

## **The First International Piano Competition in Estonia**

*By Ia Remmel*

**Piano playing has always been appreciated in Estonia. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all Baltic-Germans used to make music at home and there was a lively concert scene in two largest cities in Estonia, Tartu and Tallinn. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the time on national awakening, among Estonians aspiring to better education, the piano became a more and more important instrument next to the organ. Many musically gifted young Estonians studied music at accessible music institutions, mostly the St. Petersburg Conservatoire.**

**The popularity of the piano as a music instrument is evident by the fact that for a long time already there have been made over fifty different kinds of pianos in Estonia. The Estonia Piano Factory is nowadays the most successful and outstanding piano maker in the Baltic Sea countries and Scandinavia.**

### **Estonian pianists and international music scene**

Estonian pianists were first successful in international competitions in 1910 when Artur Lemba, a graduate of the St. Petersburg Conservatoire took part in the Anton Rubinstein Competition and won a diploma. Among the laureates of the competition were many famous pianists: the 2<sup>nd</sup> prize went to Arthur Rubinstein and Edwin Fischer received a diploma, just like Artur Lemba.

In 1938, then 15-year old Heljo Sepp won the London competition for the British Council Music Award.

Much later, Rein Rannap made it into the finals of the Bach Competition in Leipzig in 1976. In 1981 in Zwickau, Kalle Randalu won the 3<sup>rd</sup> prize in the Robert Schumann Competition and in 1985 the *Grand Prix* in the ARD competition in Munich. Ivari Ilja is the finalist of the Chopin Competition in Warsaw and Vianna da Motta Competition in Lisbon. In 1990s, Lauri Väinmaa has won prizes in the international competition in Glasgow, Scotland and William Kapell Competition in Maryland, USA.

In 2000, the piano duo Kai Ratasapp – Mati Mikalai won the 1<sup>st</sup> prize in the ARD International Competition in Munich. Mihkel Poll received the *Grand Prix* in the Rina Sala Gallo Competition in Italy in 2005, while still a student at the Tallinn Music High School. The greatest number of victories belongs to a 30-year old Irina Zacharenkova, a student of the

Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. In 2006, she won the 1<sup>st</sup> prize in the Bach Competition in Leipzig and Alessandro Casagrande Competition in Italy, in 2005 in the Enescu Competition in Romania and in 2004 in the *Premio Jaén* Competition in Spain. In addition, in 2006 she received the 4<sup>th</sup> prize in the 1<sup>st</sup> Villa Lobos Competition in Brazil, in 2005 the 2<sup>nd</sup> prize in the Épinal Competition in France and the 3<sup>rd</sup> prize in the international competition in Geneva.

### **From a national to an international competition**

There is quite a long tradition of national competitions in Estonia. The first one took place in 1968; the winner was Arbo Valdma, now a Professor at the Cologne Academy of Music. Next competitions were organized in 1973, 1980, 1987, 1994 and 2002. In the Soviet time, Estonian pianists often competed in the republican and Soviet Union-wide piano contests, where the competition was often more fierce than in some international contests. Among then prize-winning Estonian pianists are Peep Lassmann, Lauri Väinmaa, Ivari Ilja and many others.

The idea of an international piano competition in Estonia was long in the making. Peep Lassmann, rector of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and an initiator of the competition had following to say about its beginning: “Estonia has many great pianists and that was the reason for founding the first international competition.” Lassmann also added that it was time to start a new tradition. Unlike Latvia and Lithuania with their Čiurlionis and Vītols competitions, Estonia had no such events in the Soviet time that could have developed an international dimension. Yet he remarked that both neighbouring competitions are now a bit regional and it was the wish of the Estonian music public to organize such a competition that might in time become a truly international event.

Lassmann had following to impart about the origins of the competition: “Years ago when the idea first came to be about it was obvious that we cannot self-finance the competition. We presented our vision in the form of project application to the European Union. Our idea was to create a European network of courses for young pianists; the principal teachers would have been the world-famous pianists, such as Alfred Brendel, Alicia de Larrocha and many others. The courses would have taken place in many European countries, been simultaneously visible to all participating countries and we would have used the latest technologies. The participants and also other pianists would have had access to an international competition in Tallinn. Unfortunately, this project application was not approved. Then we thought about year 2005 and celebrations of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Estonian

composer Eduard Tubin – we planned to unite the piano competition and his music. However, the competition was postponed for a year and finally happened in 2006.”

### **Impressions from the 1<sup>st</sup> international piano competition in Tallinn**

The participants were judged by a prominent jury, its president was Pascal Devoyon, Professor of the Paris Conservatoire and Berlin Art University, winner of the 1978 Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow. Jury members were Petras Geniušas, noted Lithuanian pianist and piano teacher; Prof. Yang Ming from the Beijing Central Conservatoire, Prof. Matti Raekallio from Finland, Prof. Joaquín Soriano from the Madrid Royal Conservatoire and Professors Aleksandra Juozapenaite-Eesmaa and Ivari Ilja from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. There were 28 participating pianists from 11 countries.

A member of the jury, EAMT Prof. Ivari Ilja expressed his delight that the endeavour he dreamed so long about had finally come to fruition. He remarked that right now Estonia is blessed with many gifted and personable young pianists. The EAMT Prof. Lilian Semper emphasized the original and well-chosen programme of the competition. She also said that it was very interesting to listen to different interpretations of Tubin’s works by foreign participants.

When asked about the impressions of the competition, the president of the jury Pascal Devoyon thought the participants were quite accomplished, and members of the jury Matti Raekallio and Joaquín Soriano believed they were good. Petras Geniušas compared the Tallinn international competition to the Vītols competition.

The Estonian piano school was very much praised. Pascal Devoyon said: “The high level of the local piano school, which I acquainted myself with during the competition, is obvious and I think it has good prospects. You have many interesting students.” Matti Raekallio: “I found it especially pleasant to see so many good Estonian musicians. Also many of those who didn’t make it to the finals were highly masterful.” Joaquín Soriano: “I think you may take pride in the high level of your music academy.”

Matti Raekallio characterized Estonian pianism as being based on classical-romanticist tradition, which is the best for any piano school. “The local piano playing is an interesting mixture of the Russian and Mid-European piano schools,” he added.

Jury members found the competition programme well chosen. Matti Raekallio remarked how wonderful it is that it also contained a contemporary etude. Raekallio was impressed with music by Tubin, although he thought that so many pieces of Estonian music in the programme of an international competition might present problems for future participants.

On the other hand, he said that Tubin were a composer worthy of greater acclaim. Joaquín Soriano and Petras Geniušas believed that too much national music in the programme might lessen the number of participants. Geniušas remarked on similar problem with international competitions in some other Baltic countries: Čiurlionis competition in Vilnius and Vītols competition in Riga.

Devoyon was of the opinion that all the finalists are still very young and will have a great future. Matti Raekallio noted that in the third round, concerto with the orchestra, participants displayed the sides of themselves not apparent in previous rounds. About the Estonian finalists Sten Lassmann and Mihkel Poll he said that the first pianist is a strong and intellectual performer who has plenty of experience with different repertoire and excellent understanding of the musical forms. The other one were a great pianist and despite being of tender age has all the prerequisites to perform very well the most monumental works (Poll competed with Sonata B minor by Liszt and Third Piano Concerto by Rachmaninov). Both pianists are studying with Prof. Ivari Ilja at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Tallinn International Piano Competition will take place in 2011, when Tallinn will become the European Capital of Culture.

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**An interview with VARDU RUMESSEN,  
pianist and musicologist, Chairman of the International Eduard Tubin Society**

*By Ia Remmel*

***What were your impressions of the Tallinn 1<sup>st</sup> international piano competition?***

I would say that in my opinion it was the greatest musical event of the year. And I think it was very regretful that our media reacted to it so passively and listlessly.

The competition, I believe, was of very high level and attracted the interest both of participants and the audience. I think that already the 2<sup>nd</sup> round should have been organized in the Estonia concert hall.

There were many pleasant performances at the competition. But what I couldn't foresee was that our own young pianists gave the best impressions. My most vivid memories are of the 3<sup>rd</sup> round, especially of the 3<sup>rd</sup> piano concerto by Rachmaninov performed by Mihkel Poll, which sounded simply wonderful. I loved his approach to timbre. His play is very much alive; it almost breathed poesy and beauty. He performed with great inner strength

and dedication, which is very necessary with Rachmaninov. The second Estonian finalist, Sten Lassmann, was also impressive. He performed the 2<sup>nd</sup> piano concerto by Prokofiev, an immense work. The concerto was a success, especially on the dramatic plane. Sten Lassmann can think big and prepare great culminations well in advance. The way he played Brahms Intermezzos in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round was also memorable because of his concentration and deep understanding.

***The competition programme contained quite many works by Tubin. What is your view on how much national music the programme should include?***

I am deeply convinced that Tubin is the composer the competition should be named after. There are numerous such competitions around the world. The Tubin competition could be for different musicians – one year for singers, the next for conductors and the next for string players. Most important would be to have certain constancy, a certain brand signalling the rest of the world of the significance and quality of the competition. And when we have such a brand it becomes easier to introduce Estonian music to the world. And Tubin has written music suitable for competition programme, in all genres and for all instruments.

***How did you find the performances of Tubin's works?***

With many interpreters I had a feeling that they were looking for the familiar 20<sup>th</sup> century composers, not so much for Tubin's individual style, which seemed quite foreign to many musicians. With Tubin it is very important to know how to unite improvisation and the logic of the form in order to achieve intense development. It was great that the Swedish publishing house Gehrman's Musikförlag issued seven compilations of Tubin's piano pieces and we were able to send those to the participants.

I absolutely agreed with the decision of the jury to award the prize for the best rendering of Tubin's work to Mihkel Poll who performed the *Ballad on a Theme by Mart Saar*. Also Sten Lassmann gave a very good performance of the sonata *Virmalised (Northern Lights)*.

1 <sup>st</sup> prize	Mihkel Poll (Estonia)
2 <sup>nd</sup> prize	Gang Sun (China)
3 <sup>rd</sup> prize	Daniil Sayamov (Russia) and Sten Lassmann (Estonia)
Prize for the best rendering of work by Eduard Tubin: Mihkel Poll	
Finalists:	Szczepan Kończal (Poland) ja Gintaras Januševičius (Lithuania)

### Competition Programme

#### 1<sup>st</sup> round

J. S. Bach. Prelude and Fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier 1 or 2

Chopin. Etude

Stravinsky, Bartók, Prokofiev, Lutosławski, Messiaen or Ligeti. Etude

Selection of romantic pieces from one opus or cycle by following composers: Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Smetana, Dvořák, Grieg, Tchaikovsky

Tubin. 2 preludes

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> round

Sonata by Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven

One of the following works by Tubin: *Sonatina*, Sonata No. 2 for piano, *Ballad on a Theme by Mart Saar*, *Selected Preludes*, *Suite on Estonian Shepherd Melodies*, and *Four Folk Songs from My Native Country*

Works chosen by the participant

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> round

Piano concerto: Bartók, Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Franck (Symphonic Variations), Liszt (incl. *Totentanz*), Mozart (beginning with KV 271), Prokofiev, Rachmaninov (incl. *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*), Ravel, Saint-Saëns, Schumann, Scriabin, Shostakovich, Tchaikovsky or Tubin (*Concertino*)