

The Leeds Competition in 1981 was the third competitive event of the four around the world that I entered. In each of them I was a finalist, and never an outright winner.

The first had been the 1976 and only British Liszt Competition – a national competition founded by the Liszt Society – in which I was beaten into third place by the extraordinary late Terence Judd, and close friend Martin Roscoe, the latter of whom became our Best Man in 1980, and has been my two-piano partner for nearly forty years.

The second had been the Bartok/Liszt Competition, a little later in 1976, in which I was an unplaced finalist out of eleven. The winner then was Robert Benz, who went on to be a fine chamber musician and member of the Trio Bamberg.

I was reluctant in principle to enter any more, as I was unconvinced that it was necessary, at the same time as which I did not see myself as a competition 'type'. By 1980 or so I was doing more than enough concerts in the UK to comprise a good career – not in any way connected with the above-mentioned competitions, I hasten to add. Thanks to several conductor colleagues' recommendations, I had already been lucky enough to secure a manager (Ingpen and Williams) in 1977, dates at the Proms in 1979 and 1980, a Queen Elizabeth Hall recital in 1980, regular appearances with almost all the regional British symphony orchestras and one or two with the London orchestras as well, starting in 1976. I had made two recordings on the EMI label (1981), and I was a regular on BBC Radio 3 going back to 1975. Within the confines of the UK, I had far more opportunities than I had ever dreamed I would, and I considered myself very lucky.

There was a feeling amongst my family, friends and colleagues that in order to establish a presence outside the UK, I needed the sort of international profile a competition win would produce. However, courtesy of the work Ingpen and Williams were doing, I had already been invited to the Warsaw Philharmonic and one or two other places in Europe, so that would begin to slowly expand too.

So what was the point in entering another competition? The idea of it daunted me. I did not trust competitions, and I did not relish the disappointment of being eliminated (something I had never experienced and I had no desire to).

Yet, at the same time I had such a tremendous impression of the Leeds Competition from my youth that I was inexorably pulled towards it, despite being terrified. I seemed to have such a strong connection with the city of Leeds that went way beyond knowing where it was.

I am just old enough to remember the excitement of the first Leeds in 1963 – my parents were certainly excited about it, and because I had already made plain my desire to become a pianist, their fascination with it was infectious and swept me up. Their interest in it was probably also partly as a result of part of my family having settled in Leeds years before, and their subsequent familiarity with the city from frequent visits.

I vividly recalled the 1969 competition (and still do); not only was it won by Radu Lupu, but Boris Petrushchansky played Stravinsky's Three Movements from Petrushka in his televised semi-final at the time I had become interested to the point of obsession with the music of that composer. That was the first time I had ever heard it the solo piano version, and Petrushka eventually became a mainstay of my repertoire, after playing it at my ultimate competition in Moscow in 1982.

Subsequently I studied music with Sir Alexander Goehr at Leeds University. The 1972 competition - when Murray Perahia won first prize - took place just after I left the university, and I returned to listen to the finals.

Not forgetting the fact that I was in those early days not at all sure that I wanted a performing career, I was fairly uncritical of the pianists themselves. In 1972 I was there simply to increase my awareness of the music world, and was as interested in the process of setting up the orchestra and stage management issues as in the piano playing, which at the time seemed as excellent as it could be.¹

I was at sea to some degree; the only thing I knew for sure was that I would always be a professional musician of some sort - either an academic or a performer. Later, I was drawn back into taking the piano as seriously at the age of about 24 as I had done at the age of 8 by several unsolicited invitations, including a Halle Orchestra Summer Prom that coincided with the very day I left the R.N.C.M. in 1976 – a good omen, I thought at the time. But it still did not occur to me to enter such an extraordinary event as one of the three major international piano competitions in the world (I only ever considered there to be three – see main document). Not until I was 28 did I finally give in to the ultimately irresistible temptation to go for the Leeds. The time began to feel right, and I was being encouraged to left right and centre by family, friends, colleagues, conductors and agents. And once one got to the age of 30, it was too late. So I finally went for it.

It went extremely well. It is not for me to comment on how individual pieces came off, but it is interesting for me to look back at the repertoire choices:

Round 1

Beethoven Waldstein Sonata

Bartok Etude Op18 no 2

Scarlatti Sonata K286 in G

Chopin Ballade 4

Round 2

Liszt Sonata in B Minor

Bartok Sonata

¹ I was more inclined towards musicology and composition then. Later I became a symphonic timpanist/percussionist and sometime rock-drummer. I had already gone through learning to play the tuba, clarinet and the double bass incomparably dreadfully, and prior to that doing relatively well as a beginner on the violin, and remarkably decently on the viola (although not decently enough – I was probably the cause of the viola joke tradition). My percussion-playing, however, was on a high level, and I enjoyed it immensely; in fact, there are aspects of it that I still miss, despite not having played professionally since 1979 (I went as far as trialing for the jobs of timpanist with the Halle Orchestra, and sub-principal percussionist with the BBC Philharmonic (then BBC Northern SO). If I had been offered one of those jobs – which I wasn't - I may have accepted, and things would have been a whole lot different for me over the next few decades. That may have included my weight; there is nothing more anerobic than humping timpani up and down stairs and into a van after a concert – something symphonic percussionists would not be seen dead doing now, but times have changed.

Semi-final

Ravel Gaspard de la Nuit

Schubert Wanderer Fantasy

Mozart Piano Quartet in E flat K493

Final

Beethoven Concerto 4

For whatever reasons, none of which were ever divulged to me, I was awarded the sixth prize. The other prizes, in order, were awarded to (1) Ian Hobson, (2) Wolfgang Manz, (3) Bernard d'Ascoli, (4) Daniel Blumenthal and (5) Christopher O'Reilly.

Unless you win a competition outright, you are going to be disappointed – obviously. I imagine the disappointment to be very acute if you are eliminated from a first round. Having never experienced it, I can only imagine what it feels like, but I do have many friends who have been in that position and it made them feel bad for sure. However, the statistical chances are high, so it is not necessarily a reflection of what the jury thinks of your abilities. In any case, public awareness of the ones who do not make it to the second round is very small in almost all competitions I have experienced.

[The exception to the latter situation would be the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, where, at the time I entered it (1982), every note of every competitor was followed by national TV: that is to say the national TV station of a country that covered one fifth of the world's land mass, with a population of around 250,000,000, and with very little in the way of alternative TV entertainment.]

The later in the competition the elimination comes, the more disappointed you are going to be, and in the main the more aware the public – including the TV audience - is going to be of your 'un-success.' If you do make it to the final, anything other than the top prize will feel similar to elimination, however it is couched verbally by the organisers.

That was the way it was for me, and I believe it has been the same for everyone else I have encountered who has been in the same position in any major competition. We all say in our assorted interviews that the whole experience has been wonderful, and that we are happy with a lower prize. But the truth is that almost everyone entered it in the hope of winning and it opening up a major career. Otherwise, what is the point? ; It has dominated the best part of a whole year in preparation, including as many public performances as possible, one's performing repertoire choices and forms the focus of all your musical activities – either that or you should not be entering.

As the competition had progressed, I had got extremely good vibes from everyone around me [that is to say audience members, fellow musicians who were following it both live and on radio – including Simon Rattle (already into his second season at the CBSO), who was supporting me from afar, and whose parents were prominent in the competition audience

(and apparently very vocal, so I am told by Dame Fanny) - the conductor of the finals – Sir Charles Groves, who had already been a great supporter of mine for several years – and even many of the other competing pianists, some of whom have remained firm friends ever since.] I have no idea if that groundswell of support is actually a ghetto that is duplicated in some form or other around all the final competitors; perhaps it is something that progressively happens to everyone in competitions as they ascend the slippery pole. But it was incredibly heartening. It puts one on a kind of false high.

Coming in last in the final, live on TV to my own nation, was indeed extremely disappointing. It was also a surprise - being eliminated at any point earlier in the competition would have been less so.

Every competition holds the same possible fate for someone of course. This year's sixth prize-winner was indeed a very fine pianist, and someone always has to come in in that position. As a several-time jury member myself now, I have always been very keenly aware of what a blow we are indirectly delivering to the last of the competition prizes simply by awarding higher prizes to the others – which is how it always feels to jury members, rather than them actively wishing to award a booby prize to any individual.

Heightening the piquancy of my feelings at the time was the fact that I had loved the experience of the competition (notwithstanding my general doubt about the reliability of competitions) so much until that point. And I had always admired Fanny Waterman for what she had achieved with the vision she had had so many years before.

Dame Fanny has recently told me that I should have chosen a different piano concerto for the final. I can see this in retrospect, but of course the reason for the choice was to demonstrate a different side of one's musical personality, having played Ravel, Liszt, Bartok etc. earlier on. That would probably have worked with certain judges. However, as I now know from my own jury experience, there is nowt so queer as juries – not because they are corrupt or bigoted, as they are often accused of, but because they are human, hold strong pre-conceived ideas that form the backbone of their own teaching, know certain works better than others, and often are themselves, in another way, competing.

I have also recently become aware of a situation in which the final placings sometimes comprise results that none of the jury members intended. That is to say that occasionally some very fine pianists are eliminated and not so great ones win prizes as a result of a marking system that doesn't work. The final roll-call can ultimately horrify every member of a jury, and each of them has then to live with a partially incomprehensible result that they appear responsible for, but did not intend. They are then often viewed as idiots, bigots and even manipulators in the eyes of audiences, critics and many of the competitors who didn't win. In Moscow in 2011, I was accused, along with everyone else on the jury, of all those things, yelled at in the street, pilloried on Facebook, and on one occasion had a half-brick thrown at me, which hit me in the small of my back and left a bruise, near the Conservatoire. I realise that nowhere else in the world other than in Russia is that level of passion likely to be whipped up, but nevertheless it does show how being a jury member is a bit of a no-win situation.

It is now much easier for me to view the Leeds of thirty one years ago objectively.

I am incredibly lucky:

For one thing, the sixth prize at Leeds at any point over the last 50 years is a major stroke of luck when one considers how many pianists are in the first round, and is perhaps seen as such by everyone other than the sixth prize-winner.²

For another, if the last is untrue and it actually comprises a failure, this 'failure' spurred me on and determined me to enter further major competitions before I was too old; the next one I did (in Moscow one year later), I effectively won. I chose the International Tchaikovsky partly because it was the only major one taking place during the following year. (I had a plan to find another in the year after that if Moscow flopped; the Busoni Competition was due to take place in 1983, and, although not so major, would have been my last chance before the age of 30 - normally the cut off age for entering.) It also revolved around the Russian repertoire, which I was always drawn to. Because of the political issues surrounding the Tchaikovsky, and the implications of taking on the Soviets at their own game, it was the most daunting piano competition in the world, and brought the greatest reward. By that, I certainly don't mean prize-money, which was in the event, 2,500 Russian Roubles divided equally between Vladimir Ovchinnikov and me, in a currency that was invalid outside the USSR, and in a country where there was virtually nothing in the shops you could possibly want. However, the prestige was the greatest achievable in the world at the time, and the ensuing engagements and opportunities overwhelmingly wonderful, continuing into the present day after 30 years.

² [In fact, as I was very busy haring up and down the UK in my car on an almost daily basis at that time. As I used to be a rather reckless driver, I had gathered enough points – they were called endorsements in those days – by the Autumn of 1981, to be eligible for being banned from driving for a year. I had been caught speeding over the motorway limit once too often.

In order to plead my case, I turned up at the local magistrate's court complete with recently styled and washed hair, freshly pressed dark suit, and an empty but impressive looking brand-new briefcase. I explained to the three magistrates that I was a concert pianist, dependent upon being able to drive in order to fulfil my engagements, and that public transport would simply not enable me to be at all the places ay which I was contracted to play and teach.

None of this impressed them – they looked at me as if I was a bank robber asking for several other offences to be taken into consideration.

Until I mentioned the TV broadcast of the Leeds Competition, that is. I said that I wondered if any of them had seen it, and that that represented the kind of thing they would be preventing if they banned me for a twelve-month period – slight artistic verisimilitude, I think you will agree.

The three magistrates - two men and one woman - suddenly looked up at me like meerkats – as if they were going to try to persuade me to compare the car insurance market. The female magistrate was completely bowled over by me, and specifically by my Leeds sixth prize, and beamed an indulgent motherly smile. Immediately it was as if she had found her long-lost son, rather than a speeding reprobate who thought that playing the piano rendered the rules of the road inapplicable to him. Her deep admiration for me obviously affected the two other magistrates; I had to pay a small fine, but was allowed to keep my driving license, effective immediately.

Such was the prestige of the Leeds that I think that if all I had done was to have entered it, it would have carried more weight with the magistrates than my 1980 QEH recital and my 1979 and 1980 Prom appearances put together. This story, of course, almost inadvertently sheds light on the British justice system as much as it does on the significance of the Leeds International Piano Competition. By the way, no I don't drive like that any more; in fact I rarely drive at all now.]

And, finally, it introduced me to another world – that of the Soviet Union, the Cold War, the degree of passion surrounding culture and the arts in that country and the comparison with that of the West; this set me off on a crusade that has been as close to politics as to music. The degree to which culture and the arts have always been directly influenced by politics has become more and more obvious to me as the years have gone by. Cold War politics, with its inevitable accompanying spy stories and propaganda battles, and the extreme effect it had on the music world, became a very major part of my wider interests, and they still are. [To read Peter Donohoe's diary of the 1982 International Tchaikovsky Competition, click [here](#) (for a summary) and [here](#) (for the complete version).]

The sixth prize at Leeds was thus a springboard from which I jumped into the unknown and came out of it on top with nothing at all to complain about. Notwithstanding that any winner is extremely lucky, and that competitive events in the arts are as much, if not more, a lottery than is a beauty contest, I was very proud in Moscow, and I should have been very grateful to Leeds.

However, at the time I was terribly embarrassed. For a year or so I felt angry, and every time a promoter in the UK, such as the managers of virtually every major orchestra, the BBC, my own agent – the brilliant Howard Hartog and Jonathan Groves – fellow chamber musicians, orchestral players, friends, and, in one case, a member of the Leeds jury, gave me their verbal support after the event, it made me angrier.

I can say openly now – 31 years later - that I have re-thought those feelings. It is easier at this distance to see it in retrospect for what it was. You might say that it is in the light of my Tchaikovsky Competition success, and the resultant 30 years of joy in indulging my hobby at the highest level - convincing myself that it is work - that makes it possible to be magnanimous, because people will get to hear my point of view under those circumstances. 'What if you hadn't entered Moscow or the Busoni, or indeed if you had not won a prize in either of them? What would you have to say about Leeds then, and who would listen?' people might say, and they would be right. But that does not alter the fact that my response was misguided, however right or wrong the decision was deemed to be.

I had no contact with the Leeds organisers during the next three decades, and, although my negative comments to the media – both before and after Moscow – were actually directed at the competition world as a whole, many of them were taken as and sometimes distorted to seem like attacks on Leeds.

All great institutions essentially revolve around the vision of one person, and in the case of the Leeds Competition it is Dame Fanny Waterman. An attack on the L.I.P.C. is thus an attack on her, and it mortifies me to think of it that way. No one in musical history has achieved anything like what she has, and the nation should be – and actually is – very proud of such an achievement.

She is extremely energetic, visionary, determined, commanding and charismatic. These qualities have apparently possibly been seen by some as egotistical, self-opinionated, domineering and insecure. However, I can identify with those qualities very easily, and perhaps they are qualities that anyone who makes a difference tends to have. More than anything, she has put the city of Leeds on the world's musical map. Without her, the Town Hall Concert Series would be a shadow of what it has become, and it is possible that Opera

North would never have been based in Leeds without the already existing musical culture she had done more than anyone to create. Let us not forget that the Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra had been only professional symphony orchestra in the area, and it was disbanded in 1955 after only eight years of existence.

I am still sorry that my competition success had to take place in another country – it almost seemed like another planet in those days, given the Communist system and the propaganda war that infected the Tchaikovsky Competition. I would have loved it to have been at the greatest competition in my own country where I was lucky enough to win. I am at heart very sentimental. However, if I had, I doubt that it would have given me the opportunities afforded me by the Tchaikovsky. Nevertheless this is an emotional issue, rather than a logical one.

So, after this terrible long silence, [I wrote to Dame Fanny about a year ago...](#)