



COURTESY THE ARTS CENTRE, CHRISTCHURCH

COMPETITION REPORT

THE ADAM'S

CHRISTCHURCH (POPULATION 380,000) IS THE MOST SOUTHERLY city of its size in the world. It was New Zealand's first city by royal charter and is still generally regarded as the most English in the country. The river that runs through it is the Avon. Its streets have names like Oxford and Worcester, it brims with cosy pubs and cafés, boasts an impressive array of restaurants (even Lao and Burmese), and abounds in art galleries, museums, theatres, gardens and Gothic architecture. Christchurch also hosts the most southerly international music competition on the planet. The Adam International Cello Festival and Competition may be remote geographically, but the 2006 competition (the sixth), held from 14 to 21 July, attracted nearly a hundred applicants. Of these, 23 cellists from 17 countries were chosen to participate, nearly half of them from Asia or of Asian descent.

The drama began even before the competition officially opened. The cellist from Uzbekistan simply disappeared — his phone had been disconnected, he had no email address and there was no way of contacting him. One of the judges, Giovanni Sollima, bowed out at the last minute owing to a scheduling conflict. Two cellos failed to arrive at the same time as their owners: Konstantin Manaev recovered his within a day, but Soo Bae went five days without hers.

But aside from these mishaps, all appeared to run with Swiss-like efficiency. The opening ceremony set the tone, exuding warmth, informality and friendliness in the Great Hall of Christchurch's Arts Centre, a city block of handsome buildings that once served as the University of Canterbury. The Great Hall is indeed grand — an imposing, baronial edifice that might well have served as a Harry Potter set.

The first round began the next day and continued into Sunday morning. The contestants played music by Bach, Boccherini and Britten against the discreet counterpoint of a crackling fire from the centrally located fireplace that warded off the chill of a New Zealand winter.

Competitors had the choice of the prelude and courante from either the fourth, fifth or sixth Bach suites, but nearly all chose the sixth ('the least problematic', according to jury chairman Alexander Ivashkin). Most also chose the best-known Boccherini sonata (the A major), but only three opted for the second of the three Britten suites. In most cases, the competitors showed their greatest strength in the Britten. Many began their Bach with authority and energy but failed to sustain momentum or to inject musical interest. Exceptions included Soo Bae (a Korean—Canadian), Hee-Young Lim (one of four competitors from Korea or of Korean ancestry), Konstantin Manaev (the only Russian) and Benyamin Sonmez (a young Turk who brought Byzantine

The Great Hall of the Arts Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, where the competition was played out. With its Gothic architecture, it could have been used as a Harry Potter set

Even lost cellists and instruments could not spoil the welcome at a recent cello competition in New Zealand. ROBERT MARKOW reports

FAMILY

colour and Baroque elegance to his playing), all of whom advanced to the second round. Bae used a Guarneri generously loaned by Ivashkin while her own instrument continued to travel the world.

Australian Charlotte Winslade, veteran of an eight-concert solo tour of Afghanistan in 2004, performed with assurance and conviction but surprisingly did not advance; nor did Mok-Hyun Gibson-Lane (one of two New Zealand competitors), who played with unfailing musical intelligence and beauty of tone.

Ten contestants were chosen for the second round, scheduled for the Tuesday. In the interim, other events took place that make the Adam competition unique, for this is a true festival in addition to a competition, with masterclasses, recitals, lectures and discussions. Natalia Pavlutskaia presented an intriguing recital honouring Mozart and Shostakovich in their anniversary years. Her programme included Schnittke's *Moz-Art à la Haydn* (a reconstruction for two

The opening ceremony set the tone, exuding warmth, informality and friendliness

cellos of partly lost music for a pantomime, K416d), and the Sonata K292, a work of doubtful attribution originally for bassoon and cello but played here with Ivashkin on a second cello. The Shostakovich component included the single-movement Moderato discovered about 15 years ago in the composer's archives, possibly a discarded movement from the well known sonata.

New Zealand luthier Noel Sweetman provided insight into cello cases, glue, rosin and the like, reminding us that every part of the instrument was once a living thing. Simon Morris (a co-owner and director of J.&A. Beare in London) discussed what the cellist can give to the instrument and vice versa. His words of wisdom included the remark that 'changing cellos is like changing girlfriends – you can't just get the same but better; things are going to be different.'

Most listeners who had followed the first round of the competition expected Bae, Manaev, Sonmez and Lim to advance to the second, but in addition others who had not yet revealed their true potential made the grade, particularly Alex Friedhoff (a Spaniard, despite his very Germanic name). He brought a sense of uninhibited romanticism to the Barber Sonata, and was one of the few to play Popper's required *Elfentanz* with elfin elegance, not merely as a technical

tour de force. Englishman James Barralet had much to say about the music in round one, but fell short in round two, particularly in Beethoven's 'Bei Männern' Variations (the other required work). Blaise Dejardin brought a measure of Gallic grace and charm to his playing, though his approach to the Shostakovich Sonata seemed a bit tame to me. And then there was the German Nicolas Altstaedt, who did not particularly impress me in either round, but who somehow persuaded the judges to choose him as a finalist. They also chose Dejardin, and, to no one's surprise, Bae and Manaev, both of whom were by now front runners and seemingly in line for first and second prizes. Toke Moldrup (Denmark) had excellent stage presence (a quality absent in many contestants) but had little to say about the music. Likewise, Victoria Simonsen, the other New Zealander, lacked assertiveness, assurance and musicality in her second round, even though she has already won numerous prizes in England in the course of her studies there.

All competitors in round two were also required to play a freshly minted composition called *Games* by young New Zealand composer Robin Toan, who missed all ten performances of her piece due to fog-bound airports that prevented travel from Auckland. (A special performance was added to the final gala concert on the Friday.) This five-minute work was supposedly derived from the opening theme of Shostakovich's Third Quartet (yet another bow to this composer in his centenary year), but other than two extremely brief allusions to the opening gesture, *Games* seemed to be little more than an exercise in scraping and scratching without rules. ▶



The winner of first prize, Nicolas Altstaedt from Germany

OLIVIA GAUSIUS/PULSE PHOTOGRAPHY

The gap between round two and the final included a recital by juror Leslie Parnas, who played Saint-Saëns's *Swan* with such unearthly beauty that he could be designated an endangered species. Mention should also be made of Parnas's accompanist Iola Shelley, who assisted many of the competitors as well with unfailing support, sensitive musicianship and impressive technique. Masterclasses with Pavlutskaya and Ivashkin revealed master teachers who instructed with enormous enthusiasm and coaxed their students into finding answers for themselves.

Nicolas Altstaedt dropped the bombshell with the evening's second performance of the Shostakovich

In the final gala concert, four contestants competed at concerto level, assisted by the Christchurch Symphony. Manaev's performance of Shostakovich's Concerto no. 1 was more frantic than intense. Next, Dejardin gave an elegant but low-key account of the Schumann Concerto. Then Altstaedt dropped the bombshell with the evening's second performance of the Shostakovich, this time played with electrifying presence. Last came Soo Bae in Elgar. Like Manaev, she didn't quite sustain the standard she had set earlier.

Predictably, and deservedly, Altstaedt won the first prize of NZ\$16,000 (provided by the competition's founder and principal sponsor Denis Adam) plus a recording contract with Naxos and performances with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. It must have been a tough choice for the judges to rank Manaev (second prize: NZ\$8,000) and Bae (third prize: NZ\$4,000), for both had done their best playing earlier. Bae had proven herself to be the more mature and polished artist, but perhaps it was Manaev's fierce Russian temperament and bold musical personality in previous rounds that tipped the balance. Even Ivashkin admitted to learning from his spine-tingling performance of the Schnittke First Sonata.

Until midway through the gala, there had been no provision for a fourth prize; it looked like Dejardin was going to walk away with nothing. But the sponsors of the third prize, Christopher and Jilly Marshall, rose to the occasion and created a fourth award of NZ\$3,000 on the spot — a characteristically generous and noble gesture in keeping with the spirit of the entire event. Manaev won the prize for best performance of Britten in round one (making him the only cellist to win two prizes); and Sonmez won the prize for best Boccherini.

Ivashkin summarised the competition by noting the extraordinarily high level of contestants, the strong international representation, the compatibility of the jury ('the best I have ever worked with') and that the festival had greatly enhanced the cultural profile of New Zealand. But above all, he stressed the learning experience it had been for everyone: 'Such events, in every field, especially in the arts, are important because without them there is no development and advancement. There were no

Jury

Alexander Ivashkin RUSSIA—UK
(festival artistic director and jury chairman)
Simon Morris UK
Leslie Parnas USA
Natalia Pavlutskaya RUSSIA—UK
Arvo Volmer ESTONIA



The competition jury: (from left) Leslie Parnas, Natalia Pavlutskaya, Simon Morris, Alexander Ivashkin and Arvo Volmer



Prizewinners: (from left) Blaise Dejardin, Konstantin Manaev, composer Robin Toan, Benjamin Sonmez, Soo Bae and first-prizewinner Nicolas Altstaedt

losers here.' Competitor Kenny Mizushima echoed this sentiment in saying that 'just by being here I know I've gotten better.' And Sonmez is already looking forward to the next competition in 2009: 'Next time I'm going to win first prize!' ■

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