

2018 MELBOURNE VIOLIN COMPETITION FINAL  
SUNDAY OCTOBER 21  
ABODE, 318 RUSSELL ST., MELBOURNE

Music competitions come in many sizes, although their shapes are pretty much the same throughout the world. If you win, there's a prize at the end – cash or prestige; both, if you're lucky. But the format is an inevitable one: you apply by sending in a sample of your work, you go through the (usually) impersonal process of being assessed remotely, you get chosen as a candidate, you go through an elimination round or a set of finals, and – if you last the distance – you get to perform live in front of a panel of judges.

As a general rule, the more well-known the prize, the larger the reward; more so if a benevolent government takes an interest and puts some money where its cultural mouth is. For this newest kid on the block, initiated by young Melbourne musician and entrepreneur Jennen Ngiau-Keng, the cash rewards are modest - \$5,000 for First Prize, and \$1,000 each for silver and bronze places. But it's hard to imagine a more daunting end-of-the-road process for the three finalists.

First, the competition has set its focus on a dominant figure in Western music: Johann Sebastian Bach. Second, if you confine yourself to this composer, then you're talking exclusively about his *Six Sonatas and Partitas* – music of matchless craft and integrity but extra-demanding because the violinist plays solo; no distracting orchestra or helpful piano accompanist. Third, the jury comprises a collection of Melbourne's professional musicians – no bureaucrats, no music-world politicians, all present or past professionals, and all without an axe to grind or a student to promote.

I don't care how familiar, even blasé you may be with playing in front of a jury, or how many competitions and *concours* you have fronted throughout your career: this one is very demanding. In the semi-final, held at Melba Hall in the University of Melbourne on Saturday October 20, the seven chosen performers – coming from Denmark, Sweden, Australia, the US, China and Australia – had to present either a complete sonata or partita to a filleting panel of two: the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's co-concertmaster Sophie Rowell, and her first violin colleague Sarah Curro. So far, so fine; Melba Hall is one of the best venues for chamber music in the city, comfortable for players and audiences.

But the three picked out for the finals – Christine Bernsted from Denmark, Anna Dorothea Mutter from Germany, and Australian Edward Walton – faced further hurdles.

One after the other, these three young violinists performed a partita – the voluble No. 2 in D minor from Bernsted and Mutterer, the more flighty No. 3 in E from Watson – in a moderate boardroom-sized space, with only a few metres at most between musician and front row. No room for hiding anything here: every sound came across with immediate impact, any slight deviation instantly apparent.

Usually at local music competitions and eisteddfods, the audience is made up of family and friends; public interest at national or potentially international-type events is roused mainly by descriptors like 'Australian' or 'Pan-Pacific'. Sunday's audience saw a few family members and a handful of helpers in attendance. But the greater number of listeners were violinists from (or with links to) all the city's notable institutions for serious music: concertmasters and ex-concertmasters alongside current rank-and-file and former members

of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Orchestra Victoria, members of the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Music subsumed under the Victorian College of the Arts, notable names from the Music Faculty at Monash University and the Australian National Academy of Music . . . as well as one terrifically well-informed critic.

So, the three finalists played to a jury that knew this music inside out, each one of them following the *partitas'* movements with a wealth of inside information. The wonder was that each player coped so well with these close and closed-shop conditions.

Anna Dorothea Mutterer opened with a slashing reading of the D minor Partita which concludes with a massive *Chaconne*, a creative miracle where the composer takes his terse theme and constructs a chain of 64 variations. Mutterer powered through the score, keeping the pressure on herself (and her audience) right up to the final emphatic bars.

Edward Walton showed his fluent finger-work right from the opening *Preludio* of the E Major Partita and found a happy dynamic level on which to operate, moving effortlessly from the rapid-fire opening, through the familiar *Gavotte en rondeau* and into the lightly bounding *Gigue* finale. This player's hallmark is an apparent absence of stress as he sailed through many taxing pages with unflappable assurance.

Christine Bernsted gave a nuanced reading of the D minor Partita, the four *Chaconne*-preceding movements full of individuality and dynamic contrasts. That long final segment demonstrated this player's talent at finding an emotional continuity throughout the composer's creative flights, the subtlety of her reactions one of the distinguishing factors that gave her this competition's top position, with Walton and Mutterer receiving finalist awards.

Where to now for the Melbourne Violin Competition? The obvious directions are upwards and outwards. When you can attract musicians of this calibre, most of them winners of previous competitions in their own countries, the impetus is strong to make the Melbourne Violin Competition a regular event; quinquennial, like the Sibelius Violin Competition; quadrennial, like the two Melbourne chamber music competitions; triennial like the Leeds Piano Competition; biennial, as is Leipzig's Johann Sebastian Bach Competition; or annual like the Herald Sun Aria. Obviously, the market for such an event is promising but the organizers – Ngiau-Keng, founder of Jenner Shoes, and Alfred Horning, CEO of Tingelman Print Media Group and a former cellist with a formidable Bach background – can use help from sponsors with an eye to quality. As well, you can see that, after a few years, the competition's current all-Bach diet could prove difficult to sustain; still, the repertoire for solo violin holds some comparable, if later, masterworks.

Finally, the enterprise needs to expand physically so that a larger audience than just jurors and devoted family-members can experience this riveting art-form which is both concentrated and engrossing. Obviously, the event has the goodwill of top-class Melbourne musicians, happy at Ngiau-Keng's initiative and pleased to be involved in its processes. What is needed now is a bigger platform: more public awareness, a wider operational base, larger accommodations. Sunday's success should serve as a vigorous reinforcement of the competition's potential.

Clive O'Connell