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ARTS AND CULTURE, COMMUNITY NEWS

## Washington International Piano Artists Competition: Truly a Festival of Music!!!

by [Henri Georges Polgar](#) • August 12, 2016

“Music has no boundaries” is the message conveyed year after year by the Washington International Piano Artists Competition, as pianists from all corners of the globe participate in what has become a highlight of the cultural season in DC. As the 2016 competition came to an end with its grand finale announcement of the winners at the Sphinx Club, it was clear that the art of piano performance will continue to thrive for many more years as WIPAC perseveres in its mission “to promote international friendship and mutual understanding among nations through music.”

Beginning with 23 performers on the first day of competition, the WIPAC jurors had the difficult choice of selecting the 13 semifinalist pianists who would compete at George Washington University and the 6 finalists who would perform at the Sphinx Club. As the winners were announced, it was clear that many of the pianists merited recognition, not only as the first, second and third place winners, but also for their excellent performances of works by various composers and musical styles.

The competition is open to pianists 31 years of age and above who are not professional pianists.

First place winner, Ken Iisaka (Software Engineer from San Jose, CA), performed the Beethoven Sonata No. 23 in C Minor Opus 111. The last of the great Beethoven Sonatas, written when Beethoven was already deaf, it is one of the most rhythmically and technically demanding piece in the piano repertoire that takes the pianist to the edge, divulging both emotional artistic depth, and pianistic ability by the musician.

Ken Iisaka performed the work flawlessly. His talent is characterized by a sense of ease and naturalness, a total fusion of pianist and instrument, reminiscent of descriptions of the great pianist Leopold Godowsky who was referred to as the ‘Buddha of the Piano.’ The First Prize Award was given by Austin Hay.

The Second Prize, donated by Charles and Joyce Hagel-Silverman, went to Jeanne Backofen Craig (Webmaster, Lynchburg, VA) who also won the Audience and Press Awards. A pianist with an exuberant personality, she had given up performing for 20 years, and one day at the encouragement of her family decided to “dust off her music” and compete in the WIPAC competition. She performed the Bach Prelude and Fugue in G Minor WTC 1, Debussy Arabesque No.1, Liszt Concert Etude No.3 in D Flat Minor “Un Sospiro,” and Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody, Jeanne Craig performed with great interpretive and technical skill.

Ferdy Talan (Real Estate Agent, Indonesia/USA) was awarded the third prize as well as the award for Performance of the Most Imaginative Programming. The award was donated by the Panamerican-Panafrican Association in honor of pianist Robert Pritchard. In the final round, Ferdy Talan performed the Bach Toccata in E Minor BWV 914, Astor Piazzolla *Adios Nonino* (arr. Laercio de Freitas), and a work by Henry Cowell, "The Harp of Life."

The performance of "The Harp of Life" was one of the highlights of the Competition. Cowell, considered one of the great American composers, wrote the work in 1924. He was a renowned experimentalist, creating pieces utilizing tone clusters that the pianist would execute with his or her elbows and arms. Ferdy Talan explained that "The Harp of Life" had its origins in Irish Mythology where the pedal signifies the grumbling sound of the center of the earth and the strings reach out to the heavens. As Hector Bellman describes, it signifies "the creation of life by means of a cosmic harp that extended from the underworld to the heavens. Each tone sounded by the Irish God of life created a new living creature." This beautiful hymn-like melody is accompanied by clusters which Talan performed by using his arms in an extremely physically challenging performance.

Ferdy Talan was the last finalist to perform in the competition, leaving the audience with the memory of this eerily beautiful piece which he performed with depth and a mystical insight. His gift is channeling a youthful enthusiasm into free spirited musicality.

It is noteworthy that the WIPAC events are characterized by a spirit of camaraderie rather than strict competitiveness. Discussing the growing circuit of "Amateur" competitions here in Washington, Boston, Colorado, Texas, Paris, Warsaw and others, veteran WIPAC competitor, Daniel Kandelman of Montreal, Canada, described the Washington competition as the venue with the warmest and most welcoming spirit. It can only be surmised that this spirit is largely due to the gracious hospitality of the Founders of WIPAC, Chateau and John Gardecki. They have created a music festival where pianists from throughout the world congregate to perform for an appreciative audience of piano music lovers.

Of course, the pianists do compete for cash prizes and awards, in acknowledgement of the dedication of the contestants to pursue a high standard of musicianship.

Indeed, the winner of this year's first prize will also be performing with the McLean Orchestra in Virginia. Under the direction of Conductor Miriam Burns, also Music Director of the Tallahassee Symphony, and a former assistant conductor of the NY Philharmonic during the tenures of the great conductors Kurt Mazur and Lorin Maazel, this collaboration marks WIPAC's growing success in bringing first rate musicians to the greater Washington DC area.

Next year WIPAC will bring another group of pianists from across the globe, true to its mission to "make music flourish in our communities."

FIRST PRIZE WINNER: Ken Iiasaka  
SECOND PRIZE WINNER: Jeanne Backofen Craig  
THIRD PRIZE WINNER: Ferdy Talan  
AUDIENCE & PRESS AWARDS: Jeanne Backofen Craig

SPECIAL AWARDS: Best performances for.....  
BACH – Reiko Osawa, Chromatic Fantasy & Fugue  
BEETHOVEN – Andre Leonard, Sonatas No. 7 & 12  
CHOPIN – Suzanna Laramée Trois Nouvelles Etudes  
LISZT – Deirbhile Brennan, Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este  
(from *Années de Pèlerinage: Troisième Année*)

RAVEL – Ken Iisaka, Sonatine  
BAROQUE – Deirbhile Brennan, Ramau-Gavotte & 6 Doubles  
CONTEMPORARY – Ferdy Talan, Leoš Janáček 1. X., 1905  
CLASSICAL – Ken Iisaka, Beethoven, Sonata 32, Op. 111  
ROMANTIC – Simon Finlow, Balakirev-Islamy  
MOST IMAGINATIVE PROGRAMMING: Ferdy Talan

SPIRIT OF THE AMATEUR PIANISTS: Neil McKelvie



Pianists: Ken Iisaka; Jeanne Backofen Craig; Ferdy Talan; Deirbhile Brennan; Simon Finlow