

REFLECTIONS ON THE XII DARMSTADT INTERNATIONAL CHOPIN PIANO COMPETITION OCT. 2022

A Commentary by Roger M Nellist

This commentary offers some personal reflections on the XII International Chopin Piano Competition which took place between 21 and 31 October 2022 in The Orangerie in Darmstadt, Germany. It is intended to complement the detailed insightful analysis of the competitors' performances, produced by the expert Chopin reviewer, Michal Moran.

The Competition was organised by Jill Rabenau (Vice-President, Chopin-Gesellschaft in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e.V, which is now celebrating its 50th anniversary). She was ably supported throughout by a dedicated team (about which there is more below).

As a lover of Chopin's delightful music, romantic and patriotic, this was my fourth visit to Darmstadt - having attended the corresponding X and XI International Chopin Piano Competitions there in 2013 and 2017 as well as the first ever day-long Chopin Marathon in 2015. (My review of that Marathon is accessible [here](#)).

The 2022 Competition followed the successful model of the recent Darmstadt Chopin Competitions - a Gala opening concert in which every Juror performed a number of Chopin and other works of their choice; followed by three competitor Rounds (the Final with a string 'quintet'); and then a Prize Winners' concert given by each of six Finalists. At the end of the First Round all the competitors had the option of playing an Improvisation; seven chose to do so.

58 pianists were initially accepted to play in the 2022 Competition, slightly more than in the last event in 2017. By the time the Competition Programme Booklet was printed at the beginning of October six of those had notified their withdrawal, so 52 pianists were profiled in the printed Programme. However, only 37 turned up in Darmstadt to play in the First Round - a not unusual dropout rate of nearly 30%. The reasons for non-attendance were given as Covid, other illnesses, personal problems and preparation for certain other international piano competitions (Dudley, Paderewski and Busoni).

Nonetheless, the 37 pianists who played in the First Round offered an impressive international coverage, representing 17 nationalities as follows: China (7 pianists), Japan (6), Korea (5), Poland (4), Australia (2), Croatia (2), and one each from Albania, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, USA, Vietnam and White Russia. So, half of the competitors (18) came from the big three Far Eastern countries - China, Japan and Korea - which typically produce many Chopin pianists. There were no British or Italian competitors, though a couple are living in the UK. I had also imagined there would be more than the four Poles competing but was told that another four had initially been accepted but subsequently withdrew.

From the initial 37 competitors the Jury selected 20 pianists to proceed to the Second Round, and then six to play in the Finals. Although I missed the four days of First Round performances (choosing instead after the opening Gala to make my first visit to Freiburg and the Schwarzwald), I returned to hear each of the Second Round performances and the six Finals. I felt that the Jury had made a reasonable selection of Finalists.

The Jury comprised eight distinguished Chopin performers (all now Professors and also providing a broad international perspective). Chaired by Kevin Kenner (USA), the other Jury members were: Christopher Elton (UK), Martin Kasik (Czech Republic), Alexander Kobrin (USA), Aleksandra Mikulska (Poland/Germany, and President of the Chopin Gesellschaft), Katarzyna Popowa-Zydron (Bulgaria/Poland, and Chair of the Warsaw Chopin Competition Jury), Sabine Simon (Germany, and Deputy Chair of the Jury) and Dina Yoffe (Latvia). Unsurprisingly, they each gave strong performances in the opening Gala concert - an equitable arrangement which no doubt put them under some personal pressure to demonstrate their own pianistic skills in front of all the competitors and a large public audience. Several of their performances earned protracted, enthusiastic applause. The Gala got the Competition off to a promising start.

Michael Moran has published a detailed musical review of the competitor performances during the Competition. His insights provide essential reading for those seeking more knowledge of Fryderyk Chopin's music and an informed understanding of how individual performers in an important international Chopin competition progress. This is the link to Michael's review: <https://michael-moran.org>

This year the Jury decided not to award a first prize - a seemingly controversial outcome that Darmstadt has not seen since its Second International Chopin Competition in 1986. Two second-equal placings were made instead. The complete list of the 2022 Prize winners is:

1st: not awarded
2nd: Mateusz Tomica (Poland)
2nd: Vojtech Trubac (Czech Republic)
3rd: Andrey Zenin (Russia)
4th: Da Jin Kim (Korea)
5th: Fantee Jones (USA/Taiwan)
6th: Zvezdan Vojvodic (Croatia)

Prize for the Best Mazurkas: Mateusz Tomica (Poland)
Prize for the Best Improvisation: Andrey Zenin (Russia)
Prize for the Best Semi-Finalist: Ailun Zheng (China)

The organisers intend to publish, in some form, the Jury's scoring - as happened with the last Competition in 2017 and with recent Warsaw competitions. This is an admirable demonstration of fairness and transparency - which will enable readers to track the progress of the competitors between one round and the next, and possibly the curious to assess the degree of overall Jury cohesion and Juror consistency between Rounds.

I think it is worth mentioning that in both the Second Round and the Finals two of the competitors received prolonged and almost thunderous applause from the audience. In this respect it distinguished them from the other contestants. They were Mateusz Tomica (Poland) and Andrey Zenin (Russia). It was no surprise therefore to see them awarded 2nd and 3rd Prizes in this Competition, as well as the Mazurka and Improvisation special Prizes. It is worth noting too that the 6th Prize winner, Zvezdan Vojvodic, was also the youngest competitor, not yet 20.

I would now like to offer these reflections on the 2022 Competition:

1. This was the first Darmstadt competition to be held against the backdrop of an ongoing pandemic (Covid) and of Putin's aggression in Ukraine. In different ways, these two external factors presented something of a destabilising environment for the Competition (its competitors, organisers and audience members). People in the city's hotels and other buildings, and on all public transport, wore masks. Some did in the Orangerie during the Competition performances too. One of the Competition organisers caught Covid and was unable to attend the Finals and Prize Winners' concert. One Ukrainian and one Russian pianist played in this year's Competition and hearing their recent life stories made one appreciate their courage and determination in the face of adverse circumstances.
2. The relatively low number of competitors (37) who actually played was a little surprising, although it was 7 more than in the last Competition. We can but speculate on the reasons - but Covid, other imminent piano competitions, the cost-of-living crisis now affecting everybody around the world, the war in Ukraine and perhaps the relatively modest total Prize money for the Competition (€30,000) are all explanations. Also, two pianists I know expressed the view that the unusual repertoire requirement this year, focusing on Chopin's early works at the expense of his better-known later works, deterred them from applying. There is also the fact that the Darmstadt Competition timing is now out of sync with the Warsaw Chopin Competition - it is another three years to the next Warsaw - which provides less motivation for potential competitors to master the wide suite of challenging Chopin works.
3. During the Competition there was a perception that the overall standard of some of the performances was not as high as in previous years. (Again, the global disruption that Covid has caused for pianists in particular in the last three years, and the lower number of competitors performing this year, may partly explain this). Although such a perception is inevitably subjective it can be evidenced by a few facts - such as the Jury's decision to halt one competitor's performance in the First Round and its decision not to award a Competition 1st Prize.
4. Each of the six Finalists chose to perform Chopin's Concerto in F minor. This was disappointing for the many of us in the audience who had hoped for at least some variety. I learned that the Competition organisers had gone to great pains in their attempt to provide a more varied Final Round but, of course, had no influence on the Jurors' choice of Finalists. All Finalists had indicated the F minor Concerto on their

application form. Perhaps in future Darmstadt Competitions the Jury should be empowered to require some variation, as happens in some other Competitions.

5. Even though they were candidates competing against each other, it was gratifying to see many of the pianists chatting together and enjoying each other's company during the numerous Intervals, in the auditorium (where some sat to hear others play) and at the two special Competition dinners that the organisers arranged for the pianists, Jurors and a few other invited guests. Such camaraderie is not always seen among pianists!

6. The 300-year-old Orangerie proved to be a superior and elegant venue to host all stages of the 2022 Competition. (In earlier Competitions the Darmstadt Akademie für Tonkunst hosted adequately the three performance Rounds, but it seems there had been an unfortunate double-booking which precluded its use this year). The Orangerie's 11 floor-to-ceiling windows and doors let in much sunshine, gave direct access to the landscaped gardens and (with Covid concerns) enabled essential airflow during the Intervals. With more than 400 seats, it provided ample space to accommodate everybody, in comfort. It was almost full for both the Gala and Prize Winners' Concerts. About 100 people attended each of the two Finals (on weekend evenings), while 35 - 55 people joined each of the (weekday) Second Round sessions. Transportation to/from the Orangerie was easy - with a car park and two trams stopping just outside the main gates. My only gripes were the lack of refreshments during the weekday sessions, the dim lighting in the late afternoons and evenings (which made photography difficult) and the apparent unwillingness of Darmstadt taxis to come out to the Orangerie after 11pm at night.

7. At times the organisers expressed to me their disappointment at the lower-than-expected numbers attending the actual performance Rounds, especially on the first weekend, despite very reasonable ticket pricing - €5 for each morning and afternoon session or €8 for the whole day. On workdays it was understandable, but the view was that more of the Chopin Gesellschaft's 175 membership could and should have attended. Perhaps one has to conclude that the Competition suffered the general post-peak-Covid malaise that is now affecting classical music concerts everywhere, with declining audience attendance. There is also the publicity angle to consider: as I toured Darmstadt I saw very few advertising posters (I was informed that posters are not allowed in the city centre) and apparently the local newspaper or radio did not cover the Competition as adequately as the organisers had hoped. I also suspect that the choice of greyish-blue colour posters this year was not as eye-catching as the red and white ones of earlier Chopin events.

8. However, I would especially like to commend the production, design and content of the Chopin Competition Programme Booklet. It contains much relevant information - profiling the Jurors, competitors, the 'quintet' and financial sponsors. It sets out the Gala concert programme, the Competition Rules and provides a most useful summary of the previous 11 Darmstadt Chopin Competitions. It was well worth the €5 selling price.

9. Instead of a small orchestra as in previous competitions, the 2022 Finals were performed with a 'quintet' - an arrangement which worked well and presumably saved some expenditure. The Polish string ensemble - apparently on the recommendation of Jury Chairman Kevin Kenner - was The Apollon Musagète Quartet (based in Germany) joined by the Polish double bass player Slawomir Rozlach. They accompanied the six Finalists impressively, not least the way in which they were able to perform the F minor Concerto three times in a row on each of the two Finals evenings, essentially without a break (and after having had rehearsals in the afternoon with three Finalists!).

10. There was one striking oddity, remarked on by a few interlocutors and the Finalists. With the exception of Darmstadt's Sabine Simon, none of the other Jurors stayed to listen to the Finalists perform in their Prize Winners' Concert on the Monday night. Of course, they are all busy people with numerous international commitments, and had already been in Darmstadt for 11 days. But the pianists, in particular, thought their absence conveyed a negative message. Conversely, several of the Finalists told me they felt much freer, more relaxed and comfortable playing their Prize Winner pieces than they did performing the Finals in front of the Jury.

11. Lastly, the 2022 Competition was neither Livestreamed nor recorded, apart from a video recording made of the Prize Winners' concert and of the concerto performance of Mateusz Tomica. Some of those videos will be uploaded on the Society's website shortly. Several members of the Chopin Gesellschaft, and others, took still photos of the performances - and a few are included here. Covid has forced many musicians and music societies to start Livestreaming their Live concerts and, alongside several other big international competitions, Darmstadt may need to do so next time. In making that decision there are some key pros and cons to consider, the main one being the extent to which Livestreaming undermines the revenue flow from ticket sales.

Overall, this was an exciting international piano Competition which offered many satisfying performances of beautiful Chopin works. It was supremely well organised, kept impressively to schedule and gave me the opportunity to meet several old friends on the 'Chopin circuit' and to make a few new ones. It was well worth travelling from London for, and I look forward to the next one (probably in 2026).

In London I help run a very active classical music society known as the 'Friends of St Mary's Perivale'. Each year, we present 120 (three a week) classical concerts plus a couple of multi-day festivals (the last one being a three-day Chopin Festival at the beginning of last month). All our concerts are recorded and Livestreamed and we have so far attracted viewers in 57 countries. This year the Critics Circle awarded us a Prize for broadcasting more Live classical concerts than any other music entity in the UK. Our 2023 concert schedule as well as the Livestream link and much other material is at: www.st-marys-perivale.org.uk

So, I can well appreciate just how much planning, effort and resources went into organising this year's successful 11-day International Chopin Piano Competition in Darmstadt. Its planning commenced more than two years ago. In leading all that work,

Jill Rabenau was greatly assisted by several other keen Chopin Gesellschaft members - prominent among whom were Hartmut Stolzmann, Regina Heck and Jill's husband Erhard Rabenau. I offer my congratulations to them all on a job very well done.

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11 November 2022



The Prize Winners (L to R):
Mateusz Tomica (2nd)
Vojtech Trubac (2nd)
Zvezdan Vojvodic (6th)
Andrey Zenin (3rd)
Fantee Jones (5th)
Kim Da Jin (4th)



The Prize Winners with the
Competition Sponsors at the Prize Winners'
Concert, Monday 31 October 2022



Award of their Prizes at the Prize Winners'
Concert, with Jill Rabenau presiding



The Prize Winners announced in turn,
Sunday 30 October 2022



The Jury at work during one of the Competition sessions. From L to R: Alexander Kobrin, Christopher Elton, Aleksandra Mikulska, Martin Kasik, Dina Yoffe, Sabine Simon, Katarzyna Popowa-Zydron, Kevin Kenner



Jill Rabenau (standing) reintroducing the Jurors who were about to announce the winners at the end of the Finals, Sunday 30 October 2022. Seated from L to R: Katarzyna, Dina, Sabine, Martin, Kevin, Aleksandra, Christopher, Alexander



After the Gala Concert in which each Juror performed, Friday 21 October 2022. L to R: Organisers (Jill and Erhard Rabenau) and Jurors (Martin, Aleksandra, Christopher, Sabine, Dina, Alexander, Kevin (Katarzyna is missing from this photo))



An evening view inside the spacious Orangerie with the Shigeru-Kawai grand piano



The Orangerie, Darmstadt, October 2022. The Competition was blessed with good weather throughout



The Chopin Gesellschaft's large bust of Fryderyk Chopin, displayed on stage during each Round of the Competition in the Darmstadt Orangerie



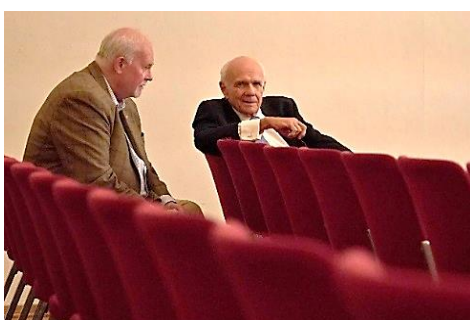
Jill Rabenau standing with the Competition's two Second Prize Winners, Mateusz Tomica (L) and Wojtech Trubac (R)



Michael Moran, Jill Rabenau and Roger Nellist



Michael Moran and Roger Nellist chatting with Mateusz Tomica (centre) and Wojtech Trubac (L) after the Prize Winners' Concert, Monday 31 October 2022



In one of the Intervals, Roger Nellist and Michael Moran reflecting on some of the Competition performances