



# CHOPIN AND HIS FOLLOWERS. A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHOPIN COMPETITION IN WARSAW

*Posted on November 1, 2021 by Magdalena Bartnikowska-  
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The final auditions of the [18th International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition](#) ended on 20 October 2021, and [the winner](#) was the Canadian pianist [Bruce \(Xiaoyu\) Liu](#), who was also given the sobriquet, "Bruce Lee of the piano."

The Chopin Competition is one of the most prestigious piano tournaments in the world. It has promoted many world famous artists, such as [Krystian Zimerman](#) and [Martha Argerich](#). Held in Warsaw every five years, the competition generates great excitement and young pianists are cheered by music lovers from all over the world.

The very first Chopin Competition was held in 1927, when Chopin's music was not yet as well known around the world as it is today. Poland, having just regained independence in 1918, had little cultural influence on the international stage and the idea of organizing a Chopin competition was without question a political matter. The Competition was like a sports tournament, in that the process of the competition was inspired by the emotions that only sports events evoked in young people. Twenty-six candidates from seven European countries applied for the first edition. The twelve-member jury was then composed solely of Poles, who, rightly or wrongly, at that time were still convinced that Poles understood Chopin's music best. This soon changed and today's jury is international. The first winner was [Lev Oborin](#) from the USSR.

The competition quickly gained in stature and fame, and five years later, in 1932, representatives of seventeen countries came to Warsaw. In this competition (the jury was already international), the judges included not only outstanding pianists of the time but also music critics and even a literary man. [Karol Szymanowski](#) himself was a member of the competition's Organising Committee. There were eighty-nine pianists competing for the main prize, so the duration of the competition was extended to eighteen days. The participants were expected to be perfectly prepared: If one of them did not seem good enough from the very beginning, the chairman of the jury would interrupt his playing by ringing a bell. The winner was Kiev-born [Alexander Uninsky](#), who at that time claimed to be stateless (he later became a citizen of the United States).

As many as 250 candidates from Europe, America and Asia applied to take part in the third competition; after preliminary selection rounds, seventy-nine contestants remained. Thirty judges from a dozen countries sat on the jury, among them [Wilhelm Backhaus](#) and [Emil von Sauer](#), Franz Liszt's last living pupil. All stages of the competition were held with the participation of the audience, who – just like in a

sports competition – placed bets on their favorites. When the results were announced, the lack of a prize for the audience's favourite, the Japanese pianist [Chieko Hara](#), caused great excitement. The first and second prizes went to representatives of the USSR: [Jakov Zak](#) and [Rosa Tamarkina](#), while the third prize went to the Polish pianist [Witold Malcuzyński](#), a pupil of [Ignacy Paderewski](#).

On 26 September 1939, the Warsaw Philharmonic building, where the competition auditions took place, was completely destroyed by Nazi bombs. The next edition of the competition, planned for 1942, did not take place - World War II was raging all around. It was in 1949 that the competition once again organized and was held in the [Roma Theater](#), because there was no philharmonic hall in which the performances could be held. Putting together the competition was very difficult – there were no pianos for the participants; there were no hotels where they could sleep. However, the organizers managed to cope with these problems and fifty-four young pianists started the competition. Travelling around the world was very difficult at that time, yet representatives from France, England, Italy, Austria, and even Brazil, the USA and Mexico came to Poland. The international jury included Lev Oborin, the winner of the first competition. Since then, the participation of former laureates in the jury has become the norm. A novelty in this competition was that the judges listened to the pianists from behind blinds, without seeing the participants. This was to prevent unfair judgments. This idea was abandoned in subsequent competitions, as the pianist's posture at the piano is an important part of his playing. The first prize was won for the first time by a Pole, [Halina Czerny-Stefańska](#).

The next competition took place in the new Philharmonic building. Its construction was completed in 1955, and so the fifth edition of the competition was organized after six years, not after the usual five years. The jury consisted of thirty people, including the eminent Polish composer [Witold Lutosławski](#). The Executive Committee of the Competition was headed by the outstanding Polish writer [Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz](#). The competition was attended by seventy-seven pianists from twenty-five countries around the world, including Chile, Ecuador, South Africa, China, Japan, Mexico, and Ceylon.

The first three prizes were awarded to pianists who went on to have dazzling careers: The Pole [Adam Harasiewicz](#) (who won First Prize) is still a member of the competition jury today; the Soviet candidate [Vladimir Ashkenazy](#) (who won Second Prize), and the Chinese pianist [Fuo Ts'ong](#) (who won Third Prize). The Chinese representative also received a special prize for the best performance of the mazurkas, for it had always been said that only a Pole could play them well. The scores were calculated by a mathematical machine. The audience did not fully agree with the jury's verdict – in their opinion, the first prize should have gone to the fourth place winner, the Frenchman [Bernard Ringessen](#). The crowd

showed its enthusiasm for the pianist before his departure - by tossing him up in the air along with the car.

The next competition was held in 1960, the 150th anniversary of Chopin's birth. In the same year, [Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne](#) completed an edition of the composer's *Complete Works* edited by I.J. Paderewski – this edition is still played by pianists today. The jury was composed of eminent persons. The session was chaired by [Artur Rubinstein](#), who was known for his weakness for doughnuts made by [A. Blikle](#), a famous Warsaw confectioner. Apparently, the pianist could eat eleven of them during jury deliberations! The vice-president of the jury was [Nadia Boulanger](#), French composer and teacher of [Wojciech Kilar](#), [Astor Piazzolla](#), [Philip Glass](#) and [Aaron Copland](#). Among the participants for the first time were pianists from Australia, India, Israel and Turkey. The jubilee competition enjoyed an unprecedented turnout – not only Poles, but also many foreign listeners came. The Philharmonic Hall was full, and music lovers, who did not manage to get in, jammed the doors. One evening, they managed to break through the door and force their way into the hall! This edition of the competition was unusual in one more respect – for the first time, the jury's verdict met with the approval of the critics and the audience. The winner was the Italian pianist [Maurizio Pollini](#).

After victories by Slavs in previous editions, Pollini's triumph initiated prizes for representatives of other nations. The first prize in 1965 went to Argentine Martha Argerich (who sat on the jury of subsequent competitions), who in addition to the main prize received several others, including the Polish Radio Award for best mazurka performance. The winner of the next edition of the competition in 1970 was the American [Garrick Ohlsson](#), the Second Prize went to the Japanese [Mitsuko Uchida](#), the Third to the Pole [Piotr Paleczny](#) and the Fourth to the American [Eugen Indjic](#). All these names are of great importance to world piano playing today. The Polish winner of the Sixth Prize, [Janusz Olejniczak](#), who is considered one of the most outstanding interpreters of Chopin's music, has also made an international career. But the winners did not include [Jeffrey Swann](#) and [Diane Walsh](#), both talented American pianists, which was met with outrage by critics and audience alike.

A special change came at the 8th edition of the competition, when it was held in autumn (when the composer died), rather than on the composer's birthday. The reason? Frequent illnesses of foreign participants, not used to the Polish climate. And it was not only the foreigners who fell ill; the winter-spring period is a time of colds in Poland – critics still remember how [Zbigniew Drzewiecki](#), the chairman of the jury in 1965, could not stop coughing during the auditions. Since then, it has tradition and all editions of the competition are now held in autumn.

Along with the prestige of the competition, its popularity grew - there were more and more people willing to buy audition tickets. In 1975, during the 9th edition, a situation developed when the audience blocked the entrance to the philharmonic because of a lack of tickets. Only the intervention of security services resolved things. The competition was won - as the youngest in its history - by an 18-year-old Polish candidate, Krystian Zimerman, who also received prizes for best performance of the mazurkas, polonaise and sonata.

As many as 216 pianists from six continents applied for the 10th jubilee competition, and as many as 149 were admitted to the competition. The large number of candidates made the jury face a difficult task. This, of course, was not without its scandals. Before the final, Martha Argerich left the jury as a protest - the reason was the rejection of the Yugoslavian candidate [Ivo Pogorelic](#) in the third stage. The eccentric pianist became a darling of critics and audiences alike, and his "big loss" ultimately helped him develop a stunning career. The First Prize in the competition was then won by the Vietnamese pianist, [Dang Thai Son](#), who was the only winner in the history of the competition to perform the Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor in the final, which is considered unlucky - all others won with Concerto No. 1 in E minor.

The winners of the 11th and 14th competitions were Russian [Stanislav Bunin](#) (1985) and Chinese [Yundi Li](#) (2000). And what happened in-between? At the 12th and 13th contests, the main prizes were simply not awarded. In 1990, at the first competition in free Poland after the Round Table Agreement, the winner of the second prize was the American [Kevin Kenner](#), who, according to critics, deserved the first prize. Five years later, the second place ex aequo went to the Frenchman [Philippe Giusano](#) and the Russian [Alexei Sultanov](#). The Russian pianist, who saw himself as the winner, was outraged by the jury's decision - and did not perform at the winners' concert. [Nelson Goerner](#), an eminent pianist and Chopin interpreter, also participated in this competition - but at that time the jury did not even admit him to the final.

After 30 years of waiting, the Polish team experienced its triumph in 2005, when [Rafał Blechacz](#) won the competition. His victory was unquestionable; apart from the main prize he received all the special awards. The advantage of the Polish pianist was so great that the jury did not award the second prize. This competition was unusual also because it was the first time it was broadcast via the Internet.

Five years later, at the Chopin Jubilee Competition on the 200th anniversary of Chopin's birth, the jury's decision caused great excitement - the winner was [Yulianna Avdeeva](#) from Russia. The audience's favourite was the Austrian [Ingolf Wunder](#), who won Second Prize ex aequo with the Russian/Latvian [Lukas Geniušas](#). The 17th competition ended with the triumph of candidates from overseas: Korean

[Seong-Jin-Cho](#) (First Prize), Canadian [Charles Richard Hamelin](#) (Second Prize) and American [Kate Liu](#) (Third Prize). This edition of the competition had an unprecedented reach – the broadcast reached 31 million listeners who commented on the auditions in real time. Never before had such heated discussions about classical music been recorded on the Internet.

The recently concluded edition of the competition (postponed by a year due to a pandemic) was also very emotional. From a record number of 500 applications 87 pianists were selected to participate in the competition. The jury assessed the level of the candidates as the highest in history and therefore admitted as many as twelve people to the final! (The rules stipulate 10.) The winner was Canadian representative Bruce (Xiaoyu) Liu. The number of awards was also greater than usual – the second and fourth prizes were awarded twice. What will the jury surprise us with in four years time?

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The [featured image](#) shows, "Chopin concert," by Henryk Siemiradzki; painted in 1887.

