

In The Eyes of the Jury Member

On evaluating the competitors and jury members in piano competitions

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my first words I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Fryderyk Chopin Institute for their invitation. As always, I treat it as a great distinction.

The task that I am about face is far from simple. Any attempt at evaluating the work of competition jury members is a sort of an attempt to review the reviewers. I do not consider myself the most appropriate person to do that. There are several reasons for that:

First of all, I do not aspire to be a researcher, a scientific scholar who uses tools allowing him to see the problem in question in a synthetic manner. I do not follow most of the competitions on a daily basis.

Secondly, the matter that I was asked to present here is extremely complex and escapes general definitions.

Thirdly, while considering the people who could try to address this matter, my humble person should be considered at a second or third place – for reasons such as my relatively small experience.

Since I stand here today, however, I will attempt to present my opinions on the work in competition committees in the most concise and substantial manner possible. These opinions are very subjective. The point of view that I will be presenting is also very personal. It results from my care for reliable and possibly non-controversial appraisal of the young pianists' play.

Competitions are and will certainly remain a significant element of artistic education in general. They entail many positive aspects. They allow friendships to form, to become acquainted with the play of peers from the most distant countries of the world, to meet extraordinary pianists and teachers and to ask them for opinions. Each success in a competition is a trigger for further work – it is the best motivation to accept new challenges. I am certain that there are many positive aspects. However, I would not like to focus on these excessively. Instead I propose to ponder on the problems and potential threats that are posed by such competitions. Even if my point of view is affected by exaggeration, I think that it is high time to start talking about certain matters. That way or another, prevention is always better than cure.

I gained my personal experience as a jury member at competitions at all levels of education, starting with competitions for 8-9 year old children, through youth competitions (local, national and international), up to prestigious and widely recognized international competitions. Among the latter, I should mention the M. Long and J. Thibaud competition in Paris, the I.J. Paderewski Competition in Bydgoszcz and, of course, the 17th International Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw – which was an extraordinary honour to me.

While comparing the methods used by the juries in competitions that vary so greatly, one may certainly notice many common practices. There are differences, however. Let us start by taking a closer look at the children competitions...

SMALL COMPETITIONS – small problems?

In case of the youngest piano playing apprentices, we mostly assess their artistic potential, their sensitivity to sound and their creativity of expression. In a sense, we attempt to foresee their future artistic development. We need to understand that in many cases the pupils are under such a great influence of their teachers that the presented program is completely "staged". Often a beautiful melodic line is a result of hours of exercises under the supervision of the teacher and does not necessarily confirm the musicality of a child.

While a picture drawn by an adult and brought by a child as their own homework may be easily exposed, in case of a musical composition this is not so simple. Moreover, we often provoke the teachers to excessive interventions in the world of the child's imagination by requiring "mature interpretations." The methods that are observed in some countries, consisting in playing the "model interpretation" to children and forcing them to approach the perfect model by multiple repetitions is an extreme example of irresponsible and non-developmental approach to teaching. It is thus an important role of the jury member to notice the unnatural play of the child. It means to distinguish between what is "pre-arranged" and what is the child's actual artistic proposal. Accidental accents, insufficient length of pauses, excessively quick and inadequate raising of hands from the keyboard after a finished performance are pieces of information that require special attention. Theatrical gesturing is also an interesting phenomenon. It does not always express the experiences and immersion in the music. We often see gestures that are learned as part of the show and we ask ourselves – why teach such behaviour?

Assessing the youngest pianists is very difficult. We should not expect deep musical knowledge and the children programs are usually very short – which poses an additional difficulty – as we have little time to clarify our opinions. The responsibility for the judgement, on the other hand, is extremely serious. In extreme cases, a failure might mean the resignation from further piano education. It must also be remembered how easy it is to be mistaken while assessing the youngest and treating an artificial copy prepared by a teacher as a beautiful and natural original.

At this point, you might want to ask me why I am speaking about that here, at the Fryderyk Chopin Institute Conference, focused on the largest international competitions?

My view is that all possible problems encountered by us later in the assessment process stem from the early education phase.

Before I shall attempt to demonstrate this, please let me shed some light on youth competitions.

In these competitions, the criteria are slightly different. While in the case of the youngest, abilities serve as the decisive appraisal criteria, in the following years the skills start to play a major role. Often it is mostly the skills that are decisive for the appraisal. The general advancement in piano teaching techniques often causes that at the age of fourteen, young people reach an extreme manual freedom. At this age it is typical for a young person to be fascinated by technical possibilities, mostly fluency. Unfortunately, it is rarely the case that the technical capabilities are followed by artistic sensitivity and musical knowledge. It is of course a very broad problem requiring

precise analysis; it is however, noteworthy that the manual fluency of youth often far exceeds the understanding of style, form and body of the performed compositions. This is where the jury's problems begin. Is the extraordinary technical potential the decisive criterion? Will the young pianist with such potential be more artistically mature within the next two years? The questions multiply... To what extent should we turn a blind eye to substantive errors such as a bad notation? To what extent should the appraisal concern the obvious mistakes of the teacher that could be rectified within a single day? Should the interpretation be solely intuitive or should it also be based on the knowledge to a certain extent? Is it allowed to "correct" the composer by changing the rhythm, articulation and the tempo of the composition? The questions are many and I'm afraid that each jury member may provide slightly different answers. As a consequence, their appraisal will also differ (hopefully only slightly) from the appraisal of other judges.

In my opinion, while it is rather uncontested that in the case of competitions for children the focus should be on predispositions, in case of the youth the appraisal should be more complex - giving consideration also to the knowledge and skills - what is important - presented here and now.

THE GRAND COMPETITION

Expectations...

It is difficult to ultimately define the procedure that would have to be followed for the result of a globally renowned competition to meet all the expectations. In fact, what are these expectations?

Let us attempt to narrow the considerations to just one competition – The Chopin Competition.

The winner should:

1. Understand and feel Chopin's music in a manner consistent with the intentions and style of the composer, preferably while considering the performing traditions and at the same time proposing a modern, original reading of the works (while not being iconoclastic).
2. Be charismatic, be able to enrapture the audience.
3. Be able to assume the responsibilities of the winner of the first prize, that is, be a pianist who is impeccably prepared in terms of their skills, exhibit a wide repertoire and be prepared to start their career with all the consequences that are entailed. They should be immune to stress and failures, be able to submit to the dictatorship and rigour of the impresarios.

Is it possible to reconcile these qualities?

I am certain of one thing. Chopin would not have made it! The number of his confirmed concerts demonstrates that clearly. It is hard to imagine his difficult character, frequent lack of decisiveness, his health problems and... submission to impresarios and full availability.

It is thus someone who is mentally different from the composer himself. Can such a person, however, enter the imagination of the composer and be authentic? That is right: **authenticity!**

Here, we touch upon the first problem that we have already encountered in case of the “small competitions.” Is what we hear an authentic and spontaneous expression or a staged theatrical performance prepared for the purposes of what we may now call show-business? After all, the directors of this performance are the same – the teachers. Some time ago, Professor Jasiński has aptly reproved us, the younger teachers, not to give the student a caught fish (that is, a ready interpretation), but to give them a fishing rod (a working tool).

Unfortunately, the pressure of results and career (also teaching career), causes many professors to provide their pupils with a ready solution (that is, the interpretation) instead of tools. The product is often so authentic that it is virtually impossible to distinguish it from plagiarism. In combination with a perfect execution, which is generally common (as we practice that from our early days), it produces a very high chance of success at a competition.

The problems arise only after the competition, when it turns out that without their teacher, the pianist is helpless and lost. It is then that it becomes obvious that the jury did not make the right decision – they did not see through the mystification.

Additionally, the successes of other pianists, rejected in competitions, confirm that as well.

Let us now address the second problem that has been raised earlier – **theatrical expression**. The care for one’s image is very common nowadays. This is the fulfilment of the expression “fine feathers make fine birds”. Our world is under the dictatorship of the media. Social engineering has also penetrated the world of music. Beautiful covers of CD albums increasingly frequently resemble those that used to be associated with popular music. Well, sales and income matters after all, and this draws attention. An Internet audience of one million that follows a piano competition has its own criteria. How often the video quality matters to them more than the audio transmission! That way or another, the phenomenon of lossy mp3 recordings in the times when a 32-bit or higher encoding is possible is also symptomatic. One's appearance is thus important (also, or even – most of all). If a less-involved music lover had any doubts about what we wish to convey, he should be facilitated with our gestures and mimics. Unfortunately, this does not always seem natural.

The “amazement” with an unexpected modulation supported by the raising of eyebrows and a sudden tilt of the head backwards rarely turns out natural. A repeatedly presented artificial gesture leaves a bad taste in the mouths of at least a part of the members of the jury. Very often, however, the pianists using and overusing similar “tricks” gain the audience’s approval. The arsenal of the measures that are used is successively growing and the similarity to natural behaviour is on the rise. Politicians are also taught how to behave in front of the cameras... and the results are very good...

What is a jury member supposed to do when he senses a skewed interpretation and inconsistency between the gestures and the music? What are they supposed to do when, – according to the audience and the critics – they are evaluating the most creative personality of the competition?

And theatrical expression is formed at a very early stage, in childhood...

There is one more analogy with the children’s competitions – **the length of the programme**.

Contrary to what might be expected, it isn’t only the youngest pianists who are assessed based on a 10-15 minutes of programme. The preliminary qualification round of a grand

competition is only slightly longer. We assess an adult pianist based on 10-15 minutes of music. It would be hard to arrange it differently if there are 450 participants. Is it possible to “perfectly stage” such ten minutes? Of course it is.

Now, let us consider several analogies to youth competitions.

The advancement of the piano teaching techniques in the past few decades is undisputed. This especially concerns the **element of fluency**. While comparing the levels of the current competitions to those from 50 years ago, there is no doubt that back then we did not hear such a number of „perfectly executed” most difficult études. It used to be unique to hear an entire opus of Chopin’s études. Today, on the other hand, it is quite common. Having had the privilege to work in the commission selecting from over 450 CDs submitted to the last edition of the Chopin Competition, I can attest that at least 350 of them complied to the standards of professional performance in terms of the candidates' technique. The fluency of most young pianists was at the highest level and the tempos of the études often exceeded the composer’s recommendations. In many cases, however, the drive to display one’s skills dominated over the musical meaning of the composition, not to mention the form. The technically excellent codas of ballads did not always carry the emotional load that is so essential in this music.

How to assess that? Please note that extremely quick performances always gain the applause of the audience.

Contrary to what one may expect, in this case the dilemmas of the judge are not substantially different from the doubts raised while judging 15 year old players. The questions that we ask ourselves are practically the same. The difference is the fact that a 15 year old still has time to mature artistically, while a winner of a major competition is expected to immediately confirm their value, not only as a proficient pianist, but also as a fully developed musician. I do not need to mention how difficult the choices are between very talented 17 year olds and mature, yet not phenomenal 27 year olds. Is there a conversion factor? Of course there isn’t. If so, however, we shall always encounter controversies.

Every time that I am appointed as a member of the jury, I dream of a situation that is as easy to evaluate as possible: one great individual fulfilling all the possible expectations and several other outstanding pianists, standing out from the others and – at best - different from each other. This would give a chance of a result that is not causing many controversies.

Usually, however, it is not that easy. The greatest problem is always posed by a lack of leaders and a good or very good, equal level of the competitors. In such a case, even the most elaborate evaluation system is doomed to failure. The differences are slight, often a decimal or even centesimal fraction of a point is decisive in terms of the qualification to the next stage. The decision whether to award 17 or 18 points may be a question of a competitor’s further participation.

This is truly difficult. Generally the area of the so-called „averageness” always causes the most controversies. We hear of the jury’s injustice or even their ill-will. Throughout over a dozen years of my experience in participating in juries, I have not encountered such situations. Of course, the behaviour of some individuals is sometimes a cause of bewilderment, but generally it does not affect the final judgement. Despite that, however, many judgements cause controversies. Again, it is worth to look at the matter in the light of children’s and youth competitions.

ON THE EVALUATION OF CANDIDATES AND THE ASSESSMENT OF THE JURY – the common contestation

Regrettably, even at the earliest stages of education, the jury's decisions are being questioned. This is led both by the parents and the teachers of the young competitors to whom the prize or title of their pupil is of a higher value than their correct and systematic artistic development. The pressure for results is often absolutely disproportionate to the rank of the event. Whether the verdict is correct or incorrect, if it is against our expectations – it is a bad verdict. The most detrimental fact is that the contestation is often made in the presence of the children. The pedagogical effect is disastrous. At this very point we start to tear down the authority that was established with great difficulty. The consequences are immediate...

At the youth level the problem escalates. It is not hard to imagine the comments of the disappointed participants. A pattern emerging from the impressions of the care-takers from the previous years is repeated (the lesson is learned). Generally, it does not matter whether my play was good; it is important that the judgment was unquestionably unjust. This is supported by teachers, parents and friends. Sometimes, another intriguing element comes into play. It happens that a jury member approaches a participant who did not win the first prize and expresses their opinion that this participant was – without any doubts – the winner... The other members of the jury, however, have failed.

This all sounds rather pessimistic. I am sure that the presented vision is exaggerated and one-sided, however some tendencies may certainly be clearly noted throughout the recent years. We do have a problem with building authority. We destroy them very easily. Of course, to be honest, often the authorities lead to their own failure. But after all, does it concern only piano competitions?

At the current level of performances, the evaluation of the young pianists' play became a truly problematic matter. I shall even risk to say that the same competition held for the second time, in the same conditions and with the same interpretations of the participants, could end with different results. The changes would certainly not be fundamental, but they could be considered significant. Suffice to mention an example of a winner of a grand competition who – due to her place in the preliminary qualifying round, should not have participated in the first stage.

A few words on the REGULATIONS AND JURY MEMBERS

It is an important task of the organizer of the competition to prepare possibly optimal regulations regarding the jury's work. Of course, this does not solve all the problems resulting from the differences in the jury members' opinions, but it certainly decreases the level of their randomness. It seems that the commonly applied correction system (in case of score-based assessment) is a just solution. The system eliminates accidental errors of single persons and compensates for the effect of hypothetical personal animosities. The system of double scoring used in the last Chopin Competition (the yes/no method and additional scoring system with correction) seems optimal. The otherwise proper rule of non-consultation of jury members before making their evaluation is also quite problematic. Unfortunately, this rule is very difficult to enforce. The members of the jury like to share their observations on a current basis. In such

cases (whether consciously or not) they often succumb to the influence of others and change their scoring. An accidental public statement such as “I have expected something more” or “How can anyone interpret this piece this way” may cause slight corrections in the scoring of other jury members, and this, in turn, may be decisive for the candidate’s assessment. Of course, there are juries who strictly abide by the rule regarding non-consultation. I do think, however, that these juries are a minority.

The rule of publishing complete scoring protocols that has been introduced in the recent years and is increasingly applied, seems to be a generally good idea. This rule may indirectly influence the increase of “consultation tendencies” among juries fearing excessive differences between their own assessment and the other scores, but it certainly constitutes a disciplining factor. This, of course, gives rise to an entirely different set of problems. After the competition, our colleague pianists who are the teachers of the rejected participants have the access to the scores. Sometimes friendships end, and antagonisms are born. This is just a side effect.

One thing is certain. No regulation may guarantee a good result of the competition. The human factor is always the dominating element. It should be reasonable to believe that performing pianists who select the winners (and especially the first prize winner), do not treat them as a potential competition on the music market. This would be disastrous. A question should thus be raised: is a young pianist-jury member who postulates to not award the first prize at an important competition credible?

THE CRISIS OF THE FORMULA OF A COMPETITION?

Is the formula of a competition undergoing a crisis? Considering the number of newly established competitions – it is not the case. Such a number of events, however, causes their value to decline. Today, to a pianist dreaming of a career, a first prize in a single competition does not change much. This results in the tendency to “collect” competition prizes. How often do we hear the same persons, presenting the same program (horror of horrors!), several or in the extreme cases, over a dozen times a year. Do these persons have at least a little time to study new repertoire or, at least, to reflect upon their interpretation? The pace of life that we impose on ourselves, makes us devoid of time necessary for an in-depth analysis of our own performance. This is why we witness more and more good, but also superficial interpretations in competitions.

No better method of evaluating musicians than a competition has been invented so far. Moreover, the formula is increasingly penetrating the electronic media. TV shows with celebrities, online competitions where the pianists’ play is evaluated based on recordings registered in lossy formats are undergoing dynamic development. The audience likes to see rivalry and demands participation in the evaluation of the contestants. Oftentimes qualifications are not necessary not only to perform, but also to judge.

I would prefer to be an optimist as far as the future of the piano competitions is concerned. The development of the evaluation rules is our duty, although we need to be aware that there are no perfect solutions. The selection of jury members who are both moral and artistic authority figures, who are able to be above their own particular interests is necessary if we wish for the idea of a competition to survive. The achievement of the National Fryderyk Chopin Institute, namely the last-years competition, encourages to reject pessimistic visions and to look into the future with

hope and conviction that the grand competition idea established nearly a century ago is alive and well.

Not everything, however, will depend on the organizers and the jury members. The attitude of the young pianists, assuming the possibility that someone better might appear in the competition and their kind acceptance of that fact shall have a crucial meaning. This needs to be learned starting from the youngest age. This, is our investment in the future.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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