

Gala Instrumental Concert

Townsville Civic Theatre
7pm 25 July 2017

The Australian Concerto and Vocal Competition has treated Townsville audiences to a delightful few days filled with outstanding solo and group performances. As the final section draws to a close, three finalists must compete for the competition's most lucrative prize and the honour of being named the winner of the Open Instrumental section.



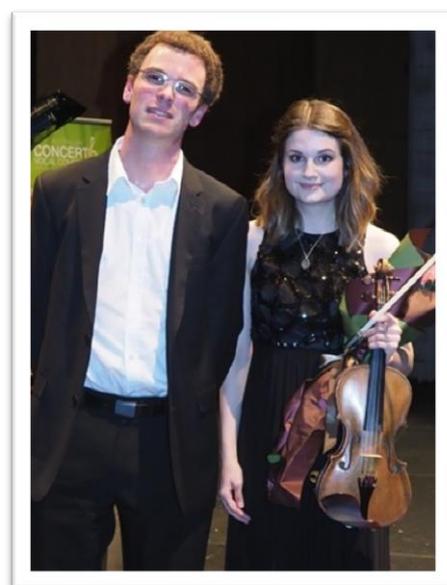
The evening began with **Chiacheng Sen**, a pianist from California, USA, presenting Chopin's *Piano Concerto no. 2 in F minor*.

Sen's biography is certainly impressive - she has won third prize in the 2017 Risingstars Grand Prix in Berlin, and won the 2009 American Protege International Piano and Strings competition which led to her Carnegie Hall debut. With her playing described by Cosmo Buono as "very virtuosic", it seems this Chopin concerto which was written while Chopin was merely 20 was a fitting choice. While Chopin's Concertos have never been received as warmly as his solo works, the lyricism and lightness in these works show they don't deserve to fly under the radar. With an extensive introduction performed here by charismatic accompanist Rhodri Clarke, Sen entered with the familiar theme and went on to deliver a brilliant first

movement. Sen's delicate yet firm touch served her well in the Larghetto movement (admittedly my favourite) with her piano dynamics exquisite, though a little unbalanced in some places. The robust Allegro vivace was played with immense skill and Sen sounded comfortable with the speedy passages in the right hand. The coda was expertly played, with dramatic and intense chromatic passages played with flourish to finish the concerto on a high.

Next on the program the audience was treated to **Courtenay Cleary** from London performing Korngold's *Violin Concerto in D major*.

The varied concerto was a good choice for Cleary, who has made performance appearances everywhere between Westminster Abbey in front of Her Majesty the Queen, to the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition with the Borodin Quartet. The opening passage was played with such sweetness, you simply had to sit up a little straighter in your chair and pay attention. The 20th century Korngold's film music composing experience was at show here – one could easily



imagine the score played in the background of an Audrey Hepburn film. Accompanied by the talented Robert Manley, Cleary graced through the first movement with apparent ease despite difficult high notes. Her unaccompanied cadenza grabbed the audience's attention with the chromatic double-stops played flawlessly. The second movement's graceful melody sang out beautifully with Cleary allowing just enough space for her rubato to not be too overpowering. The Allegro assai vivace was certainly a contrast and showed off Cleary's technical skills with the bow. After a dramatic coda which saw consecutive fourths between the piano and the violin (which shouldn't work, but strangely did), Cleary finished with a flourish.



Our last finalist was **Oscar Wong** from the Gold Coast performing Tchaikovsky's famous *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor*.

Wong, the only Australian of the evening, has recently performed in the Hamamatsu International Piano Academy in Japan and is currently studying at Queensland's Griffith University under Natasha Vlassenko. The performance started with a bang with the famous opening D flat major chords played by accompanist Rhodri Clarke – the first chords from Wong were beautifully balanced and managed to fill the whole room without sounding forced. The less frantic cadenza was played skillfully with contrapuntal melody lines brought out well which made for interesting listening. The graceful Andantino was played exquisitely, with beautiful interplay between Wong and his accompanist Clarke. By this point it was clear that the Tchaikovsky was a

good match for Wong's sturdy hands – he bounced between delicate passages and dramatic chords with ease with no apparent show of difficulty for the technical requirements of the piece. The Allegro con fuoco was played skillfully with difficult passages of chords played with ease. The piece finished with a short coda, with large chords played with incredible clarity.

Adjudicator Spiros Rantos had the difficult task of placing the finalists, and mentioned the high calibre of entries this year. He awarded third to Chiacheng Sen, second to Courtenay Cleary, and first to Oscar Wong, who also won the Audience Choice award.

Review by

Stephanie Smith, Townsville