

September 13, 2014

IVCI semi-finals - first four players

By Tom Aldridge

- 2014 IVCI semi-finalists

From now on we don't have to show till at least 1:30 p.m. instead of 9:30 a.m.--and we hear only four players a day rather than nine or ten. The International Violin Competition of Indianapolis runs with two afternoon participants and two in the evening in its semi-finals division. Its recital format continues at the Indiana History Center, this time drawing from the Romantic and post-Romantic eras--always including Beethoven, plus a new piece written for the event.

On Friday we first heard Nancy Zhou, 21, U.S., play Beethoven's Sonata No. 4 in A Minor, Op. 23 with Nelson Padgett, pianist; Strauss's ambitious Sonata in E-flat, Op. 18; the performance debut of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Fantasy for Solo Violin; and Eugene Ysaÿe's Sonata No. 6 for Solo Violin, Op. 27. The Zwilich piece is quite accessibly tonal, its slow and fast linearity complemented by double stops, trills and pizzicati. It starts and ends on a sustained D.

Next came Yu-Chien Tseng, 20, Taiwan, with pianist Chih-Yi Chen offering Beethoven's mercurial Sonata No. 8 in G, Op. 30 No. 3, Ravel's "Gershwin-esque" Sonata, also in G; Zwilich's Fantasy; and the Carmen Fantasy, Op. 25 by Pablo de Sarasate.

Tseng was followed that evening by Ayana Tsuji -- at 16 the youngest of the 37 participants -- from Japan. She played Beethoven's Sonata in A, Op. 30 No. 1; Zwilich's Fantasy; the Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso by Saint-Saëns; and the monumental Prokofiev Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Op. 80.

Tessa Lark, 25, of the U.S. ended the evening with Beethoven's Sonata No. 8 in G; the Sonata No. 5 for solo Violin, Op. 27 of Eugene Ysaÿe; the Zwilich Fantasy; and the Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano by Bela Bartók.

Lark, who incidentally also plays top-tier bluegrass music, easily bested her three competitors in presenting a sustained tonal beauty. She was their equal in other criteria: virtuosity and musicality. In these latter-day IVCI's--let's say from 1998 to the present one, few participants vary much in displaying those latter two criteria. This is not to say any two of them play them alike -- far from it. It is rather that their musicianship has approached the summit of penetrating a score's depth--to the player, along with the ability to impart this "vision" to their audiences. What they all cannot impart is a consistent level of beauty and tonal perfection when drawing their bow across a string and vibrating their left fingers in such a manner as to render that tone as pleasing to the most listeners. On this day Lark reached this exalted state the most often. More to follow on the tone rendering criterion.

Sept. 12; Indiana History Center