



## Turning up the heat

The six finalists at this year's quadrennial International Violin Competition of Indianapolis showcased an impressive musical range in Classical, Romantic and 20th-century repertoire, as Tim Homfray reports

There was a heatwave in Indianapolis when I arrived on 11 September: blue skies and temperatures in the eighties. The International Violin Competition of Indianapolis, founded in 1982 and held every four years, had been running since the beginning of the month, and the 38 original contestants had been whittled down, after two rounds, to six. There were two more sort-of-rounds to go (all part of the finals), but the remaining contestants were already winners: three of them would be ranked Gold, Silver and Bronze, and the others would be laureates.

First came the Classical Finals, spread over two nights, in which each violinist played a Mozart concerto and one of six Kreisler pieces orchestrated by Jaakko Kuusisto, himself a 1994 laureate. They took place in the Howard L. Schrott Center for the Arts, where the acoustic is

warm and clear, with the elite, conductorless East Coast Chamber Orchestra in attendance.

In the first concert all three finalists opted for Mozart's Fifth, starting with Richard Lin, a 27-year-old American with a string of prizes already under his belt. His playing was rhythmically alive, with crisp bowing and eloquent vibrato. His phrasing was meticulous, and every slight shading of dynamic sounded carefully planned. Kreisler's *Tambourin chinois* felt immediate, witty and fun.

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Risa Hokamura, a 17-year-old from Japan, was engaging and spirited, with a feeling of spontaneity in her playing. Technically she was not always immaculate, and she had a memory lapse in the second movement, but the flair and personality she brought to the music trumped such infelicities. The last movement danced. In the *Tambourin chinois* she combined generous rubato with a firm sense of direction.

The Romanian violinist Ioana Cristina Goicea, 25, performed with authority and purpose, more briskly than the first two and presenting the big picture rather than sculpting myriad details. The Adagio was subtly shaped and expressive, and the finale, again taken at a fair pace, was dramatic, punctuated with accents. In Kreisler's *La Gitana* Goicea was coquettish, with flashes of fire.

On the second evening there were two performances of Mozart's Third Concerto and one of his First. Canadian Shannon Lee, 26, brought an appealing natural beauty to the G major. Every phrase was impeccably shaped. In the second movement she seemed to draw us into an intimate confidence, and the finale was a winning combination of delicacy and energy. Lee's *La Gitana* was tempestuous and seductive.

In the second appearance of the Third Concerto, 28-year-old American Luke Hsu played with passion and enjoyment. The second movement was one long beautifully moulded cantilena, and the last movement, with its vivid dynamic contrasts and touches of humour, was akin to an operatic scena. He appeared to relish the virtuosity of *Tambourin chinois*.

Anna Lee, 23, another American, played the First Concerto with style and grace, her passagework nimble and elegantly shaped. The many scampering scale and arpeggio figures of the finale were nicely articulated. Kreisler's *Caprice viennois*, with some neat double-stopping, had a melancholy air.

For the second part of the finals, featuring the big concertos, the venue switched to the grand downtown Hilbert Circle Theatre, home

of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, which was on duty under the direction of Leonard Slatkin. Richard Lin opted for Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy*. After a suitably fruity and soulful introduction, the Scherzo swaggered, with many a capricious flourish tossed away. Lin's veiled tone in the Andante sostenuto gave it a reverential air, with long-breathed, supple melody. There was dashing fluency in the virtuosic double-stops of the finale, although intonation began to slip in Bruch's less inspired passagework.

In Tchaikovsky's Concerto, Hokamura let loose the panache which had simmered in her Mozart. She has an instinct for when to press ahead (even if a little too impetuously), when to indulge and enjoy, and when to let a passage build without gilding the lily. She played the second movement like a folk song, with some plaintive story to it, and gave a bravura display in the finale, brimming with personality and colour.

Goicea's account of Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto emphasised its severity. The opening Nocturne moved implacably onward. The Scherzo had fierce impetus, with the bow biting into the string. After a Passacaglia of extraordinary cumulative power, the cadenza was a terrifying piece of musical drama, slow-building and brilliantly paced.

The following evening, Shannon Lee opened Walton's Concerto with sultry warmth of tone and much nicely judged rubato. She dashed off the challenging pyrotechnics of the Presto capriccioso in fine style, played the Italianate section with slinky phrasing and expressive harmonics, and was splendidly flamboyant in the finale.

In Hsu's hands Tchaikovsky's Concerto was a bit of a race. He tended to blaze through scalic passages, swallowing some of the notes in his charge to the top. But there was great beauty as well in the generous melodies and the cadenza. He gets a black mark for not using a mute in the second movement, and here too he could have allowed the music to breathe more. The Finale was tremendous, fleet and light, with hearty pesante playing along the way.

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Clockwise from top Gold medallist Richard Lin was dashing in Bruch; Bronze winner Luke Hsu performed Tchaikovsky's melodies with great beauty; Silver medallist Risa Hokamura's Tchaikovsky brimmed with colour

Anna Lee performed Mendelssohn, in which she demonstrated a quicksilver facility, with light, energetic playing. There was no indulgence even in the second subject, and the arpeggiated exit from the cadenza skipped forward. In the second movement there was always a sense that the musical lines in both major and minor sections had a destination, and in the effervescent finale she demonstrated a great line in up-bow staccato.

For the gala announcement of winners the venue shifted again, to the Scottish Rite Cathedral, an imposing neo-Gothic structure with a little theatre built in dark-wood baronial style, complete with a sword hanging alarmingly from the ceiling. There were many speeches, and various contestants had spot appearances as they

won awards for best performances through the competition: Best Performance of a Bach Work, Best Performance of a Mozart Sonata... there were eleven in all.

Of the finalists, opinion had tended towards Lin, and he was indeed awarded Gold. I was taken with Hokamura, and pleased when she got Silver. Hsu was Bronze, and the other laureates, in four, five and six order, were Anna Lee, Goicea and Shannon Lee.

For each winner the Cantantes Angeli Children's Choir sang the appropriate national anthem – thus, we heard the Star-Spangled Banner three times. They sang from memory, so presumably they had learnt another half-dozen they didn't need. Still, who knows when the Kazakhstan one might come in handy. ●