

# Jay Harvey Upstage

Tuesday, September 4, 2018

## The second afternoon of IVCI prelims: the challenges and rewards of 'one more time'

During an intermission in the preliminary round of the last [International Violin Competition of Indianapolis](#), I got into a fascinating chat with a new fan of the contest. He had convinced himself that the range of repertoire choices facing participants was too liberal. So he put across to me a rather startling viewpoint: the young violinists should be required to play exactly the same pieces.

My mind reeled, as I thought of the bludgeoning that the ears and sensibilities of jury and audiences alike would be subject to. From the Bach unaccompanied repertoire, for example, all 40 participants might be judged on how they played the monumental Chaconne from the D minor Partita. No more electing a multi-movement Partita sampling, like the Allemanda and Double, Corrente and Double from the B minor suite.

I think the friendly conversation was pitched upon an analogy to sports competitions. That kind of comparison is always tempting to make when it comes to musical contests. Like most analogies, it breaks down pretty quickly when we consider that what is at issue is artistry. So, from the repertoire list, all the violinists and their teachers get to choose what compositions they feel closest to, as well as the order in which they will present them during the prelims. That's as it should be — we're not about deciding who's baking the best gingerbread men from the same recipe and merely assessing the effect of different cookie-cutters.

With a performance order determined by lot, a miniature version of what my interlocutor stoutly preferred can crop up. On Monday afternoon, audiences gathered at the [Indiana History Center](#) had the opportunity to be stimulated — or perhaps anesthetized — by four performances in successive mini-recitals of the first two movements of Bach's Sonata No. 3 in C major, the Adagio and Fuga. To contemplate listening to nothing but that brief slow movement and the substantial fugue that follows gives me the willies. But repetition that doesn't go overboard can be illuminating, whether the music repeated is already known to the listener or not.



Fumika Mohri: *Setting a Bach standard*

For me, the standard to meet was set right off in **Fumika Mohri's** performance, so much so that I had to resist prejudging the afternoon's other Adagio and Fuga performances. At the end, I felt confirmed in admiring the one presented first. To start with, Mohri handled the slow movement with a light but firm touch. She kept the melodic line uppermost, soaring and sustained, through the harmonies that support it; they lent direction and substance unobtrusively. Her vibrato was varied, adding an extra expressiveness.

But it was in the ten-minute fugue that she really offered something special: The momentum was firm but never mechanical. She privileged both light and shade in her performance. Even at his most formal, Bach had an unparalleled knack for representing both the vulnerability and strength of life, sometimes shoulder to shoulder. We hear certainty and doubt explicitly in the vocal and choral works, but amazingly also, as here, where there are no words to reinforce such an interpretation. It's as if the composer is pointing to the vivid interrelatedness of life's contrasts, sometimes in neighboring phrases, saying: "Yes, this — but also *this*." Mohri illuminated this emotional canvas in every detail. In sum, I never expected to hear a performance of this Bach fugue that would bring me close to tears. But this one did.

Of the others, let me briefly say that **Risa Hokamura's** narrative style in the Adagio, with the harmonic building blocks more emphasized, was also persuasive, and her Fuga showed a good feeling for structure and consistent attention of making the fugal voices clear. **Elli Choi's** Adagio was more studentlike, with a few touches of poignancy; in the fugue, she knew where the main interest lies at any given point, but the interpretation was a bit "road-mappy." **Kyumin Park's** version was built from the ground up, the fugue a little stolid and tedious at length. His sound was somewhat monochromatic.

So, where did these players excel in their programs? Hokamura in two Paganini caprices — she nailed the interval leaps of No. 2 and found a light, sunny approach to No. 11 that worked well. The main thread of any musical argument in these showpieces always glowed.

Park was best in his Mozart sonata (in A major, K. 305), though the relentless assertiveness of his playing was relieved mainly by good dynamic control in the Theme and Variations second movement.

Choi gave the afternoon's best performance of the other selection the audience heard four times: Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp minor, as arranged by Nathan Milstein. I had just been charmed by her

Mozart sonata and impressed by her fiery command of the fifth Paganini caprice, so I was expecting the picture would be well completed by her thoroughly lyrical and nicely paced rendition of her chosen encore piece.

Other highlights:

\*The rhetorical coherence and balance of **Misako Akama's** Paganini Caprice No. 23 and her thoroughgoing rapport with pianist Thomas Hoppe in Mozart's Sonata in A major.



*SongHa Choi: Holding back just right in encore piece*

\*The poise of **SongHa Choi's** Allemanda and the excitement of her Corrente in those movements (with a "double" variation tagged to each) from the Bach B minor Partita, in addition to a well-judged account of Wagner's "Albumbblatt" (as arranged by August Wilhelmj), with the intensity held back until the point where it would count the most: good judgment not to peak too soon.

\*Mohri's choice of Nathan Milstein's "Paganiniana," variations on the 24th caprice, new on the repertoire list this year. Compared with the variations treatment Paganini himself gave to his famous theme, this version is more about public spectacle resting on the already spectacular original. Milstein had the whole 19th century to draw upon for his exploration of violinistic effectiveness: To have for instance, a "forest murmurs" trills variation succeeded by a brassy fanfare episode that then yields to a sentimental salon-music excursion is part of a delectable smorgasbord — a microcosm of the fare the prelims offer in abundance, even allowing for considerable repetition. Who would want nothing but repetition when there are such delicacies to savor?