

Original article [in Russian]: <http://www.rg.ru/2015/07/02/li-site.html>

## George Li: Participating in the Tchaikovsky Competition has been my dream since childhood

The Tchaikovsky Concert Hall has announced the winners of the Tchaikovsky Competition XV. Second prize in the piano division was awarded to a 19-year-old American, George Li. His incredible technical skill and passionate and sincere attitude for the music moved the Russian audience. His performance of Beethoven's final sonata in the first round and Mozart's 23rd piano concerto in the second round added to the image of the brilliant virtuoso concert artist - Li showed himself to be a sensitive and intelligent musician, not content with a powerful, but a superficial, veneer of sophistication. Silver medalist George Li gave an interview to the "*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*."

*Russian Gazette:* Why did you decide to participate in the Tchaikovsky Competition?

*George Li:* Mainly to have the experience of performing in Moscow Conservatory's Great Hall, an amazing and historical place. I actually did not come to win a prize; the competition itself was not the most important thing for me. I really wanted to travel to Moscow and play in front of the Russian public.

*Russian Gazette:* Are you from a musical family?

*George Li:* My parents are not musicians. They did not have the opportunity to study classical music due to the "Cultural Revolution" in China. But I grew up hearing the sounds of Beethoven, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff. My older sister studied piano and we were always going to concerts in Boston. So, classical music has been part of my life almost from birth.

*Russian Gazette:* When did you realize that music was your calling?

*George Li:* I think it happened when I was 11 years old. That was when I first played onstage with the orchestra. It was not a major event - a small room, an amateur orchestra - but for me, it opened up a whole new world. After the concert, people from the audience came up to me and described how my playing had changed their mood, had touched them. That was when I first realized that an artist can have that kind of effect on people. It was a turning point in my life - since then I've wanted to play regularly for audiences.

*Russian Gazette:* You impressed the audience at the competition with your fantastic virtuosity. Is this a natural gift or the result of hard work?

*George Li:* It's actually the result of many years of work: since I've been 11, I've been practicing seven hours a day. But I want to say that technique is not the most important thing for a musician. It is only a means for creating music, for making it sound perfect. I believe that, above all, every piece should be played with emotion and feeling; there must be a story that you want to share with your audience.

*Russian Gazette:* In addition to music, you also study literature at Harvard.

*George Li:* The main reason for my decision to attend Harvard was a desire to get a good education. I want to develop, to become a deeper, more knowledgeable person. I think my education will be reflected in the music that I play.

*Russian Gazette:* What works of literature are you studying at the moment?

*George Li:* I recently finished reading "*Crime and Punishment*" by Dostoevsky. It took some time to get absorbed in this novel - at first it seemed quite depressing, but then I got carried away. In general, I love French literature - "*The Three Musketeers*," "*The Count of Monte Cristo*."

*Russian Gazette:* In the first round you performed the 32nd piano sonata of Beethoven - for a competition, that is quite a brave choice.

*George Li:* My teacher introduced this sonata to me within the last year, and I was shocked by its complexity and scale. For me, the main theme in this work is gratitude to God. There is great spiritual insight and humility at the same time; the composer overcame the trials sent to him, and lets you feel real gratitude to the Creator for the opportunity to live and make music. That is my understanding of this sonata. Choosing the repertoire for the competition, I thought I could try to share my vision.

*Russian Gazette:* This is your general approach to performing music - you are creating a certain image for your audience? Who are the composers that are closest to you?

*George Li:* I am inspired by very different music: Beethoven, Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and, of course, Tchaikovsky. When I start learning a piece, it is important to feel some sort of main idea, some type of emotional condition. This is something that stays with me, and I end up trying to convey this feeling to the listener. Then begins the long and painstaking work, and in this period of learning it's very easy to lose that first intense feeling. The most important thing for a pianist is being able to maintain a balance between his own perceptions and strict adherence to the composer's music. I always try to do so.

*Russian Gazette:* The Tchaikovsky Competition is one of the world's toughest. Participants who reach the finals perform a total of five times (including a qualifying round): three complex solo programs and two performances with orchestra. What stage was the most difficult for you?

*George Li:* All of them! [laughs] In the first round there were many different and very complex works. The transition from the first to the second round was tough - the break between rounds was very short, and we had to disengage from the old program to the new. The performance of Mozart's concerto was certainly nothing to take lightly - he is a very subtle composer. It's easy to lose the essence of his music; even the smallest blemish is very noticeable. And, of course, the third round! Playing two concerts in a row is very difficult, both physically and emotionally.

*Russian Gazette:* Do you get nervous?

*George Li:* I usually don't worry, I just go out and play. I try to keep this attitude: I say to myself that I'm just going out to play for the audience. But at some moments I got caught up thinking that this is a competition and I'm in a jury room, that this is a special responsibility, a full house, and somewhere in the hour before the performance I begin to shake. But five minutes before going onstage I managed to pull myself together and focus on the performance.

*Russian Gazette:* The competition lived up to your expectations?

*George Li:* Not only that, it exceeded all my expectations! The level was so high, there were so many interesting, talented pianists, I would rather call everything that happened a grand festival, where everyone can share their talent. And, of course, I was totally shocked by the Russian public - it is unlike any other, it is easy to establish the connection which every artist seeks.

*Russian Gazette:* In Russia, you have a lot of fans. Do you plan to return?

*George Li:* Well, of course! I really want to. I have an offer to perform at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory in September, so I hope to come back very soon.

### *About George:*

George Li was born in Boston, August 24, 1995. One of his mentors was Chinese pianist Ying Chen Zhong - silver medalist of the II International Tchaikovsky Competition (1962). His public performances began at age 9. He is currently a student in the double-degree program of Harvard and the New England Conservatory. His professors are Wha Kyung Byun and Russell Sherman. In 2012 he won a Gilmore Young Artist Award, which is presented to U.S. pianists under the age of 22, as well as the Academy Award of the Tabor Foundation in Verbier, Switzerland. In 2014, in Paris, he won the International Competition "Grand Prix Animat" and

won the second prize at the International Vendome Prize Piano Competition. In 2011, at the invitation of U.S. President Barack Obama, George performed at the White House during an evening honoring German Chancellor Angela Merkel. George has performed piano recitals in the United States, Canada, and Europe. He has performed with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, and many others.