



KENDALL NATIONAL VIOLIN COMPETITION

Prize takes violinist Ray Chen from whoa to presto

WINNING the Queen Elisabeth music competition in Belgium in May hardly allowed Brisbane violinist Ray Chen to rest on his laurels.

Although Chen, 20, had won some important competitions before, winning the Queen Elisabeth International Violin Competition demanded that he rapidly assemble a concert career.

From giving about 10 concerts last year, he suddenly had bookings for 50, including 15 in June.

"I suddenly went from not-so-busy to, whoa, mind-numbing," Chen said in Melbourne this week.

While many young musicians aspire to a glamorous solo career -- with its plush concert halls, expensive antique instruments and lavish sponsorships -- Chen knows the risk of crash and burn.

"I always wanted to be a soloist, but it's a narrow path to walk on; it's a tightrope," he said.

Chen was born in Taipei and grew up in Brisbane. At age four, he started violin lessons in the Suzuki method, with its famous group classes. These, he said, instilled in him a genuine love of music, founded in joyfulness rather than discipline.

"It creates an interest (in music) for the young ones," he said. "You are not taking things so seriously from the beginning."

At eight, he made his debut with the former Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra, and at 15 was accepted into the Curtis Institute of Music, one of the leading academies in the US.

From there came a spectacular series of competition wins: the Australian National Youth Concerto Competition, the Young Concert Artists International Auditions in New York, and the International Yehudi Menuhin Violin Competition in Wales.

The Queen Elisabeth competition in Belgium -- which comes with a E20,000 (\$32,550) cash prize, concert engagements and the loan of a Stradivarius violin -- is internationally recognised.

"It has been a great honour to win," Chen said. "In the violin world, it's a very prestigious competition."

Australian record producer Maria Vandamme, who has signed Chen to make a series of recordings, said Chen had natural musical charisma.

She said he had been signed to the New York-based Columbia Artists, whose roster includes star violinists Vadim Repin and Anne-Sophie Mutter.

Chen is in Melbourne to record a CD of Stravinsky pieces with pianist Timothy Young, for Vandamme's Melba Recordings; then he's on tour again, to the US, Japan, Puerto Rico and Lebanon. Australian audiences can expect to see more of him: he will be at the Huntington Estate Music Festival in Mudgee, NSW, and with the Queensland Orchestra and the Sydney Symphony.

Matthew Westwood, The Australian, December 24, 2009