

'The full scale of musical talents', Hendon Times April 2007

Lifetimes

Thursday, April 12, 2007

The full scale of musical talents



MIRIAM CRAIG
finds out about a
North London arts
festival that celebrates



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MUSICIANS OF ALL abilities

"I like taking part in the festival because you can see how well you're doing," says Asagi Nakata, 11, of Crown Lane, Southgate, talking about the North London Festival of Music, Drama and Dance, which runs this year from April 16 to May 20. "You get to play in front of lots of people. It's really open and friendly. To see people who are better than me means I can challenge myself more, and when you see the beginners, you feel there's more to come from them."

Last year, Asagi won the European Piano Teachers Association Cup for the most talented pianist under 16 at the festival, and the Sara Medina Cup for playing music by JS Bach. She will be entering several sections (called 'classes') in this year's competition as well.

Asagi is following in a long line of music, drama and dance enthusiasts who have challenged themselves in the festival. Others have included Diana Cummings, now leader of the English String Quartet and professor at the Royal Academy of Music.

The festival started in 1920 and has taken place every year since, apart from an interruption during the Second World War.

Last year, there were about 1,500 entrants, including choirs and orchestras. It is all organised by a committee of nine volunteers, apart from the professional adjudicators who judge the classes.

There are hundreds of classes ranging from classical to lighter genres such as operetta, jazz, ragtime and blues, as well as sections for dance, and speech and drama.



Classy player: Asagi Nakata, 11, hopes to impress judges again at this year's festival

Festival chairwoman Rachel Douglas, who ran a violin shop in Kentish Town for 16 years before retiring four years ago, says: "We have classes for everybody from the four or five-year-old beginner to the postgraduate music student or the amateur of any age — last year our oldest entrant was 93. What they have in common is that they play music because they love it."

Each class is a mini-competition in which medals are given out and every entrant receives a written adjudication sheet with feedback on their performance.

"The aim is to have a festival in which people who love music can come together and share their delight in it and hear what other people are doing."

"Very often, if you're a pianist, you'll have lessons by yourself with one teacher, and not know what other people are up to," Mrs Douglas says.

Judges award a number of trophies, cups and cash prizes. For some prizes, cash is donated by north London bookshops, music shops and other organisations.

The most illustrious prize, however, is given by the festival's president, conductor Sir Colin Davis, which goes to the top musician of any age, and for which partici-

pants are individually invited to compete. The winner receives £200 donated by Sir Colin and a silver cup donated by the Hornsey Rotary Club.

The preparation, competitions and prizes culminate in a concert displaying the festival's top talent from every section, which will take place this year on May 20, at the United Reform Church, Tetherdown, Muswell Hill, at 5pm.

The festival will follow the usual tried and tested formula, says Mrs Douglas, but innovations are creeping into the programme little by little.

There are, for example, two classes for 'religious text reading', and until two years ago the only religious text accepted was from the Bible. Now a prepared passage from the Bible, Koran, or any other sacred text can be read in English. This is particularly appropriate as participants are multi-ethnic, says Mrs Douglas.

"The festival is classically based but the aim for the future is to have sections for, for example, Indian music and African drumming. If anyone is interested in promoting such a class we would be delighted to hear from them."

For Mrs Douglas it seems this would be a fitting extension of the

festival's ethos of openness in a broader sense, despite the inevitable competitiveness that also accompanies such an event.

She says: "In the top classes where you are competing for a cash prize, people will take it very seriously, but we also have more informal classes where it's a 'let's see what people bring to it' sort of idea."

"For music students it's a terrific chance to refine their performing skills and we hope it will be the beginning of many great performances. But we have other people who will never get anywhere at all, and that's absolutely fine, as long as they enjoy doing it. It's not just for the high flyers, nor is it just for the plodders. It's for all of them and for everybody in between."

Events are held at the United Reformed Church, Tetherdown, Muswell Hill; St James's C of E Church, Muswell Hill Road, Muswell Hill; Finchley Youth Theatre, High Road, East Finchley; Grieg City Academy, High Street, Hornsey. They are open to the public and free to attend. For more information visit www.northlondonfestival.org.uk or call 020 7485 1467.

nraig@londonnewsquest.co.uk

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