

Top two



CORRENTIN SCHMEL

Jonathon Brown reports back from the revived Long-Thibaud Competition in Paris, where two young pianists shared first prize

Perhaps for that French taste epitomised by the riotous booing Wagner received from the Jockey Club, the greatest scandal of the reinvented Long-Thibaud Competition was that there was no scandal. Of the six finalists, two shone brightest and won.

As remarked in these pages last month, Gérard Bekerman, newly elected president of the Long-Thibaud Foundation, has a liking for joint prizes and their Latin legalistic nomenclature, *ex aequo*. He also has a liking for teasing his audience at prizegiving ceremonies, so did not miss this opportunity when announcing in humorous convolutions that there was to be no second prize: Hyuk Lee (22, South Korea) and Masaya Kamei (20, Japan) shared first place.

The ceremony was unusual for taking the form of a 'best of' in which not only did some finalists play again, but three candidates from the elimination rounds, whom harsh arithmetic had kept from the last six, were also given a chance to perform. One, the Bulgarian Petar Dimov, stole the show with a performance of Rameau's playful *Rappel des oiseaux* that gave us the most scintillating, imaginative and self-effacing pianism of the evening.

It was gratifying to see that Bekerman's revived competition placed the eternal universality of art over the transient yet ever-recurring horrors of politics. Before the evening started the point was made that Marguerite Long and Jacques Thibaud had launched the competition in occupied Paris in 1943, and we were reminded of Ukrainian candidates *not* present, who had been unable to fulfil their applications. Images of the horrors of destruction were shown, to remind us that these Ukrainian pianists had probably had to swap the piano keyboard for a drone control panel.

The ceremony that followed made for an extended evening after a fairly lengthy day: six concertos (including three Tchaikovsky Firsts), all accompanied by the indefatigable and uniformed Orchestre symphonique de la Garde républicaine under Col François Boulanger's gracious and precise baton. In the historical setting the fact that the orchestra played in full uniform added a surreal undertone, but an undertone that was completely overruled by some fine music-making. It is quite an ask to make the third Tchaik 1 as fresh as the first, six hours later.

Neither winner played the Tchaikovsky. Michael Davidman (USA) did, and in a personal, flexible and

Above: Joint competition winners (l-r) Masaya Kamei and Hyuk Lee

Gérard Bekerman
announces the results



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detailed manner that was rather special, its chamber-music sensibility perhaps explaining why he was chosen by the orchestra for its prize. The jury on the other hand, who had also heard him through the preliminaries, placed him third due to his brutally unidiomatic account of the first movement of Chopin's Second Sonata.

Hyuk Lee gave a powerful and well-judged Prokofiev Second, the beast of the bunch, rating perhaps 94 on the Parker wine scale where few but the likes of Yuja Wang can achieve the elusive 100. Thereupon Masaya Kamei brought the house down with Saint-Saëns' Fourth – a piece with less Dostoyevskiyish ambition but designed to please the audience. (He took both Public and Press prizes.) They deserved the *ex aequo* tag overseen by Bekerman in a jury decision which, he told me, took only three minutes. 'I don't let them talk. They write their decisions on a slip of paper, then we count. That's how we get our winners. There's no need to debate. It's about music – we don't need words.'

Upon the announcement, the two young men spontaneously shook hands, to great applause, sealing a sense of music triumphant and adding to that a dose of bewildered glee. That glee seemed undented when they were asked to perform again, each presenting half of their chosen concerto, followed by a 'private' party at which they chatted tirelessly to the gathered fans.

The event was presented in partnership with France TV and Radio Classique, whose coverage ensured its triumph. Perhaps the all-pianist jury was a little thin on youth and big names, plus it might be a good idea for entrants to offer a second-choice concerto to avoid the Tchaikovsky pile-up, but in the snug glamour of the Châtelet Theatre, whose stunning acoustic projects the soloist most vividly, the Jockey Club had nothing to boo. **IP**

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