

Germany's Alexander Schimpf wins the 2011 Cleveland International Piano Competition

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- No one versed in classical music would look at two evenings of Brahms, Beethoven and Rachmaninoff and call them adventurous.

But no other word better applies to the final round of the 2011 Cleveland International Piano Competition, which took place Friday and Saturday nights at Severance Hall and concluded with Alexander Schimpf, 29, of Germany taking the \$50,000 first prize.

Between the intense level of competition and the jury's ultimate rankings, the evenings were nothing if not high on excitement.

Schimpf's win on his first visit to the U.S. seemed likely following his performance Saturday, but many debates are no doubt still going over who took second (\$25,000), third (\$15,000) and fourth (\$10,000) places: Alexey Chernov, 28, of Russia; Eric Zuber, 26, of the U.S.; and Kyu Yeon Kim, 25, of Korea, respectively.



Alexander Schimpf.

Say what one will about the roster of finalists, and who else might have belonged on it, but the four who made it to this exclusive stage held up well under the extreme, potentially once-in-a-lifetime pressure of a concerto with the Cleveland Orchestra, conducted by Christopher Wilkins. Regarding the jury's decisions, it's important to remember the concerto was just one factor in a complex equation, albeit a large one.

Schimpf, the last to take the stage, distinguished himself in more ways than one Saturday performing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4. Even before he played a note, his selection of the round's lone Classical-period work attracted attention.

Then came the performance, the finest of the four, marked by secure interaction with the orchestra and complete mastery of the score's technical and emotional dimensions. By turns, the pianist whipped up storms, spun out golden filigree, and plumbed philosophical depths.

Others played their selections. He owned his.

The two youngest contestants, Kim and Zuber, made their Severance debuts Friday. Kim played Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1. Zuber played Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2.

Kim took a while hitting her stride. Her performance of the first movement was timid and mechanical, and notably low on brawn, even as it sparkled where the music turns rhapsodic or fluttering.

Only in the second and third movements did Kim shine. To the Adagio, she brought true yearning and fragility, and her hard-edged sound and dazzling agility suited the steely, fast-moving Rondo.

Chernov presented the same concerto Saturday. But where Kim sometimes struggled to be heard above the orchestra, Chernov easily transcended, giving a brilliant performance a few missteps shy of flawless but overflowing with raw energy.

This was especially true in the first movement, but also in the third, to which the pianist applied dynamic breadth and tonal allure. Yet Chernov also excelled at the lower end of the sonic spectrum, treading an exquisitely soft line in the Adagio.

Zuber and Rachmaninoff also proved a superb match. Not only did the pianist fully inhabit the lush, Romantic score, he rendered it with expressive distinction.

In addition to a well-stocked technical arsenal, Zuber displayed both dramatic sweep and emotional sensitivity. The latter, in particular, defined his gently pulsed reading of the Adagio. What's more, he played the showman, injecting striking contrast into the final Allegro.

What comes next, besides Sunday's winners' recital, remains to be seen. On Thursday, the finalists described post-competition plans including vacation, concerts, studies, and other musical contests.

One thing is certain: As first prize-winner, Schimpf will be busy. In addition to \$50,000, his prize package includes a recital at Carnegie Hall in New York and more than 50 concert engagements.

So the adventure that was the 2011 Cleveland International Piano Competition is over, but Schimpf's adventure is just beginning.