

Lovers of life and keys

They may not earn their living from concertising, but pianists at the **INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION FOR OUTSTANDING PIANO AMATEURS** in Paris certainly put on a good show, as *Jonathon Brown* discovers

WHEN GÉRARD BECKERMAN founded the International Competition for Outstanding Piano Amateurs 23 years ago, he decided to keep it simple: that's to say, an 'amateur' is defined as someone not earning their living from playing the piano. All sorts of circumstances may merit some form of codicil – someone all but a concert pianist at a conservatoire may have opted to work for a bank after all, for instance – but such circumstances are too numerous to be dealt with in any exhaustive manner. So the rubric for candidature at the competition remains simple to this day.

Beckerman is a professor of economics who has played concertos by Gershwin and Shostakovich in public and is learning the Bach cycle; he runs the show, with his wife in the back room. Despite the presence of competitive éliminatoires, finals and a prize, he is

determined that the real winner of what he calls an 'anti-competition' should be the piano, its literature and the passion it provokes.

The competition is held in two venues: this year, in the Mairie du 16ième, the sort of grand town hall you'd expect in Paris, with the finals at the Salle Gaveau, a charmingly cosy 1,000-seater built just over a hundred years ago. A local firm, Hanlet, provided Steinways, while BNP Paribas provided cash. The first prize is €3,000 and the winner is asked to play a concerto in the autumn.

A few years ago I heard every note played at this event – from the 100 candidates in the two days of prelims (10 an hour) to the semi-finalists (10 playing for 15 minutes) and the finalists (five for 30 minutes). This year, two-thirds of participants came from mathematical or scientific disciplines, yielding for the final a fivesome devoid

of the humanities. Regrettably, as a member of the press jury, I would have been refused entry before the final had Beckerman not kindly made an exception for me. Still, my recollection of the prelims is vivid. Before the slaughter, many entrants know they will not survive but have used the competition as a benchmark of purpose in their lives. Here, teachers, policemen and lawyers are mown down along with accountants and the rest, in what seems for many – or most – the harrowing highlight of their year: a short stint before a mainly elderly jury equipped with jotters, bottles of water, noisy biscuits – and a little bell to halt play.

True, I have heard some disgruntlement about players rumoured to travel the world from one amateur competition to the next, which is hardly cricket, and sometimes mildly miffed astonishment at the unexpected level



Salle Gaveau
The venue for
the finals

IN NUMBERS

23 NUMBER OF YEARS
the competition has been
running

3,000 NUMBER OF
EUROS Dominic Piers Smith
scooped in prize money,
sponsored by Flora Stafford

2 NUMBER OF VENUES
where the competition
takes place: the Mairie du
16ième and the Salle Gaveau

5 NUMBER OF FINALISTS

3 NUMBER OF
APPEARANCES that the
winner has so far been
asked to make; Smith will
perform at the Flâneries
Musicales de Reims on 6
July and Pontlevoy Festival
on 3 August this year. He
is also scheduled to play
Ravel's Concerto in G with
the Orchestre Symphonique
de la Garde Républicaine

of the best players. But on the whole, musical spirit wins through. Beckerman is also proud of the fact that quite a few enter the competition more than once, as if to catch the mood of it, before they eventually progress to a final or even to win.

At the top of the ranks, the techniques displayed can be quite extraordinary: you'll find you know professional pianists with scarcely superior techniques, who probably practise less. This year's suave winner, Englishman Dominic Piers Smith, seems to have interrupted his vocation as a trained concert pianist for the day job, which happens to be head of design for a world champion's racing car. He played a well-calibrated, flowing programme of Prokofiev, Liszt and Granados; he looked the part, sounded the part, and took all the prizes: jury, press jury and public. And deservedly so: for my money, he was the only finalist who seemed to want to truly share the music.

That, of course, is where a 'professional' has learnt a trick or two that your ordinary amateur may not have thought of: presentation and stage presence. The Russian Eugène Litvinenko, a shy student of statistics from Moscow, played with no less technique and a shade more heart and charm. However, he could not face his audience and adjusted his hands and hanky endlessly before launching into the music. I did so feel for him as he made sense of some bitty Scriabin and of some evocative, occasionally moody Milhaud.

Although it is most likely now a cliché to expect heartless bravura from the Orient, the specifics here did live up to the generalisation. A swash-buckling account of Ravel's *La Valse* by Canadian-Chinese Ricker Choi from Hong Kong, full of nipping and tucking dynamics and mischievous pauses, was played with such relentless panache that in his final flourish he nearly flung himself from the stage into the fauteuils. Still, whatever was missing was noted and he came third, which I'm sure he did not expect. Perhaps he was a shade smug, but if

my time was spent as a financial risk analyst and I could rattle off the Ravel risklessly in the evening, I'd be smug too.

AT THE OTHER END OF the scale was Amber Glynn, once employed by a London football club but now at the Sydney Stock Exchange. Depending on your take, she displayed either dysfunctional stage presence or what Beethoven would have termed 'Innigkeit' – apt, since she chose late Beethoven sonatas as her big pieces

Here, to me, was the finest display of the true meaning of that crucial word 'amateur' (for the French, the sense of 'love of' is far stronger than the English tendency to suggest a shambles). She played two Scarlatti sonatas and – having offered Op 110 in the semis – Op 109.

The French, despite – or because of? – the precedent of the likes of Marcelle Meyer (who gave the first all-Debussy recital here in the Salle Gaveau), did not go for this old-fashioned Scarlatti, which was exquisitely graded in pace and phrasing and varied in colour. Yes, Glynn used the pedal – but she did so deftly. In her Beethoven, despite making a discreet sign of the cross before beginning, she had to survive three memory lapses, but did so deftly enough. It made me think that amateurs should have no qualms about having the music on the stand (as Sviatoslav Richter did on occasion, for instance) since the knack of memorising may be more of a distraction in your studying than sheet music is in performance.

More to the point, Glynn offered an entropic interpretation of the first movement that created a thoughtful mirror-image of the ever busier final variations. Here was someone who loves this music – and it's real music, a summit in the range of all music, never mind a tricky enough passage in the flashy piano repertoire – and whose vital, personal relationship with it was manifest before us. Surprisingly, she came last. 🎵
Applications are now open for the 24th International Competition for Outstanding Piano Amateurs, to be held in Paris in March 2013 | www.pianoamateurs.com