

Semi-final showdown

We report from behind the scenes at the Sage to meet some of this year's semi-finalists – before and after their big moment

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY: NINA LARGE

It's the first year that the BBC Young Musician semi-finals and final have taken place at the Sage, Gateshead. The surroundings may be different from two years ago when the competition came from Edinburgh, but the same intense, nail-nibbling atmosphere lingers. Which isn't terribly surprising: as past experience shows, the ultimate winner has a good deal to gain (as do all the finalists), so there is a fair bit of adrenalin pumping as, one by one, the musicians steel themselves for their nerve-jangling turn in the spotlight.

This particular musical spotlight certainly jangles the nerves more than most. Apart from the obvious pressures of the competition itself, the broadcast element brings completely new challenges to the young musicians. Not only does the BBC film the performances from the stage, but the backstage areas at the Sage are also awash with camera crews for a BBC documentary on the competition – competitors and accompanists are followed about as they rehearse and prepare for the evening's semis. "The cameras do take a bit of getting used



to, but they have a job of their own to do; it adds to the excitement I suppose,' says Sarah Oliver, an 18-year-old cellist from Surrey. Even the accompanists have their work cut out to try and ignore the pressure created by the cameras, as Chethams accompanist Brenda Blewett confesses: 'They do add a strangeness because if you are doing a normal concert you don't have cameras there. Sometimes on stage here, you can hear them creaking and moving about.'

With cameras, of course, comes the promise of a huge audience. All the competitors admit that, along with a swathe of the British public, they've watched the semi-finals on television since they can remember. Sarah Oliver was so enthralled by Natalie Clein's playing in the 1994 finals that, at just six years old, she bullied her parents to let her play too – even though no one else in the family had ever shown any musical prowess. 'It's very bizarre to be here,' she admits. 'It's like a bubble. A

played under top pressure with everything recorded live on camera.'

Eighteen-year-old double-bassist Meherban Gillett, however, sees the broadcast element as a real advantage over and above simply providing experience for future stressful performances. 'Because it's all done so publicly, it's about the most open competition around. I've seen some very strange results in competitions which are more "closed" where things can sometimes become a political minefield of who went to what music school and had what teacher, and so on. It's not exactly Fame Academy but, rather than pandering to a very specialist jury with specialist opinions, in this competition the most important thing for both jury and public is to have good music presented well.'

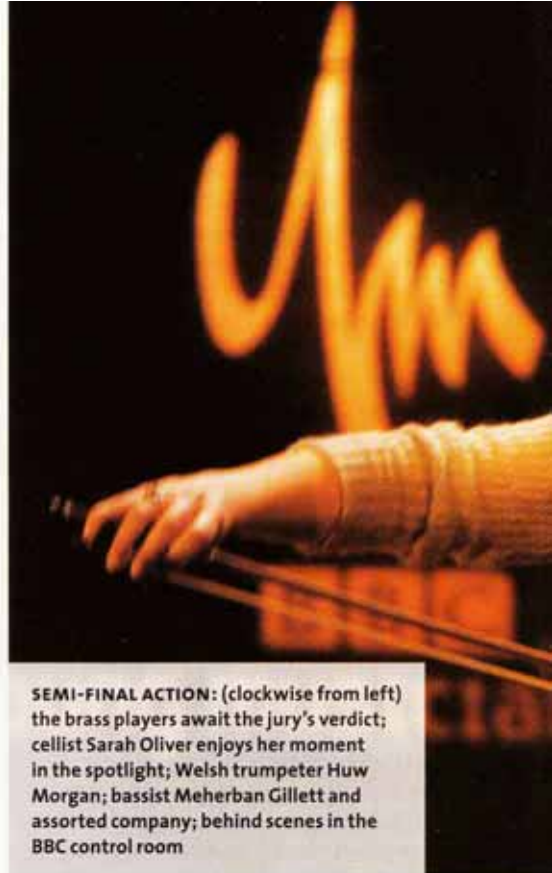
What BBC Young Musician does share with all major competitions, however, is its gift to talented performers to focus their energies

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day feels like a week, so I feel as though I've been here for ages. The main thing is just to concentrate on rehearsing and practising.' There's a lot of practising to be done – as well as repertoire for the local, regional and quarter-finals, each semi-finalist has to have a varied programme lasting 15 minutes, including one piece written in the last ten years.

Elizabeth Burley, the competition's official accompanist for the musicians who haven't brought their own accompanist along, knows all about the huge workload in store. 'We have to get to work straight away as there are a lot of notes to learn, but it's such an incredible experience for them; by the end they've all

and to provide a first-class post-competition experience. The five concerto finalists will all get Young Concert Artist Trust (YCAT) representation and the chance to perform in world-class venues including the main stage of the Sage with Yan Pascal Tortelier and the Northern Sinfonia (for the final) and the Wigmore Hall. Big stuff indeed, and that's why the judges have to get it right. 'Choosing the winner is a responsibility,' advises Richard Watkins, head of the brass adjudicating panel. 'You hear the level of performance and they could be professional, but really they are still very young. The top priority is to find the musician who really has something to say,



SEMI-FINAL ACTION: (clockwise from left) the brass players await the jury's verdict; cellist Sarah Oliver enjoys her moment in the spotlight; Welsh trumpeter Huw Morgan; bassist Meherban Gillett and assorted company; behind scenes in the BBC control room



but nonetheless if you had two equals that you were struck by but you feel one is a bit uncomfortable, and the other is naturally at the right age and mentally in the right place where they can handle it, then I think you have to push that person forward.'

That said, Watkins is keen for competitors to take the long view. 'Ultimately the classical music industry is all about longevity. That's why it doesn't matter who wins really – the main thing is that it's all part of a slow learning



curve. You can't suddenly get the experience of a 40 year-old when you're 16. By the time they've got into the quarter- or semi-finals, most of them are going to be at the standard of going to a music college which is the first leg into a professional career, if that is what they so wish. They have to keep it all in perspective.'

But that underestimates the determination of a certain Meherban Gillett. The double-bassist isn't afraid to say exactly how much the BBC Young Musician of the Year means to

him: 'I've got to the stage where I've stopped doing competitions just for experience. I have to be able to pull off a performance that I'm happy with. I won't be able to go off afterwards and say, "Oh well, it was just a good experience". This is one of those close competitions that anyone would like to win.'

And Welsh trumpeter Huw Morgan, 18, suggests that on top of their determination, these young musicians aren't fazed by the cameras after all – he finds the whole event less

terrifying than he thought he might. 'In some ways it was a bit of an anti-climax. On TV they make out that it's the most special 15 minutes of your life, but when you actually do it you come down to earth and just get on with it. It's all much more normal in reality.' Ah, the carefree attitudes of youth... ■

The BBC Young Musician of the Year semi-finals are on BBC Four in the week beginning 15 May; the final will be on BBC Two on 20 May.