Tantrums and Tiaras

When competition results are finally announced they provoke a variety of emotions in audiences and performers alike. On occasions when dissent is in the ranks, blame is often focused on the judges. However, as **Joseph Smith** explains, the task set before an adjudicator is no easy one

I was extremely flattered when Phred Meller called me to ask if I would consider adjudicating the New York City International Piano Competition for Outstanding Amateurs. Nevertheless, I turned down the opportunity, as I have when I've been asked to adjudicate other competitions. When I explained my reasons to Phred, it occurred to us both that they might interest others.

Let me start by saying whoever is chosen as first place winner, some of the public will disagree with the decision. Yet I wouldn't be surprised if there were dissent among the judges. In some situations, depending on the system of scoring, it can even happen that *none* of the individual judges agree with the collective decision. Whenever such things happen – and, let's be honest, they almost *always* do – the public is confused. Did something go wrong? To my way of thinking, the only thing wrong is the basic premise of competitions: the premise that performances at a high level of accomplishment can be successfully ranked – that there *ought* to be agreement on issues of esthetic preference.

First, repertoire presents an essential problem. In order to make a reasonable comparison of quality between two things, the two things have to be to some degree comparable. If I were to ask you 'who is the better novelist, Fielding or Proust?' you might reply that the two authors are doing different things – therefore, one cannot say which is 'better', only that both are great. On the same principle, it seems obvious that playing different composers may require different qualities from a performer. One pianist, let's say, chooses Scriabin's Fifth Sonata, and confidently splashes over the keyboard, exhibiting a wide range of colour, and projecting eros and mystic rapture. Another chooses Mozart's big B-flat Sonata, and plays it with transparency and singing line, projecting tenderness, innocence, and dignity. Here, what are we to compare? Let me add parenthetically that it saddens many serious musicians that those who play the bigger, more virtuosic works tend to be favored in a competition situation. But if the reverse were true – say, that the judges placed a higher premium on intimate, serious works – this preference would then be unfair to those who excel at the virtuosic and extrovert.

But let's say that we are comparing two different performances of the same composer. For instance, let's compare Wanda Landowska to Clara Haskil. Both these pianists were universally recognised as supreme Mozart interpreters, and in both cases recordings bear this out. They have something else in common – neither seeks brilliance through the extreme articulation of rapid passages. Yet the impression that they make is still entirely different.

Landowska offers great freedom of inflection. She produces the impression that Mozart is a friend of hers, allowing her to play his music with relaxed informality and spontaneity. Haskil, on the other hand, succeeds in making her own interpretation invisible. One feels that she is the medium through which Mozart's text is heard. She manages to shape the music over long stretches of time without our being aware of the

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shaping from note to note. This is a true example of the art that conceals art. Which is greater? Both – Landowska is greater at what she does, and Haskil is greater at what she does. Now, comes the question: do I, Joseph, really have no preference? Perhaps I do have a preference, but so what? My personal preference simply isn't important. I am enlightened and delighted by both approaches.

I will limit my references to pianists whose greatness is generally accepted, who are no longer walking on this earth, and whose art is preserved on recordings, so that we will have a point of reference. If I were to discuss living pianists, I fear I might inflame partisan feelings and obscure my arguments.

The layman always finds it difficult to understand that two artists can interpret the notation of a piece of music faithfully, and still produce differing, valid interpretations. But consider how many symbols there are on a page of music, in addition to notes. There are articulations, phrase marks, word indications. And all of these must be interpreted in relation to each other. In this piece, how fast is fast? How does this phrase mark modify the notated rhythm? Is pedal called for, if not explicitly marked, and if it is, must it be modified to account for changes between instruments of the composer's day and ours? Notation is incomplete and ambiguous, thank God – otherwise, the performer's task would be boring and mechanical, and we could assign it to a computer! There exist an infinity of variables. Individually, each of these factors may seem to be small, but the sum of them reflects the artist's sensibility and conception of a piece. Two different artists can serve the same text with respect and fidelity and still come up with very different results, which can both be valid. This is not, of course, to say that we do not sometimes encounter performances that ought to be condemned as distortions of the text.

But are there not *some* objective standards one can apply to piano performances? What if we leave the subjective realm of interpretation and simply discuss playing the instrument? Surely, for instance, playing accurately is preferable to playing inaccurately. Surely it is preferable not to blemish the music and unnerve the public with memory lapses. Surely, it is preferable to elicit pleasing tones from the instrument rather than harsh tones. Surely, it is preferable to play clearly.

But, in art, things are not quite so simple. Vices can be inextricably linked with virtues and vice versa. Yes, it is undesirable to strike wrong notes and to forget passages. But Alfred Cortot did at times miss notes and forget, and yet, to his admirers (including me), he is a very great artist. Would he have been still greater if he had played more accurately and consistently? I'm not so sure. What if his inaccuracies were a concomitant of his spontaneous, fluid conception of the work at hand? Is it not possible that the very qualities that made his playing so overwhelming militated against a cleaner, less flawed execution? One could still legitimately say, 'the inaccuracy really bothers me – I can't get past it,' but one cannot dismiss him as an incompetent, even at his most flawed. We can agree that banging – producing a coarse piano tone – is undesirable. But, frankly, the great Rudolf Serkin tended to bang. Would he have been still greater had he possessed a more consistently round, pleasing tone? What if the banging were a concomitant of his rhythmic intensity, of the drive that helped audiences feel the coherence of large, intellectually challenging works? Not everyone need respond to Rudolf Serkin's art (I do), but one cannot dismiss him – he was a significant artist. What about clarity? Isn't that a virtue? Josef Hofmann played with glittering clarity. The effect was not only viscerally exciting, but also enabled the listener to hear every note of the piece. But it is possible to feel that Hofmann's clarity distorts the music by elevating unimportant details of texture to the same level as important elements of content. The same quality that made him so great can legitimately be criticised.

"The only thing wrong is the premise of competitions"

Any strong quality necessarily comes at the expense of another quality. We cannot be circumspect and reckless at the same time, for instance. And any strong quality may be perceived either as a strength or as a weakness. So, isn't the answer a balance of qualities? Well, yes and no. The problem is that moderation, in excess, can produce a performance uncommitted to any approach. And an uncommitted performance, no matter how skillful, no matter how true to the text and the performance practices of the composition's period, may in the end fail to involve the listener to as great a degree as a committed one.

Is this to say that there are no standards for judgment – that every performance is good? No, of course not. The crude decisions are easy. One can easily say that neither Harry Truman nor Bess Myerson was a major pianist, whereas both Horowitz and Schnabel were. Past a certain point of achievement, though, judgments become less clear and certain. Even when the pianists we are discussing are far from the achievements of Schnabel or Horowitz, we may still be confronted with subtle matters of aesthetic preference.

Let me anticipate some possible objections to what I have been saying. First, that evaluation and competition, in some form, are inevitable. Of course. When a conservatory presents a concerto on an orchestra concert, it must choose a soloist. And a foundation distributing grants must choose which applicants are to receive grants. These choices, however, are governed by necessity. They are not a celebration of ranking. And they are not public events.

I think it might surprise you how many musicians share my feelings, at least in part. Often, when I discuss my views with a friend or colleague, the reaction is not 'Joseph – you're crazy!' but rather, 'well, yes, but ... the public likes the idea of competition – it's human nature ... we have to interest the public in music somehow ... ' In other words, they agree with me that the premise is false, but they feel that the ends justify the means. I can understand the validity of such a position. And it is undeniable that they offer pianists a strong incentive to prepare repertoire – they bring an intensity to practicing. But the problem is that people involved in music take their own sophistication for granted. They know that judgments are subjective. They know that being an artist is not a matter of manipulating the instrument – that there are goals other than playing fast and accurately. They know that there is not a single 'correct' interpretation of a piece of music. But they may forget that the public does not necessarily share these assumptions. My concern is not primarily that the contests are unfair for the applicants, or force the judges to make impossible choices and compromises. My concern is the effect on the public. The competitions, instead of celebrating the value of a rich variety of performances of a work, and diverse approaches to music making, suggest instead that there is a quantifiably 'best' reading for a work, a quantifiably 'best' pianist. The more the public believes this, the more it can delegate its aesthetics to the 'experts', and the more it can confine its concert going to performances of the few best-known names. In other words, as in so many facets of modern life, there is the danger of more and more power being placed in the hands of fewer and fewer people.

Furthermore, since competitions surround the making of music with the aura of a prizefight, in which one combatant is supposed to clobber another with his 'definitive' performance of some work or other, I fear that the competitions suggest that music is yet another manifestation of materialism and aggression, rather than an antidote to them.

From a talk delivered at the New York City International Piano Competition for Outstanding Amateurs, May 2003


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