



BBC Young Musician 2014: Forget the format, give us the music

The biennial competition showcasing the nation's finest young classical musicians is approaching its finale, but why the emphasis on looks over talent?

by Jessica Duchon

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BBC Young Musicians 2014 is building up to its grand competition finale. It's a wonderful chance to hear some of the UK's most gifted young classical performers. But the contest is always controversial, and this year is no exception. The trouble is that making formula TV seems antithetical to the notion of making good music – and there is no doubt about which is taking priority.

I've been hooked on the section finals. The standard is high and the documentary portraits of the youngsters give real insights into the dedication that musical training entails. Yet all this is shoehorned into an Apprentice-like structure, with many performances horribly truncated (you have to go to the website to see the contestants playing actual complete pieces). It's not the young musicians that are dumbed down as the apparent perception of us, the viewers; as if we're poor dears who surely can't cope with more than about four minutes of actual music at a stretch. Not even the grand final makes it onto mainstream primetime, sequestered away on BBC4, plus Radio 3 – one might imagine they're embarrassed about screening something in which the participants are really good at what they do.

The tired TV formula backfires, too. There's much emphasis on musical and eye-candy-like star presenters, thus far the trumpeter Alison Balsom and the guitarist "Milos" – but they are out of their comfort zone, especially poor Milos, who seems wooden as can be. The judges are introduced with grim, scowling images and doom-laden jingle. Yet these expert jurors are not Simon Cowell. They are mostly kind, wise and mild-mannered. The mismatch of style and content is worthy of a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

More seriously, on most talent contests the participants are adults. But here the youngest is all of 13 (trumpeter William Thomas). Where does one draw the line between celebrating talented kids and risking the perception that they are being exploited?

The violinist Jennifer Pike was only 12 when she became the youngest ever winner in 2002. She is now a well-established soloist, but says that while she is grateful to the contest, it can be a tough call. "If only competitions like this could come with a health warning," she says. "For me, it was wonderful because I knew I wanted to be a soloist, but at 12 you don't have a clue about what life is going to be like. You've got to be aware of what the prize will open up and how you want to pursue it, which can be difficult at that age."

The right people win occasionally, but not always. Many have gone on to good careers and some to stardom, including the violinist Nicola Benedetti (now the competition's "ambassador") and the cellist Natalie Clein. The 2012 victor, the 15-year-old cellist Laura van der Heijden, drew quite a buzz. String players, indeed, win top prize more often than any others and seem most likely to inspire intense attention – especially, dare one say, if they are beautiful young girls.

This year I've been mesmerised by the percussionists – their skill, daring and originality of repertoire was extraordinary – yet a percussionist has only ever won once since the competition began 36 years ago (Adrian Spillett in 1998). Personally I would love to see this category's victor, Elliott Gaston-Ross, emerge triumphant. But I'm not holding my breath.

For if any doubt remains as to the show's priorities, one little mantra gives the game away: "Sadly, there can only be one winner..." Well, that's only because they say so. At most serious musical competitions a jury can offer a joint prize if two contestants merit it – or, indeed, award no prize if nobody is good enough. Here one person must win, because that is what TV demands. And TV is king. Never mind the music. μ

BBC Young Musicians 2014 grand final, 18 May, Usher Hall, Edinburgh, broadcast on BBC4 at 7pm and Radio 3 at 7.30pm