

To Compete or Not to Compete, That is the Question

“A flower does not think of competing with the flower next to it, it just blooms.”
(Anon.)

For good or bad, competition is a part of life. Life's sometimes difficult struggles for survival and success are begrudgingly accepted by most of us as being integral to the human experience, disagreeably necessary for the relentless progress of our species. Yet when it comes to music competitions, is all that strenuous effort and scuffle really necessary? Must they really be gravely intense games of survival of the fittest? What's the point of music competitions?

Musical contests are notably different from many others, especially from those where athletic skills are measured. Once the technical skills of playing the right notes at the right time are mastered, then the competitive outcome or the artistry of an individual's performance becomes essentially a matter of taste. Yet the decision to choose a winner can often be a rather nebulous and arbitrary process and not always completely fair. Sometimes the often-slight differences between the finalists in any given contest can be lost on many listeners. Contentious issues like these have long troubled many. The great Hungarian composer, Béla Bartok once quipped, “Competitions are for horses, not artists.” Was he right?

When it comes to pianists, the path to a professional stage career does not necessarily include taking part in piano competitions. There are many examples to demonstrate that a path to a fabulous career need not demand stumbling through the often-rocky trail posed by these sports-like rivalries. Many of the world's greatest pianists have either chosen not to participate or did not win any competitions. Richter, Gilels, Gould, Anderszewski, Kissin, and Andsnes, all leapt onto the stage without the assistance of a competition “trampoline.” Some might sensibly claim that these distinguished artists achieved their success during completely different times with different realities. Regardless, the dilemma whether to participate in these contests is a question considered by nearly every serious young pianist who aspires to present herself or himself to the world.

In the 1970s and 1980s the road leading through one of the great competitions was a comfortable and effective shortcut to the stage. Despite the scandals and controversies around jury verdicts, a strong showing in the Chopin Competition or the Tchaikovsky Competition, or a high place in Brussels yielded an almost automatic possibility of a rapid start to a career. The laureates of these lofty contests, superb pianists such as - Pollini, Argerich, Ohlsson, Zimerman, Van Cliburn, Sokolov, Ashkenazy, and others, have formed a true pianistic pantheon.

Currently, there is a piano competition fetish. Competitions have multiplied to the point where, unfortunately, many have been devalued. For some, objectivity has been challenged and the reliability of the ratings doubted. The once-venerable competition has ceased being a magic vehicle to instant success. Yet despite the symptoms of a breakdown, there are an unfathomable number of competitions in the world today, and their number continues to increase.

No one now would absolutely negate the value of a piano competition. As a means of gaining exposure, as a way of comparing oneself to others, and as a method of challenging oneself to greater heights of accomplishment, competing can often be a very good thing. The stress of these competitions does not always need to be a destructive process. The intense pressure of a competition, whereby pianists largely toil in solitude in preparation for a high-stakes performance, is essentially a concentrated version of the life of a performing artist. Experience and exposure are at the heart of the process of growing artistically. Though young pianists on the road to success now might use a completely different map from that of previous years, a piano competition remains a place to which well-trod paths lead. For most, it may be a necessary itinerary on the way to self-discovery and success. Participating in a competition does not necessarily create character, but it certainly can help to expose it.

When the original members of our Chopin Foundation, Northwest Council, created the Chopin Festival, they intended it to be a friendly competition, a celebration of Frédéric Chopin's music and the students who choose to undertake the difficult challenge of learning to play it. It was also meant to be a celebration of our community's piano teachers and a showcase for that talent. Our competition, spelled with a small "c," was intended to encourage as many young pianists as possible to love this music and make it a permanent part of their lives. After these many years, I truly believe we have succeeded!

I remember hearing the Dalai Lama once making a remark about the issue of competition and it sums up my ideals for our Festival.

"There is competition, but if it is used in a good way. It is positive to go first provided the intention is to pave the way for others, make their path easier, help them, or show them the way. Competition is negative when we wish to defeat others, to bring them down in order to lift ourselves up."

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