

I was invited as a guest to the whole of this year's Leeds, the most part of which I was unable to accept owing to performances elsewhere. However, on that Sunday, as well as participating in the *Conversazione*, I spent some time with Dame Fanny, the jury, Lang Lang, and many of the organisers.

Originally my role was to have been to publicly interview those (who wanted it) who had been eliminated from the second round, and to discuss their feelings. The idea was that I could use my own example to show that not winning is sometimes as stimulating to a long-term musical career as is winning first prize.

In the event it turned out that 9 September was not a good day to meet the second-rounders, as it was two days after the selection announcements. Almost all those eliminated had already left Leeds, probably because they were required to pay for their accommodation once they were out of the competition. One pianist had decided to stay, and in the event she was the only one involved in the '*Conversazione*'.

Three of those through to the semi-finals seemed keen to be included. However, as was quite obvious, they couldn't be as it also involved discussion with the jury members, which is completely against the rules of any competition.

We made the best of the '*Conversazione*', and it turned out very well, as many interesting observations were made by several people. It was a public event in the University Great Hall, hosted by Dame Fanny, with the whole jury on her left, and me and the one eligible pianist who had remained on her right. The audience was also asked to participate by asking questions, and some members of the jury gave their views re competitions in general. Robert Levin's and Christopher Elton's contributions were particularly valuable, and should be noted by every aspiring competition entrant.

However, the two main points of this exercise were:

Firstly to give me an opportunity to reassure the pianist to my right that she should not take it badly that she had been eliminated – something she did not seem to be doing anyway. Given that the exchange took place in front of the jury and about 250 members of the public, I can only admire her for her courage and pleasant demeanour under the circumstances – particularly as she was the sole competitor to participate in the discussion.

Secondly, to give me the chance to set out to the public what the Leeds Competition and its history, its founder/chairman, and my experience at 31 years distance all meant to me. I essentially told the audience what I have written in the [linked document](#) and it seemed to interest them very much. I felt like I was back in the midst of the Leeds Piano Competition atmosphere that I remember so well from so long ago. In fact, I wanted to enter again, but unfortunately I now exceed the age limit by 39 years....

The words of Dame Fanny were very emotional, and very touching. I had experienced this side of her when we met earlier this year, but this time it was completely public. I was much moved.

Afterwards, the jury members and I took Sunday Lunch together with Dame Fanny and Lang Lang – plus the latter's managers. I had the pleasure of talking with Lang Lang; he expresses himself extremely intelligently, is very personable, and a great asset to the

competition in his new role as Ambassador. I was as impressed with his charming and genuine persona as I have been by his superhuman technical skills.

One of the battle cries of the L.I.P.C. is that it is 'The Greatest Piano Competition in the world'. I think it is wonderful that the city of Leeds and those organising the competition have such pride and belief in their extremely high-profile event, and let's face it, it is a very good marketing label.

Leeds is certainly up there, but let us keep it in perspective. If we judge the overall performance of a competition on the long-term success of its winners, what about certain others? :

Firstly, the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow (occupying a special place in 20th Century political history, as it was created by the Soviet government as a gesture of détente with the West, and to some degree was intended as a method of showing the outside world that the Soviet Union could do better than the rest of us. This obviously means that its role has changed since the political change in Russia; however, it remains one of the most prestigious competitions in the world, particularly now that it has been revamped and modernised by Valery Gergiev and Richard Rodzinski.)

Secondly, the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw (to some degree a more specialised competition, as it is devoted to the works of Chopin.)

I would like to suggest that Leeds is one of three greatest piano competitions in the world – not the third greatest, but – to stress their equality again – one of the three greatest.

Muscovites, Varsovians, and Loiners are all to be admired for their pride in their wonderful piano competitions, and it is inevitable that they should themselves be competitive with each other. In terms of their long-term history it is certainly true that those three competitions knock the rest of the world's piano competitions into a cocked hat. The fact that many have regarded some of the results at all three as questionable at some point is inevitable under the circumstances, and simply demonstrates that we are all human. That there have been some great results as well makes it all worthwhile, as long as it goes hand to hand with great cultural awareness and commitment through government education policy amongst the consumers.... Oh...

When Dame Fanny is speaking of the successes of the competition – the most prominent being the subsequent careers of Radu Lupu and Murray Perahia - I also think the wonderful Dmitri Alexeev deserves a mention in the list of huge successes, but somehow regularly gets left out.

She also mentions some of the ones who did not win and highlights their subsequent careers. This she did during the 'Conversazione'. The ones she always refers to are Andras Schiff, Mitsuko Uchida and Piotr Anderszewski, who were not first prize winners but who have gone on to achieve major careers. It is always rewarding to hear about these people. I guess that she refers to her personal favourites, rather than noting the global success of the alumni generally.

Almost as an aside, let us take a look at the list of top prizes from the three competitions mentioned above, since the formation of the Leeds in 1963. I have included those who won

a second prize when no first was awarded – not just because I was one of them...., but also because when no first is awarded, the second is effectively the winner. I have also excluded competitions that took place later than the year 2000, as the world changed in so many ways at that time; I am thinking of the huge effect the downfall of the Soviet Union had on the music world, and the degree to which the influence of competitions has decreased in recent years. It is also true that it is impossible to really assess the long-term statesmanship of an artist until several years have passed.

Chopin Competition

1960 Maurizio Pollini

1965 Martha Argerich

1970 Garrick Ohlsson

1975 Kristian Zimmermann

1980 Dang Thai Son

1985 Stanislav Bunin

1990 Kevin Kenner

1995 Philippe Giusiano/Alexei Sultanov

2000 Yundi Li

Tchaikovsky Competition

1958 Van Cliburn

1962 Vladimir Ashkenazy/John Ogdon

1966 Grigori Sokolov

1970 Victor Krainev/John Lill

1974 Andrei Gavrilov

1978 Mikhail Pletnev

1982 Vladimir Ovchinnikov/Peter Donohoe

1986 Barry Douglas

1990 Boris Beresovsky

1994 Nikolai Lugansky

1998 Denis Matsuev

Leeds

1963 Michael Roll

1966 Rafael Orozco

1969 Radu Lupu

1972 Murray Perahia

1975 Dmitri Alexeev

1978 Michel Dalberto

1981 Ian Hobson

1984 Jon Kimura Parker

1987 Vladimir Ovchinnikov

1990 Artur Pizarro

1993 Ricardo Castro

1996 Ilya Itin

2000 Alessio Bax

Not a bad list from any of the three, eh? That Leeds has been able to compete successfully with two major cultural capital cities from the former Eastern Bloc is a tribute to the incredible energy and commitment of its founder. (By the by, I notice that out of that list of pianists, the only female is Martha Argerich. I don't know exactly what the significance is, but I feel somehow that there is one – the first time a woman won Leeds was in 2009, when Sofya Kulyak took the first prize.)

I have a suggestion to the TV media – BBC FOUR would be ideal. I wonder how the music world and the TV audience would react to seeing previous years' competitions re-broadcast in the light of what has happened to the prize-winners. I would of course be particularly interested in seeing my own from 1981, in which I was beaten by Ian Hobson, Wolfgang Manz, Bernard d'Ascoli, Daniel Blumenthal and Christopher O'Riley (in that order). But it would be a revelation to revisit all of them – maybe particularly the 1972 and 1969 competition finals – or even earlier rounds. That really would put the success of the competition in perspective.

It would raise many questions of course, and would make many people very apprehensive; but it would also raise public awareness of the competition in the wider sense - away from the novelty of the here and now - and to see the changing fortunes and history of this extraordinary institution.

That it is one of the three greatest in the world would be highlighted. But far more than that - that it had the humility to display its less successful moments would be a way of putting into relief just what a wonderful boost it has been to the careers of certain pianists, and to public

awareness of classical music in general. It is great to rave each and every finalist in the present competition, but let us see it in light of its historical context.

Above all else, it would demonstrate that the TV media, represented by the BBC, really did have a genuine interest in culture, and was proud to be associated with this great institution.

If such a thing ever happened, I would like to suggest that the media presentation of what is one of the three greatest piano competitions in the world is not as if it is a kind of nerdy version of 'X Factor' or 'America's Next Top Model' ('Classical Music's Next Top Pianist?') with dramatic 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' – style linking music, complete with slo-mo and other gimmicks. An historical documentary-style insight into a great musical event, with some intelligent knowledgeable commentary, would be wonderful.

It has been mooted that I should include in this blog my impressions of the finalists at this year's competition. I have watched all the concerto finals on BBC FOUR, and taken in the comments by Noriko Ogawa and Tom Poston, Mark Elder, and others who were asked their opinions by Suzy Klein. The trouble with saying anything positive about one person is by definition at the detriment of the others. One has to do it as a jury member – it is what one is there for. I obviously have my opinions, and they are quite strong ones, but it is not for me to post them. This time I was not even a critic. I was there as a guest, and the jury had the ever-present and consistently nerve-wracking job of determining an order.

The six finalists were all very fine pianists, all of whom may have revealed different aspects of themselves in different repertoire, or even perhaps on a different day. It should be pointed out that, as always, the finalists' playing in the earlier rounds must be taken in to consideration, so the fact that only the finals are televised can be in itself a slightly deceptive factor to the viewing public.

Putting them in order would have been, as always, a nightmare. Been there and done that (in Moscow, not Leeds), and I would do it again if asked. However, it is certainly not fun to be on a jury; it is a burden that comes with a feeling of great responsibility. You are part of a committee of career executioners (in both senses); out of the huge number of people who enter each and every competition, there is only going to be one – and even that if you award a single first prize - who is not going to go away disappointed. The thought that they might have got it wrong weighs on most jury members' mind very heavily; whole life-long careers may be at stake.

And let us not forget the words of Dame Fanny Waterman – "Piano competitions are not perfect, but there is no alternative". Very true, particularly as in most of the Western World – courtesy of government educational policies over the last few decades - the public is progressively less educated in music and more of a pushover by the marketing industry. As I wrote elsewhere, culture has always inextricably entwined with politics, and there is yet another example.

It will be evident from these pages that I took the whole business of entering competitions very seriously. I still do. That to me seems fundamental, and almost shouldn't be worth mentioning. However, there have always been some, and I fear this tendency is on the increase, who simply do the competition circuit as a matter of course, often doing well in the first round and then letting themselves down by not having prepared anything else. An example of this was mentioned by one of the audience members at the 'Conversazione'. My

response was then, and always will be, that nice stories about competitors not being ready for the next round after being taken forward are sometimes very amusing. However, the number going through is strictly limited, so for everyone who goes through there is always another who doesn't – whose first round may well have not been quite as arresting but who was consistently good. To me it is irresponsible to one's fellow musicians to enter without proper intentions and preparation.

These people are of course not to be confused with those who pretend they were not ready to go through and then play wonderfully. That syndrome is widespread at every level in all disciplines and is a bit sad. It is a similar trait to the one some have who say they never practise when actually they are working at every opportunity; they presumably think it is all grist to the mill of creating the image of the demigod-like figure who doesn't need to do mundane things like learn pieces or keep his or her technique up. They do, I promise – otherwise the cracks begin to show, however great their talent is.

My advice to competitors in any musical competition is still the same as it was 30 years ago:

Spend as much time as you can preparing for all the pieces involved, including getting friends to listen to you, make recordings of yourself to listen back to, and if you can arrange public performances of the relevant repertoire. In other words put the pressure on yourself and learn from what happens.

There is nothing wrong with doing the 'competition circuit', as it is dubbed nowadays, but take all of them very seriously – they are not social events.

Make sure you read the rules very carefully, or you might find you get eliminated over some requirement you didn't fulfil and could easily have done.

Listen to as many other pianists playing the same works as you can (rejecting or accepting their ideas appropriately) – learning from them without copying anyone gives you confidence in your own musical ideas.

Play at the competition as if you were giving a concert – i.e. play sincerely to the audience, not to the jury.

Do not choose musical ideas on the basis of what you think the jury wants to hear, and be yourself.

Whilst at the competition do not get involved with the rumour mill. It is always wrong.

Above all else, do not take the results personally, or allow it to put you off further attempts. You only cross the age threshold once, and by and large, jury members are doing their best to be fair.

Finally I would like to put a question out there regarding the almost complete absence of British entrants in, not only the Leeds Competition, but also in every competition on which I have been a jury member, plus all those I have heard about recently. It is generally accepted by those who think about it, and by those who organise these major musical events, that British interest in entering international competitions has waned to the point of being almost forgotten. The same has happened on several summer schools I have worked on. On, for example, the Aurora Chamber Music Course in Sweden – on which I coaching this week –

the British were represented by one flautist, one cellist and one violinist who were British, out of a total of around 100. The same happened on a similar course in Portugal in 2010, as well as on international piano summer schools in Dallas, Beijing, Alsace and Oxford – there were almost no British students, and in some cases, none at all. And the same happened in the case of international piano competitions in Tbilisi, Vilnius, Prague, Moscow, and, most distressingly of all, Leeds. Despite its position as the highest profile music competition in the UK, and one of the greatest in the world, the only British pianists to make it past the pre-selection stage to the first round of the competition were trained in the USA. (How many actually applied I do not know). Something is seriously wrong regarding the younger generation of British pianists. Where are they, and what is the explanation of there being so few? I have my own suspicions of course, but I would like to read yours first, before posting them. Comments, please.

In the meantime - if you have been, thank you for reading this.