

## For Students: On Competitions

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I must say that I have a love/hate relationship with composition competitions. On the one hand, it is immensely gratifying if you win, especially if there is a significant cash prize or performances awarded. On the other hand, when you lose, and you do lose often, it becomes very easy to equate your abilities as a composer with your results in these competitions.

The words “if” and “when” in the preceding paragraph are chosen deliberately: winning a competition is, for most composers, a very rare occurrence. It is an event that happens as much by luck as it does by skill. Not winning, however, takes neither luck nor skill, and each composer understands that this is the likely outcome when he or she enters a competition.

Yet we still compete, almost any time we can. Why? Unfortunately, one significant way in which emerging composers can establish themselves is by winning competitions. Some performers look at a composer’s record and think that because he or she won these prizes, he or she must be good. Potential employers (usually colleges or universities, as composers with advanced degrees and experience gravitate toward these institutions because, by and large, these are the institutions with composition programs) use awards as a way to limit the field of potential employees. This means that it is more or less essential that a young composer win a few awards. Composers who do not win may be undervalued because they seem to lack “prestige.”

The rub here is that by no means does winning a competition mean that you are a good composer. The nature of adjudication is completely arbitrary, regardless of how fair

the competition is. Judges, like all human beings, like what they like. They bring a set of priorities to the adjudication process, and the pieces are evaluated according to those criteria. The winning piece, then, is the one that most closely matches the judges' ideals. And though there may be several pieces that match well, usually only one can be awarded, so in the case of a tie, the judge will often rely on instinct to determine the winner.

Is that fair? Well, yes. The majority of judges are fair, experienced, well-trained musicians who work hard to ensure that every entry receives due consideration. Having been on that side too, I can attest to how difficult the process is. Many times the number of entries is staggering. There is a great deal of time involved in adjudicating, and it goes without saying that judges have other responsibilities they must attend to. Why should they not be able to use their personal aesthetics to guide them toward selecting a winner? Why train them to be independent, creative musicians if they will not be able to function in that capacity?

The result, though, is that the best piece does not always win. Many judges will stipulate to this, of course, as will many of the submitting composers. We accept this as the basic premise of competitions. Why, then, should it (does it) matter who wins these—why do we take them so seriously? Without objective, universal standards for comparing one piece with another, how can one piece be determined to be “better” than another? Ultimately, then, are awards valuable at all in determining the artistic merit of a composer?

For demonstration purposes, here is a partial list of composers who are generally considered to be great but have never won the Pulitzer Prize, an award considered by

many to be the field's most prestigious honor: Bela Bartok, Gyorgy Ligeti, Phillip Glass, Steve Reich, John Cage, Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Pierre Boulez, Joan Tower, Chen Yi, Leonard Bernstein, Libby Larsen, Nicholas Slomninsky, William Albright, Henry Cowell, David Diamond, Tan Dun, Hans Eisler, Brian Ferneyhough, Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhannes, Jennifer Higdon, Christopher Theofanidis, Micahel Daugherty, Lowell Liebermann, David Maslanka, Toru Takemitsu, Conlon Nancarrow, Michael Nyman, Frederic Rzewski, Anthony Braxton, Samuel Adler, Augusta Read Thomas, Michael Torke, Edgard Varese, Iannis Xenakis, and Frank Zappa. All of these composers, and many, many more, still had huge international careers without ever winning the Pulitzer Prize (though I will add parenthetically that some of these composers may still). Each of these composers composed great music despite this obvious oversight. Did it matter that they didn't win? Are they less good at what they do?

So with an arbitrary adjudication process in one hand, and a market imperative to win in the other, coupled with a general lack of public support for new music, few available teaching positions, and virtually no sustainable income from composing, how can we possibly continue to compose music?

We can continue if our self-worth is not dependent upon winning competitions. Winning only helps us become employed, it does not determine how we develop as a composer, or what we achieve in terms of musical expression. Winning a prize does not guarantee an enthusiastic audience response (by the way, how many people in the general, non-professional music population—or even in the professional music population for that matter—can name three Pulitzer Prize-winning compositions?), nor does it help the performers want to play your piece as well as they can. Winning certainly

does not inspire new ideas that lead to new pieces, or the discovery of new techniques, or collaborations with colleagues in other artistic media. In short, winning competitions does not make you a better composer. It can only make you feel good about yourself for a relatively short period of time, and becoming dependent upon the congratulations of others in this way will ultimately prevent you from achieving your potential. For if your self-esteem is based on a judge you don't know telling you how great you are, then you simply are not prepared to deal with the adversity of being a professional musician. You will not possess the tools you will need to develop your capabilities from within your own soul, and within your own mind.

However, if your self-worth is based on personal achievement when compared to standards you have set for yourself, you can find the motivation to continue despite all the negative feedback associated with a career in music. Your successes will be your own, independent of anyone else. Your art will prosper from the courage of your convictions, experiences, and confidence.

Ultimately, the competitions we composers should focus most on is the competition for the hearts and ears of the audience and for the respect of the performers. Without performers, no audience will hear our music. Without audiences, no performers will play our music. Winning those prizes, consistently, with integrity and humility, will do more for our careers than winning an award, even one as special as the Pulitzer.

Although, a pat on the back every now and then, though, can be pretty nice.