

A very special music *competition*

The „CRESCENDO“
magazine in the
middle of a
prominent press
jury



“Our pianist”
Karen
Purpero and
Thomas Yu

An interesting request

The invitation came a few years ago with a friendly letter: Would CRESCENDO be prepared to send a jury member to a big international competition. They were anticipating representatives from the most famous newspapers on various continents: Figaro, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Los Angeles Times... I hesitated and made cautious enquiries - convinced there was some kind of misunderstanding. There are of course other magazines with the name “Crescendo”. A polite but firm answer came from Gérard Bekerman, the director of the competition. He wanted at all costs to have our “Crescendo” magazine (and no doubt also our movement) present. Gérard Bekerman is not only a Professor of Economics in Paris, but is also a trained musician; he founded the international piano competition for outstanding amateurs 20 years ago.

“Our jury-member “ Verena Dietrich-Tenneroni

Following the invitation received by “Crescendo”, the pianist Verena Dietrich-Tenneroni, co-ordinator of our work in the Paris area, became a member of the jury.

She writes about her experiences:

“When I went on the Press Jury for the first time, I certainly felt a little apprehensive. I did not feel that I quite fitted into the surroundings, as I am a pianist and not a journalist, and because Crescendo, in comparison with the large newspapers present, is rather a “small fish”. But my caution was unnecessary, because, thanks to the influence of Gérard Bekerman, a spirit of loyalty and friendship dominated in the two juries (musicians and press) as well as amongst the candidates. On the musicians’ jury, there were resonant names like Alexis Weissenberg, Michel Beroff, Marc Laforet or Geneviève Joy-Dutilleux.

I have taken part in the Press Jury for several years, each time looking forward with joy and excitement to meeting

new faces, equipped with samples of the Crescendo magazine and flyers, and prepared and supported in prayer.

One of the first questions amongst the journalists is: “What paper do you write for?”

This provides an immediate opportunity to explain the work of Crescendo and to pass out the materials.

The response to this has varied from polite to genuinely positive.

This year, for example, a German journalist was very interested - for his son, who wants to study church music.

Another time, I got into conversation with a co-founder of “Jugend musiziert”(Germany), of which he was for many years national manager. He knew Martin Helmchen (Crescendo member), who had also participated in “Jugend musiziert”.

But now back to the competition. The Press Jury is involved in the final stage of the competition, following the elimination rounds and semi-final, in one of the most beautiful concert halls in Paris, in the “Salle Gaveau”.

The enthusiasm of the participants as well as of the audience is remarkable.

The juries have great respect for the finalists and try to adjudicate as fair-

ly as possible. The awarding of the prizes after the 3 hour final is a quite special and emotional event. Then the social part follows: a dinner to which all the pianists and accompanying persons are invited. This is a wonderful opportunity to chat (and possibly to talk about Crescendo...) with candidates and jury members. It also shows how valuable personal contacts and relationships are for Gérard Bekerman, one of the special qualities of the competition. This year, it was a particular pleasure to get to know Karen Purpero and her husband. They work for Agape in Italy. Karen came to Paris to take part in the competition. We were also able to pray together. In such ways, the competition is an enriching experience every year, musically, in relationships and spiritually. I am already looking forward to the next one on the 1st April, 2007 (that's not a joke...)"

„Our“ pianist Karen Purpero

Karen is a team member of Agape 1 Campus for Christ in Italy and as an amateur pianist a «passive member» of Crescendo. She took part in the competition this year and reports here on her experiences.

....Personally, I feel it is so important as an amateur musician to surround myself whenever I can with others who have full lives outside of music but who desire to keep the music as a passion. It is so much to juggle, but the love of the music is compelling. And for me, sharing it as a means to bridge to the Gospel, makes it all the more joyous. Being in an environment like Paris, surrounded by gifted people from all over the world, is a tremendous opportunity for ministry. All of us in the competition have other full time jobs. My job title said «missionary», so obviously, I had many opportunities to explain what I do with my husband in Youth ministry for the last 20 years with Agape/CCCI. This led to many wonderful spiritual conversations with people. I have been able to continue my relationship with several of them. The winner, Thomas Yu, is a Christian, a Chinese Canadian. I look forward to continuing to encourage him to use his platform as a brilliant pianist to glorify the Lord. As for me, I continue to be a mother of 3 (Ellyn is 15, Anthony is 12 and Chloe is 11). I also help alongside my husband in Youth ministry with teenagers, and I do a lot of laundry! Whenever I can, I carve out time to practice piano. This is for me a way to worship the Lord. My heart is to use music as a tool to reach all kinds of people, from children to university students to executives. Sometimes I think of myself as a «Music evangelist» because I play often for non-musicians who don't necessarily like classical music, but they come to an event because they were invited by a friend or because they were curious. Then they find that they really do like classical piano music! And, they leave with a message from the Lord that will never return void. It is a great way to bridge into peoples hearts.

In Paris, I was a quarter-finalist (Between 13th and 25th place), and I was so happy with that, considering my full life with children and limited preparation time, and the fact that it was my first try! I hope to return again."

„I prefer poetry to grammar... even if combining the two satisfies me best.“

Interview with Gérard Bekerman, Founder of the International Piano Competition for Outstanding Amateurs

What was the real deep-down reason for starting the International Competition for Outstanding Piano Amateurs?

It was the need to share a passion and find other people who, like me, both in France and across the globe, lead a double life: their profession – born of necessity – and their love of music, the piano in particular. But this „double life“ is really one and the same. For outstanding amateurs like ourselves, 1 + 1 = 1. See! An economist who knows how to count! In fact, music does not just hold a place in our lives, it is our life. We work for a living, but we live for music. And this twofold experience is enriching on a human level. It teaches us that we have to combine the wisdom and commonsense we need to acquire a profession with a passion that doesn't necessarily butter our bread, but is our reason for living. I don't have a business card, but if I did, I'd put „economist“ on one side to use in the day and „pianist“ on the other to use at night.

How do you select candidates from every corner of the globe and every walk of life?

It's just „natural selection“. Every year, we receive about a hundred entries from throughout the world without really knowing where they come from. The level of our candidates varies considerably, but gradually becomes more homogeneous when you get to the semi-finals and finals where our candidates are usually of a very high calibre. I also have to say that I have tried to instil a certain philosophy into the Concours. In every candidate, no matter how imperfect they are, there is always something worth discovering, even if their fingering technique may be a little short. To a certain degree, I prefer poetry to grammar ... even if combining the two satisfies me best.

You say that it's an anti-competition. Don't you think that every competitor is driven by an overwhelming desire to be first?

In art, the notion of first is relative. In the history of piano competitions over the last century, some marvellous pianists such as Kissin haven't competed in a single competition, while others, like Lipatti, have come second (Cortot, who was the judges' chairman, walked out in sheer disappointment!). I think that it's quite legitimate for a candidate to want to win, but I can assure you that, at the Concours – and it's the same in my professional and personal life – you can win without it meaning that you have beaten someone else. In a certain sense, the only person a candidate really has to beat at the Concours is themselves. Competitors have to learn to have complete self-control, totally master their situation and overcome the logistics of the keyboard, so that the door to expression, the „soul“, will spontaneously open. The piano, as you know, is a lot of soul and even more sweat.

Do you think that the professional pianists who judge the Competition sometimes have maybe

an unconscious feeling of rivalry with amateurs who sometimes play better than they do?

Once again, I don't share your idea of „rivalry“ in art. Chopin is not a 100 metres Olympic sprint. I'm not in a very good position to answer the question. Having said that, I would be curious to know their answer. You should put the question to them. On a personal level, I'm delighted when I hear a pianist play better than I do. Needless to say, I'm often delighted!

For you, as president, what are the most outstanding, or most unusual, or the funniest moments you have experienced during the competition?

I have a little story to tell you. For years, Nella Rubinstein, the wife of Arthur Rubinstein, was a faithful member of the judges' panel. She loved it! Sometimes, during the preliminaries (because she wanted to be in on all the heats), when we started to get tired, we would spontaneously catch each other's eye, and Nella would start to entertain me with fabulous recipes from Eastern Europe (she had even published a book of them). Both my grandfather and father were born just a few miles from the village where Arthur Rubinstein himself comes from, in Lodz in Poland. Nella's education and elegance – far greater than my own – and our shared respect for the candidates, would prevent her from getting to the end of the recipe and – no pun intended – would leave me hungry for more. Suddenly, I was the one who would start to imagine myself in a Delicatessen when I was supposed to be concentrating on the candidates. Since then, whenever I walk in the streets of Berlin or Los Angeles or Paris and I see a Delicatessen, I think of Nella, and of my concentrated efforts to hear the last bars of Mozart's Variations by Dupont or Liszt's Valse oubliée ...

But back to more serious considerations. If I were to tell you about two outstanding moments, one would neutralise the other, so I'm only going to tell you about one which, in any case, I think is the best, though I wonder if I should admit it. For me, the most outstanding moment in all 17 years of the Concours took place just last Sunday. It was during the finals. It was a full house in the Salle Gaveau. The winner, Thomas Yu, a Canadian dentist and cancer researcher at Toronto Hospital, launched into the Dutilleux Sonata. Neither the presence of France 2 television, nor Canadian television channel CBC, which were filming him, nor Radio Classique which was recording him, nor the 1,100 members of the audience in Salle Gaveau, seemed to exist. It was as though he was there by himself – and in excellent company, I may say. From the opening bars, I watched the reactions of the judges. Like me, I think that they were discovering in Thomas Yu a truly exceptional candidate: a quick, clear, intelligent mind, wonderful musicality, a deep understanding of the music he was playing and perfect technical mastery. When it came time to deliberate (promise me you won't repeat this), I said to the judges, „Ladies and gentlemen, why don't we just go straight on to the second prize.“ The panel included some very eminent musicians – Marc Laforet, Eric Heidsieck, Germaine Devèze and Siheng Song, winner of the last Long Thibaud competition – who were ready to accept my unacceptable proposal as judges' chairman. Thomas Yu was the unanimous winner of the judges' prize, the press prize and the audience prize! We have invited him to play Chopin's 1st Concerto on 31st May 2006 at Saint Louis des Invalides Cathedral (I hope that Napoleon, who has been resting nearby for nearly two centuries, will not rise up in his grave ...). Having said that, I know one of Thomas Yu's weaknesses – he wants to remain a dentist.

The competition gave me the greatest of joy, for I had the luck of discovering another extremely subtle and loveable pianist. This was the Bavarian Dominik Winterling, who caused a sensation, winning the 2nd prize in the competition playing a completely original work: the Variations, opus 41, by Nikolai Kapustin“.