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Fine tuning

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The eyes of classical music fans all over the world will be on Leeds this month for the triennial Leeds International Piano Competition.

Launched in the 1960s by pianist and teacher Dame Fanny Waterman, who was born in Leeds, the competition has become the most important piano contest in the UK and one of the most important in the world. Waterman, who turned 95 this year, is still its artistic director but announced last year that this competition would be her last. Last week renowned pianist Paul Lewis and BBC Radio 3 editor Adam Gatehouse were announced as her joint-successors.

The Leeds, as it is affectionately known, has helped launch the careers of some of the world's most famous pianists, including Murray Perahia, Radu Lupu, Andras Schiff and Mitsuko Uchida. The winner of the 2012 competition, 26-year-old Italian Federico Colli (pictured), has already enjoyed a huge career boost.

"I had a life before the competition and a different life after," he says. "After the competition, everybody knew me because I had won. It was also an opportunity to improve myself and understand what it means to be a concert pianist, and travel the world, which I am still doing. It was an absolutely life-changing experience."

This year's competition received 301 entries from 43 countries. Seventy-nine applicants have been chosen to compete in the live rounds, including four from the UK. Two of them are graduates of Chetham's School of Music in Manchester: Jamie Bergin, 26, and Yuanfan Yang, 18, who won the keyboard section of the 2012 BBC Young Musician of the Year competition.

The live rounds take place over two weeks and are all open to the public. The first and second rounds, and the semi-finals, take place in the Great Hall at Leeds University, with tickets available for as little as £5. The finals will then be held across two days at Leeds Town Hall, with six pianists getting the chance to perform a concerto with the Hallé Orchestra and its director Mark Elder, before a winner is chosen. The winner receives £20,000 and a string of concert engagements.

Other events include a screening of Bloody Daughter, a documentary film made by Stéphanie Argerich about her mother, the concert pianist Martha Argerich, and a benefit concert on 9 September, during which Colli will share the stage with Chinese star pianist Lang Lang, an ambassador for the competition. Colli will perform in the first half, playing music by Mozart and Mussorgsky, and Lang Lang will round off the concert with music by Chopin.

"It will be fascinating for the audience to see two pianists, doing one half of the concert each," Colli says. "Lang Lang is a great showman as well as a musician and I am looking forward to sharing a recital with him."

Colli, who had not visited Leeds before 2012, believes the competition has helped promote the city to an international audience. "In the music world, there are five top piano competitions: the Van Cliburn, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Queen Elisabeth and The Leeds," he says. "The Leeds is the only one that takes the name of the city, so that is very important for the city and also for the country."

After things have wrapped up this year, the competition can only hope to find a successor to Dame Fanny who will continue to secure its status on the world stage.

The Leeds International Piano Competition is on 26 Aug-13 Sept, various venues (leedspiano.com)




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