Autumn leaves
Overcoming the complications of Covid and travel bureaucracy, Matthew Power arrived in Montreal in October for the closing stages of the CIOC, where he found the competition rooted in a broader, ongoing environment of promoting the organ.

Since its inception in 2008, the triennial Canadian International Organ Competition (CIOC) continues to attract highly talented organists under the age of 35 to compete for monetary prizes and further awards. Its prestige is well deserved and the fifth edition in October 2021 (postponed from 2020 because of Covid restrictions) revealed astonishingly high standards of performance. The smooth running and unfailingly welcoming ethos are overseen by artistic director Jean-Willy Kunz, who also chairs the jury, and executive director Thomas Leslie, along with their team of staff and volunteers, many of whom are organ graduates themselves.

Montreal in the autumn is as beautiful as New England further south. Multi-coloured maple leaves paper the sidewalks, and its many churches open their doors to competitors and recitalists during the two weeks of live rounds. Because of the pandemic, this year the 16 quarter-finalists were judged on video submissions and 10 semi-finalists were invited to the city. Five finalists were selected, each playing a free-choice programme of one hour. For the first time the final took place at La Maison symphonique on the IV/83 Casavant organ of 2014. 'Playing in a concert hall is so rare and gratifying for the finalists,' says Kunz, 'that I want the final round in 2024 to be at the Maison symphonique again.'

Despite many faultless performances from the other finalists, winner Aaron Tan (Canada/Philippines) seemed to place himself in another league. His technical assurance was complete. The variety of his interpretative...
< skill just continued to unfold into the most engaging performance I have witnessed in a long time.

To begin, there was drama in the third movement of Évocation, Poème symphonique op.37 (Dupré), then the extraordinary accomplishment of the etude Notes répétées op.5 no.5 (Demessieux) with toes dancing like raindrops, colourful mutations responding from the manuals. Delicious chromaticism and legato playing came next in the second movement of Karg-Elert’s Cathedral Windows op.106. The lyrical music of Rachel Laurin (a Canadian jury member) featured in many programmes, and here we heard impeccably timed phrasing in Poème symphonique pour le temps de l’avent op.69. The Scène and Marche from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker suite toyed with vivid colours, the Air with Variations from Leo Sowerby’s Suite for Organ gave room for the sublest of phrasing before Guillou’s transcription of Prokofiev’s Toccata op.11 ended the hour with its disruptive, madcap high jinks brilliantly communicated.

I catch up with Aaron Tan a couple of days later. With a PhD in Materials Science followed by studies at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, last autumn he embarked on a DMA programme at the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York. I ask which instrument he most liked from his time in Montreal. ‘Probably my favourite was the renovated 1920 Casavant [at the church of Saints-Anges] in Lachine, which we played for the Gala Concert. Its stops had the most personality to my ears. Especially memorable was the lovely English Horn on the solo.’ Tan’s final programme displayed a flawless technique. How does he prepare works which are technically exacting? ‘I often practise technical passages for the manuals at a piano, and even before that, try to fastidiously decide ideal fingerings before they are engrained in muscle memory. I begin with the usual slow practice until the notes become second nature and one does not have to think consciously about the mechanism of playing. I find technical pieces are actually much easier to memorise, as one has to drill the notes so many times that they naturally commit to memory anyway.

‘I would posit that for a competition, the lyrical pieces are just as difficult and are often even more important in determining the outcome. The mechanical difficulties of setting up a piston scheme on an unfamiliar organ, within a short period of practice time, poses a significant challenge for both listening and time management. I
think it is in lyrical pieces that judges and audiences can discern whether or not a competitor has a true voice or is simply a very facile technician.'

Martin Baker was the UK jury member. What was the group dynamic like among the judges? 'I'm always happy to hear a performer convey a sense of line or project a strong musical personality,' he says. 'Other jurors would no doubt have different priorities, but there was a very convivial atmosphere, all elegantly managed by Jean-Willy. There were no tantrums!' Are there particular features which set this competition apart? 'The legacy of John Grew (now retired) and the late Noël Spinelli has set the tone of the competition. The cross of North American and French cultures is evident in the organs themselves, but particularly noteworthy was


Aaron Tan's win combined technical and musical artistry. Can Martin Baker pinpoint some memorable moments in his and others' playing? 'Yes, the technical wizardry of Aaron's playing of *Notes répétées* (Demessieux) was mind-boggling. Highlights from the semi-finals included Ben Bloor's Fauchard (*Le mystère de noël*), which brought a smile and an occasional guffaw, two Liszt performances (*BACH and Funérailles*), beautifully played Bach (*An Wasserflüssen Babylon and Schmücke dich*), and in the finals some Healey Willan and Jean-Louis Florentz.'

\`Young organists are the future of our profession\' —  

Jean-Willy Kunz

that candidates were given so much time to perform in each round and, I gather, a correspondingly appropriate amount of practice time. There was some specification about choice of music in the semi-finals but also plenty of freedom, and the finals programmes were 60 m nutes of completely free choice. [We] got a broad perspective on each performer, notwithstanding the rather artificial competitive environment compared with a normal concert performance. The music of Rachel Laurin was a particularly notable feature throughout and it was wonderful to hear her play the day after the finals – a most satisfying dessert!'

French-Canadian organist-composer Laurin was also a member of the jury and gave (as part of the recital series at the cathedral in Saint-Hyacinthe) a vibrant performance of her own music along with that of Reger, Tournemire and others, on the IV/46 Casavant; restored in 2006, it is one of the firm's earliest surviving instruments, originally a three-manual built for the cathedral in 1885.

Jean-Willy Kunz is also organist in residence at the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal (OSM) and organ professor at the Conservatoire de musique. I ask what drives his work. 'Shedding new light on the king of instruments for an audience partly unfamiliar with its many possibilities. I work with the orchestra's director of programming on a yearly series of events. A pipe organ in a concert hall allows you [greater] scope: the large stage at the Maison symphonique, the acoustics of the hall (3.5 seconds of reverberation), the two consoles (tracker and electric, which can be played simultaneously), and the absence of any stylistic expectations.'

Alongside the organ's regular appearances as a solo, orchestral and concerto instrument, imaginative projects with the OSM have included pairing it with saxophonist Branford Marsalis or Canadian singer-songwriter Pierre Lapointe. There have been silent movies with organ improvisation, and organ music choreographed for a 17-piece dance company. The most ambitious project...
Results of the Canadian International Organ Competition 2021

1st prize: Aaron Tan (Canada / Philippines) CAN$25,000; also, the Sir Ernest MacMillan Memorial Foundation Award, the RCCO Raymond Daveluy Prize, and the Marcel Dupré Prize.

2nd prize: Ben Bloor (United Kingdom) CAN$15,000; also, the Spinelli Prize.

Joint 3rd prize: Bryan Anderson (United States of America); Tyler Boehmer (Canada) CAN$7,500 each; Bryan Anderson also won the Louis Robilliard Prize.

Anastasia Stahl (Russia) was awarded the quarterfinalist Richard Bradshaw Audience Prize of CAN$5,000.

Further details were published in the December 2020 issue.

Video recordings of the competition rounds, gala concert and more

tinyurl.com/ye88gucz

Further information

ciocm.org/en

Kunz has dreamt up, 'Organ and Space,' used a live video connection to the International Space Station; he is quick to credit NASA, the Canadian Space Agency and the European Space Agency for help, and hopes that a future collaboration can go even further and allow remote connection to the organ's MIDI interface to enable it to be played live from space.

Partnerships are valuable, Kunz recognises: 'Crossover projects increase awareness and reach a new and larger audience – around 270,000 in total before the pandemic. Education of young organists is so important. I strive to inspire my students and show them that the organ [presents] many opportunities. Young organists are the future of our profession.' Masterclasses on the Casavant at Maison symphonique have been given by Jean Guillou, Olivier Latry, Philippe Lefebvre, Vincent Dubois, Johann Vexo and Louis Robilliard.

The CIOC, Kunz believes, has a duty to support all its competitors. 'We provide them with opportunities, contacts and tools to launch and carry on their career, and we love to see them evolve in the organ world. Several past competitors decided to settle in Montreal. I like to think that they found here everything they needed to fuel their musical ambitions. Every edition of the CIOC adds something new, so stay tuned for October 2024!'