



New

Howard Smith reports

As 1995's formidable July snows held New Zealand's mountains in an icy grip, Christchurch, the South Island's major city, hosted a pioneering competition and festival that attracted youthful cellists from four continents. The Adam International Cello Competition, held from 24 to 29 July, became the world's most southerly music assembly.

The event fulfils a dream for its director, emigré virtuoso Alexander Ivashkin, a graduate of Moscow's famed Gnessin Institute, former soloist of the Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra and director of the

Bolshoi Opera and Ballet. Ivashkin's enterprise and industry were backed with finance from Wellington arts supporter Denis Adam, head of a forward-looking charitable trust, the Adam Foundation. As a child in London in the late 1930s, Adam was privileged to sit in on Carl Flesch's violin classes, and his love of stringed instruments was no secret. 'When Dr Ivashkin approached us for finance', Adam commented, 'he had a captive audience.' Other vital assistance came from the NZ Arts Council, local arts groups, and Christchurch University at Canterbury, where Ivashkin teaches.

Even then, the prizes (first: NZ\$8,000 [£3,330]; second: NZ\$4,000 [£1,670]; and third: NZ\$2,000 [£830]) seemed less than extravagant and contestant's hefty travel fares could not be met. Despite this, 40 would-be entrants applied from as far afield as Hungary, Japan and Siberia. After careful consideration of preliminary tapes, 18 cellists (maximum age, 30) were selected, and 15 showed up. Three were from New Zealand.

The gathering combined a high-powered, yet easy-natured competition with concerts and masterclasses from each of the five-member jury: David Geringas (chairman, Lithuania/Germany), Ivashkin, Natalia Pavlutsкая (Russia/New Zealand), Marcus Stocker (Switzerland/Australia) and Young-Chang Cho (Korea/Germany). New Zealand's young cellists snapped up places at these classes, while others journeyed from Australia.

Early rounds of the contest were heard at a spartan, neo-Gothic stone venue in the downtown arts centre. Each cellist played Haydn's Concerto in C major (first movement) plus a Prelude and Sarabande from one of Bach's Cello Suites. All had to fight the cold and cope with miniature detonations and cracking from the large wood fire in the Great Hall hearth. A few betrayed nervousness or inexperience. But finding six clear semi-finalists posed no problem.



Top: prizewinning Lübeck cellists Wolfgang Schmidt, first (left) and Martin Michael Osten, second. **Above:** competition sponsor Denis Adam (centre) with jury members (left to right): Alexander Ivashkin, David Geringas, Natalia Pavlutsкая and Markus Stocker. **Opposite page:** first prize winner Wolfgang Schmidt

Zealand cellofest

on the first Adam International Cello Competition and festival in Christchurch

'We have a first level that isn't too demanding technically,' Geringas explained, 'not so we can pick winners, but so as to include the fullest range of talented contenders.' For the semi-finals contestants could play either Hindemith's Sonata op.11 no.3 or the Shostakovich Sonata op.40, plus Fauré's *Elégie* or Bruch's *Kol Nidrei*. 'In this small, compact programme you can identify the full musical personality of a performer and also hear their fullest depth of emotion,' says Geringas.

Martin Michael Osten of Lübeck showed sound musicianship with few surprises – reliable, uncontentious, and well prepared. His cello by Joseph Panormo (London, 1798) permitted agreeable warmth and projection. After training in Australia, Berlin and Southern California, Osten will further his studies with Geringas at the Musikhochschule in Lübeck. Although at times he appeared a shade nonchalant, each reading was intelligently considered and impressively assured.

By comparison, Timothy Park, a student at Yale, took repeated risks. He revealed assertive energy and intensity but sometimes proved over-emotional and erratic. A free, personal account of Bruch's *Kol Nidrei* was badly marred by audible gasping. Yet with New Zealand's veteran accompanist Maurice Till, Park's strongly individual Shostakovich Sonata possessed clarity



and flair. Shostakovich's austere lyricism, the grinding, machine-like Allegro and the playful finale, were robustly, if rather nervily characterised. In the earlier Haydn Concerto, Park's cello (Carlo Antonio Testore, Milan, c.1750) produced a worryingly wiry tone. But elsewhere it showed better

amplitude and Park produced some lovely tonal colouration.

Diminutive Korean cellist, Bongshin Ko, plays an Antonio Gagliano (c.1789), and everything she presented for Christchurch audiences had great warmth and beauty. Her Haydn Concerto was delightfully focused. Boston-trained Ko appeared most at ease in lyrical work though much of her programme lacked sufficient shape or intellectual force. The unyielding Barber Sonata presents daunting problems of balance between cello and piano, and this wasn't helped by Ko's blurring of detail in propulsive moments.

New Zealand's most consistent participant, Ashley Brown, might not yet be totally in command of epic musical forms; but his musicianship is always impressive. Now and then his work appears overly cerebral. However Brown possesses a classically relaxed bow arm and he sustains lyric lines with admirable control and feeling. Partnered by pianist Iola Shelley, he invested *Kol Nidrei* with marvellous expressive probity.

Playing a fine modern instrument by Bruce Carlson (Cremona, 1994) he also brought meticulous technical address to the Shostakovich Sonata. Its discomfiting Andante was appropriately inward, the first Scherzo suitably roughshod, and the main last-movement theme quirky and angular. Brown plans to study further with Aldo Parisot.

Adam International Cello Competition

Peter Benjamin Seidenberg (30, USA), the oldest contestant, caused more raised eyebrows than any other semi-finalist. He presides over his Giovanni Floreno Guidante cello (Bologna, 1715) like some gaunt bird of prey: his right arm comes in at an unusually high angle while his head is often strangely aligned with the fingerboard. Despite such idiosyncrasies of

Sadly, Dvořák's overall plan seemed to elude Seidenberg and his performance suffered from recurring moments of unease. Each of the other contestants gave the performances that the regular, attentive audience had come to expect. Osten produced a clean, propulsive, musicianly Saint-Saëns – nothing overlooked, nothing out of place. Brown's

to the work of New Zealand's makers. Even so, the Antipodean market calls for drastic underpricing – here, fine new cellos fetch between NZ\$8,000 (£3,300) and NZ\$12,000 (£5,000). The audience heard Geringas's J.B. Guadagnini (1761), Cho's handsome Andrea Guarneri (1669) and modern instruments from top New Zealand makers,

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style, and indeed of performance, Seidenberg's best work proved a revelation. His palette is not large; his tone not big; but he reveals a striking measure of poetry and musical integrity. In Bach's Prelude and Sarabande (Suite no.6) his dynamics were exaggerated and all sense of forward motion was lost. But his rivetting grasp of the Barber Sonata was a highpoint of the contest.



Left to right: cellists David Geringas, Alexander Ivashkin and Natalia Pavlutsкая, with Tanya Schatz (piano)

From the early heats it was evident that Christchurch had found an outright winner in Wolfgang Schmidt, a product of the (Geringas) Lübeck Musikhochschule. Freiburg-born Schmidt (24) displays a grandly monumental approach, compelling outward ardour and a richly malleable tonal compass. Stylistically, he appears Germanic, yet all his readings were stamped with the Russian imprimatur. He is also blessed with a Matteo Goffriller cello (1710), part of the Landessammlung Baden-Württemberg collection, and once owned by the Mendelssohn-Bartholdy family. Fauré's *Elégie* was played with expansive, aching, and consolatory expression. The Shostakovich Sonata, with steely-fingered Tanya Schatz at the piano, was wildly implacable in its impact. Schmidt's technique, interpretative instinct and passionate assurance held jurors and public enthralled.

Osten, Brown, Schmidt and Seidenberg were selected for the concerto finals – a choice of Elgar, Lalo, Schumann, Dvořák or Saint-Saëns A minor, with piano. All opted for Dvořák except Osten, who chose Saint-Saëns.

was a fine, robust, mainstream Dvořák Concerto – a shade too cautious yet highly eloquent. Schmidt captivated the audience with his finished style, sheer flair and outright artistry. This was heartfelt, committed and memorable music-making.

Incontestably Schmidt took the top prize; Osten was second; and Brown moved into third place, ahead of the controversial Seidenberg. However the latter's extraordinary reading of the Barber Sonata was singled out by the judges for special mention. In a final gala concert featuring the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra conducted by Theodore Kuchar, Brown was heard in *Kol Nidrei*, Osten played Saint-Saëns, while Schmidt repeated his Dvořák.

A public discussion bringing together New Zealand's violin makers with the contest adjudicators centred on a typically divisive topic: old instruments versus the modern product. Local woods are unsuitable for the luthier's craft and visitors expressed surprise that imported European maple is essential

Noel Sweetman, Adrian Studer and Malcolm Collins.

At the opening concert, days earlier, David Geringas and his wife Tanya Schatz presented the Schnittke Cello Sonata (1978). Geringas told how he'd obtained the manuscript for this important work from Alexander Ivashkin, who smuggled it out of the Soviet Union for a Hamburg performance in 1979 – its first in the West.

Was Ivashkin's most recent initiative equally successful?

Beyond all doubt, yes. The six-day Christchurch experience impressed contestants, jury and observers with its creative diversity, easy informality and dedicated music-making. Competition patron, Mstislav Rostropovich, called the gathering 'an important step for the progress of cello playing in an important part of the world'. Yet already the arts community is asking: what of its future?

Once again New Zealand's isolation is a governing factor. Ivashkin and his colleagues envisage an event repeated every two or three years. They hope for increased backing, bigger rewards, guaranteed prizewinners' engagements and paid airfares. But financiers are predictably talking of cost-effectiveness: wouldn't less-pricey national contests and local prizewinners' overseas forays profit New Zealand equally in international terms? Quite simply, no. This country's standing on the global music stage can be immeasurably advanced, but only if events like the triumphant Adam 'Cellofest' are instituted and allowed to grow. □