

Indianapolis Violin Competition

Judging the Winners in a
Splendid City

Gil French

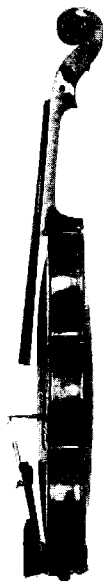
One thing was clear in the finals (Sept 22-25) of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis: which three of the six finalists would be awarded the top three prizes.

In the finals each soloist played two concertos, one by Mozart or Haydn and one romantic or post-romantic. I had not heard the preliminary rounds with 40 contestants or the semi-finals with 16, unlike the judges, whose final independent decisions were fed into a computer that determined the winner by weighing 15% on their choices in the preliminaries, 35% on the semi-finals, and 25% on each of the final concertos.

In the classical concerto round in Mozart's Concerto No. 5, South Korean Clara-Jumi Kang, 23, gave a plush romantic introduction that contrasted nicely with the crispness of the main theme. But she wasn't entirely at ease. Her rhythms lacked ensemble with the orchestra, and the cadenza lacked architecture as she languished a bit, causing runs and arpeggios to lose their flow.

In Mozart's Concerto No. 3, South Korean Soyoung Yoon, 25, had much more personality and authority. It was her really secure rhythms rather than the soggy conducting of Samuel Wong that established tempos for the lackluster Indianapolis Symphony. Her sustained long lyrical lines and incisive style became toe-tapping in the first movement. In the Adagio, even though her tone wasn't especially sweet, her long lines were graced with lovely light rubato. When Wong failed to follow the directions she whispered to him before the finale, she took charge by, amazingly, maintaining ensemble while speeding up the tempos. While the pace may have been too fast for some, it definitely worked for her because she made the third movement dance.

A major disappointment at the competition was the Indianapolis Symphony. For the classical concertos, one half of the orchestra played the first night, the other half the second. The first evening the strings were lethargic, with many players using less than full bow, like amateur students. The oboes screamed, and someone really should have taken out a



contract on the French horns, starting with the excruciating principal.

One reason American Benjamin Beilman, 20, stood out in the classical round was because he played the second night, when the strings were fuller, the oboes were balanced, the horns didn't fart on more than 60% of their entries. Another was that he chose to play Haydn's Concerto No. 1 for strings only plus a nicely played harpsichord.

Beilman was also the only finalist who made Wong seem competent. Right off the bat, he played with the first violins. He exuded authority with his clean terraced arpeggios, firm flow, depth of expression, and a fabulous Beethovenesque cadenza. His flowing rubato in the Adagio's elegant Vival-

di-like theme was so natural that Wong didn't even conduct the pizzicato strings. And his incisive rhythms and pulse in the finale spelled style, style, style. Beilman was clearly having huge fun (the opposite of nerves).

The University of Indianapolis's 500-seat Ruth Lilly Hall, a shoebox with balcony all around, was adequate for the chamber orchestra but made the solo violin sound wiry and void of lower overtones. A much more satisfying venue was the 1,735-seat Hilbert Circle Theater, used for the larger concertos. Built in 1916 as a movie palace with Grecian frieze details, it was rescued from oblivion, restored, and reopened in 1984 as the home of the Indianapolis Symphony. Its acoustics are very satisfying (though different) on both the main floor and in the balcony.

The Hilbert is found on Meridian Circle, the thriving downtown's gorgeous fulcrum with a splendidly sculpted monument rising to the sky, surrounded by curve-faced buildings, both old and new. From here radiate out three department stores with an indoor mall connecting them, countless banks and hotels both recent and historical, thriving shops, sports stadiums, theaters, an incredible number of museums both cultural and sports, and the zoo (pleasing to both animals and visitors), all in walking distance. With its wide streets and friendly people, Indianapolis a rare example of a Midwestern city blessed with decades of intelligent civic leadership, starting with Mayor Richard Lugar in 1968.

In the romantic and post-romantic rounds, the other three finalists duplicated their efforts

in the classical round. Sixth-place Russian Andrey Baranov, 24, lacked rhythmic interest and eloquence; fifth-place Hungarian Antal Szalai, 29, had a steady, firm, substantial tone but little nuance; and fourth-place Haoming Xie, 20, betrayed the fact that, until four weeks before the competition, he had never trained anywhere but in China—his playing was note-perfect painting-by-numbers. Several judges trumpeted what they described as the incredible depth of this competition's 40 participants; judging from these three finalists, they were wearing rose-colored glasses.

When Samuel Wong began Beethoven's Violin Concerto with a sluggish tempo and lardy style, I said to myself, "How can Clara-Jumi Kang ever make music with such a conductor?" But she did! She shaped her lines in the long first movement with gorgeous flowing lyricism and ample tone color; even the development's arpeggios were shaped, and the minor key theme that followed she made especially sweet. After the tediously-played *Larghetto*, Wong finally sprang to life in the finale. Kang's performance was picture-perfect (the kind judges love) but studied even in its seeming spontaneity. I placed Kang third by default.

The other two finalists both played the Sibelius Concerto. Soyoung Yoon's stage entrance was electrifying: confident and smiling, with a stunning, tight gold gown. One guy said it made her look as good coming as it did going; one woman said, "The moment I saw it I said, 'Yes, gal, go for the 'gold!'" (I'll bet the judges were intimidated.) Her performance matched this assertion of personality: full force with superb flow, except in the cadenza, which felt thought-out. Her pitch was shy just a bit too often, and her tone color was limited by the sheer power of her technique, which probably accounted for the lack of atmosphere, so essential in this work. But I'm partial to players who take risks in the finals—self-confidence and inventiveness spells a future. Yoon merited second place in my books.

Atmosphere, chilling and gripping, is the quality that Benjamin Beilman conveyed from his opening note in the Sibelius. He also knew how to aim the work; he had a full grasp of the work's form and forward-moving drama. His rubato had a magical flow. His use of vibrato was varied and deliberate. Like Yoon, he plays a gorgeous instrument. And, above all, his rhythms and pulse were so absolutely secure that he was the only finalist Wong seemed to connect with. The soloist's clams were so few that, in a normal performance to mention them would be mere quibbling, but then I'm not a competition judge. Later Beilman said that he had decided beforehand to just "go for it" and play it as he felt it, come what may.

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Based just on the finals, I'd have awarded Beilman first prize, which is saying something, since, after having heard him perform the same concerto twice at the Montreal International Music Competition in June (Sept/Oct 2010), I was not prepared to be impressed this time either.

The atmosphere at the competition itself was warm, easy, extremely well organized, and very friendly. Pianist Rohan De Silva said this is one of only two competitions he plays at because it manages to pick a high percentage of winners who go on to flourishing careers and because "there is no hanky-panky with the judges". (One judge told me he once refused to enter the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow because he was told beforehand that he would be awarded first prize, as judges planned who would be the trade-off winner at another competition.) The quadrennial "Indianapolis", as they call it, is such a point of pride for this marvelous city that I was surprised that seats were only two-thirds to three-quarters filled at the four finals concerts.

The same was true the night before the finals began, when De Silva joined the competition's 2006 winner, Augustin Hadelich, in concert. Hadelich *compelled* me to listen to sonatas by Beethoven (No. 8), Ysaye (No. 4), and even one by Schnittke that I don't especially like. His total concentration conveyed a grasp of form and direction as he sustained and shaped phrases, picking me up at the beginning and not putting me down till the end. It was after intermission that Hadelich's weakness came through as he applied his "one style fits all" to a very aggressive take on Poulenc's Sonata. Also, he missed the gypsy element in Sarasate's *Ziguenerweisen* (the chromatic portamentos didn't weep); nor did he make Kreisler's *Liebesleid* nearly schmaltzy enough. But it was great to experience the confidence and maturity of this great talent, who turns 27 this year.

Amidst all the verbage and multiple additional awards announced on September 26 at the closing gala at the jaw-droppingly sumptuous Scottish Rite Cathedral, the best thing was hearing the six finalists play one of their competition works, free from all the pressure. In Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp minor, Baranov was marvelous—more Hungarian than the Hungarian, making me want to go drown my sorrows in some Budapest bar. But the prize performance was by Yoon, making Tchaikovsky's 'Valse Sentimentale' simultaneously swirl, drip, and weep—beyond Viennese, beyond gypsy-dom.

Oh, and whom did the judges choose? Beilman was third, Yoon second, and Kang first. All hail, South Korea! (And keep an eye out for Beilman too.)