For Dranoff Competition teams, twenty fingers are better than ten

By Corinne Ramey

Natalia Lavrova and Vassily Primakov are one of eight semi-finalist teams taking part in the Dranoff 2 Piano Competition.

It isn’t easy when four hands share 88 keys.

“It’s like acrobatics, two people all over each other,” said pianist Liuben Dimitrov, one of the artistic directors of the Dranoff International 2 Piano Competition. “It’s like the Blue Angels in the Air Force, flying across the air like crazy. You feel like they will hit each other, but it never happens.”

Navigating the basic logistics of sharing a piano can get personal. “You feel like the other person is always taking up more space than you,” said pianist Yoon-Jee Kim, who is competing in this year’s Dranoff Competition. “And one person has to pedal for both of us.”

On May 11, the semifinal and final rounds of the twelfth Dranoff International 2 Piano Competition will open in Miami. One of the most prestigious competitions of the duo piano world, the event takes place every few years, bringing young piano duos from around the world to South Florida.

Live regional rounds were held internationally, and the top eight teams will compete in Miami from May 11 through May 16. The teams, all between the ages of 21 and 31, must play music for two pianos and for one piano, four hands. This year, the duo teams hail from countries including Hong Kong, Russia, South Korea and Germany. Notably, none of the teams are American this year, although some have studied in the U.S.

The Dranoff competition started in 1987, and the most recent competition took place five years ago.

Liuben Dimitrov, who, along with duo partner Aglika Genova, is one of the artistic directors, said he regularly receives emails from young duos asking when the next competition will occur. When the Dranoff Foundation announced it would be this year, the pair was thrilled.

“It was like a stone came down, like a huge rock from our soul,” said Dimitrov, whose duo is a former Dranoff winner. “We could say to the people, ‘You can prepare for Dranoff.’”

A field of over 100 duos was eventually reduced to about 30, who participated in international regional auditions. The eight semifinalist teams then come to Miami, where they stay with host families. Each of the duos prepares three and a half hours of repertoire, which includes works for both two pianos and piano four hands, and two concerti. The semifinal rounds, which are open to the public, are held from May 11 through 14 and will be streamed live on the Dranoff website. The finals are on May 16.
The final round includes playing two-piano concerti with orchestra, and the duos don’t know which of two concerti they will play until the afternoon of May 14. They prepare both the Poulenc concerto and a lesser-known concerto by American pianist and composer Victor Babin.

Babin and his wife were close friends of Loretta Dranoff, the founder of the Dranoff competition and foundation, and her husband, Murray. The Dranoffs, both pianists, performed internationally as a duo piano team. Loretta founded the competition and foundation as a tribute to her husband, who passed away in 1985. She has been credited with reviving an interest in piano duo music and commissioning significant new piano duo repertoire.

There are seven judges, ranging from artistic administrators — Anthony Fogg is the artistic administrator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Kate Monaghan, the assistant director of programming at Lincoln Center — to pianists, including Wu Ying, John Perry and Volker Stenzl, a former Dranoff winner.

Being in a piano duo is like a marriage of sorts — requiring quite a bit of cooperation, joint artistic decision making and copious amounts of time together — and several of these finalist teams are more than just artistic collaborators; the members of Duo Yamamoto are sisters, Duo Ping and Ting are twins, and the members of duo imPuls are married. Genova and Dimitrov, the artistic directors, are married as well.

These close relationships between duo partners aren’t surprising, said Carlene Sawyer, executive director of the Dranoff Foundation. “I think it’s written into the music to explore relationships and emotion,” she said. “With the time, emotion and commitment you have to make for great art, that’s what happens.” The Dranoff is an emotional time for the competitors. “There have been children conceived at the competition,” Sawyer added.

The members of Duo Yoo and Kim, who were close friends before they began to play together, met when Yoon-Jee Kim’s chamber music partner canceled at her on the last minute, and she needed a partner for a school exam. Close friend Jaekyung Yoo, now 28, suggested they play together.

“I was frantically looking for a new duo partner,” said Kim, 27, who is originally from South Korea. “Jaekyung offered to help me, and the exam went really well. Our teacher at the time said we should think about doing this seriously, because we play really well together.”

The two are both nervous and excited about the competition, and looking forward to their first visit to Miami.

“The program is quite big,” said Kim. “It’s almost like sports in that you really have to control your endurance.”

“For me, it’s always more enjoyable being on stage with Jaekyung,” she said. “It’s a competition but it’s also a performance, and it’s always been fun being on stage and playing together.”

Pianists Natalia Lavrova and Vassily Primakov, who will also be competing, first met in 1999 at the Juilliard School, but didn’t begin playing together until 2010. The two played the Arensky Suites for Two Pianos, and then began to fall in love with piano duo music.

“It grew from there,” said Primakov. “It actually started with specific repertoire for us, and then we were hooked.”

They’re also excited about the competition. “The idea is to prepare ourselves as much as we can, and once we’re there to enjoy ourselves as much as possible,” he said.

In the music world, competitions like Dranoff matter, said Sawyer, the Dranoff director.

“Competitions are very productive, but also very high stakes,” she said. “They are really essential for young people who want to be performing artists and want to have a career.”

Sawyer insists Dranoff is more than just a competition, but also a talent show that sets up piano duos for their future careers. “We explain this to young people as a cross between the Olympics and American Idol,” she said.
The foundation commissions new works for piano duo; this year’s piece is by Gabriela Lena Frank, and previous commissioned composers have included William Bolcom and John Corigliano. The foundation also has an educational component called Piano Slam, which brings artists into local schools.

Winning the competition brings not just a title and monetary prize, but performance engagements and collaborations coordinated by the foundation.

“We want to make sure the people who are surrounding them professionally are part of the contemporary art scene, said Sawyer. “When a classically trained Dranoff winner has to play with a hip-hop DJ, it’s mind blowing.”

Dranoff is a major competition in the piano duo world, said Dimitrov, the artistic director. “That’s why I compare it with Everest,” he said. “The whole music world is looking at this competition, and watching what will come out.”

The Dranoff concerts take place on May 11, 13, 14 and 16. Tickets are available at dranoff2piano.org, or by calling 305-572-9900. The competition will also be livestreamed on dranoff2piano.org.

The Dranoff Competition Semi-Finalist Teams

Duo Yoo and Kim

Duo Yoo and Kim
Pianists Yoon-Jee Kim and Jaekyung Yoo, both South Korean, became a duo in 2010. They’ve since won first prize at the International Piano Competition in Rome, the International Piano Duo Competition in Byatskot, Poland, and at the International Four-Hands Competition in Valberg, France.

Aventure Piano Duo

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Russians Ada Gorbunova and Vitali Gavrouc are both 26 and post-graduate students at the Moscow State Conservatory. The duo, formed in 2010, has performed throughout Russia including at the Piano Duo Festival Piano Forte Gallery in Yekaterinburg, Russia, where they performed with the Ural State Philhamonic.

Duo Yamamoto

Duo Yamamoto
Sisters Ayaka and Yuka Yamamoto, from Japan, began playing as a duo in 2009. The sisters have performed in Italy, Austria, and Japan, and won grand prize at the International Piano Duo Competition in Tokyo. They are students at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in
Rostock, Germany.

Duo Ping and Ting

**Duo Ping and Ting**
Twin sisters Chau Lok Ping and Chau Lok Ting, from Hong Kong, formed a piano duo in 2007. The sisters have won first prize at the International Piano Duo Competition in Bialystok, Poland, and have performed at festivals in Hong Kong, China and Poland. They also study in Germany, at the Hannover University of Music and Theater and Media.

Lavrova/Primakov Duo

**Lavrova/Primakov Duo**
Originally from Russia, pianists Natalia Lavrova and Vassily Primakov formed a piano duo in 2010. They have their own record label, LP classics, for music that is not frequently recorded and previously unreleased recordings. They have recently recorded Anton Arensky’s two-piano suites on their label. They are currently based in New York City.

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Duo

Bohemes

**Duo Bohemes**
French pianist Aurelie Samani and Romanian pianist Gabriela Ungureanu met while studying in Paris. The duo won the special prize at the International Competition for Piano Four Hands, in Valberg, France and first prize at the Concours Musical de France in Paris.

Yulia Gedallo and Alexander Andreev Piano Duo

**Yulia Getallo and Alexander Andreev Duo**
Russian pianists Getallo and Andreev formed their duo in 2004, when both were studying at the Moscow Conservatory. The duo won first prize at the Grand Prix of International Competition, in Lithuania, and the Piano Ensembles Competition of Alexander Bakhchiev, in Russia.

duo imPuls
duo imPuls
Husband and wife team Barbara and Sebastian Bartmann, from Germany, have been playing together for more than a decade. The duo received first prize in the Concours Valberg Nizza Competition, and at the Edvard-Grieg Competition in Oslo. They hold fellowships at the Richard Wagner Association and at Live Music Now, an outreach program. Sebastian Bartmann is also a composer.

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