



Vanska, Harbison, and Jacobs.

brilliant cadenza for organ, followed by a gentle and beguiling aria.

Jacobs played with his customary flair and clarity. The organ sat on an apron in front of the stage, looking like the cockpit of a small space ship waiting for takeoff. Its sound, rich but mellow, easily filled the hall. Vanska, to his credit, enforced a nice balance between organ and orchestra. Harbison, who was present for the concert, joined the musicians for bows. Afterwards Jacobs returned to the stage to play a Bach fugue, employing the kind of super-wide dynamic range once associated with Virgil Fox.

Vanska maintained that fine balance between organ and orchestra in the Saint-Saens as well. The performance stressed the poetic and ceremonial rather than the melodramatic and grandiloquent qualities of this often played work. Billmeyer was an adroit soloist.

Given that this was something like a Harbison weekend in the Twin Cities, the composer took another set of bows the next afternoon at Sundin Hall in St Paul, where, near the end of the concert, he did a little piano playing himself, revealing a flair for jazz in two pop songs of his own, 'I'm Through' and 'All for You.'

This lively program, presented by the enterprising Chamber Music Society of Minnesota and its astute Artistic Director Young-Nam Kim, was a tribute to Harbison on what would be (on December 20) his 80th birthday. With it came an opportunity to hear some of Harbison's seldom heard chamber music. Among the pieces were a Trio Sonata for three saxophones from 1994 and, as the curtain-raiser, a work that Harbison composed in high school, an Andante for cello and piano dated 1955, an early example of the craft and abun-

dant lyricism that have characterized all this composer's music for 60-plus years.

A special pairing started the second half. First up was a graceful arrangement for string quartet of the famous Air from Bach's Suite No. 3 in D by Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (music director of the Minneapolis Symphony-Minnesota Orchestra from 1960 to 1979—the name change took place in 1968), a revered figure in these parts who died last year at the age of 93. In 2014 Kim put together a tribute to Skrowaczewski in honor of his 90th birthday. One of the six works composed for that memorable event was Harbison's *Four Encores for Stan* for narrator and string quartet. Fred Harris, director of wind and jazz ensembles at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the author of the much-acclaimed biography of Skrowaczewski, "Seeking the Infinite", acted as narrator, reading the brief quotes from Skrowaczewski's writings that serve as interludes between the "encores"—eloquent little pieces that might be thought of as haiku for string quartet. For the finale, a jazz set, Harris played drums, joining bassist Anthony Cox and violinist Ariana Kim, Young-Nam Kim's daughter, who teaches at Cornell University.

[For a taste of the old Northrup's acoustics, the Mercury recordings with Antal Dorati and the Minneapolis Symphony, and a few with Skrowaczewski, were made there and have a peculiar acoustic quality even Mercury couldn't overcome. Once when former Music Director Eugene Ormandy returned to Minneapolis and was asked if he had any suggestions for improving the acoustics, he replied, "Dynamite." -Editor]

Indianapolis Violin Competition 2018

Solid Soloists, Honest Judges, Few Surprises

Gil French

The finals of the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis (IVCI) are always preceded by a concert by the previous competition's first prize winner. The limited enthusiasm I had for Jinjoo Cho, 30, after the 2014 competition evaporated on September 11 at Butler University's Schrott Center for the Arts. What a difference four years had made. Her accompanist was pianist Hyun Soo Kim, who is also admissions director for Encore Chamber Music, a summer training program in Cleveland for young talent that Cho founded.

Cho chose a terrific program with which to "show her stuff". Though this was an audience of mainly aficionados (you could hear a pin drop), I wasn't the only one who commented, "I've never heard either of the first two pieces" that made up the concert's first half. It opened with Benjamin Britten's Suite, Opus 6, with a March, Perpetual Motion, Lullaby, and Waltz. Simple, you think, like his teenage *Simple Symphony*, Opus 4? Hardly! This is *very* bad boy Britten—outrageous exaggerations in its harmonies, melodies, ponticello effects, abrupt contrasts, playful intersection of violin and piano, and furious fiddling and doublings. Its bravado is perfect as an opener—to make an impression. And impress she did!

The second work was André Previn's deceptively titled *Tango Song and Dance*. Commas are needed to clarify that it's in three, not two, movements. From its almost soap-opera tango with its filigree recitatives, sultry low portamento slides, frequent tempo changes, and lyricism to its whisper-soft 'Song' and the concluding meter-shifting Dance, it, like the Britten, showed off Cho's mature strengths: (1) Her bowing yielded a rich variation of volume from pianissimo to highly intense with a wide variety of tone color. (2) She had a solid grasp of form and a gift for flow; the music never died all evening. (3) She was a very physical player—never a show-off,

but so involved with what she was playing that sometimes I could see her restraining her urge to dance. And (4) her ability to play the many different styles required in these two pieces plus the two French works after intermission is a gift even the most famous artists often lack.

The second half began with Chausson's *Poeme*, the one work that showed her only weakness. This dark, moody, slowly evolving work requires lingering over long phrases, where Cho's one-style-fits-all vibrato—a slight, rapid, even, identical wobble on most notes—was amplified, which contributes little to expression. If not performed with a chamber orchestra, *Poeme* really requires an organ to draw out its lower tones and seamless harmonic movement. Kim's Steinway lacked a good bass, but more of a problem was the arrangement he used. Also, the percussive nature of the piano seemed to drive Cho toward an overload of intensity. I could also visually see how her concentration with the music faded in and out.

What a difference in Faure's Violin Sonata No. 1. As with the Britten and Previn, this was a work that Jinjoo Cho "owned". The first and last movements had uninterrupted flow with ideal use of rubato. From intensity to her ability to linger tenderly, her touch was infallible. The Andante was pure soul. Only the scherzo was misjudged; Kim began at so fast a tempo that he couldn't define its rhythm, and Cho followed. Ignore that. Keep an eye out for Jinjoo Cho. She was born in Korea, but her English is as American as apple pie. I'd be surprised if IVCI's four years of follow-up career assistance doesn't have her poised to become a major star.

On to the competition. All contestants' repertoire was chosen before the competition began. The order they played was determined by a drawing, and that was maintained to the end of the competition as the field was narrowed to the six finalists.

Thus it was that, at the first round of classical Finals at the Schrott Center, all three finalists played the same concerto, Mozart's No. 5. Comparisons are odious to the losers, but comparisons were inevitable. And my choice for the best was a matter of taste. Richard Lin (27, Taiwan/US) was "beyond technique". He had a sweet lyrical tone and gait with a rich full-bowed tone in his lowest register. He had full grasp of each movement's form, pacing them with A-major buoyancy that was exquis-



L-r: Shannon Lee (6th), Ioana Cristina Goicea (5th), Richard Lin (Gold), Luke Hsu (Bronze), Risa Hokamura (Silver), and Anna Lee (4th).

itely musical, adding perfect rubato, especially in his interchanges with the orchestra. Indeed, he veritably “led” the conductorless East Coast Chamber Orchestra (strings 4-4-4-3-1), which performs standing.

Especially notable were Lin’s keen, crisp articulation (more akin to period-instrument playing) and the nuance he gave to lyrical phrases. At the end of the first movement he apparently used his own imaginative yet perfectly fitting cadenza. He made the Adagio extraordinarily sweet. In the Rondo he seemed to have created his own imaginative but shorter cadenza. In brief, he not only “owned” the piece, but his alertness and seeming spontaneity left me with the impression that, if he played the concerto again the next night, it would be different and fresh all over again.

Ioana Cristina Goicea (25, Romania) was Lin’s match, but in a more European style. She had a full romantic approach to the first movement, reminding me more of Perlman or Zukerman than a period-instrument style. The tone her gorgeous instrument produced was almost sultry, and her phrases were more linked than articulated. In the first movement she used the traditional Joachim cadenza.

Ah, but in the second movement she seemed to transcend tightly controlled concentration. So subtle was her use of vibrato that I had to concentrate to realize how superbly she used it for expressive purposes—no merely habitual wobbling here! Most magical was the development, where she drew out every harmonic movement and dissonance to full suspended effect. She then turned imme-

diately to the Rondo, giving it an extra impetus to distinguish it from the Adagio. In brief, like Lin, she too “owned” the piece and “led” the orchestra; but I had the impression that, if she played it again the next night, it would be pretty much the same.

The choice between Lin and Goicea was a matter of taste. I could picture the judges who favor a more European approach fawning over Goicea and those preferring a more American style preferring Lin. One journalist from Japan strongly preferred Risa Hokamura (17, Japan). Perhaps it was her more straight-forward approach that appealed to her fellow countryman. But I found her playing pedestrian and uninteresting. I’m sorry, but, once someone is on the international stage at North America’s most important violin competition, I give no favor to age or pedigree. She had little depth of tone color. Her phrases were not finely tailored. Pacing in the first movement began to sag ever so slightly. Her pitch was not spot-on. In the Adagio I began to wonder if one of her strings was beginning to slip out of tune, and she had a glaring memory lapse from which she recovered quickly. Even though she became more lyrical in the Rondo, she still was not very nuanced. She also seemed to concentrate more on her violin than the orchestra.

All three finalists were required to follow the concerto with a short piece by Fritz Kreisler for violin and orchestra. Lin gave far more color and playfulness to the ‘Chinese Tambourine’ than Hokamura. As Goicea began the opening bars of ‘La Gitana,’ I immediately thought, “Ah! Gypsy!” Kreisler then

moves quickly from sultry Eastern European to sunny Spain, which Goicea eased into with evident joy.

The next night began with more comparisons: two performances of Mozart’s Violin Concerto No. 3. After about the first five minutes, it seemed that Shannon Lee (26, US-Canada) would use only one basic tone color and not much depth of expression. Although it never dragged, it was never compelling. In both the Adagio and Rondo, she was accurate but lacked distinction. In ‘La Gitana’ those opening few Gypsy-style measures had a strong sultry sound; the rest of it was nicely played but without a defining style.

What a contrast to Luke Hsu (28, US). A short stocky fellow with a broad grin and glistening teeth, he played with attitude. He played the introduction with the orchestra, his back to the audience. He then turned with his right shoulder to the audience, as if playing to the violas, holding his violin extraordinarily high. His wiry tone had limited tone color but unlimited depth of expression. Through lots of body weaving, he got the long romantic sound he wanted. His style in the Adagio was sweet even though his tone was not. Here he apparently played his own cadenza. His gave bright, alert flow to the Rondo with perfect retards that gracefully created seamless transition points with the orchestra.

In all five violin concertos Mozart has the soloist playing with the first violins whenever he doesn’t have a solo line. This is something Hsu took advantage of in the lengthy final measures of No. 3 that ends with orchestra alone; Hsu played along, making his mark right to the end. Some critics felt that showman Hsu imposed his personality on the Mozart, which they preferred to hear “pure”. Another matter of taste. I thought he was totally engaging, though I didn’t rank him above Richard Lin and Anna Lee. In the ‘Chinese Tambourine’ Hsu served up huge showmanship, complete with swoops, plucks, sly high runs, and plenty of rubato. What a romp!

Anna Lee (23, US) was not on the critics’ radar and surprised the life out of them. Utterly poised, dressed in an elegant but simple dark blue gown with her right shoulder uncovered, a slightly sparking thin accent belt, a tiny simple pendant hanging from her neck, black hair pixie style, and facing the audience directly, she looked 33 and played Concerto No. 1 like she was 43. Her softer darker tone and

subtle expressive depth was in sharp contrast to Hsu. She was also the only one of the six finalists who struck me as having absolutely tight rhythms—not “upright” but right on the beat, feeling almost ahead of the beat but not. Her exciting precision led the orchestra in all three movements. Also, more than any of the other soloists, she had a strong grasp of each movement’s form—that is, she always knew where she was going, how different sections and phrases fit into the whole.

She played with the orchestra in the introduction, defining its tempo and style of articulation. The opening and closing movements were buoyant with superb flow; in the Adagio she was the model of a soloist listening to and engaging with the orchestra. For the Kreisler “encore” she was the only one to choose the ‘Viennese Caprice’. Even in this short piece her swoops, portamentos, and rubatos gave me the distinct impression that, more than any other soloist, she engaged the most with the orchestra, which responded after both works with vigorous applause and wide smiles.

September 14 and 15 were the two nights when finalists played their choice from a list of 19th- and 20th-Century concertos. One journalist, rooting for Richard Lin, bemoaned his choice of Bruch’s *Scottish Fantasy*, saying it wasn’t a showy enough piece. I, a lover of the work, couldn’t have disagreed more, especially after hearing the performance. His utterly sweet purring tone was perfect for the music, especially as he molded the work into one flowing whole. So tight and spiky were his rhythms that he, Leonard Slatkin, and the Indianapolis Symphony were in perfect ensemble. He was intense, while giving the music plenty of breathing space, especially in the quieter moments. He also chose to play the original version, unedited.

Risa Hokamura followed with Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto, where her intonation was off occasionally (twice in her cadenza) and the music began to become a bit of a slog until she had her long break midway in the first movement and Slatkin re-energized things. She seemed to be concentrating on keeping things as planned rather than being caught up in the music itself, proceeding section by section rather than shaping movements into a whole, making it seem very long. Even a relative with whom I sat said afterwards, “She seemed to be into herself rather than with the orchestra.”

What a contrast to Ioana Cristina Goicea after intermission in Shostakovich's Concerto No. 1. Her demeanor was totally confident, and she kept a careful eye on Slatkin, especially in the opening movement with its slowly shifting, almost amorphous harmonic flow. She made the Scherzo appropriately brutal—the few ensemble problems were Slatkin's, not hers. The question that nagged me from the start—"This is a concerto I've never fully understood; will she be able to finally sell it to me?"—began nagging me more and more as she moved through the Passacaglia into her long, slow-building cadenza and finally the concluding Burlesque. She played to the woodwinds when they were her accompaniment, and her intense concentration never flagged. But her overall intensity and forcefulness seemed so predominant and constant that she made the concerto sound too unvaried and so voluminous that I am still questioning whether Shostakovich wrote a work whose form speaks a clear message or not. Nonetheless, she left an indelible impression.

The next night Shannon Lee began with a very weak performance of Walton's concerto. Her on-and-off projection meant that sometimes I couldn't hear her even from the fifth row center. In the first movement she gave no atmosphere to Walton's sweetly contrasting second theme, her rhythms were not tight (Slatkin's were), and her harmonics at the end of the movement were flat. In the Presto her articulation was not clear, and her rhythms

Leonard Slatkin on the Detroit Symphony & IVCI

Call this "making up for lost time". In the Sept/Oct 2018 issue our look back at Leonard Slatkin's time as music director of the Detroit Symphony (2008-2018) was cut short because his sudden need for heart surgery meant the cancellation of his last three concerts with the orchestra. But in September he made his first foray back to the podium as conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony for the 19th-20th Century finals of IVCI, where I interviewed him.

I was curious how he positioned himself during the devastating DSO strike in 2010. Unlike Osmo Vanska during the Minnesota Orchestra's lockout that occurred shortly thereafter, Slatkin disappeared from the scene. He said that he learned his *modus operandi* early in his career. His music directorship of the St

again were not integrated with the orchestra. And she failed to weave the Vivace finale into one continuous whole.

It was like night and day when Luke Hsu followed with Tchaikovsky's Concerto by delivering the performance of a romantic or contemporary concerto. He was what I call "beyond technique". So absorbed was he not into his fingers on the strings but into the music itself that he reminded me of Martha Argerich who can be so far beyond mere technique that her brain seems two or three measures ahead of the music at hand, allowing her the freedom to be spontaneous and inventive.

Hsu and Slatkin were immediately together rhythmically; Hsu knew how to "lead", how to indicate rhythmic precision purely aurally without conductor and soloist having to even look at one another. To put it crudely, they clicked. The continuous flow breathed but never stopped, especially in the heavenly second movement, where Hsu made me think of Robert Shaw's comment once to a chorus about the need to maintain an inner intensity in the gentlest pianissimo moments. In the final movement Hsu's quick instincts reminded me of the cheetah I had seen early that day at the Indianapolis Zoo. Hsu always had an ear on Slatkin, even though he stood apart from him, close to the edge of the stage. It was a breathtaking triumph for soloist and orchestra alike.

How does one follow someone like Hsu? As they say, it's always easy to follow a loser but almost impossible to follow a winner. That

Louis Symphony began with a strike. His mentor at the time advised him, "Get out of town". The question was, "Why?"

Slatkin said that the music director is hired by the board of directors, but he is in charge of the orchestra, which in a strike places him in the dead middle, which means, "Get out of town". Because the strike was between the musicians and the board, it didn't involve him. Thus, it was vital for him *not* to take sides. However, he did meet privately with all sides and smaller groups who were involved, because it was important that he be able to deal with things after the strike had ended, such as increasing visibility through web broadcasts, increasing concerts in Detroit's neighborhoods, increasing the presence of young people at symphony concerts, all of which soon resulted in a 62% increase in ticket sales and finally a 90% increase. Above all, he advocated that it is just as important for the

task fell to Anna Lee with Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto, where she was wanting. She was shy of pitch in the opening movement, which she broke up by ruminating far too much in its sweet valleys. Unlike Hsu, she did not "lead", especially in the Andante, which here was not at all compelling. I kept asking myself, "What happened to those really tight rhythms that made her Mozart so compelling?" Then suddenly there they were, back for the finale. Also, it must be said that Slatkin delivered what must have been the loudest accompaniment to the Mendelssohn on record. Whether that hurt or helped Lee I couldn't tell.

The jury members were President Jaime Laredo and fellow violinists Pamela Frank, Rodney Friend, Dong-Suk Kang, Cho-Liang Lin, IVCI 1982 gold medalist Mihaela Martin, Dmitri Sitkovetsky, Arnold Steinhardt, and 1986 gold medalist Kyoko Takezawa. Scores are weighted in the following manner: at the end of the semi-finals, the preliminary scores are given 30% weight and the semi-finals 70%. At the end of the competition the finalists are weighted 15% for the preliminaries, 35% for the semi-finals, 25% for the classical finals, and 25% for the romantic-contemporary finals. It's important to remember in the comments that follow that I heard only the finals.

Richard Lin was gold medalist (\$30,000), Risa Hokamura silver (\$15,000), and Luke Hsu bronze (\$10,000). Fourth place went to Anna Lee (\$7,000), fifth to Ioana Cristina Goicea (\$6,000), and sixth to Shannon Lee (\$5,000).

board and musicians to ask where the money is coming from when times are good as when times are bad. The financial crisis that hit the US in 2008 began in Detroit in 2006 in the auto industry. Money and the transparency of its sources remains a constant subject about which all parties must be concerned, Slatkin maintains.

Slatkin worked with the orchestra's CEO, who had the allure of an ax murderer at the start of the strike and remains with the orchestra to this day. He also got the orchestra *not* to initiate a two-tier salary system for new players, something which has a deadly effect on morale.

At the 2017 Van Cliburn Competition Slatkin, who conducted the finals, told a group of journalists that the most difficult work in the finals was Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* because it's really a symphonic work with piano where the conductor

Many felt that Goicea should have been a medalist. I was surprised that Hokamura was one. More important than the money is IVCI's follow-up for its laureates with a "holistic approach to career management of financial planning, publicity, fashion consultancy, media relations, and website development". IVCI also has a year-long Laureate Series of concerts that brings past winners back to Indianapolis for solo and chamber concerts.

There were numerous other awards, mostly of \$1,000—not a laundry list but a catalog of opportunities for a wealth of individuals to sound their very best for an audience that included artist representatives and artistic scouts for orchestras and concert series across the nation: Luke Hsu for two best performances, of a Bach work and a Mozart sonata; Lin for best Kreisler encore and for best 19th-20th Century concerto (\$5,000); Lin, semi-finalist Elle Suk (29, US-South Korea), and Hokamura for three best performances of Paganini caprices or Milstein's *Paganiniana*; Suh for best encore work; Anna Lee for best Beethoven sonata, classical concerto (\$2,500), and violin-piano sonata other than Beethoven; semi-finalist Stephen Kim (22, US) best performance of the commissioned work (Bolcom's Solo Suite No. 3); Shannon Lee for best Ysaye sonata.

The atmosphere was relaxed, the weather was glorious, and downtown Indianapolis is alive and thriving with museums and the zoo in walking distance. The next IVCI will be in 2022.

must be aware of everything the pianist is doing and the pianist must be aware of every detail in the orchestra. When asked what the most difficult finals piece would be here in Indianapolis, he said Walton's Violin Concerto because it hadn't been performed by the Indianapolis Symphony since the 2014 IVCI and not before that for 25 years. And Slatkin himself hadn't conducted it for about 10 years. But out of the five concertos in the finals, it is the one that locks the soloist and orchestra together most tightly.

No matter his opinion of the six finalists, he is the kind of sincere, down-to-earth person, free of airs, who was determined to deal evenly, fairly, and helpfully in the two rehearsals each soloist got. Believe me, the competition and his recovery from surgery caused him far less stress than current national politics.