

**Composer's Corner III:  
Horse or Artist?**

## Abstract

This article serves as the third installment in a six-part serial on the following topics: I: “The composer’s identity within the historical narrative,” II: “Crafting one’s voice,” III: “Horse or artist?,” IV: “A work in progress – *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*,” V: “The composer in exile,” and VI: “Aesthetics and accessibility in the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century.”

In this issue, I discuss the role of competition in the art of creation. For this perspective, I rely upon my experience both as a competitor and adjudicator. I attempt to address the importance of competition for a young composer’s career, the pressure to write within stylistic constraints, and issues of self-promotion/ self-identification. I also discuss the process of adjudication and the ramifications of consensus-based selection for competition awards.

## Introduction

Bela Bartok once famously commented: “competitions are for horses, not artists.” In theory, I absolutely agree with this statement. After all, in an ideal world the composer would not be motivated by the attainment of external (and arguably arbitrary) rewards, in the form of juried selection. However, in most cultures today there are simply more composers than the surrounding economic milieu is willing or able to support. Whether right or not, competitions have largely become the gauge by which a composer’s relevance is established and the primary determinant distinguishing gainfully employed composers from hobbyists or “failures.”<sup>1</sup> I feel it is important to engage in this discussion because, as may be apparent, I question the value of the competition circuit for the field, at least as it currently stands.

In the interest of being forthright, I must explain that I am no stranger to competition. Although a relatively young professional myself, I have already worked several times as an adjudicator for the **Siam Cement Group – Young Thai Artist Award** (of which I am currently the Project Director), the **Goethe Institute – Young Composers of SE Asia Competition and Workshop**, and the **Mahidol Composition Studio Prize** (which I founded and direct). In addition, as the annual host and Program Manager for the **Thailand International Composition Festival (TICF)** – which includes a competition component – I work closely each year with a group of competition finalists. I conducted my ensemble (*Contemporary Enclave*) in the performance of finalist works for TICF 2013. I also helped to organize all rehearsals and performances of finalist works in 2012. So, from the perspective of the jury, as a performer, and as a competition organizer I have a modicum of experience. Regardless of the reservations presented in this article, I have contributed to these projects and will continue to do so because I feel honored to take part in the promotion of and support for the younger generation of composers. In the absence of a paradigm shift in the value perception of art within the culture at large, I am left with little option outside of promoting and contributing to organized competitions if I wish to work positively in support of emerging composers.

I am also familiar with competitions from the perspective of the competitor. For the most part though, I have been attracted to conferences, festivals, and workshops more than prize competitions. Although not involving a prizewinner, these events entail selection for inclusion from a “call for scores,” which is a form of contest. As a participant at **June in Buffalo**, the **SCI National Student Conference**, the **American Composer’s Orchestra/ Penn Presents New Music**, the **U3 Festival**, and several other events, I have gained insight into competition, its importance to emerging composers, the pressure to conform to a “competitive style,” and issues surrounding self-promotion. I placed my works in these events for the experience of working with senior composers, excellent performers, and alongside other emerging composers.

Quite frankly, I have served on juries and submitted to various competitions because I am accustomed to the reality of an execrable economic milieu and I have no authority or influence to alter the greater societal circumstances inducing the need for competition. In effect, this article is my small way of encouraging discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course there are some noteworthy exceptions to this; however, the majority of freelance composers active today either became known after having received an award or were validated by the attainment of a major prize, leading to yet greater success.

## Qualities Encouraged, Quality of Selection

In the larger sense and in general terms, of course competition can be a positive force, not only for the economic encouragement they lend to young artists. First, as any proponent of capitalism is quick to point out, competition encourages greater work ethic and productivity. The theory is that composers will have to work hard and produce many works to compete and this is true for certain personalities. Second, competitions can create a form of vindication and encouragement for the winner, qualities that may often be in short supply within the delicate egos of composers. Third, formal competitions seemingly provide a manner of evaluating the relative quality, relevance, and merit of artists, which can be quite a difficult task in the supply-dominated market, especially since the establishment of objective criteria is impossible.

To the first point, I believe productivity and work ethic are not paramount for a composer. Of course, like all musical pursuit, composition certainly does require discipline in order for the novice eventually to master the behemoth intricacies involved in musical structuring. However, consider for a moment Ravel. One would be hard pressed to call him productive, having only composed eighty or so works in his sixty-seven years. However, his influence is irrefutable, given that a large proportion of these works have found a place in the standard repertoire. His works represent a concentrated effort at perfection, for he conceived of each piece as an individual artwork (a different kind of productivity and work ethic). It is also worth noting that Ravel never won a major award. We could consider many other composers in this same category – those who rose to prominence outside of the competition circuit, yet maintained a concentrated clarity in their work and exerted a lasting contribution to the canon.

To the second point, certainly the winner's ego will be gratified in the wake of a competition. Yet, we must acknowledge that the positive reinforcement will only be gained by a small minority of applicants, the chosen few prizewinners. Also, the line between confidence boosting encouragement and a self-satisfied sense of overconfidence and entitlement is quite thin. This can be dangerous, especially for "young composer" competitions. Yes, competitions can be a provenance of support for promising young composers. All-too-often, though, the *wunderkind* arrives at a place of arrogance and resistance to growth, which could actually negate the chances of achieving greatness with time. So, for some competition winners, success might yield a positive result. However, for others (and, perhaps the majority) winning may actually detract from their potential.

Finally, as to the third point, we must ask what is being distinguished in formal competitions. As one author argues: "[Juries] exist to generate and perpetuate consensus views. They can't make great art, and it's all but impossible for them to agree on great artists. Such disagreement inevitably leads to compromise, which more often than not produces B-plus winners, who please all of the jurors but thrill none of them."<sup>2</sup> Simply by the process by which they are conducted, it may not be possible for juried competitions to select masterworks.

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<sup>2</sup> Teachout, Terry. "Why Piano Competitions will never yield a superstar," <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles> (4 July 2013).

## Outcomes of a Competition-Oriented Field

As a result of the undue influence of formal competition, academia greatly encourages works that are deemed to be “competitive.” This emphasis has ramifications for faculty hire, student development, and, fundamentally, how composition is taught at the university level. To a large extent, gainful employment within academia (which provides, arguably, the last bastion of economic security for composers) depends upon success or failure in this arena. So, students are encouraged to move in the direction with the most probable, favorable outcome, to compose for competitions.

At some level, this process implies that the outcome for a successful competition is the selection of the work or works of the greatest quality. However, the quality of composition does not yield to objective criteria. Just as each composer’s worldview is and should be subjective, so the biases of the jury play a large role in selecting winners. Being experts in the field, this would be fine, were these biases not so often at-odds with the predilections of the audience and performer. Both the audience and performer ought to have a say in this discussion, given the important role competition plays in the proliferating music of tomorrow. To their credit, some competitions factor in this element through the audience choice award, inclusion of performers on the jury, etc. However, this trend remains a minority within formal competitions generally.

Jurists are, of course, biased by their own experiences and this can also contradict the capacity to select the best music of and for the concurrent moment. If a jurist composes in a specific style, for example, they may consciously or unconsciously avoid works in this style or favor works similar to their own. Whatever his or her choice about stylistic criteria, the jurist cannot help being influenced by the priorities they place within their own music. This is to be expected, of course. However, it is important to acknowledge that this may prejudice against the selection of great works.

In this historical moment, there is also a predominant preference for works that are visually appealing on the page. In their defense, jurists often have little choice but to prioritize the appearance of a score, at least in the “first cut,” especially when the volume of submissions is high. This preference is also due in part to the innovations in notation of the twentieth-century.

Of course, this is not wholly negative since some degree of the creative process is evident in the way a score looks. However, in the current milieu, too much preference is given to works with scrupulous details in the score and the appearance of great care taken on the part of the composer. The score is NOT the music and very strong arguments may be offered to support the view that great compositions foster collaboration between the performer and composer. Works with this potential may yield multiple interpretations depending upon the circumstances surrounding individual performance.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the causes, this focus on appearance almost

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<sup>3</sup> I recently had a very engaging conversation with Maria Meerovitch about this issue. She claims that each of her performances are catered to the circumstantial minutiae surrounding the performance, as an event in time and space. For this reason, no two performances of any work can be the same and, especially concerning phrasing, tempo, dynamics, and articulation the number of people in the audience, the temperature of the room, the weather outside the hall, the political circumstances of the day, etc. will all shape the specific performance. Now, I ask: is it really in the best interest of composers to restrict their works to one, ideal performance, with every subtlety controlled on the page? Does this not rob music of one of its most crucial features, namely, collaboration between composer and performer?

certainly overlooks some wonderful musical works. As a composer of works that don't usually *look* innovative, I can empathize with the frustration of young musicians who have great musical ideas, yet whose aesthetic inclinations are out of sync with the dominant paradigm of this time.

I believe we must recognize that, when motivated by the accomplishment of prizes, probably the quality of works is compromised. Composing to please an imagined jury leads to disingenuous work, an overdue focus on concurrent fads (which will almost certainly be steeped in the recent past<sup>4</sup>), and, most likely, inferior art.

## Solutions?

The fact is that competition will always be integral to the field of composition. However, as I have attempted to address in this article the current process for distinguishing emerging composers is somewhat flawed. In my view, competition: 1) fundamentally discourages subjectivity in favor of works mired in someone other than the composer's conception of what constitutes meaningful art; 2) opposes the impetus toward insightful engagement with society, instead diluting the impact of new works 3) is based upon compromise, not quality; 4) does not obtain the educational component enough; 5) exerts too much negative influence on composition education; 6) reinforces stylistic restrictions, rather than pluralistic approaches to art; and, in some cases, 7) actually works to the detriment of emerging composers' potential. I leave the reader with a few suggestions to improve the competition milieu:

- 1) As often as possible, competitions for young composers should include a workshop component with the jury. This will encourage growth as a tangible outcome.
- 2) Instead of awarding one prize, perhaps more competitions (at all levels: emerging, open call, etc.) should award several prizes equally. This would allow juries the opportunity to include different styles and would reduce the need for compromise, to the detriment of quality.
- 3) Competitions should promote a variety of aesthetic goals, to encourage pluralism within the field. This prescription may seem vague and may be difficult to deal with concretely. However, I feel this aspect is crucial to the revitalization of outcomes that will benefit the society at large.
- 4) Composition educators must encourage their students to seek a unique voice, not mimic the style of "competitive" works.
- 5) As often as possible, competitions should award commissions, rather than cash prizes. Commissions provide greater opportunities for growth than money alone by pairing the winner with experienced performers of contemporary music.
- 6) More competitions should encourage input from the audience and performers. In fact, as often as possible the voice of these adjudicators should be equal to that of the "experts."

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is worth acknowledging that some juries will place a primacy on "freshness."

- 7) Juries must consider works that don't *look* pretty.<sup>5</sup> Music is not made of paper. Music is resonant bodies vibrating together and alone (at times remaining perfectly still), to meet in the mind of the listener. This cannot be overstated.
- 8) Composition educators must discourage their students from placing too much emphasis on the outcome of competitions.
- 9) If the goal is to distinguish outstanding artists and encourage their professional development and potential for economic security, perhaps competition for a broad National Artist Program – with a salary component – would better serve this need.

In conclusion, we must actively consider that some attributes formal competitions encourage *are not those we should promote in a composer*. How can an artist hold a mirror to his society if his or her livelihood is weighed (and perhaps dropped) in the balance? Won't this induce composers to sacrifice artistry for pragmatism, in pursuit of vindication and encouragement? In addition, can we really expect the competition circuit to remain unbiased in this, seeking only the best interest of society in the selection of "winners?" Even in a comparatively free market structure such as that found in the modern US, reliance upon the waning generation to select its successor often at best favors a diluted, derivative work.

As I consistently contend the most important job of the composer is to share an honest, subjective view of the world. This view should be entirely contemporaneous to the composer's circumstances and must, in some way, be uncompromising. Even if we accept that, in the current state of affairs, selected works are of a very high quality, we must acknowledge the cost of inclusion in the winner's circle. Out of respect to the younger generation, we ought to at least consider other possible methods for improving formal competition.

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<sup>5</sup> This suggestion is really difficult to quantify and even more difficult to prescribe but I feel it is essential.