

Classical

Leeds Piano Final

Town Hall, Leeds

★★★☆☆

The Leeds International Piano Competition was really established in the early 1970s when it launched the careers of some of the greatest pianists of our time, such as Radu Lupu, Murray Perahia and Dmitri Alexeev. But since Alexeev won in 1975 it has never really be able to reach the same heights.

Of the six pianists who made it through the three demanding recital stages to play concertos with the Hallé and Mark Elder (something of a prize in itself), two were head and shoulders above the rest, and thankfully they went away with the first and second prizes. Sadly those prizes were awarded in the wrong order, though as everyone was reminded, the placings are based on performances throughout the competition and not just on the final concerto.

This can be the only reason for placing 25-year-old Evgenia Rubinova from Uzbekistan behind the Finn Antti Siirala, who is a year younger. Rubinova's account of Tchaikovsky's First Concerto was the only occasion in the two final evenings that had the audience on the edge of its seat, the only time that ideas commuted between soloist and orchestra. Where others offered a diet of neutral, safety-first pianism, Rubinova took risks, and most of them came off wonderfully. She has real presence and energy in her playing, alongside which Siirala seemed two dimensional, for all his good keyboard manners and the quiet poetry of his account of Beethoven's Fourth Concerto.

Elsewhere there was plenty of technique on display but little else. Neither the sixth-placed Nigerian-British Sodi Braide (Rachmaninov's Second Concerto) nor the Ukrainian Igor Tchetuev (Rachmaninov's Paganini Rhapsody), who came fourth, seemed to be bothered about making a nice sound, though at least the fifth prize Chiao-Ying Chang from Taiwan (Beethoven's Fourth again) and the third, the Japanese Yuma Osaki (Tchaikovsky again) had some elegance and a suggestion of a tonal range.

With just three composers represented, the choice of concertos in the final was depressingly narrow, but then the Leeds Competition doesn't encourage real enterprise — otherwise Rubinova would have won.

Andrew Clements