

The Piano Capitol of the World

Warsaw is not widely considered to be a tourist destination. It's not listed among the most popularly visited cities of the world. Yet to Chopin lovers, pianists and Classical music enthusiasts, it ranks high on the list of honored places, as it's the city of Fryderyk Chopin's youth as well as the home of the prestigious International Chopin Piano Competition. Begun in 1927 and presented every five years since 1955, this competition has eventually become the granddaddy of them all, a venerated contest attracting the world's best pianists. Success at this event has propelled many pianists, including Maurizio Pollini (1960), Martha Argerich (1965), Krystian Zimerman (1975), and Julianna Avdeeva (2010), and others into the rarified air of international stardom. Due to the increasing recognition of this competition and Chopin's marvelous music Warsaw is now promoting itself as "the piano capitol of the world." Savoring the tremendous musical zeal felt throughout the city during this event leaves absolutely no doubt in one's mind that it's "the Chopin capitol of the world."

Warsaw's tragically tortuous history has only added to the sophisticated atmosphere of its storied piano competition. The National Philharmonic Hall, the location of the competition, along with much of the rest of Poland's capitol, was completely destroyed at the start of World War II in 1939 by the extensive German bombing. The painstakingly slow reconstruction of this historic structure took years and it was not until 1955 that the renowned piano competition resumed. The Philharmonic now represents the immense pride of the Polish nation in resurrecting itself from the terrible devastation of that terrible war. Chopin aficionados around the world revere the building and the hallowed tradition continued within its walls, and enter it with a level of excitement unmatched at other piano competitions.

As one measure of the popularity of the competition, tickets are extremely difficult to procure. When they became available for the scheduled 2020 event, they sold out within minutes. To the relief of the thousands who were able to obtain these highly desired tickets, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the postponement of the event until 2021, those same tickets were honored.

Since 2000 I have regularly attended the Chopin Competition and have always been awed by the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from its many devoted attendees. From all over the world they come, armed with preferences for specific styles of playing and strong affections for their favorite pianists. Enthusiasm for these competitors runs high, along with incessant speculation, especially for those pianists who appear to possess the means to advance to the finals. Many attendees believe they know exactly how the music should be played. How do they know this? How do they know the judges criteria? Does anyone believe there is a "best" way to play Chopin's works?

One way of knowing how the adjudicators vote is to listen to them play the music of Chopin. Over the years I have gotten to know many of the competition's adjudicators and have heard most of them perform. It's remarkable to me how similarly they interpret this music. There is a complete lack of rigidity and an absence of excessiveness in their playing, whether it is in their tempo, rubato, or volume. However, there's usually a richness of emotion in their performances. Chopin once remarked to a student, "Put all your soul into it, play the way you feel" revealing his openness to new deeply felt interpretations. One of the jurors of this year's competition, Professor John Rink, recently stated, "The studied neutrality of Chopin's music frees one's imagination and enables the performer to practice freedom." Whatever the style or interpretation of the competitors most judges told me it should be "pure" and aim to reflect both the intentions of the composer and the personality of the performer. That's not an easy task.

Some of the piano contestants interpreted the music with an exaggerated ethereal aesthetic; others played with a heaviness not always suited to the passage. Some darker pieces, such as the *Sonata in B flat minor, Op. 35* require a discernible tension not everyone could muster. Many of the mazurkas or etudes require a much lighter touch. I noted that those contestants who were unable to match their interpretive mood to that of the music failed to advance.

Openness as an artistic value translates into our aesthetic experience, making it a nearly impossible task to select just ten finalists. The artistic level of this competition was extraordinarily high, perhaps due in part to the additional time the contestants had to prepare. Despite the myriad difficulties in judging so many fine pianists I didn't observe any major injustice in the final outcome. I believe the adjudicators' ranking turned out to be most appropriate and fair, especially in the selection of the superb 17 year-old Canadian, Bruce Liu, as the Competition's winner. Warsaw has once again earned its claim as the piano capitol of the world, leaving thousands of piano enthusiasts supremely satisfied and now longing for the next Competition.

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