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NUVO

Listening to the Violin

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Six IVCI finalists

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The Ninth Quadrennial International Violin Competition of Indianapolis hosted 37 of the best violin players in the world--and perhaps the highest average caliber of all preceding competitions. In 1982, 1986 and 1990, it was fairly easy to rate the players as there were many non-world class participants. Indeed one or two of the gold medalists from that era have failed to find fame and fortune in the interim; they were simply not of world-class caliber. It was often the silver medalists who fared better. Was this the jury's fault? Was it an improperly managed career launch? Who knows?

In any case, the present complement of players having been chosen for the IVCI are so good that it may not matter as much who finally gets picked. All of them are capable of sailing through the most difficult passages that composers old and new can write for the instrument. Brilliantly executed passage work, rapid staccato, rapid double stops, fast pizzicato: They were all heard during these preliminaries and semi-finals, and were all handled as well as any already successful touring performer. Plus they all show an

understanding of a piece's "musicality," its intrinsic meaning, of course differing with each player and comprising the so-called subjective element of music making.

But there is one element in the playing of any stringed instrument and in the singing of any voice that resides in only the uppermost tier of performers: their tonality--or specifically in present-day performing practice--the shape of their vibrati. And with the violin, it's in their finger-work and bowing. During a sustained note drawn on the fingerboard, the player vibrates his/her left hand which varies its pitch at around 5 times a second. This "wavering" effect is most pleasing when it is done to a certain degree--enough to think you're hearing a "tremolo," a modulation of a note's loudness--but not enough to hear a change in pitch, which I've termed a "wobble."

And there were a number of IVCI participants who showed wobbliness in their vibrati, one almost continuously throughout her two events. Even though she excelled in all other aspects, her vibrato was irritating, rather like "warm maple syrup strained through a very old brassiere," to quote someone a long time ago describing something smarmy. Most of the participants played with a highly varying tonal width, some going from white (no vibrato) to wobbly within a measure. This manner of playing is common enough that many are used to it, don't really hear it, or are enamored more with the persona than with the playing.

This tonal variable remains with all violin performers, those in competitions, as well as those who've "made it" on the tour. But those with near perfect vibrati are few and far between. Among the younger crop of today's touring players visiting our environs, I could name Gil Shaham, Hilary Hahn, and Christian Tetzlaff as the best examples. And from the IVCI, I would include the 2006 gold medalist Augustin Hadelich and the 2002 silver medalist Sergey Khachatryan at that level. Those with lighter vibrati but otherwise making smooth, beautiful sounds include Joshua Bell (he's improved in recent years) and the Japanese player Midori. Past examples of great fiddlers with great tonality include Arthur Grumiaux, Jascha Heifetz (in his younger years), Aaron Rosand and of course Josef Gingold.

I heard three of this year's IVCI participants come close to achieving this criterion of beauty: Tessa Lark, Petteri Iivonen and Yoo Jin Jang, the latter making the IVCI commissioned piece, "A Fantasy for Violin" by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, the most beautiful of any of its 16 performances. Regrettably Iivonen did not even make the semi-finals, while the other two are in the finals. I therefore make no claim to be "in tune" with the jurors, who may weigh different criteria with a different emphasis.