

THE WORLD OF PIANO COMPETITIONS



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2

2025

Eric Lu
*wins the
Chopin Competition*

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W E L C O M E

Dear readers,

The piano is fundamentally different from all other musical instruments. Rudolf Steiner once commented that all musical instruments “are derived from the spiritual world; the piano, however, in which the tones are abstractly lined up next to each other, is created only in the physical world by man. A piano is like the Philistine who no longer contains within him the higher human being. The piano is the Philistine instrument.” But on the other hand, he continues: “It is fortunate that there is such an instrument, or else the Philistine would have no music at all.”

Looking at those large, black boxes weighing around 500 to 600 kilos, with thousands of parts – intricately crafted machines that dominate concert stages – I tend to agree with Steiner. The fragility of old fortepianos only strengthens this idea of a “devilish machinery.” In Steiners words: “The piano arises out of a materialistic experience of music.” Other instruments, by contrast, are more closely tied to the human body, more closely connected to nature. It’s no revelation when I say that the purest form of music comes to us through the human voice. After all, that instrument is built into our very bodies, and it’s no surprise that pianists often seek to approximate that ideal, singing voice.

The piano, precisely because of the physical distance between the performer and the instrument, is a difficult one to master. The contact with the instrument itself is limited – at least when compared to other instruments. “Eyes and ears in the fingertips” as the legendary Josef Hofmann once put it, are needed. Anyone who listens to his interpretation of Chopin’s Fourth Ballade, recorded live in 1938, will begin to understand what he meant. Is this sometimes suffocating and even terrifying vision still music? Hofmann ventures far beyond the capabilities of the piano and the recording quality cannot fully capture his expression. But, so what? Beethoven, after all, would not have worried about this. He once told a violinist who complained about an unplayable passage, “What do I care for your instrument when the Almighty God speaks to me?”

In this publication, we take you once again to Warsaw, to the Chopin Competition, and also to Budapest and Utrecht, where his great counterpart is celebrated. Reflecting on our world of piano competitions, I’m reminded of something Chopin once said: “Simplicity is the final achievement. After one has played a vast quantity of notes and more notes, it is simplicity that emerges as the crowning reward of art.”

Great art is the domain of a select few. And in our age of countless piano competitions, are we not all searching for that one great artist? The one who can follow in the footsteps of Josef Hofmann, leading us – after we have been overwhelmed by notes, notes, and still more notes – into the silence of simplicity?

ERIC SCHOONES

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

PIANIST MAGAZINES



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EMCY is a network of national and international music competitions for young people across Europe. We believe that music competitions stimulate passionate musicianship. For many, they're a first glimpse of performing in public, playing in ensembles, or of breaking out of orthodox repertoire. They foster a sense of healthy self-assessment, can help conquer nerves, and motivate practise. Young people can be inspired by experiencing fresh interpretations and discovering new works and other European cultures. We do not think of competitions as the end of the learning process: for us, they are the beginning.

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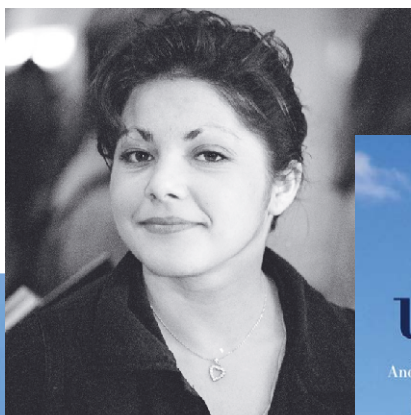
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ERIC LU wins the Chopin Competition 2025



After winning fourth prize in 2015 at the age of 17, Eric Lu returned to Warsaw this year to claim the Gold Medal at the 2025 Chopin International Piano Competition. As the winner of the XIX Leeds International Piano Competition (2018), he has since performed with major international orchestras and conductors, and as a recitalist he tours worldwide. His new album, featuring Schubert's complete Impromptus, will be released on Warner Classics early next year, while Deutsche Grammophon recently issued his live recordings from this year's Chopin Competition.



I was fortunate to hear you in the third round in Warsaw. It felt very much like a recital – perhaps because you chose works from the same period?

The third stage is the longest, and I think it benefits from a kind of programmatic unity. I chose the Third Sonata, Op. 58, having played the Second earlier in the competition. For the Mazurkas, I felt most connected to Op. 56 – my favourite set and, to me, the most profound, especially the third Mazurka in C minor, possibly the best Chopin ever wrote. I then needed another major work, so I decided on the *Barcarolle*. It's unlike any other Chopin piece, in

its entire aesthetic and sound world. It is absolutely one of the most difficult pieces Chopin has written. While it must sound completely without angles, technically it's written in a way that makes it quite unnatural to achieve this feeling of a “water world.”, with all the awkward chordal writing. Furthermore, the piece requires infinite nuances, all needing to sound completely natural and organic. To contrast the three late works, I chose the lighter, early work – Polonaise, Op. 71 No. 2 - I first discovered it when Evgeni Bozhanov played it so wonderfully in the 2010 Chopin International Piano Competition.

Did you listen to recordings of the Barcarolle for inspiration?

When I first learned the piece, I did listen to reference recordings. But now that I've played it for some time, I already have a clearer idea of what I want to do with it, so I don't listen much anymore. I do, however, resonate with how Sergei Babayan plays it, and also my former teacher, Dang Thai Son.

Do you generally avoid listening to others in order to develop your own ideas from the score – since, as you said, everything you need is there?

Yes and no. I think a good balance is necessary. You have to listen in order to discover the range of possibilities that great artists have explored in the past – that's important. But ultimately, you can't copy. You have to find your own voice.

Your ideas about Chopin must have evolved since 2015.

Certainly. With time, maturity, and a deeper intuitive understanding of this musical world and its language, you also develop a clearer sense of your own voice within it.

Could you listen back to your 2015 recordings?

I tried to avoid that, but the few times I did, it was a mixed experience. There were elements that were good and unique, but also

many things I wish I could have done better. You can't rush anything in music – especially something that will exist for posterity, *like a recording*. I need time to live with the music, to experience it both in practice and on stage.

You've said Chopin offers so many possibilities, so many freedoms. Yet your playing strikes me as very pure – you don't indulge in many rubatos or exaggerations.

It depends on who you ask. Everyone has different tastes. I don't consciously try to make a point of avoiding or doing something. I just look for an interpretation that feels closest to my own musical truth. However, it turns out that it's constantly evolving. And of course, depending on the piano and the acoustics, I'll have different ideas – different timings, even different tempos. That's the beauty of music: it offers endless possibilities.

How is the acoustics in the Warsaw Philharmonic?

It's a great hall – very reverberant. What you hear there is actually quite different from what you hear on YouTube. That's just physics: microphones are close, so they capture only the immediate sound. In the hall, the sound blends with the air and the walls, bouncing back and interacting with the space. You hear colours and sonorities in the hall that microphones simply can't capture.





It must have been a very different experience this time, compared to 2015 – you were only 17 then.

Of course. The pressure this time I was facing was enormous, nothing like 10 years ago when I was 17. Admittedly, it was a huge risk, and I had thought about this idea, wavering back and forth for 2 years. Many instances, I had thought to not go through with it. But long story short, I felt frustrated with the way my career was going, and being more familiar with that world, you learn a lot about how the music industry works, much of it which is not fair, or purely artistically driven. And mainly, the spots for a consistently high-level of concerts for young pianists is extremely limited. This is why at the end of the day, I decided the risk was worth taking, to sort of change my fate, if you will. However, I don't like competitions at all, they are completely unnatural, and in many ways incompatible to art. I have only attended the biggest ones for the platform to show more people my playing, and the chance of winning a top prize that undoubtedly bolsters one's career. And with the rise of YouTube, it is clear that the Chopin's spotlight really is one of, if not the most – brightest of all. It was an extremely scary thought, but at the same time motivating, to think about playing for that many people.

Do you now feel part of a tradition of great Chopin Competition winners, or is that not how you view competitions?

Not really. Of course, it's a great honour to be part of that list of winners. But the Chopin Competition has such a huge variety of laureates – there's no single "style" among them.

Maria João Pires once told me she enjoys stepping in for someone at the last moment, because it makes things more spontaneous.

Yes, totally. She's right that there can be pros and cons to taking on something quickly. But if it comes from a deep foundation with the piece and the composer – and from past experience – then inspiration can strike, and you might create something new, a unique atmosphere or emotional world. Sometimes you can even surprise yourself. The result can be much better – though not always. It's a never-ending search, always fluid, always moving forward.

Are you happy with the album that has just come out, since it's all live recordings?

It is a live recording and that is of course part of its charm, but there

are things I wish I could have done differently. I think the way the microphones were placed, or used this year, was too close to the inside of the piano. It needed much more distance, to capture more of the sonority of the piano and the hall, and not so much of the mechanically imperfections of being close up to a huge grand piano. Also, with the character of this particular Fazioli, it is far better to be heard in the very reverberant hall like the Warsaw Philharmonic, and not that close up. Also, with the performances themselves, of course this is a snapshot of a ridiculously high-pressure, and grueling competition. Far from the ideal conditions of making a recording. In a studio recording, I am very obsessive with microphone placement and sound mix between them, as well as of course trying different takes for interpretation. So this is quite unnatural for me, and requires a huge amount of 'letting go'.

You also have a Schubert album coming soon, with the complete Impromptus.

I love this music. Every *Impromptu* is full of magic, life, and meaning. I recorded them in two separate studio sessions, and each opus forms a complete, organic whole – almost like a sonata. The individual pieces are interconnected, and when you play them as a set, it feels like one organism. I often perform them this way in concert. The great Schubert sonatas are, to me, among the greatest works ever written. There's no end to studying them – I'll continue to learn from them for the rest of my life.

You've had quite a hectic schedule, and now you're heading into a big tour of Asia.

It's even more hectic now, but I'll have a break around Christmas and New Year. And next year I'm planning to bring some new repertoire.

I suppose you never get tired of Chopin.

No.

ERIC SCHOONES





Eric Lu
1st Prize

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FAZIOLI

From the first note to the final applause, every artist made the XIX Chopin Competition unforgettable. We are proud to have been part of this extraordinary journey: thank you to all who chose to perform with Fazioli.



Tianyao Lyu

4th Prize and Warsaw Philharmonic Award
for the best performance of a Concert



Adam Kałduński

Bella Davidovich Award
for the best performance of a Ballade

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WFIMC Piano Competitions

2026

16 – 24 January

UTRECHT | THE NETHERLANDS

International Franz Liszt Piano Competition (Liszt Utrecht)

10 – 23 February

TAKAMATSU | JAPAN

Takamatsu International Piano Competition

26 February – 5 March

JYVÄSKYLÄ | FINLAND

Ilmari Hannikainen Piano Chamber Music Competition

26 February – 7 March

HASTINGS | UNITED KINGDOM

Hastings International Piano Competition

15 – 26 March

BARCELONA | SPAIN

Maria Canals International Music Competition

9 – 18 April

JAÉN | SPAIN

International Piano Competition Prize Jaén

28 April – 15 May

TEL AVIV | ISRAEL

The Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Master Competition

5 – 10 May

BARTLETTA | ITALY

International Piano Competition Premio Mauro Paolo Monopoli

6 – 14 May

PRAGUE | CZECH REPUBLIC

Prague Spring International Music Competition

21 – 28 June

PORTO | PORTUGAL

Santa Cecilia Piano Competition

24 – 27 June

SALT LAKE CITY | USA

Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition

18 – 26 July

NEW ORLEANS | USA

New Orleans International Piano Competition

23 August – 19 September

BUCHAREST | ROMANIA

George Enescu International Competition

4 – 13 September

GLASGOW | UNITED KINGDOM

Scottish International Piano Competition

12 – 20 September

BUDAPEST | HUNGARY

Franz Liszt International Piano Competition

13 – 25 September

HENGQIN | CHINA

Hengqin International Mozart Competition for Young Musicians

4 – 10 October

MONZA | ITALY

Rina Sala Gallo International Piano Competition

5 – 16 October

TBILISI | GEORGIA

Tbilisi International Piano Competition

9 – 17 October

VERCELLI | ITALY

Gian Battista Viotti International Music Competition

27 – 31 October

ORLÉANS | FRANCE

Orléans International Piano Competition

31 October – 8 November

TONGYEONG | SOUTH KOREA

Isangyun Competition

8 – 14 November

LAS ROZAS DE MADRID | SPAIN

International Piano Competition Spanish Composers

Reflections on a Crowded Field of Talent

This year's Chopin Competition served as a captivating showcase of pianistic personalities, each contestant offering their own blend of introspection, audacity, poetry, and pragmatism. While the jury's ultimate decisions provoked lively debate among critics and fans alike, the week's performances collectively painted a colourful portrait of the next generation of Chopin interpreters.

In the third round **Kevin Chen** (Canada) impressed with exemplary control and refined musicianship, the Op. 41 Mazurkas tender and introspective, Ballade No. 4 cohesive and noble, and B minor Sonata elegant, poised, and architecturally unified. All deeply musical, though emotionally reserved.

His rendition of the Polonaise-Fantasie in the final stood out for its immaculate technical polish and gleaming surface, but here as

well, beneath the sheen, many listeners yearned for greater inner fire and a more compelling sense of line. His performance of Concerto No. 1 displayed similar characteristics – rhythmically square and emotionally restrained, with a pacing that stretched time rather than shaping it. More relaxed than in earlier, uneven rounds, Chen nonetheless projected an air of caution, and the sound rarely blossomed. At times, it seemed the orchestra propelled the momentum



Kevin
Chen



Shiori
Kuwahara

more than the soloist. With undeniable gifts at his disposal, Chen seems poised for a future in which, one hopes, he will embrace greater tonal imagination and dramatic conviction.

David Khrikuli's (Georgia) Polonaise-Fantasia, in contrast, felt impatiently dispatched – velocity taking precedence over intention. This relentless drive persisted into his Concerto No. 2, where dazzling technique translated into somewhat two-dimensional results. Throughout the competition, Khrikuli's playing was coloured by echoes of the so-called “Golden Age of Pianism,” but in the finals, cracks began to appear in his otherwise formidable façade. His dark, brooding tone can mesmerize in solo repertoire, but in the concerto, where collaboration is key, his sound lost focus. Without a stronger sense of partnership with the orchestra, Khrikuli's magnetic individuality may find its true home in the recital hall rather than on the concert stage.

Shiori Kuwahara (Japan), on the other hand, brought warmth, amplitude, and a deeply personal voice to her Polonaise-Fantasia. Her E-minor Concerto sang from the first bar to the last, free of artifice; here was a young pianist with an old soul and a generously human sound. In the finals, Kuwahara remained steadfastly herself – elegant, resonant, and consistent – though perhaps too risk-averse to truly ignite the jury's imagination.

The psychological challenge of opening a final round cannot be underestimated, and **Tianyou Li** bore that burden with composure. Yet, his performances felt constrained – thoughtful and sincere but laboured in phrasing and often lacking clarity. Sensitivity was evident, but the spark that transforms skill into greatness remained elusive.

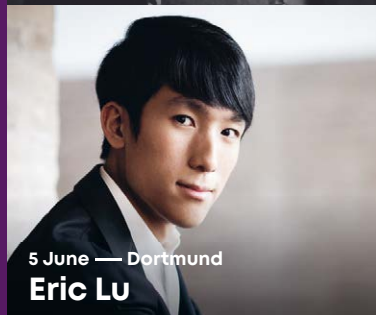
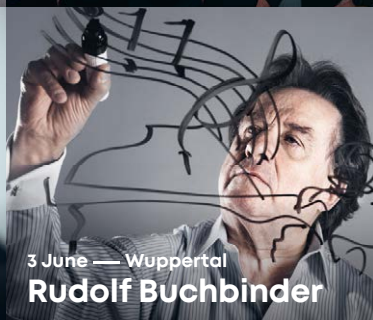
Eric Lu's (USA) entrance after Li was like the turning of a page. His Polonaise-Fantasia unfolded with quiet introspection and a rare, philosophical calm, emerging as one of the most organically evolving interpretations of the evening. Despite orchestral challenges – including musicians reading from newly prepared parts – Lu's poise never faltered. His tone filled the hall, and his sense of tension and

release was perfectly balanced. In a field brimming with dazzling virtuosity, it was Lu's restraint and sense of inner pacing that set him apart – a mature artist who allows drama to breathe rather than declare. The Fazioli piano's superior sound projection was particularly noticeable during his Concerto, with a piano sound consuming the orchestra.

Tianyao Lyu with conductor Andrzej Boreyko



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Vincent Ong
with conductor
Andrzej Boreyko

Also in his third round Lu – showed himself as the complete and mature artist he is: poetic, authoritative, and masterfully controlled. Barcarolle and Polonaise Op. 71 No. 2 exquisitely phrased and coloured. Op. 6 Mazurkas rhythmically alive, deeply idiomatic. B minor Sonata masterly, blending lyricism, structure, and expressive authority.

Performing on the same Fazioli immediately after Lu, **Tianyao Lyu** (China) a promising natural talent, with impressive facility, opted for intimacy over brilliance. Her Polonaise-Fantasia was cohesive, sincere, and intimate, though perhaps less structurally assured. The Concerto revealed a musician with natural charm but still-developing breadth; her understanding of Chopin's chamber-like textures is growing. Yet, now lacking in colour range and expressive depth, her sincerity and confidence hint at much potential ahead – she is an artist still discovering her full expressive range.

Vincent Ong (Malaysia) with his third round technically sound and structured needs more tonal and emotional variety. While in the final his Polonaise-Fantasia occasionally lost focus, it never lost integrity. His Concerto, despite an opening mishap, became one of the evening's most characterful performances. The slow movement glowed with poise, and the finale sparkled with freedom and wit. Ong's thoughtful professionalism and quietly assured musical identity continued to intrigue listeners with his refined articulation, a hallmark of his playing throughout the competition and marked him as a pianist to watch.

Miyu Shindo (Japan) was well-prepared and technically reliable in the third round. The final exposed both her strengths and challenges. Her intensity was palpable, but physical tension and volatile phrasing sometimes undercut her control, resulting in uneven tone and technical slips. Warlike passion is her constant companion, but its inward focus prevents it from fully reaching her listeners. Until she can ease that tension, her artistry may remain confined within her own frame.

After a luminous third round, with a surprisingly refined in Presto finale of the Sonata No. 2, expectations for **Zitong Wang** (China) were high. Her Polonaise-Fantasia in the Final round began hesitantly, with memory lapses, but ultimately blossomed into one of the evening's most radiant accounts. Her Concerto confirmed her deep immersion in Chopin's sound world – lyrical, generous, and tonally sumptuous. One wonders how much stronger her impression might have been had the solo gone more smoothly. Even so, Wang's artistry and grace were unmistakable, her medal well-earned.

William Yang (USA), a distinctive musical personality, offered perhaps the clearest reading for anyone seeking to understand the structure of the Polonaise-Fantasia. His interpretation reading was the most intellectually decisive – clear, balanced, and unsentimental. His third round was both brilliant and original: Scherzo No. 4 executed with superb control and rhythmic drive. Op. 33 Mazurkas imaginative and rhythmically vital. B minor Sonata architecturally clear and boldly characterized. His Concerto was equally solid, though it lacked the poetic glow that distinguished Eric Lu's performance. Yang stands out as a pianist of notable discipline: "faultless," perhaps, if not quite unforgettable for pure handiwork.

As the competition's final Polish contender, **Piotr Alexewicz**, a mature and sincere musician, brought a sense of patriotic conviction to the Polonaise-Fantasia; its muscular rhetoric proudly national in tone and rhythm. Yet, his phrasing revealed some structural slackness. The Concerto brimmed with energy but lacked the refinement of his peers. In a field where technical mastery was a given, small insecurities became more noticeable. The commitment was there; the execution, however, wavered.

In sum, this year's Chopin Competition finals offered a thrilling glimpse into the future of Chopin interpretation – a crowded field of talent where artistry, individuality, and risk-taking continue to define the ever-evolving landscape of piano performance.

PATRICK JOVELL

Rob Hilberink

Liszt Utrecht's 40th anniversary

Since its founding in 1986, the competition – known as “difficult but humane” – has built a reputation as one of the world’s most prestigious piano competitions. Since the 2022 edition, the focus has shifted somewhat away from the competitive element, and this proved trend-setting in the world of piano competitions. Yet creative director Rob Hilberink, who not long ago also launched a successful conducting competition, continues to look for new directions.



Rob
Hilberink

With the first three phases of the competition now completed, the eight pianists selected by Nino Gvetadze, Leslie Howard, Igor Roma, and Muza Rubackyté will be heard in January at Tivoli Vredenburg, Liszt Utrecht's home venue for forty years. The lucky eight are Alberto Ferro, Chia Yang Hsu, Rune Leicht Lund, Sunah Kim, Kang Tae Kim, Thomas Kelly, Xingyu Lu, and Minkyu Kim. After the live semi-finals in January 2025, these pianists recently re-gathered in Utrecht for the 'Academy'.

Academy

Rob Hilberink, "We noticed that many participants, after the semi-finals, want to perform their repertoire for an expert – someone like Leslie Howard, for example." Howard has been the artistic conscience of the competition for many years. To ensure all participants have the same opportunity, the competition now organizes this itself, for the second time, in the form of an Academy. "It's wonderful to see that the participants don't view each other as rivals, but rather as colleagues – and friendships begin to form." Perhaps like at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in the chapel? "Exactly. We eat together, have discussions, and even a visit to Maene's collection of historical pianos adds to the relaxed atmosphere. We invited Leslie Howard and Andrea Bonatta for the Academy. The great thing is how beautifully Leslie and Andrea complement each other. Leslie is a walking encyclopaedia – he can go incredibly deeply into the details, knows all the manuscripts, how to read them, and can offer plenty of context. Andrea, on the other hand, focuses much more on the emotional side – what you want to communicate to the listener."

The opening concert on January 16 also contributes to this sense of togetherness. On that evening, both audience and jury will have the opportunity to hear all participants in one night. Each will perform an opera paraphrase and a new piece, conceived as an encore, especially composed for the occasion by Joey Roukens. Hilberink laughs: "Typical for Joey, he didn't write one, but two works: one piece based on themes by Carl Maria von Weber and Liszt, and another for left hand only. Both will be performed."

Weber

This year's featured composer is indeed Weber, connecting with Liszt as Schubert was in a previous edition. "Yes, Weber was one of Liszt's favourite composers. Apart from his operas and clarinet works, he's largely forgotten today – but he was himself a piano virtuoso and wrote four major sonatas, all of which will be performed. We've prepared four programmes with works by Weber, both solo and chamber music. Each programme will be performed

twice and has been assigned to the pianists by ballot. Fortunately, everyone got their first or second choice."

The Liszt sonata returns to the programme after a few years' absence. "Many believe it is impossible to win a Liszt Competition without having played the sonata. But we've made it a separate category now, as we didn't want it to take away from too much time from the free-choice recitals. We noticed that there is an audience who loves the sonata performance, as well those who find it a bit challenging—this way, people can choose to attend it, or not."

Stories

A new feature this year is Liszt Stories, where pianists have complete artistic freedom to design a one-hour recital. Rob: "As the name suggests, it should tell a story – and the results are incredibly creative. One example: Thomas Kelly's programme titled Pastoral, which includes Liszt's Les Préludes, several movements from Liszt transcriptions from Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, and Friedman's transcription of Mahler's Menuet from the Third Symphony: What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me. It's known that Liszt wanted Les Préludes to be performed before Beethoven's Pastoral – so it's wonderful to see that connection realized in concert. In these programmes you see music by Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Wagner, but also Debussy, Beethoven, Stravinsky, and even Martucci."

The competition thus reflects on concert life itself: "On one hand, there are the required programmes – pianists are often asked to play a specific repertoire. On the other, Stories allows the candidates to

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show that they can craft a compelling recital. After all, it's not only about virtuosity – it's about what you have to say artistically.” For the final phase, three winners will be selected to perform one of Liszt's piano concertos with the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Stéphane Denève. The winner of the Grand Prize will appear again the next day with the orchestra at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.

Family

To mark the 40th anniversary, there will also be a special concert featuring eighteen former winners returning to Utrecht. Nino Gvetadze described it as “feeling like family.” Rob Hilberink, “It's lovely that she says that – and I understand why. After each competition, we continue to work very closely with our winners, so yes, they remain very connected to us. It's going to be an evening full of surprises, including a new arrangement of the *Grand Galop Chromatique* for 32 hands on eight pianos!”

Pianos

Speaking of pianos – there's something unique here as well: each part of the competition is performed on a different grand piano, the same for all candidates. A Night at the Opera on Bechstein, the Weber solo recitals on Steinway, the chamber music on Yamaha, the sonata on Bösendorfer, and Liszt Stories on Fazioli. “This way, no manufacturer feels disappointed that their instrument wasn't chosen or played enough, as may happen in other competitions. Everything is planned – making perfect preparation possible for the technicians. And just as importantly, every participant must show their artistry on different pianos, as in real concert life. Ultimately, it's again about how pianists communicate with the audience.” After the competition, the winners will embark on an extensive tour of the Netherlands and begin the three-year Career Development Programme, featuring a worldwide concert tour with management support from the competition.

ERIC SCHOONES



MAŁGORZATA KAZUR

Żelazowa Wola

The Quiet Birthplace of Poland's National Sound

About fifty kilometres west of Warsaw, surrounded by birch trees and meadows, lies the small village of Żelazowa Wola. At first glance, it appears no different from countless other settlements scattered across the Polish countryside. Yet for music lovers, this quiet place holds special significance: it is the birthplace of Fryderyk Chopin, the composer whose works came to embody the spirit and melancholy of the Polish nation. Though Chopin lived here only a few months after his birth in 1810, Żelazowa Wola has grown into a powerful symbol of national identity and artistic endurance – a modest beginning for a musician whose influence would reach far beyond Poland's borders.



“From a modest manor in Mazovia came a sound that would one day define a nation.”

The Chopin Family and Early Life

Żelazowa Wola’s history is closely linked to the Skarbek family, landowners who managed a small manor house on their estate. In the 1790s, a young Frenchman named Nicolas Chopin settled in Poland and eventually found work as a tutor for the Skarbeks’ children. During his time there, he met Justyna Krzyżanowska, a relative of the Skarbeks who worked as a housekeeper. The two married, and in early 1810, their second child, Fryderyk, was born in one of the manor’s modest rooms.

The family moved to Warsaw soon after, where Nicolas took a position teaching at the city’s Lyceum. Yet the sounds and rhythms of rural Mazovia – folk dances, peasant songs, and the tolling of village church bells – left a deep imprint on the young composer’s imagination. Decades later, these impressions would re-emerge in his music: the syncopated steps of the mazurka, the stately pulse of the polonaise, and the bittersweet lyricism that made Chopin’s work unmistakably Polish.

“The rhythms of Mazovia would one day echo in the concert halls of Paris and Vienna.”

A House Through History

The manor house where Chopin was born was once part of a larger estate. In the decades that followed, as Poland’s borders shifted and the country was partitioned among foreign powers, the house fell into decline. Yet even in neglect, it remained a site of quiet remem-

brance. By the mid-19th century, admirers had begun to make pilgrimages to Żelazowa Wola, leaving flowers at the door as gestures of devotion.

In 1894, the Warsaw Music Society placed a commemorative plaque on the building, marking the first formal effort to recognise its significance. Restoration plans followed in the 1920s and 1930s, though the restoration itself was disrupted by the Second World War.

Remarkably, the manor survived the conflict. In 1949, the centenary of Chopin’s death, the site was fully restored and opened as a museum. A new park was designed around it, with trees planted from across the world to symbolise the global reach of Chopin’s art. The house itself – whitewashed and simple – was left intentionally modest, mirroring the composer’s humble origins.

Balakirev and the Wider Influence of Chopin

While Chopin’s legacy is firmly rooted in Poland, his influence spread widely across Europe. Among those deeply affected by his work was Mily Balakirev, the Russian composer who led “The Mighty Handful,” a group dedicated to building a distinctly Russian musical identity.

Balakirev saw in Chopin a model of how national character could be expressed through art without resorting to imitation or sentimentality. Chopin’s music proved that the language of folk melodies could coexist with the refined structures of European classical tradition.

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Through Balakirev and others, Chopin's example helped inspire a broader movement across Eastern Europe – one that sought to capture the voices of different nations through their own musical vernaculars. Żelazowa Wola, as Chopin's birthplace, thus became not just a Polish landmark but a quiet point of reference in the continent's cultural history.

A National Symbol

Today, Żelazowa Wola remains both a museum and a place of reflection. The Chopin Museum complex, managed by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute, preserves the manor's historical interiors and maintains a landscaped park designed to evoke the harmony of nature and music.

Each summer, the grounds host open-air piano recitals, continuing a tradition that began in the 1950s. Pianists from around the world perform Chopin's works beside the river that winds through the park. The sound of his nocturnes and preludes carries across the gardens, mingling with birdsong and the rustle of leaves – a sensory link between music and place.

“For Poland, Żelazowa Wola is more than a birthplace; it is a quiet emblem of continuity.”

Over the decades, the site has come to represent more than the origins of a single artist. During periods when Poland was under foreign domination, Chopin's music became a symbol of resistance and cultural survival. His birthplace, modest and enduring, offered a tangible connection to that spirit.

“Żelazowa Wola endures as both a historical site and a living reminder of how art and identity intertwine.”

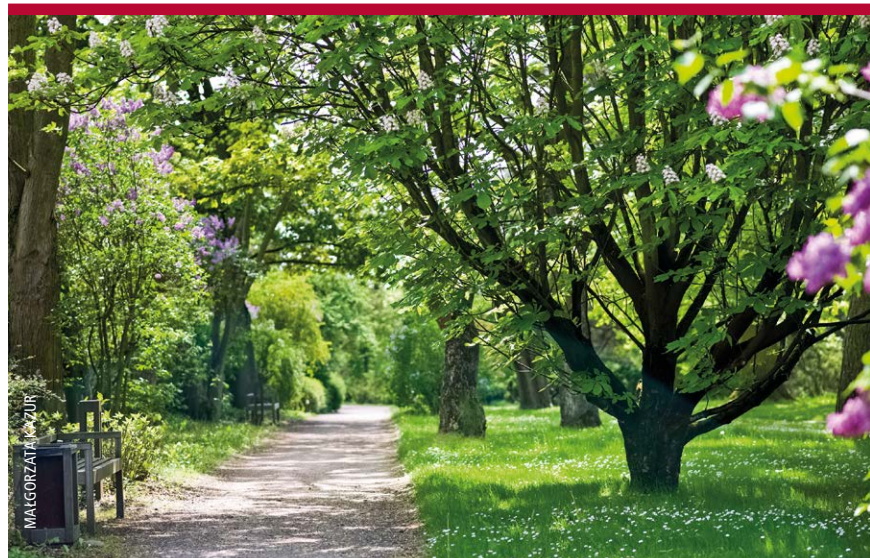
Preserving a Living Heritage

Today's visitors to Żelazowa Wola encounter more than a museum. The site functions as an educational and cultural centre, offering exhibitions on the Chopin family, the history of the estate, and the musical traditions of Mazovia. Visitors can trace how elements of Polish folk music – ornamented melodies, rhythmic irregularities, modal harmonies – found their way into Chopin's compositions. For many Poles, a visit to Żelazowa Wola is an act of quiet patriotism as much as artistic appreciation. It stands as a reminder that national culture often begins in the most ordinary of places: a small village, a single household, an infant's first lullaby. From these beginnings emerged music that continues to resonate across centuries and continents.

PATRICK JOVELL



MARCIN CZECHOWICZ



MALGORZATA KAZUR



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MALGORZATA KAZUR



Pianist and More

John Rink on the Demands and Discipline of the Chopin Competition

Every five years in Warsaw, the world's finest young pianists gather to compete in the legendary International Chopin Piano Competition – a marathon of artistry, stamina, and soul.

But behind the curtain of dazzling performances lies another endurance test: that of the jury. Among them sits Professor John Rink, one of the world's foremost Chopin scholars and a veteran juror since 2015.

Rink, who performs internationally as pianist and lecture-recitalist, has shaped the field of musical performance studies through an extraordinary academic career. Professor at the University of Cambridge, he has published eight books with Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press, and serves as Editor-in-Chief of *The Complete Chopin: A New Critical Edition (Edition Peters)*. He has also directed major research initiatives, including Chopin Online. In recognition of his contributions to Poland's cultural diplomacy, he received the Bene Merito honorary distinction from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019.

Now, in this exclusive conversation with Patrick Jovell from Warsaw, Rink offers a rare glimpse into the world of Chopin Competition judging – where fairness, discipline, and deep musical insight meet.

Thank you for taking the time for a conversation despite your hectic schedule. When you were first invited to join the Chopin Competition jury in 2015, how did you feel stepping into a circle largely made up of international concert pianists?

I'm accustomed to working with musicians in many capacities – including as a fellow performer – and I've served on innumerable juries and assessment panels over the past decades. So my initial feeling about joining the Chopin jury in 2015 was, in one sense, “more of the same”, even if the international prominence of the event was unprecedented. (It was also a little daunting to have the legendary Martha Argerich as a colleague!) From the start, I've felt part of the team, and the scores of jury members in the successive editions show that my reactions have been comparable to those of most colleagues.

How would you describe your personal mission – what do you bring to the jury that might be different from a concert pianist's viewpoint?

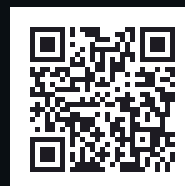
My “personal mission” is to do the best job I can in assessing the contestants over the four rounds of the competition. Naturally I bring into play the knowledge and experience I've acquired over six decades, ever since I began studying the piano at the age of five. In fact, much of my work on Chopin is similar to what professional musicians do themselves, including gaining familiarity with the music through analysis of whatever sort, studying the sources, investigating the music's performance history, and reading about the repertoire. So the difference, if there is one, is a matter of scale rather than kind.

When you listen to a contestant, what catches your ear first – the sound, the structure, the storytelling?

The first thing I listen for is the sound and what the pianist is doing with it. There were many cases in the recent competition where the sound was beautiful but lacking real *sense* – at least to me. After all, there is much more to playing Chopin than making a lovely sound! The fundamental challenge is to discover the music's inner meaning and project it to listeners in the back row, whatever the actual volume. It's essential to work out the role and interaction of individual notes, to trace the multiple lines in which they're situated, and to shape shorter and longer phrases alike, not to mention whole sections. The creation of an all-encompassing musical narrative in which the smallest details find their place could conceivably be described as “storytelling”, but we mustn't forget that Chopin's music is rarely if ever programmatic. For me, the best pianists in



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The jury of the Chopin Competition 2025

the competition demonstrate not only technical ability but also deep musical understanding and a personal, artistic voice.

How do you balance the “critical ear” with the pure emotional response that great music can provoke?

The best performances tend to be the ones that inspire me to stop taking notes because I’m so absorbed in what I’m hearing. But even when I’m consumed in this way, I’m still doing my job as a jury member, making mental notes about why the performance is so stunning. Chopin himself continually encouraged his students to probe the music – to work out the role of each element and thereby determine how best to shape it in sound and over time. For Chopin, there were no barriers between the working ear and “pure emotional response”; these were two sides of the same coin for him, as also for me.

What does “authentic Chopin” mean to you – and is that idea still relevant?

Some years ago I published an essay with that very title – “Authentic Chopin”. In it, I quoted Chopin’s pupil Georges Mathias: “Chopin, performer of genius, interpreted Mozart, Beethoven with the feeling of Chopin, and it was extremely beautiful, it was sublime.” With this in mind, I added that an “authentic” performance “might well take historical evidence into account, but, [...] it will ultimately be shaped by the performer’s own artistic prerogatives, thereby transcending the merely correct”. It follows that “authenticity” in playing Chopin potentially results from a balance between understanding his intentions and the personal assimilation that

must take place if a performance is to reflect the pianist’s convictions. Ultimately, it is a matter of balance, rather than aspiring to “the merely correct”.

Has sitting on the jury changed the way you perform Chopin yourself, or write, teach, or think about piano playing?

Most definitely. Everyone asks me whether I get tired of listening to Chopin for three weeks during the competition. Although it is physically exhausting to engage in concentrated listening for nine hours a day, I never lose a sense of fascination with the music itself. I always find something new within it. The act of listening therefore changes how I might think about Chopin. Some competitors have given me altogether new insights into particular works: for instance, in the recent competition, I found one performance of the Fantasy Op. 49 especially revelatory, but plenty of other examples could be cited too.

Finally, what makes the Chopin Competition so special to you – and how does its blend of perspectives help keep the spirit of Chopin alive?

The Chopin Competition remains one of the most important events of its kind, not least because of the unrivalled excellence and inscrutability of the music it focuses on. With each contestant, there is the potential to hear an original approach to the repertoire and to gain new insights from it. That alone guarantees that this competition not only keeps Chopin’s spirit alive, but provides endless enrichment for each and every person who takes part, whether as pianist, listener, or member of the jury.

PATRICK JOVELL

Triumph and Trajectory

Now in its 42nd year, the Pearl River Kayserburg International Youth Piano Competition continues to foster young musical talent worldwide with a new format, a distinguished advisory council, and hundreds of regional stages culminating in the International Grand Final in Xiamen, China, the competition celebrates excellence at every level and provides a powerful springboard for musical growth.

The competition's footprint is extensive, with over 200 domestic and international sub-competition zones, and its impact is cumulative, with more than one million contestants participating on a Kayserburg stage throughout its history. That scale is intentional: discover, encourage, and elevate outstanding musical talent while fostering international exchange through music.

Preliminaries for 2025 began in March, spanning multiple countries and regions to select finalists for the autumn final in China. Organizers describe this year's format as "breaking boundaries," featuring a prestigious jury, more in-depth artistic guidance, and richer experiences for participants, creating an intentional evolution to expand the stage and focus the spotlight.

Categories span four main groupings (Student, Duet/Ensemble, College, and Open), subdivided into ten divisions. Rounds include Preliminary, Semi-final, and Grand Final (two rounds for College and Open). Together, the structure creates a fair ladder for ages and levels, while repertoire breadth tests musicianship, technique, and expression across periods and styles.

Repertoire requirements at the international Grand Final emphasize range and depth: an etude from a choice of Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Debussy, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, or Ligeti, a Classical-era sonata movement (Haydn/Mozart/Beethoven/Schubert), and additional free-choice works which are memorized and from contrasting composers.

The road to Xiamen

After regional events, selected winners proceed to a Preliminary Grand Final (online), with results slated by late August. The International Grand Final took place in Xiamen, China, from October 5th to 9th 2025.

On August 16, the Singapore Regional Finals winnowed an initial pool of 400+ entrants down to 100 finalists. The event crowned category winners and named Student Category Top Prize winner

Pan Jiarong Oscar to represent Singapore at the International Grand Finals in Xiamen.

Vietnam's finals culminated with an awards ceremony in Nha Trang, performed on the critically acclaimed Kayserburg GH275Z, underscoring Pearl River's commitment to providing high-caliber instruments at every level of the pathway.

Artistic leadership

The competition's advisory and organizing leadership includes distinguished figures across China's conservatories and performance circles – among them Ye Xiaogang (Vice Chairman of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles President of Chinese Musicians' Association), Liu Shikun (Member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference [CPPCC] with Lifelong Honorary Title, Member of China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, Honorary President of the Piano Society of Chinese Musicians' Association) and Shi Shucheng (renowned Chinese Pianist and conductor) as artistic Advisors, with Wu Ying (President of the Piano Society of Chinese Musicians' Association and Professor of the Piano Department at the Central Conservatory of Music) serving among the Organizing Committee Directors alongside Wei Danwen (Vice President of the Piano Society of Chinese Musicians' Association and Head of the Piano Department at the Central Conservatory of Music) and Li Jianning (Party Committee Secretary and Chairman of Guangzhou Pearl River Piano Group Ltd.)

In many regions, the competition is paired with masterclasses and concerts by noted artists and educators, providing young pianists with close contact with role models and expanding the cultural impact of each event beyond the stage.

www.kayserburgusa.com/international-youth-piano-competition



ALL PHOTOS: PEARL RIVER



In March 2026, De Heuvellaan in Hilversum will once again set the stage for the GIPC – an international piano competition for young talents up to 22 years old. This prestigious annual event attracts the most promising young pianists from around the world.

Globe International Piano Competition: Young Piano Talent in the Spotlight

The next edition will take place from March 27 to 29, 2026. Prior to the competition, an online preselection will be held, during which a professional jury will select ten candidates per age category. These selected pianists will be invited to perform live on stage in Hilversum. The application deadline is January 10, 2026. For the public, the competition offers a unique opportunity to experience world-class young talent up close. The semifinals on Friday, March 27, and Saturday, March 28, are free to attend, while tickets for the final on March 29 are available via www.heuvellaan.com. Artistic direction is in the hands of Denise Lutgens, who, together with Markus Schirmer and Giuliano Adorno, is responsible for the online selection. The live jury for this edition consists of renowned musicians: Gaia Federica Caporiccio, Giuliano Adorno, István I. Székely, Helena Ha-Young Sul, Tania Kozlova, and Danijel Gašparović.

GIPC: More Than a Competition

At GIPC, it's not just about competition – it's about discovering, encouraging, and developing young talent. The event provides an

inspiring platform for young pianists and focuses on artistic growth, both on and off the stage.

During the live rounds, masterclasses are given by experienced musicians. After the competition, GIPC continues to organize educational weekends throughout the year, where international finalists and local talents perform together and further deepen their musical development. In addition, an annual Summer School and Winter School offer (young) professionals the chance to share their knowledge through intensive masterclasses and collaborative concerts.

These valuable initiatives are made possible thanks to music lovers who open their homes as host families, and through the generous support of the main sponsor, Heuvellaan Hilversum, which wholeheartedly supports both the competition and its educational programs.

Whether you're a participant or a lover of classical music – GIPC promises an inspiring weekend filled with virtuosity, emotion, and young talent.

www.gipc.nl | www.heuvellaan.com



VINCENT RUSSO

ON COMPETITIONS

He has performed in prestigious venues, including Carnegie Hall, as well as across Europe, Russia, and Japan. Influenced by legendary artists such as Alexis Weissenberg, Rafael Orozco, and Lev Naumov, Vincent Russo is also deeply committed to teaching. His distinctive masterclass series reflects a holistic and philosophical approach to music, shaped by years of artistic and pedagogical exploration.

What is your general view on competitions?

In my opinion, the concept of competition should never be applied to music – or the arts in general. In sports, one can judge and compare physical, tactical, and technical abilities in a relatively objective way. But music is fundamentally different: its essence lies in the emotional realm, which is inherently subjective. Who is to say which is greater – Rembrandt or Caravaggio?

But surely competitions can help further one's career?

Certainly, they can. However, in my experience, competitions come with serious risks. Many candidates – and even professors – get caught up in an atmosphere that leans toward hysteria, ego, and intense pressure. Professors often have their personal favourites, their “best horses,” as it were. The whole process can unintentionally promote a kind of narcissism, as highly talented individuals become trained for technical perfection and artificial beauty. This, sadly, can result in nervous breakdowns or psychosomatic issues. And even for those who win – how long does it last? First-prize winners are often quickly forgotten when the next winner knocks on the door. The reality is that 85% of competitors will not achieve sustained success. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the number of competitions has increased so much that one wonders: where are all these winners supposed to perform?

You've served on juries yourself.

Yes, and it's a complex issue – one that will always remain so, due to human nature, ambition, personal interests, and ego. Fortunately, not all jury members fall into these traps, but many do. I participated in some juries years ago, but in certain instances, I walked out.

I also stopped presenting students to competitions.

From the early 20th century through the early 70s – judging criteria were quite different. There was far more emphasis on musicianship than on technical fireworks or who could play the fastest octaves.

That was the era of the great masters – the golden age of the piano. I still remember sitting just a few rows behind the jury during the 1980 Chopin Competition when Ivo Pogorelić was eliminated before the finals. Martha Argerich, who was on the jury, walked out immediately and left Warsaw the next day. I spoke to her afterward – we were staying at the same hotel – and she expressed her disbelief.

How could such a unique and fascinating musician be eliminated?

The rest, as they say, is history. Many winners since then have faded into obscurity, while Pogorelić, despite his often unconventional interpretations, carved out a successful and distinctive career. He followed his own path – like a maverick who refuses to run with the herd.

You regularly teach masterclasses under the title “Not Only with Fingers.”

Yes, I firmly believe that to become a true interpreter, a musician must go beyond technical skill. Talent alone isn't enough. A student must develop an awareness of many other dimensions. One key element is physical awareness – understanding one's anatomy: the structure of the hands, fingers, arms, and body as a whole. Proper use of the muscular system is essential – using the legs for balance, the back for support in chords or fast passages, and so on. This awareness must eventually become automatic and subconscious. Slow and thoughtful practice is also vital to develop the four essential types of memory: muscular, harmonic, visual, and positional. Interpretation, too, requires imagination. I often introduce students to cultural or philosophical ideas that relate to the musical challenges they're facing. These connections help unlock the meaning behind the notes – the “unwritten” part of the score.

Breathing is another crucial aspect – conscious, rhythmic breathing – even in the most difficult passages. For anxious students, this alone can greatly improve their confidence and stability. It's all about awareness and learning to move forward without fear.

Before any masterclass, do you really want to get to know the student?

Indeed, not just their musical background, but also (with sensitivity and discretion) something about their life, aspirations, fears, and circumstances. This helps me better understand their personality, temperament, and hidden strengths – as well as the obstacles they may need to overcome. And finally, there is the spiritual side.

I encourage students to spend time in silence, connect with nature, and cultivate inner peace. It's a form of detox from the stress and noise of everyday life. All of this is what I mean by “not only with fingers.” These elements give a student the strength, clarity, and freedom to serve music in the way it truly deserves.

ERIC SCHOONES

Tuning the Fazioli

At the 2021 Chopin Competition, three prizewinners chose to perform on a Fazioli piano: Bruce Liu, Martín García García and Leonora Armellini. This year, two laureates made the same choice: Eric Lu, first prize, and Tianyao Lyu, joint fourth prize and winner of the award for Best Concerto Performance. Adam Kałduński, who received the Bella Davidovich Award for the best performance of a Ballade, also chose Fazioli. We spoke with Ortwin Moreau, who, as in 2021, was responsible for the Fazioli piano throughout the competition.

In 2021 you described the Chopin Competition as a contest for piano manufacturers as well.

Yes, absolutely. Every piano maker naturally wants to shine there – to have as many pianists as possible choose their instrument.

You were present during the piano selection process.

Yes, only the technicians from the five brands were allowed in. I watched all 84 candidates come and go. It seems to me that more pianists than before approach their choice with an open mind, free of prejudice – even though they were given only fifteen minutes to decide.

You were in close contact with Eric Lu during the competition.

Yes, and he always gave me very detailed feedback, mainly on the intonation and the left pedal. He likes to work very subtly with that. He wanted to be able to produce as many nuances as possible with it – and he really used that to his advantage. He was looking for extra colours and achieved remarkable results. He's certainly a pianist with great experience.

Before the competition, we ran several tests with pianists to give this instrument a big sound and a lot of energy, and I noticed that the pianists felt supported by that.

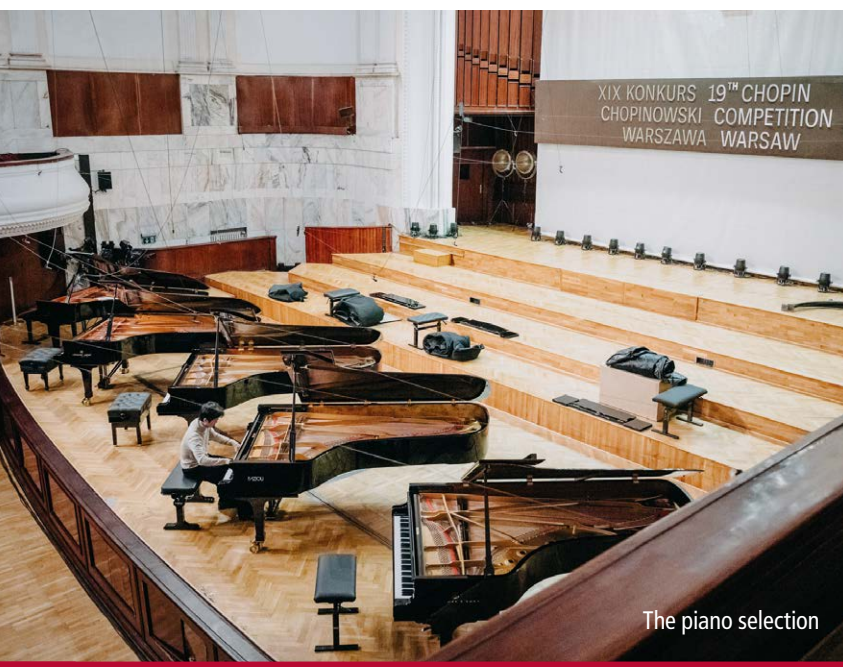
You can imagine the enormous pressure Eric Lu was under – and during the second gala concert, for example, he played much more freely. That was wonderful to witness. I'm very happy for him; things turned out beautifully.

In the hall, it was so clear how sensitively he shapes the sound.

Yes – the livestream doesn't do it full justice. It sounds so much better in the hall itself. The Philharmonic is a special venue that hides very little; so much of what happens on stage reaches the audience directly.

There's been much talk about the working conditions for tuners.

Yes, it's very intense. I was the only tuner for Fazioli, though I had an assistant who could step in if I got sick. This year I arrived a few days before the competition, so in total I spent about four and a half weeks in Warsaw – to allow more time for preparation. I worked mainly at night together with the tuners from the other brands, on a rotating schedule. At the beginning of the competition there were five of us; later only three. That gives you a bit more time, but it's still exhausting, because you want to be there during the day as well. Everyone is running on adrenaline and focus. You



The piano selection

Ortwin Moreau



ALL PHOTOS: ORTWIN MOREAU

Ortwin Moreau with Eric Lu



simply can't switch off – it's one long arc of tension until the very end. Still, I really enjoyed it. Tradition has it that for the first gala concert, all the winners play on the piano of the first-prize winner – so once again, as last time, on the Fazioli. It's fascinating to hear all the laureates performing on the same instrument and to experience the beautiful sound they create.

It's quite a responsibility Fazioli entrusts you with.

Yes – it's truly the brand's showcase. The whole world is watching. I believe around 200,000 people viewed the first gala concert, for which the piano was moved to the Opera. It's nerve-racking – nothing can be allowed to go wrong. I was very lucky that the humidity in the Opera was almost identical to that in the Philharmonic Hall. That's excellent for stability.

The situation with a competition like this is quite different from regular concerts.

Oh yes. The piano is new in that hall, and I don't always work there either. So gradually, day by day, I try to make the instrument fit better into the acoustics of the space. But unlike at a concert, you can't tailor it perfectly for each individual pianist.

I also take into account what I hear in the hall myself, and the feedback from colleagues.

The two finalists who played Fazioli, Tianyao Lyu and Eric Lu, have very different sound ideals – almost opposites – yet they had to share the same instrument. You have to find a compromise; there's no other way.

And of course, I'm very satisfied. Once again, we began with ten pianists choosing Fazioli – and ended up with two major prize-winners. A very fine result indeed.

ERIC SCHOONES

AN OPEN LETTER TO MUSICIANS BY MARIA NIKIFOROV

Dear musician,

Here're some things I wish I knew when starting out as a professional 20 years ago.

On 'getting ahead of the curve': *strategising your career will only get you so far. From what I've seen from my plethora of international colleagues, it can even get you stuck in a singular professional narrative that will unintentionally limit your worldview. In chess, for example, being fixated on wanting to play the 'Queens Gambit', means you're closed off to the impromptu connections you'll make in the most unexpected situations (which will end up helping you get further, faster).*

On developing your musical identity: *having other interests on the side will only inform your music making. They don't make you less of a serious musician. Read, make a simple drawing, go see friends... Stimulating your brain in different ways will help you get faster in distilling the opinions of the teachers you're working with and start recognising the evolution of your own musical presence. Relying on teachers is good but learning how to rely on yourself is better. The results will speak for themselves in the long run.*

A reminder that your career is yours – *no one will reprimand you for adjusting your professional expectations. Conservatories, even the 'highest and mightiest', are selling products. Since an international solo career is the product – and dream – that's highest in demand, over time its large objectives can start taking a toll. In these stressful situations it is easy to forget that you are the one in control of your own education.*

That's why it is of the utmost importance to allow yourself a general adjustment – to either start recognising that being a soloist is simply too strenuous on both the mind and the body (which is not a "failure"), or to start demanding more of yourself and shift into a higher gear in your performance practice (which is not a "win"). In short, become as practical as possible in evaluating whether the investment in your current underlying malaise is still yielding the best results.

On making mistakes: *disappointments and discomfort are inevitable parts of the game. The more time you spend getting to know yourself – yes, taking breaks from social media and going for the annoying mental health walks – the better you'll know how to efficiently deal with this two-headed creature called 'Failure' that is bound to rear its head from time to time. Do you know how you personally carry emotional, economic burdens? How do you cope with stress and fear?*

And finally: you have time. *Feeling rushed is one of the most common sensations during your studies. Train yourself in recognising that comparing your work and your path to the persons in the next-door practice room isn't constructive for you. Once again, your professional journey will turn out to be personal, and there's camaraderie in learning how to navigate its stormy waters.*

To you, musician, I wish all the best and to take it day by day.

Cordially,

Maria Nikiforov

Franz Liszt International Piano Competition 2026

From September 12 to 20, 2026, the world's finest young pianists will gather in Budapest for one of the most prestigious events in the international classical music calendar – the Franz Liszt International Piano Competition, organized by Filharmónia Hungary.



CHRIS LEE

Olga Kern,
Jury member of
the 2026 competition

Tradition, Virtuosity, and the Spirit of Liszt in Budapest

Rooted in a proud tradition dating back to 1933, when the first Liszt Competition was held under the direction of Ernő Dohnányi and won by the legendary Annie Fischer, the event stands as a symbol of musical excellence and artistic passion. Over the decades, it has become a cornerstone of the Hungarian and international concert scene, celebrating the enduring legacy of Franz Liszt – the virtuoso, composer, and visionary who revolutionized piano performance. The 2026 edition of the competition will take place at the Liszt Academy of Music, one of the world's most inspiring musical venues. The competition offers a career-defining opportunity for pianists born after September 1, 1996, to present their artistry before an esteemed international jury, including renowned pianists Olga Kern, Barry Douglas, and János Balázs, among others.

The Competition Structure

The journey begins with an online preselection round, in which the jury will choose twelve competitors based on submitted video recordings. Pianists must perform from memory and present one Liszt étude – selected from among the *Études d'exécution transcendante*, *Grandes études de Paganini*, or *Zwei Konzertetüden* – along with freely chosen original works or transcriptions. The submission deadline is April 15, 2026, and the results will be announced on May 1, 2026.

The live rounds will unfold in the magnificent halls of the Liszt Academy. The First Round (September 14–15, 2026) will feature twelve competitors performing a programme that also pays tribute to the 100th anniversary of composer György Kurtág through selected pieces from *Játékok* (*Games*).

The Semi-Final (September 17, 2026) will challenge six pianists to perform Liszt's grand transcriptions, paraphrases, and original

masterworks such as the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, *Mephisto Waltz*, or *Années de pèlerinage*.

Finally, three pianists will advance to the Grand Final (September 19, 2026), performing Liszt's Sonata in B minor and one of his great concert works – either the *Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major*, *Piano Concerto No. 2 in A major*, or *Totentanz*. The Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by György Vashegyi, will accompany the finalists in this culminating event.

All competition rounds will be streamed online, offering audiences around the world the chance to experience the brilliance, intensity, and inspiration of this prestigious international event.

Awards and Recognition

The Franz Liszt International Piano Competition offers not only international prestige but also significant prizes: First Prize: €35,000; Second Prize: €18,000; Third Prize: €9,000. In addition, special prizes include concert engagements, professional recording opportunities, and performance invitations from leading cultural institutions.

Continuing the Legacy

With its deep historical roots, artistic rigor, and the unmatched atmosphere of Budapest's Liszt Academy, the 2026 Franz Liszt International Piano Competition continues to inspire a new generation of pianists. Each performance pays homage to Liszt's genius – his boundless creativity, technical brilliance, and visionary spirit that continue to shape the world of piano music today.

Application deadline: April 15, 2026

Full details and repertoire: www.filharmonia.hu



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Zitong Wang

Going with the moment

Born in Inner Mongolia, China, in 1999, Zitong Wang entered the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music at the age of thirteen. She is currently pursuing her master's degree at the New England Conservatory under the guidance of Dang Thai Son. Zitong has earned first prizes at several international piano competitions, and in 2023, she was awarded the sixth prize at the Ferruccio Busoni International Piano Competition in Bolzano. This year she received third prize at the Chopin Competition in Warsaw, along with the Krystian Zimerman Award for the best performance of a sonata. She reflects on the competition and her artistry and Shigeru Kawai: the piano of her choice for Chopin.

Zitong Wang: “After taking part in the 2021 Chopin Competition, I knew right away that I wanted to return. At that time, I felt the programme I played didn’t truly showcase my abilities – I simply wasn’t ready.”

“I’m a very spontaneous person, so I often like to change things. When I’m in the practice room, I try to fill my ‘toolbox’ with everything I can, then see what I can pull out when I’m on stage. We are a bit like actors: even if we’re feeling sad, if we’re playing a joyful waltz, we have to express that joy. Of course, the way we express that depends on the moment. It’s impossible to control everything, just like in life – no matter how much we prepare.”

“Unlike string players, life can be very lonely for pianists, so I like to think of the piano as my best friend.” – “For me, creating a narrative with my rounds made me feel more at ease. The pieces interact with each other – take the Mazurka Op. 68 No. 4, for example, the final piece in my second round. It’s probably one of the last pieces Chopin ever wrote. If I had played it at the beginning of my recital, I would have approached it completely differently.”

“I started playing the Sonata Op. 35 when I was very young, and I

kept coming back to it. But as I got older, I realized I needed to relearn it, because some bad habits had developed over time. For the finale, I think I just followed my spontaneous side. I play it differently each time. This time, I felt it needed to be like a gust of wind sweeping through a graveyard, bringing out an inner voice. But when I played it on stage, I felt it didn’t need that after all.”

“I grew up playing on a Kawai piano at home in China, but I was trained at a Steinway school in Philadelphia. Entering the competition, I was more accustomed to playing on a Steinway, which felt safer to me. Back in 2021, I had doubts between Steinway and Kawai, since I hadn’t played much on a Shigeru Kawai at that point. This year, for my programme, which included a lot of lighter, more brilliant works, I needed a piano that could sing beautifully, even in pianissimo passages. The Kawai was the perfect fit for that. So, this time, it wasn’t difficult to make the choice.”

“The Kawai team has been incredibly supportive throughout this competition. I believe the connection between the piano and the people you work with is just as important as the instrument itself.”

ERIC SCHOONES

Liszt City Budapest

Chopin and Liszt each left an indelible mark on the evolution of the piano repertoire, as well as on piano performance and technique. They were friends and opposites – though their relationship was sometimes overshadowed by tensions, the mutual respect endured.

The façade of the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, founded by Liszt himself in 1875. The Academy celebrated its 150th anniversary on November 14, 2025.





GABOR HORVATH

Nearly a century ago, both masters were honoured with competitions bearing their names. In 1927, the International Chopin Competition was established in Warsaw – the quintessential Chopin city, even if Chopin himself did not live there for long – and in 1933 the Franz Liszt International Piano Competition was established in Budapest, which, together with Weimar, may rightly be called a Liszt city. These competitions are not just historical landmarks but the two oldest international piano competitions still in existence. The laureates of the Warsaw competition are widely known; one need only think of Maurizio Pollini, Martha Argerich, Garrick Ohlsson, and Krystian Zimerman. But Budapest too boasts illustrious prize winners among its ranks, including Annie Fischer, Paul Badura-Skoda, Lev Vlasenko, Lazar Berman, and Dino Ciani.

GUSTAV ALINK

Kevin Chen won the 2021 Liszt Competition in Budapest, one year later the Geneva Competition (2022) and then also the Arthur Rubinstein Competition in 2023. On top of that, he received the 2nd prize of the Chopin Competition in Warsaw, 2025.

A view of the monumental Great Hall of the Franz Liszt Music Academy in Budapest. This hall has magnificent acoustics and a most impressive history. The finals of the international music competitions are always held in the same Great Hall: the Liszt Competition is held every five years and this photo shows the winner (Jeonghwan Kim) of the Bartók World Competition, 2025.



GUSTAV ALINK

PIANIST

is a unique three-monthly magazine, published in seven countries in two special editions with different contents: one in German for Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Luxemburg and Liechtenstein and one in Dutch for the Netherlands and Belgium. The magazine is also distributed in controlled circulation in Eastern Europe with other European countries planned for the future.

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: May 2026

For all inquiries please contact: e.schoones@pianistmagazine.nl

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