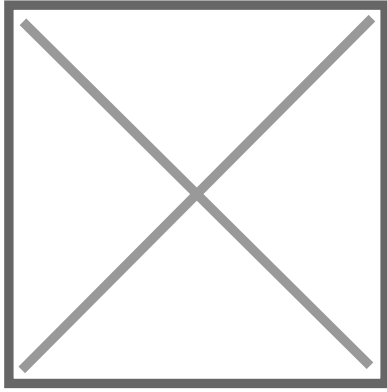




More Than Technique: Inside the Gina Bachauer 50th Anniversary Young Artists Semifinals

Description

Rose Wagner Performing Arts Center, Salt Lake City, UT • June 24-25, 2026

The Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition held the final two days of its semifinal Solo Round II of the Young Artist Division on June 24-25. The competition featured exceptionally talented pianists ages 15-18 from around the world. The semifinals presented remarkable artistry, technical mastery, and musical maturity as these young pianists competed for a place in the finals.

Since their first piano competition in 1976, the Gina Bachauer International Competition has been a stepping stone for many exceptional young pianists. Now celebrating its 50th anniversary, the Bachauer Competition is recognized as one of the world's most prestigious piano competitions. The cash prizes (\$15,000, \$10,000, and \$5,000 for the top three) are an incentive, but the greatest reward is definitely the prestige that comes with winning one of the most respected piano competitions. All five finalists also earn the extraordinary opportunity to perform with the Utah Symphony at Maurice Abravanel Hall under the direction of Kevin Fitzgerald, whose distinguished career as a conductor makes the experience even more meaningful.

The stage was centered around a beautiful Steinway & Sons concert grand piano. Two floral arrangements added a touch of elegance and modernism without distracting from the performers. Everything together created an environment of intimacy. When the first competitor walked in with great confidence, I already knew I was about to witness something great.

As a pianist myself, I pay attention to the very first notes. They reveal more than technical preparation • they establish the pianist's tone and artistic intention. They did not disappoint.

The first competitor I watched was **Yichen Sang**, a 17-year-old pianist from China. His program consisted of Brahms, Prokofiev, and Scriabin. His selection of Brahms is one of my personal favorites, so I was especially looking forward to hearing his performance. From the opening phrases, his voicing was beautifully balanced. The depth of dynamics was equally impressive • so much contrast,

carefully shaped with great precision. It was captivating to watch the way he physically connected with the music. Every gesture felt sincere, making the performance visually engaging. I was not surprised when I heard his name called as a finalist.

After his performance, I had the opportunity to ask him how he prepares mentally before going on stage. His answer was: *“I put all my thoughts on the piano.”* That answer stayed with me the entire evening, because that is something I saw in every performer. Each pianist demonstrated complete focus, as if each had learned to leave every distraction behind. Before playing, every pianist observed the same ritual – wiping the keyboard and their hands with a cloth, pausing to gather their thoughts, and then beginning to play. Watching these young artists made me think that playing at this level requires not only exceptional technique but also remarkable mental discipline.

There was so much variety in the repertoire. The programs ranged from Baroque masterpieces by Bach to romantic works by Liszt and Brahms, as well as contemporary composers like Hough. Prokofiev was one of the most frequently performed composers of the evening – not a surprise, since his music offers the opportunity to showcase extraordinary speed, agility, and technique. What impressed me the most was that musical phrasing remained intentional and expressive even in the fastest sections.

Like the performance of **Riko Ando**, an 18-year-old pianist from Japan. Her Prokofiev Scherzo was amazing. She played with so much power and energy. The final chords carried such intensity that after the last note, her arms simply fell away from the keyboard. It was a powerful visual ending that reflected the full physical effort she had invested in her performance.

The evening ended with five finalists announced: **Eunha Basu**, 16, USA; **Jaeyong Lee**, 17, South Korea; **Yichen Sang**, 17, China; **Matthew Chang**, 17, USA; and **Ziyu Shao**, 16, China.

Kevin Fitzgerald, who will conduct the final with the Utah Symphony, was present and offering support to the competitors. When I asked for his impressions of the evening, he said he was impressed by how each competitor brought a unique interpretation. I then asked what he was looking forward to most about working with the finalists. His answer was very inspiring – he was looking for authenticity, not imitation. That perspective seemed to capture the spirit of the competition, because technical skills are essential, but excellent artistry comes from bringing something personal to the music.

The five finalists will compete in the Final Round on **Saturday, June 27, at 7 p.m. at Abravanel Hall** with the Utah Symphony. Each will perform a major concerto: Eunha Basu performs Tchaikovsky’s Concerto No. 1, Jaeyong Lee performs Liszt’s Concerto No. 1, Yichen Sang performs Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Matthew Chang performs Chopin’s Concerto No. 1, and Ziyu Shao also performs Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* – making for a fascinating interpretive comparison between two finalists taking on the same work.

Tickets and livestream information are available at bachauer.com and the Bachauer YouTube channel.

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