

Dublin piano contest returns with an invasion of talent

Classical Notes

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Nathalia Milstein, the 2015 winner of the Dublin International Piano Competition

Here's hoping that by the time you read this, the so-called 'Beast from the East' will have thawed a little, but be warned, there is another blitz on the way from that general direction. This time, however, it is of a more pleasant kind – music.

It comes in the shape of an invasion of young pianists who have qualified for the 2018 Dublin International Piano Competition (May 18–29), with South Korea leading the charge with no fewer than 11 participants.

The contest, founded in 1988, has been a flagship for our musical ambition on the international scene and now ranks among the most important piano competitions in the world. The contest takes place every three years and its guiding light is John O'Connor, one of the original founders, who now celebrates 30 years as artistic director.

"There were 214 applications overall, a significant increase on 2015, and the standard has been quite staggering," says the Irish maestro. "Some really impressive players have not made the cut. That is really sad and unfortunate, but really can't be helped."

Besides the South Korean contingent, the finalists – just announced – include China (9), Russia (6), Japan (5), Ukraine (2), Israel (2) and one each from Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Georgia.

As against these, the western 'defence' is led by Ireland and the

United States (6 each), Poland (2), Britain (2) and Germany (2).

The competition was sponsored for its first three events by the GPA Group, but with that group's collapse the financial baton was picked up by Guardian Insurance and then passed to Axa, which ended its commitment in 2009 on the implosion of the Celtic Tiger. Since then, the competition has been supported by donations and private benefactors allied to the generosity and goodwill of our music institutions, mostly the RDS, NCH and RTE.

The 11 days of preliminaries and finals are truly 'blood, sweat and tears' stuff and the tension on the final night at the NCH is hard to beat for excitement as young and impossibly talented musicians are stretched to the very limit of their abilities.

The ten winners so far have all become international stars, including the inaugural victor Philippe Cassard of France in 1998, Max Levinson (USA, 1997), Antti Siirala (Finland, 2003), Nikolay Khoyzainov (Russia, 2012) and most recently Nathalia Milstein (France, 2015), the first female winner.

Siirala, a unanimous winner, will this year enjoy a more relaxed time as he is a member of the international jury – though juries in

recent times have not exactly been dashing back with their verdicts.

Generally, Irish pianists have struggled to keep abreast of the blistering standards required, with Finghin Collins and Fiachra Garvey doing best.

This time, an Irish contingent of six was chosen from 15 applicants. They are Eoin Fleming, Antonia Huang, Cahal Masterson, JJ McNamara, Billy O'Brien and Peter Regan.