EUROPEAN STRING TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

arco

ESTA UK Autumn 2022 vol.48 no.4

Cardiff 2023

Going Green(er)

Clifton's Top of the Pops

Frederick Grinke remembered

The end of the music competition?

www.estastrings.org.uk

The End of the Music Competition?

Dr George Waddell

In October 2014, two years into a PhD at the Royal College of Music in London on the science of evaluating performance, I found myself in the back corner of the RCM library perusing a shelf upon which I'd stumbled across a collection relating to music competitions. At first glance the contents seemed quite dry, mostly comprising hardbacked registers of competition winners over the decades and with Lisa McCormick's authoritative book on the subject, *Performing Civility*, still a year away from publication. However, my search was soon rewarded. Tucked between two of the tomes was a thin and unassuming booklet of just 32 pages; *[please note that the original report has now been digitised and is available from estastrings.org.uk/competition-report. Page numbers in this article now refer to this version. Ed]* its plain blue cover indicated it had been published by the European String Teachers Association, and the title simply read *Music Competitions: A Report*. In the eight years that have since passed, not a week has gone by that I haven't thought about what it contains.

First, some context. In 1981 the ESTA hosted a debate on music competitions at its international conference in Edinburgh. This was followed by a public discussion in London and the assembly by the ESTA British branch of a working party to, as the report's introduction states, "consider the nature and influence of music competitions" with the aim of "producing recommendations for competition organizers (p. 5)". This esteemed 15-member group was drawn from performance (e.g. cellist Joan Dickson, pianist Christopher Elton, violist Nannie Jamieson, vocalist Lyndon

Van der Pump), education (e.g. former Purcell School Director of Music Lenore Reynell, Adviser to the UK Council for Music Education and Training Muriel Blackwell), and industry (e.g. former BBC Radio Chief Producer Eleanor Warren, music critic Alan Blyth; BBC 'Young Musician of the Year' Producer Roy Tipping and Radio 3 Chief Producer Gordon Stewart also served as Observers to the working party), and was chaired by double bassist and RCM professor Rodney Slatford. In 1984 their findings and conclusions had been published in the report I now held.

I can't recommend more highly reading the report in full to see their arguments unfold. For our purposes, and to emphasise why I found this text so arresting, allow me to spoil the ending with its final sentence:

"Competitions are closely identified with some of the principal threats – in particular, the 'star' system and the exploitation of young musicians – and, until such time as they fade from the scene, they are best confined to the outer reaches of the profession where their influence may be negligible (p. 14).

Reading this, quite frankly, shocked me. For someone who has spent most of my life navigating the competitive pathway of a musical career (I began my training as pianist before finding myself in the worlds of academia and science), a panel of performers, teachers, and, indeed, competition organisers calling for the large-scale dissolution of the entire competitive system felt revolutionary, if not blasphemous. And as a member of the growing field of Performance Science, where we apply the tools of the social sciences to understand and optimise performance and its impacts, I was struck by how prescient their arguments were, predicting what subsequent research has since demonstrated regarding the psychology of the performer and of those who judge them.

What, then, brought them to this conclusion? They divided their findings across 19 headings, but I will summarise the main points here under four and give a sense of the degree to which their observations and predictions align with four decades of cultural and scientific evolution.

Musicians' development and health

Young performers need playing experience, but they need it in circumstances which will not expose them to a glare of publicity for which they are emotionally unprepared and to a flood of concerts for which they are unready and which will drain them of the time and enthusiasm for the kind of serious study which should occupy the greater part of their student lives (p. 9-10).

Too little work for most musicians means far too much for a few, subjecting those few to intolerable strain, which leaves them no time for rest, reflection and further growth, and which cannot fail to have a deleterious effect on them as musicians and people (p 11).

The report highlights not only the more obvious potential mental, physical, and developmental harm to young musicians exposed to a highly competitive atmosphere, but also the potential effects on professionals who may have themselves experienced competition success and now experience the intensity of the fortunate, but overburdened musician's career. We are only now fully appreciating the epidemics of anxiety, burnout, and injury on and off the stage faced by musicians in educational and professional contexts and exacerbated by unrelenting workloads, heightened expectations, and imbalanced funding models (more on this in a moment) which are often by-products (if not direct outcomes) of the music competition model. Educators and institutions are working at pace to help musicians develop appropriate strategies and build resilience against such challenges, an example of which can be seen in our founding at the RCM of the international Healthy Conservatoires initiative (*www.HealthyConservatoires.org*). But as any healthcare practitioner will tell you, one should aim to treat not just the symptom but the cause.

Measuring the immeasurable

If…we wish to judge relative grandeur, no form of measurement is conceivable since too many intangible qualities are involved. In musical performance, the only measurable attributes are aesthetically insignificant (p. 9).

… the greater the accomplishment of the performer the less valid are attempts at 'grading' (p. 9).

It is one thing to determine that the young child who made it through the work with far fewer wrong notes than their peers has produced a more 'successful' outcome and thus deserves a prize in recognition (though we may still question what we are trying to accomplish in this act). But as we reach the heights of technical achievement and consistency where only individual interpretation and personal taste separates one performance from the next, what is left to determine the 'objective' superiority of one performance to another? This observation by the ESTA panel particularly struck me as it was the very topic of my thesis and, at the time, they couldn't have known just how right they were.

In short, no amount of musical experience and training can undo the fact that we as humans are fallible, and our decisions, however well-intentioned, are influenced by factors of which we are not always aware. The case of the blind audition is a famous one, and the resulting effects on gender balance in orchestras do not need retelling here. In the years that followed the ESTA report, research has also demonstrated how performers randomly placed later in the sequence of finalists are more likely to win than those who perform earlier. How changing the visual race, gender, attractiveness, or dress of a performer can influence a judge's ratings of the same audio recording. How, as I eventually found in my doctoral work, the way one walks on stage, or the facial reaction to a flubbed passage, changes the way in which the performance is perceived. When so little objectively separates the quality of any two performances we are asked to discriminate as judges, we leave ourselves more vulnerable to the implicit assumptions and, dare I say, biases with which we must all contend. One can also question the range of attributes examined by any competition that claims to identify the next generation of great performers, us knowing full well that success and longevity in our industry relies on a much wider range of personal and professional attributes (not to mention a healthy dose of luck) that are not explicitly tested or demonstrated in a few appearances on a concert stage.

Training audiences and the 'star' system

It is only too easy for parents, and indeed teachers as well, to be led astray by the lure of nationwide recognition for a child or a pupil, and the general public is all too easily persuaded to abdicate responsibility for using its own ears and minds to decide for itself what it wants to hear (p. 10).

Where a free choice can be made, influenced by the natural variety of individual preference, it is inevitable that the performing opportunities will be shared between many instead of going exclusively to a few (p. 14).

We tend to put the musician at the fore when considering what effects their chasing the glory of a win or contending with the disappointment of a loss might bring them. But how might competitions be shaping our audiences and industry? How many musicians of incredible but unsung talent struggle to make a living through their craft while audiences in their very neighbourhood will travel and pay a premium to see one of a miniscule number of star performers? To what degree are we responsible, having trained those audiences to believe that, just as there is a fastest runner or a football team who has managed the most goals, there is a 'best' violinist (and, if you'd like a bargain, a second-best and third-best)? And if the competition system is the filter through which these musicians are selected, to what degree have the 'approved' repertoire lists and official jury criteria so often employed funnelled creativity,

ingenuity, and spontaneity of the arts into something deemed acceptable by a panel whose own divergent tastes must often be balanced and neutralised along the road to consensus? Imagine a model that instead fostered and promoted networks of local and varied artists rather than highlighting a single winner, particularly when research confirms that even the most discerning listener often cannot tell the difference between the celebrated superstar and the highly accomplished but unrecognised musician (mirroring the famous studies in which inexpensive wines are rated more favourably when presented with an inflated price tag).

Artistic winners and losers

When musical performances are asked to produce 'results', to produce winners and losers, music becomes a sport. Or rather, since that is not possible, musical performance becomes a sport, a sport which exploits music for non-artistic purposes (p. 9).

The competitive spirit is antagonistic to art and to education. The concept of winning – and, even more, of losing – in relation to music is corrupting of artistic and educational values (p. 14).

What is music for? Why do we learn it? Why do we make it? Why do we teach it? Why do we enjoy it? Regardless of what philosophical rabbit holes such questions can take us down, hopefully we can agree that having more people engage with music can only be good for society. Indeed, our research at the RCM joins a growing field demonstrating the social, health, and economic value of engaging with the arts (***www.PerformanceScience.ac.uk/HEartS***). So when we see an epidemic of childhood stress exacerbated by their feeling judged and constantly assessed, or bemoan ever dwindling take-up and persistence with music studies in private and school settings, or wonder why we might be seeing more empty seats in concert halls, might we consider whether we are promoting a culture that celebrates the arts and builds communities around them, or one built upon a winner-take-all approach in which a small deserving few are allowed the privilege of taking the stage while the rest must contemplate where they went wrong?

Of course, music competitions are not without benefits to the performer; the ESTA identified playing experience, a milestone to drive hard work, contact with other musicians, advice from expert teaches and performers, and opportunities for professional advancement (e.g. access to finances, recordings, etc.) as the notable ones. However, they also state that "nothing that is offered is peculiar to competitions since all these benefits can be found in other, non-competitive circumstances (p. 20). They suggest doing away with public 'placings' altogether and instead rewarding equal prizes for 'performances of excellence', following the tradition and growth of performance festivals, 'platforms', or whatever title one might want to give the celebration of emerging musical talent. This singling out of excellence of course still requires some degree of competitive judgement, and one might argue another value of competitions in that they help prepare musicians for the inevitable competitive placement in the musical industry. There are, after all, only so many seats in an orchestra, only so many places within a conservatoire, and only so much time in a festival programme. Thus, the audition and, by extension, the competition. The ESTA panel had a simple answer to this; auditions are and should be private, and the public elimination rounds of the competition should be made private as well. This act removes the spectacle of loss and the stressors and influences (both to musician and judge) of the public eye. They also suggested that competitions, where they exist, expand their brief to include formative experiences such as masterclasses, workshops, and lessons, and that prize money be focused on fostering educational development.

So, what effect did this report have? At first glance, it would seem not much. My digging has found few references to this report in the decades that have followed. A quick survey of the classical

and popular music industry is not encouraging. The report singles out televised coverage of competitions as particularly problematic, thus the rise the various and international *Idol*, *X-factor*, *'____'s Got Talent'* etc. series, and their general obsession with and glorification of public judgement (read: humiliation) might have horrified some members of the working party.

This isn't to say there hasn't been progress, and indeed the multi-faceted competition that includes formative events and a variety of prizes does seem to have taken prominence. The music examination has also fallen under greater scrutiny (though that is a topic for another day). But knowing that our industry faces unprecedented challenges to its finances, its mental and physical health, and its engagement with the next generation of musicians and audiences, we all owe it to ourselves to reflect on our goals and practices any time we engage in competitive acts in the music industry, whether it is sending our student or serving on a panel. I am by no means suggesting anything like a boycott; we need to support our musical institutions in whatever way we can. But let us use our influence to amplify the findings of this report and help guide the competition, or whatever new form it might take, to something that truly serves musicians and wider society, rather than making a spectacle of musical success and failure.

Dr George Waddell is Lecturer in Performance Science at the Royal College of Music. He holds BMus and MMus degrees in Piano Performance from Brandon University (Canada) and a PhD in Performance Science from the RCM.

He leads research and teaching on the science of performance psychology, evaluation, professional skills, entrepreneurship, technology, and musicians' health. He is co-author of Performing Music Research: Methods in Music Education, Psychology, and Performance Science (Oxford University Press).

The original 1984 report can be downloaded here

www.estastrings.org.uk/competition-report/