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IVCI Semi-finals - day two

By Tom Aldridge

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The second of four IVCI semi-finals days differed from the first in that the the standout was not one of the players, but rather one of the selected pieces. Stephen Waarts, 23, born in the Netherlands and now from the U.S. must surely have captivated the IVCI's nine jurors with his performance of Bartók's thorny, challenging Sonata for Solo Violin (1944). Constructed with two Baroque movements--a chaconne and a fugue--followed by linear writing (a melody) and a presto, all cast in as modernist an idiom as existed then, it's surely one the most difficult pieces in the solo-violin repertoire.

Waarts played the four movements as if he owned them, not only assaulting the most difficult passage work with seeming ease, but doing it with a near perfectly vibrant tone. His cascade of "double fourths" in the "ciaccona" seemed to flow by effortlessly, whereas his muted melody in the third movement showed off his tonal vibrancy "to the nines."

Waarts' remaining offerings -- the Beethoven Sonata No. 8 in G, Op. 30 No. 1; Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Fantasy for Solo Violin (written for this competition and required of all semi-finalists); and Ravel's Sonata in G--failed to reach the level of the Bartók, principally because of his lesser control of his tone. His vibrato varied considerably more, without any musical meaning. Yet he was technically secure throughout his program.

The same can be said of the three remaining participants: Jinjoo Cho, 26, of S. Korea; Stephen Kim, 18, of the U.S.; and Ji Yoon Lee, 22, S. Korea. All had some difficulty maintaining beautiful vibrati, though they were masterful in the other playing criteria. Stephen Kim, 18, U.S. would have equalled Waarts had it not been for the latter's supreme management of the Bartók. Kim did give us an impassioned Beethoven Sonata No. 7 in C Minor, Op. 30 No. 2. Now let's see what happens on Sunday . . .

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