

Doris Chiang Piano Studio

Spring Newsletter

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COMPETITIONS: WHAT THE JUDGES ARE LOOKING FOR?

One day during the break, I overheard a student who played for me not too long before the category ended. He made the comment to his parents: "I think I did ok because I didn't miss any note." On my way to the break room, I continued to hear many more similar comments. Sadly after the deliberation, I cannot remember what he played or did he place. Everyone, myself included, is curious to know: "what happened behind those closed doors?" Somehow it's a general impression that a note perfect performance guarantees a winning result. The reason I said I want to know what happened is because sometimes I see unmerited winner that just doesn't justify the place rewarded. On the other spectrum, when the level of performance is even, one wonders that winning feels like lottery drawing. When I say even, I mean everyone is either equally good or equally problematic.

Very few teachers would object that the best way to combat performance pressure is to enjoy what you do no matter what the circumstances are. But that is a wishful thinking. Only very talented few can achieve that kind of excellence. As I am writing this, I cannot help to recall a girl I evaluated a few days ago. She was singing the pitch during the sight-reading process and she seems to put everything in singing when she plays. Her playing sounds that she has taken long time to polish and the most importantly, she enjoys the process. That is a rare talent one possesses.

So what are the judges looking for when you play? Performing is a complex act. It's not as easy as studying academics in school. Many kids possess the intellectual knowledge: key signatures, meter, chords, scales etc. The skills only require memorization or sometimes cramped. But when it comes to playing, few can maintain the quality they practice at home. Performing arts involve timing and precision. Precision without timing is easy to achieve and vice versa. But combing both together makes the task monumentally difficult. Like figured skating, there are always two scores: technical and artistic. One is familiar that artistic marks are always higher than technical ones. To make things more complicated, one has to let go the intellectual control and allow the inner feeling and artistic expression to break free during performance. This is the part that baffles people. One can program a computer to make the execution clean at precise moment. It's a lot to ask the computer to show the artistic touch. That belongs to the human department.

Nowadays we are so accustomed to hear CD recordings. We are used to mistake-free performances. On the surface we admire Lang Lang's precision on his note execution. When I write comments, note accuracy is never my priority unless the accuracy issue contaminates the music dramatically. Composers use the various

means of repetition to construct their compositions: pitches, patterns, key choices, and imitation. To make these repetitions interesting, notes alone are not enough to sustain the listener's attention subconsciously. Musicians rely on other means. Most often used are dynamics and texture (we call articulations). To hold the piece together, the timing or pacing makes a big impact in my decision whether the performance is successful. I like to use race vs. weightlifting to contrast music with other activities. In a race one wins by running the fastest, but we all know the winner of weightlifting is the one who can hold the weight the longest. Inexperienced performers all have the similar feeling: they all want to get out of the pieces more quickly than they do at home. The adrenaline interprets the experience as danger, so rushing is a natural way to combat the situation. It takes special practice and experiences to persevere under the performance anxiety. The grace under fire is immediately put the daily practice routine to the test.

If everything is well executed: note accuracy, rhythm, tone production, dynamic and articulations, the next deciding factor is imagination. I was evaluating a duet competition a few months ago. One team plays an unfamiliar work. The first thing that struck me was their technical virtuosity. Everything was so clean and spot on. But it sounded cold and I was not motivated to learn it. My first impression was this piece is hard to maneuver. They won the category, but I was not moved by the performance. A true artist can make the most difficult music sounds approachable. Most importantly the music makes you forget about the time and commands your full attention without such realization. This is especially true when the piece is long! The process of digesting and absorbing takes long time. It took Brahms 20 years to finish his first symphony. Internationally well-known artists frequently takes years to perform a piece while their technique is more than capable to handle it.

As a judge, we were usually given two sheets: one is the comment you read, another one is our worksheet. It's in the worksheet that we express what we "truly" see, mostly problems. After the audiences were dismissed, we discuss our findings. Some judges put more emphasis on note accuracy. I tend to put more on rhythmic, musicality, and pacing of the structure. The details are given. There are camps that prefer to reward big pieces despite the fact that the performance was not close to what it's supposed to sound. Unfortunately more and more I am seeing that this camp is winning. Years ago one of my students decided to play "For Elise." We were doing it for fun and there was a scholarship opportunity available. Because there was no repertoire requirement, she played "For Elise." I warned her before she started and kept her in close leash. Every judge knows how the piece falls apart before the student begins. She did a beautiful job and won the scholarship. She later told me that other kids were doing big pieces: Chopin etudes, Liszt Lieberstraum, big Beethoven pieces. Every parent's jaws were on the floor when she won. It's one of the instances that the judges appreciate the right maturity and the warmth she showed. She plays like she wants to play, not being pushed. For my money I prefer to reward kids who put a lot of effort clean up the simplest piece with the most enthusiasm and expression. Schumann's Traumerei from Scenes from the

Childhood (the one every great artist uses as an encore) is more challenging than the Liszt Transcendental Etudes, mainly for its simplicity and transparency.

Competition is a mean to an end. It serves a purpose giving kids a goal to work toward and a place to perform. I often tell kids that the judges cannot see what a teacher sees in a mere 5 minutes of playing. They don't have the entire picture like the teacher. The judges do their best judgment based on the playing alone, not the student as a person. The pressure brings up the best potential the students have, regardless whether they place or not. Finishing the pieces in front of a panel of judges without falling apart is a great achievement that deserves a pat on the shoulders. The end of playing music is to enjoy it regardless of the exterior trophies.

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Wrong Notes! What now?