

THE WORLD OF PIANO COMPETITIONS



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2025

Nikola
Meeuwssen
*Calmly Moving
Forward*

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W E L C O M E

Dear readers,

while in the previous edition of this magazine we had a special about the Chopin Competition in Warsaw, which is already heading into the finals this October, we now look back at the freshly concluded Queen Elisabeth Competition, which ended on May 31st. And with, I may say, appropriate pride, we present the winner: the 23-year-old Dutch pianist Nikola Meeuwsen, who, at his very first major international competition, claimed the first prize. A noticeable contrast to the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, which reached its conclusion just a week later and where all the finalists, as well as many in the earlier stages of the competition, had an impressive list of international victories to their names.

The first prize winner at the Van Cliburn, for example, Aristo Sham from Hong Kong/China (who also received the Audience Award), had already won first prizes at nine international competitions, among which Monte Carlo, as well as the second prize in the Gina Bachauer competition. The second prize went to 30-year-old Vitaly Starikov from Israel/Russia, who won fifth prize in Brussels 2021, reached the first round of Van Cliburn in 2022, and was accepted this year to Iturbi, Busoni, Warsaw and Honens. The third prize went to 26-year-old Evren Ozel from the United States, who previously won second prize in Dublin (2018) and second prize in Cleveland (2024).

The remaining finalists were Carter Johnson, who had just won first prize in Dublin, only four days before the Van Cliburn began! He also took second prize at the Bachauer 2024. Angel Stanislav Wang, who shared the second prize at the Tchaikovsky Competition in 2023 and Philipp Lynov, whom you may remember from the cover of this magazine (2024/1), and who recently won first prizes at Takamatsu (2023) and Xiamen (2024).

This year there was a remarkable overlap with Brussels: Van Cliburn finalists Evren Ozel and Philipp Lynov were both selected for the Queen Elisabeth Competition, but chose to attend the Van Cliburn instead. It must have been a difficult dilemma, not so for the Kodama sisters, though: Mari served on the jury in Fort Worth, and Momo in Brussels.

We already featured Aristo Sham in this magazine (2019/2) as “One to Watch,” just before his debut with the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Simon Rattle. He said back then: “Travelling is my biggest passion, and I’ve always been very curious about different aspects of life. When I started studying economics at Harvard and music at the New England Conservatory, I wasn’t one hundred percent sure about going into music. The turning point was the Top of the World Competition, where I reached the semi-finals. Hearing the winner play better than me – I could hear myself achieving that level – so I thought: I should try to give everything.” And now, we have seen the result, or as Claudio Arrau said: “I think the highest goal any human being can have, is to develop all one’s gifts and fulfil oneself.”

ERIC SCHOONES

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

PIANIST MAGAZINES



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Piano Street provides material and services related to classical piano music and aims to facilitate and inspire communication between piano playing people from all over the world. The content of the website mainly consists of downloadable sheet music connected to hand-picked recordings, information about composers and pieces, one of the world's largest discussion forums about piano music (more than 600 000 postings), and the digital magazine section containing piano related news and articles. The popularity of the website is continuously growing, and it currently counts over 6,000 unique visitors daily. Piano Street has been online for over twenty years and operates worldwide from Stockholm in Sweden.

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XIX MIĘDZYNARODOWY
KONKURS PIANISTYCZNY
IM. FRYDERYKA CHOPINA
WARSZAWA 2025

19TH INTERNATIONAL
FRYDERYK CHOPIN
PIANO COMPETITION
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2 - 23
PAŹDZIERNIKA
2025

2 - 23
OCTOBER
2025



*CALMLY MOVING
FORWARD*



Nikola Meeuwssen wins the Queen Elisabeth Competition

It's the morning after the final evening of the Queen Elisabeth Competition, and after a short night's sleep, the walk to the competition's office in Brussels feels somewhat surreal – perhaps because we've known each other for a while. From the beginning of the competition, Nikola Meeuwssen was my favourite, as he was for many who followed the event. Understandably so. When I heard him play Robert Schumann's *Fantasie* in Arnhem about two years ago – leaving me utterly floored, as though we had just heard Radu Lupu – I knew there was something special about this young man, who has now, at 23 and being the youngest participant, claimed victory at the prestigious competition in Brussels.

Can you already look back on it?

Gradually, it's starting to sink in that it really happened.

Did it feel different from previous competitions?

Yes, definitely, because I'm now studying at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel, and they made sure I was optimally prepared. Enrico Pace was also an enormous help. He happened to be performing in Brussels and gave me a five-hour lesson right before the semi-finals. But still – it's just insane. You imagine it as something you might

work toward, not something that would actually happen. That's probably a good mindset to have, even if it always remains a bit of a dream. Honestly, I wouldn't have been disappointed at all if I hadn't made the top six. To keep the adrenaline in check during the announcement of the laureates, I had already prepared myself to wait for six names and then go up on stage. I joked about that with Arthur Hinnewinkel, my dear friend who also studies at the Chapel and won fourth prize. We have exactly the same taste. His Schumann concerto was sublime – he combines great honesty with



enormous imagination, which I find deeply impressive. I also heard a lot from the other finalists, all pianists I greatly admire. I was really happy to share the final with these people.

A lot is coming your way now, but you seem quite grounded.

Yes, I feel calm, and I think it's just important to make good choices and not overdo it.

You already have an extensive repertoire of piano concertos, which is not always the case with winners of major competitions.

True, and I'm glad about that. Over the past two years, I've fortunately had more and more opportunities to perform with orchestras. Some people need two months of vacation after a competition like this, but I just want to continue working calmly and learn new pieces. I'm not exhausted, but I did notice during the final that I was mentally a bit tired, not quite as sharp. Sometimes you're completely in the moment, and sometimes you feel like you're observing yourself. To be honest, I had to tell myself during the final to get back into focus. During the Mozart concerto in the semi-final, I could enjoy it completely because the energy from the orchestra was so strong.

In previous editions of the competition, only two Dutch pianists made it to the final: Rian de Waal and Hannes Minnaar.

Yes, I remember Hannes 15 years ago in his final, and now he came to hear my final – that was very special. I've heard so much about Rian de Waal, though I unfortunately never met him. I admire his many beautiful recordings, like Schumann's *Widmung*.

NIKOLA MEEUWSEN

(*2002) is currently studying under Enrico Pace and Marlies van Gent at the Accademia Internazionale di Imola and under Frank Braley and Avedis Kouyoumdjian at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel. In 2022 he was awarded the Grachtenfestival Award, having won the Concertgebouw Young Talent Award (2019), Royal Concertgebouw Competition (2014) and Steinway Competition (2012). He has already built up an extensive list of solo and chamber music performances, having worked with orchestras like the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Antwerp Symphony Orchestra, Netherlands Chamber Orchestra, Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra and Sinfonia Varsovia. He is a regular guest at Dutch and international festivals, and has played with musicians such as Janine Jansen, Corina Belcea and Augustin Dumay. Future engagements include concerts with the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Belgian National Orchestra and Concertgebouw Chamber Orchestra and chamber music with Alexander Warenberg, Benjamin Kruithof and Noa Wildschut.

And his *Tannhäuser Overture* arrangement?

I just listened to that recently, played by Jorge Bolet, also absolutely incredible.

Rian de Waal comes very close to that.

Then I definitely need to listen to his version too!

Antony Hermus advised you to keep a journal. Was that a way to stay grounded?

It's very strange – rereading it now, I see seven totally different personalities across the seven days in seclusion at the Chapel, while studying *Music from the Heart* by Kris Defoort, the required piano concerto. You don't have your phone, no contact with the outside world, and that's actually a relief – to be free from all the stimuli for a while. Many memories from the past came back. Halfway through the week, I thought I wouldn't make it, and then the next day everything seemed okay again. Still, it's a good exercise, because there will come a moment when you have to prepare something very quickly. Though rushing something is never ideal – ideally, I'd spend half a year studying a piece like that. There's so much colour to explore in it.

People often say you have an "old soul."

Maybe because I listened to a lot of old recordings as a child – pianists like Rubinstein, Horowitz, Cortot, and also great violinists. Now I'm also learning a lot from the people I play chamber music with, like Janine Jansen, and from the Chapel – people like Corina Belcea-Fisher of the Belcea Quartet and Gary Hoffman. You get very different, purely musical advice from non-pianists. All those influences are incredibly valuable. In Imola, you get lessons from many different teachers anyway – hence the name *Incontri con il Maestro, Encounters with the Masters*.

In addition to my long-term, stable mentors – over ten years now with Enrico Pace and with Marlies van Gent even longer – I've also been studying with Frank Braley and Avedis Kouyoumdjian at the Chapel since 2022. Sometimes they all say something completely different about a piece, and then it's up to you to figure out what to do with it.

Horowitz once said: "What you can learn is easy. What you cannot learn is difficult. It must ultimately come from within yourself."

Yes – that's exactly right.

ERIC SCHOONES



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Bartok Piano Competition

5 – 14 September 2025

MUNICH | GERMANY

ARD Music International Competition

20 – 28 September 2025

SEREGNO | ITALY

International Piano Competition Ettore Pozzoli

29 September – 16 October 2025

HONG KONG | CHINA

Hong Kong International Piano Competition

2 – 23 October 2025

WARSAW | POLAND

Chopin International Piano Competition

12 – 19 October 2025

ALBUQUERQUE | USA

Olga Kern International Piano Competition

16 – 24 October 2025

CALGARY | CANADA

Honens Piano Competition

9 – 23 November 2025

BYDGOSZCZ | POLAND

Paderewski International Piano Competition

9 – 15 November 2025

LAS ROZAS DE MADRID | SPAIN

International Piano Competition Spanish Composers

24 – 29 November 2025

MANCHESTER | UNITED KINGDOM

James Mottram International Piano Competition

3 – 14 December 2025

BONN | GERMANY

International Telekom Beethoven Competition



H. M. the Queen and the 12 laureates

ALEXANDRE TERWANGNE

The Queen Elisabeth Competition

Showcase of remarkable Piano Talents

The 2025 edition of this prestigious competition – described by Queen Mathilde as “an irreplaceable benchmark for a global audience” – has once again produced a remarkable winner, the young Dutch pianist Nikola Meeuwsen, who now joins an illustrious group of first prize laureates. Early legends like Emil Gilels, Leon Fleisher, and Vladimir Ashkenazy to more recent winners such as Denis Kozhukhin, Anna Vinnitskaya, and Severin von Eckardstein, like Nikola Meeuwsen, all performed Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto in the finals. Here are some personal impressions.

The jury, comprising such luminaries as Imogen Cooper, Denis Kuzhikhin, Jorge Luis Prats, Anne Queffélec, Tamara Stefanovich, Anna Vinnitskaya and Lilya Zilberstein, awarded the highest honour to Nikola Meeuwsen, who proved to be the most consistent performer throughout the competition's four rounds, right from the very start with his very first performance of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 10 No. 2, played with exceptional understanding. The two major works in his semi-final recital – Mendelssohn's *Varia-*

tions Sérieuses and Liszt's *Dante Sonata* – were, despite their differences, both marked by a keen sense of detail and sound, combined with great structural insight. His grip on structure emerged through all details, much like footsteps on a long journey through an enchanting landscape. That probably also made his colourful interpretation of Ana Sokolović's Two Studies for Piano so special. An imaginative work that sounded so natural in his hands.



Wataru Hisasue was awarded the second prize. He recently earned prizes at major competitions such as the ARD and Géza Anda, and he is currently studying with Klaus Hellwig at the Universität der Künste Berlin. In the semi-final, he played a stylish and enthusiastically received *Appassionata* by Beethoven. From the expectant opening passage of Brahms' Second Piano Concerto, he convincingly shaped the sweeping lines of this symphony for piano and orchestra.

Audience favourite Valère Burnon from Belgium received the third prize. A student of Florence Millet and Leonid Margarius, he has studied at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel since 2022 with Frank Braley and Avedis Kouyoumdjian – this duo of professors produced four finalists this year, including Nikola Meeuwsen. He performed Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto in the finals. Burnon played with great confidence, but not always with subtlety.

Arthur Hinnewinkel, who entered the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris at age 15, impressed especially in the final with his performance of Schumann's concerto. He is also a student at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel and won fourth prize.

Masaya Kamei came into the spotlight after winning the first prize, press prize, and audience prize at the 2022 Long-Thibaud Competition in France. He currently studies with Momo Kodama and was awarded fifth prize. I particularly remember his full-bodied interpretation of Liszt's *Réminiscences de Norma* in the semi-finals.

Jiaxin Min, who trained at The Juilliard School and the Royal College of Music in London, and later was coached by Marc-André Hamelin among others, was one of the most convincing finalists. With her modest demeanour, she gave a stunning performance of Prokofiev's Third Concerto. Many expected her to be among the top six laureates – The audience showed its appreciation abundantly during the proclamation of the prizes.

Nathalia Milstein, who trained with her father and also with Nelson Goerner in Geneva and András Schiff in Berlin, particularly stood

out to me with her intelligently constructed semi-final recital, with refined interpretations of two pieces by Jean-Philippe Rameau and masterful performances of Chopin's Fourth Scherzo and Bartók's Sonata.

Shiori Kuwahara, a student of Klaus Hellwig among others, collected second prizes between 2016 and 2021 at various competitions: Maria Canals, Viotti, Busoni, and Rubinstein. Her interpretation of Brahms' Second Piano Concerto was of very high quality, full of poetry, with remarkable calm and stability – arguably preferable to Wataru Hisasue's. She certainly deserved a higher ranking.

A special mention must go to Uladzislau Khandohi. In the first round, his performance of *Danse Macabre* in Liszt's arrangement stood out, and I would have liked to have heard more from him after the semi-final. He is a student of Stanislav Ioudenitch and has already won several prizes, including second place at Maria Canals in 2024 and was a finalist at Van Cliburn in 2022.

In the semi-final, candidates were accompanied by the Orchestre Royal de Chambre de Wallonie under the baton of Vahan Mardirossian, just as the previous edition. In the final, they performed with the Brussels Philharmonic, conducted by Kazushi Ono, who delivered memorable words: "My goal as a conductor is to liberate the musicians and let them make music. That is very important because a conductor doesn't make a single sound on their own. As a conductor, if musicians feel that you are concentrating on a conversation with the composer, it gives them the incentive to make music in a profound way." Looking back on the week, it can be said that Ono and his orchestra achieved this wonderfully. Also of note: the chamber orchestra in the semi-finals accompanied no fewer than 22 young and not always very experienced pianists in performances of Mozart concertos – chosen from KV 271, 450, 453, 456, and 595. Brussels Philharmonic performed 12 piano concertos by Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Brahms, Saint-Saëns, and Schubert – and 12 times *Music from the Heart* by Kris Defoort. A highly versatile musician,



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equally at home in jazz and classical music, his piece included a substantial improvisational section. Defoort: “They keep playing higher, higher, and higher until they can’t anymore. Then I thought: I’ll switch to a more graphic score.” A wavy black line appears across the musical staff. “They have to translate that drawing into notes.”

It was fascinating to hear how each pianist interpreted the work. Though the title referred to Defoort’s own heart condition, the music, in a figurative sense, truly touched the hearts of the packed halls – all of which were sold out. According to Barbara Stael, responsible for communication, this might be a delayed effect of the previous edition, which had to be held without an audience due to Covid.

A competition such as this obviously cannot exist without pianos, and for the first time, two instruments were used in this edition. That was necessary because the performances took place in completely different halls with differing acoustics. For the main hall of the Palais de Beaux Arts a more direct Steinway was required, whereas Studio 4 in Flagey – where solo recitals and Mozart concertos were played – needed a more intimate tone. Maintenance and tuning services were provided by Svetlozar Siarov on behalf of Piano’s Maene.

Siarov, of Bulgarian origin, trained in Poland and with Steinway in Hamburg. This was his second time working at the Queen Elisabeth: “It’s extremely hard, physically and mentally. Essentially a whole month – I often started at 7 a.m., preferably earlier, and worked until 11 p.m. The piano is used very intensively, and by the end of the competition, the piano may have been a little tired, but it all worked out splendidly.”

ERIC SCHOONES



4CD box set: Queen Elisabeth Competition – Piano 2025

Prokofiev, Concerto no. 2 – Nikola Meeuwssen
Rachmaninov, Concerto no. 3 – Valère Burnon
Brahms, Concerto no. 2 – Wataru Hisasue
Schumann, Concerto – Arthur Hinnewinkel
Defoort, Music for the Heart – Yuki Yoshimi
Sokolović, Two Studies for Piano – Shiori Kuwahara
Prokofiev, Sonata no. 8 – Valère Burnon
Bartók, 3 Burlesques – Wataru Hisasue
Liszt, Réminiscences de Norma – Masaya Kamei
Mendelssohn, Variations sérieuses – Nikola Meeuwssen
Brahms, Sonata no. 1 in C major op. 1 – Sergey Tanin
Mozart, Concerto no. 27 in B flat major KV 595 – Jiaxin Min
Brussels Philharmonic – Kazushi Ono
Orchestre Royal de Chambre de Wallonie – Vahan Mardirossian

www.queenelisabethcompetition.be



A view of the beautiful Golden Hall at the Musikverein at the start of the finals.

17th Beethoven Competition, Vienna, 16–24 May 2025

In a few other places in the world, Beethoven competitions have been launched as well, but the one in Vienna has always remained the most prestigious one, at which in each round exclusively works by Ludwig van Beethoven must be performed. This is not the only thing that makes this competition so special. Having the finals with a great orchestra in the beautiful Golden Hall of the Musikverein is, of course, a great experience, which each young musician would be proud to mention in his biography. On top of that, there is another aspect that makes the Beethoven Competition in Vienna unique: the winner receives not only an impressive amount of prize money (€30,000), but also a brand-new Bösendorfer Grand Piano (model 214 VC) as a gift! This wonderful cooperation with Bösendorfer has been a tradition for many years. As can be ex-

pected, all performances in each round of this competition are also on a Bösendorfer (concert grand 280 VC). It is hardly surprising that many pianists wish to take part in this competition. For this year's 17th edition of the Beethoven Competition, a record number of 308 pianists had applied.

Although the competition is full of traditions, the structure has recently been adjusted. In order to cope with so many applicants, the main competition is preceded by two pre-selections. All applicants must submit a video recording. All these recordings are first checked to see whether they comply with the regulations and then a pre-selection committee of five established, Vienna-based pianists selected 50 applicants who were then asked to make another video recording. From these selected applicants, 21 were finally selected

The Beethoven Competition in Vienna is among the most well-known music competitions in the world. It was created in 1961 and has since taken place every four years. Among the past prize winners are pianists who made great careers and who became well-esteemed musicians, such as Mitsuko Ushida (1st in 1969), Oxana Yablonskaya (2nd in 1969), Edward Auer (2nd in 1965), and John O'Connor (1st in 1973). The jury too has enjoyed outstanding personalities such as Alicia de Larrocha, Vlado Perlemuter, Friedrich Gulda, Stanislav Neuhaus, Homero Francesch, Rudolf Kehrner, Moura Lympany, Ivan Moravec, Brigitte Engerer, to name a few.

to come to Vienna to take part in the main competition. In the past, live auditions were arranged all over the world and a small committee would travel to hear all the pianists who had applied. Traditionally, they would then always select 36 pianists. Understandably, these live auditions around the world became too costly and this is not done any more.

This year (2025) is an extraordinary year, in which many important piano competitions are taking place and several of them are overlapping. At the same time as the Beethoven Competition, the Queen Elisabeth Competition was taking place in Brussels, the Dublin Competition had not ended yet, and the Cliburn in Fort Worth (Texas, USA) was about to begin. Not knowing in advance whether they would be admitted to one of these great competitions, several pianists had applied for more than one. It thus happened that three of them were “doubly” successful, so they had to choose where to go and to withdraw from the other competition: Roman Fediurko and Sung Ho Yoo had been admitted to the Cliburn, while Wataru Hisasue became finalist in Brussels; all three cancelled their participation in Vienna.

For the first time in the history of the Beethoven Competition, a double round was introduced: all participants had the opportunity to perform twice, without anyone being eliminated. At the end of the second part, there was a huge reduction from 18 down to three finalists, but this double first round was received very positively, both by the contestants and the jury members. Those who were not admitted to the finals could meet the jury and receive feedback, and they were all given €1,000 as appreciation and compensation for their presence and performances in the competition. The three finalists were Derek Hartman (USA), Martin Nöbauer (Austria) and Jonas Stark (Germany). For the final round, they had to submit two of the five piano concertos by Beethoven. When the names of the finalists were announced, a lottery decided which piano concerto would have to be performed. (If the same concerto had resulted three times, it would have been adjusted.) Jonas and Derek played Beethoven concerto nr. 4, while Martin played piano concerto nr. 3. The orchestra was the Wiener Symphoniker with their chief conductor Petr Popelka. This conductor took extra

time to meet with the three finalists and they even had two rehearsals with the orchestra. The Golden Hall of the Musikverein was filled with an enthusiastic and knowledgeable audience: many music lovers, but also professional and well-known pianists with great understanding of the music by Beethoven. The jury did not have an easy task. All three finalists performed at a high level, as did the orchestra. There was some difference among these finalists in touch, tone, colour of sound and acuteness. Jonas Stark had a warm, softer sound and played more intimately. Derek Hartman surprised the audience with a self-composed cadenza, which developed into a mixture of styles. One might wonder if it was risky to present this in Vienna, which is so full of traditions in classical music. However, his interpretation was very much appreciated and Derek won, while Jonas and Martin shared the second prize.

GUSTAV ALINK

Prize winners and jury members on stage for the Award ceremony, presented by Artistic Director and Chairman of the Jury: Jan Jiracek von Arnim



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Every two years, the world's most promising pianists gather in Salt Lake City for the prestigious Gina Bachauer International Piano Competitions.

Since 1976, The Bachauer Foundation has been a cornerstone to the arts. With its educational outreach programmes, the foundation introduced thousands of children to the extraordinary qualities of classical music, prestigious competitions, festivals, and concerts help undiscovered talents find new audiences, and reach international acclaim. As a non-profit organization based in Salt Lake City, The Bachauer has developed an international reputation as one of the premier organizations bringing opportunities for fame and career development to the world's most talented young pianists.

Greek concert pianist, Gina Bachauer (1913–1976), was often regarded as the greatest female pianist of the 20th century. A highly sought-after world performer, Bachauer developed a close bond with the people of Utah as she frequently performed with the Utah Symphony under the direction of Maurice Abravanel. Ms Bachauer became a close friend of Maestro Abravanel and spoke very highly of the Utah Symphony, which helped to facilitate their first international tour in 1966. The legacy of mutual admiration between Gina Bachauer and the Utah community lives on through the Gina Bachauer International Piano Foundation.

The Junior Piano Competition (ages 11–14) provides opportunities for pianists demonstrating exceptional ability as they continue their musical journeys. The Young Artists Piano Competition (ages 15–18) opens the doors of possibilities beyond their preparatory years. The Final Round is accompanied by Utah Symphony.

With over \$60,000 in prizes, the repertoire is open and preliminary rounds are scheduled in Hamburg, New York City, Shanghai, Seoul, and Salt Lake City. In the international jury we find Tanya Bannister, Alvin Chow, Douglas Humpherys, Daejin Kim, Alexander Korsantia, Carolyn True and Eleanor Wong.

We see many successful pianists among the laureates of previous Junior and Young Artists Bachauer competitions: Nareh Arghamanyan, Tonya Bannister, Stephen Beus, Rachel Cheung, Leonardo Colafelice, Mao Fujita, Kotaro Fukuma, Lukas Geniušas, George Li, Yundi Li, Jan Lisiecki, Mackenzie Melemed, Chaeyoung Park, Jaehong Park, Beatrice Rana, and Aristo Sham.

www.bachauer.com

SCHEDULE

September 15, 2025	Application Deadline
November 2025	Preliminary Round Hamburg
December 2025	Preliminary Round New York City
January 2026	Preliminary Round Shanghai
January 2026	Preliminary Round Seoul
January 2026	Preliminary Round Salt Lake City
June 15–18, 2026	Junior Solo Rounds
June 20, 2026	Junior Final Round with second-piano accompaniment
June 12–25, 2026	Young Artists Solo Rounds
June 27, 2026	Young Artists Final Round with Utah Symphony



Jaehong Park with the Utah Symphony



Leon Fleisher in 1952

A Century of Glory and Grit at
the Queen Elisabeth Piano Competition

The Crucible of Keys

In the heart of Brussels, where grand architecture whispers tales of bygone eras and the aroma of pommes frites hangs sweetly in the air, a different kind of atmosphere takes hold every few years. It's not the clamour of political debate or the buzz of diplomatic meetings, but the hushed anticipation surrounding the Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition. More specifically, its piano edition – a crucible where young virtuosi are tested, celebrated, and ultimately, forged into the stars of tomorrow. For nearly a century, this prestigious contest has not only unearthed exceptional talent but has also woven itself into the cultural fabric of Belgium and the wider musical world, its history a rich tapestry of royal patronage, artistic ambition, and the unwavering pursuit of pianistic excellence.



Eugène Ysaÿe

The seeds of this legendary competition were sown in the interbellum, a time of both artistic flourishing and a yearning for cultural unity. Eugène Ysaÿe, the celebrated Belgian violinist, harboured a vision for a musical contest of the highest calibre, one that could rival the established competitions elsewhere in Europe. Though his initial focus was on violin, his close friendship with Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, a passionate music lover and accomplished violinist herself, broadened the scope. The Queen, deeply invested in the arts and recognizing the power of music to transcend borders, became a fervent supporter of Ysaÿe's ambition.

Though Ysaÿe tragically died in 1931 before his dream's full realization, Queen Elisabeth and a devoted committee ensured its continuation. The first Eugène Ysaÿe International Music Competition, focusing on violin, took place in 1937. Its success paved the way for the piano to be featured in 1938.

The early years of the piano competition were marked by both promise and disruption. The shadow of World War II loomed large, and the 1939 edition was tragically cut short due to the outbreak of hostilities. Yet, even amidst the turmoil, the competition demonstrated its resilience, returning in 1951 under its current name: the Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition. This renaming not only honoured its steadfast royal patron but also cemented her enduring association with the event.

The competition's format, refined over the decades, has become a hallmark of its rigorous and demanding nature. Unlike some contests that focus solely on repertoire performance, the Queen Elisabeth Competition places a significant emphasis on a newly commissioned work, specifically written for each edition. This unique element

throws a curveball at the contestants, demanding not only technical mastery of established repertoire but also the ability to quickly learn, interpret, and perform a contemporary piece under intense pressure. This commissioned work often becomes a significant addition to the piano literature, showcasing the competition's commitment to fostering new music.

The famously rigorous selection starts with video submissions judged by renowned musicians. Successful candidates proceed to public recitals in Brussels, where artistry, technique, and musicality are assessed. The semi-finals often include chamber music, evaluating collaborative abilities and ensemble integration.

The culmination of the competition is the highly anticipated final week. Here, the twelve remaining candidates perform a concerto of their choice with a prestigious symphony orchestra. This final stage is a true test of their ability to command the stage, communicate with the orchestra, and project their interpretation on a grand scale. The tension in the concert hall during these performances is palpable, the weight of expectation heavy in the air.

Over the decades, the Queen Elisabeth Piano Competition has served as a launchpad for numerous stellar careers. Iconic names like Gilels, Fleisher and Ashkenazy along with recent stars like Giltburg, Vinnitskaya and Vondracek – all first-prize laureates – resonate through the annals of piano history. Their victories in Brussels marked pivotal moments in their ascent to international stardom, providing them with invaluable recognition, concert engagements, and recording opportunities.

The competition is more than a star search; it's a crucible of dedication and artistic exchange. In Brussels, young global pianists

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unite through passion and the pursuit of excellence. This shared, high-pressure experience often creates lasting bonds and deep artistic respect.

Composed of globally celebrated pianists, educators, and conductors, the jury is vital to the competition's prestige. Their closely followed decisions frequently ignite musical discussions. The jury's integrity and expertise are essential for the competition's credibility as a benchmark of outstanding talent.

The Queen Elisabeth Competition is not without its controversies and evolving dynamics. The subjective nature of artistic judgment inevitably leads to discussions and differing opinions on the jury's choices. The increasing globalization of the music world has also brought a wider range of stylistic approaches and interpretations to the competition stage. Furthermore, the evolving landscape of the music industry and the challenges faced by young musicians in building sustainable careers add another layer of complexity to the competition's role.

While deeply rooted in a rich tradition of prestige and artistic rigor, the Queen Elisabeth Piano Competition has also demonstrated a commendable willingness to adopt thoughtful innovation over the years, ensuring its continued relevance and impact in a rapidly changing world. Here are a few notable areas where these progressive adaptations can be clearly observed:

A remarkable tradition, an innovation in itself, the competition unveils a newly commissioned score. Finalists face the daunting task: to learn, master, and perform this intricate work within a single, high-pressure week, devoid of guidance. This intense trial fiercely tests their formidable technique and deep musicality. It also demands rapid assimilation and flawless execution under duress, culminating in a compelling artistic interpretation of the unfamiliar.

While the cherished and foundational standard classical repertoire naturally remains absolutely central to the competition's framework, the selection of music for the earlier rounds often thoughtfully includes a greater representation of more contemporary and recently composed works. Notably, the esteemed jury has been observed to appreciate candidates who demonstrate a willingness to explore and perform more recently written piano concertos, sometimes even leading to higher rankings for those who showcase this adventurous spirit and embrace the music of our time.

Beyond the immediate intensity of the competition itself, the Queen Elisabeth Competition actively aims to provide tangible and meaningful support to the laureates in launching their international careers on a solid footing. This vital support gifts laureates radio and television performances, forging crucial professional networks. These connections often blossom into prestigious concerts with leading orchestras and in renowned halls globally. The eagerly awaited recital tours following the finals further solidify their presence and artistry on the international stage.

As it steadily approaches its momentous centenary, the Queen Elisabeth Piano Competition stands tall and proud as a powerful and enduring testament to the timeless legacy of its visionary royal patron and the unwavering dedication of countless individuals who have selflessly strived to uphold its exceptionally high standards of artistic excellence and integrity. It is demonstrably more than simply a musical contest; it has evolved into a cherished and vital cultural institution, a rigorous and transformative crucible where exceptional talent is both discovered and refined, and an indispensable and vibrant thread in the rich and intricate tapestry of classical music.

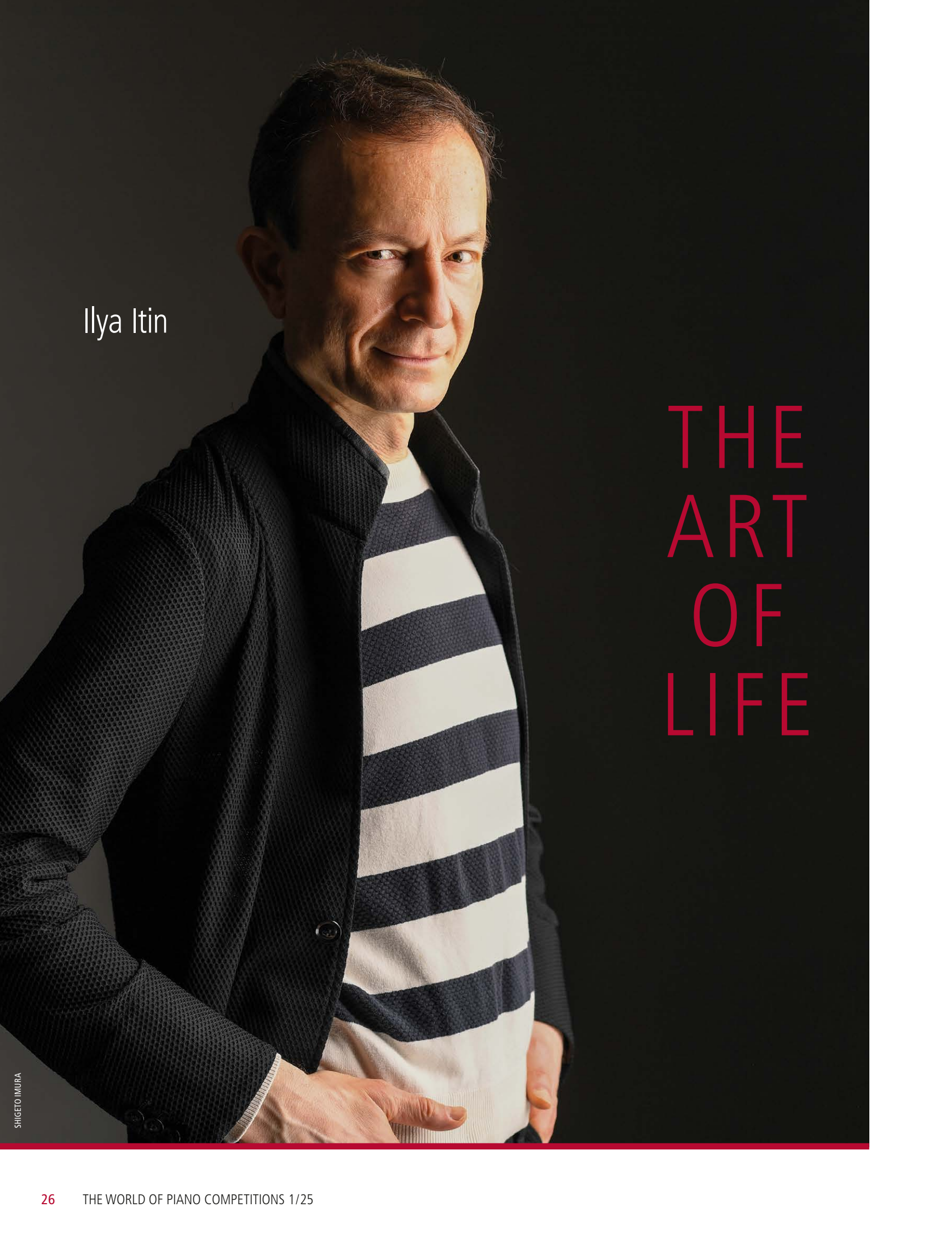
PATRICK JOVELL



Emil Gilels
1938



Queen Elisabeth
of Belgium

A portrait of pianist Ilya Itin. He is a middle-aged man with short, dark hair, looking slightly to the right with a gentle smile. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket over a white and dark blue horizontally striped sweater. The background is dark and out of focus. The lighting is soft, highlighting his face and clothing.

Ilya Itin

THE ART OF LIFE

SHIGETO IMURA

Away from the spotlight, Ilya Itin quietly carves his own artistic path. A thoughtful musician often dubbed “the perfect pianist,” he is celebrated for his remarkable sense of colour and structure. We had the pleasure of an inspiring conversation with this rare master, who shared his insights on performance, teaching, and two of his personal heroes.

Living the Music

One of the most important things I learned from my professor, Lev Naumov, was that when you're on stage, you're essentially composing. It's not helpful to fight your state of mind or your environment. Instead, focus on the sounds of this incredible instrument. No matter how much we prepare, performance is never mechanical. Each moment is shaped by the acoustics, the instrument, the time of day – even the weather. It's always new. Always different. And it demands that we let go and truly listen. At that moment, we have to create something meaningful from the sound in front of us. It's a gift. I think about that almost every day. To me, the art of interpretation is really the art of life.

Spirit Over Letter

There are certain laws in music you can't escape – just like you can't say you don't like gravity. When I look at a score, I try to understand what's behind it. When I meet people who claim to know exactly what Beethoven intended, I just shrug. It's a bit pre-

sumptuous, to be honest. You hear debates among musicologists about whether a slur goes from this note or that one, or whether the pedal should be lifted a fraction later. But if I have to choose between honouring the letter or the spirit, I'll always choose the spirit. I'm not trying to be different, or the same. I'm just trying to make sense of why a particular note follows another. It works on both a micro and macro level. And that's probably the only real way you can teach.

Selling the Magic

I love teaching. Some performers feel it takes time away from what they *should* be doing, but for me, teaching and performing go hand in hand. I learn and grow through my students. The solutions I find for their challenges often help me in my own playing. But teaching must be honest. Without explanation, it becomes a kind of illusion – selling magic without revealing how it works. We must be precise about the parameters that create music. At the same time, we shouldn't drown in analysis without a musical purpose behind it.

Ilya Itin was the Gold Medallist at the 1996 Leeds International Piano Competition, where he also received the Contemporary Music Award and the BBC Audience Award. Earlier, he won top prizes at the Russian National Rachmaninoff Competition, William Kapell, Casadesu (now Cleveland), Gina Bachauer, and Arthur Rubinstein competitions. He began piano studies at age four, studying under Natalia Litvinova at the Sverdlovsk Music Conservatory for Gifted Children, and later with Lev Naumov at the Moscow Conservatory, graduating with highest honours in 1990. As a soloist, he has performed across Europe, Asia, South America, and the U. S., appearing with major orchestras under such conductors as Sir Simon Rattle, Neeme Järvi, Christoph von Dohnányi, and Mikhail Pletnev. He has also performed chamber music with Igor Gruppman and Ida Haendel at the Miami International Piano Festival. His recordings have received critical acclaim. A sought-after pedagogue, Itin has taught at the Juilliard School, the Peabody Institute, and Musashino Academy in Tokyo. He recently joined the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music.

*“The mission of
the teacher comes down
to two things:
to inspire and to explain.”*

It’s a bit like Western medicine versus traditional Chinese medicine. You prescribe antibiotics, knowing they’ll likely work, but people react differently. The same goes for teaching: even if a method is technically correct, it can still be counterproductive. Ultimately, I want to help my students thrive – and sometimes, that means knowing when *not* to interfere.

Honesty and Engagement

Masterclasses are very different from private lessons. I sometimes struggle with the distinction – I want to give the student as much as I can, and they want to show their best. But time is limited, and there’s also an audience to consider. I don’t aim to entertain, but I do want to engage them and offer something meaningful. Judging competitions can be challenging. I have to quiet my inner teacher. There are so many internal questions, and I strive to be objective – if that’s even possible. Sometimes I realize I dislike a performance simply because I’m used to something else. I try to be honest about that.

People often say, “Tell a story.” But what story, and how? In this regard, the Stanislavski method has been my foundation. I was raised with the idea of seeing music through imagery – linking it to non-musical phenomena. It’s incredibly creative. Still, when it comes to actually playing, you have to translate the “blue sky” into a specific sound.

Movement and Stillness

It was only recently that I discovered Rachmaninoff once said, “I do not use the upper arm.” That was eye-opening. If you watch videos of me before the Leeds competition, you’ll see I moved quite a bit at the piano. During the competition, I was already shifting in another direction, though not fully there yet.

It’s not that I try *not* to move – quite the opposite. My ideal is to feel poised for movement at any moment. For that to happen, I need to be in the right place mentally and physically, aligned with the keyboard and the sound I want to create. When I play, the movement comes naturally.

The Performer’s Paradox

I vividly remember hearing Rachmaninoff’s recording of his Third Concerto for the first time. When he reached the climax of the development section, I stood up – literally. I was just a child, and it overwhelmed me. Now, when I perform that piece, I’m on the other side. My task is to move others in the same way. That’s the

fascinating paradox of being a performer. You must listen deeply while performing – but listening and feeling don’t always align. Chaliapin wrote about this beautifully; sometimes, he sang with tears in his eyes.

A Great Loss

The recently unearthed recording of Rachmaninoff rehearsing *Symphonic Dances* with Ormandy gets incredibly close to his essence. It feels raw, real, and utterly authentic. One of the great tragedies of my life is that there is no film of him playing – and not nearly enough recordings. Wouldn’t it be a gift to hear him perform, say, Beethoven’s Op. 111? Schnabel once said Rachmaninoff gave the best performance of that sonata he’d ever heard. Rachmaninoff was such an architect in performance – precise, powerful. He would have been a phenomenal Beethoven interpreter.

Modern Classic

Our knowledge of Rachmaninoff’s style is mostly based on recordings from his fifties. Who knows how it evolved? Listening to his contemporaries, his playing feels strikingly modern – almost Bauhaus in its precision and economy. His Villa Senar was built in Bauhaus style, and his interpretations remind me of Jugendstil, Art Nouveau – what we call *Stile Moderne* in Russian. To classify him as a romantic pianist is misleading. He was Michelangeli before Michelangeli – his structures are alive, flexible, yet nothing is accidental.


Some claim he was born too late, that he belonged to a bygone era. I disagree. He created a distinct musical language – deeply rooted in Gregorian chant and Russian Orthodox music, but also forward-looking. In some ways, he anticipated minimalism. He wasn’t looking back; he was ahead of his time. His rubato is often cited as proof of romanticism, but if you study it closely, you see it’s integral to his structure. He built long, expressive arches – emotion was found not in every gesture, but in the overall form, just as Busoni described.

A Once-in-a-Lifetime Moment

I consider myself incredibly lucky to have heard Horowitz live in 1986 in Moscow – or even just to have seen him in person. Thinking about it still gives me goosebumps. It felt like seeing Liszt, Chopin, or Rachmaninoff himself.

The very first notes Horowitz played – I can’t describe them. The effect was physical, like being intoxicated. It was unforgettable.

ERIC SCHOONES

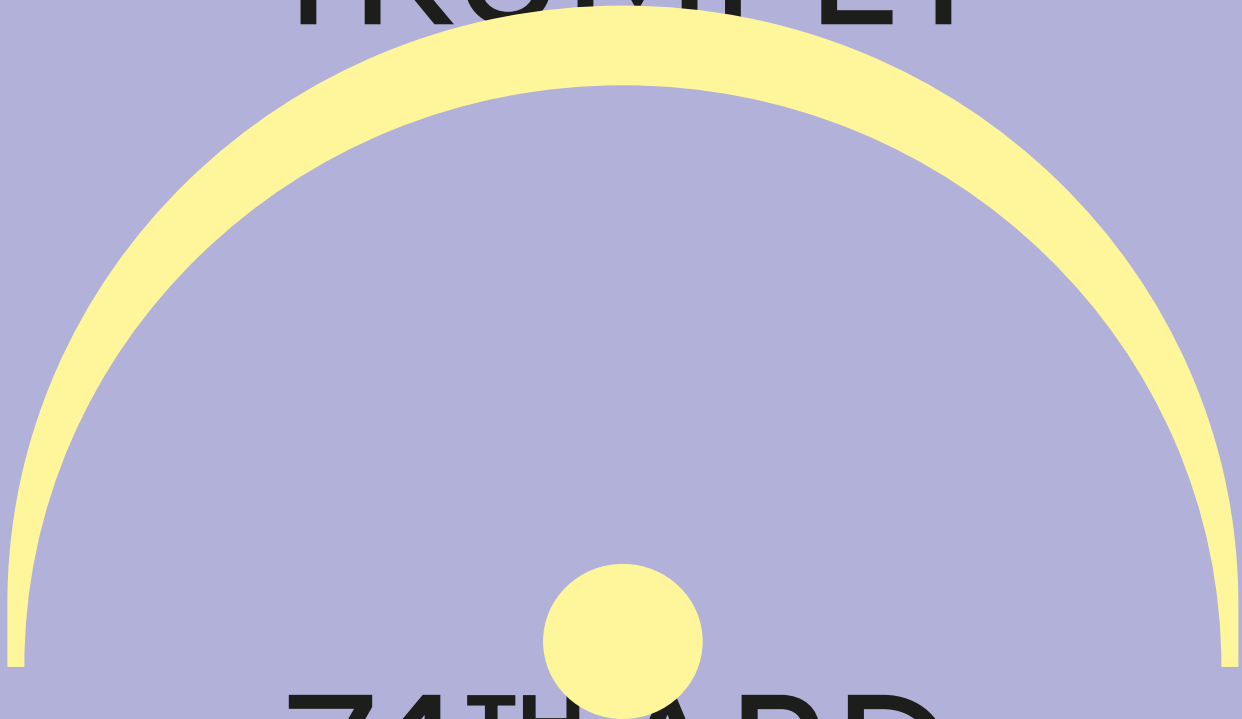
A portrait of Shigeto Imura, a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a blue blazer over a light blue button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

*“Music only
becomes music when
it reaches the soul
of the listener.
As a performer,
you’re transported into
that world as well.”*

SHIGETO IMURA

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DANIEL DELANG



Prize winners 2024

ARD International Music Competition

The ARD International Music Competition, being one of the most renowned and large-scale competitions of its kind, was founded in 1952 by the public broadcasting radio stations of the Federal Republic of Germany, managed by Bavarian Broadcasting in Munich and takes place every year in September.

For many of today's world-famous artists, an award from the ARD International Music Competition in Munich represented a springboard to their major careers. Consider the likes of Jessye Norman, Francisco Araiza, Christoph Eschenbach, Mitsuko Uchida, Thomas Quasthoff, Yuri Bashmet, Christian Tetzlaff, Sharon Kam, Heinz Holliger, Maurice André, Trio Wanderer, Antoine Tamestit and the Quatuor Ebène to name but a few.

Over the years, the ARD International Music Competition with its annually changing line-up of musicians has developed into an internationally singular and highly regarded institution. Since 2001, the presence of contemporary music has been considerably reinforced through commissions to prominent composers.

Each year an average of 400 to 600 young musicians apply to take part in the competition. Then, following a preliminary round, some 200 competitors from 35 to 40 countries actually appear. The competition takes place every September in Munich in four varying categories.

The next competition will take place from September 1 to 19, 2025 for trumpet, clarinet and piano. More than 600 young musicians have applied to take part in this year's competition. Following a preliminary round, 169 competitors from 32 countries have been invited to appear in Munich.

The winners can look forward to cash prizes of up to € 15,000 (first prize for solo instruments) as well as numerous special prizes and concert engagements.

FUTURE COMPETITIONS

September 2026: String quartet | Percussion | Bassoon | Organ

September 2027: Violin | Voice | Flute | Piano Trio

September 2028: Viola | Violoncello | Horn | Piano

www.ard-musikwettbewerb.de



Innovations at
the Honens International Piano Competition

The Complete Artist

Like all major piano competitions, the Honens International Piano Competition is dedicated to fostering artistic excellence. But with what might be called a distinctly Canadian approach, Honens goes several steps further – seeking not only technical brilliance but the development of what the competition calls the *Complete Artist*. In doing so, it also nurtures public appreciation and understanding of the piano and its music. We had the pleasure of speaking with President and CEO Amanda Smith, alongside Artistic Director Jon Kimura Parker, about how Honens continues to innovate and inspire.



Nicolas Namoradze performing
on Calgary's Stephen Ave

Over the years, Honens has evolved significantly – not only in terms of artist development, but also through its innovative approaches to community engagement, diversity, and inclusion.

Jon Kimura Parker: We try our best. Our goal is to form as complete a picture as possible of the participants – not just as pianists, but as people. We're looking beyond technical perfection. That's the essence of the *Complete Artist* concept. It includes chamber music with a cellist and a piano quintet, and in accompanying a Kreisler-like salon piece, the ability to completely submerge your own artistic personality, even for five minutes, I think is part of being a complete artist too. We actually incorporate feedback from the chamber music partners into the evaluation process, because we welcome someone who works well with others and will be a good colleague. During the competition, we conduct interviews that allow the pianists to express their artistic ideas, which the jury takes into account too. And we ask them to speak directly to the audience – perhaps introducing an encore not listed in the program and sharing why it matters to them. It gives us another glimpse into their personality.

Amanda Smith: We're also proud of our Canadian identity, not only are we commissioning a Canadian composer to write a new work specifically for the competition. We want to show how Canada is a welcoming country, and in recent times, we've seen a growing sense of national unity and pride that's truly exciting.

That was also part of Esther Honens' original vision, wasn't it?

Jon: Very much so. Calgary was her pride and joy – she saw it as the cultural capital of Canada. She once attended the Cliburn

competition in Texas and came back thinking, "Calgary can do this too." She was determined to bring that vision to life. In fact, she passed away just five days after the very first finals, as if she held on to witness her dream realized.

Amanda Smith: What also sets us apart is that we don't just name a winner. Our laureates become part of the Honens family for life. Many of them speak about life "before Honens" and "after Honens" – and how transformative the experience was. Our Artist Development Program is designed to fit the individual situation of each candidate, to whatever they need to build a meaningful career.

Jon Kimura Parker: I should also mention our jury process. While the voting remains strictly confidential, we allow space for any jury member to advocate for a candidate who hasn't achieved general consensus. They can say, "I really believe we should take another look at this pianist." I think that kind of openness is quite rare.

Let's talk about two groundbreaking initiatives you've launched: *Keys for Newcomers* and *Xenia Concerts*. These programs seem to redefine the role of a piano competition in society.

Amanda Smith: Both programs are very close to my heart. Canada has welcomed a large number of immigrants, particularly during the invasion of Ukraine. Alberta, and Calgary in particular, now has one of the highest Ukrainian populations in the country. *Keys for Newcomers* aims to provide accessible music education music education for children and youth, and employment opportunities for immigrant and refugee music teachers. For many, music is deeply woven into their identity. This program helps them settle, start teaching, and rebuild their lives.

Honens International Piano Competition

discover

the Complete Artist



20
25

EXPERIENCE THE EXCITEMENT

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*“Canada as
an incredibly
welcoming
country.”*

As for *Xenia Concerts*, our first presentation was back in 2017. It’s an organization originally based in Ontario, focused on creating inclusive, high-quality musical experiences for neurodiverse and disabled audiences. It began with concerts for individuals on the autism spectrum, but now we also serve eating disorder clinics, blind or partially sighted people as well as those with dementia, and others who might not feel comfortable in a traditional concert hall – people who need to move, dance, or make noise without fear of judgment. I thought, “Alberta needs this and Canada needs this. This is something Honens should be doing.” Therefore, we’ve continued our relationship with Xenia Concerts, through which we have launched our own series of adaptive concerts in Calgary, called Classical Adaptations. And this year, we’ll be offering our laureates specialized training in this kind of inclusive performance practices.

Jon Kimura Parker: One more exciting innovation I might add is our Incubator Award. It’s designed to support projects that push boundaries – whether through social change, research, or entirely new concert formats. The first recipient was Nicolas Namoradze, our 2018 laureate. In partnership with the University of Calgary, his project studies how a performer’s brain responds to music. For example, if a certain region of the brain lights up while playing Beethoven, and a different region for Mozart, that knowledge could guide music-based therapies for people with brain injuries. It’s groundbreaking work.

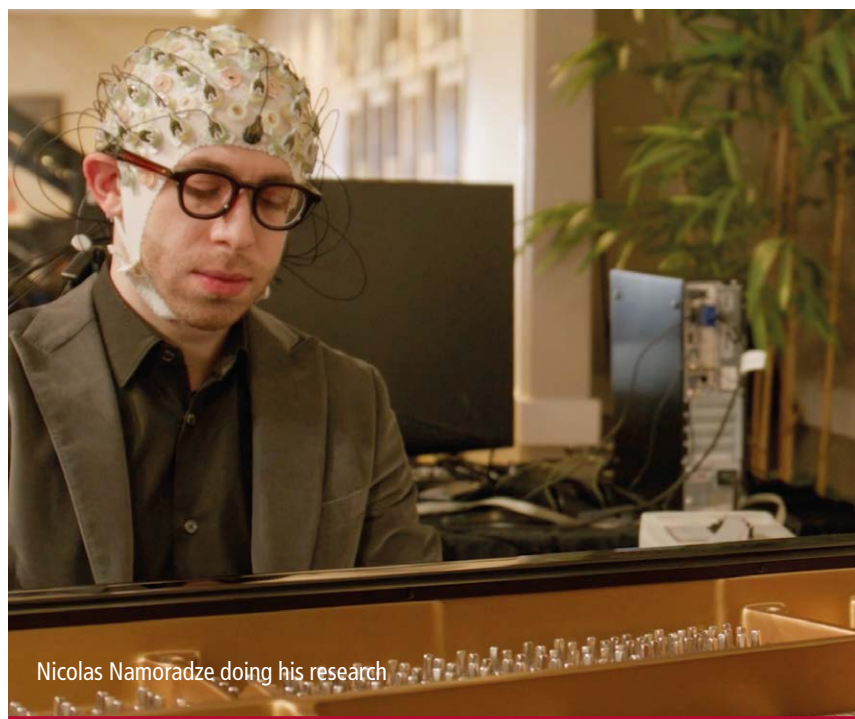
Amanda Smith: The Incubator Award, if granted, will comprise a grant of up to \$25,000, given to one of our applicants – regardless of whether they make it to the finals or not. It’s meant to help them launch a project with the potential to create real change in the classical music world.

ERIC SCHOONES

Semifinals: October 16 to 20, 2025

Finals: October 23 and 24, 2025

All further information: www.honens.com



Preliminary round of the 19th International Fryderyk Chopin Competition

The first International Chopin Competition was held in 1927; it has been held every five years since 1955. It is no exaggeration to say that the International Chopin Piano Competition has become a fully celebrated national event in Poland, and one of the most important International Music Competitions in the world. The 18th edition was scheduled for 2020 but was postponed by a year to 2021 due to the corona pandemic, so by exception it was decided to have the 19th edition four years later. The 19th International Chopin Piano Competition attracted a record number of 642 applicants. It has always been a popular competition for pianists and some of the greatest pianists of the 20th and 21st Centuries have emerged from it.

The preliminary round was held in the Chamber Music Hall of the Warsaw Philharmonic from April 23 to May 4. A total of 162 contestants competed, including those who were exempted from the video preliminary round. As has been the trend in international music competitions in recent years, there was prominent representation from Asia among contestants with 67 participants from China, followed by 24 from Japan and 23 from South Korea. Thirty participants were teenagers, the youngest just 15 years old. Participation is possible for those born between 1995 and 2009.

The preliminary round repertoire this year included two Etudes,

one Nocturne/Étude, one Scherzo, and one Mazurka from the lists. For the previous edition, instead of a Scherzo, participants had to choose a Ballade or Barcarolle, or Fantasy. In 2025, a Ballade or Barcarolle or Fantasy is to be played in the first round of the main competition. Even though still teenagers, many of them were not only able to play extremely well but were also musically mature! At the press conference, when the results were announced, Artur Szklener, director of the Chopin Institute said: “Our impression – that is, my impression and that of the judges I spoke to – was that the level of this preliminary round was in many ways like the first





ALL PHOTOS: CHOPIN INSTITUTE/GREDZINSKI

rounds of the past. The artistic level was extremely high, which was both a privilege and a challenge for the jury. The most played piece in this preliminary round was the most difficult of the Scherzos: the one in E major Op. 54 and the choice of repertoire clearly shows the high level of excellence.”

The preliminary round was also broadcast live and can still be enjoyed on demand (www.youtube.com/@chopinstitute). The recording quality is impressive, and you can definitely enjoy it, but when compared to the performance in the hall, you will get a different impression.

According to the spokesperson of the Chopin Institute, Aleksander Laskowski, the broadcast of the preliminary round reached over 3 million views on Facebook in 5 languages (Polish, English, French, Chinese and Japanese), over 2 million views on Instagram and over 3.5 million views on YouTube .

Since 2010, the competition has been organised by the Chopin Institute. This Institute also launched a new competition in 2018, the International Chopin Competition on Period Instruments, with a second edition in 2023. This was initiated to further deepen the understanding of Chopin’s works. As a result, many pianists (on modern piano) developed an interest and started to learn Fortepiano to participate in the International Chopin competition on Period Instruments.

Winners and contestants of this competition on Period Instruments participated in the preliminary round of the “modern piano” competition this time. There are many pianists with strong personalities, but apart from them, performances could be heard that make use of ideas from the fortepiano playing. For example, a couple of competitors played Nocturne with variants (ossia in the Ekier edition)

in the preliminary round. It will be very interesting to see how such performances in the Chopin Piano competition will influence future performances of Chopin’s works on modern piano.


As many as 85 pianists from 20 countries will gather in Warsaw in October for the main competition which will last approximately three weeks: they comprise 66 who have successfully passed the preliminary rounds plus 19 who have been exempted from the preliminary rounds (first and second places in nine other International Piano Competitions from a list). As expected, the highest number came from China (29), followed by 13 from Poland and 13 from Japan.

Some of the participants already have careers as professional pianists, like Eric Lu (1st prize Leeds, 2018) and Tomoharu Ushida (2nd prize Hamamatsu, 2018). There are also prize winners of other prestigious competitions (Kevin Chen, Rubinstein and Geneva; Alberto Ferro, Busoni and Queen Elisabeth; Kaito Kobayashi, Leeds and Hamamatsu; Shiori Kuwahara, Rubinstein and Busoni; Philipp Lynov, Paderewski and Xiamen etc.), as well as finalists of the previous edition (Hyuk Lee and Hao Rao), and the 4th prize winner in this competition in 2015 (Eric Lu).

It is remarkable that this competition has a high number of re-entrants, even though the competition is held only once in 5 years. Piotr Paleczny, who chaired the jury for the preliminary rounds, and jury member for the main competition in October said: “We are not just looking for a pianist, but a true artist who feels Chopin, loves Chopin. And above all, a strong creative artistic personality. That is the kind of pianist we are looking for.”

AKEMI ALINK

www.chopincompetition.pl

A man and a woman are smiling and posing for a photo in a brightly lit hallway. The man, on the left, is wearing a dark blue flat cap, a white button-down shirt, and a dark jacket. The woman, on the right, has blonde hair and is wearing a grey herringbone coat over a dark top. They are standing close together. The background shows a long hallway with a glass and metal ceiling structure and yellow walls.

*„Our mission is
to foster musical
understanding at
every level.“*

Interview with Randall Faber

Music is an Adventure

Randall Faber, alongside his wife Nancy, is well-known for co-authoring the best-selling *Piano Adventures* teaching method. Their books, recognized globally for fostering students' creative and cognitive development, have sold millions of copies worldwide. Previously translated into nine languages, *Piano Adventures* is now also available in Dutch and German. We had the pleasure of speaking with Randall Faber about his work and philosophy.

We share an admiration for Dinu Lipatti.

He was the first pianist who really captivated me. I remember playing Schumann's *Piano Concerto* and hearing his recording, which was extraordinary – it stood head and shoulders above everything else. And in your book on Zen and music making, Lipatti is the main character!

Yes, his letter on how to study is unmatched. It shows how he transformed the score into a vibrant and spontaneous performance, starting with the music itself before ever touching the piano. This approach is beneficial at all levels, from beginners to virtuosos.

I see a parallel in how we aim to engage young children right from the start, encouraging full expression and creativity. Instead of just focusing on technical training, we give them tools to express themselves.

There's no point in learning to hit the right keys and only later adding a little music. The musical content itself should guide the practice.

Exactly. If you skip the conceptual phase, you're just repeating what you've already learned, at best adding a bit of "salt and pepper" for expression. We should bring rhythm into the body, make it kinaesthetic. We use creative audio examples, singing the music, so when students approach the piano, they already have a clear concept of the musicality in their minds – just like Lipatti did. It's a far cry from merely decoding notes and turning them into something that vaguely resembles a song. Our mission is to foster musical understanding at every level.

The early phase of learning piano might seem easy because the notes are laid out for you. But it also has the disadvantage that it's not always easy to physically connect with the keyboard.

Yes, but one could argue that the sensory feedback from the fingers in the motor cortex is linked to spatial reasoning. This might explain why humans have historically counted on their fingers. I also feel that the physical connection to the keyboard is very closely tied to the auditory cortex.

Do you know what Joseph Hoffman said? "Eyes and ears in the fingertips."

Exactly! In our early childhood courses, aimed at five-year-olds, we focus on building plasticity and sensitivity to develop that neural connection. Pitch, rhythm, and tactile experiences are all connected with emotion, and this emotional engagement makes music-making a true adventure.

This emotional connection seems crucial in keeping children motivated to continue their piano studies.

Yes, I did my doctoral research on the stages of talent development, and I found that people have different needs at different stages of life. For young children, fun is the main motivator. We call it the spirit of play. Five- and six-year-olds are naturally curious, constantly exploring the world and receiving feedback from it. Our job is to fan the flame of their curiosity. As they get older, motivations shift toward self-esteem and introspective questions like, "How do I fit into the world?" When a student thinks, "Wow, look what I



can do!” they realize that they can develop skills through effort. They start to understand, “If I put in the work, I can achieve this.” And that’s when they begin to form their artistic identity.

In that sense, music-making can help not just in developing musical skills, but in shaping one’s personality.

Absolutely! Even if they end up in a creative field like architecture or engineering – or even in banking – there’s still a sense of artistry. While we strive to elevate the arts, sometimes the ego gets in the way. But with the really great artists, that reach out and connect with others. Like those artists, everyone eventually could transcend the ego, but during adolescence, though, it’s important to allow students to show their peacock feathers – they need that stage.

It’s part of their growth.

How much of your own personal experience is reflected in your books?

I started playing at eight years old, but I didn’t have a great piano, perfect pitch, or a fantastic ear. I really had to work to develop those skills. I think starting at a young age has its advantages. We adopted our daughter from China, and music had such a profound effect on her – it was like she came to life through it. Working with her and some of her friends, we saw how music opened up a whole new world of perceptions. It was an inspiring experience for us. Of course, you can’t be more passionate about developing talent than with your own child. Watching her grow and develop was essential to writing our books.





Your own development also played a key role in this process.

I was classically trained, but as a teenager, I started playing a lot of pop music, which taught me so much. One of the first things we did when we began publishing was arranging Disney tunes. This led to materials in various styles – pop, Disney, rock and roll, Christmas songs, hymns – so young students could feel a connection to the piano by saying, “This is my book, my sound, my style.” That was the piano revolution in the ’90s, especially in the U.S. Exploring different genres myself had a big impact on my freedom at the piano. I could improvise in pop styles, go through chord progressions, and that made it easier to understand the structure of the music when I played Brahms. Over the past couple of decades, I’ve spent a lot of time training teachers on how to incorporate songs like Disney tunes and be more free with their fingers and hands – seeing harmony as a matrix on the keyboard. Teachers often aren’t trained in that way.

Teaching is about the interaction between the teacher and the student, and your materials provide a foundation for that.

The question remains: how much can we influence a student through methodology? Yes, we have a curriculum, but it’s really up to the teacher how they deliver it. Every teacher has their own personality and style, and the key is authenticity, patience, and soulfulness. Teachers also need to remember to set aside their own egos, they should take the backseat. It’s not about leading the student, but about following their curiosity and guiding them along the way. It’s all about nurturing a love for music and growth in the child.

You’ve developed a checklist, one could say, of key topics to cover in teaching.

Yes, we’ve developed what we call the ACE triangle – Analyse, Create, and Express. These are the three components of artistry. To understand music – its structure, its grammar – students must be able to create with imagination, which sparks artistic expression. It all comes together in one organic whole, and indeed, ACE can serve as a checklist. It’s about ensuring the teaching is all-rounded: Did we touch on expression? Did we encourage creativity? Did we analyse the music, breaking down the structure of a piece like Beet-

hoven’s, for example, and discussing its themes and harmonic progressions?

And that’s so important – ensuring the music is connected to the teacher’s and student’s feelings and personalities. You don’t want to make a student into a copy of yourself.

Absolutely! It has to be a personal, holistic experience. I’ve seen teachers in masterclasses tear a student apart in an attempt to play the piece the way they themselves would. That’s not the goal. With the principles behind ACE, a teacher can open doors for the student, allowing them to continue learning in their own way and experience their own musical adventures, which will grow and evolve over time.

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Each issue includes interviews with leading pianists and rising talent, news, features, analysis, reviews and comment. We also publish in-depth articles on piano recordings and repertoire, piano brands, retailers, master classes on piano technique and interpretation, reports from festivals, competitions, and so on.

Our German edition was launched in 2017 at the request of the Ruhr Piano Festival, and we maintain a close cooperation with the festival.

Upcoming edition of The World of Piano Competitions is published: December 2025
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COMPETITION PROFILE

The winners of the special prizes

International Piano Competition for Young Pianists Kronberg

“Fantastic level”: Young pianists from all over the world fascinate in Kronberg. “Impressive, moving, phenomenal!” enthused the audience after the second edition of the International Piano Competition for Young Pianists Kronberg from March 21 to 23, 2025, at Kronberg’s Casals Forum/Germany.

The young talents from all over the world wowed the audience with their passionate playing, artistry, and skill, both in the competition and in the live-streamed prizewinners' concert. “This is the very highest international standard,” says Ulrike Danne-Feldmann, Artistic Director. “With the second edition, this competition has established itself as one of the most important competitions for young talent worldwide,” states Gregor Willmes, Chair and Cultural Manager of the Carl Bechstein Foundation. The innovative concept, which emphasises the comprehensive and holistic promotion of young pianists, has attracted talents from the USA, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the USA, Canada, New Zealand, and the whole of Europe. “Out of 204 applications from 37 countries, 66 young pianists from 18 countries were admitted to the competition after the digital preliminary round,” explains Ulrike Danne-Feldmann.

Five pianists from the Netherlands were invited to Kronberg, of whom Yuewen Yin won the second prize from AG V and Rei Fukuoka the third prize from AG VII. In six age groups – AG I was not represented in 2025 – the young pianists between the ages of 7 and 19 roused the large audience in the Carl Bechstein Saal to storms of enthusiasm. The jury with Prof. Matthias Kirschnereit, Prof. Claudia Schellenberger, Prof. Christian A. Pohl and Ulrike Danne-Feldmann were highly impressed and awarded prizes worth over €35,000. They took plenty of time for the subsequent discussions with each participant. The highlight of the competition was, of course, the prizewinners' concert in the main hall of the Casals Forum in front of a sold-out audience! The first prize winners and

special prize winners thrilled everyone and played rousing. Equally remarkable was the warm contact between the young talents, which was particularly evident on stage while they were waiting to vote for the audience award. The free supporting programme with excursions to the Opel Zoo, Kronberg Castle and the Rhein-Main-Therme spa invited participants to make friends and have fun together. Workshops in body percussion promoted the musical development of the young artists and enabled a completely different approach to music and rhythm. “It was a true pleasure for my child to take part. What stood out most was that the competition felt more like a festival of music rather than a mere contest. It was a space where talented young pianists could truly share, connect, and grow together through their performances. The atmosphere encouraged not just excellence, but also joy, inspiration, and a deep love for music. We are sincerely grateful for this enriching experience,” enthused Jay Choi, the mother of Soho Park, first prize winner of AG III.

The young talents will perform in various follow-up concerts of the competition throughout Germany in 2025 and 2026, and inspire the audience with their outstanding piano playing.

The next edition will take place from April 2 to 4, 2027. The International Piano Competition for Young Pianists Kronberg – promoter, initiator, motivator, organiser: International Piano Competition Taunus e.V.
Website: <https://piano-competition-kronberg.de/en/>

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The Takamatsu International Piano Competition

The Takamatsu International Piano Competition was conceived in Takamatsu City with the aim of providing young pianists with an opportunity to showcase their achievements and open doors to the world, as well as to contribute to the development of local musical culture by providing a place to interact with first-class musicians. Sunport Hall Takamatsu, a splendid venue overlooking the stunning Seto Inland Sea, where gentle waves and countless islands create an incomparably beautiful landscape, stands as the stage for this event.

The 1st Takamatsu International Piano Competition (TIPC) was held in 2006. The sixth edition is scheduled to take place from February 10th to February 22nd, 2026, marking precisely two decades since the inaugural event. The judging process is structured into four stages. In the initial round, contestants are required to perform compositions by Bach, Liszt, and one or more pieces by the designated composers. The repertoire for the subsequent round encompasses a Mozart sonata and pieces of their choosing by Schumann, Brahms, Schubert, Mendelssohn, or Chopin. The third round will include Beethoven Sonatas, a commissioned work, and chamber music to highlight the contestants' performance skills as soloists and accompanists. Finally, the five finalists will perform a concerto with the Seto Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Junichi Hirokami.

The twelve-day competition will be judged by [in alphabetical order] Vincenzo Balzani (Italy), Dang Thai Son (Vietnam), Pascal Devoyon (France), Akiko Ebi (Japan), Jan Jiracek von Arnim (Germany), Yoheved Kaplinsky (USA), Daejin Kim (Korea), Katarzyna Popowa-Zydrón (Poland), and Antti Siirala (Finland). The distinguished panel will also include composer Shinichiro Ikebe (Japan), renowned for his compositions featured in Akira Kurosawa films, including his masterpiece, *Kagemusha*. Furthermore, Susumu Aoyagi, a member of the jury since the 1st Takamatsu International Piano Competition, will serve as chair of the jury.

Chloe Jiyeong Mun, the first-prize winner of the 3rd Takamatsu International Piano Competition, went on to win the Geneva International Music Competition and the Busoni International Piano Competition. Similarly, Yasuko Furumi, winner of the 4th Takamatsu International Piano Competition, was awarded the 2nd prize at the Dublin International Piano Competition and has performed extensively around the world. Moreover, Philipp Lynov won the Xiamen International Piano Competition in 2025, following his victory at the 5th Takamatsu International Piano Competition. Thus, it is fair to say the competition has become one of the world's leading competitions for young pianists.

The competition is currently accepting applications, with a deadline of August 20, 2025. Further information can be found on its website at <https://form.tipc.jp>. It is worth noting that international participants will be subsidized for their travel expenses. The first-prize winner will receive a cash prize of 3 million yen and performance opportunities in Japan and abroad. For additional information regarding the competition, including the required repertoire, please refer to the official website at www.tipc.jp.

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December
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András Lakatos during his performance in the finals with the Kölner Kammerorchester.

5th International Robert Schumann Competition Düsseldorf for Young Pianists

The International Robert Schumann Competition for Young Pianists has been held in Düsseldorf since 2017. It takes place every two years. We all know the Robert Schumann Competition, which was inaugurated in 1956 in Zwickau: the city where Robert Schumann was born. It is very logical to have the other Schumann Competition in Düsseldorf, where he spent such an important part of his life. This competition is specially for young pianists, in three separate age categories: up to 13, 14–17 and 18–20. Artistic Director of the competition is Barbara Szczepanska, an excellent pianist herself who is often invited as jury member to many other international piano competitions and who also teaches at the Robert Schumann Hochschule in Düsseldorf.

Even though the competition is relatively young, it already has an impressive list of past prize winners. Roman Fediurko, Magdalene Ho, Yumeka Nakagawa, Elisey Mysin, Eva Gevorgyan and Elia Cecino. They were all awarded in Düsseldorf and proved to be magnificent young musicians as they went on to win the Horowitz Competition, the Concours Clara Haskil, the Nashville Chopin Competition and even reaching the finals of the famous Chopin Competition in Warsaw and the Arthur Rubinstein Competition. This year, an overwhelming number of 158 young pianists applied for the competition. Similar to so many other international piano competitions, a high percentage of these talented young musicians originated from Asia. In total, 71 were selected to take part in the live competition in Düsseldorf.

The Robert Schumann Hochschule in Düsseldorf has excellent facilities to accommodate the competition. Each age category has three rounds (which is quite exceptional for competitions for the youth). The first two solo rounds are held at the Partika Hall of the Robert Schumann Hochschule, which has superb acoustics. Both in the first and second round, the programme must include a work by Schumann. From the second round, all performances were streamed on a live webcast, which can still be viewed at: www.youtube.com/@robertschumanncompetitiond4414/streams

The finals are held in the Robert-Schumann-Saal of the Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf. It is very special that even in the youngest age category the finalists can perform with an orchestra! They have to prepare the first movement of a piano concerto by Haydn or Mozart, while in the highest age category it has to be Schumann or Chopin. The hall was full and the audience could enjoy nine wonderful young pianists perform their choice of concerto with orchestra. Chaired by Barbara Szczepanska, this year's jury included pianists and pedagogues from five different countries: Michael Becker, Eser Bilgeman, Justas Dvarionas, Joanna Ławrynowicz, Wolfgang Manz, and Zhe Tang.

In the highest age category, the first prize went to András Lakatos (Hungary), in category B the first prize was not awarded and two finalists shared the 2nd prize: Jan Kwiatkowski (Poland) and Ivan Petrenko (Ukraine). In the youngest age category A, the first prize went to Menhe Liu (10 years old, China). In each category, there was also an audience prize that mirrored the verdict by the professional jury. András Lakatos also received the special EMCY Award. It was yet again a high-level competition. Everyone is already looking forward to the next edition in 2027!

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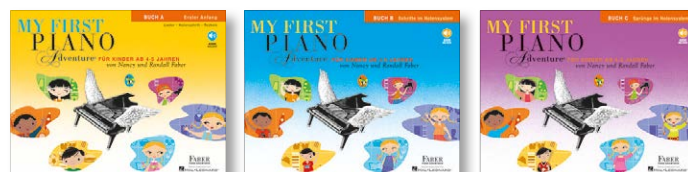
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For 25 years, we have worked on making this international competition for pianists, aged 10 to 24 in four age categories, a place for real musical and human encounters, and it is a pleasure to see so many of them finding their way to Belgium.



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Application deadline: October 10, 2025

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The fifth Kölner Klavierzimmer

The renowned amateur competition for pianists, the Kölner Klavierzimmer, will take place for the fifth time this year from August 20 to 24, 2025.



Regardless of age and playing experience, it is all about the joy of experiencing and creating music together! The “Kölner Klavierzimmer” would like to provide a chance for amateur musicians to perform. Anyone who does not earn their living by playing the piano in public or is not studying to do so is welcome at the fifth Kölner Klavierzimmer. Following the outstanding success of recent years and the great response from participants, the chamber music with piano category is now open to all string instruments. There is also a new time format: adults in the E-G categories will have up to 30 minutes to present longer works to the jury. Participation is possible either in person or online. A jury concert on August 20, 2025, at 7 pm will open the competition. The final concert with the winners of the fifth Kölner Klavierzimmer will take place on Sunday, August 24, 2025, at 4 pm. Registrations are open until July 20, 2025.

www.klavierzimmer.com



The Young Pianist Foundation
thanks all participants of the

YPF European Piano Competition 2025 and extends special
congratulations to *Paul Salard*, *Viviana-Zarah Baudis* and
Brecht Valckenaers on their well-deserved awards.
YPF is looking forward to the next competition in 2028.

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