
Lisa McCORMICK, *Performing Civility: International Competitions in Classical Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2015)

“We live in an age of competitions,” is the opening sentence of a fascinating book. Competition is everywhere and classical music is no exception. However, music competitions have specific characteristics and tensions, and those characteristics are the subject of this study. While competitions and prizes proliferate in classical music, the author observes that they do not seem to be very successful in selecting stars and offering winners certain careers. Lisa McCormick, herself a professionally trained musician and a sociologist, suggests that commercialization and the pursuit of prestige are important. However, they cannot fully explain why young musicians are so intent on participating while at the same time disillusion is so rampant. Nor can they explain why competitions are not suitable tools for discovering the most eminent performers and offering the social capital that would go with that. The author argues that the answer to this puzzle has to be found in the tensions between two incommensurable ideals that together govern music competitions: the aesthetic ideals of music and the ideals of civility that have recently entered the field of music competitions. The concept of civility is taken from Jeffrey Alexander, as “the cultural codes, integrative patterns and institutional procedures that characterize a community based on universalistic solidarity” [5]. Objectivity, fairness, equality, openness, and transparency form the core of civility. By contrast, music ideals are characterized by subjectivity, beauty, the sublime, and artistic individualism. Inequality, patronage, aesthetic authority, and relational experience are basic elements of music’s social sphere, but they contradict the requirements of civility. The book explores why competitions proliferate, why young musicians continue to participate, and how the various participants in the competitions deal with the tensions between civility and musical performance.

The ethnographic foundation of the analysis is based on three high ranking competitions: the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, the Rostropovich Cello Competition, and the Banff International String Quartet Competition. The examples are well

chosen, because they differ in organization, the types of venue, as well as in the specificities of instruments which pose different challenges to the performers. In addition, the author conducted interviews with current and former jurors, patrons of competitions, competitors, music teachers and coaches, journalists, and members of the highly fragmented audiences involved in the competitions. What makes the study unusually comprehensive is that the author also studied media and blogs covering the competitions, which have recently expanded audiences considerably. Together these various actors constitute the complex social field of competitions.

For McCormick the common conceptualizations of music are too narrow. In musicology music is usually seen as text. The sociology of music on the other hand focuses on music as a product of cultural industry, or a source of social action. Following Small and Alexander, McCormick opts for a performative perspective. Music is a mode of social performance in which text, context, and interaction are brought together. Her analytical framework consists of six elements: systems of collective representations; the actors; the audience; the means of symbolic production; the *mise-en-scène*; social power.

The book opens with a historical account of international competitions, going back to the pre-modern precursors of the 12th century and shows how they slowly transformed into “civic institutions of the artistic sphere” [53] in the 20th century.

The background of the more detailed analysis of performance, jurors, and audiences is completed by a discussion of the frames in which competitions represent themselves in public discourse: the deeply gendered game frame emphasizes that it is about testing and identifying extraordinary talent and fortitude deemed necessary for an international career. The other frame is that of ritual, emphasizing superb musical experience and extraordinary performances. Journalists criticize these ideal images and emphasize that competitions are inherently arbitrary due to a lack of consensus about what constitutes excellence; they fail to identify the next generation of great artists; and they do more harm than good to sensitive artists. These critical voices have forced competitions to adjust their procedures and images. McCormick concludes that, in practice, competitions are always ambivalent and combine the various frames, striving for what Levi-Strauss would call “fused performance” in which the performer becomes fully connected with the audience.

The analysis of the historical, institutional and discursive settings of competitions already offers an immensely interesting and important

contribution. However, the most interesting and innovating part of the book concerns the effects of competitions on the performers, the judges and their judgments, and the role of audiences. McCormick sets out by presenting four major tropes of what generally constitutes an excellent performer. Each is associated with particular mythical figures: Mozart as the iconic “prodigy,” Paganini as the dark “fire-breathing virtuoso,” Beethoven as the tragic “conquering hero,” and Glen Gould and Alfred Brendel as the “intellectuals,” primarily interested in the architecture of music. Performers draw on these tropes, move from one to another over their careers or according to the situation, careful not to imitate one particular iconic figure or to be seen as one-dimensional. They do so through musical and visual means of symbolic production, including composing a repertoire, the instruments on which musicians play.

McCormick emphasizes the importance of visual aspects of music performance, which she calls “the sight of sound”. The choice of instrument, facial expression and gestures, and physical demeanor, as well as style of attire, all serve to express a particular trope and are crucial for the evaluation of jurors and audiences. Non-verbal communication is as important among performers as between performer and audience. Here, women face specific tensions. Technical competence is associated with masculinity. It is seen as natural for men to overcome the technical challenges of an instrument, but not for women. Women therefore have to strike a balance between femininity and competence. This is most readily done for the trope of prodigy. The trope of virtuoso is regarded as less “natural” for women; the conquering trope is often strongly associated with sexual power, while the heroic trope is the most male oriented of all.

The competition situation poses particular challenges for the performer. Ideally, a “fused performance,” a term borrowed from Alexander, is successful if “cultural extension of the musical text and the musician to the audience” is combined with “a psychological identification of the audience with the performer” [157]. But since it is the jury and not the performer who controls the situation, the likelihood that such fusion occurs is undermined by the competition context itself, and performers often compromise their musical values. As a result, many performers react with cynicism and disillusionment to competitions. McCormick therefore asks why competition remains so popular despite its shortcomings. She suggests that participation is seen as an opportunity to learn, to redefine one’s musical identity and to reconsider what had been taken for granted.

Competitions are as problematic for jurors as for performers. Performing music is, as the author explains, fundamentally the art of bringing two “sound worlds” together: imagining the sound one wants to create and listening to the sound produced. Jurors are professional musicians and are as such experienced in inhabiting two sound worlds, but they also have to transform all the different qualities of the performance into quantitative evaluations. Though all jurors claim they primarily search for the magical in a performance, their evaluation involves much more.

Taking a pragmatic perspective, the author argues that jurors have to be open and overcome their preferences for style and interpretation, and try to capture the stylistic sensitivity of the performer. Yet there is much disagreement amongst jurors. This does not regard technique and physical displays which are usually uncontroversial. Style and interpretation are subject to controversy. However, in contrast to academic interdisciplinary peer reviewers that resemble music jurors in many ways, and where discussion is considered a vital contribution to the legitimacy of the final decision, music jurors feel that discussion among them would generate undue influence. They fear this would undermine their legitimacy. Yet the quantifying system of evaluation and the lack of discussion tend to eliminate exceptional performers because they split the jury.

According to McCormick, the problems of commensuration and the lack of debate are the main reason why jurors are as critical of and dissatisfied with competitions as the performers. In addition there is the general assumption that there are networks of voting alliances, and the fact that competitions are no longer a certain stepping stone for an international career. The author wonders why musicians are still willing to serve on juries. The answer is that jurors see it as an opportunity to obtain an overview of musical trends and talent. They hope to find exceptional talents whom they can personally support in their future careers. In addition, competitions promote music to a more general public.

Competitions are not only about performer and juror. The audience is a vital part of the drama and the author offers illuminating insights here. A music audience is generally seen as having a low level of collectivity, because sound disappears immediately. By contrast, McCormick argues that, in competitions, the audience tends to act like a highly active but heterogeneous public. Competitions, she argues with reference to Adorno, form a performance environment in which audiences listen with quite different orientations. Some focus on the work of art, others on the performance, the performer, or the event. Yet others manage to direct their attention to several aspects. In this

competition context, the distinction between audience and public is largely dissolved. The opinions of the audience and the audience prizes contribute to an important degree to the legitimacy of competitions. Audiences are far more than enthusiastic listeners physically present at performances. They have become more of a public that in modern communication media such as blogs actively engage in debate and in the generation of musical taste. The author argues that much more is involved than Bourdieu's *habitus*, a concept that after all was developed before the age of the new media.

In an almost too brief concluding coda the author expresses optimism that competitions will continue to be attractive. They have shown to be highly flexible and capable of adapting to shifting geopolitical conditions. Competitions today are more integrating, not in the cosmopolitan sense of adopting Western codes, but in the sense of multiculturalism, incorporating more different music codes. Unfortunately she does not explain from where she draws her optimism that competitions will become more multi-culturalist.

This study is one of the most exciting works of social science I have recently read. The performative perspective she develops in this work has shown to be highly productive. It allows the author to combine the presentation of rich and at times quite moving empirical material with a highly sophisticated and lucid sociological analysis that includes the perspectives of performers, their teachers and coaches, competition patrons, jurors, and the audiences involved. The study pays attention to institutional, communicative, and material aspects, to music interpretation and taste. It talks about instruments, and the architecture and acoustics of music venues, as well as the bodily and facial expressions of performers and jurors. The historical background of competitions emphasizes the flexibility of the genre, and underscores the specificities of current competitions, made possible by modern communication media. The various short comparisons with academic work in which competition is also highly prominent are illuminating. Not only does it highlight the inherently ephemeral characteristic of music; it also makes one wonder to what extent competition has similar ambivalent effects on young scholars. This book is therefore also an invitation for equally comprehensive and sophisticated analyses of competitions in other fields including art, as well as in academia.

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