seeking an artistic identity, one can look to mentors and to success stories. The best artists, in any field, "they're confident, they enjoy being in front of an audience, and they are generous." The kind of artist who endures is someone who is willing to go on stage and share for long enough for people to get a picture of what they are like as an artist. It's a presence that is beyond musical training, and a persistence about achieving that. The best performers take the act of performing and giving very seriously.

Smirnoff referred to a wonderful [YouTube video of 'As Time Goes By' that features a version by Stephane Grappelli](#). "That one song becomes the basis of a whole soundtrack and the fulcrum of that whole movie," he said. In that way, a violinist with an artistic identity will make something of a phrase in the middle of a piece -- the artist knows which one -- and the audience will never forget that phrase.

The world is different now, for an artist building an identity and a career. Many years ago, if you won a competition, you would win, and then wait for the phone to ring. These days, the Internet connects us on a daily basis, and an artist can start building there, for better or for worse.

Both Kwok and Smirnoff also addressed the issue of the overwhelming number of South Koreans in this year's competition -- five of the six finalists are South Korean. Kwok said that there were 179 total applicants to the 2014 IVCI, and they were from 31 countries. Thirty percent of the applicants were Korean.

Smirnoff said that one reason is teachers such as Nam Yun Kim: "She came to this country and studied with the best there is," then she went back. "She is responsible for so many amazing musicians and she is a complete musician herself." Also, countries in Asia have embraced Western classical music and created a large market for it there. "There is an appreciation of the history and the best of Western culture in those countries -- perhaps even more so than here."