GRESHAM

COLLEGE

The place of competitions

COMPETITIONS

in the personal and musical

AND

development of

YOUNG

young people

MUSICIANS

PETER RENSHAW

Gresham Professor of Music

COMPETITIONS AND YOUNG MUSICIANS

LECTURE

The Place of Competitions in the Personal and Musical Development of Young People

PETER RENSHAW

Gresham Professor of Music

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Competitions and Controversy

Competitions, especially those resembling a sporting event, play an increasingly large part in the lives of talented young musicians. Market forces are pressurising teachers and parents to enter the competitive 'rat-race' so that their fledglings can become 'winners' and attain public recognition at an early age. Some parents find themselves enmeshed in this system unwittingly, quite unprepared for the repercussions. There are others who, like some teachers, are only too keen to support a process which will enable them to bask in reflected glory if their children are successful. But living through one's child or student can only too easily backfire and create serious psychological and musical problems.

It is hardly surprising that most parents, if asked, will place 'happiness' at the top of their priorities for their children. But they then sometimes assume that if their child is gifted artistically, academically or in sport, happiness will be attained by that person becoming a winner or a high-achiever. There is no doubt that early recognition can open doors for further success, but this is often achieved at a price – at great personal, psychological cost, thus making the goal of happiness look pretty flimsy and illusory.

This Gresham lecture was delivered on 6th November, 1989 in St Mary-le-Bow Church, Cheapside, London EC2. Subsequently it was revised for the purpose of this publication. I am indebted to discussions with Peter Wiegold, Artistic Director of the Performance and Communication Skills Project at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, regarding the views about a 'holistic' form of music training towards the end of the lecture.

The point of this lecture is to explore the terrain of music competitions and to see whether it is possible to conceive of a 'competitive' system which is not inherently damaging. My motivation for this stems from living closely with talented young musicians at the Yehudi Menuhin School, where I was Principal for nine years, and from observing a generation of students at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where I am Director of the Project in Performance and Communication Skills.

The arguments I intend to deploy are acknowledged as valid by many educationalists and musicians who have been actively concerned about the nature, status and effects of competitions in our musical life. On the other hand, there is an equally vociferous group determined to keep their vested interest in competitions alive, regardless of the human and artistic cost. This lecture, then, constitutes yet one more voice in the present controversy about the place of competitions in the personal and musical development of young people.

From the outset it needs to be asserted that the concept 'competiton' is value-free. It is a neutral term which is neither intrinsically good nor bad; neither right nor wrong. What matters is what we 'do' with competitions – how we use them and for what purpose. It is in this area of application that two central questions need to be raised. Do competitions necessarily have to be musically and psychologically damaging? Can competitions be used in a responsible way, thereby presenting a creative challenge to young musicians?

I intend to present two views of competitions – a 'Marketing/Commercial' model, which is product-orientated, and an 'Artistic/Educational' model, which is process and context- orientated. I am deliberately polarising the argument, so the models are fairly extreme. They might be regarded by some as rather crude caricatures, but sadly they contain more than a grain of truth which many informed people find highly disturbing.

A 'Marketing/Commercial' Model of Competitions

This utilitarian marketing model reflects the values of a tough entrepreneurial world which sees competition as a sporting contest in which a potential 'star' wins. The form of life which underpins this model contains many of the features associated more with the world of marketing: for example, corporate sponsorship wanting a readily identifiable return on its investment, through which a company can promote a 'winner' and raise its public profile by being seen to support the arts. In its strongest form this model is amenable to media hype and as such it can distort the nature and content of competition.

Secondly, it could be argued, perhaps rather cynically, that by mirroring the tough realities of the market place, in which the 'survival of the fittest' becomes the central guiding principle, this marketing model performs an invaluable service to the public, the sponsor and the performer alike. Unquestionably conservatoires are over- producing professional musicians, so competitions can be seen as a useful social mechanism which controls entry into the upper echelons of the profession. They are an effective device for sorting out the sheep from the goats. This might appear harsh, but there is no doubt in my mind that some teachers in some institutions are driven by a kind of 'killer instinct' which is then caught by the more ruthlessly determined student.

Let us look at some of the dangers arising from this marketing model of competitions. First, it can lead to the exploitation of talented young people for the benefit of teachers, parents, institutions and high television ratings. Much of the general public responds enthusiastically to media hype and is excited by the gladiatorial approach to competitions which feeds fantasies and fears. But how far should young performers, from school age to the late 20s, be seen as cogs to be manipulated in the marketing machine? Moreover, most young people are vulnerable; talent is often fragile. Therefore no teacher or institution has the right to use their 'successful' students instrumentally as a means to their own ends.

Secondly, this marketing of the 'star' system is based on a narrow con-

cept of achievement or of excellence, which maximises failure rather than success. In their search for identity and self-esteem, which is an essential part of their development, some young students use competitions to boost their egos in an attempt to gain recognition and stardom. But how far are their perceptions and expectations rooted in the 'real' world? How far are their aspirations cocooned in a dream or fantasy?

Many students and teachers are trapped in a cultural or social bubble, seemingly oblivious to the fundamental changes taking place around them. The narrow, stereotyped view of competitions can only reinforce their musical tunnel vision, thus contributing very little to cultural development in general. Moreover, it seems equally absurd that many of these teachers and students are locked into institutions which are premised on failure. On this account only a small handful of musicians are going to 'succeed' and become international stars, flogging, metaphorically, the Mendelssohn from Hilton to Hilton – a way of life which seems somewhat narrow and has more to do with marketing and public relations than with music.

Unfortunately, students are very much caught up in this star system with its own in-built pecking-order – soloist, chamber music, ensemble, orchestra, opera chorus, teaching – in that order. If young performers continue to define achievement in such narrow terms, thereby equating excellence with becoming a soloist, inevitably they are going to see themselves as 'failures'. This not only distorts their perception of themselves, but it can also be very destructive as young musicians are inextricably bound up with their own identity, self- confidence and self-esteem.

Another damaging element arising from this 'gladiatorial' view of competitions takes the form of 'force-feeding' by status-seeking institutions who are preoccupied by their public relations image, and by possessive teachers and ambitious parents whose egos are bound up with the success of their students or children. In their attempt to gain approval many students are motivated, not by the love of music, but by fear, by feelings of guilt and a sense of duty.

These feelings are often deep-seated and go back a long way in the

personal history of each student. It is not unusual for talented 20-year olds to stop and take stock of their situation, questioning why they are studying music. This can easily lead to a crisis of confidence, which is hardly surprising when they suddenly recognise that they have never made an authentic choice throughout their frenetic lives. Some students at college, especially string players and pianists, have been dutifully responding to the subtle and not-so-subtle machinations of parents and teachers for a high proportion of their lives – maybe up to 15 years in some cases. They have been subjected to a ritual of practice, the discipline of which is rarely internalised, but is tolerated at best out of the need to please or at worst out of fear.

Caught up in such a severe work ethic, in which 'childhood' is often prematurely lost, it is not uncommon for many children to become motivated by guilt or a sense of duty. It is only natural for them to want to succeed, and if success is seen to be connected with parental and teacher approval, 'winning' and 'achieving' quickly become a major source of motivation. This guilt feeling is reinforced once children are mature enough to recognise the high degree of emotional and sometimes financial investment their parents have made in their musical lives.

One suspects that under certain circumstances children themselves might not mind 'failing', but in no way do they want to 'fail' their parents and teachers. Therefore if placed in a competitive setting, especially one commanding media attention or regarded as a high status event, the pressure to succeed is enormous. The fear of failure can then be crippling, with some young people becoming quite dysfunctional.

In the training leading up to a competition this guilt-fear syndrome is often accompanied by what might be called crudely a 'recipe- based/survival kit' approach to teaching and coaching, during which students are force-fed and over-taught. Frequently this leads to 'safe', anodyne performances which rely heavily on technical skill but fail to capture the spirit of the music. Such an attitude to performance is reinforced by competitions, as technical facility can easily be identified and fits comfortably into a market economy which emphasises the slick, the cosmetic and the

superficial.

The joy, love and magic of music-making often found in the performances of young children or in a highly charged group like the National Youth Orchestra gradually withers away under competitive pressure. Having tasted failure, many students around the ages of 18, 19 or 20 begin to opt for safety within secure boundaries. Performances then become bland to the point of boredom. This is a tragic indictment on a system of teaching which becomes distorted the more it operates within a highly judgmental, competitive frame.

It goes without saying that music and the arts are a vital life-force in any society. We have a cultural imperative to keep music alive. Competitions might titilate and provide momentory excitement for audiences, but they can only too easily lead to artistic death for the performers. We owe it to young people to keep their artistic flame alive.

Similarly, we owe it to them to develop a system of training which does not perpetually erode their self-confidence and self-esteem. Within the competitive world students, often consumed by self-doubt, become severely judgmental both of themselves and of others. A growing lack of trust develops, which results in a ruthless competitiveness within their music-making and can lead in extreme cases to a form of collective neurosis within an institution.

This unhealthy state might not always be apparent on the surface, but it often takes on a life of its own as part of a hidden agenda. A typical student response is to demonstrate a singular lack of commitment and to resort to an apparent laziness. Many erect their own defence mechanism and hide behind a thin veneer of apathy and cynicism in order to protect themselves both from the pain of perceived failure and from the power of their deeper feelings.

Any human inner world is fragile, and yet having the strength to share this vulnerability is an essential part of an artistic process. The danger is that the stress and pressure of competitions can readily result in students playing a survival game which lacks artistic integrity and fails to embody any form of artistic engagement. This process, I would suggest, is psy-

chologically damaging, musically barren and constitutes nothing less than a negation of education.

Perhaps most important of all, the energy required to succeed both in competition and professional performance often arises from external pressure. Motivation tends to 'react' to external surface stimuli, rather than be rooted within a person. Students caught in this competition 'trap' very rarely 'reach in' and find their own creative energy – a creativity which enables them to take risks, to act in the moment, to be spontaneous, to make imaginative leaps, to put their own authentic stamp on their performance. That is, they are unable to demonstrate the hall-marks of a great artist.

It seems essential that students are given the space, time and opportunity to become more rooted within themselves and within their artistic life. In the final analysis, both their inner motivation and quality of engagement are central to what they have to say as artists. Do we really wish to breed a generation of technically competent performing puppets who are artistically disconnected and contextually unaware?

If there is any validity in the preceding analysis it must be apparent that most young music students will have to come to terms with feeling a 'failure'. Very few will 'win' a significant competition, but most of them will be caught up in the norms of an institution which defines achievement in terms of 'stardom' and personal recognition. As I said earlier, on this view conservatoires are premised on failure! But what might it look like for the winners – for the high-fliers? Those young musicians who are successful in major competitions are quite often confronted with problems of their own – of raised expectations, of excessive demands, of even less opportunity for making choices and for controlling their lives.

Coping with premature success, perhaps even at the early age of 15, is never easy – so much depends on the attitude of parents and teachers. For example, many concert engagements flow after winning a competition and the resulting pressurised life, accompanied probably by an inadequate, undeveloped repertoire, can be overwheling for the young musician. Momentarily, success might appear good for the ego of parent

and child; it might boost the reputation of the teacher and the institution – but unless handled with great care and understanding it can crucify a person's development. At its worst the challenge becomes one of survival, rather than of allowing for a balanced emotional, social and artistic development. Educationally such a system can only be regarded as 'unhealthy'.

I would maintain, then, that this marketing model, with its emphasis on a high public profile end-product, is the central concept underlying a large number of our music competitions – not all, but a significant amount, especially those attracting substantial exposure through the media.

The questions raised by this viewpoint are so serious that they cannot be ignored by those parents, teachers and institutions who really care about the future development of young musicians. From my experience students themselves can be highly illuminating and articulate about the processes they have been subjected to. Their voice is not often heard – perhaps it is time we started to listen to it.

An 'Artistic/Educational' Model of Competitions

In the second part of this lecture I intend to explore an 'Artistic/Educational' view of competitions. Here there is a shift from the marketing of a product to the fostering of artistic understanding and critical reflection within a context which recognises the rapid changes taking place in the world and does not distort the learning process. The educational position underlying this view rests on a certain moral concept of a person and reflects those psychological processes which are underpinned by these values.

My aim is to produce a community of musicians and artists which respects each individual as an end in himself or herself – a community which values self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, inner motivation, personal autonomy, individual choice, creative inner-energy, breadth of perspective and artistic vision. These present a cluster of qualities which are connected with both the art and with the person, and we need to reinforce this connection rather than the disconnection which we have, I think, at the moment.

In what way, then, might competitions fit comfortably within this value system, or is it inevitable that competitions reinforce a discontinuity between the strictly utilitarian aims of those considered worthwhile within the educational and artistic process?

First, one has to be realistic. In the present harsh competitive climate it is unlikely that there will be an end to competitions – the vested interests are too high. On the other hand, it is possible for those people in positions of responsibility to adopt a more enlightened attitude towards competitions. Parents and teachers could help their young musicians to view them with a sense of proportion, whilst competition organisers could be encouraged to modify their procedures, so that each event is seen more as an educational and artistic experience. For example, competitions could be perceived as an integral part of the curriculum along with many other learning experiences.

They could constitute a genuine musical event in the student's life, there-

by presenting a creative challenge, a focus for work, an opportunity to learn new repertoire and to gain performing experience in artificial, demanding circumstances, a chance to be exposed to fellow musicians and possibly to meet professional jurors. On this account competitions are not seen as something 'special'; by taking their place alongside other things in life, a balanced perspective is maintained and the 'killer instinct' is diffused. Perhaps competitions in this sense become nothing more than a concert before supportive listeners, not judges.

It goes without saying that the preparation for such a competition has to be musical and psychological, with the attitudes of parents, teachers and institutions remaining sensitive to the development of the young musician at all times. It would not seem impossible to devise a system which enables students to make a realistic appraisal of themselves in an unthreatening climate – one which highlights the quality of the artistic process and the context in which learning takes place.

The criteria for such an appraisal then need to be examined carefully, because under present circumstances there is a danger that competitions draw out those skills which are readily identifiable and can be assessed within some kind of margin of objectivity. It would seem essential that all the following criteria are adhered to when making judgments about performance. The qualities falling under the domain of Communication and Response, although perhaps less tangible than those under the areas of Experience and Skills, lie at the heart of any convincing performance and must be allowed to blossom rather than wither.

Experience *Relationship between the performer and the music*

Quality of interpretation

Knowing and responding to the music – intuitive awareness, analytical grasp, contextual understanding, insight.

Skills *Skills as a means to an end – serving the music*

Quality of listening and sensitivity to sound: eg: tone, timbre, intonation, ensemble

Technical skills: eg: facility, co-ordination, control
Concentration
Interpretative skills
Communication skills
Creative skills

Communication and Response *The quality of response to the music and the ability to communicate it to an audience*

Quality of engagement – commitment, honesty, sincerity, conviction. Living the music in the moment; making the music one's own; daring to take risks.

The performer must have something to communicate: eg: a love of the music, an expression of joy, the magic and spirit of the music.

The performer must be centred, displaying a creative inner energy and confidence.

Quality of interpersonal awareness between performers.

Accessibility of the performer to the audience – the audience needs to perceive the vulnerability of performance and to share in the creative process.

Sensitivity of the performer to the audience and venue.

Appropriateness of the piece or programme for the audience and venue.

Presentation – verbal and non-verbal forms of presentation.

Audience involvement – active listening and different forms of participation.

We now need to move into fresh terrain and extend this educational argument further, by enabling young musicians to become more open and responsive to the changing needs of the 1990s. Most young classically trained musicians, especially those in conservatoires, are no way in touch with the demands of the 1990s. Many of them are suffering from a musical and cultural tunnel vision which is rooted in the past and reinforced by the traditional system of competitions.

Somehow, by virtue of their talent, they feel that society owes them a living, yet they do not have the breadth of perspective, the flexibility of

attitude or versatility of skill to meet the changes which now confront us. In brief, they have not been prepared to meet the challenges of a contemporary, multicultural world, with its global as well as local affinities.

It is as if they and their teachers are banging their heads against a metaphorical Berlin Wall, failing to recognise that it has been breached and that people are now asking qualitatively different questions on the other side of the wall. Traditional assumptions are being challenged, new boundaries are being drawn, old concepts are being re-defined, new skills are being developed. As art itself is being re-appraised in order to make it more relevant and accessible, our means of communication have to change, leading to a fresh relationship with audiences and to the development of new audiences.

Making the imaginative leap which is necessary to move into the new world certainly challenges many of our cherished preconceptions. No longer can we remain locked into out-dated, narrowly defined concepts of success and achievement. Music institutions have to come to see the validity of different forms of excellence – the future cannot be predicted on one right way, on one view of excellence.

Competitions, therefore, will have to break new ground in order to accommodate these changes and to reflect the needs of the musician of the future. One exciting area of development which can no longer be ignored lies in the exploration of connections, both within music and between art forms. More and more people are working towards a 'holistic' philosophy which fosters a wide open attitude to other people and to their art, as well as encouraging the meeting and engagement of 'opposites' through the making of connections – beween mind and body, performing and composing, performer and audience, classical and popular music, Western and non-Western music, music and theatre, music and dance, music and the visual arts.

Imaginative projects drawing on different forms of music, relating to cross-art forms and involving audiences in a more engaging way could become the basis of a different, more all-embracing kind of competition. As we move towards a more person-centred approach to performance,

thus recognising the importance of individual creativity and ownership, supporting projects could be designed to demonstrate the participant's individual and collective improvisatory, creative skills. Such projects could take the form of a series of workshops operating within the structure of the competition.

Another area that needs to be considered seriously in a competition is that of the development of communication skills, so that musicians can be seen to be relating to and performing convincingly to any audience in any context. Opportunities could be created, placing participants in different educational and community settings, thereby challenging them to make their performances accessible.

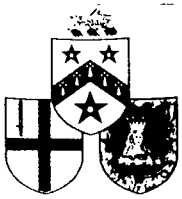
For this one would not be looking for slick, surface performance skills, but the focus would be on the inner confidence and imaginative flexibility of the participants – for example, on their ability to understand, respect and engage an audience; having the versatility and practical skill to cope with changing circumstances; having the creative skill to find a practical solution to a musical or social problem within their own limits.

It could be maintained that competitions are incompatible with a 'holistic' approach to artistic development, but if they are going to remain an integral part of our musical life, as I am sure they will for the time being, the aim, conception, structure and content of competitions need to change. As competitions begin to search for a more 'whole' artist, they will have to become more innovatory and include a matrix of activities such as different projects, creative workshops and community performances, as well as the more traditional forms of performance.

Such an approach would be far more demanding, both for organisers and participants, but it would be less contrived and would relate to a reality which acknowledges the changes taking place in the world. This might be regarded as an unrealistic, utopian vision, but personally I feel that exploring such new avenues is not only possible but essential if young musicians are going to be given the opportunity to meet the challenges of the 1990s.

Gresham College was established in 1597 under the Will of the Elizabethan financier Sir Thomas Gresham, who nominated the Corporation of the City of London and the Worshipful Company of Mercers to be his Trustees. They manage the Estate through the joint Grand Gresham Committee. The College has been maintained in various forms since the foundation. The one continuing activity (excepting the period 1939-45) has been the annual appointment of seven distinguished academics "sufficiently learned to reade the lectures of divyntye, astronomy, musicke, and geometry" (appointed by the Corporation), "meete to reade the lectures of lawe, phissicke, and rethoricke", (appointed by the Mercers Company). From the 16th century the Gresham Professors have given free public lectures in the City. A Mercers' School Memorial Chair of Commerce has been added to the seven 'ancient' Chairs.

The College was formally reconstituted as an independent foundation in 1984. The Governing Body, with nominations from the City Corporation, the Mercers' Company, the Gresham Professors and the City University, reports to the Joint Grand Gresham Committee. Its objectives are to sponsor innovative research and to supplement and complement existing facilities in higher education. It does not award degrees and diplomas, rather it is an active collaborator with institutions of higher education, learned societies and professional bodies.



GRESHAM COLLEGE

Founded 1597

Barnard's Inn Hall,
Holborn, London EC1N 2HH

Telephone: 020 7831 0575
Facsimile: 020 7831 5208
e-mail: enquiries@gresham.ac.uk
Website: http://www.gresham.ac.uk