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COMPETITIONS & AWARDS

A Piano Competition Where Rigor Rules

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MILAN--Covid-19 restrictions have penalized early-career artists more than their well-established counterparts. While stars like Igor Levit have seamlessly shifted their fan bases online with virtual concerts, budding musicians without such sizable digital followings still largely rely on live events—not least competitions—for visibility. Keen to throw up-and-coming players a lifeline, organizers of the triennial Concours Géza Anda were determined to deliver this year's edition live, at all costs. The finals went ahead on June 5 as scheduled, with the 24-year-old German pianist Anton Gerzenberg easily taking top prize over two strong players.

Based in Zurich, named for the Hungarian pianist who died in 1976, the Concours Géza Anda is less well-known than other major European competitions such as the International Chopin Piano Competition or the Queen Elisabeth. With candidates required to master a vast range of works from Anda's own repertoire, it is also one of the world's most

grueling. This year's three finalists were whittled down from 36 candidates in the four preceding (live) rounds and were accompanied by the illustrious Tonhalle Orchestra, conducted by Gergely Madaras at the Tonhalle Maag concert hall. They competed for a first prize of 40,000 CHF (\$45,000), with second and third prizes of 30,000 CHF (\$33,152) and 20,000 CHF (\$23,000), respectively.

But Hortense Buehrle, Anda's late widow and the daughter of a wealthy local arms-producer, launched the event in 1979 with the aim of cultivating, rather than just rewarding, talent. As is the case with an increasing number of these events, the Foundation arranges major performance opportunities for its winners. Alumni including Dénes Várjon and Alexei Volodin (who won in 1991 and 2003) have gone on to enjoy distinguished careers; Claire Huangci, the Chinese-American pianist who won the top prize three years ago, is now starting to make waves.

This year's edition, honoring the 100th anniversary of Anda's death, was characteristically rigorous. Candidates were asked to select a 25-minute first-round program comprising selected works by Bach or Scarlatti, Mozart or Beethoven, and Chopin or Liszt, before the jury devised an individual 55-minute-long program for each second-round pianist. Semi-finalists chose works from a list of Mozart piano concertos, while finalists selected individual pieces by Bartók, Beethoven, or Liszt. After their performances, the nine-member jury led by Gerhard Oppitz, who replaced an indisposed Nelson Freire, deliberated, basing their choices on all three rounds.



German pianist Anton Gerzenberg, 24, took the top prize, in a league of his own

In a press breakfast the following morning, Tobias Richter, President of the Géza Anda Foundation, said he had attempted to create a competition that would make for enjoyable viewing. Holding the final at the stylish Tonhalle Maag certainly helped. With its ubiquitous Müller-BBM-calibrated wooden panels, the 1,200-seat auditorium—part of an old factory in a post-industrial quarter of Zurich, and refurbished in 2017 to host the orchestra's concerts while the historic Tonhalle undergoes a 165 million CHF (\$184 million) renovation—boasts exceptionally bright and warm acoustics. The orchestra had hoped to retain the space post-construction. Alas, the Maag will soon be turned into a residential and office building.

Live audience numbers were limited to 100 in compliance with local Covid restrictions, with performances broadcast on Swiss television and radio and streamed via social media and MezzoTV.

Marek Kozák, a 27-year-old Czech, kicked off the finals with an attractive rendition of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.5. The former Chopin International Piano Competition semi-finalist provided crystalline cascades, kaleidoscopic colors, shimmering trills, and beautifully calibrated playing throughout. There were few notable slips in the work's relentless runs, but his reading lacked bite, not least in the rambunctious Rondo. Even when, on occasion, Kozák ventured into more tempestuous territory, you could sense him naturally gravitating towards a milder comfort zone.

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The Tonhalle Orchestra seemed to be egging Kozák on. In the tight and explosive first movement, rustic-sounding strings lurched into the first beat of the bar, incendiary brass sliced through the texture as if through butter, and the timpanist was in irrepressible form. The orchestra, which is famed for its Beethoven, offered a ravishingly dusky opening to the second movement, a memorable preface to Kozák's pearly dreamscape.

Julian Trevelyan, the 22-year-old British graduate of Oxford University, delivered shock charisma as he bounded on stage. With his tight-fitting waistcoat, wavy locks, and tendency to shoot an elated gaze skywards, Trevelyan exuded a disarming romantic spirit. It was no surprise that he received the audience prize.



Julian Trevelyan, the 22-year-old British graduate of Oxford University won the audience prize

His playing matched his showmanship: In Bartók's Piano Concerto No. 3, the first movement's dancing fireflies were a vehicle for myriad shades and a sense of febrile ecstasy. The pianist was in ruminative form in the second movement's slowly unfolding nocturne and displayed impressive rapport with the orchestra as he eyeballed players from under the piano's open lid. They responded in kind aurally, with warbling flute, luminescent violins, and chirruping oboe merging in a lurid whole.

But Gerzenberg was in a league of his own. The pianist coaxed jaw-dropping power from the opening march, unleashing wild tirades of notes with icy composure. In playing that was as robust as it was musical, he covered a vast dynamic and expressive range. Driving the orchestra onward one moment and withdrawing into a more reflective mode the next, he seemed in total control, armed with uncommon self-assuredness for a pianist of his age.

He followed with an equally imperious Piano Concerto No. 1 by Liszt (Gerzenberg got two pieces because the concerto is shorter than the rest). After picking up his prize, the German delivered a schmaltzy—if slightly wooden—winner's encore of *Liebesleid* (Love's Sorrow) by Rachmaninoff/Kreisler. It was not clear from this outing whether Gerzenberg has emotional depth to match his fearsome technique. Regardless, he looks every bit a potential leading light of his generation.

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