

Arts & Entertainment

Piano competition sets the bar high for top musicians

By JIM ABBOTT
SENTINEL MUSIC CRITIC

Imagine a few stressful situations: a driving test, Bar exam, job interview.

Roll them together, multiply by 10, and it might approach the pressure on musicians at this week's Grand Bohemian Orlando International Piano Competition.

After thousands of hours of practice, one errant touch of a key in a 40-minute performance could be enough to stand between a world-class performer and the event's \$20,000 first prize. Three finalists, who endured a week of such high anxiety, will vie for first prize by performing concertos with the Bach Festival Orchestra tonight at Carr Performing Arts Centre.

The finalists emerged from a field of 19 masterful international pianists, who displayed

their skills this week at Tiedtke Concert Hall at Rollins College in Winter Park.

A piano competition is an event engineered around stress, like an Olympic trial.

"It's being proven by fire," says Laurent Boukobza, professor and chairman of piano studies at the University of Central Florida. "That's the idea. It's as much pressure as you can get."

A winner of many international competitions, Boukobza is a judge as well as the artistic director of the Orlando competition. He came on board at the urging of Ellen Hamilton, whose logistical work to launch the inaugural event is reflected in the first prize that bears her name.

The comparison of world-class pianists to Olympic athletes is an apt one, Boukobza says.

"It's extremely physical," he says. "These contestants must sleep regular hours. Like athletes, they must organize their bodies to react precisely at particular moments."

And they must keep their minds focused, even when the most fleeting mistake can be costly.

"When I was younger, I cared so much about the mistakes, and that's all I focused on," says Yekwon Sunwoo, 19, a Korean musician who studies at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music. "Now, I feel like all I have to do is express what the



JACOB LANGSTON/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Sun Ah Lee of Michigan was among 19 musicians vying for the \$20,000 prize in the Grand Bohemian Orlando International Piano Competition.

composer is saying and express my thoughts to the audience."

Another competitor, Ukrainian Alina Kiryayeva, 28, echoes that idea.

"It's hard to remember that we are here because we love to play," says Kiryayeva, who tries to convey pictures in her mind to the audience as she plays. "It's hard to separate myself from the notion that mistakes

are being counted against me, but I find that if I do that, I have a good performance."

In Orlando, the contestants usually practice at least five hours a day but still find time for some tourist activities. Each musician stays with a host family that can introduce them to the area.

Kiryayeva made it to the gym Tuesday, and Sunwoo visited Disney's Animal Kingdom for

the first time. He returned in time for his daily five-hour rehearsal, in which he refined Beethoven's demanding Sonata Op. 101 no. 28 in A major.

In the preliminary round, each performer was required to tackle a sonata and three études, as well as other works that they might choose to showcase their skills.

Between each selection, competitors silently wipe down

the keys, lean back, close their eyes and cope with the tension. Offstage, there are other options.

"We might take him to the beach," says Richard Merrigan, head of Sunwoo's host family. "After all, you can't practice all the time."

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Grand Bohemian Orlando International Piano Competition

What: Finals, with Bach Festival Orchestra accompaniment.

When: 7:30 p.m. today.

Where: Carr Performing Arts Centre, 401 W. Livingston St., Orlando.

Cost: \$36, \$26 and \$15 for students and seniors.

Call: 407-849-2020.

Online: floridapiano.org