

Finding violin virtuosi of the future: Glen Kwok on the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis

By Thomas May, 22 December 2017

Like the Olympics, the [International Violin Competition of Indianapolis](#) (IVCI) is a quadrennial event; indeed, its scale and intensity bring the global athletic games to mind.

“During the opening ceremonies, we have a procession of flags much as you see in the Olympics,” notes Glen Kwok, who has served as IVCI’s Executive Director since 2000. “It’s a nice bit of colorful pageantry for the one night that we want the violinists to feel they are *not* competing. We want them to be able to relax, since the next sixteen days will be super-intense!”



Participant Richard Lin during the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis Opening Ceremony © Denis R. Kelly Jr.

The 17-day competition returns for its tenth edition in August and September 2018. Founded by Josef Gingold in 1982, the IVCI became a member of the Geneva-based World Federation of International Music Competitions just two years later.

“Josef Gingold was a huge influence on my own life,” says Kwok, who studied with the legendary violinist as a child at the Meadowmount School of Music in Upstate New York. Kwok remained close with him during Gingold’s years teaching at what was then known as the Indiana University School of Music (now the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music) — located in Bloomington, about an hour south of Indianapolis, home to the IVCI. Gingold’s star pupil Jaime Laredo took over the reins as Artistic Director following the former’s death in 1995. The founder’s legacy is continued in several other ways as well – including a loan to the winner of the 1683 “ex-Gingold” Stradivari violin for four years following victory at the IVCI.



Josef Gingold

Until 28 February 2018, young violinists from around the world have a chance to apply (all materials are submitted online), as long as they will be at least 16 and not yet 30 by the time of the competition. Kwok says there are always more than 200 applicants, the majority of whom are from outside the United States. “There’s clearly a worldwide trend of many applicants coming from Asia, with a huge presence of South Koreans in particular applying,” he notes.

From these applicants, a total of forty will be invited to compete in Indianapolis, having been chosen by a screening jury of three concert violinists (including Jaime Laredo). During the competition itself, the IVCI jury itself consists of an international, nine-member panel: in addition to Laredo, in 2018 this will comprise Pamela Frank, Cho-Liang Lin, and Arnold Steinhardt (USA); Rodney Friend (UK); Dong-Suk Kim (South Korea); Mihaela Martin, who took first prize at the very first IVCI in 1982 (Romania); Dmitry Sitkovesky (Russia); and Kyoko Takezawa (Japan).

Following the Olympic-flavored opening ceremonies – held at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at the city’s Newfields Center – the IVCI unfolds in four rounds, which take place in the Eugene and Marilyn Glick Indiana History Center and the Howard L. Schrott Center for the Performing Arts at Butler University, culminating in the final round at the Hilbert Circle Theatre, the home of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

The preliminary round, spread over four days, gives each violinist 45 minutes to display their art in a program of solo Bach, Paganini Caprices, a Mozart sonata and an encore. The forty participants are winnowed to sixteen for Round Two. Those who do not progress to semi-finals are asked to stay in Indianapolis to learn from their peers. Kwok refers to a rich program of related events during the course of the competition that are focused on education outreach. “We send these young violinists into the schools to give what we call ‘informances’ – brief discussions of their lives as performers, combined with short performances. It’s very inspirational for the kids. Since most of the violinists are not from the US, this is in effect a huge cultural exchange program.”

Round Two replicates the conditions of a 75-minute recital (without interval). Here, the repertoire choices are a Beethoven sonata and a choice from a list of Romantic sonatas, followed by a longer showpiece. One signature of the IVCI is the commissioning of a new work for the semi-final round; this can be for solo violin or violin and piano. In past editions, Joan Tower, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, Richard Danielpour and Bright Sheng have done the honors; for 2018, William Bolcom’s *Suite no. 3 for Violin* will be given its world première during this round.



William Bolcom © Philip Brunnader

“We want our composers not only to write a piece for the competition but to add to the violin literature,” says Kwok. “One of our most popular is Lutoslawski’s *Subito*, which he wrote for the 1994 competition but today is on so many programs. I tell the composers to write a piece that will have a long future. They don’t need to write a piece that merely tests technical ability. The level of playing is already astounding; there’s no need to show that these participants can play the violin!”

The sixteen semi-finalists are narrowed down to six finalists for the third and fourth rounds. In the third, they play a Mozart or Haydn Concerto with chamber orchestra. Starting in the last IVCI in 2014, the conductorless East Coast Chamber Orchestra (ECCO) was brought on to partner with the finalists. Kwok points out that this gives them an opportunity to show “a side of you we would normally not see: the ability to lead, to work with people you don’t know, to see how well you can collaborate with an orchestra when not just performing as a soloist and following the conductor.”



Jinjoo Cho (South Korea) - 2014 Gold Medalist with Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra © Denis Ryan Kelly Jr.

Two days later, in the fourth and final round, the finalists choose from a list of 21 possible concertos for their performance with the Indianapolis Symphony; in 2018, Leonard Slatkin will conduct. “We try to make the list as broad as possible,” according to Kwok. “It really is one of the largest lists on the international competition scene. And that’s important, because how you program shows a lot about musical tastes and personality.” What ultimately sets the IVCI apart is the longterm career fostering provided after victory. The loan of the ex-

Gingold Stradivari is actually just one facet of this post-competition career support and mentorship, and it includes all of the expenses associated with a rare instrument (insurance and maintenance, etc.).



*Glen Kwok, IVCI Executive Director
© Denis R. Kelly, Jr.*

“We are quite proud of how this distinguishes us from other competitions,” says Kwok. “What we are looking for is someone who is ready to have a concert career, and so we provide detailed mentorship. It’s not enough to give cash prizes. [The Gold Medalist earns \$30,000 USD.] Nowadays, you do not launch a career overnight as happened fifty years ago. We arrange concerts for the next four years, working with the laureates on repertoire choices. When young violinists win, their eyes are often so huge and they want to accept everything.”

Along with the artistic counseling, Kwok emphasizes the importance of the advice offered for the practical side of careers. “We know by virtue of your winning the IVCI that you are a fantastic violinist. But we can help you with the non-musical aspects that are equally important to your career as well, from travel and tax planning to learning how to give interviews and masterclasses. All of this is tailored to the needs of the winners, since each comes with different levels of experience.”

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