

Young soloists shine in Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra Competition

ROBIN GREGORY was there, and reports:

For 28 years the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra has hosted a competition for young soloists aged 23 and under. This year, five musicians won through to the final round which took place on Sunday afternoon, 1 February, 2015, in the Birley Centre. The great thing about this competition as it has evolved is that every finalist goes home with an award. The winner (and occasionally a runner-up) secures not only a money prize but also the opportunity later in the year to perform a full concerto with the orchestra.

Past winners of the competition (all listed on www.eso.org.uk) have included a 14-year-old Freddy Kempf (who won a junior prize in 1991), Amy Dickson (2002), Alexandra Dariescu (2005) and, last year, Roberto Ruisi, a finalist in the BBC Young Musician Competition.

This year's final saw Gen Li from China, a student at Trinity Laban Conservatoire, play first. He set a challenging standard, with performances showing both vitality and sensitivity. Every competitor is required to offer movements of two concertos, and because Gen is a pianist (and because no orchestra is at hand) two concert grands stand side by side. The second piano is there to be used by another fine musician (in this case Gen's young wife) whose task is to 'become the orchestra'. Linlin proved to be a worthy musical partner in both Prokofiev and Shostakovich. (Indeed, the quality of the accompanists was, in every case, superb.)

Thomas Isaac, a cellist from the Royal Academy of Music, then gave us Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations, followed by a Shostakovich movement. His beauty of tone and ability to shade the volume to a whisper impressed.

Emma Halnan, a graduate of the Royal Academy, played the first movement of Nielsen's Flute Concerto, and the delightful Concertino by Cécile Chaminade, showing fine breath control and perfectly smooth legato.

Stephanie Childress, introduced by master-of-ceremonies John Thornley, as a 15-year-old Londoner studying at the Junior Royal College, proved to be a mature and gifted violinist, already leader of the National Youth Orchestra. Mozart and Tchaikovsky were her choice, and her performance of the latter's Concerto (final movement) was breathtaking: fast, but perfectly articulated and shaped.

The last finalist was Naufal Mukumi, a joint winner of this competition in 2012. His assured performances of Beethoven and Rachmaninov (the opening movement of his 1st Concerto) led many to think that, this time, he would carry off the crown rather than merely sharing it.

After tea and cake, the judges came down from the gallery to give their verdict. Chairman Graham Jones, the ESO's conductor and musical director, introduced clarinettist Philip Edwards, pianist Dorina Latawska, orchestra leader Lisa Wigmore, and John York, international pianist and teacher, and one of the patrons of the ESO.

He then announced their choice of Gen Li as overall winner, Emma Halnan as winner of the Cox Memorial Prize, Stephanie Childress as winner of the Duke of Devonshire Award for the best finalist under 18 years of age, and Naufal Mukumi as winner of the Colonel Howes Award.

As Graham Jones said: 'Our congratulations go to all five competitors. To reach the final of a competition like this is a huge achievement; all finalists could be winners.' Something with which, judging by comments overheard during the intervals, the large and appreciative audience, who were joined by the Deputy Mayor, would agree.