

CULTURE

Pulling at audiences' heartstrings

Young violinist's musical prowess wins first-place prize, **Chen Nan** reports.

At the Carlo Felice Theatre in Genoa, Italy, the final notes of the 58th International Violin Competition "Premio Paganini" resonated in the air as 17-year-old Zhang Aozhe took center stage, performing on the legendary Cannone — the 1743 Guarneri violin once played by Niccolò Paganini.

"To play the Cannone — it's incredibly exciting. It's a great privilege," Zhang says, his voice filled with wonder.

"I wanted to see what sounds I could bring out of this violin."

On Oct 26, Zhang was awarded first prize at the 58th International Violin Competition "Premio Paganini", one of the most prestigious violin competitions in the world.

This victory, which includes 30,000 euros (\$34,600) in prize money and a series of concert engagements at leading venues, solidified his place among the top young violinists worldwide.

Zhang not only claimed first prize but also won the prize for the best performance of Paganini's *Violin Concerto*.

"This choice was not easy, but Zhang showed remarkable talent through his nuanced articulation at every stage of the competition," says jury president Uto Ughi.

Silvia Salis, the mayor of Genoa, adds: "Zhang's victory is a testament to how Niccolò Paganini's artistic legacy continues to inspire new generations. The Premio Paganini is not only a great opportunity but also a great school where merit, preparation and cultural value prevail."

Since its inception in 1954, the competition has served as a milestone for aspiring violinists.

Past winners from China, such as Lyu Siqing, Huang Bin, Huang

Mengla and Ning Feng, have gone on to have illustrious careers. Remarkably, Zhang's win marks the return of a Chinese champion to the top of the competition after a 19-year gap.

The success has opened new doors for Zhang, with invitations to perform in upcoming concerts, including collaborations with major orchestras.

"I've received many invitations to perform next year, and I'm looking forward to collaborating with these orchestras," Zhang says, his excitement tempered by calm maturity beyond his years.

Although the competition was fierce, Zhang remained unfazed. He performed Paganini's *Violin Concerto No 1* and Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto*, both of which he approached with a sense of personal fulfillment.

Zhang's ability to remain calm and focused throughout the competition was largely due to the guidance of his teacher, He Xian.

"When I watched Zhang in the first round, I knew he could make it all the way if he maintained his high performance level," the teacher recalls.

"This victory is not a coincidence; it's the result of years of hard work."

One standout moment came when Zhang, on the teacher's suggestion, performed two Chinese pieces — *Yangguang Zhaoyao Zhe Tashikurgan* (Sunshine Over Tashikurgan) and *Miaoling De Zaochen* (Morning of Miaoling) — during the second round of competition.

These pieces, rich in Chinese cultural heritage, were met with enthusiastic applause.

"The audience was especially moved by these works, more so than by the Western repertoire. They were excited by the fresh sound," Zhang says.



Chinese violinist Zhang Aozhe, 17, takes the top prize at the 58th International Violin Competition "Premio Paganini" in Genoa, Italy, on Oct 26.

PHOTOS BY GIUSY LORELLI; COURTESY OF PREMIO PAGANINI



Winning the Premio Paganini isn't my ultimate goal. It's just one of many steps in my journey to improve as a violinist. There are still many competitions ahead."

Zhang Aozhe,
Chinese violinist

The teacher, who encouraged Zhang to incorporate Chinese compositions, was pleased with Zhang's boldness.

"In the history of the Premio Paganini, it's rare for a Chinese competitor to perform Chinese works," he notes.

"Zhang's performance was brilliant and felt completely natural. It's a way to share our culture with the world. I hope it helps bring more recognition to Chinese music."

The competition included a chamber music round, where Zhang collaborated with European musicians in works by Joseph Haydn, Igor Stravinsky and Robert Schumann.

Zhang's musical journey began at the age of 4. By 9, he was studying

with He, and by 14, he had already held a solo recital, performing all 24 Paganini Caprices.

"I was deeply impressed by his focus from the very first lesson," the teacher says.

"His ability to discern pitch and correct himself is exceptional — something many students at the conservatory lack. After just two months of lessons, I knew he was extraordinarily talented."

Zhang's family has always supported his musical ambitions. His father, a doctor, moved from their hometown of Hefei, Anhui province, to Shanghai to support his education.

Before his victory at the Premio Paganini, Zhang had already amassed an impressive collection

of accolades. In 2023, he won the Chinese Golden Bell Award for Music, becoming the youngest winner in the violin category. He also took first place at the 43rd Rodolfo Lipizer International Violin Competition in 2024, and this year, he secured third place at the 9th Sendai International Music Competition.

Despite his early successes, Zhang remains focused on improving.

"Winning the Premio Paganini isn't my ultimate goal," he says.

"It's just one of many steps in my journey to improve as a violinist. There are still many competitions ahead."

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Guangzhou limbers up ahead of National Games

By YUAN SHENGGAO

China's 15th National Games are to open in Guangzhou, South China's Guangdong province, on Sunday. As one of the host cities, Guangzhou has been making all guarantees ready such as transportation, power and water supply, as well as food supply, medical support, and barrier-free care.

The Games also mark the first time Hong Kong and Macao are to host such a national-level sports event. Following the opening of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge and the release of the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area by the Chinese central government, the Games are another milestone in the development of the Greater Bay Area. It will also bring far-reaching changes to the Pearl River Delta region.

Centered on hosting a successful event, Guangzhou has invested much effort in its city facelift project. It has promoted 291 urban improvement projects covering roads, gardens, rivers, neighborhoods, lighting, urban appearance, and beautiful villages.

Venue renovation

To serve both the



A torchbearer hands over the torch in Yuexiu Park on Sunday. XINHUA

Games and city's long-term development, Guangzhou has renovated 30 venues.

Taking the opportunity of venue renovation, Tianhe Sports Center Stadium has achieved an energy saving and carbon reduction of more than 45 percent, becoming China's first large-scale near-zero-carbon stadium. It has also added an aerial circular track and updated the outdoor fitness track, creating shared space for runners.

The renovation of Guangdong Provincial People's Stadium highlights its role as one of China's oldest stadiums. Yuexiu Mountain Stadium continues Guangzhou's soccer tradition. The fitness pods at Guangzhou Gymnasium now allow residents to book virtual reality training and artificial intelligence posture assessment. In addition, four wheelchair viewing areas and 50 wheelchair seats in the gymnasium have been added.

Guangdong Olympic Sports Center has added 39,000 square meters of green space outdoors, providing activity areas with tree shade. The sports center at Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center integrates the design of

an ecological park and will become a parent-child sports park after the Games.

To transform venues and neighborhoods into new landmarks for public fitness and culture after the Games, Guangzhou has built 17 cultural blocks around 30 venues in the city. During this renovation, a total of 150,000 sq m of green space has been added, 19 outdoor sports spaces improved, and 10 outdoor fitness tracks upgraded.

Tech tools

From event organization and services to venue construction and operation, as well as supporting facilities for food, accommodation, transportation and entertainment, high-tech tools are used everywhere. The application of cutting-edge technologies such as AI and cloud computing will demonstrate the integration of high technology and sports events.

Avatar volunteers will assist the traditional volunteer services in language communication. The 10-meter precision intelligent meteorological system can output accurate forecasts every 12 minutes, providing guarantees for outdoor events such as sailing and marathons.

Guangzhou Gymnasium has deployed AI cameras to form a sky-eye network, which can predict crowd gathering risks 15 minutes in advance and automatically formulate emergency evacuation plans. Badminton AI live broadcast cameras can intelligently identify highlights such as multi-rally exchanges and smashes. Smart barrier-free stands are equipped with electronic guides and driverless vehicles to serve people with disabilities.

Guangzhou has currently implemented more than 20 technological achievements such as autonomous driving logistics vehicles and hydrogen emergency power supply vehicles. Innovative applications including Avatar volunteers and metaverse technology-driven athlete villages are also being applied.

Linking partners

In February, the Guangzhou city government launched the Guangzhou City Partner program and issued



A pair of jumbo mascots are set up at the Haixinsha Wharf in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, on Nov 1, to embrace the 15th National Games. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

a global invitation. It invites enterprises, institutions and individuals willing to grow with the city, hoping to support the hosting of the 15th National Games.

Different from the traditional government-led and enterprise-sponsored model, this time Guangzhou is attempting to place the city and enterprises on the same footing, and establish an equal and co-governed relationship. The program has set up three identities: "strategic partners", "super partners" and "city dreamers". It also designates "city promotion ambassadors" to form a multilevel system composed of industries, culture and individuals.

As of November, a total of 29 enterprises are participating in the program through sponsorship, public welfare donations and resource coordination. Cooperation covers key areas such as strategic consulting, digital technology, low-altitude economy, intelligent manufacturing, finance, logistics, and cultural tourism, including many Fortune Global 500 companies and industry leaders.

The first batch of "city promotion ambassadors" announced on Oct 31 includes eight outstanding representatives from fields such as science and technology, culture, sports and medical care. These representatives — experts, celebrities and masters with high reputation in their fields and

deep ties to Guangzhou — are invited to participate in the shaping and dissemination of the city's brand.

Peng Gaofeng, executive deputy director and secretary-general of the Guangzhou division executive committee of the 15th National Games, said the city will continue to optimize the business environment, enhance the reputation of Guangzhou's services, ensure the precise implementation of various policies, and let everyone develop in Guangzhou. "We will strive to be a trustworthy partner and give strong backing to everyone," Peng said.

Guangzhou is a historical and cultural city, renowned as a "millennium commercial capital". It has hosted prestigious sports events such as the sixth National Games, the ninth National Games, the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, the FIFA Women's World Cup, various table tennis and badminton competitions, and the Guangzhou Marathon, gaining the title of "city of sports".

Data show that the total scale of Guangzhou's sports industry has exceeded 200 billion yuan (\$28 billion) for three consecutive years, and the total sports consumption in 2024 exceeded 63 billion yuan. In recent years, Guangzhou has been selected as a national pilot city for promoting sports consumption and the sports economy.