

Dublin's piano competition celebrates its 30-year anniversary



Michael Dervan Classical Music

Founded in 1988 by John O'Connor, who raised all the sponsorship and roped in RTÉ to provide its symphony orchestra, the event made the musical world sit up and took notice

The Dublin International Piano Competition, which will run from Friday, May 18th, to Tuesday, May 29th, is 30 years old. It came into the world in 1988 and placed itself in competition with a rake of great, long-established institutions.

The Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, at which Van Cliburn had briefly melted the Cold War in 1958, was a venerable 30 years old. The Leeds competition, which had launched the careers of Radu Lupu and Murray Perahia, was just 25 years old. The granddaddy of them all in the world of piano playing was the Chopin Competition in Warsaw. It had been held

for the first time in 1927, when one of the finalists was none other than the great composer Dmitri Shostakovich, and its laureates included Maurizio Pollini, Martha Argerich and Krystian Zimerman.

John O'Connor, the artistic director of the Dublin competition, set out his stall with all the innovative spirit of a new kid on the block. He raised mega-sponsorship from Tony Ryan's Shannon-based GPA (Guinness Peat Aviation), which was then the world's largest aircraft leasing company. He roped in RTÉ to provide its symphony orchestra for the two nights of finals at the National Concert Hall.

He made sure the musical world sat up and took notice, too, by giving a mostly free rein to the competitors. They could play what they liked within given time constraints in the first three rounds, with the exception of a five-minute test piece by an Irish composer in the semi-finals. The list of concertos in the finals was limited to 10, though it has since risen to 28. Orchestras, obviously, can't be expected to have the whole concerto repertoire at their fingertips or in their libraries for delivery at short notice.

In those days Leeds, for example, had a fixed repertoire, with groups of pieces specified for each round and competitors compelled to make selections from each group. The idea was clearly to narrow the testing ground, make sure the players could handle specific challenges within the standard repertoire, and give the jurors a chance to compare like with like, or at least like with nearly like.

O'Connor threw that rulebook away and took a more real-life approach. His idea was for the players to express their individ-



Irish pianist Hugh Tinney with David Orr, managing director of sponsors Harveys of Bristol (left) and Robin Frost (right), head of PR of Harveys, at the Leeds International Piano Competition in 1987. PHOTOGRAPH: J ROBERTS

uality and "demonstrate an understanding of programme building, an ability to play in a variety of musical styles and most importantly to show the depth of their own musicianship rather than mere technical brilliance". Those ideals still stand.

Changing times

This year, the Dublin competition is as old as the Moscow competition was back in 1988, and five years older than the Leeds

was then. The world of piano competitions has been through major upheavals during its lifetime.

The Chopin competition, which is held every five years, failed a number of times to select a first prizewinner. The Moscow competition became embroiled in scandals over favouritism. It took a reboot under the great conductor Valery Gergiev and a new voting system to get it back on track in 2011.

The Leeds competition, which will be held next September, has also undergone a major change. One of its founders, Fanny Waterman (who also served on all of the Dublin juries up to 2015) remained in charge until 2015, when she retired at the age of 95. She has been replaced by a pair of artistic directors, pianist Paul Lewis and conductor, radio producer and administrator Adam Gatehouse.

Lewis and Gatehouse have set about implementing a raft of changes intended to reinvigorate the competition. The 2018 first round gets under way this week, not in Leeds, but in Berlin, where 40 pianists will go through their paces at the Universität der Künste (University of the Arts). Another first round session follows at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory in Singapore, and a third at the DiMenna Center in New York City. All of the sessions will be open to the public and tickets are free.

There's a new 2018 Leeds Piano Festival in May, that will be held across 10 days in Leeds and London, with past prizewinners juxtaposing the competition's "core repertoire" of Bach, Mozart, Brahms and Beethoven with the work of 20th century masters. Young scholars from the Lang Lang International Music Foundation will also be involved, and there will be related mas-

ter classes and education and learning programmes in both Leeds and London.

Reinvention

The competition's repertoire limitations have been eased, though there is still a first-round specification to include both pre- and post-1800 works. The semi-final round includes both a solo piano programme and chamber music performance, covering piano quintets and trios, violin sonatas and cello sonatas. And the semi-final also requires a choice of a 20th or 21st century work from a list by Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio, Brett Dean, György Ligeti, György Kurtág, Thomas Larcher, Thomas Adès, George Benjamin and Helmut Lachenmann.

You won't be surprised to learn that Paul Lewis wrote an article for the *Guardian* which began "I've never liked competitions. So when I was approached about becoming one of the new artistic directors of 'the Leeds', my first reaction was to say no".

The reinvention extends to upping the career management of prizewinners – the agency Askonas Holt "will take up one of the three winners, but not necessarily the first-prize winner" – and jury mentoring will be offered "to any competitor we think would benefit". And, in an effective answer to the biggest gripe about competitions, the Leeds jury is now performer led, and fights shy of teachers.

It's looking as if the scarcely-changed Dublin competition has now become the old fogey, and it's a reconceived Leeds that's pushing the envelope.

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