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Piano Competitions

The preparation and purpose

Skriftlig reflektion inom självständigt arbete

Till dokumentationen hör även följande inspelnings:
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Summary:
This project is written by Filip Michalak and is about how one can best prepare to a competition and also what the actual purpose is of competing.

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Introduction

Already as a child, I entered my first piano competition and went through the thrills that it gives you, when you go on stage. I competed in various competitions in my home country Denmark on a regular basis, but at that point in my life, I did not reflect any further on the purpose of my participation. At the age of 11, I participated in my first competition abroad, The International Chopin Competition in Narva, Estonia, which changed my perception on music composed by Frederic Chopin and gave me a renewed thought on the prestigious competition in Warsaw, Poland named after that same composter, i.e. *The International Chopin Piano Competition*, which is held every 5th year. Since then it has been one of my biggest dreams to compete in this special event. However, in order to get accepted to compete in prestigious competitions like the International Tchaikovsky Competition, Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Master Competition, Van Cliburn International Piano Competition or International Chopin Piano Competition, it is crucial that you have had a lot of experience on stage and have a substantial amount of repertoire in your portfolio.

Today, after a number of competitions, I started to realize how important competitions have been for my development as a musician, but most importantly how they have helped taking my piano performance to another level.

Nevertheless, the questions still left to answer are how one can best prepare in order to achieve the optimal benefits and what the actual purpose of competing is. These are some of the questions I would like to investigate further in my master’s thesis and provide a reflection on the pros and cons of participating in piano competitions. Before one can compete in important competitions, a lot of practice and preparations are needed. However, one can approach practicing in various ways making it a long and tedious process, which is why I am going to investigate how to efficiently practice and prepare before a competition and significantly what kind of important elements should not be forgotten in the preparation process. I will combine theory written on the subject by various scholars in the field with my own experience and knowledge gained on the art of practicing. Hence, this thesis will describe own experience, but I will also include interviews with fellow students and discussions on their opinions on different competitions and include articles about the fairness/corruption in competitions.

Main question

How can one best prepare in order to achieve the optimal benefits of participating in competitions and what is the actual purpose of competing?
What are competitions about and why do we participate?

Generally speaking, a competition is a contest or rivalry between two or more individuals and can be found in different fields, such as economics, sports, politics, music, etc. Usually, we associate competitions with sports, but during the last century there has been an increasing awareness of various competitions within music.

The Hungarian pianist and composer Béla Bátok once said that competitions should be for horses, not musicians. He refused to sit on competition juries because he did not want to deal with verdicts that were against his own view of the contestants. However, whether or not you agree with Bártok’s statement, I think competitions are an integral part of the development of up and coming musicians and helps shaping the music culture of today and the future. Major competitions such as the International Tchaikovsky Competition (held every four years), the Leeds International Piano Competition (every three years) or the Chopin International Piano Competition (every five years), reveal new talents and have launched international careers of some of the greatest pianists that we know today like Rafał Blechacz1, Daniil Trifonov2 or Boris Giltburg3. The competition format is by no means perfect. Many musicians see competitions as highly subjective or an artificial way of dividing musicians into the elite and the unfortunate few. Therefore, it should not be a surprises to anyone that some of them feel moved to comment on the system itself. Nevertheless, I sympathize with the ones who consider competitions as great opportunities and a platform for young musicians to be seen. This has made me discuss three important reasons for why competitions are important in my pianistical career;

1. One of the most important reasons for participating in competitions is the opportunity to overcome technical, musical and mental challenges that one might be struggling with and which can hinder further musical development. Many challenges can be overcome in the class room or during long practice sessions, but overcoming a challenge in a public venue and in front of a jury is a much more celebrated victory and one that usually brings multiple other small victories within. In a perfect world, one should not sign up for competitions and expect to win necessarily but one can see it rather as way of growing artistically, musically and technically. Musicians

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1 Rafał Blechacz (born June 30, 1985) is a Polish classical pianist.
2 Daniil Trifonov (born 5 March 1991) is a Russian pianist and composer.
3 Boris Giltburg (born in 1984) is an Israeli classical pianist, born in Russia.
will often push themselves to work harder and more effectively than they normally would and this is one of the main sources to musical development.

2. Another reason for participating in competitions is exposing oneself to a group of people who appreciate and support music, including a jury, audience, agents, managers, etc. Multiple pianists have made life changing connections at competitions that eventually led to scholarships, concerts, masterclasses and other unique contacts. A good network is the key to success but in the end, constructive feedback from these people, especially the judges, can help an aspiring artist identify his strengths and weaknesses and thereby finding areas for further development.

3. A third reason for why one should participate in competitions is the chance to observe your competitors. Competitors are a source of inspiration. Our human nature tells us to always compare ourselves to one another. Hence, a competition can be described as an important source of self-awareness and a big opportunity to gauge your own strengths and weaknesses against your peers eventually resulting in a visible development as a musician. Furthermore, you are exposed to various new and inspiring repertoire. Nowadays the majority of the competitions include an obligatory piece written by a living composer, or they simply want to hear a modern piece written after 1950’s or later, which is a great opportunity to get acquainted with repertoire, we mostly likely would never hear or play in our professional career. I will discuss the repertoire aspect later on.

Preparing for a competition

When preparing for a piano competition, one naturally wants to be as ready as possible, with limited time to prepare. However, what is the optimal way of preparing and what does that imply? We often associate competitions with and even expect flawless performances. In order to achieve this, you have to master a list of basic requirements linked to so-called flawless performances such as technical preparation, musical interpretation and performance practice. Most of the time these preparations might be hindered by insufficient time, since the focus will be on mastering new and often very demanding repertoire. Furthermore, it is not enough to just learn how to play a piece but you also need to memorize it and keep it in a somehow playable condition up until the competition. This requires extensive planning e.g. through developing schedules and timelines in order to achieve the final objectives of the competition. Questions to be asked in this connection could be when exactly the competition will take place, which repertoire is required, in what order different pieces should be ready, etc. It is also important to set priorities and create a list of tools and skills,
which might help during preparations. In order to do so, one should keep a number of key factors in mind:

1) **MEMORIZATION**: There are only a few things that are worse during any performance than experiencing a substantial memory slip, and having to restart playing from an earlier point. At competitions, this is almost always considered an instant failure if not by the jury then definitely by the person performing. Memorizing repertoire is very important before competitions and it is a vital skill that any performing musician must incorporate in his preparations. When one starts learning a piece from the score, the brain processes the information and the piece is learned as a set of motions. The real problem is then revealed once your fingers take over the steering and your brain is suddenly put on hold. In fact your brain should be the lead and your fingers should follow along. Hence, it is a cooperation between your fingers and your brain with the brain being the main provider in the relationship. In the process leading up to your fingers and brain developing a cooperation in terms of memorization of repertoire, it is important to consider the movements of the hands, thoroughly analyze the score from a theoretical point of view and to incorporate a sensitivity in your ears.

2) **ACCURACY AND TECHNIQUE**: The word “technique” derives from the Greek word *techne*, which means “art or craftsmanship”. To many accuracy and technique would seem as very obvious part of piano playing, but even so it is important to emphasize the art of playing accurately and with proper technique. I think technique is incredibly important to any performer, but it can never be an objective on its own. Technique is a very complex combination of many different elements. Developing good technique is a long and tedious process requires years of hard work, discipline and commitment.

Of the many technical approaches, teachers I have met generally emphasize one of the following three fundamental physical actions: (1) independence use of well-articulated fingers; (2) rotation movements of wrist or forearm, as well as thrust initiated by these body parts; (3) use of weight of the forearm and upper arm as the source of the pianist’s physical activity. Some teachers endorse of these actions exclusively while belittling the other two. In my opinion it is equally wrong to exaggerate the importance of any one of these physical approaches over another or to ignore any of

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5 Berman, Boris (2000) “Notes from the Pianists’ Bench” - Chapter: Technique  
1st of September 2018, Stockholm
them. In reality, most of the pianist’s movements are combinations of two or all three of these actions.6

While accuracy is something to continually strive for, my experience is that most judges want to be emotionally moved by music. Minor slips during a performance are acceptable and even something that is mostly expected no matter what level you are playing on, but that does not mean that one should not always try and achieve perfection both technically but certainly also in terms of musical impression. Music is known to connect people and it’s a language everyone can understand. This should always be the main purpose of any performance — to connect through the musical language. However, without accuracy, a performance will also lack expression. Technique and accuracy goes hand in hand with the musical idea and expression, and if we neglect one of them, the music will in the end not be as valuable as it could have been.

SOUND: A pianist's sound exists only in the performer's brain and inner ear. Before a pianist touches the keyboard of any instrument he must internally "hear" the wished-for sound, then produce it. A personal quality of sound is unique, and we often hear that a good pianist should be able to make any piano sound at its best. To do this the inner ear must always listen carefully, and monitor the hands to produce what the music demands. This task I find as one of the most difficult things to do, as it requires many years of practice and also a very developed ear. Sound is a topic that in my opinion is frequently neglected by teachers and students, or it receives only perfunctory attention. For music, this omission is as strange as ignoring color in visual arts, or body movement in acting. Sound production should be considered part of technique in a broader sense, for technique is much more than the ability to play notes rapidly or evenly.

In achieving a personal sound, I have found it very helpful to practice on any piano, regardless of quality, without pedal. It will give a much more clear sound picture, and it makes the pianist more critical to the produced sound. Later, pedal can be used to enhance and supplement the already established sound.

Another element in working on sound is the idea to approach the piano with care and love, to “draw” or “pull” the sound from the instrument, rather than force it. One of the primary tenets of the Russian School of pianism is to produce a warm, round, and rich sound, and achieving this requires more from the wrists, elbows, and body than the fingers themselves.

6 Berman, Boris (2000) “Notes from the Pianists’ Bench” - Chapter: Technique
1st of September 2018, Stockholm
One of the difficulties of being a pianist is that we are dealt with unknown instrument every time we go somewhere to rehearse or to perform. If we’re lucky, we have a few moments to get “familiar” with the instrument, to learn its personality, sound quality and unfortunately, its flaws. While any other instrumentalist has the luxury of a lifetime with their instrument to learn these traits, a pianist might have only a few minutes. In competitions I believe that the level of sound quality of the performer is an important factor and often determines whether he or she will pass to the next round.

**VISUALIZATION AND IMAGINATION:** I find that I can best express myself and tell a story with music when I can bring to mind images and ideas pertaining to each part of a piece. Often, going beyond the average performance is a matter of thought. Making music for me is like telling a story. Each story has its beginning, development, climax and ending. The storyteller takes written material, which he first has to read the same as a musician has to read a music score. The letters have to be identified, then letters make words, words make small phrases, those phrases make sentences, paragraphs, chapters, parts, and the whole story. Besides that we have all the symbols which help articulate the sentence the same as indications for dynamics, tempo, etc., help to shape a musical phrase.

Once a storyteller has read the material which he has to tell on stage and has understood all the symbols, letters, pronunciations, etc., there is still more to be done so that those who listen will find the story enjoyable. The story has to be interpreted. He has to live the story in his imagination, to give the story life, direction, excitement when it needs it, to speak in surprising ways, to shout, to whisper, to cry, to laugh - all while telling the story. If he doesn’t do that, we might like the story, but we would not enjoy it nearly as much as we would if he had put all of his emotional expression into it.

For me it’s the same with music. We can learn all the indications that come in the score, notes rhythm, tempo marks etc. put it all together and execute with great speed and accuracy, but then what? It is still empty. Imagination helps us make a story from the piece of music, a story that will be told in a different language, not the spoken one, but one that is played and sung. This process can be learned and practiced as well. Of course one cannot become musical by practicing if he or she has not got talent for it. What I mean here is that it is possible to practice the art of interpretation and the feeling and musicality we have inside can gradually be brought to the surface. Little by little imaginative interpretation helps to overcome stage fright, and this is a everlasting process. Each of us has an inner world that expands with the things we experience over time. For many it is very
difficult to share this inner world, but music is one of the best ways to reflect what we have inside and in a competition the judges are enough experienced to see, if a performer truly understands the music being played. Visualization and imagination is a method that can help develop and demonstrate this musical understanding in the performance.

**PERFORMANCE PRACTICE:** At the end of the day, musicians are creatures of the stage, and how one conducts oneself can and will subtly influence the audience’s enjoyment of the performance. Before any important performance whether it will be a competition, exam or concert, it is very useful to do try-outs. Even if those try-outs are just in front of a few friends, they create a situation similar to the one we will be facing. The try-out concerts should be a part of the preparation for competitions and a help in the performance practice. I do it myself quite often, and those performances showed me where my weak spots were, and which parts required a little more attention. I would then work more on those spots, dedicate more time to them to memorize them better, or even change some fingerings. It is generally said that we do not learn from good experiences but from bad ones. I think in great part that it is true. If the experience is bad we try to change things so that we don’t suffer the same circumstances again. On the other hand, a good experience build up confidence. The important thing is to reflect on the performance, whether it went good or bad.

I read an interesting quote by Lucas Debargue\(^7\), 4th prize winner at the Tchaikovsky Competition, in which he said:

> “My thoughts about piano competitions – and competitions in general – are clear and simple. Firstly, a student passes quite difficult entrance examinations into our higher musical education system and then gets to know professional musicians – that is pianists, harpists, flutists, clarinetists etc – who have to share a part of their knowledge with him. All that looks wonderful on paper, however at the same time one should not forget that nobody promises anything. The fact that you entered an educational institution doesn’t mean that you’ll have concerts one day, release CDs or get enough skills to be on stage. It only means that you’ve got an obligation to take exams. Musical education is nowadays organized like a university, there is a licentiate, master, thesis and so on. One spends there a lot of time, in something highly – at least for me – intellectual, in something related to the knowledge – libraries, lectures, seminars, etc. Myself, now, after two years of the concert activity – and I’ve had about 150 concerts after the competition – I can say that what I

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\(^7\) Lucas Debargue (born October 23, 1990) is a French pianist.

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learned on stage I couldn't have learned in any other way. Only by playing and facing the challenges on stage one can develop something, understand something, find out which are the strengths and weaknesses, because on the stage one concentrates better and listens better. One realizes that what seems to be working at home doesn’t work on stage, and then one understands what to look for when practicing and how to prepare oneself more effectively...

(source: Lucas Debargue’s Facebook page)

He says that what we learn on stage, we can’t learn anywhere else, and I couldn’t agree more. We are challenged in a totally different way and in the same time we develop the ears enormously, because we concentrate and listen better. Debargue is of course referring to real concert situations, but I would consider any performance as something similar.

The performance practice should not only be used to try out the program, but also for preparing your whole attitude towards the performance. That’s why performance practice is a significant part of the preparation to any concert, masterclass or competition.
Choice of repertoire

How does one make these choices? What criteria comes into play? Obviously when entering any competition, the rules of the game must be taken into consideration but one should always choose repertoire showing the strongest sides of your playing. Competitions very often include an audience, so how do you allow your audience to stay engaged in what you are doing? The repertoire choices must take your technical development into account, as well as your ability as an artist to reach an audience, your personality, your dramatic ability and how the repertoire demonstrates your musical understanding. Are you doing that with your competition program? Are you showing your versatility? Your uniqueness? Your strengths?

Jury members want to see and hear some personality and creativity, and very often the repertoire choice can make them intrigued enough to want to see and hear you. I would always encourage people to explore outside the box and find repertoire that you can truly stamp and individual mark on. It’s all about daring to create a program that flows - dramatically, emotionally and technically, and also dare to be creative and enjoy it. This does not mean picking completely obscure things, or going so far afield that we don’t know what is going on. Everyone should find their strengths and build the repertoire according to that — it should have depth and breath, but should not put you in a box.

Choosing repertoire is a process with you and your teacher and you must try many different genres and pieces. But in the end you are the one up there on stage, so if you will not feel comfortable, the jury will know. They want to see you playing the piano — not worrying on stage. So, as you choose a program, safe is fine if it doesn’t get dull. If the program doesn’t excite you, it won’t excite the audience or jury. Music has to find us where we are and ignite a passion. Whether it excites, bring us to tears or soothes, it must do it completely. The performer has to find the repertoire, that allows him to discover how he can access all those things. Then nothing will be dull and the jury will most likely remember you.

Programs should demonstrate an understanding of program building, an ability to play in a variety of musical styles and most importantly to show the depth of their own musicianship, rather than mere technical brilliance.

Down below I will give an example of repertoire in one of the biggest and finest piano competitions in the world “The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition”.

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Preliminary Round
Thirty (30) competitors have been invited to participate in the Fifteenth Cliburn Competition. Each pianist will perform one recital in the Preliminary Round, not to exceed 45 minutes in length. The repertoire must include the commissioned work by Marc-André Hamelin.

Quarterfinal Round
Twenty (20) competitors will be chosen by the jury as quarterfinalists of the Competition. Each pianist will perform one recital, not to exceed 45 minutes of length. The repertoire will consist of works chosen by the pianist.

Semifinal Round
Twelve (12) competitors will be chosen by the jury as semifinalists of the Competition. Each pianist will perform in two phases of the Semifinal Round. Phase I: Each pianist will perform a recital not to exceed 60 minutes in length. The repertoire will consist of works chosen by the pianist.

Phase II: Each pianist will perform a Mozart piano concerto with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Nicholas McGegan. Repertoire must be chosen from the following:
Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-flat Major, K. 271
Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466
Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major, K. 467
Piano Concerto No. 22 in E-flat Major, K. 482
Piano Concerto No. 23 in A Major, K. 488
Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor, K. 491
Piano Concerto No. 25 in C Major, K. 503
Piano Concerto No. 27 in B-flat Major, K. 595

Final Round
Six (6) competitors will be chosen by the jury as finalists of the Competition. Each pianist will perform in two phases of the Final Round. Phase I: Each pianist will perform a quintet with the Brentano String Quartet. Repertoire must be chosen from the following:
Brahms: Piano Quintet in F minor, op. 34
Dvorak: Piano Quintet in A major, op. 81
Franck: Piano Quintet in F minor
Schumann: Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, op. 44

Phase II: Each pianist will perform a concerto with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, to be conducted by Leonard Slatkin. The pianist may choose any work scored for piano and symphony orchestra. The choice is subject to approval by the Cliburn and conductor of the Final Round, based on rehearsal requirements and considerations.

Repertoire taken from the competition website: https://www.cliburn.org/2017-cliburn-competition/jury-handbook/
The majority of piano competitions usually consists of 3 rounds, but as Van Cliburn competition is one of the most demanding ones, it actually has 4 rounds. The last two rounds are divided in 2 phases, which makes the repertoire even bigger and more demanding. You have to prepare approximately 4.5 hours of repertoire, which is a very difficult task for any professional pianist, and to prepare for such a big competition requires a huge amount of proper practicing, scheduling and mental training as I have talked about in the previous part of this project.

The rounds in this competition have a quite free choice of repertoire, if you compare to other competitions, where you usually have to play etudes, classical sonatas and romantic works. I would assume the reason is, that most of the chosen participants are already established pianists and the jury is looking for someone unique. In the last edition of the competition, you were supposed to play a commissioned work in the first round by the famous pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin, who was also a member of the jury. Normally competitions will put commissioned or modern works in the later rounds, but it was a very interesting twist for the competitors and the listeners. I was following the competition on the livestream, and I must say it was very enjoyable and inspiring to hear the commissioned work in so many different interpretations, as everyone had to play the same piece.

Competitions: fairness or corruption?

“Classical music competitions are rife with corruption and bribery”, claimed by Julian Lloyd Webber in the English newspaper “The Guardian”\(^8\). There is a growing resentment among talented young players who feel abused by flawed judging, and they are beginning to rise up. Although the fairness of judging is becoming much more transparent, we still find corrupted jury members and competitions. Lloyd Webber claims in the article, that the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow is “an example of unscrupulous judging”. I would have to disagree with that statement, as the competition has been very transparent during the last editions. After each round the votes have announced and published on the internet, to avoid any speculations and misunderstandings. The biggest competition such as Chopin Competition, Rubinstein, Van Cliburn etc. are doing the same strategy nowadays by using the voting system and announcing the results after each round (or after the competition) and I find this as the best solution to fight against the corruption, because otherwise it’s very difficult to keep it transparent.

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\(^8\) Julian Lloyd Webber is a distinguished cellist and conductor, and brother of musical impresario Andrew Lloyd Webber. Read the whole article “Julian Lloyd Webber: classical music competitions are rife with corruption” at [https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/jul/25/julian-lloyd-webber-classical-music-competitions-corrupt](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/jul/25/julian-lloyd-webber-classical-music-competitions-corrupt)
Recently I read an interesting article about the results of Dublin International Piano Competition, which was held in May 2018. In the article, written by Norman Lebrecht\(^9\), he talks about the possible corruption, when the jury members are having own pupil’s participating in the competition.

“You can imagine the jurors’ conversations elsewhere — you vote for my pupil, I’ll vote for yours. Like Fifa’s World Cup ballot, this business is largely controlled by a bunch of time servers, in this case professors at major conservatories.”\(^10\) I could easily imagine the jurors’ conversations and how they manipulate each other to vote for their own students. This became unfortunately a very big scandal in the latest edition of Dublin International Piano Competition. In the event, 7 out of 12 Dublin semifinalists were students of jurors, and two out of the four finalists, which indicates already something very suspicious. Lebrecht even comments, that “One young pianist told me she took one look at the Dublin jury and decided not to apply, since so many of the judges had a horse in the race”. It’s very sad to hear young musicians cancelling competitions, because they already know how the outcome it going to be.

Competitions will always be surrounded by corruption and unfair results, but nevertheless it’s a platform to be seen and you make yourself visible to the classical world — sometimes you will be the lucky one winning the heart of the jury or the public and win fair and square.

**Reflection and outcome after a competition**

The most significant part of entering a competition is the reflection afterwards.

How was my performance? Did I perform worse than for example in a normal concert? How did the jury affect my playing? Could I have prepared better, if so — how? Those are just a few questions popping up in the head after any competition, and it’s important to actually give yourself time to answer them. The reflection gives a whole new perspective of your own playing and also the preparation behind it. The reflection will also give you a new recipe for the next time you will participate. You learn a lot about your playing both technically and musically, the psychologic aspect of playing under pressure and also about yourself as a person.

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\(^9\) Norman Lebrecht (born 11 July 1948 in London) is a British commentator on music and cultural affairs, a novelist, and the author of the classical music blog *Slipped Disc*.

\(^10\) Read the whole article “You vote for my pupil, I’ll vote for yours – the truth about music competitions Who will break the stranglehold of the Fifa-style music professors?” At [https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/06/you-vote-for-my-pupil-ill-vote-for-yours-the-truth-about-music-competitions/](https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/06/you-vote-for-my-pupil-ill-vote-for-yours-the-truth-about-music-competitions/)
The best advice to players entering competitions is to be yourself. It’s so easy with so many fantastic recordings that we get fixated on playing right, with perfect technique, and flawless performances. That is a pursuit of excellence we will be following our whole lives, but when you’re young it’s important to show what you want to say, to show what your music making is about. If you can do that in the tough environment that is a competition then when it comes to recitals and chamber music concerts that individuality will come out much richer because you’ve been strong enough to display it in such a harsh situation.

I think one should use competitions to challenge oneself. I don’t think I’ve entered any competition with the aim of walking away with the first prize because music is not a mathematical process where you can say “he got it right” or “she got it wrong”. I’ve always taken opportunities to test myself and challenge myself further. I think for all the criticism of competitions, if people approach them right they can be very useful and helpful. Helpful in the sense that the reflection afterwards will allow you to see your strong and weak sides in your playing and you will most likely change your approach the next time you will practice, which I think is the most important reflection after all. Whether you will succeed in a competition or not, being a musician is a lifelong process which will never end and we can always develop, even though we can feel “on top” after winning.

Interview questions and discussion of them

I have asked three of my fellow students some questions about piano competitions, and I will comment and discuss each of them. They all asked to remain anonymous.

1. What is your general opinion about competitions?
2. Do you have any special preparation schedule before competitions?
3. How important is the teachers role when you prepare for a competition?
4. Is it possible to do a career without having big prizes from major competitions?
5. Would you recommend or encourage other students to participate in competitions?

What is your general opinion about competitions?

Answer 1: I think competitions – if used right – can be a great thing. The main thing is that you learn a lot about yourself, because you need to plan and structure the preparation process very well to get your repertoire on highest possible level.
Besides money prizes and possible concert engagements even if you don’t do well, competitions help you to establish a network when you meet new people from outside.

Answer 2: From my point of view I see a competition as a tool in today's music industry. Depending on where you are in your career you can always use a competition for a certain purpose. It can be either to get concert engagements, to widen your repertoire or to meet new pedagogues. Sometimes you can even meet people who will offer you scholarships or a study place at a certain conservatory. The point is that you can always use competitions to your benefit, and you should not be affected by the possible corruption you may find here and there.

Answer 3: I think that competitions are a good opportunity to train performing skills, learn a lot of repertoire and and have a wider perspective of the music world. However, it is quite tricky to evaluate the artistic abilities of performers in competition, and sometimes the importance of the ranking is overestimated. I would anyway always encourage pianists to get as much experience as possible, and competitions are one of them.

Discussion: After looking at all three answers, I can conclude that competitions can be very beneficial in different ways. I would also assume that most people would generally find competitions as something good for everyone to try out. They are an incredible opportunity to learn new repertoire and also to meet many new people from across the world.

I remember one of my own experiences at a competition in Italy. I was unfortunately kicked out from the first round, even though I played a very good and stable performance. One of the jury members came to me, and said that he really liked my playing and told me to apply to a special foundation which is helping young artists with their career. I followed his advice and some months later I got a concert in London. What I want to say is, that it’s not always about winning in competitions. It’s about creating and establishing a network.

One downside of competitions, as mentioned in the third answer, is the evaluation of the artistic abilities of the performer. Music is very subjective and normally people would see competitions as something objective - something you can measure like in sport. In music competitions this measurable things could be technique or the sense of style, but anyway it’s almost impossible to judge these things objectively. That’s why we often see big clash in opinions and views. Another big topic is the possibility of corruption in competitions. Even though it’s almost impossible to
completely avoid it, the organizations WFIMC\textsuperscript{11} and Argerich-Alink Foundation\textsuperscript{12} are working tirelessly to eliminate manipulation and corruption from the most significant competitions.

**Do you have any special preparation schedule before competitions?**

**Answer 1:** Not anything special. But I plan my working process in two parts. The big overview where I’m making deadlines for myself when I need to learn specific pieces and so on. And then comes the daily planning, where I carefully decide which pieces I need to go through during the day. Besides that I try to play my repertoire as much as possible before the competition.

**Answer 2:** Firstly of course it's important to work well on the repertoire with the teacher. Secondly I like to play through the repertoire a lot in the weeks preceding the competition. Finally I think it's important to establish some sort of plan for the performance so that it wont feel strange and scary to go on stage and perform.

**Answer 3:** I don’t have any special schedule, I just try to play the program as much as possible in concerts and group lessons trying to improve particular aspects of performance from time to time. I also try to coordinate with the teacher, when to work on the different pieces, because a lot of the competitions require very big repertoire, sometimes up to 4 hours of program, and if you don’t plan together with your professor, you might not get through everything in time.

**Discussion:** The answers are quite different from each other, and gives me a picture, that it’s very individual how one schedules the preparation before a competition. One thing in common is, that it’s good to play the repertoire through on different occasions, for example in concerts, group lessons or just for your friends. I believe this is a very important factor in the preparation, maybe even the most important one. Personally I also like to have specific deadlines for myself with the repertoire and would always encourage others to do the same. It gives one a much better overview and perspective of the whole preparation. I have learned from previous competitions, that it’s always good to have a plan and goal, because you are much more aware of how you practice and

\textsuperscript{11} The World Federation of International Music Competitions (WFIMC) is an organization based in Geneva, Switzerland that maintains a network of the internationally recognized organizations that aim to discover the most promising young talents in classical music through public competition. It was founded in 1957, and now 120 of the world's leading music competitions are members of the federation.

\textsuperscript{12} AAF is a unique organization, offering the most complete details on music competitions ever compiled. By its nature and background, AAF has the widest range of information on piano competitions.

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what specific problems you have to solve. Two of the answers are mentioning the importance of the teacher, and I agree that the mentor plays a important role in the preparation.

**How important is the teachers role when you prepare for a competition?**

**Answer 1:** It is of course very important also if you’re not going to competition. Apart from teaching, the teacher helps with pushing and supporting and can notice a lot of things from outside. The teacher should not only give you advice with repertoire, but he/she should also be a part of the whole mental aspect of preparing to a bigger competition.

**Answer 2:** It’s very important. The teacher not only helps you with the music, but also helps you with all the factors surrounding the competition such as nervousness and stage fright. When you prepare alone, there are many things you will not pay attention to or even forget about, but the experienced teacher or professor will guide you through the most common problems.

**Answer 3:** The teacher can help a lot, especially in the earlier stages of competition experience. I have experienced that there are a lot of details in “the art of competing” that you just can not know in the beginning and therefore an experienced teacher who is there to help not only with the preparational process but also psychologically is a huge advantage.

**Discussion:** The teachers role will always have a big influence in the preparation. Besides giving musical, technical and interpretational ideas, the teacher can often help with many psychological aspects regarding competitions, such as nervousness, stage fright, negative thoughts while playing etc. For many people competitions are much more demanding than normal concerts, and if you have an experienced teacher, who has competed a lot, it’s a big help for the student. In my last few years I have had many great experiences in competitions, and I personally think, that I would probably not have had the same experience if my teacher would not have supported me during the preparation. The teachers role should always be significant, even if we are not competing. As musicians we are working many hours a day by ourselves and it can be very tough, if you don’t have the support and encouragement from the teacher. A teacher should be the third eye and ear, because we are not always able to see and hear the same things as the teacher.
Is it possible to do a career without having big prizes from major competitions?

Answer 1: Yes for sure. There are many examples. But it makes you have to think outside the box and be creative. The reason why competitions are valuable in networking, is because you gather with many people interested in music. The jury members have a lot of experience, but also many different contacts around the world, and if they like you, they might introduce you to some of them.

Answer 2: Yes if you're lucky enough to meet the right people through other ways. A teacher can for example have very good contacts and therefore connect you with the right manager or conductor who can help you launch a career.

Answer 3: Yes, at least from what I have heard from many musicians. But it is certainly not possible for everyone. You have to have many acquaintances in the music industry of concert/festival organizers, agents and sponsors who want to promote you, which can be very difficult if you for example don’t compete internationally. I have always learned that we have to take every opportunity in this faculty, because you never know what kind of people or contacts you may find.

Discussion: The three answers are very clear and it’s definitely possible to get a career without having big prizes from major competitions. Nevertheless, it requires from you many other skills than just being a professional pianist. You have to promote yourself on the freelance market, and do many different types of networking. A big helping factor is also your social competence and communication. I have met many musicians, who maybe didn’t play on the highest level in their profession, but they were very humble and genuine personalities — something that the audience appreciate very much.

I would personally suggest, to compete as much as possible, because this is often where the networking begins. Some of the answers also highlights the importance of competing, even though it’s possible to make a career without any competition prize. If you do well and win a prize, it’s just a bonus in your future career.
Would you recommend or encourage other students to participate in competitions?

Answer 1: Yes. Of course practicing and motivation should already come from the deep interest in music making, but by participating in competitions it helps you to decide some specific repertoire and pushes you to learn pieces within certain time limit.

Answer 2: Yes definitely, if you do it properly and always try to learn and set goals with the competition it can only come to your benefit. Competitions will give you a new perspective of the music world, but will also teach you how different the performance can be from the normal concert situation. Besides that you will have the opportunity to learn a lot of repertoire, but also sometimes learn repertoire you would normally never play.

Answer 3: I think that competitions fit for most. Even though you might not win a competition, you will gain new experience regarding your playing but also conquer many mental aspects. I would encourage everybody to at least try it out.

Discussion: In my opinion, competitions should definitely be a part of your study time and I think most people who have already competed, would encourage others to do it. I have learned that the process towards a competition is very developing. It gives you many new insights in your playing, and you learn how to handle bigger repertoire in the same time. The competition field is nowadays very big, and it’s possible to compete on many different levels and also find competitions with different repertoire requirements. If you want to try your first competition, you should look for those with maybe one or two rounds and not too big repertoire. How we handle the competition preparation will be very individual and therefore, it’s good to discuss it with your teacher and plan according to your current level and expectations, but in the end I would recommend everyone to try it out.
Conclusion

During the time I have been writing this project about how to prepare for competitions, I have realized that it is very individual how one schedules the practicing and how one prepares mentally. There are some certain patterns everyone must follow, like different steps of practicing, but in the end we make and follow our own daily preparation habits, because this is human nature. We know ourselves how to structure the day in the best way and also how our body tolerates stressful situations like competition preparation.

Nevertheless there are no ways around whatsoever with practicing certain things such as accuracy, sound, memorization etc. In fact I believe that because of competitions, you learn how you practice most efficient and what kind of improvements you have to work on in the future. Competitions are in my opinion the best way to expand your repertoire, but also an opportunity to work on larger repertoire at the same time. As a student we often don’t have time to work on 2 or 3 hours of program, because we simply have too many different projects at school, or because we have part-time jobs just to make our living. But if we decide to participate in a competition, it is a great opportunity to learn a lot about yourself and how to structure your life.

In this master thesis I have focused mainly on the positive sides of how competitions can be helpful and beneficial in different aspects, and what the purpose is to participate. For many, the concept of a competition is not fruitful in the field of art, and it can even be dangerous. “The Best” doesn't exist in art, and elimination, which is in the nature of any competition, is not right either. To cultivate a creative environment and artistic development one has to support variety. This may sound idealistic, and indeed it is very far away from the reality. What we see today is that many competitions hardly pursue artistic goals. For young musicians a competition is the most realistic way to earn money, but the price is high. Competing can create terrible, unnatural stress, frustration, and, sadly, artistic compromises. Music competitions have become a significant part of musical life, but there is still a long way to make them ideal. We all have to work hard to reorganize their structure gradually, bringing them to accordance with their initial function – to help young musicians on their artistic way. British pianist Peter Donohoe\(^\text{13}\), recipient of the Silver Medal in the 1982 International Tchaikovsky Competition and jury member of several competitions has said:

\(^{13}\) Peter Donohoe (born 18 June 1953) is an English classical pianist.

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“I think the anti-competition lobby needs to be very careful not to tar us all with the same brush. Competition prizes have sometimes been won by people who have gone on to make great contributions to the world of music, and in most cases they would not have been in a position to do so without those prizes. On the other hand, some juries have obviously been better than others, and results speak for themselves. We are trying, I promise, to make the system better and better. There is after all now no effective alternative for young musicians – other than comprising yourself of a good business opportunity for large companies, connections, financial backing, networking and good luck. There are too many, for sure, there are some very strange results sometimes, and jury members vary in their ability to spot potential long term talent – the choice of jury members is of course a testament to the quality of those running the competition. But by and large they are good things, they are occasionally great things, they create goals for young people, stimulate media and public interest, and are a representation of life in the real world once you leave the protection of family and teachers.”

(source: Peter Donohoe, via Facebook)

I find Mr. Donohoe’s statement very interesting and it gives the impression that the competition world is anyway trying to develop towards something better. It will never be possible to make competitions completely fair and without corruption, but the constant strive for this ideal scenario can in fact become something great, as Peter also mentions. The purpose of competitions are in the end to expose yourself to the world and stimulate the interest for classical music. Through competitions you can easily establish a network which can partly help you in your career development.

“...But then there are others who say “I don’t go to the competitions because I’d rather pursue networking”. This means that they build a network, maintain friendly relations and thus get the opportunities for the concerts through their “blah-blah”. - I was never interested in this and my teacher wasn’t interested either. That’s why we went to the Tchaikovsky competition. I had a program, we worked hard, intensely three years, I was leading a truly Spartan life. Because it’s an honest way to show your achievements. When I came to Moscow in order to present the results of my work I did not have thoughts like “others are so strong, they are in a super shape, I am an idiot, one plays “Feux follets”, another plays Chopin’s Etude with the thirds way better than me, one plays faster, another has got more power” etc. I had only a very
simple thought: here is my work, I am proud of my work which I did with my teacher, I came here to represent my country. I know that now it is considered tendentious but I say that France is a European country and a world’s country, I am a world citizen, a European and a citizen of France and I represent my country at the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow without any shame and with all that possible pride, knowing that music is universal and has no boundaries, and I am very proud to be here with my teacher and participate in auditions.”

(source: Lucas Debargue’s Facebook page)

I think Debargue is having a good point regarding networking and also what the actual purpose is to compete. He points out that it’s very difficult to do networking without participating in competitions, and I think he has a good point. Of course there are other alternatives, but why not give yourself more possibilities, and in the same time give you the opportunity to learn a lot of repertoire? I also find Lucas’ clear approach and mindset towards the competition very inspiring - to just go and be yourself. Don’t think about others and how they will perform. You should be the one in focus — you have prepared for months, maybe even years, and you should be proud of your achievements. And this is what the jury saw in Lucas’ playing; honesty and love for music. I would encourage everyone to at least try to go to competitions, wether they will like it or not, but without trying you will never know how it feels.
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You vote for my pupil, I’ll vote for yours – the truth about music competitions

Who will break the stranglehold of the Fifa-style music professors?

Norman Lebrecht

A young Korean, 22 years old, won the Dublin International Piano Competition last month. Nothing unusual about that.

Koreans and Chinese, raised in a school of hard knocks and rounded off in western conservatories, are winning most prizes. A few — like the phenomenal Lauren Zhang who made child’s play of Prokofiev’s second piano concerto in the BBC Young Musician of the Year — are prodigious talents with bright futures ahead. Dublin’s winner Sae Yoon Chon is probably not one of them.

His Prokofiev, an effortful shadow of Zhang’s electrification, trundled along at pedestrian pace with one or two stumbles. I was therefore surprised to see that Chon
won. I also noticed that he is a student of the jury chairman.

While the unsuspecting pupils remain none the wiser, this kind of outcome has become familiar at international music competitions, of which there are 300 every year. You can count on one hand those that are fair, honest and transparent. They include the BBC, the Chopin in Warsaw and, latterly, the Tchaikovsky in Moscow. You can imagine the jurors’ conversations elsewhere — you vote for my pupil, I’ll vote for yours. Like Fifa’s World Cup ballot, this business is largely controlled by a bunch of time servers, in this case professors at major conservatories.

Imagine the following scenario. A teacher in a German Musikhochschule is offered a paid week in a sunny resort. All she has to do is listen to hopefuls for a few hours a day and pick a winner from a list of students of the professor who invited her. If she plays ball, the chairman might let one of her pupils take the fourth prize. The rewards would swiftly follow. As a teacher of an international prize-winner, our anonymous friend might then be able to double her private fees and promise all future students that they will have prizes.

There is a twinkle-eyed Russian called Zakhar Bron who, long ago and far away in Siberia, taught young Vadim Repin and Maxim Vengerov. On the back of their fame, Bron often judges competitions where his pupils come out top. His recent wins include Shanghai’s Isaac Stern Competition, the Monaco Music Masters, Young Virtuosos in Bulgaria. At one point Bron announced a new competition in memory of his own teacher Boris Goldstein. Five of the six prizes in the Boris Goldstein competition went to pupils of Zakhar Bron.

Some might be suspicious. At a recent Van Cliburn competition, nine contestants were students of four music professors on the jury.

The Bonn Telekom Beethoven piano competition was won by the chairman’s pupil. Likewise the Bartok Competition in Budapest. Likewise the once-vaunted Carl Flesch last week. One young pianist told me she took one look at the Dublin jury and decided not to apply, since so many of the judges had a horse in the race. In the event, 7 out of 12 Dublin semifinalists were students of jurors, and two out of the four finalists.

Where there are winners there must also be losers. I hear from kids who spent a fortune on entering competitions, only to face what looks like a rigged result. If TV viewers think they are seeing a test of art and skill, they’d be better off watching all-in wrestling. A few protests have been raised — the conductor Fabio Luisi quit this year’s
Paganini Competition in Genoa when professors were added to his jury — but the music business is terrified of any kind of clean-up for fear of losing its only opportunity to expose young talent to a mass audience.

Still, the tide is turning. The quinquennial Chopin competition sets the gold standard by limiting its jury to past winners. At the last event, Martha Argerich and Yundi Li, artists of very different temperament, were delighted to find they had picked the same order of winners, an unarguably good result for the Korean Seong-Jin Cho. Moscow’s Tchaikovsky competition, once a cesspit of apparatchik meddling, has been sanitised by Valery Gergiev’s decision to publish judges’ marks directly after each online performance.

Now, the Leeds piano competition — founded in 1963 by a piano teacher whose pupil won its first prize — has banned teachers from its jury. Artistic director Paul Lewis will chair the judges this year and he has co-opted a violinist to offer relief from the sight of professors tutting away about fingerings. Contestants can now go to Leeds with a promise of fair play. Lewis believes ‘it might be possible to reinvent the competition in terms of what benefits the participants.’ It remains to be seen if he has broken the stranglehold of Fifa-style music professors. Fingers crossed. The future of music may depend on it.
Classical music competitions are rife with corruption and bribery, Julian Lloyd Webber has claimed.

The distinguished cellist and conductor, and brother of musicals impresario Andrew Lloyd Webber, told the Times that the winners of internationally esteemed music competitions were chosen by jurors selecting their own pupils.

The competitions, which can award more than £15,000 to winners, are often seen as the launching pad for the classical careers of talented young musicians.

However, Lloyd Webber said corruption was rife in Britain and abroad, singling out the Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow, held every four years and open to musicians between the ages of 16 and 30, as the most prestigious example of unscrupulous judging.
"Everyone knows it, but no one says it, because when you're in the profession, you don't," he said. "There are obvious exceptions, such as BBC Young Musician of the Year, which is not corrupt at all, but you have these competitions for violins, cello, piano and it's all about who you studied with."

He added: "I'm talking about specialised competitions. The Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow - it's either highly political or it's a fix for somebody's pupil to win it. You have a situation where a juror is friendly with another juror and there's a kind of trade-off."

Lloyd Webber warned music students that "they have to get the right teacher or there's no point in entering."

The Tchaikovsky competition was last held in 2011 and since then reforms have been introduced, including in the jury - now made up of well-known international performers and artists to ensure the competition is skewed less in favour of native musicians. In the piano category, only one non-Russian has won since 1990.

Barry Shiffman, the executive director of the Banff international string quartet competition in Canada, said: "I can understand how many people feel there are problems."

"The importance of a transparent, nuanced systems of voting is critical, and to date there are not good standards that are utilised at all competitions. In Banff we have worked hard on a system of voting that prevents abuse and unfair punitive voting that could give unfair advantage to a competitor."

This is not the first time allegations have been levelled at classical music competitions. In a 1990 documentary on the ninth international Tchaikovsky competition, the allegations of corruption and bribery were dealt with openly on camera.

James Gibb, a British juror, told of being approached by a contestant's uncle who handed him a sealed envelope. In it, he found $1,000 (£588), which he returned. Gibb later discovered that other jurors had given the contestant piano lessons but his suggestion the pianist be disqualified was rejected.

The documentary also revealed that just before the competition, one of the contestant's fathers had donated a new Hamburg Steinway piano, worth about $88,000 (£51,781), to the Moscow Conservatory, where the competition was held.

In 2009, a group of musicians formed a group called 10,000 Musicians against Corruption in Music Competitions, which called for transparency, fairness and an end to the nepotism rife in the competitions round the world. They demanded that all rounds must be held behind a screen except for the final, they must be recorded and made public, and relations between jury members and competitors must be made public before the competition starts.

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