

Pop Queens and Buzzer Kings

If Day 1 was a storm, Day 2 was a sprint. We started with the written exam—ninety minutes of quiet intensity, everyone furiously scribbling answers and wrestling with AP-style questions. The room was silent enough to hear pens scratching and pages flipping like the soundtrack to a group mind meltdown.

Then the buzzer rounds hit. The History Bee prelims were a blur of lightning-fast triggers and half-finished questions. Bobby Wang was the first one out in my round, of course, answering with the kind of speed that makes you wonder if he's hacked the system. The rest of us scrambled to keep up, buzzing in as soon as we thought we had a shot.

Classical Music Bee followed, and it was anything but quiet. We placed bets on the start time— IAC's trademark delay working at its best. Himanshu Surukanti from Canada was last-minute cramming and focused solely on Brahms. It became a running joke when the Brahms tossup required naming Wagner too. Jas Inayat Singh showed up late but still snagged second place, which felt like a quiet victory in its own right.

Pop Music was next, and Ramona Bentzel was on fire. She maxed out the score almost immediately, answering deep-cut questions about The Beatles and Joni Mitchell like she owned the playlist. I placed silver again, but watching her was a lesson in just how next-level this game can be. Before the round, I met Harrison Bagwell from Georgia and Jessica Santos from the Philippines— all strangers, all suddenly bonded by shared passion.

Between rounds, I wolfed down a slice of pizza like it was the last meal on earth. No time to chew, just pure survival mode fueled by cheese and adrenaline. Outside, Paris couldn't decide whether to rain or shine, so it did both.