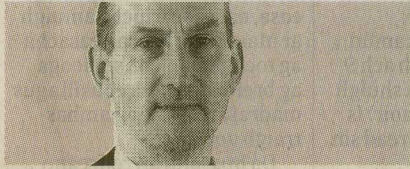


Comparing notes at the Dublin International Piano competition



Michael Dervan Classical Music

In the opening round, 63 young players were whittled down to 24. My verdict often diverged from the jury's

There's always a lot to think about at the Dublin International Piano Competition. It was nearly impossible to listen to the 63 young players who performed in the first round of the Dublin competition last weekend without wondering why they put themselves through such a gruelling experience. Why do they participate in a practice that seems to turn the art of music into some kind of sport? What do they hope to gain?

The stated aims of the Dublin competition are diverse. They begin with providing an opportunity for "young Irish pia-

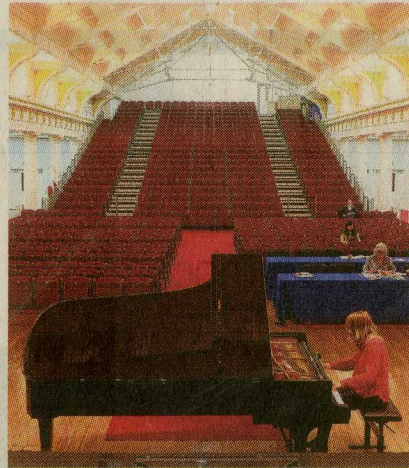
nists to participate in our international competition of the highest standard" and include bringing "the world's best young professional pianists" to Dublin, before getting around to the matter of offering contestants "the opportunity of being heard by international agents and press under concert conditions, which will help launch them on a successful professional performing career".

The daddy of them all

The homepage of the Leeds competition, the daddy of them all when it comes to piano competitions in these islands, is rather more succinct. Leeds, it says, "gives an outstanding opportunity for young international pianists to advance their careers and become the artists of the future".

One of the main distinctions between Dublin and Leeds is the matter of repertoire. In Dublin it's free, bar a selection from a handful of specially commissioned, short test pieces by Irish composers. In Leeds, where the rules have relaxed over the years, the first round stipulates the inclusion of "one important work by Bach, Mozart, Clementi, Haydn, Beethoven or Weber" and the second round "one major work" by Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Brahms, Mussorgsky, Rachmaninov, Scriabin, Stravinsky, Bartók, Debussy, Ravel, Janáček, Granados or Albéniz.

In the days when the likes of Radu Lupu



“This year was marked by lots of flaws, the most annoying being a frequent insistence on unnecessary loudness

and Murray Perahia won at Leeds, competitors still had to choose from lists of specific pieces, which varied from competition to competition.

The freedom in Dublin is real, but not quite what it seems. Players coming to

Dublin who also want to try their luck at a number of other competitions just reorder the set-pieces they are required to know.

Just two of this year's Dublin competitors offered programmes that steered fully clear of Leeds's list of required inclusions: Amanda Gessler (US) paired Berg and Franck while Billy O'Brien (Ireland) chose Messiaen and Barber. The players are conservative, too, although Russia's Natalia Sokolovskaya stood out from the pack by offering a set of *Paganini* Variations that she wrote herself. Not one of this adventurous trio made it into the second round.

Listening to competitive performances creates the risk of a kind of cocoon effect, in which you compare players to one another rather than to the world at large. I ask myself a few simple questions about each player: would I like to hear them again? Would I like to hear them in the repertoire they have offered in the next round? I try to keep myself grounded by asking myself not about the competitive potential they are showing, but if I would want to hear them in a real-world recital.

The answers are sometimes far from heartening, and this year was marked by lots of flaws, the most annoying being a frequent insistence on unnecessary loudness.

The names of the 24 players who will be heard in the second round have been announced. I agreed with the jury on a number of them. Korea's Yun Tai Kim made a real impression in Bach, Schumann, Cho-

pin and Liszt; my notes have him down as "formidable".

Sako Kotakejima offered a strange juxtaposition of Handel, Balakirev (his slight *Au jardin* rather than the daunting *Islamey*) and Liszt; my notes conclude "you can listen to her". Canada's Alexander Malikov, who played Scarlatti, Scriabin, Liszt and Shostakovich, marked himself out by persuading you that he always had something in reserve.

Light and deft

France's Nathalia Milstein offered some carefully studied Prokofiev (the Fourth Sonata) and light, deft Bach (the Toccata in C Minor). Mishka Rushdie Momen from the UK made light work, in the best sense, of late Beethoven (the Sonata in E, Op 109), a Ligeti Étude (*Der Zauberlehrling*) and Ravel (*Alborada del gracioso*). My notes on Denmark's Gustav Piekut in Mozart, Debussy and Chopin conclude, "distinctive, just-sit-back-and-listen kind of playing".

The jury gave the nod to Korea's Woogil Park, and although I didn't share their positive verdict, I did enjoy the well-judged scale of his Haydn. They also liked Ireland's Peter Regan, in Schoenberg, Debussy and Liszt. Still only 19, he is the most individual and developed young Irish pianist I've heard in years. Canada's Alexander Seredenko showed big, fearless playing in Rachmaninov and Chopin, and my heart warmed to the cheer of America's Ja-

son Stoll in Villa-Lobos's *A Prole do Bebê*, though not to the cluttered sound of his Scriabin.

China's Hao Zhu showed lots of aggression, but poetry and thoughtfulness too, in Schumann's *Carnaval*. The jury must have enjoyed the pairing of Elliott Carter and late Beethoven by China's Xiaohui Yang in ways that I didn't, nor did I share their approval of Russia's Mikhail Berestnev in Bach and Rachmaninov, whose *Corelli* Variations didn't respond well to a peculiar stop-go approach; nor did I share their verdict on the noisy tumult that Italy's Alexander Gadjeiev produced in the Bach/Busoni Chaconne in D minor.

There was nothing to dispute about the airiness that German-Japanese Caterina Grewe brought to a rarely heard Haydn sonata, nor to the way she found a clear path through the Third Sonata of Scriabin.

Players I might have given the benefit of the doubt to include Sunhwa Kim, Andrei Korobeinikov, Michael Davidov, Costanza Principe, Georgy Tchaidze and Amiran Zenaishvili. But the jury opted for Daiki Kato, Ilya Maximov, Sean Rooney, Chang Yong Shin, Alexander Bernstein, Alexander Beyer, Hanbin Chyung, Lu Shen and Kei Takumi.

The Dublin International Piano Competition continues at the RDS today and tomorrow, and at the National Concert Hall on Saturday, Sunday and Tuesday 26th. See [dipc.ie](#)