



Local News



Calgary piano prodigy scoops up top prize at major European competition – and makes history at the same time

Kevin Chen made history this weekend by becoming the youngest ever winner of a prestigious international piano competition

Monica Zurowski • Calgary Herald
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Calgary piano prodigy Kevin Chen. PHOTO BY PHOTO COURTESY FRANZ LISZT INTERNATIONAL PIANO COMPETITION

Calgary piano prodigy Kevin Chen made history this weekend by becoming the youngest ever winner of a prestigious international competition.

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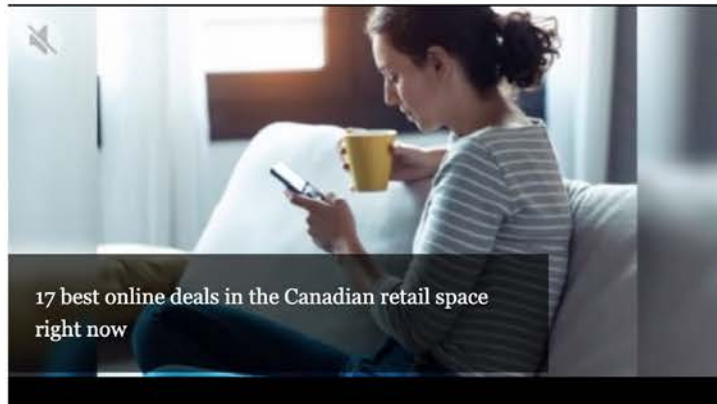


Chen, 16, won the [Franz Liszt International Piano Competition](#) — one of the most esteemed competitions of its kind in the world — on Saturday night in Budapest, Hungary.





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“It’s absolutely fantastic,” said Chen’s piano teacher, Marilyn Engle, a professor at the University of Calgary. “There couldn’t be a more worthy recipient.”

The trilingual Chen was only seven years old when he received a first prize in the Canadian Music Competition. He could read music at age five and began composing when he was six. To date, he’s written more than 100 pieces of music, including four full symphonies and one piano concerto.

Engle said she’s been told by those in attendance at the competition that Chen amazed judges and the audience right from the start. During the second round of the competition, even the judges rose to their feet to acknowledge Chen’s performance.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

While hundreds of musicians may apply to participate in the competition, only two or three dozen are invited to compete. This year, 22 musicians competed, with that number being whittled down to four finalists on Saturday.

With multiple pieces being performed in various rounds, competitors not only need musical focus and intellectual endurance, they also need physical endurance, Engle said.

Winning a competition like this is a feat no less astonishing than winning an Olympic medal, said Engle, an international piano competition winner herself, who spent five to six hours a week with Chen to help him prepare to

“We have been working very, very hard — many hours a week — to prepare,” she said, noting there was an added element of uncertainty about

prepare, she said, noting there was an added element of uncertainty about whether the competition would go ahead due to the coronavirus pandemic.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



While the pandemic meant Engle wasn't able to attend the competition with Chen (his father went with him), she was able to watch a [livestream](#) of the event.

"As far as the instrument goes, he has more than phenomenal — really incredible — co-ordination and speed," Engle said of Chen. But he's also able to communicate the emotion of the music.

"Liszt music is notorious for being the most difficult from a technical standpoint, so I said (to Chen), 'What's going to set you apart is if you convey the meaning, the fun, the drama, the warmth of the music . . . and it has to come through you, personally.'

"What sets (Chen) apart is not only his technical ability, but also he's a phenomenal musician, with a phenomenal ear, an incredible brain, and last but not least an incredible heart," Engle said. "He is such a special young man . . . It's a privilege to know him as a person."

In an interview with Postmedia five years ago, Chen said he began composing after playing nursery songs and lullabies for his younger siblings on a toy piano.

"I like the sound," Chen simply said of the piano.

The Franz Liszt International Piano Competition takes place every five years. The 2021 competition celebrated the 210th anniversary of the birth of Hungarian composer Franz Liszt and the 100th anniversary of the world-renowned Liszt interpreter Gyorgy Cziffra.

The first-prize package included an award of 30,000 euros (C\$45,000) and international concert appearances.





Six years ago: Kevin Chen, a nine-year-old piano prodigy, poses for a photo at a piano with his suit and sneakers in Calgary, on February 3, 2015. Postmedia file photo. Calgary Herald



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