CLASSIQUENEWS

LONG-THIBAUD COMPETITION

For more than 80 years, the LONG-THIBAUD COMPETITION, founded in 1943, has nurtured musical excellence, recognised the most compelling artistic personalities and shared its own musical discoveries with the world. A flagship among international competitions, it holds a remarkable position, both for the consistently outstanding artistic standards of each edition and for its ability to reinvent itself.

This year, around twenty young violinists will compete in a spirit of mutual inspiration and goodwill. Recruitment procedures, candidates' profiles, distinguished former laureates, the two founding artists, new developments and the support provided to prizewinners: these are among the many subjects explored and illuminated for Classiquenews by Gérard Bekerman, President of the Long-Thibaud Foundation.

CLASSIQUENEWS: Since its creation in 1943, how do you explain the Competition's ability to have maintained such a high level of excellence and prestige?

Gérard Bekerman: For at least three reasons: the prestige of its founders, the quality of its laureates and the reputation of its juries.

Consider Marguerite Long, a pupil of the illustrious Marmontel, who crossed paths with Chopin and Liszt and was a friend of Ravel and Debussy. Debussy saved her life when she attempted suicide upon learning of the death of her young husband, Captain Joseph de Marliave, who was killed by the first German bullets in 1914. She was also the dedicatee of Le Tombeau de Couperin. And then there was her close associate, Jacques Thibaud.

We must remember that these two artists shone like two stars in the musical world of their time. Their influence extended across the worlds of art and politics, reaching the Emperor of Japan, Charlie Chaplin, Aragon, Cocteau, General de Gaulle, Chagall, and later Maria Callas, Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, who had been a pupil of Thibaud, Arthur Rubinstein, Yehudi Menuhin, Henryk Szeryng and Darius Milhaud.

After becoming a widow, Marguerite Long devoted her life to teaching and to the Competition. She had no children of her own, yet she had more than a hundred young musicians to nurture.

Among them were Aldo Ciccolini and Alfred Brendel, who, at the ages of eighteen or nineteen when they took part in the Competition, wrote to her asking for help to meet their “needs as a student without money”. There were also Paul Badura-Skoda and Bruno Leonardo Gelber.

The Competition has also distinguished itself through its laureates, including Samson François, Michèle Auclair, Brigitte Engerer, Mihaël Rudy, Elisabeth Leonskaya, Vladimir Feltsman and many others.

The founders’ reputations also opened every door to concert halls, orchestras, government ministries and the media.

We have preserved the Long-Thibaud Foundation’s archives: words from Monsieur Tchaikovsky, recordings of cadenzas in D major by Beethoven written by Jacques Thibaud, beautiful letters from Maurice Ravel, photographs of the young Marguerite Francfort, the extremely wealthy wife of Thibaud, who gave her rather irresistible husband the Baillot Stradivarius violin, together with Viotti’s Pique bow, as a wedding present. And finally, there are his last photographs in Saint-Tropez, with… Gilbert Bécaud and Bourvil.

I believe the excellence of the Long-Thibaud Competition stems from this entire history, from the golden age of a France that placed art and culture at its heart.

We must not misunderstand the significance of the year 1943. France was under occupation, and it was one of the darkest years of the war. Some artists displayed ambiguous attitudes, occasionally rendering services to members of the Resistance or to people of Jewish faith whom they knew, although such cases were rare.

Marguerite Long, however, whose husband, as I mentioned, had been executed in 1914, felt no sympathy whatsoever towards the Germans.

In the midst of the war, the first Competition was not open to foreign participants. Its mission was to offer young French artists consolation and hope.

CLASSIQUENEWS: How are candidates recruited? What criteria are used?

Gérard Bekerman: The process is straightforward. Candidates register online and submit their programme and biography. They must be between sixteen and thirty-three years old.

They come from a wide range of countries. This year, among the twenty violinists who qualified out of approximately 200 applicants, there are ten men and ten women, half of them from Europe.

As for the piano competition, certain works are compulsory, such as the first and fourth movements of Chopin’s Sonata No. 2, a requirement established by Marguerite Long. Another prescribed piece might be Prokofiev’s Scherzo, Op. 12, No. 10, because you also need strong fingers to make it through the Long-Thibaud. But that is not enough. The fingers must serve the soul.

We particularly like to set Fauré’s Second Impromptu in F minor.

In the archives, I have some very interesting and occasionally amusing comments. I remember one candidate, whose name I must withhold because he would go on to enjoy a prestigious career, about whom a juror remarked: “This young man has more fingers than intelligence…”

In truth, there are two criteria, and this duality is reflected in the prescribed repertoire.

For example, at the next violin edition of the Competition, from 10 to 14 November 2026, every candidate will have to perform a Paganini Caprice as well as the Andante and Allegro from J. S. Bach's Sonata No. 2 in A minor.

A caprice, as its name suggests, can be free in spirit. With Bach, it seems to me, you immediately know what you are dealing with: the grammar, the spirit, perhaps a truth that comes from above and carries us far beyond ourselves...

The fingers are a physical instrument to be put to use. Music must remain the priority, the ultimate goal.

CLASSIQUENEWS: Regarding the candidates' profiles, have you noticed any changes or significant trends in terms of age, nationality, repertoire or other characteristics?

Gérard Bekerman: A few decades ago, relatively few Asian musicians entered the Competition. Things have changed considerably. The prominence of Korean, Chinese and Japanese musicians illustrates this new reality.

Curiously, this year half of the qualified candidates also come from the United States, Russia, Ukraine, Norway, Italy, Hungary and even France! We welcome this geographical diversity.

But we must not misunderstand the strong presence of Asian candidates. Who are they actually studying with? Very often, they work with teachers who trained in our conservatoires, in France, and who have absorbed and respect the style, elegance and spirit of piano playing cherished by Marguerite Long and, in violin playing, by Jacques Thibaud. These teachers are now transmitting that tradition in their own countries.

Many French artists and pedagogues have taught, or continue to teach, masterclasses in Asia, where they enjoy a truly outstanding reputation. In the past, I think of Germaine Devèze, Sabine Lacoarret and Éric Heidsieck; today, of Marc Laforet, Yves Henry and Jean-Marc Luisada.

Something strikes me. Look at Saehyun Kim, winner of the Long-Thibaud Competition's First Grand Prize in 2025. He was invited to perform a recital at 9 p.m. at the La Roque d'Anthéron Festival. Your colleague Marie-Aude Roux wrote about him in Le Monde. What a writer! Her praise of this young prodigy was reminiscent of Boileau's L'Art poétique, so eloquent and so generous was her language.

And what recognition for France when Saehyun records his first CD for Warner and remembers to include Fauré, who was so close to Marguerite Long.

Ultimately, music has no real nationality. It is a universal language. It needs no passport to travel.

As for purely technical, finger-based virtuosity, it can be seductive in the sense of dazzling an audience, but it rarely truly captivates. It may please for a moment, provide entertainment and demonstrate extraordinary prowess, but one can clearly see that it reaches a point beyond which something else is required.

Listen to the great Cziffra playing the étude in thirds or the Revolutionary Étude. He transcends technique, almost mocks it, turns it into a game, like a sorcerer's apprentice, because his vision was always music itself, art in all its beauty.

Only artificial intelligence, perhaps, will soon be capable of matching the accuracy and power of his fingers. It will never come close to his soul.

When Cziffra plays the Revolutionary Étude, blood, fire, barricades and the fury of a rebellious people erupt from his soul: a people at once so fragile and so powerful!

Who knows? Perhaps one day the Long-Thibaud Competition will discover a First Prize winner who comes close to his genius.

CLASSIQUENEWS: Which great artists have left their mark on the Competition since the Second World War, either as members of the jury or as laureates?

Gérard Bekerman: Samson François, First Prize winner at the very first Competition in 1943, the same year that Michèle Auclair won the violin prize.

There have been so many others since then. I am afraid of leaving out someone famous. I would mention Aldo Ciccolini, Peter Frankl, Gérard Jarry, Pascal Rogé, Vladimir Feltsman, Mikhaïl Rudy, Alexandre Brussilovsky, Jorge Luis Prats, Stanislav Bunin, Christophe Boulier, Cédric Tiberghien, Hyuk Lee, Masaya Kamei, Bohdan Luts and Saehyun Kim.

I would also like to mention artists who did not win First Prize but went on to enjoy remarkable careers: Alfred Brendel, Elisabeth Leonskaya, Frédéric Aguessy, François-René Duchâble and Bruno Leonardo Gelber.

CLASSIQUENEWS: Have there been any new developments this year?

Gérard Bekerman: Many Europeans have entered, and the jury brings together eminent artists such as Maxim Vengerov, Gidon Kremer, Silvia Marcovici, Gérard Poulet, Boris Kuschnir, Mihaela Martin, Corina Belcea, Pavel Vernikov, Vera Weiling Tsu and Nathan Mierdl.

Another innovation is the voting system I have introduced. There are no numerical averages. Each juror submits one name. We count the votes individually, without discussion, and I simply announce the candidate who received the most votes, followed by the second, the third, and so on.

I remember an experience at a competition jury to which Van Cliburn had invited me, in 2000, I believe. The model struck me as perfectly appropriate for a Latin examination, but not for a piano competition. At the end, an elaborate and rather sophisticated scoring system was used to distinguish between the candidates.

Music does not always soothe tempers. It can intensify them to extremes. Musicians perform with their individuality, their sense of life, their conception of beauty and their understanding of style.

I do not think Bach or Chopin would have accepted a system of numerical scoring.

The best approach is not to discuss things but simply to say: “I support this candidate, and I do not support that one.”

In any case, it is very difficult to convince a musician who is not convinced already...

I hope that I will soon be able to persuade the World Federation of International Music Competitions to adopt the new model that the Long-Thibaud has successfully implemented, in the interests of music, impartiality, sincerity and, ultimately, respect for all candidates.

We have the right to cherish a particular student. But above all, we have a duty to cherish every candidate.

Another undeniable innovation is the active involvement of the City of Paris in the Long-Thibaud Competition. The Mayor of Paris, Emmanuel Grégoire, is personally committed to it. He has written the foreword to this year's official programme.

The city's 22,000 students across its eighteen conservatoires will vote for their own prize, which will be awarded to one of the four finalists during the concerto round, accompanied by the Republican Guard Symphony Orchestra conducted by Bastien Stil.

The Competition is reconnecting with its great moments from the days of Georges Auric, Tony Aubin, Darius Milhaud and Roger Boutry.

That is precisely the spirit of Long-Thibaud: engaging young people.

I would add that the illustrious Maxim Vengerov, a member of this year's jury, will give a masterclass for these students at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional on Rue de Madrid. You can imagine the excitement among them.

Thank you, Mr Mayor, dear Emmanuel! And let us extend that thanks to Séverine Féron, a devoted servant of music at the City of Paris.

Finally, the Competition benefits from the support of France Télévisions and Radio Classique, which will broadcast highlights and the final round.

A door has also just begun to open with Radio France, which has invited the laureate to perform at its celebrated Festival d'Occitanie. Thanks to the efforts of Michel Orier and the new director of France Musique, Stéphane Grant, I am convinced that this door will soon be wide open.

And I must not forget the generous support of the Caisse des Dépôts, which has made one of the world's finest performance venues available to the Long-Thibaud Competition: the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

CLASSIQUENEWS: You are particularly committed to supporting laureates after the Competition and the awards ceremony. How do you help them?

Gérard Bekerman: I do not vote; I act as an arbitrator when asked to do so. The candidates are the soul of the Competition. The jurors are not judges.

In 1949, when the young Aldo Ciccolini won the Long-Thibaud, Marguerite Long organised some 150 concerts for him, helping launch his career.

At the time, there were organisations devoted to promoting young musicians, such as the Jeunesses Musicales de France (JMF), which provided extraordinary support for their careers. It was a golden age.

Today, the Foundation helps its laureates as best it can. We have organised around thirty concerts for each of our First Prize winners, most often in prestigious venues.

I am thinking of Hyuk Lee, Bohdan Luts, who has also just won the Wieniawski Competition in Poland, Masaya Kamei, who travels the world, and Saehyun Kim. Their engagements have included the Royal Opera of Versailles, the 14 July concert before millions of listeners, the La Roque d'Anthéron Festival, the Cziffra Foundation in Senlis, Radio France, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and many other venues.

We can also help them finance further studies and advanced training in Salzburg, Lausanne or Paris.

CLASSIQUENEWS: Your partners have remained numerous and loyal from one edition to the next. What attracts them to the Competition? Which aspects appeal to them most?

Gérard Bekerman: Sponsorship must be reciprocal: it must bring benefits to both parties.

One of our very first sponsors was Fuji Sankei. Its support was decisive. Sadly, I speak of it in the past tense, because after some thirty years, its commitment will probably come to an end.

Our leading sponsor is the Abeille Group, part of a large mutual insurance family serving twelve million French people, myself included. The group is loyal to us, and we are loyal to it.

Introducing companies to the values of quality, social responsibility, an appreciation of beauty, the truth of our cultural heritage and, above all, the importance of meaningful human relationships is an asset for the business world.

I remember a particularly fruitful experience with L'Oréal, initiated by François Dalle at the Couvent des Capucins in Montfort-l'Amaury. Its purpose was to bring culture into the lives of employees from the most modest positions to senior management. Companies such as Auchan, Thomson and Rhône-Poulenc took part.

We discussed Montesquieu, Beethoven, Picasso, quality, finance—which was the most boring subject!—and ecology.

Bruno Lussato, a friend of mine and a professor at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (CNAM), believed that culture strengthened employees' ability to adapt to change and improved productivity.

Groups of executives, cashiers, employees and business leaders all came together to help their companies prosper through an awakening to the arts.

We met people such as Edgar Morin, Henri Dutilleux and Pierre Boulez; Friedelind Wagner, Wagner's granddaughter; young unknown figures, myself included; and celebrities such as Jean-René Fourtou, the former CEO of Rhône-Poulenc.

Madame Mitterrand was also among them. In the middle of a dinner, at midnight, she had to leave us because, as she put it, "François is waiting for me at the Élysée Palace"!

To run a company successfully, it is better not to be entirely insensitive to this reality.

The Abeille Group understands this.

The State is weighed down by debt. Local authorities have limited resources. We no longer have queens, kings or marquises to patronise the likes of Liszt and Chopin.

We must encourage the business world to step forward.

If companies give us one, we will give them back two. I am sure businesses understand this language…

ClassiqueNews – October 29th 2026 - https://www.classiquenews.com/entretien-avec-gerard-bekerman-president-de-la-fondation-long-thibaud-a-propos-de-ledition-2026-du-concours-long-thibaud-violon/