

By LISA DUBOIS

VIRTUOSO PERFORMERS

*Top students at the
Blair School of Music
go note to note in
the annual solo
concerto auditions.*



EACH YEAR A FEW VANDERBILT STUDENTS AT THE BLAIR School of Music willingly pit themselves against one another in competition. They are violinists and cellists, pianists and timpanists, sopranos and tenors—for whom college life shifts back and forth between the academic milieu of math, science, history and language, and the rarified world of classical music and the art of performance.

For those few who are mentally and technically ready and who are willing to subject themselves to immense pressure, to long hours of rehearsals for a 10-minute solo, and to the scrutiny of outside judges, the ultimate prize is worth the trouble. Three winning participants are allowed to perform their solo concertos in a concert backed by a full symphony orchestra.

From a field of 27 competitors, *Vanderbilt Magazine* selected four students of differing musical passions and followed them as they prepared for and performed in the 2002–03 Blair Collegiate Concerto Competition. All four of them put their musical craftsmanship on the line. In the end, only one of them would receive recognition.

The Week Before

The day of the competition is set for Saturday, Feb. 1, 2003. The weather has been frigid and gray, and Nashville is digging out from a snowstorm that has made traveling unusually treacherous. Melissa Rose, assistant professor of piano and chair of the committee that runs the concerto competition, has been e-mailing music professors all week to determine which of their students have been approved for participating. She is trying to get a head count.

Typically, around 30 students audition, she says, although the numbers are still trickling in. This year the competition has some rule changes. A maximum of three students, rather than the usual four, will be named as winners. And this is the last year that previous winners will be allowed to audition.

“The Blair Concerto Competition is not as cutthroat competitive as those at other schools and conservatories,” says Rose. “We prefer to treat this as a good learning and per-

formance opportunity, because it requires virtuosity. We have the judges comment on each student’s performance, and we make those comments available to the students’ professors.”

The four judges, all of whom come from outside the close-knit Blair community, represent different musical persuasions—piano, strings, vocals and winds/percussion. Their charge is to determine the three best performances on that particular day. They are also allowed to bestow “honorable mention” honors on students with outstanding, but not winning, performances.

Emelyne Bingham is senior lecturer in aural studies at the Blair School and assistant conductor of the Nashville Symphony. She will conduct Vanderbilt Orchestra’s spring concert featuring one of the winners. Explaining the golden ring dangling before these young artists’ eyes, she says, “The difference

between playing an unaccompanied solo and playing a solo with a full orchestra is like the difference between a black-and-white photo and a color photo. There is so much more art to be made with color. Most people don’t get a chance to play those pieces as they were intended to be played with the colors that come from combining cellos, French horns and violas. The full range of instruments gives a more realistic interpretation of the true art form. Orchestras are expensive, and it’s rare for a student to get this kind of opportunity.”

The Performers

Jonathan Chu, Senior, Nisacayuna, N.Y.

If any student in this year’s competition understands Bingham’s comments, it’s senior violinist Jonathan Chu. Two years ago during his sophomore year, he won the competition and was able to debut as a soloist with the Vanderbilt Orchestra. “It was a great experi-

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PHOTOS BY NEIL BRANKE

ence playing with an orchestra of 80 people rather than with a piano,” he says. “That’s why I decided to enter again.”

He has been preparing Brahms Violin Concerto, First Movement, for the competition. It’s a piece he’s been practicing for months, not only for this event but also for auditions to graduate-school programs. In fact, graduate school, at the moment, is weighing much more heavily on his mind than the competition. Although he is double majoring in violin and economics, he recently has decided to pursue music rather than business after he leaves Vanderbilt. Ultimately, he hopes to have a career as a violinist in a string quartet and believes the Brahms concerto lets him prove his chops in both technique and musicianship. Throughout college he’s garnered numerous awards for his musical skills, and the buzz among the students is that he’s the odds-on favorite to win again.

Jonathan admits, “I really feel like I’m well prepared. I did lots of work before this year, and I feel like now I’m reaping the fruits. Lots of people are cramming, and although I’m not taking anything for granted, I’m not too stressed.”

He knows, however, how capricious such competitions can be. “I also competed my freshman year,” he says. “I thought I’d nailed my performance, and I didn’t win.”

Krystal Grant, Sophomore, Birmingham, Ala.

Sophomore Krystal Grant is searching for her voice—not the one in her throat, the one within the keys of a piano. Trained in classical music and a student of Craig Nies, associate professor of piano, she has selected a 10-minute abridged version of George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” for her concerto audition and is striving to be freer and looser with the bluesy jazz rhythms and cadences of this musical genre.

“Granted, it’s a technical challenge, but it’s mainly an interpretive challenge,” she says. “This is my voice, in a way.” She has been practicing the work for months, and although she thinks it’s now “seasoned,” she recently began to feel like she was losing touch with its message. So, a week ago she picked up the original score and played it in its entirety—all 42 pages.



“I got the concept of the piece back. I was able to appreciate it in context again,” she says.

With only a week left before the competition, she has become fiercely protective of her practice time. Rehearsing with her accompanist, Leah Bowes, Krystal focuses on her pauses and stops, learning to cue her accompanist, who stands in for the orchestra.

Bowes explains, “The big difference between preparing for a concerto competition as opposed to one for solo work is keeping in mind that you hopefully are going to be playing with a symphony. You have to consider the conductor. You have to cue me and let me know your intentions. That’s a very big point for the judges. They want you to get across the beauty of the whole [orchestrated] piece.”

Suddenly, the telephone in the office rings—once, twice, three times. An answering machine clicks on, and an unknown voice leaves a lengthy message for a missing professor. Unfazed, Krystal does not stop playing. Showtime is fast approaching, she has exactly 30 minutes with her accompanist this day, and she has no room in her schedule for interruptions.

Noelle Jacquez, Senior, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Because voice majors usually take several years to develop the vocal technique necessary to be competitive in such an event, this is soprano

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Noelle Jacquez’s first opportunity to audition for the concerto competition. Her mentor, Amy Jarman, senior lecturer in voice, is careful about which students she will recommend for the competition, which is considered prestigious to enter, much less to win. Noelle is fine-tuning a luscious aria from Antonin Dvořak’s opera “Rusalka,” based on the story of the Little Mermaid. Sung in Czech, this aria is rarely performed by undergraduates.

“This song requires somebody with a big instrument, who has a good top and a good low,” says Jarman. “About a year ago I thought Noelle’s voice had matured and that this was a perfect piece for her. The challenges of this aria have made her sing better and have taken her voice farther. That’s been really thrilling.”

Sitting in the Blair lobby between rehearsals, Noelle comments, “I’m nervous because I know how well I can do. I don’t want to have a freak-out and not do as well as I can. I feel like if I

do well, then it will be a triumph. This aria is a technical breakthrough piece for me.”

She adds that she enjoys the audition process because it’s “a great adrenaline rush,” and that she is looking forward to the experience. As Noelle prepares to go to her warm-up, she realizes with chagrin that she has been speaking, as they say in the business, “on the fry”—meaning she’s been using her lower vocal register, which is less healthy for her voice.

Lin Ong, Sophomore, Ames, Iowa

For percussion major Lin Ong, the concerto competition represents not just a performance but a comeback. A specialist on the marimba, Lin suffered an over-use injury akin to carpal tunnel syndrome last spring that caused

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excruciating pain and weakness in her right hand. She couldn’t grip a pencil, much less a marimba mallet. After months of rehabilitative therapy, she slowly began to work her way back to practicing her beloved instrument for a few minutes at a time.

By mid-January of this year, she finally was able to return to a fairly normal practice schedule. On several occasions she has come close to withdrawing from the competition, ultimately deciding she would go through with it as a tribute to her recovery. However, she has been rehearsing her concerto, Alan Hovhaness’s “Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints,” for only three and a half weeks. The other entrants have spent months preparing theirs.

Explains her mentor, Assistant Professor of Percussion William Wiggins, “She feels like she’s under some pressure to do this. Lin is highly motivated and has a competitive nature—and she’s a talented player.”

“I’m not going to win,” Lin says. “Maybe I’ve overshot myself. It’s a daunting task to try to learn a concerto in three and a half weeks. But given that it’s been three and a half weeks, I’m really happy with it.”

Finding an accompanist on such short notice posed an additional problem, and she’s

enlisted her friend, fellow sophomore Ralph Blanco, to play the orchestral portion of the work. Ralph has not entered the concerto competition, but is busy with his own auditions for a master class at Blair later in February with internationally recognized pianist Emanuel Ax.

“I’m approaching this competition from a different angle because of my injury, and I’m just seeing it as a lot of fun,” Lin says. “For me it’s not the winning, but the road I took to get to this point, that matters.”

The Competition

On the day before the big event, the atmosphere at the Blair Music School is a dichotomous swirl of joviality and high tension. Krystal has picked up a virus that made its way through the University, and she has been unable to practice for three days.

Lin has finally found time to rehearse with Ralph, and they perform her piece before her percussion studio class in front of her peers. After she completes the concerto on the marimba, Professor Wiggins explains that Hovhaness originally wrote it for the xylophone, a smaller, tighter instrument. With the understanding that Lin has never practiced it this way, he suggests she demonstrate how “Fantasy on Japanese Woodprints” sounds on the xylophone. Lin and Ralph run through the concerto again. Although the keyboards of the two instruments are similar, Lin’s body is used to the larger, softer-toned marimba and she stumbles a few times. The students comment that they actually prefer the work played on the xylophone because of its sharper musical coloring.

During the early hours of Feb. 1, 2003, the world learns that the space shuttle *Columbia* has blown apart while reentering earth’s atmosphere. Twenty-seven students have no option but to set aside the tragedy temporarily if they are to play well in the Blair Concerto Competition that same day. Lin Ong is slated to perform first. The Blair Recital Hall is empty, save for four judges and a timer. Lin appears on stage, dressed in a flowing black and silver skirt, wheeling her instrument into the room. Ralph takes his seat, and Lin begins to perform—on the xylophone. Hands flying, mallets dropping gently on the



Noelle Jacquez is fine-tuning a lush aria from Antonin Dvorak’s opera “Rusalka,” based on the story of the Little Mermaid. Sung in Czech, this aria is rarely performed by undergraduates.

orchestra in the midst of a concert. He made a professional decision to plow ahead—a choice that may or may not have cost him a chance to win.

“Jonathan doesn’t fold under pressure,” says his mentor, Chris Teal, a violinist with the Blair String Quartet and the Joseph Joachim Professor of Violin at Blair. “Competitions are fickle things. If you live to win competitions, in my estimation you don’t belong in music, because you have to be motivated by your love of the art and craft of music-making. I admire him very much. He faced a lot of choices at that point, and he chose to play through. As a teacher, I feel very fortunate to have had Jonathan Chu as my student.”

Although Noelle was also disappointed by the results, she is taking some solace in the high praise and scores given her by the vocal judge and in knowing she met the challenge of singing an extremely difficult aria. “When you build yourself up to performing the best you possibly can,” she reasons, “you’re always disappointed when you don’t win. Now I have to move on and audition for other things. It was a great performance for [accompanist] Daphne Nicar and me, and we accomplished all we set out to accomplish. When it’s a passion and you love it so much, it’s really not hard to keep keeping on. You just have to get over the little hurdles.”

With nothing to lose, Lin went for broke. The comments by the members of her studio class hit a nerve. Because they preferred the way the piece sounded on the xylophone, Lin decided to give it a shot—knowing she was coming down to the wire. “It was neat to change to the xylophone at the last minute, even if it was a little abrupt,” she says. “Although it felt new and weird on that instrument instead of on the larger marimba, I didn’t feel like it was out of control. I felt like it was doable. Next year I’ll hopefully have a concerto that I’m more ready to play.” Lin was so

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wooden keys, she creates the sound of raindrops on water, playing beautifully on an instrument she first tested out the day before.

A few hours later Jonathan Chu stands before the judges. “Excuse me,” he says apologetically, when he realizes he must retune his violin on stage because it doesn’t match the key accompanist Leah Bowes gives him on the piano. Rightly tuned, Jonathan launches into the Brahms concerto, his bow ripping through the dramatic, physical passages and dancing across the light, lyrical phrases. All of a sudden, one of his strings slips, losing its pitch. In an instantaneous decision, Jonathan plays on without stopping, although by the end of the concerto his E string has dropped to a G-sharp. His performance is stunning, albeit noticeably flawed. After he leaves the stage, the judges stir and whisper among themselves, clearly facing a dilemma.

Krystal follows immediately. She is wearing a long gold skirt that shimmers under the spotlight as she begins the famous Gershwin classic, teasing the melodies out of the piano and, without distractions, perfectly cuing her accompanist during the breaks and resumptions in the music.

It is mid-afternoon when Noelle takes the stage. Dressed in a long red skirt and earrings

that sparkle as they catch the light, she sings an aria that Dvorak could have composed for her voice alone. Pleading to the moon with heart-tugging emotion, she lets her full soprano ring through the hall and ends her performance with a slight curtsy.

Later that evening Professor Rose posts the names of the concerto winners: freshman Preetha Narayanan, violin; sophomore Martin-Patrick Eady, piano; and senior Jennifer Bernard, oboe. The judges also award three honorable mentions: junior Scott Seaton, saxophone; junior Sarah Seelig, piano; and senior Jonathan Chu, violin.

The Aftermath

“I’m disappointed,” Jonathan says simply. “Every competition is a snapshot of a player, and that performance is a bad snapshot of me.” Three days have passed since the competition, and the dramatic loosening of his string still stings like a fresh wound. Because the Brahms concerto moves quickly without any substantive breaks during which he could have paused gracefully to retune, he knows he would have had to stop his accompanist, retune, and pick up where he left off. In the real world, however, a soloist can’t halt an

son & Johnson and Chick-fil-A, and the writings of contemporary Protestant theologian Harvey Cox. Along the way, he mentions relevant areas of his research, such as examining the role of business leaders as public theologians of a sort, and evaluating the “ethical climates” that determine the moral boundaries in various companies and organizations.

This broad style of inquiry comes naturally to Victor, says colleague Bruce Barry, a one-time graduate student of Victor’s who is now the Brownlee O. Currey Associate Professor of Management at Owen. “A lot of business schools have an ‘ethics guy.’ And you could look at Bart and say we do, too. But I think what *we* have is actually something unique, which is an ethics guy who first of all is well grounded in the underlying moral philosophy of ethical reasoning—and, sadly, you can’t say that about all business-school ethics professors.

“But more important than that, we have somebody who has core pieces of intellectually focused experience that are grounded in key areas outside of that—one of which is corporate strategy, which he has taught successfully here and at other places. And another is this firm grounding in social science at both micro and macro levels. What we have, then, in Bart Victor is unique, in that he brings not just a focus on ethics but also a real grounding in other social sciences.”

Victor’s work experience reflects his broad academic interests. Starting with an undergraduate degree in sociology, he moved from social work to service as executive director of a system of 20 day-care centers, then on to management consulting on day-care issues. Drawn to graduate school in business (“I just needed to know more”), he earned a Ph.D. in business administration at the University of North Carolina. After teaching at the universities of Nebraska and North Carolina, he took a plum position at the Institute for Management Development International (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. (“It’s a world-renowned place that’s kind of part western business school and part executive development laboratory,” says Barry.) Victor taught there three years and ran the IMD’s program for executive development.

What drew him to Vanderbilt in 1999 was the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration inherent in the Cal Turner Chair in Moral

Leadership. The chair is part of an entire program in moral leadership, endowed in 1994 by Vanderbilt trustee Cal Turner Jr., BA’62, the recently retired CEO of Dollar General Corp., which brings together Vanderbilt’s professional schools (medicine, law, nursing, divinity and business) to explore topics that present ethical issues for all, such as genetic research.

Under the auspices of the Cal Turner Program, Victor leads an interdisciplinary course in moral leadership offered through both Owen and the Divinity School that is open to students of all the University’s professional schools and is co-taught by Victor and faculty from the various schools. Similarly, his Turner Program connections have led him to invite faculty from the other schools into his Ethics in Business course to expand the frame of reference.

Bringing together faculty and students from these other disciplines, says Victor, “allows us to deal with [ethical] problems in the way they really are. The interesting problems don’t just fit here in the business school. They don’t just fit in the law school. Just as business isn’t simply a concern of business.”

Indeed, says Victor, “business is the single most significant social defining force in the world today. It reaches everywhere. The world has never seen a social movement as significant, as powerful, as pervasive as business.”

Which, come to think of it, makes the idea of teaching moral leadership in business seem all the more imperative.

Despite all the recent corporate news of accounting fraud and executive deceit, Bart Victor remains upbeat about the possibilities for American business. He sees it not as some faceless, out-of-control juggernaut but as an engine that we all have some power to control. “I like business. I think business is a great, positive thing. I think it can do awful stuff, like anything powerful. It is not simply good in and of itself. It is a human creation. *We* are business. *We* are the market. Not somebody else. So let’s take responsibility for it.” ▼

An English major when at Vanderbilt and now a Nashville freelancer, Paul Kingsbury, A’80, is the author of books on the Grand Ole Opry and Nashville’s historic Hatch Show Print poster shop. His articles have appeared in Entertainment Weekly, US, Nashville Life, and other magazines.

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content with her performance that she left immediately afterwards for the W.O. Smith Community School of Music to teach a percussion class to school-aged children.

After the competition Krystal derived some satisfaction in knowing she had played “Rhapsody in Blue” very well—maybe even well enough to win. A few weeks passed, however, before she truly understood why she had undergone so many hassles for an experience she just as easily could have sidestepped. “On Wednesday night,” she says, “I played through “Rhapsody in Blue” for the first time since the competition. An upright piano was in the Ingram Performance Hall lobby, and I always like playing on pianos I find in random places. I played through the whole piece, solo, without the cuts for the competition excerpt. It was a joy just to be able to play this particular piece of music. Even if I don’t get to perform it with an orchestra, it’s a great piece to have learned: an American concerto flavored with jazz, a piece with rhythmic vitality, a piece with melodies that one leaves the practice room singing.”

That’s why Gershwin called it a “rhapsody.” And, more than any other reward, the discovery of such rhapsody drives students at the Blair School of Music to keep performing. ▼

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of his blood and whispered to the people rushing to his side, “Is everybody all right?”

The answer, of course, is that none of us was. In the political life of our troubled young country, there was simply no cure for that kind of loss. ▼

Frye Gaillard, BA’68, was chairman of the IMPACT program that brought Robert Kennedy to the Vanderbilt campus. During his lengthy career as a journalist, Gaillard has written about that event in several places, including the Charlotte Observer, for which he served as southern editor, and in his family memoir, Lessons from the Big House: One Family’s Passage Through the History of the South.