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## How Can Competitions Be Improved?

Four musicians recommend new best practices.

BY BRIAN WISE

### Pamela Frank

*Violin faculty member, concert violinist*

→ As a teacher and concert violinist, Pamela Frank has seen competitions and prizes from all angles. She has chaired the jury of the Menuhin Competition and served on jury panels at the Indianapolis, Queen Elisabeth, Michael Hill, and Young Concert Artists competitions. She says an ideal competition has the ambience of a festival and “should be a healthy, enjoyable, pleasurable, and even friendship-fostering experience.”

**BLIND PRE-SELECTION:** “If I were a contestant, what would lead me to one competition over another is the ethics of it, or at least the perception of fairness. The Indianapolis [International Violin Competition] does a great thing in which the pre-selection is done all live by three jurors in the same room, listening in realtime with a proctor. Now, I would even

modify that. I would say, in the effort to be fair, nobody would read résumés, even in the pre-selection process, and it would be blind, not by video. It would just be listening, without seeing or knowing anything about the candidate.”

#### TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS:

“The definition of a teacher needs to be extremely specific. It should be made known to all the potential jurors ahead of the competition. Usually, it’s not specific enough. Some competitions [require disclosure] if you’ve given two to three lessons in the last year; I would say it would have to be at least one or two lessons in the last two to four years. Furthermore, you’d have to disclose master classes. But the other way to eliminate problems is just to say that current students of jury members are not eligible.

**JURY MAKEUP:** “I would advise having fewer teachers and more diverse types of

professionals on the jury. The smallest proportion should be the teachers—even though I am one—and then performers, other kinds of educators, managers, critics, presenters, or other instrumentalists.”

**PRIZES:** “For me, the competitions that help the student most are not, ironically, the ones that just provide money, but [those] that provide support. Management and mentorship, to me, are the most important.”

**REPERTOIRE:** “I would want as broad and diverse [repertoire] demands as possible. You’d curate your own recital program just to see what kind of artistic vision or voice you have. You would play chamber music. You would lead a chamber orchestra without a conductor and play a concerto. And besides the commissioned piece, I would have an improvisation round, which is what the Menuhin Competition used to do, to see how creative you are on the spot.” →



## Monica Ellis

*Chamber music faculty, bassoonist, Imani Winds*

→ At the 2001 Concert Artists Guild (CAG) International Competition, Imani Winds was chosen as an Educational Residency Ensemble, placing it on a circuit of community education events. The honor “really honed in on the type of skill set needed the most” for chamber groups, says founding bassoonist Monica Ellis. She now sits on the board of directors for CAG, a role that has given her a window into the competition process. Recently, CAG announced it is ending its annual competition in favor of smaller, local auditions that will take place throughout the year.

**ADJUDICATION PROCESS:** “I judged the [Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition] about four years ago, and that was my first time judging. That was a very interesting adjudication process. Nobody talked to each other. You go in expecting to deliberate, but it’s actually just the opposite. As a judge, for every round, you put your choice in the hat and then somebody takes that hat, counts the votes up and then, ‘Here’s the answer.’”

**MORE DIVERSE JURIES:** “For there to be more diverse winners, there must not only be a more diverse jury but also more diverse applicants. So, what’s the organization doing to help? From the jury’s point of view, there’s got to be a lot of opinions in the room. There can’t just be one or two people deciding who is going to be on the jury, from the tape round all the way to the final round. You ask ten people and only five can do it, so make sure that the ten people to begin with are from diverse groups.

**BROADER TALENT POOLS:** “For the pool of applicants, you have to work a little bit harder. Some of the most basic things: Did the marketing go out to a wide variety of locations that have chamber music programs, or did it only [reach] the top five conservatories around the country? Don’t just wait for all the applicants to come to you. You must go to various applicant pools and think outside the box.”

## Haochen Zhang (Piano '12)

*Concert pianist*

→ Because Haochen Zhang was just 19 when he won the 2009 Van Cliburn Competition, he says he quickly put aside the need to chase more prizes. He never had to face competition burnout or worrying about matters of fairness or transparency. “Afterwards, I was like ‘I’m done with this!’ I didn’t really think about what the jurors were thinking, and what I could have done differently.”

At the same time, Mr. Zhang believes that competitions can have a vital place in classical music, if managed properly. “Of the different art forms, music is the closest to sport,” he says. “I’m not saying they are similar—not at all. But in comparison with other arts—[whether] movies, photography, painting, or novels—there’s a certain kind of athleticism associated with the virtuosic quality of instrumental or vocal music as a performing art.”

**JURY FEEDBACK:** “I had a lot of friends who were in competitions, and I did see some controversial results: When I thought some of my friends played well, they didn’t advance to the next round. Some people whom I thought were less deserving went forward to the final and even won the competition. I don’t have a definitive answer, but if the jurors can write down comments everybody can see after each round for each competitor, that might help the transparency of the competition—and form a healthier discussion around the musicians’ playing.”





**PRIZES:** “One of the reasons I attended the Cliburn instead of other top-tier competitions was because I felt they didn’t just want to produce a winner; they wanted to build a platform for making a real concert pianist. The reason is they have this automatic three-year [management]. It’s not, ‘We have a winner here whom we’ll throw to the market and see which management wants to take our medalist.’ It’s more like, ‘We want to take care of the medalist, provide support after they win, and give them concert exposure.’ That’s what I value the most.”

**ONLINE PUNDITS:** “A competition is like a social media event. Sometimes, you see this gap between the viewers online and the jurors’ decisions. In that regard, if the jurors could write comments about each contender, it might help merge this gap between the juror and the online viewers, and it might form a better public discussion about music and music playing.”



## Timothy Chooi (Violin '17)

*Violinist, faculty at the University of Ottawa*

→ Timothy Chooi’s lengthy competition credits include the top prize at the 2018 Joseph Joachim International Violin Competition Hanover and second prize at the 2019 Queen Elisabeth Competition. Recently appointed head of the string department at the University of Ottawa, he calls himself “a big supporter of competitions.” Still, he sees room for improvement. Competitions can help an artist break into new countries or markets, but they don’t offer a catch-all career boost.

**PERSONALITY SHOWCASE:** “If I were designing a competition, I would model it like a German competition, like ARD, Hanover, or Stuttgart, and put a lot of weight on the repertoire. But I would like there to be rounds where the artist’s [personality] really shines through as well. I would create something where the performer had to compose something. I think a lot of competitions are very general right now.”

**TEACHERS AND STUDENTS:** “Any time I’ve had any relationship in terms of teaching or mentoring a participant, I’ve always recused myself [from voting]. In that sense, I’m proactive about that. I think it’s obvious, but everybody has a different moral code when someone should recuse themselves. When you have your girlfriend or boyfriend in a competition, you need to recuse yourself. That is pretty obvious to me, but you’d be surprised how often that doesn’t happen. As a teacher, any mentorship over the last ten years, I would recuse myself. If it’s a master class at a festival from three to five years ago I would think twice, but I don’t think it’s as big of a deal.”

**ADVICE TO STUDENTS:** “I advise every [student] to have a goal. Some would include competitions, many not. It’s not for everybody. It’s a specific mindset and everything is already a competition, in some ways.”

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.