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*In a Battle of the Batons, a Barely Visible Alchemy*

## Elim Chan's Flick Conducting Prize Is Rare Win for a Woman



Elim Chan, the winner of the Donatella Flick Conducting Competition, leading the London Symphony Orchestra.

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Critic's Notebook

By MICHAEL WHITE

LONDON — The finals of the [Donatella Flick Conducting Competition](#), run in collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra, took place at the Barbican Center here on Monday night; and as happens with such things, it was a largely male preserve. Discouraged by ingrained prejudice and arguments that they don't possess what it takes to command an orchestra, successful female conductors still have the rarity of a protected species. Of 225 initial entrants for this competition — all of them young hopefuls struggling through the early stages of their podium careers — only five were women: a dismal but not wholly surprising statistic.

So hurrah that one of those women not only made it through to the finals but ended up victorious. Taking first prize, 28-year-old Elim Chan, a Briton born in Hong Kong who is studying at the University of Michigan, evidently had the special something that a conductor needs to make the 80-plus musicians of a symphony orchestra sit up, take note and give their best.

How you define that something, though, is hard; and its elusiveness can turn conducting competitions into strange events of questionable meaning. Judging instrumentalists or singers is more straightforward, because they're physically producing sound. Conductors make no sound at all beyond odd grunts and wheezes no one wants to hear. Their job is to extract music from others, whose own talents feed into the equation. Orchestras are not unknown to play on autopilot. Good orchestras instinctively compensate for directorial shortcomings.

But hearing successive conductors unleashed on the same orchestra in quick turnover, as is the case in such competitions, shows that the person wielding the stick can make a difference. At the Flick, the three finalists — Minhail Gerts, 30, from Estonia, and Jiri Rozen, 23, from the Czech Republic, alongside Ms. Chan — indeed produced different results, perhaps because the orchestra was taking care to do no more nor less than the conductors' gestures told them.

The contrast was most obvious in three readings of the same piece — Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture — but still apparent when the finalists took different sections of Stravinsky's Symphony in Three Movements and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade." No doubt this was partly related to differences in technique, from the basic beating of time and cuing of entries to the subtler business of finding the right gesture to signal emotion. But technique isn't everything. Some powerful figures in the history of conducting — Klaus Tennstedt, Otto Klemperer, Mstislav Rostropovich on a good night — seemed to do no more than quiver to achieve sublimity, their beat so hard to read it looked like swatting flies.

Clearly there's more at stake here than deployment of a baton. Conductors have the overview of how the music works. They have to sell that view to 80 often-difficult and prickly skeptics, get them to agree and then keep them together. That requires charisma, willpower and a quality that the conductor Charles Mackerras summarized as "emanation": sending messages on terms beyond the physical. A simpler word is magic.

Competitions don't have good track records for discovering magic, or the stars who demonstrate it. The Donatella Flick — named after the wealthy socialite, former wife of a Daimler heir and sometime gymnast who covers the costs — has been in existence for 24 years and has helped many capable talents on their way. But eventual stars have been in short supply among the winners, the best known being François-Xavier Roth in 2000. And it's a similar story with most of the other major contests for young conductors.

[The Besançon Competition](#), running since 1951, had Seiji Ozawa in 1959 and Lionel Bringuier (now taking over the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich) in 2005, but most of its winners have settled into lower profiles. The [Malko](#) in Copenhagen, which began in 1965, produced [Claus Peter Flor](#) in 1983 and [Rafael Payare](#) in 2012, but few others of real note. Among more recent arrivals, [the Cadaqués](#) in Spain, founded in 1992, has perhaps the best record, with Gianandrea Noseda in 1994 and Vasily Petrenko in 2002. The [Gustav Mahler](#) in Bamberg, Germany, opened spectacularly in 2004 by anointing [Gustavo Dudamel](#) but hasn't had anyone of spotlight caliber since.

Assorted reasons might explain this relative failure to back the right horses, and one is that the circumstances of competitions allow so little time to establish the chemistry on which so much depends. But as one of the Donatella Flick jurors, Daniel Harding, said when the night was done, "You can tell in 15 seconds whether someone has that galvanizing power or not." With Mr. Dudamel at Bamberg, that was certainly the case, as I can testify, having witnessed it.

Mr. Harding built his own eminent conducting career without entering a competition. But he said he sees the purpose of them, and that what he looks for as a juror is "essentially that sense of someone making a difference." That is presumably what he and the seven other jurors in the final round unanimously found in Ms. Chan.

Mr. Rozen's youth counted against him when it came to subtlety and nuance: There was impact but no atmosphere, and never quite enough control to feel secure. With Mr. Gerts, there was style and technical accomplishment to a degree that could have triumphed had he only brought more personality and daring into play.

As for Ms. Chan, the technique wasn't quite so polished — she was working hard to get the sound she wanted — but the end result was interesting and willed.

For her reward she has a 15,000-pound (\$23,500) prize and a year's contract as assistant conductor to the London Symphony, where she'll have the chance to learn about the mysteries of her craft from the grandest names on the conducting circuit.

The only problem is that, being mysteries, they invite a certain flippancy when great conductors try to explain them. Richard Strauss told aspirants to keep the left hand "always in its proper place in the waistcoat pocket," and "never look encouragingly at the brass," while Thomas Beecham's recommendation was to "get the best players, pay them well," and "then conducting isn't *so* difficult." Little wonder there's no Thomas Beecham Competition.