

Impressions of the XI International Chopin Piano Competition

In Darmstadt, 6 - 16 October 2017

by

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“Poles dominate Darmstadt’s XI International Chopin Piano Competition”

This records my personal impressions of the XI Darmstadt International Chopin Piano Competition, and complements the insightful, highly-readable and more technical review by Michael Moran <https://michael-moran.org/2017/09/24/xi-darmstadt-international-chopin-piano-competition-2017-6-16-october-2017/> of each competitor’s performance throughout the Competition.

I came from London specially to attend the 2017 Competition and sat through the entire event - enjoying the Gala (Friday 6 October) and Prizewinners (Monday 16 October) concerts as well as the three Rounds of the Competition itself (which were held every day between Saturday 7 and Sunday 15 October). I had attended both the X Darmstadt International Chopin Piano Competition in 2013 as well as the historic Chopin Marathon in 2015, so had high expectations for this 2017 Competition - of both the performance standard and the efficient organisation of the event by the Chopin-Gesellschaft in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Darmstadt.

On my arrival at the Darmstadt Orangerie for the Gala concert the Competition Director and Gesellschaft Vice-President, Jill Rabenau, informed me that 17 of the 47 accepted competitors had not turned up to play. (The Liszt and Tbilisi competitions were taking place concurrently and some of the other accepted pianists were either preparing for the Dudley and Brahms competitions or had subsequently agreed big conflicting concerts elsewhere). This meant that the First Round line-up was smaller by half than at some of the previous ten Darmstadt Chopin Competitions (in 2009 for example 64 candidates had performed and in 2013 there had been 54). Initially, I was surprised and disappointed to hear this but as the First Round of the Competition progressed it was obvious that there was a strong field of competitors and that we were in for an entertaining time. In retrospect I was glad - and I suspect the jurors were too - that we did not have to listen to such a long list of pianists as had played in the earlier Darmstadt Competitions. (In April 2015 I attended the Warsaw Competition Preliminary Round and heard 105 of the 150 pianists perform. Enjoyable as Chopin’s works are, that was quite an endurance test).

In this 2017 Darmstadt Competition, including the Gala and Prizewinners concerts, we experienced 11 consecutive days of Chopin music totalling almost 42 performance hours - principally played over the three Rounds by the 30 competitors from 16 countries. Although Polish pianists came to dominate the Finals and the

Prizes, an excellent international mix of pianists was maintained throughout the Competition, as the Table below summarises. The seven eminent jurors, all especially well known in the ‘Chopin world’, added further diversity to the international nature of the 2017 Competition.

Number of competitors by nationality in XI Darmstadt International Chopin Competition					
Country	Accepted	1st Round	Semi-Finals	Finals	Prize Winners
Poland	12	8	4	4	6 (1 st + 2 nd + 4 th prizes + Best Mazurka + Best Pole non-main prize Finalist + joint Best Improvisation)
Japan	4	4	3	2	2 (5 th + 6 th prizes)
China	5	2	2	1	1 (Best non-main prize Finalist)
Korea	4	2	2	1	2 (3 rd prize + Best Chamber music)
Czech	3	2	2	-	
Ukraine	2	2	1	-	
Russia	2	1	1	-	
Hungary	1	1	1	-	
Romania	1	1	1	-	1 (Joint Best Improvisation)
Uzbekistan	1	1	1	-	
Vietnam	2	1	-	-	
Argentina	1	1	-	-	
Australia	1	1	-	-	
Brazil	1	1	-	-	
Lithuania	1	1	-	-	
Netherlands	1	1	-	-	
Bulgaria	1	-	-	-	
USA	1	-	-	-	
Canada	1	-	-	-	
Denmark	1	-	-	-	
Germany	1	-	-	-	
TOTALS					
Competitors	47	30	18	8	12
Countries	20	16	13	4	5

The ages of the competitors ranged from 16 to 30. For me it was a little disappointing though that, despite efforts by the Gesellschaft and others, no German or British pianists took part in the Competition. (There had been several in the 2013 Competition).

During the three Rounds 98 works by Chopin were performed (i.e. almost half of his total compositions). As the following Table shows, several of them were performed many times. Three pieces in particular stand out as the most frequently played: the ‘Heroic’ Polonaise op 53 (played 14 times), the third Sonata op 58 (played 13 times;

interestingly, the majority of the Polish Semi-Finalists chose the ‘Funeral March’ Sonata instead), and the E minor Concerto (with none of the eight Finalists opting for the F Minor).

Most frequently played pieces in each round		
XI Chopin Competition	Chopin work	Number of times
First Round	Etudes: 10/3	8
	10/4	8
	25/10	7
	25/11	6
	10/5	6
	10/8	6
	10/9	6
	10/10	6
	Mazurkas: op50	7
	op59	7
	Polonaise: op53	14
	Nocturnes: 15/2	4
27/1	4	
cis-Moll op. post	4	
Semi-Finals	Sonata op58	13
	Sonata op35	5 (inc by 3 Poles)
	Ballade op52	6
	Barcarolle op60	4
	Scherzo op31	4
Finals	E minor Concerto	8 (All Finalists)
	Introduction et	3
	Polonaise	
	Brillante for Piano & Cello op. 3	

With such inevitable repetition it was refreshing to hear a handful of the pianists play a significant work that no other competitor chose. So, for example, we heard each of the Andante Spianato et Grande Polonaise, the Military Polonaise, Berceuse, and the Polonaise-Fantaisie once only.

Four substantial innovations were incorporated for this 2017 Competition, which not only strengthened the Competition but enhanced our enjoyment of it. The first was that in the opening Gala concert on the evening of Friday 6 October in the impressive Darmstadt Orangerie each Jury member performed for about 20 minutes various pieces of their choosing. This arrangement was possibly a world first for an

international piano competition, certainly in Germany. Of course, all seven jurors played works by Chopin, but four of them also included pieces by other composers such as Paderewski, Elsner, Kurpinski, Dvorak and Ravel. There was an air of heightened expectation and excitement as each juror in turn stepped up to the grand Bösendorfer 280 VR to demonstrate their credentials to all the assembled competitors and an audience of about 350 guests including representatives of most of the Chopin Societies throughout the world belonging to the International Chopin Federation, which was meeting in Darmstadt the next day for its annual conference. Naturally, they received enthusiastic rounds of applause.

The second significant innovation was that all First Round competitors were encouraged to volunteer a 5 minutes improvisation on a theme popular during Chopin's lifetime. They were given two hours' notice of the theme and the Competition Rules assured them that they would not be penalised for a weak performance. In the event, only six of the 30 competitors felt bold enough to take on this challenge - and their improvisations were sufficiently interesting that the Jury decided to award a joint Prize to the two best players (one of whom progressed to become the First Prize winner of the Competition).

The third innovation was the requirement for a Chopin cello work to be played by each finalist, along with one of the piano Concertos. The cello works lasted about 15 minutes and the eight finalists were accompanied by the distinguished French cellist Romain Garioud, playing his 18th century cello. The Finals were held in the Orangerie during the evenings of Saturday 14 and Sunday 15 October, with four finalists playing each evening. A little disappointingly, all eight finalists had opted to play the E minor Concerto; they were accompanied by the Russian Chamber Philharmonic of St Petersburg. However, the audience showed great appreciation in being presented with the full range of Chopin's cello works, including two performances of his seldomly performed Grand Duo Concertant.

The fourth very significant innovation was that, following the Warsaw 2015 Chopin Competition practise, each juror's scores for each competitor in the First and Second Rounds of the 2017 Darmstadt Competition were published. (The tabulations are now available on the Gesellschaft's website: http://www.chopin-gesellschaft.de/ChopinScoring4_round1.htm and http://www.chopin-gesellschaft.de/ChopinScoring4_round2.htm). Despite the obvious difficulties and sensitivities, this is a welcome move towards greater transparency in the sometimes controversial music competition world. Sadly, no such scoring has been published for the all-important Finals, where decisions were apparently taken by 'majority voting' (whatever that actually means). Several things can be discerned from careful scrutiny of the published scores. For me two of the big 'take-aways' are: (i) inevitably, there are differences of view between the jurors on the respective performances of the competitors but the overall pattern is not one of wide disagreement. Rather, the impression is one of a cohesive, consistent Jury; and (ii)

the First Prize winner of the Competition (Piotr Pawlak) held fifth ranking in the scoring of both the First and Second Rounds yet in the Finals obviously leap-frogged the four above him in those Rounds ultimately to come out on top.

A few words about the Jury. Several jurors were Warsaw Chopin Competition laureates, including Dang Thai Son who won the gold medal in 1980 and Kevin Kenner in 1990. Ewa Poblocka was a laureate in 1980 and shared the Mazurka prize that year with Dang Thai Son. Andrzej Jasinski was chairman of the jury in Warsaw for many years and the only teacher of Krystian Zimerman. As an audience member I watched them at work throughout the Competition and also had the opportunity to chat with most of them in the margins. They were very professional in their Jury processes and seemed to get along well together. (The point I made above about their scoring seems also to bear this out). I was impressed too at their readiness after each Round to give honest, helpful feedback to each competitor who sought it, and many did. And interesting too that all seven continue to perform concerts internationally - and that they too were also asking the Competition organisers for practice rooms to be made available for them as well as for the competitors.

The two Competition venues seemed admirable. The large and elegant Darmstadt Orangerie was the venue for the Gala and Prizewinners Concerts as well as for the two nights of the Finals, with close on 1,000 people in total attending those four evenings. The main Competition Rounds were held at the modern purpose-built Darmstadt Akademie für Tonkunst (Academy of Tonal Art), which offers a large comfortable auditorium (with about 200 seats and a grand Steinway), ample practice rooms for the competitors and jurors, as well as adequate other spaces including a reasonable café. Both venues are located in quiet locations on the edge of town, surrounded by gardens and parks, and are easily accessible by public transport or walking from the centre.

Reflecting on this Competition several other things will stay in my mind:

- one of the Chinese competitors was blind and it was amazing to hear and see him perform his Chopin pieces with such accuracy and to such a high international standard. He made it through to the Finals (where he won the prize for the best non-main prizewinner) and certainly earned the longest applause in each Round;
- during the First Round the performances of two of the competitors were halted by the Jury chairman because they had exceeded the 30 minutes allowed for each player. They were not unduly punished, since one of them went on to become a Finalist;
- on the second night of the Finals when one of the Japanese competitors had just started her E minor Concerto a string snapped in the piano, making a disconcertingly loud bang. The conductor soon brought the performance to a halt, technicians were summoned to make the necessary repairs and the Concerto was restarted half an hour later;

- all the Competition concerts and auditions were open to the public and were well attended. Between about 30 and 100 people listened to each of the First and Second Round sessions in the Academy, whilst the numbers were impressively larger (between about 200 and 350) for each of the four events in the Orangerie;
- it was a particular pleasure to meet two of the Competition special guests: the Competition Reviewer and author Michael Moran (whose daily blog is on the Gesellschaft website); and Gustav Alink who hosted a tea for the Semi-Finalists whilst the Jury deliberated on which of them would be in the Finals. (Alink then emphasised the importance of networking and establishing contacts, telling the competitors: "today you are competing against each other but tomorrow the pianist sat next to you might provide you with your next concert"); and
- although inevitably quite late in the night, the final dinner for the competitors, jurors, guests and organisers - held after the Prizewinners concert - was a rather special way of rounding off the whole Competition. Everyone I spoke with though commented on just how tired they felt after 11 consecutive days of listening to Chopin! A huge amount of interest and activity had been packed in to less than two weeks.

For me personally - rather tired at the end too - the Competition was an excellent opportunity not only to hear much of the repertoire of my favourite classical composer but also to meet so many interesting people in the 'Chopin world'. The organisers made me feel most welcome and, after attending the Gesellschaft's three last big Chopin events, Darmstadt is beginning to feel like home! In London I help to run a very active classical music society (www.st-marys-perivale.org.uk) where we organise more than 100 concerts annually, and next year we will invite one or more of the Darmstadt prize winners to come and perform for us (as happened after the X Darmstadt International Chopin Competition in 2013). In fact, two of our now regular pianists played in this 2017 Darmstadt Competition; one became a high-placed Semi-Finalist and the other a Main Prize Winner Finalist.

Organising and delivering a big international event like this 2017 Competition takes a huge amount of careful planning, networking, skill and effort (not to mention funding). From the standpoint of an informed outsider, the whole event ran admirably smoothly. The personal dedication of many in the Chopin Gesellschaft was evident. Formally, the Competition was hosted by the Gesellschaft President, Aleksandra Mikulska, but by an unfortunate coincidence of timing she was called to Vienna to perform a concert in the Musikverein and so was absent for the first two Rounds. The Vice President Jill Rabenau (who was also the Competition Director) and Hartmut Stolzman, member of the board, were responsible for actually running the Competition, and did so impressively. They were of course supported by a committed team of volunteer helpers, without which the Competition could not have been so successful. Together they all ensured that the needs of the competitors, jurors and invited guests were taken care of, that unexpected developments (such as the non-arrival of competitors, an ill competitor needing urgent medical attention, and

the piano string replacement) were promptly addressed and that as friendly an atmosphere as possible was created for the contestants to give of their best. Moreover, an event like this is run to a very tight budget (I was told that the overall cost of the Competition was in the order of Euros 100,000) so sponsorship and ticket sales had to be promoted effectively and daily expenditures monitored and strictly controlled.

One example of the attention to detail deserves mention. The Competition Programme booklet - a glossy publication in both German (primarily) and English, with colour photos and all the competitors' and jurors' bios presented clearly and attractively - was professional and user-friendly. It presented the Competition schedule, Competition Rules and the list of Prizes to be awarded; included short 'Welcome' remarks by dignitaries; and, thankfully, carried very minimal advertising. Of particular interest I thought was the summary of the key facts and statistics of the previous 10 Darmstadt International Chopin Piano Competitions. Priced at just Euros 3, this Programme booklet was an invaluable companion for all of us attending the 2017 Competition.

The Chopin Gesellschaft leadership now has a difficult decision to make - when to hold their next Competition. The challenge would seem to be that of marrying competitor playing interest with that of the next premier international Chopin competition, in Warsaw in October 2020. Should Darmstadt break its customary four-yearly Competition cycle and run its XII Competition during 2019 (or even perhaps early 2020), so that it feeds nicely into Warsaw 2020? Or keep to four years and hold it in 2021, when it will be even more firmly than this 2017 Competition in the Warsaw Competition 'dead zone'? The reduced competitor numbers in Darmstadt 2017 probably at least in part reflect the fact that it was held two years after Warsaw 2015 and three years before Warsaw 2020. No doubt, funding considerations will also be a major determining factor.

Whatever their decision I offer just three small practical suggestions for enhancing the next Chopin Competition experience in Darmstadt. First, building on the commendable 2017 practice, publish the Jury scores too for the Final Round, even if the scoring basis has to change to reflect the nature of the Finals performance requirements. Secondly, for the benefit of the non-German English speakers (i.e. the international competitors, the overseas visitors and possibly some jurors), ensure that more of the announcements throughout the Competition are also given in English. (Jill Rabenau was careful to repeat all essential announcements in English, but most of the other announcers did not do so and at both the Gala and Prizewinners concerts several long speeches were made in German; three of the competitors later asked me if I knew what had been said). And thirdly, it would be a nice gesture if the Akademie café could be kept open throughout the Competition - it was for the First Round only - and that the Orangerie served drinks at all the Competition event evenings there.

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