

# Competitive edge

For young pianists, winning a competition can mean the difference between having a career or not. But winning is only the beginning, says **Jessica Duchon**

It's the moment every young pianist dreams about: the competition is over, the jury reassembles to announce the winner, and the chairperson declares: 'First prize: >fill in with your own name<.' International piano competitions involve intense preparation and high levels of stress. Everything seems at stake. Winning one quite simply can make the difference between having a career, or not.

Still, there have been plenty of competition winners who despite initial fuss have not gone on to make a name at the level that might be expected. To move up the ladder and establish themselves firmly on the top-notch performing circuit, young pianists now have to do a lot more than win a prize.

Which winners in the past few years, then, are emerging as the likely long-term players – in every sense – and what does it take for them to manage it?

At the moment, several are making impressive headway towards celebrity status. Among them are Behzod Abduraimov, winner of the last London International Piano Competition in 2009 when he was only 18; Federico Colli who won the Leeds International Piano Competition last year; and Daniil Trifonov, whose trilogy of significant prizes in autumn 2011 has catapulted the young Russian towards the musical stratospheres.

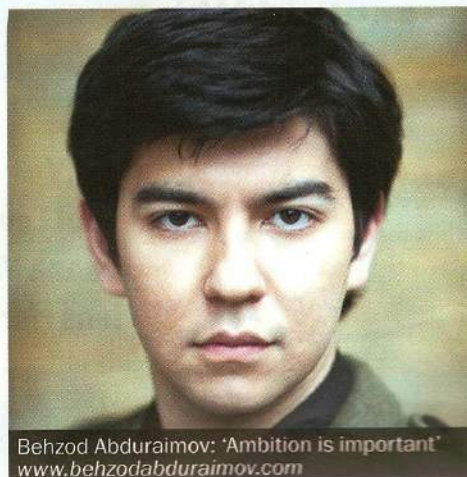
Trifonov and Abduraimov have both been snapped up by top record companies, respectively DG and Decca; Colli is to record his own debut CD this summer at Champs Hill. What is it that divides the men from the boys, so to speak? (Apologies that the candidates on this occasion are all male. Yulianna Avdeeva, winner of the first

prize at the Chopin International Piano Competition in 2011, was unavailable for interview.)

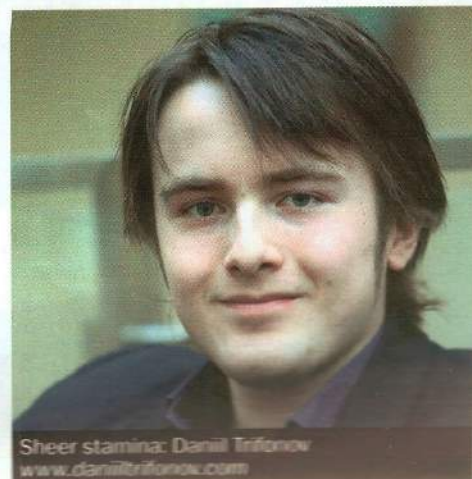
Daniil Trifonov was 19 in 2011 when he decided to test his prowess for the first time in an international competition. But he did not enter only one; instead he plumped for no fewer than three, in quick succession – and they were three of the biggest, the Chopin International Competition in Warsaw, the Arthur Rubinstein Competition in Tel Aviv and the Tchaikovsky International Competition in Moscow. He won third prize in Warsaw and first prize in both the others.

'Perhaps the main challenge was that the Tchaikovsky competition was held right after the Rubinstein and in between them there were only two weeks,' Trifonov says. 'And these two weeks were dedicated completely to a winner's gala tour for the Rubinstein competition! It involved about 13 concerts in 14 days, a very intensive schedule. The last concert there was in the morning; that same evening I flew to Russia, and the next morning I was already choosing the piano for the Tchaikovsky competition.'

The event in Russia offered even more challenges than usual. It was the first Tchaikovsky competition to be held under the chairmanship of Valery Gergiev; there had been a substantial overhaul in its practices and transparency and the music world consequently was eyeing its every move. Meanwhile its main venue, the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, had just been refurbished; the acoustics were new even to those who had performed in the space before, and the building work was so fresh that there had been no time to



Behzod Abduraimov: 'Ambition is important'  
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Sheer stamina: Daniil Trifonov  
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put in an air conditioning system.

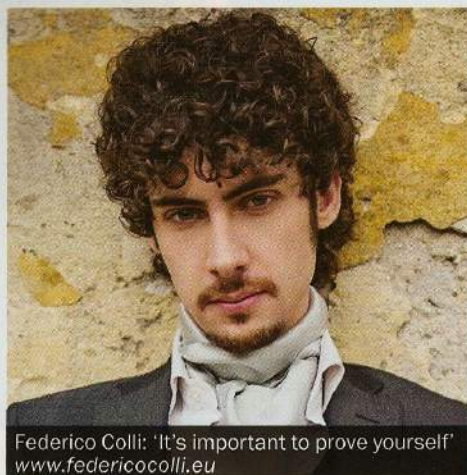
'The temperature in Moscow at that time was extremely warm,' says Trifonov. 'It was more than 30 degrees. And with the full orchestra on stage in the final – you can imagine!' Though if you have to play the piano, he agrees, it is better to be too hot than too cold.

But the biggest demand, especially given the schedule he was on, had to be on his sheer stamina. 'I'm happy that I had enough energy to go through into the last round in Moscow,' he says. 'That was my main concern: whether I would have enough emotional and physical strength to go through the whole competition.' Despite all, it was only a few days later that he felt tired: 'During the competition there was great concentration and music was taking first place for me. Probably a realisation of exhaustion appeared only after everything was over.' Of course, everything was not over: for Trifonov, it has proved to be only the beginning.

After Federico Colli took first prize at Leeds last year, the 24-year-old Italian followed a very different path. This contest does not oblige its winner to undertake an instant concert tour – so, instead of plunging straight into a plethora of performances, Colli took six months off. He went home to Brescia, consolidated his repertoire and learned some important new concertos. He is going to need them: his schedule is now sprouting impressive debuts worldwide.

'Competitions are always very stressful, but it's necessary to do them,' Colli suggests. 'It's important to prove yourself in a competition in order to have a real idea of your work – you need to compare yourself to the other performers.' At Leeds, he appreciated the set-up in which 'everything was near': he could eat, practise and socialise (when time permitted) all within the university hall of residence where the competitors were accommodated, 'and it was never a problem to find a piano on which to practise'.

But for him, the stress dissipated once he reached the concerto final: 'By then you are not on stage alone – instead you are sharing music-making with this wonderful orchestra and the great conductor Sir Mark Elder and it is simply a pleasure. I felt in the final that I was performing in a concert, not a competition, and for a normal audience, not a jury. I



Federico Colli: 'It's important to prove yourself' [www.federicocolli.eu](http://www.federicocolli.eu)

enjoyed it so much!'

His time off was a valuable move, he insists. 'In the competition I felt I was in good shape and very strong,' he says, 'but I was very pleased to have six months at home between October and April. I needed to relax, I needed to be comfortable, I needed to study new repertory and improve myself. And this I consider a very good choice because after the competition not only I but everybody was tired and stressed. It is necessary to stay calm and take stock of everything.'

Behzod Abduraimov is from Uzbekistan, studied in the US with Stanislav Ioudenitch, and thrilled the critics with his performance in the final of the London competition. His debut CD for Decca came out last year and his Queen Elizabeth Hall recital in winter 2012 was hailed as 'sheer genius' (*Sunday Times*). Based in Texas, the busy 21-year-old musician acknowledges that winning the competition enabled him to begin his international career – but he is well aware that there is more to success than scooping a prize.

'Love and passion for music is essential for every musician, but I think ambition is also very important in order to be a concert pianist,' he says. 'It takes a lot of focused, hard work and endurance. Just like an athlete, I have to stay in musical shape and train every day. My goal as a performer is to connect emotionally with the audience – I give my all during each and every performance and feel a deep commitment to bringing the composer's intentions to the listeners.'

Colli echoes those words about hard work. 'I am very proud to have been born in Brescia opposite the birthplace of Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and I grew up with Michelangeli's philosophy,' he declares.



Chopin first: Yulianna Avdeeva

'He always said that talent is necessary, but that the most important thing, not only for a pianist, but for any artist, is: study, study, study. Talent is necessary, because without talent you cannot have charisma, and without charisma you cannot make an impression on a public. That is necessary, and charisma starts from talent. But all the other situations in a concert career come only from hard work. I feel a responsibility to the soul of Michelangeli!'

This summer Abduraimov is making his second CD for Decca, which will consist of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No 1 and Prokofiev's third. Colli's debut CD is to include ('probably,' he says) Beethoven's *Appassionata* sonata, Scriabin's Sonata No 10 and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Trifonov's first release on DG is a live recording from his Carnegie Hall recital debut; it is due out later in the year. But next, Trifonov says, there is the small matter of his own piano concerto.

As if all that hard work on performing was not enough, he is following in the footsteps of the golden-age greats by writing music too. 'It's a three-movement concerto and I would say influential links can be found in the music of Prokofiev, Scriabin, Ravel and Rachmaninov,' he says. 'I'm looking forward to premiering it next season.'

It is not every young pianist who can tackle a hat-trick of contests in quick succession, write his own concerto, tour the globe and still be standing at the end of it; not every young pianist who can be termed 'genius' by top critics; not every young pianist who feels he must uphold the standards of Michelangeli. Without a doubt, these are names to watch.