

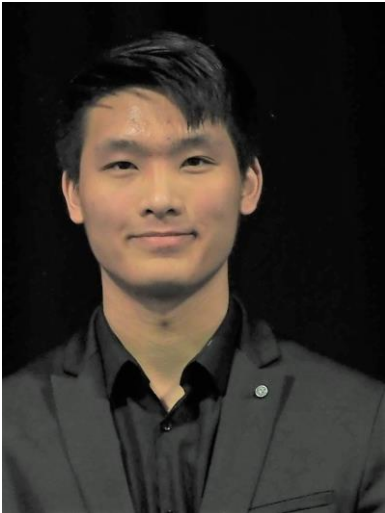
The Australian Concerto and Vocal Competition has treated Townsville audiences to a delightful few days filled with outstanding solo and group performances. Esteemed adjudicator Piers Lane AO was so impressed with the calibre of this year's entrants, he awarded five finalists a chance at the top prize in the finals, more than the usual three.



The evening began with **Michael Li** from Melbourne enchanting audiences with Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto no. 3 with Peter de Jager, which is in his words "as loved as it is feared". It is easy to see why, as this piece jumps from speedy semiquaver passages to huge rumbling chords to pianissimo expressive phrases, all in a few lines. Li handled the faster passages with aplomb, maintaining control over the dynamics and evenly balancing out the moving voices. What emotion may have been lacking in the first movement was shown tenfold in the second, an adagio requiring enormous technical control. Li appeared to show delight at teasing the audience in the second movement when a surprising quirky semiquaver passage would interject an expressive section and surprise the listener. Li appeared fully invested in his performance however, never losing his focus throughout the mammoth 45 minute piece.

Audiences were then treated to **Crystal Smith** from Tomewin performing Carl Vine's Piano Concerto no. 1 with Luke Sharp. She described her interpretation as being "one of waves of all kind; tempestuous waves, and more slow and serene waves". One certainly had this image from the first few bars - as the large atonal chords crashed and clashed between performer and accompanist, you couldn't help but imagine a high tide crashing into the rocks. The first movement featured hugely rhythmic passages where the melody was passed between performers; Smith handled this expertly and made the difficult cross-bar rhythms seem effortless. The calm and serene second movement conjured up images of a fading low tide, creeping back into the calm sea. Smith maintained her control over the dynamics to deliver a nuanced second movement. The piece finished with an erratic third movement that lacked some of the intensity of the first two movements. An unconventional ending featuring two elbows to the keys marked Smith's final moments on the piano.





The first half of the evening finished with **Victor Dai** from Sydney performing Prokofiev's Piano Concerto no. 3 in C major with Catherine Davis. The 20th century piece certainly captured audience's attention from the first few lines, with chromatic thirds and huge chords marking the entrance of the first movement. This hugely technical piece displayed Dai's enormous technical control, even in the few moments where he came unstuck with Davis. The second movement began with sneaky quiet staccato chords and featured a marked difference in tone as Dai maintained his control over the keys. Dai finished the piece with the third movement that featured quiet chromatic thirds interrupted by huge runs up and down the keyboard. The enormous chords throughout the piece were an even match for Dai's huge hands, and it was clear he had chosen a piece that highlighted his abilities. Even as the mood of this movement changed as quickly as it would begin, Dai kept his focus throughout and took the audience on the journey with him.

The second half of the evening began with Shostakovich's Cello Concerto no. 1 in E-flat Major performed by **Raechel Suh** of Brisbane with Robert Manley. The first movement began with loud brash chords from the cello, showing it was more than capable of holding its own in competition against three other pianos. While there may have been some balance issues in the sometimes harsh first movement, these were ironed out by the second movement; a delicate adagio that was played with the utmost emotion. Suh's vibrato swells on the low reverberating notes showed her passion and conveyed the most emotion of the evening. A particularly difficult harmonic passage was handled expertly while still maintaining dramatic musicality. The contrapuntal cadenza was beautifully emoted with near-flawless technical skills, and Suh finished with dramatic flair. Despite the obvious difficulty of some passages, Suh never sounded uncomfortable - something to be commended.



The evening finished with perhaps the youngest player, 18 year old **Yebin Yoo** from Melbourne performing Beethoven's famous Violin Concerto in D major. As the instantly recognisable chords from accompanist Peter de Jager rang out, it is easy to see why this is one of the most performed concertos around the world. A dominant seventh chord signalled Yoo's entrance, and there was an unmistakable lightness to her playing that gave the whole first movement life. As she continued to dazzle audiences throughout the sombre second and lively third movement, Yoo displayed flawless technicality throughout the more difficult chordal sections and cadenzas. The even balance between the violin and piano landed itself to the extended piano accompaniment, and the two players came together flawlessly. The Rondo was played to perfection, with none of the semiquavers missed.

Adjudicator Piers Lane had a hard time deciding the winners, and made special mention of all the competitors' ability to hold the audience captive and make each concerto come alive. He awarded first place to Yebin Yoo (who also won the Audience Choice award), joint second to Victor Dai and Michael Li, and Crystal Smith and Raechel Suh winning the Most Promising Pianist Frank Carroll Memorial Award and Most Promising Strings AUSTA (Nth Qld Branch) Award, respectively.

**Review by Stephanie Smith,
Townsville**