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canadian adventure

The annual **MONTRÉAL INTERNATIONAL MUSIC COMPETITION** is a highlight in Québec's cultural diary. *Claire Jackson* discovers some promising pianists at its tenth instalment, and finds a province passionate about music

FRANCOPHONIC MONTRÉAL IS A PLACE WHERE European chic meets North American charm. The Québec city is famed for its *joie de vivre* and there is no better way to experience this than via its arts scene – except, perhaps, through sampling the famous haute cuisine.

Subterranean passageways (for easy access even in extreme weather conditions) in downtown Montréal lead to Place des Arts, a cavernous venue that contains a rather tired 3,000-seater concert hall. The surrounding area is a building site, awash with workers in hard hats and high visibility jackets bustling to give the place a deserving makeover – including a brand new 260m Canadian dollar (£169m) arts venue, L'Adresse Symphonique. It's difficult to imagine that the new space will be ready to open this autumn, such was the forest of scaffolding during my perambulation there at the end of May, but if all goes to plan, inaugural concerts will be held in September.

Skin-deep beauty matters little. The Place des Arts has been home to Canada's premiere ensemble, the Montréal Symphony Orchestra (Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal), since the 60s. Conductor Kent Nagano has been at the helm since 2006 and has led the group through some high-profile engagements including, during my visit, the city's first ever performance of the inimitable *Das Rheingold*, part one of Wagner's Ring cycle. I have never known a three-hour unstaged (that is, an orchestral and choral performance only) production to fly by so quickly. As Nagano mused to a small gathering after the concert, it seems inconceivable to think that just a few decades ago, Montréal-based culture vultures would have been required to travel to Toronto to experience this type of performance. The city's musical community is now complete and all-encompassing; classical, jazz, dance and indie all jostle together to create Montréal's special sonic landscape.

It was against this backdrop that the Montréal International Music Competition (known as Concours Musical International De Montréal, or MIMC) was formed in 2002. Although the event is a relative youngster, the tenth instalment – held throughout May and June this year – proved that it has well and truly carved its place on the competition circuit. Since the first edition of the

contest, dedicated to voice, almost 2,000 candidates have applied to participate.

And it's easy to see why. Generous prizes (first prize this year was \$30,000 plus a career development programme valued at \$20,000, on a par with established pianistic contests such as the Van Cliburn and Tchaikovsky, and outdone only by Calgary's Honens, which bestows upon its once-every-three-years champion the tidy sum of \$100,000), an esteemed jury panel and – for impressionable young artists, possibly most importantly – a friendly atmosphere have contributed to its widespread interest.

THIS YEAR SAW 24 PIANISTS FROM ACROSS THE globe battle it out for laureate status. Although the response from home soil had been strong, none of the five Canadian pianists made it through to the final rounds. The six finalists were Americans Henry Kramer and Lindsay Garritson, South Koreans Zheeyoung Moon (*pictured, below right*) and Jong Ho Won, and Beatrice Rana and Yulia Chaplina, from Italy and Russia respectively. Each performed concertos – a choice of two by Liszt (Nos 1 and 2), Tchaikovsky's First, Prokofiev's Second, Rachmaninov's Second and Ravel's Concerto – with the Orchestre Métropolitain, led by Jean-François Rivest.

Interestingly, the competition also pitted four different brands of piano against each other. Performers could choose among two Steinways, a Fazioli and a Yamaha. In the finals, only Won performed on the Fazioli; the others settled for the Hamburg Steinway (on loan courtesy of the Montréal Conservatory of Music).

On the first night of the finals, Kramer took on the Ravel, Moon performed Liszt's Second Concerto and Rana went with the Tchaikovsky. The following evening, Garritson tackled Prokofiev's Second, Chaplina played Rachmaninov's Second and Won closed the finals with Liszt's First. All performances were polished, but some sparkled: the third movement of Ravel's Presto was superb under Kramer's hands, executed with light dexterity and tonal sensitivity. Chaplina's Rach Two was suitably brooding and Garritson's Prokofiev was simply stunning. But it was Rana's Tchaikovsky that turned heads. The 18 year old

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(pictured, left) played with such colour and with such a variety of touch and emotional intensity that we could only gaze, agog. The prescribed pieces are naturally some of the most popular works in the piano repertory, but the Tchaikovsky No 1 has got to be one of the most performed and recorded concertos, regularly trotted out by aspiring professionals. Each work comes with its difficulties – Prokofiev’s Scherzo movement, anyone? – but choosing the populist option was a gamble. It paid off: Rana scooped first prize and a standing ovation.

I have been lucky enough to attend some of the world’s most prestigious classical contests: the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels and the Menuhin Competition, to name a couple, and regularly there is discord between the judges’ final decision and the audience’s favourite. That’s why the additional prizes, often voted by audience members, are so important. At the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow earlier this year the jurists were booed inside and outside the hall after they eliminated the young Russian pianist Alexander Lubyantsev. However, at the MIMC, harmony prevailed, as Rana received first prize and the ‘people’s choice award’ (\$5,500), as well as scooping the catchily titled ‘award for the best performance of the imposed Canadian work’. Garritson took second prize (\$15,000) and Kramer came in third (\$10,000) (finalists pictured, above). Chaplina, Moon and Won each received a MIMC grant of \$2,000.

Classical music competitions can be arduous, gruelling and exhausting experiences. But, as several members of the jury testified, the MIMC is unusual in that it does foster a sense of community among its participants and audience members. Most organisations claim to support and nurture their young talent but all too often this can simply be words for press releases. At the Montréal competition, however, participants can expect genuine camaraderie. The 2012 session will focus on voice, while in 2013 violinists will be on show. We will rejoin the MIMC in 2014, when the attention once again is on the piano; and, if the performances this year are anything to go by, it will be worth the wait. 🎵

It’s a little far ahead, but here are the diary dates for 2014: The MIMC takes place 26 May to 6 June, and the application deadline is 15 January. Applicants must be no older than 30 on 1 January 2014.

