

Viano String Quartet

American Record Guide

September/October 2017

Osaka, World's Largest Chamber Music Competition American String Quartets Reign

By Robert Markow

7 string quartets, 9 wind ensembles, and 18 additional ensembles of various sizes and makeup; 126 musicians from 12 countries performing 68 separate programs of 30 to 50 minutes each almost 40 hours of music: such was the content of the world's largest chamber music competition, held in Osaka for nine days in May. This was the Ninth Osaka International Chamber Music Competition and Festa, a triennial event organized by the Japan Chamber Music Foundation and held in a jewel of a concert hall, the acoustically perfect 800-seat Izumi Hall in central Osaka. Since the inception of the competition in 1993, it has seen the participation of 1,393 musicians in 384 ensembles from 47 countries on 6 continents.

10 ensembles shared nearly 15,000,000 yen (about \$135,000) in prize money, and firstprize winners will undertake a 10-city tour of Japan. The juries are international in scope and in constitution: violinists Martin Beaver and Levon Chilingirian, violist Paul Katz, cellist Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi, saxophonist Claude Delangle, horn player Radovan Vlatkovic, and trumpeter Philip Smith were among the jury members this year. The event is actually three competitions in one. They constitute probably the most wide-ranging music competition anywhere on the planet. The event is sponsored by some of Japan's leading business interests, including Suntory, Sumitomo, Daikin, Toshiba, and Aeon, and enjoys the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Agency for Cultural Affairs, Osaka City and Osaka Prefectural Government, and the media giant Yomuri, whose newspaper group has the largest daily circulation in the world and whose Telecasting Corporation scheduled two edited programs of the competition in late June.

STRING QUARTETS (Section I)



Section I is always for string quartets and ranks as one of the four most important quartet competitions in the world, along with Banff, London, and Reggio Emilia. Normally 10 string quartets are invited. This year only 7 arrived, following withdrawals owing to illness and, in one case, uncertainty whether a player in an American quartet would be allowed back into the country (thank you, Donald

Trump). Of the 7 that came, 3 were American. With American quartets crowding the field, it was tempting to speculate what the chances were of one of them winning first prize. And what were the chances of Americans winning all the prizes? Whatever the odds, that's exactly what happened. By the time of the final round, the quartets left in the running were all American, and it merely remained for the jury to rank them first, second, and third.

There were no serious contenders for prize money in Round 1. They all played something well, even if just a movement or two, but too often there was force without power, rushing of the beat, and a feeling of self-consciousness. The jury generously allowed all 7 to return for Round 2, where standouts began to emerge. Here the American Aizuri Quartet (aizuri refers to a kind of Japanese woodblock print emphasizing deep blue color) gave a convincing account of Berg's densely contrapuntal quartet where every dynamic marking and expressive notation in the score was meticulously observed. **Another American group, the Viano Quartet, consisted of four strong players with matching sound and unanimity of concept. They made Bartok's Quartet No. 4 hair-raising, with bolts of lightning flashing from many pages.**

Many major competitions impose a newly commissioned or recently composed work on the competitors. Osaka does too, but it is rare to find the same composer so honored twice in a row. In the case of Akira Nishimura (b. 1953) it made sense, for not only is he one of Japan's most highly regarded living composers, but he was born just a few blocks from Izumi Hall, the site of the competition. In 2013 Nishimura dedicated his Quartet No. 5 to Irvine Arditi, leader of the Arditi Quartet on the occasion of his 60th birthday. Five quartets made it to Round 3, where they all played the imposed work, Nishimura's No. 5, plus a quartet of their choice. **In this round the British Maxwell Quartet and the American Viano Quartet made the deepest impression on me**, the former for its totally integrated body of sound, perfect balance, and technical assurance in Britten's Quartet No. 2; **the latter for its huge range of dynamics, massive sound, and spontaneity in Dvorak's Quartet No. 14.** At this point I marked either of these two for first prize.

Alas! The jury knocked the Maxwell out of the race. My choice for first prize remained the Viano, but they won only third. Still, this was the quartet that had everything in the Final Round. Their account of Schubert's No. 15 had Aizuri Quartet all the warmth, balanced sound, rhythmic solidity, and elegance one could wish for. Momentum never slackened in this long 50-minute score. The performance truly commanded attention. Wow! was all I could think when it was over. The Aizuri, which won first prize with Beethoven's No. 13 (including the Grosse Fuge) played well **but lacked the magically blended sound of the Viano.** In addition, too many passages were self-consciously aggressive, and momentum sometimes flagged. Second prize went to the Ulysses Quartet playing Beethoven's No. 15 with exceptional control of dynamic contrasts, structural integrity, expressive intensity, and perfection of ensemble. The 15-minute slow movement was a transcendent experience, with a climax of almost unbearable poignancy.

Repertory choices were wide enough to accommodate just about any ensemble's strengths. They could choose from Haydn (Opp. 76 and 77); Mozart's Haydn quartets or Beethoven's Op. 18; plus Debussy, Ravel, Verdi, Janacek's two quartets, and Dvorak's No. 13 or 14 for Round 1. Round 2 offered choices from Mendelssohn, Brahms, Schubert, and Schumann, plus a 20th-Century component from Dutilleul, Ligeti, Berg, Shostakovich (No. 15), or Bartok (Nos. 3-6). Round 3 consisted of Nishimura's Quartet No. 5 and a work of the ensemble's choice. The ensembles that made it to Round 4 could choose from a late Beethoven quartet or Schubert's late G-major Quartet. In all, a daunting list of repertory to prepare.

What the seven participating quartets chose made for interesting observations. 5 quartets played Haydn but none played Mozart. 5 chose Janacek (4 of them No. 1), and 6 chose Bartok (5 of them No. 4). No one touched Dutilleux, Ligeti, or Shostakovich; but in the third round there were some bold offerings for the work of choice: the British Maxwell Quartet played Britten's No. 2, and the Los Angeles-based Aizuri Quartet went out on a limb to give the Japanese premiere of a thoroughly avant-garde American work written for them and premiered just last year, Paul Wiancko's *Life*. 4 of the 7 quartets had Beethoven's No. 15 ready for the final round, and only one (Viano) chose Schubert's No. 15. If this quartet had not made it to the final round, we would not have heard a single note of Schubert in the entire the competition.

Formerly a horn player in the Montreal Symphony, Robert Markow now writes program notes for that orchestra and for many others in Canada, the U.S. and Asia. He writes regularly for such classical music journals as American Record Guide, Fanfare, Symphony, Strings, The Strad, Opera, Opera News and Opera Canada.

For the full review, click [here](#).