

The murky music prize

Our classical music competitions can be corrupt,
says Jessica Duchen

Tuesday, 21 April 2009

It's competition season in classical music. I used to enjoy spotting the rising stars, but no longer. For if ever there was proof that self-regulation is useless, it is to be found in music competitions, where everything depends on the personal opinions of eight to 12 jurors. Perdition beckons.

Some competitions have helped to launch fine careers, with relative impartiality, and support their winners with a roster of engagements plus prize money which sometimes runs to as much as \$50,000. But under that tip it seems that there lies an iceberg of nepotism, sexual coercion, financial greed and downright megalomania that has gone unchecked for decades.

Last week I received a message from a Facebook group called "10,000 Musicians against Corruption in Music Competitions". Ben, its founder, told me his story, a saga which reveals how some contests advance jury members' students, lovers and children, eliminating players who are "too good" to avoid showing up the failings of the favoured, and by-passing the rigidity of a marking system in favour of "discussion". Ben's group demands that all competition processes be made public and transparent.

Some years ago, I was reporting on a piano competition and, before the final, ran into a juror who was literally shaking with rage. This competition, he explained, trusted its adjudicators to decide individually whether or not they could vote for their own students. The Russian juror, allegedly a powerful KGB official, had decided that he could. Nobody would have known this outside the jury room. The voting was skewed; the juror's student came in third and I have never heard of any of the winners again. Further, there is a juror who adjudicates at contests all over the world and some successful candidates among his students apparently go home wondering what has become of their prize money.

I spoke to a pianist who entered a contest run by an adjudicator he felt was among the more suspicious, as there were wild rumours flying around of nepotism and sexual relations with competitors.

Our pianist quickly grew so cynical that, he says, "I didn't bother practising and played my first round like a pig. Suddenly I get through to the next round and all the "proper" competitors are out! I thought I might as well start practising. My decision coincided with the other adjudicators, having realised what was happening, deciding to gang up against the corrupt ones and support the only surviving good pianist – me! The adjudicator then tried to disqualify me twice for some trumped-up misdemeanours." He won a prize, but not the top one.

Competitions devalued themselves years ago by an excessive surge in their number and through betrayal of trust. If a musician protests, his or her future can suffer. I know a pianist who joined other disgruntled youngsters to write and sign a letter of protest to a leading Russian newspaper. None of them, he says, ever passed a first round again, though eventually they all built good careers.

Today, winning a competition may not make as much difference to a budding musician's career as it might have done in the past. But these competitions remain one of the best arenas for star-spotting available to the public, concert promoters and record companies.

And, if you are star-spotting – at the forthcoming London International Piano Competition, which is most definitely among the better ones and runs until the 28 April – my advice is don't just listen to the winner. Hear the early rounds; look for the talents that just can't be kept down. There's still hope that they will win through in the end.