

Arts

Just What the Doctor Ordered: Surgeon Sparkles at Amateur Piano Competition

By TIM PAGE
Washington Post Staff Writer

One of the wonderful things about the word "amateur" is its infinite adaptability. If you have ever played "Chopsticks" or participated in a one-finger duet of "Heart and Soul," you are by definition an amateur pianist.

But there are amateurs and there are amateurs, and the five players who made it to the final round of the Third Washington International Piano Amateur Competition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art on Sunday afternoon were skilled, schooled musicians who have been studying their instruments for many years.

Indeed, all 12 of the semifinalists — the preliminary rounds took place on Thursday and Friday — pursue careers other than music. (Inexplicably, Andrew Celentano and John Vineyard chose to found and run Skyworld Interactive and Sunlake Investments, respectively, instead of opting for the near-poverty and perennial professional insecurity that afflicts many of those who play piano for a living.) The roster

included doctors, lawyers, chemists, a psychiatrist and an Argentine gymnasium owner.

By Sunday, the list had been winnowed down to Robert Finley, a telecom engineer born in England and now living in Massachusetts; Gerardo Molina, a computer engineer from Mexico; Louis Dalaveris, a New York ophthalmologist; Henri Delbeau, a surgeon from Jackson Heights, N.Y., and Scot King, a mortgage broker from California.

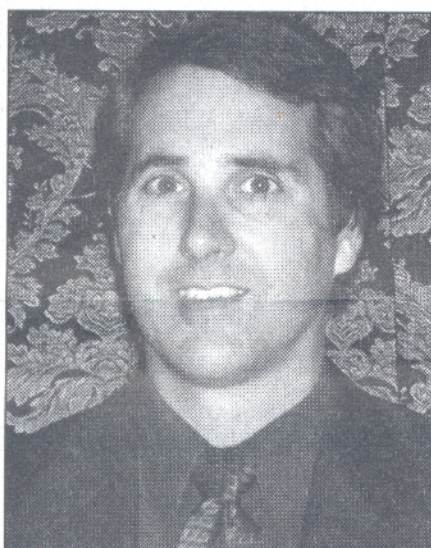
It was an interesting and mostly rewarding afternoon, hosted by Chateau Gardecki, president of the Washington International Piano Arts Council, and Jerome Barry, a baritone and the founder of the Embassy Series of concerts. And as so often occurs in professional competitions, the winner was obvious long before the results were announced.

Delbeau, who played the opening movement of Schubert's Sonata in G, Op. 78, and two Hungarian Rhapsodies (Nos. 2 and 6) by Franz Liszt, and who won the top prize, is a genuine artist. He spun out the Schubert movement as though it were a spontaneous meditation that could go on just as long and happily as it

wanted to, in a state of sustained melodic grace.

The Liszt rhapsodies were played with a delicious mixture of stereotypical Gypsy fierceness and flashy Hollywood fun (whenever a Bugs Bunny cartoon included classical music, it usually came from one or the other of these pieces). Rarely has the composer seemed so expansive and good-humored, and his music sounded all the better for it. Delbeau's set was greeted with whoops of approval, richly deserved.

All of the other pianists had their moments, but I was mystified by some of the repertory they chose. Finley selected Robert Schumann's "Etudes Symphoniques," which is as close as this composer ever came to shouting. It is a huge piece and enormously taxing and quickly devolves into undifferentiated gigantism unless its demands are as child's play for the pianist. Too often, performances of the "Etudes Symphoniques" remind me of watching a weight lifter struggle with barbells that are simply too large and heavy for mere mortals to hoist. Finley's playing is not without poetry, but he would have been better suited to the



THE WASHINGTON INTERNATIONAL PIANO AMATEUR COMPETITION

New York surgeon Henri Delbeau, left, stood head and shoulders above the others as he won first place at the Third Annual Washington International Piano Amateur Competition. Scot King, center, and Gerardo Molina were runners-up.

more intimate Schumann — “Kreisleriana,” perhaps, or even the “Kinderszenen.”

Nor did I understand why Dalaveris chose the Verdi-Liszt “Rigoletto” Paraphrase, another work that must be tossed off blithely or not at all. There must be hundreds of pieces this thoughtful musician could have made his own — why opt for anxious attempts at fancy filigree? Dalaveris was better in the Beethoven Sonata in E Minor, Op. 90 — especially in the stern, abstract opening movement — although I wish there had been more ease in the wonderful finale, which should flow as effort-

lessly as a brook at full tide.

King’s performance of Beethoven’s Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57, “Appassionata,” won him second place; it was smart and effective playing, lacking only the final degree of technical polish and a certain mania.

Molina brought a desperate and convincing urgency to Chopin’s Sonata in B-flat Minor, Op. 35, and Prokofiev’s Sonata No. 7. Parenthetical structure is not his thing, which left his performances sounding the pianistic equivalent of breathless on occasion, but they were mostly exciting, and he managed a nice save

at the end of the Prokofiev toccata, which had threatened to derail.

Delbeau excepted, I had the sense that these pianists were trying to make grandly ambitious points about their technical prowess by selecting unusually challenging repertoire, and I wondered why that should be. It has always seemed to me that polished, proportionate and (if you will pardon the old-fashioned sentiment) purely *beautiful* renditions of a few deftly chosen miniatures can certify one’s level of musicianship at least as truly as thrashing around with pianistic behemoths.