

Review: IVCI Finals Begin with Tessa Lark, Jinjoo Cho and Ji Yoon Lee



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Whatever anyone's opinion about the standing of each finalist in the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, Friday was an exhilarating night of music-making.

The competition's final round began with performances by violinists Tessa Lark, Jinjoo Cho and Ji Yoon Lee with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra at Hilbert Circle Theater, with Joel Smirnoff conducting. For this round, each is required to play a full Romantic or Modern concerto with orchestra. Saturday will feature Ji Young Lim playing the Brahms; Yoo Jin Jang playing the Tchaikovsky and Dami Kim playing the Sibelius. (Listen to these performances on the [live-streaming](#) or [archived performances](#).)

On Friday, Tessa Lark played the Walton Violin Concerto, a piece less familiar to me (and to many) than the other pieces on this program, which were the Korngold and the Tchaikovsky. She played with guts and great intensity, without ever over-playing.



Tessa Lark- Photo by Denis Kelly

She also showed a great ability to pick notes out of the sky and just nail them to the wall, the intonation was so satisfyingly good. The second movement to me seemed a study in circular motion, from the spinning of a tornado to a lost-in-a-foreign-land dizziness, ending in breathless perpetual motion, up and down and all over the fingerboard. Tessa played the third movement with authority and strong voice, overall a really generous performance that had people on their feet right away.

The cinematic wonderland of the Korngold Violin Concerto felt just perfect after the real-world modern drama of the Walton -- like genius programming rather than the happy coincidence of the competitors' choices. The first movement of the Korngold requires that the violin produce massive long-tone sound for what seems like the whole movement-- Jinjoo Cho made it sound beautiful and easy.



Jinjoo Cho - Photo by Denis Kelly

The second movement sets the violin melody against a backdrop of amorphous bells, clavichord, harp -- she was able to get that veiled affect while still holding steady and clear. Everything seems under a spell, floating up and away, until the wake-up call of the third movement. Here is where I noticed the joyful and abundant energy of conductor Joel Smirnoff, whom I'd seen in his roles as a soloist and teacher, but until this moment, not as a conductor. When everything is so well in-hand one can relax and enjoy what the music is saying. For example, his concerto has such an extended ending, it's almost comical. Again, the audience responded very warmly to Jinjoo's performance.

Ji Yoon Lee played the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, certainly the best-known and most-played of the three concertos tonight.



Ji Yoon Lee - Photo by Denis Kelly

The first movement requires both chops and stamina, and Ji Yoon certainly has both, full of energy to the end. The second movement calls for a mute to dampen the sound throughout the movement; not everyone does it, but tonight Ji Yoon did it, to good effect. Her violin (a 1730 Petrus Guarnerius from the Deutsche Stiftung Musikleben) was powerful enough that the volume never fell below the level of the orchestra. It really does make that middle movement both a break in the action and in the volume of sound. It's usually a break in speed as well, but she took it on the fast side. It brings out the third movement's volume and speed, though her train was a bit too speedy for the orchestra, they fell out of sync briefly. But especially toward the end of the piece, she seemed clearly to be having fun, and that was infectious.