

Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra's competition attracts five worthy winners

For twenty-nine years Eastbourne's own orchestra has organised a competition to discover young musicians (under the age of 24) capable of performing with a full orchestra. There were over thirty entrants this year, and the five finalists played at the Birley Centre on Sunday 7 February.

Organising such an event is no easy matter. Clearly it would be unrealistic for the entire orchestra to accompany each young musician in so intimate a venue, so two grand pianos must be put in place and tuned. One will be used by a professional accompanist who will stand in for an orchestra. This year the task was in the masterful hands of Daniel King-Smith, a London-based freelance pianist and formerly accompanist at the Purcell School. He proved to be not only a champion of the keyboard but a really sensitive support for the competitors, whatever their chosen instrument.

Adjudicators must, of course, themselves be fine musicians. This year the chairman was again Graham Jones, principal conductor of the ESO. His team was clarinettist Philip Edwards, pianists John York and Dorina Latawska, and violinist Lisa Wigmore. The orchestra's concert manager, John Thornley, presented the event to an enthusiastic audience.

I have seen this competition in action for many years. Indeed I well recall in 1991 seeing a hugely talented 14-year-old Freddy Kempf receive a prize: he went on to wow the Russians in the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, and maintains contact with Eastbourne despite his international fame. What, I wondered, would 2016 yield?

Competitors came from far and wide. The finalists this year included, for example, a cellist from Turkey and a pianist from Rumania. All are required to offer two contrasted works in order to display true mastery of their instruments. At the end of the day it was clear that any one of them would have been a worthy winner, and it is to be commended that sufficient prizes are available for every finalist to go away with some reward. For the winner, there is, in addition, an opportunity to return to Eastbourne at a later date to perform a full concerto with the ESO.

Emma Halnan (flute), graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, had won second prize last year, and entered again playing Mozart and Khachaturian. Offering Mozart and Chopin was Cristian Sandrin (piano) from the Royal College of Music, as was Thomas Isaac (cello) who gave us Haydn and Dvorak. From the Junior Department of the same college came Ben Goldscheider (horn) who offered Mozart and Richard Strauss. During the period when the judges came to their conclusions, 16-year-old flautist Hambel Goodchild from the Purcell School (who had already been awarded the St Cecilia Bequest) played pieces by Godard, Fauré, Piazzolla and Mouquet.

So who took the main prizes? This year two performers won the opportunity to return to perform with the ESO, and I shall certainly look forward to hearing them again. One was Ben Goldscheider, already mentioned, and clearly rated highly by the judges. The other was Jamal Aliyev (also studying at the RCM) who had been the first on stage. He took the first prize and, in my humble opinion, is already a cellist of enormous talent. His phenomenal attack on the opening movement of Shostakovich's Cello Concerto was staggering, and he gave a romantic performance of Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations that surpassed any I have heard,

even on disc. Be sure to hear him when he returns on 19 June in St Saviour's Church. Before that, another date for your diary: the ESO's annual choral concert is Elgar's Dream of Gerontius on 24 April. More details from www.eso.org.uk or 07780 993801.

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