



# All for love

A periodontist dazzling audiences in Saint-Saëns? A gastroenterologist performing awesome Liszt? Forget Leeds and Honens: **Warwick Thompson** turns his attention to the no less exciting – and in many ways more fascinating – world of amateur competitions

**W**hy would they do it? Why would someone who runs, say, a busy clinical practice, want to devote their precious free time to putting themselves under the fearsome spotlight of a musical jury? Why would a lawyer spend thousands of non-billable hours getting the finger-breakingly difficult 'Scarbo' from *Gaspard de la nuit* up to professional performance level?

The motivations are different for different people, but whatever lies

behind their individual passions, it's clear that, in general, the world of amateur competitions is in boom mode. Top of the field is undoubtedly the Van Cliburn Amateur Competition, which has been held (almost) every four years alongside the professional competition since 1999. But on a similarly top-drawer level, there's also the Concours International de Grands Amateurs de Piano, based in Paris, which has been showcasing ear-boggling talent since 1989 (Erica Worth has been a member of its press jury).

Since 2009 the Chopin Competition in Warsaw has incorporated an amateur element. The healthy number of American events and competitions continues to expand; even Russia is getting in on the act. This magazine has also played its part. In 2005 and 2007 *Pianist* and Yamaha were joint partners for the Pianist-Yamaha Piano Competition for Outstanding Amateurs; in 2012, *Pianist*, Yamaha and Chetham's joined forces for an Amateur Piano Competition. It seems that the hunger of amateur pianists to enter the ring is insatiable. Ting-a-ling, seconds out! Round one!

## Chance to shine

My rather cheap boxing metaphor hardly represents the attitude taken by one of today's most successful amateur pianists. Christopher Shih won the Concours in Paris in 2008, and the Van Cliburn in 2011. His website [Christophershshih.com](http://Christophershshih.com) hosts plenty of clips, including a superb performance of Brahms's Variations on a Theme of Handel, which demonstrate just why he wowed the judges. But he's also a board-certified gastroenterologist who trained at the





universities of Harvard and John Hopkins, and who runs a busy practice in Pennsylvania. Why does he want to put his stamina, endurance and artistic sensibility through such a demanding process?

'It's a chance to perform,' he replies. 'Ultimately it comes down to loving music and desiring to share our ideas and interpretations with fellow musicians. These basic drives are no different whether one is professional or amateur. We all have something to say, and this springs from something very basic and fundamental to who we are as human beings trying to understand our reasons for existence. For years there were very limited performance opportunities for amateur musicians, and these competitions give us a chance to showcase our talents to a large and appreciative audience.'

As a one-time participant in the professional Van Cliburn Competition, Shih is in a good position to compare and contrast competitions for amateur and professional pianists. 'On a musical level there shouldn't be a difference between them,' he says. 'It doesn't matter what the venue is: the goal is doing the music justice and effectively communicating the composers' intentions to your audience. But practically speaking, the stakes are much higher in professional competitions. If an amateur gets eliminated, they can return to their day job. A professional win or loss has the potential to have much more of a lasting impact.'

Shih says that he never intended to deviate from his medical career, and his participation in the 'main' competition was for his own motivation. 'Even so,

the nerves were a hundredfold higher than the amateur competition. Plus there was literally 10 times the amount of repertoire to learn.'

### Giving up the day job?

Thomas Yu, a Canadian periodontist who (like Shih) has won both the Parisian Concours (2006) and the Van Cliburn (2016), made a powerful impression on Erica Worth when he came joint first in the 2012 competition organised by Chetham's, Yamaha and *Pianist*. He played the first movement of Dutilleux's Sonata and Liszt's *Rigoletto* Paraphrase. 'He was confident, with a wonderful command of the keyboard,' says Worth. 'His Liszt had all the bravura and beauty you could hope for, and his Dutilleux was pure rock and roll.' I'd also recommend his scintillating account of the final movement of Saint-Saëns's Fifth Concerto on YouTube, and when you've scooped your jaw up from the floor at the technical fireworks, check out the 'YuTube' channel on his own website.

From the wealth of clips and recordings of both Yu and Shih, it's pretty clear that the term 'amateur' does not signify 'of lesser skill' in their case. The technical level on display in all amateur competitions is astonishingly high, in fact. One of Erica Worth's most vivid pianist memories is of Tim Morris, a professor of theoretical physics, who won the audience prize in *Pianist* magazine's 2005 competition. 'He played the most inspirational and "frightening" Liszt *Funérailles* I've ever witnessed,' she says. 'He was so into it, his mouth gaping, his body hunched over the keys as if they were going to bite him.'

**Thomas Yu, far left and above, having come joint first in the competition organised by Chetham's, Yamaha and Pianist. Middle pictures, above: a triumphant Christopher Shih receives the trophy from the man himself at the Van Cliburn competition. Bottom left: Finalists at the 2005 Pianist-Yamaha Competition**

He played as if his life depended on it.' It was in the same competition that the young lawyer and composer Rupert Egerton-Smith performed 'Scarbo', as mentioned in the opening paragraph of this piece. That a non-professional should even consider tackling such a pianistic byword for impossibility is impressive enough: that he should have played it with such panache is truly astonishing.

### Hooked on the buzz

If one has such extraordinary gifts – in whatever walk of life – it seems only natural that one would want to communicate them to an appreciative audience. Yu agrees with his friend and duet partner Shih (whom he met through the competition circuit) that the chance to perform in front of an audience is a major factor in competition participation. 'I love the energy of being on stage in front of an audience and jury. And when I found myself playing in a sold-out Salle Gaveau, with the France 2 TV channel recording my every move, I was hooked on competing.' Like Shih, he also once competed in a professional competition (the Chopin) in 2005, and recalls that the atmosphere was very different from subsequent amateur events. 'It seemed like everyone was out for blood. So you come with national titles and awards? Big deal, everyone does. But in an amateur competition there is more support and positivity among pianists, audiences and juries. Your competitors become your lifelong friends.'

I wonder if Shih and Yu see the balance of the respective clinical and keyboard aspects of their lives

# COMPETITIONS



## NOT FOR SUNDAY PIANISTS

Eight of the most distinguished events worldwide for amateurs

### EUROPE

#### International Piano Competition for Outstanding Amateurs

The 29th edition of this annual competition held in Paris will take place in March 2019. Application deadline: 1 November 2018, maximum of 100 candidates.

[www.pianoamateurs.com](http://www.pianoamateurs.com)

#### The International Fryderyk Chopin Competition for Amateur Pianists

You've missed the application deadline for the fourth edition of this triennial competition, which will be held in Warsaw in September, but keep an eye out for news of one of Europe's most prestigious amateur events.

[tffc.chopin.pl/en/competition-for-amateur-pianists/](http://tffc.chopin.pl/en/competition-for-amateur-pianists/)

#### Pianestival

Debussy was naturally the theme for the 10th anniversary of this Parisian event, held in June, which draws pianists from not only Europe but the US and Asia.

[www.pianestival.org](http://www.pianestival.org)

#### Piano Bridges International Competition for Amateur Pianists

Held annually since 2011, this Saint Petersburg competition gives participants the opportunity to work both in ensemble and with an orchestra.

[www.pianobridges.com](http://www.pianobridges.com)

### NORTH AMERICA

#### Boston International Piano Competition

Presented by the Boston Piano Amateurs Association, the ninth edition of this biennial event took place in June 2017.

[www.bostonpianoamateurs.org](http://www.bostonpianoamateurs.org)

#### Cliburn International Amateur Piano Competition

The next edition of this quadrennial competition is scheduled for June 2020, admitting 75 amateur pianists from around the world for seven days of performances, symposia and social events.

[www.cliburn.org](http://www.cliburn.org)

#### Bradshaw & Buono International Piano Competition

There's an amateur division for this annual New York event as well as three school-age divisions: the next edition is scheduled for April 2019.

[www.alexanderbuono.com/piano-competition](http://www.alexanderbuono.com/piano-competition)

#### California Concerto Weekend for Amateur Pianists

5 November 2018 is the deadline for up to 12 amateur pianists aged 25 and over to rehearse and play concertos on Steinway instruments at West Valley College in Saratoga.

[www.californiaconcerto.org](http://www.californiaconcerto.org)

in a similar way. Do they feed into each other? 'I could never imagine a life where I couldn't balance my busy medical career with an artistic outlet,' says Shih. 'They keep each other fresh and exciting, and prevent me from becoming jaded with either.' Yu agrees. 'Being a periodontist challenges my mind, while being a musician energises my soul. Although they have little to do with each other, one could not exist without the other.'

### Painful choices

It took a little while for Yu to reach this point of medical-musical balance, however; and even now he confesses to still having wobbles. 'Personally, I was quite deeply conflicted during my university life. I recall a visiting teacher who told me to quit dental school and go to study with him. He said music was a language, and if I didn't pursue it early enough, I wouldn't be able to learn it. According to him, at 23 I was getting too old. But then I met my eventual teacher, Marc Durand, who said "But Thomas – you already speak the language. So finish dental school, and I will wait for you in Toronto." I then got into a dental residency at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, and simultaneously worked with Marc for six years.'

Either a hospital residency or an intense period of pianist training would exhaust the resources of most of us, I suspect. But both Yu and Shih seem to find more hours in the day than the customary twenty-four. Do they have a magic time machine? What's their secret? 'My job allows me plenty of free time to pursue other interests – and I only accept three or four concerts a year, which gives me plenty of time to prepare,' says Shih. 'But I firmly believe that no-one really "doesn't have time" for something. It's all about priorities. If you want something, you'll make time for it.'

Yu agrees with him. 'After a full day of consultations and surgeries, there isn't much time to practise, yet somehow it always works out. I guess you're never too busy to do the things you love. And it also helps to have an amazing and supportive wife.' Goodness, I think: it seems almost superhuman to add the demands of family life into such a full schedule. But Yu seems to take it in his stride. 'The biggest challenge now is to manage it all with our little son. At 16 months, Alexander is already battling me for time on the piano!'

### The impact of the Van Cliburn

His competition win has had a huge effect on Shih. 'I've unexpectedly developed a flourishing chamber

music career. I've made the decision to focus on collaborative projects (partly because I have developed focal dystonia) and I've had the pleasure and honour of working with some of the world's greatest artists in the past seven years. But it isn't really a "career", as I don't accept a penny in artist fees. Arts organizations struggle enough as it is. I choose to perform for love of the music.' In a further philanthropic gesture, he is also an artistic advisor and supporter of several of his local arts organizations in Pennsylvania, including the Lancaster Symphony Orchestra, the Trust Performing Arts Center, and the Ware Center.

Yu gives a much more personal account of his win. 'I entered it for my mother, who passed away from cancer shortly before the competition. During her final days, I promised her that I would win it for her. She never cared for such things in the past, but she was always happy for me. Every note I played in that competition was in memory of her.'

### A man's world

When one considers the demanding nature of the repertoire, and the level at which so many talented amateurs perform at, I wonder where the difference between an amateur and a professional lies. 'The perception that "amateur" equates to "lesser quality" is changing,' says Shih. 'The distinction is getting blurred, as more and more people are successfully straddling both worlds. But rather than focus on that, we should emphasise what matters, which is recognising the importance of music in all our lives. Art counterpoises horror we see all around us in the world. It gives us hope.'

It strikes me, without statistical confirmation, that far fewer women than men enter amateur competitions. Shih agrees with me and ponders the reason why. 'There are socially constructed gender inequalities in many fields. But I certainly don't see any intrinsic reason that it should be case here. Music is universal. It's cross-cultural. It knows no gender or racial or age barriers.'

Although Shih never intended to give up music or medicine for the sake of either, Yu confesses that it was 'not an easy pill to swallow' when he knew he wouldn't become a professional concert pianist: and for that reason, he's all the more grateful for the amateur competitions for giving him a chance to help realise his dreams, and to perform. 'I'd like to be a role model to amateur pianists,' he says, 'to inspire them to keep playing amid their busy lives.' ■