

5-25-2017

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Anna, "Piano, Performance, Politics: The World of Classical Piano Competitions in an Increasingly Globalized World" (2017). *Grants & Fellowships*. 30.
<http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/honors-grants-and-fellowships/30>

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Piano, Performance, Politics:
The World of Classical Piano Competitions in an Increasingly Globalized World

Anna Thompson

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A musician will be told this hackneyed phrase consistently throughout his or her career: the classical music industry is dying. At first glance, this appears to be true. Pop music appears to be one of the few genres appealing to a mass audience, and the majority of people cannot name more than a few classical musicians. Those who listen to and perform classical music are now viewed as the musical elite, an unreachable club that looks down at the music of Michael Jackson and Kanye West. The numbers are few: classical concert attendance has dropped in the United States by 2.8% between 2002 and 2012 (A Decade of Arts Engagement 15). However, a surprising statistic arises from the classical music world: international classical piano competitions are increasing at a staggering rate— over 650% from 1990 to 2009 (Johnson)— and more and more aspiring pianists continue to strive toward glory in the competitive field. Musicians (competitors and judges alike) span the globe to participate in competitions that are the pride of the country in which they take place. People may not realize that the piano competition world is alive with criticism, politics, prejudice, and bias. Running parallel to this are trends that cannot be ignored: China, Russia, and the United States rise as top winners in modernity. Simultaneously, those same countries are becoming increasingly influential within global politics. This research proposal seeks to find possible explanations for these geo-specific patterns as well as faults and merits of the powerful industry.

In terms of overused sayings, the classical pianist has heard his or her fair share. In my personal experience, providing the fact that I am a classical pianist elicits a consistent response: “I wish I played (or, even more likely, didn’t quit) the piano.” This comment is regularly followed by a dreamy look as the individual pictures themselves gracefully sitting on the piano bench, not warming up, and stunning their friends and family present with their musical prowess.

The classical musician, especially a competitive one, must resist rolling their eyes.

Like any successful athlete, expertise in any activity requires thousands of hours of practice as well as warming up before any demonstration of one’s skill. Many are familiar with Malcolm Gladwell’s 10,000 hour rule from his revered book *Outliers*. In this book which explores the methodology of successful people throughout many disciplines, Gladwell concluded that 10,000 hours of “deliberate practice” are necessary to become an expert in an area of study (Gladwell). Though criticism has arisen against Gladwell, many concede that the theory still holds true for music (Baer).

The culture of focus and discipline remains evident in the world of classical music. Though non-musicians may recoil at the thought of practicing a craft decreasing in pop-culture for six to eight solitary hours daily, many people studiously continue to advance their skill in an instrument. How could this be? I, a collegiate-level pianist who prides herself on knowledge of classical music, could name the modern concert pianists who play with prestigious orchestras around the world on my two hands. Even worse, the amount of concerts that the elite few play are miniscule in comparison to only orchestral concerts. The Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestra and its connecting chamber and small groups perform 86 concerts planned for January

through May of 2017¹. Only around 15% of those concerts feature a concert pianist, and six pianists share that 15 percent. The concert pianists featured are world-renowned and famous, including Emanuel Ax on January 26-28, Lang Lang on February 1, and Yuja Wang from May 26-28 (LA Philharmonic). One fact is clear: concert pianist performance opportunities are scarce, and concert attendees would like to see the huge names in the classical realm and not burgeoning stars.

However, one aforementioned statistic inexplicably contradicts all stated above: participants in international piano competitions have increased by 650% from 1990 to 2009 (Johnson). Though the percentages of concert pianists are extremely low, both youth and adult pianists are devoting entire lifetimes for only a few minutes of judged performance on stage. With this in mind, it can be discouraging to realize that an undeniable aspect of music is opinion. How does one determine which participant is superior if all have breathtaking technique and an undying love and understanding of the instrument? Many have critiqued the classical music world for promoting musicians to excessively emote while performing in order to prove to the judges that they are beings with classical music running through their very veins. In addition, judges have even conceded that first impressions, biases, and previous knowledge about a pianist can affect the scores that are given to them (Johannesen). What are the politics behind an increase in ‘artificial musicianship’, if such a thing exists? Their detection can be a matter of opinion, but a criticism toward the rise of said artificiality has blatantly become more prevalent. In addition, what are the underlying politics and bias that lie underneath the surface of international piano competitions? Furthermore, is there a correlation between the current state of

¹ Note: These are not the season date for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and should simply be interpreted as a small portion of concerts that are played during their musical season.

a country's government and the success of their participants? Statistics show that higher incomes correlate with how many US citizens attend classical music concerts (A Decade of Arts Engagement 15). Could that correlation also be seen through a bigger lens to apply to entire countries? If so, perhaps one could further connect concert attendance with classical music exposure, and, subsequently, playing the instruments and competing.

Piano competitions are a fascinating lens into the functioning of a country as well as the state of classical music in a contradictory rise and fall of popularity. Like olympic athletes, classical pianists serve as representatives of the countries of which they are from; however, unlike Usain Bolt and Michael Phelps, musicians rely on the opinion of the judges of the competitions and the biases that may be present within those individuals.

Finally, if there is prejudice, corruption, and implicit unfairness in competitions, could one argue them to have any merit at all?

I found myself drawn toward this subject for myriad reasons. The primary source of my fascination with piano competitions was my own personal experience with them throughout my life. Although I practiced only between one to two hours a day, I consistently trained for the many competitions provided for young artists from age eight to eighteen. My progress in music was relative to the nearness of a competition; the success was measured by the color of the ribbon or medal. In some cases, cash prizes were given. However, one fact never escaped my brain: even if I played an extremely difficult piece to the best of my ability, there was the distinct possibility that I would not receive recognition. Contrarily, I could win by playing exceptionally ordinarily. After examining this, I realized the real prevalence of bias: I preferred the way I played because of recordings I had listened to previously and my teacher's perception of the

piece. The judge preferred what she had heard growing up as well as how she would have played it. No one was necessarily correct.

Piano competitions are an excellent indicator of what is occurring in the countries of origin of the participants. The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition website provides their winners of the past few years: the first, third, and fourth place winners were from China last year (Van Cliburn). Artists such as Lang Lang are finding wild success in piano, and there is a great influx of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean participation in competitions. As New York Times journalist Michael Johnson said, quote:

“The temperature continues to rise as more pianists, notably from China, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong, flood into the competition world just as concert career opportunities shrink. The Alink-Argerich Foundation data shows that since 1990 the percentage of Asian players has gone up from 21 percent to more than 35 percent, the Chinese showing the greatest leap ahead” (Johnson).

There is also a large presence of people from the United States and Russia. In the Euro-centric classical world, this is a fascinating trend that should not be ignored. Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt were European men, and their work is played seemingly across all borders. This is an adage to globalization and the spread of information throughout the increasingly communicative world.

Past judges have openly critiqued piano competitions for their unfairness and corruption. Concert pianist Grant Johannesen (Johannesen) and London International Piano Competition

judge Michael Johnson have written books and articles, respectively, designed to uncover the truth behind large names such as Van Cliburn and the Chopin International Piano Competition (Johnson). Documentaries have also been made to chronicle the competitive process. However, little work has been done to investigate the merit of international piano competitions paralleled with the opinion of those both facilitating and participating in them. Likewise, few explanations have been put forth for the correlation between governmental structure and the cultural view of competition and the success of foreign competitors.

I propose exploring these questions by traveling to Fort Worth, Texas to attend the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. The competition is held between the 25th of May and the 10th of June. I will set up interviews with the judges, competitors, and audience members. With a set of precise questions aforementioned, I will examine their perception of country identity, validity of competitions, and their desired outcome of the competition. Winning is an obvious desire. However, people may respond that they wish to bring pride to their country or family. This is seen on Russia's Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, where Vladimir Putin references the pride that a winner of the competition will bring to his or her country (About the Competition). In order to understand International Piano Competitions, I must speak with those who coordinate the events as well as the musicians who participate in them.

I would also like to speak to Van Cliburn winner Jon Nakamatsu (Jon) and world-renowned pianist Lang Lang to hear their opinion on the validity of piano competitions. I will hopefully be able to communicate with both of these people through personal connections. The classical musical world is small, and though I am on the fringe I hope that I can connect with these musical powerhouses. Finally, I would like to research the Alink-Argerich Foundation,

which is the epicenter for piano competition information (Alink). It was this website that led me to discover the date and time of Van Cliburn. Michael Johnson said that the foundation was responsible for putting teachers in a position of power to influence the success of their students (Johnson). Further research should be done to either confirm or negate these claims. My findings would either result in a paper and presentation. I hypothesize that the musicians I interview will deny that artificial musicianship is present in music, but the judges and audience members may have enough distance from the competition to agree that there is a great increase in musical artificiality. I also hypothesize that the most successful participants will be citizens of China, Russia, or the United States. If the competition results are consistent with my research, there could be a correlation between political strength and governmental organization and success within the classical music world.

In order to explore these questions, I would require a round-trip plane ticket from Spokane, Washington to Fort Worth, Texas. I would also need accommodations for the last five days of the competition (June 6-10). An undeniable contradiction must be explained: why, in an increasingly inopportune musical field, are young musicians increasing in both number and intensity to compete in international piano competitions? Is this partly due to an increasingly globalized world and the subsequent aspect of nationalistic competition? I hope to answer all of these questions and more with the Honors Research Grant.

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