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# Impact of Online Music Competitions on the Young Musicians' Professional Skills and Their Musical Development During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Classical music competitions present a medium for the development and motivation of young musicians. In this context, they prepare young musicians to professional life and play an important role in their career. Online competitions became more popular due to the Covid-19 pandemic with an increasing number of high professional quality applicants. This research aims to focus on the impact of online music competitions on the young musicians' professional skills and their musical development. The research will set forth the differences between online competitions and real life competitions from various aspects such as application process, video presentations, and efficiency of the young musicians in using available technology, jury formation, evaluation of the applicants' performances by the jury as well as the applicants' evaluation of their own performance among other applicants.

**Keywords:** online music competition, young musicians, technology, covid-19

## Introduction

Music competitions which have existed since early ages have become popular in the 20th century and have added to their momentum a tool of advancement: the online format in the 21st century, reaching a peak during Covid-19, a pandemic which has been a threat to humanity world wide. Affecting life seriously and causing a collapse

in the range and number of many activities, Covid-19 had a catastrophic impact on the lives of the mature professionals and young musicians. Their performance, career, and motivation were jeopardized. As Einstein had claimed in his famous quote, “in the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity”, this exceptional period of pandemic has taken us to crossroads with technology. Hence, this paper will examine online competitions from the perspectives of their brief history; organizational input, professional jury formations~ academicians, scholars and transparency of evaluation norms; young musician contestants; requirements for participation in competitions with appropriate use of technology; the quality of contestants’ submissions; their self-learning, self-evaluation from the preliminary to final stage ; worldwide viewers; and the merits of the overall musical experience of the online competitions from pedagogical and artistic perspectives.

The methodology in the presentation of information in this paper will be submission of research material, concerning the history of online competitions and their organizational design from reliable sources that are documented in the references. This information will proceed with observations of competitions, viewed either personally or obtained from professional musicians’ critiques in scholarly journals. Observations as an international competition jury member, myself, together with those collected from organizers, other jury members or contestants, themselves will additionally add genuine methodological value to this paper. Feedback from contestants concerning all stages of preparation, application, performance, and submission will be another component of methodology that will lead itself to recommendations in the conclusion.

## **History**

Starting with the history of competitions, it’s known that Greek and Roman societies considered competitions as a central part of the worship of their gods, associated with religious processions and a sacrifice. It’s observed that from the time of the first music competitions held in Athens in the fifth century B.C. to the Middle Ages, “the victors of the contests were called laureates and contests among troubadours, trouvères, minnesingers, and Meistersingers became common” (Iakovlev, 1966). In the 18th century, prominent composers competed in performances with their instruments such as the organ, clavichord, harpsichord, and the violin.

The modern form of music competition originated in the 19th century as the first national music competition was held in France in 1803. Later were established national music competitions for composers in England for Mendelsson Award (since 1848 – held in London once every 4 years), in Austria – for Beethoven Prize (since 1875 – in Vienna – annually), and others (Yakovlev 1974). What started the trend of an international competition in various European capitals at a regular basis was A. Rubinstein’s organization of an international competition of pianists and composers in St. Petersburg, in 1890 and its regular repetition every five-years till 1910. When music competitions started to become widespread in Europe in the 20th century, they

served as the basic means for discovering young talents. The establishment of The Federation of International Music Competitions with its headquarters in Geneva was an important event in 1957. Since 1959 the Federation's issuing an annual bulletin with international competitions, their programs of rounds, the number and amount of prizes, instrument and age categories, and other details increased awareness for organizations of competitions (Iakovlev, 1966).

The most important contemporary international competitions included the P. I. Tchaikovsky Competition (Moscow), the Queen Elisabeth Competition (Brussels), the M. Long and J. Thibaud Competition (Paris), the F. Chopin Competition (Warsaw), the H. Wieniawski Competition (Poznan), the Young Opera Singers' Competition (Sofia), the G. Enesco Competition (Bucharest), the Budapest Competition, the Prague Spring Competition, the Performing Musicians' Competition (Geneva), the J. S. Bach Competition (Leipzig), the R. Schumann Competition (Zwickau), the Pianists' Competition (Leeds), the Orchestral Conductors' Competition in Rome, and the N. Paganini Competition in Genoa (Iakovlev, 1966).

The starting of World War II affected life to a great extent in Europe and as a natural consequence, the organization of music competitions came to a pause. Poland saw the first edition of the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw as founded by the Polish pianist Jerzy Żurawlew in 1927. A German air raid on Warsaw in 1939 completely destroyed the Warsaw Philharmonic building, but the competition endured the conflict and restarted in 1949, returning to a newly restored concert hall in 1955.

Among the oldest-running classical music competitions in the world was also the Queen Elisabeth Competition, held in Brussels. Created under the impulse of Belgian violinist, conductor and composer Eugène Ysaÿe and HM Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, it was held for the first time in 1937, the first laureate being Soviet violinist David Oistrakh (Volpi, 2018).

When World War II swallowed up Europe, the competition was suspended. This event was however very dear to the Belgian queen, and restarting it in 1951 was seen as an integral part of the healing process of the country. It was broadcasted via radio starting in 1951, with television programming beginning in 1960 and online streaming in 2001 (Volpi, 2018).

World War II devastated Europe, but one competition managed not to have their programme interrupted: The Geneva International Music Competition in Switzerland, which had started in 1939 under the name of Concours International d'Exécution Musicale (CIEM). Founded by Austrian musician Frédéric Liebstoekl with Henri Gagnebin, the Director of the Geneva Conservatoire at the time, it had among its first winners pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and soprano Maria Stader. While the war spread across the continent, the competition persevered. Although it was no longer marked as international, it continued to harbor musicians from all over Europe, welcoming artists as refugees and helping them with the competition's

monetary prizes. Famous names who won accolades during the war included Hungarian-born pianist and conductor Sir Georg Solti and Austrian violist Paul Doktor. In 1946, after the end of the conflict, the competition restored its international credentials.

In France, the Long-Thibaud Competition opened its doors in 1943 and the name was changed to Long-Thibaud Crespin in 2011, when a voice prize inspired by operatic soprano Régine Crespin was added. Its founders, pianist Marguerite Long and violinist Jacques Thibaud, are quoted in an article published in 1947 on French newspaper, *Opéra*, talking about their desire to encourage young musicians by giving them hope. While it was impossible to dream of an international competition in an occupied France, they still went ahead with a national event in 1943 (Volpi, 2018).

The International Tchaikovsky Competition, founded in 1958 was perhaps the world's best-known gateway to musical success. Thirty-two years after its foundation the Association of Tchaikovsky Competition Stars (ATCS) was formed, whose approximately 100 members were all prizewinners of past competitions, including such illustrious names as violinist Gidon Kremer and pianist Van Cliburn. The ATCS promoted concerts and festivals and funded scholarships, but one of its most ambitious ventures was the founding of the Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians, which was held for the first time in Moscow in 1992 (Sazonova, 1978). Its aim was not simply to identify talent early but also to support financially. Prizewinners were expected to tour Japan, Russia and other countries with the ATCS covering the expense. The second competition of the same Association, jointly organized by the Russian and the Japanese, took place in Sendai, Japan between August 24-September 10, 1995. Part of the philosophy of the competition was that it should move around the world to allow young musicians to participate more easily, returning to Moscow every four years (Chadwick, 1996).

In today's world, international classical music competitions are becoming sites of the global cultural public sphere, whereas traditional festivals had previously served as "arenas where nations competed for supremacy" (Volpi, 2018). As competitions have become more globalized, they have created opportunities to foster cosmopolitan sociability and cultivate global values such as "cooperation and collaboration" (Lowe, 2018). Competition Versus Cooperation: Implications for Music Teachers What has added to this communicative function is the Internet that has connected the peoples of the world regardless of geographical divides or financial status.

With the convenience and efficiency of the internet and online services being well understood in practical terms, there has been an increased popularity of technology in competitions. This new challenge has gradually increased competence and in correlation with it "quality" for organizers, jury members, contestants, and performance viewers, that is the silent audience attending concerts at the comfort of their homes.

As Dr. Taylor from Columbia University said in a New York Times article “Technology is not an end in itself, it is a means to accomplish what is important to you” (Auh, 2019), the Internet was a facility that musicians who could not attend competitions physically used at the beginning of 2000. However, in the following years its use had a peak, diminishing expenses of travel for the contestants and their instruments, or/and their parents’ in the case of young prodigies; their accommodation costs and provided the comfort of contestants’ own recordings. Technology’s being used as a valuable tool could not be ignored during the period of Covid-19 as it became a worldwide epidemic affecting people’s lives, many activities and their involvement in music as performers.

Observing the existence of the many online competitions since the beginning of the 21st century on the Internet through their websites, it can be said that there has been a tremendous increase in the number of online competitions, particularly for the young musicians, concerning various instruments and different age groups at different venues, not necessarily prominent European capitals, but cultural centers known with their reputation in music in the past.

The below given competitions are only some of the well known competitions in Europe that have helped young musicians’ voice to be heard and changed their lives with the merits of technology and online format even before the uproar of Covid-19:

North International Music Competition <https://www.northcompetition.com/north-music-competition/>, Vienna International Music Competition <https://www.viennacompetition.com/>, Berliner International Music Competition <https://www.berlinercompetition.com/> for piano, strings, voice, wind, and chamber music, World Music Competition <https://worldmusiccompetition.com/application.html>, Golden Classical Music Awards Competition <https://goldenclassicalmusicawards.com/>, Muse International Music Competition <https://themuse.gr/muse-2020-competition-announced/>, Malta International Music Competition <https://vfimf.com/malta-international-music-competition/>, IMKA International Internet Music Competition <https://internetmusiccompetition.com/>, Music in the Vineyards Online Music Competition <http://www.vricmf.com/competition.html>, Melos Competition <http://www.ac-melos.com/on-line-competitions/?lang=en> in Kyoto, Brussels, Nice, and Rome.

One competition that has started to be online due to Covid-19 is: Young Musician International Competition ‘Città di Barletta in Italy whose organizational focus I, as their jury member, having witnessed their conscientious concerns, know very well: [http://www.culturaemusica.it/public/wordpress/?page\\_id=49&lang=en](http://www.culturaemusica.it/public/wordpress/?page_id=49&lang=en).

Besides websites that provide information about application formats, electronic audition submissions or evaluation procedures, the presence of a “web concert hall” is also an innovation of modern times in the study of competitions’ history. The idea for a Web Concert Hall evolved while Yoon-il Auh, a 10-year-old violin prodigy in

South Korea in 1971, worked on several projects with Dr. Taylor in later years, including one project an educational ear-training application called Wiz Ear and a Web database of audio clips from more than 200 of Bach's cantatas. Dr. Taylor and Yoon-il Auh started the Web Concert Hall [www.webconcerthall.com](http://www.webconcerthall.com) in 1998 and it has achieved its goal until now. Youn-il Auh recently divides his time between the site, his job as an associate director for distance learning at New York University and his own software company, Intrepid Pixels (Auh,Y. 2019).

### **Competition Organizations & Juries**

The idea of music competitions as a healing and uniting force for the world is echoed in a statement by Yehudi Menuhin, who headed the violin jury at the Long-Thibaud Crespin Competition from 1993 until his death in 1999. In 1996 he was quoted saying: “we gather here, the jury members and I, not to measure the distance that separates the participants from each other, but rather to highlight the level of connection that they have achieved [...] at the service of music and humanity” (Volpi, 2018).

Every year, promising young musicians emerge as prize winners in major competitions around the world. These competitions allow their talent to be noticed, and subsequently bring in concert engagements and recording contracts. Some of these competitions have a long and prestigious history, while new competitions are also coming up in various parts of the world at different levels.

Victoria Borisova-Ollas, composer, winner of several national and international awards and Member of the Board of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music had emphasized the importance of online competitions in her words “The North International Music Competition is a great opportunity for young musicians to develop their skills as performers already at the early stage of their careers. Making music at the highest professional level is not an easy task. Let this wonderful event encourage you for a life-long mission of being passionate and successful professional performers!” (Borisova-Ollas, 2020)

What is the importance of an organization when the main focus is competitions? It's definitely the organization of a competition that reveals its credibility and echoes its mission, strategies of work, evaluation processes, and awarding tools through a website that is its voice. The organization's reliability, accuracy of work, convenience of its tools, and clarity of information presented are all important that serve for transparency and confidence in the product, which is the essence of the competition (Parncutt, 2018). Website of the organization is usually taken as the Competition website. It must start with a mission statement that explains the philosophy, the objective of the organization and the competition (Todes, 2014). It has to include information about the application process for the registration to be done easily, accurately, and on time. That means competition calendar that gives the deadlines; procedures to be followed for registration and the submission of the performance's recording; instrument categories together with the need for accompaniment; solo, duo, or chamber music categories; age categories; number of rounds if required; time

limits for age groups or instruments; composition of the jury, jury members' names, titles and affiliation. Evaluation policy with variations for solo, duo, or chamber music must be precisely given to avoid ambiguity. Information about the awards for the Absolute, First, Second, Third prizes calculated by adding the scores given to each contestant from the evaluation table must be very explicit. Diplomas, scholarships, and mansions; presence of gala concerts are also center of attention topics. Three main prize-winners may also receive medals and grants from commercial sponsors. There may be special awards for the youngest competitor as well as awards for the best accompanists and even the best teachers in each section. All this information on the organization or conference website might be of special value to reflect the voice of the organization and the competition.

As a competition may be unique to one instrument or may be divided into sections for different instruments such as the piano, violin, cello, flute, harp or others; and as there may be different age groups from a wide range of countries, juries must be composed of adequate number of international members--professionals, academicians, or contest winners-- instrument and age group specifications always taken into consideration for quality of expertise. The composition of juries must aim at excellence in the profession.

Competition websites may also list their rules as articles to define the implementations required for the smooth-going of competitions. Some articles may serve as conflict resolution tools in the case of discomfort or misunderstandings.

With global interests and search for standards within a global context, musicality and artistic values can be kept running parallel to technical skills. It's wise for competition websites to indicate how they set their norms specifying their evaluation criteria. The norms set by international jury members for the evaluation of contestants' performance determine the standards for both technical and artistic characteristic of the performance of each contestant regardless of age and instrument (Checka, 2018). The presence of this information on the competition website is useful for international viewers who keep a close eye on social media for their own evaluations.

Adding my experiences of having taken part in 5 international classical music competitions as a jury member for the cello, live (once) in International Competition Young Virtuosos-Sofia, Bulgaria (2011); once in International Benyamin Sönmez Cello Competition-Fethiye, Turkey (2017); once in Young Musicians International Competition-Barletta, Italy (2017) before the pandemic Covid-19; and online -- once in International Music Competition-Belgrad, Serbia (2020); (once) in Young Musicians International Competition 'Città di Barletta in Italy (2020) again after the pandemic Covid-19, I can compare live and online competitions and say that online competitions do not definitely degrade the quality of the international music competitions.

Besides my observations as a jury member at international classical music competitions, my students' participating in many international music competitions

and their being the recipients of numerous First, Second or Third Prizes in the last 10 years have made me and my students acknowledged about the components of “well-organized music competitions” which mean “quality” from the perspectives of organizers, contestants, juries and viewers.

We believe today, with no more miles traveled, no money invested in contestants’ or their instruments’ plane or train tickets, and no costs of accommodation, no concerns for other means of transportation, online competitions will serve the same goals as do the live competitions, avoiding the risk of a pandemic. Today, with efficient digital access young talents can reach a potentially large audience as music competitions offer both excellent visibility and technical accuracy.

### **Participants & Learning Value**

In the 21st century, we have come to the understanding that music means life and we care for the younger generations with a talent for music, for they mean hope. Seeing the deterioration of some values and the collapse of some systems especially threatened by a pandemic, we want to encourage young musicians to perform technically and artistically well, to grow, excel in their profession and build excellent careers. A competition can offer many benefits to young musicians and provide a platform where they can feel comfortable competing. We believe that developing confidence in themselves as well as in others, young musicians can realize their dreams and potential. This is an achievable goal. Our purpose is to discover artists of outstanding personality and provide awards which can help to launch international careers. Aside from rigorous training and natural talent, we look for performers with a strong artistic personality and stage presence. The emphasis is therefore not on the purely technical aspects of the performance, but also on the overall artistic impact of the performer.

Impact of online music competitions on the young musicians’ professional skills and their musical development is undeniable. The educational value in young musicians’ self-evaluation of their own performance as they choose their best recording is immense. Why academicians, jury members are in favor of online competitions; why the implementation has grown popular among applicants, and how quality is ensured through the processes of preparation and selection need to be focused on from an educational perspective.

When we consider the benefits gained from participating in music competitions, we see that they are an opportunity to overcome technical, musical, artistic, and mental challenges. In the special case of being “online”, these competitions grant the contestant the opportunity for self analysis and self-evaluation. What the contestant experiences as he/she chooses the best recording of his/her performance to be sent to the competition is the best teaching a musician can get.

An online competition is also a chance to observe one’s peers and judge their performance. The contestant can gauge his/ her own strengths and weaknesses



against those of his/ her peers. Thus, the contestant is now his own judge to make his/her own “SWOT Analysis”. Seeing his/her Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. He/she learns and hence the young contestant is on the road to perfection. This is a highly celebrated victory!

### **Transparency and the Value of International Viewers**

McLuhan claims that “the most notable difference of a new society of the twenty-first century from the previous societies has been the rapid spread of global information networks, the Internet and electronic communication technologies. The Internet has revolutionized how people work, disseminate the results of their work and new knowledge, and culture and peoples of the world have the opportunity to be much closer than in the previous era”. Interestingly, long before the mass distribution of the Internet M. McLuhan used the term “global village”, which to some extent reflects the essence of the Internet. Thanks to the technological improvement there has been a significant compression of time and space, people around the world have become closer to each other. According to the scientist, “breakthroughs” in electronic communication technology provide new unity of all people on the level of emotional and bodily experiences, therefore, as a result of unprecedented technological development occurs electronized “global village” (McLuhan, 1964). In light of this paraphrase, a young talent’s musical performance can reach the prominent international professors and professionals of a highly recognized competition jury, crossing oceans and continents and gets evaluated within the norms of the competition right after the performance and scores are seen on the screen when the evaluation finalizes. The young talent’s life changes within minutes as the organization announces the scores and the grants offered electronically. Time and space meet at a juncture as the 21st century’s little devil, Covid-19 smiles from a corner. The whole picture is transparent. International viewers are delighted to have watched a concert, not paying for a plane, or a train, not booking a hotel room, not rushing in the street to reach the Concert Hall. They get connected in a global village.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides information about the importance and function of online formats of music competitions that have been developing in recent years for young musicians in the threatening and restricted world of Covid-19 that has affected the whole world. Gathering the whole world on a digital window, the internet prepares young musicians for real life stage performance, performance evaluation and critics; and thus, becomes a general rehearsal of real life for real live concerts. Through the competitions, young musicians have the opportunity to prepare themselves for professional life by observing their peers around the world, perceiving their different comments and understanding jury evaluations with the best possible adaptation on the online platform. We will witness the increase of these competitions altogether in the future.

All in all, with what has been collected from various professional written sources or through contestant feedback and personally experienced through live or on-line contests, it can be said that young musicians are offered a facility out of the catastrophe of Covid 19 that has affected the whole world. What can be recommended is that young musicians should use this facility wisely to benefit from the online competitions as the digital medium can enhance the student contestants' performance mentality. They are equipped with skills development strategies that they discover themselves as they perform many times at their convenience and submit the best of their performance to the organization designing the competition. Young musicians are also given the choice to compare their performance with that of their peers, hence they should benefit from this transparency of performances as well as the evaluations of the juries. Another recommendation is, using this facility, student contestants can also broaden their repertoire and apply for many competitions. One final recommendation may be, being contemporary and coping with the requirements of modern times, that is digital technology, they can reach many other musicians; observe their work across borders, and feel they belong to a wider community of musicians.

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