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Performing Civility: International Competitions in Classical Music

Lisa McCormick

Cambridge University Press, 2015

Performing Civility takes its place among a burgeoning collection of ethnographically-grounded studies of Western classical music institutions. Other examples would include Henry Kingsbury's ethnography of an American music conservatoire (*Music, Talent and Performance* 1988), Georgina Born's assessment of Boulez's IRCAM in *Rationalizing Culture* (1995), or Claudio E. Benzecry's investigation of opera fanatics at the Colón Opera House in Buenos Aires (2011). This is distinguished company, and Lisa McCormick's volume, which focuses on 'International Competitions in Classical Music', is a worthy addition. These ethnographic approaches to Western classical music and its practice seem to antagonize a small number of musicologists, who continue to argue for the primacy of the musical text and decry sociological or anthropological approaches that fail to put the musical sounds and structures at the centre of the methodology. McCormick's work would certainly irk them further, since it contains no textual analysis. But the rest of us can enjoy a compelling and insightful volume that illuminates a hitherto unexplored part of the classical music landscape.

The 'civility' of the title is not meant to suggest (of course) that such competitions provide opportunities for genteel exchanges between participants. Indeed, behaviours from performers, jurors and audience members appear on occasion to be less than rarefied. Rather, McCormick draws on Jeffrey Alexander (*The Civil Sphere*, 2006) to define civility as 'the cultural codes, integrative patterns and institutional procedures that characterize a community based on universalistic solidarity' (p.5). It is the rule-bound nature of music competitions, the regulations that pertain to them, and the various organisations that sustain them (notably the *World Federation of International Music Competitions* [WFIMC]) that McCormick sees as providing an analogy with civil institutions elsewhere and the aspiration to 'transparency, fairness and openness [that] are championed in the civil sphere' (p.6). But music and civility are uncomfortable bedfellows. They are 'fundamentally incommensurable social spheres' (p.6) which are 'ultimately irreconcilable' (p.81). One may be forgiven for wondering why they are therefore juxtaposed. McCormick argues that it is the boundaries between them that she seeks to examine, to provide greater insights into the competitions that are her main focus (p.6). For this reader, however, the relationship between music competitions and civility is perhaps less illuminating than some of the

other issues considered along the way, such as gender politics, the projection of national and self identities, the construction of prestige economies or the function of ritualizing practices. But no matter. The richness of the ethnography, and the insights and interpretations that are drawn from it, make the book an absorbing read.

In part this is because, although competitions are widespread, they provoke significant disenchantment. They are plagued by controversy and rumours of corruption. They require investment of time and resources by performers who know that they have only a slim chance of winning. And there is very little evidence that competition success translates into a glittering career in the world beyond. As McCormick puts it, 'to say that competitions are an unloved institution in the classical music world would be putting it mildly' (p.166), and much of her analysis is concerned with trying to explain why this is so. After setting out in Chapter One the historical background to modern competitions, we begin to get a flavour of the national identity politics that they sometimes engender. The Soviet domination of the inaugural 1937 *Ysaÿe Competition* led to dark mutterings of state complicity (a historical resonance that modern athletes would surely enjoy). Several cycles of the *International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition* were similarly infused with tensions arising from the competition between Russian and Polish pianists, for understandable historical reasons. The politicising of such competitions is of course evident elsewhere, particularly in relation to the *Eurovision Song Contest*, which consistently reinforces the point that music competitions are never 'just' music competitions.

Perhaps mainland Europeans are simply more interested in these kinds of competitions than others. In Chapter Two, Italy is identified as the country with the most contemporary major competitions—eighteen in 2011—with other European nations lining up behind. In contrast, the USA had only seven, the UK four and Australia two. Given the significant emphasis put on competitive sport in these Anglo-American contexts, the relative paucity of competitive music events is striking (and noted by McCormick). This chapter provides the most explicit association between music and civility, with the rulebook of the *WFIMC* being measured against Alexander's framework for civil institutions. The American Van Cliburn's famous win in the first *Tchaikovsky Competition* in Moscow in 1958 comes under particular scrutiny, not only for the obvious political dimensions of his success at the height of the Cold War, but also because McCormick sees him as a 'civil hero, exemplifying and facilitating a universalizing solidarity' (p.75). McCormick justifies this statement by measuring Cliburn's words and actions against Alexander's criteria. But this feels an uncomfortable fit, as though the broader and more transparent socio-political dimensions of this event, while clearly recognised here, have been somewhat down-

played to accommodate the less well-fitting civility narrative. Chapter Three considers processes of cultural construction by analysing public and media discourses surrounding particular competitions. McCormick notes (p.96-97) the criticisms often heard about these competitions: that musical judgements on performances are inherently arbitrary and unfair; that because so few award winners go on to successful careers, they do not achieve their stated aims of identifying musical talent; and that the pressures they put on performers in the early stages of their career do more harm than good. In the second part we see the idealized – and frequently gendered – tropes that are deployed by the media to characterize the different approaches of the performers: the competitor as athlete, or hero, or artist.

The next three chapters draw more heavily on ethnographic data and demonstrate the value of close engagement with the participants in these events. McCormick argues in Chapter Four that there are four genius tropes at play in the performers' projection of self-identity: the prodigy, the fire-breathing virtuoso, the conquering hero and the intellectual. These four tropes are constructed and embellished through various forms of symbolic production: 'musical' symbols involve instruments, bodies, the performance of particular pieces and the manner in which they are performed; 'visual' symbols include concert attire and physical appearance, ritualized stage movements and the more or less theatrical gestures of particular performers. Chapter Five focuses on the jurors. Given the power that they have to determine the outcome, one might expect them to hold less jaundiced views than the competitors. But what emerges is their disdain for a particular type of auditory experience, one that feels unnatural because its sole purpose is to determine whether the performer should proceed or be eliminated from the competition. This is the aural equivalent of the gladiatorial thumbs up–or down–although it is usually expressed by means of some form of mathematical calculation. McCormick sees this transformation of aesthetic qualities into quantitative rationalization as being 'unusual' in the world of classical music (p.170). I beg to differ. The metrification of musical performance is entirely usual and frequently employed. Neophyte performers are quite used to being examined through ABRSM exams or as part of the conservatoire systems pertaining around the globe. The same occurs in universities and senior conservatoires. Reservations about the process abound, but it is widespread. The allocation of numerical scores, and the implied ranking that comes with them, would most likely be very familiar to all participants long before they reach these international competitions. McCormick sees possible redemption for the various ills invested in these competitive processes arising from the meetings that sometimes take place between jurors and competitors, either between rounds or after elimination. Although these meetings can be awkward, they allow 'jurors and ex-candidates to present ideal musical selves to each other' (p.202), that is, through the display of positively viewed individual traits which can

thus be seen as redeeming the otherwise antagonistic qualities of the event. It is notable that some music conservatoires now adopt a similar approach, with external examiners meeting candidates later in the day, after their performance exams. If the adversarial nature of music competitions and examinations risks de-socialising music-making, such meetings perhaps endeavour to re-socialize it. The final chapter focuses on the competition audiences. McCormick recasts Adorno's typology of listeners (articulated in his 1962 Introduction to *The Sociology of Music*) arguing, contra Adorno, that such a typology should not be comprised of mutually exclusive categories to which listeners can be assigned, but a 'repertoire of different positions' (p.225) that listeners might move between during the competition itself. Material drawn from interview data and online blogs evidences different listener responses as they engage with diverse aspects of the competition.

Music competitions may be unloved, but there is no shortage of them, particularly in popular culture. UK television shows such as *Stars in Their Eyes* or *Britain's Got Talent*, and televised searches to find principals in musicals such as *The Sound of Music*, demonstrate the widespread popular appeal of gladiatorial music-making undertaken in public view. The concept may appear less tasteful in relation to classical music, but it is much longer established. This book serves musicology highly in illuminating this otherwise opaque activity. If, by any chance, the organisers of these competitions were also to take on board its insights, it may prove even more useful to the musical world at large.