Introduction

We live in an age of competitions. In the world of business, performance measures dictate whether employees are promoted or fired, and which companies attract investors or fail. Law schools, universities and hospitals are all routinely ranked. Prizes are awarded in nearly every field of endeavor; the most prestigious ones, which make careers in science, architecture, poetry, film, journalism, art and literature, are routinely announced in the media. Athletes in every sport undergo grueling training regimens in the hopes of winning the next championship or beating the previous record. Children are encouraged to study so that they can be at the top of their class; after school, many are shuttled off to activities such as competitive dance, spelling bees and scholastic chess, when they might prefer to be at home besting a virtual opponent in the latest video game. Popular reality television shows entertain viewers by pitting participants against each other in winner-take-all contests for everything from an apprenticeship position to a romantic partner. A standard token of appreciation on occasions such as Father's Day is a card or confection made out to the "Number 1 Dad" or "World's Best Father," declaring one's parent a winner in a contest that does not exist.

Music is no exception. The competitive spirit is nurtured in music students from the very beginning of their instruction; by participating in local and regional competitions, soloists, choirs and bands are told how they measure up to their peers, and receive expert advice on how to improve their standing in future contests. Competitions also figure prominently in the popular music industry. Radio stations, nightclubs and concert promoters regularly stage a "Battle of the Bands" for up-and-coming heavy metal and rock groups to build a local fan base by competing for a recording contract. The announcement of the shortlist of contenders for a music prize, such as the Mercury Prize in the United Kingdom and the Polaris Prize in Canada, is a major event in the national music scene that has a measurable impact on album sales.

This book is about classical music competitions, the contests staged for highly trained players who are in the early stages of their performing careers. This is the corner of the music world[1] where the culture of competition is most pronounced. Since the Second World War, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of organizations that run recurring, high-profile events in which musicians from around the world compete for a prize. And the number continues to grow; even in recent years, amid increasing desperation over shrinking audiences and predictions of the demise of classical music, new competitions continue to be founded. There are now so many competitions that the prize-winning musician is no longer exceptional; approximately 160 laureates are named every year in the piano discipline alone.[2] Now that most musicians can boast a collection of top prizes, it is considered more impressive to establish a career without entering the competition circuit at all. Why have competitions become so prominent in classical music? What is fueling this proliferation?

Theorizing performance and civility

It is tempting to see the rise of competitions as a symptom of marketization. Classical music has become a highly competitive field because of the success of the conservatory system; competitions could be seen as a mechanism to manage the oversupply of competent musicians and to identify merit in a standardized, efficient manner. Those inclined to seek an institutional explanation might also look to changes in funding sources to explain this trend. Street (2005), for example, found that the emergence of the arts prize in the United Kingdom coincided with the replacement of state support by corporate sponsorship; classical music competitions could be an analogous case where the interests of the culture industry, corporate sponsors and competition organizers converge sufficiently to produce an event that generates publicity and expands the audience for this minority musical taste.

While these are both important developments in the music world, they are not enough in themselves to explain the proliferation of competitions. The

[1] "Music world" is shorthand for "the social world of music" as it would be understood in symbolic interactionism. The two other spatial metaphors used in the sociology of music – scene and field – are less compatible with my theoretical framework. In his landmark work, Becker (1982) defined the concept of the "art world" as the "network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that the art world is known for" (p. x). I prefer this more inclusive term to "music profession." However, I agree with Kingsbury (1988:171) that art worlds do not produce only material objects; they also produce cultural abstractions.

[2] Calculation based on the number of competition results posted between 2003 and 2012 on the Alink-Argerich Foundation Website (www.alink-argerich.org/), accessed 24 April 2013.

first problem that a purely institutional argument would encounter is that the perceived glut in the market and the impact of corporate sponsorship of the arts emerged after international competitions were well established. A second challenge would be accounting for the rise of competitions in noncapitalist countries; in these national contexts, it is the absence of the free market system that would be seen as creating the need for a standardized mechanism to identify excellence efficiently.

Another plausible explanation would identify prestige as the driving force behind the growth of music competitions. Goode (1978) developed one version of this argument from the perspective of exchange theory. He cast prestige as a system of social control; along with wealth and power, honor is used by individuals and groups to accomplish goals such as eliciting the help of others and encouraging members of an organization to conform. Prize competitions formalize the allocation of prestige in order to serve three group goals. First, they "sift and evaluate the participants, . . . offer[ing] a basis for judgments about possible future achievements" (p. 164). Second, they substitute for benefits that the activity does not normally provide, such as financial gain. Third, they provide a way to recognize achievements that, if overlooked, would amount to a denial of the values that society claims to uphold. According to Goode, these functions help to explain why competitions are considered more appropriate, and found to be more numerous, in areas not defined as among "the central concerns of society," such as school, athletics and the arts (p. 167).

A second variation of the prestige argument would draw from Bourdieu's (1993; 1996) sociology of art. From this perspective, the social function of competitions is obvious: they can be nothing other than a mechanism controlling the distribution of symbolic capital. By reinforcing the distinction between consecrated performers (professionals) and lesser musicians (amateurs in the derogatory sense), they enable the musical elite to fill their own ranks. Competitions would be seen as particularly well suited to the task because they provide occasions for the production of false belief in the rarity of talent. Just as the consumer's refined taste must be naturalized to mask its origins in an upper-class upbringing (Bourdieu 1984), the musician's connections and superior training must also be attributed to a "natural gift"; the impression of a scarcity of "great" performers helps to sustain the lopsidedness of restricted production, where only a few stars are seen as deserving of substantial fees for their concert appearances. From a Bourdieuian perspective, the rapid proliferation of competitions would be seen as a predictable pattern arising from the relational structure of the cultural field similar to that identified by English (2005) in his study of cultural prizes. He claims that prizes are not just "an instrument of cultural hierarchy" (p. 54), but also inevitably become subsumed to a larger

hierarchy in the field as a whole, setting up a second-order dynamic of status chasing. New prizes are constantly being invented in an effort to challenge established ones, either by tarnishing their reputation or by pushing them out of the limelight. As he explains,

> the logic of furious propagation does not tend, as practically all commentators have imagined it must, toward saturation. It is in fact completely wrong to suggest that the field must by now be crowded with redundant awards to the point of their mutual suffocation. On the contrary, each new prize that fills a gap or void in the system of awards defines at the same time a lack that will justify and indeed *produce* another prize. (P. 67)

Any account of music competitions would be incomplete if it overlooked the process of giving and withholding esteem, but neither version of the prestige argument would get very far without running up against some puzzling problems. The first is the widespread disillusionment with competitions. Professional musicians and music journalists have openly voiced their doubts about the effectiveness of competitions as a mechanism for identifying talent, which has undermined their utility as a basis for making judgments about future achievements. Furthermore, if winning a competition prize does not bring with it the respect of members of the relevant upper echelons or the admiration of the general public, then it no longer serves as an adequate substitute for the precarious financial situation that most musicians are likely to face. While competitions might aim to recognize admirable achievements that should not be overlooked, this noble purpose is often overshadowed by the controversy that surrounds them and the rumors of corruption that perpetually plague them. The second problem for the prestige argument is the degree of cooperation across the hierarchy of competition organizations. The directors of the most established competitions regularly attend each other's events to share best practices, and it is more common for new competitions to seek guidance from established organizations and imitate their procedures than to present themselves as protest prizes in the way that the National Book Award established itself as the "anti-Pulitzer" (English 2005). However, the biggest problem for an argument resting on prestige is the weak evidence to support the consecratory role of competitions. There has been a troubling tendency for many laureates to vanish from the public eye shortly after their moment in the limelight. If competitions are supposed to produce stars who play to sold-out halls around the world, they have had a poor success rate for the past forty or so years.[3]

[3] For these very same reasons, it is difficult to argue that music competitions are "tournaments of value." This has been a popular concept in studies of similar occasions such as book fairs and fashion weeks. Appadurai (1986:21) defined these as "complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life." There is indeed

What is the purpose of competitions, and how have they resisted all the reasons for their decline? Why do self-respecting musicians continue to participate in them if they have so little faith in the process? And why do audiences still care who wins when so many previous laureates have been forgotten? Answering these questions requires that we consider both the broader cultural significance and the interactional structure of these events. I will argue that competitions have inspired and frustrated in equal measure because they attempt to bridge music and civility.

By civility, I have in mind primarily the cultural codes, integrative patterns and institutional procedures that characterize a community based on universalistic solidarity (Alexander 2006). International music competitions proudly define themselves as inclusive; musicians of every nationality, ethnicity, religion and gender within a certain age bracket are eligible to compete, and the idea is for their performances to be judged without regard for the competitor's background. The musicians who participate enter with the understanding that the competition will not be arbitrary, but will instead be regulated by rules. Organizations are expected to be transparent about their regulations and consistent in applying them, and they are pressured to adopt measures that ensure the equal treatment of competitors and that prevent personal bias or other prejudices from distorting their deliberations. The other sense in which civility applies in this context is more along the lines developed by Elias (2000). The performance of masterworks from the Western canon entails a controlled bodily display and emotional disposition. There have been times in the history of music competitions when they have, like sporting events, provided an outlet for nationalist sentiments and ideological hostilities (Elias and Dunning 1986). But competitions are not necessarily arenas where nations try to assert or usurp cultural superiority; they have also served as sites of cultural inclusion where musical refinement generates solidarity and cultivates cosmopolitan sociability among all participants.

As institutions that bridge the civil and artistic spheres, competitions ground their legitimacy in legal-rational terms as well as musical ideals, but that should not suggest that music and civility blend harmoniously. Because the aim in

a fit with competitions in terms of ritual dynamics: participation is "both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them", and the central currency is "set apart through well understood cultural diacritics." But music competitions do not clearly meet Appadurai's final criterion; despite being set apart in time and space, the "forms and outcomes" of tournaments of value "are always consequential for the more mundane realities of power and value in ordinary life." This last point also explains why scholars such as Moeran (2010) find that the concept fits "fair and square within Bourdieu's discussion of fields of cultural production with their mechanisms of consecration and structural homology between creative works, positions, and actual position-taking as participants seek to capitalize on opportunities made available in a specific field" (pp. 138–9).

the music world is to create beauty and achieve the sublime, artistic individualism trumps everything else. The sacredness of playing "musically," or eliciting "musical" performances from others, typically anchors a patronage-style system of social organization in which charismatic figures are entrusted with determining how best to serve the art of music (see Kingsbury 1988). But artistic authority can be exercised in ways that perpetuate other forms of inequality. For example, the sexism rampant in classical music came to light again in 2013 when Vasily Petrenko, a high-profile conductor, claimed that orchestras "react better" when they are led by a man because "a sweet girl on the podium can make one's thoughts drift towards something else" (Ross 2013). And while the cultivation of musicianship requires a close relationship between pupils and teachers, the recent inquires into allegations of sexual abuse at British music schools reveals that the structure of authority in musical education is vulnerable to malfeasance (Pidd 2013).

In contrast, the goals of transparency, fairness and openness are championed in the civil sphere. However much musicians espouse these ideals, their transplantation into the artistic sphere clashes with musical ways of being. The implementation of rational procedures jars with the idiographic nature of musical appreciation, and efforts to ensure objectivity and fairness work against the subjective and relational nature of musical experience. For example, in most musical settings, musicians discuss their reactions to a performance once it has concluded, either with other listeners or with the players. But jurors are discouraged from sharing their opinions in order to prevent undue influence; instead they are asked to translate their impressions into numerical scores so that the results can be tallied. The bureaucratic mandate to eliminate candidates and produce a final ranking also interferes with the normal ritual dynamics of musical performance; musicians perform differently knowing that they are being judged, and audience members listen with an ear to assessing the competitor's chances.

The study of music competitions, then, presents an opportunity to examine boundary relations between two fundamentally incommensurable social spheres. Over the course of this book, I will show how the contradiction between music and civility manifests itself in every aspect of these events and I will explain why efforts to make competitions fair have tended to undermine the ritual structure through which great artists could emerge. The problem is not contests per se. This format resonates with the meritocratic principles that predominate in societies where individualism has overtaken group identification; winning is admired as a personal achievement in a "society of individuals" (Elias 2001) when it is accomplished "fair and square." The problem arises when this manner of performing civility is imported into the artistic sphere;

the mode of producing fair and objective judgments interferes with the ritual dynamics of transcendent aesthetic experience that allow musical talent to receive acclaim and attention.

Scenes from the competition circuit

Competitions aim to create settings that generate excitement about promising musicians. To convey a sense of what it is like to be drawn into this sphere of activity, this section will provide a glimpse into three of the nine competitions that I attended over the course of my research: the *Van Cliburn International Piano Competition*, in Texas, USA; the *Rostropovich International Cello Competition*, in Paris, France; and the *Banff International String Quartet Competition* (BISQC) in Alberta, Canada.[4] All three organizations were founded after 1950, and they highlight important variables in the competition circuit today. The *Cliburn* is a contest for the quintessential solo instrument and awards generous cash prizes thanks to considerable resources accumulated through private donations; the *Rostropovich*, in contrast, is a contest for a problematic solo instrument and is largely state-supported. The BISQC was selected because groups compete rather than individuals, and for its unusual location; it temporarily creates a self-contained world because it is held on an isolated mountain campus where the candidates, judges and audience gather for the duration of the event. While I will include some background about the circumstances in which each competition was founded and describe its proceedings, the higher priority is to convey the "places" where competitions happen, both in the literal sense of the cities and venues where they are staged and in the more figurative sense of how these organizations reflect their local cultures.

The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition

The *Cliburn* enjoys the distinction of being the only competition that was created to celebrate a competition winner. A group of music teachers and citizens of Fort Worth, Texas founded the organization on the heels of Van Cliburn's victory at the *Tchaikovsky Competition* in Moscow in 1958, a highly significant event that I will analyze in depth in Chapter 2. Since its first cycle in 1962, the quadrennial contest has become a major civic event involving a small army of dedicated volunteers. The 2005 program book listed no fewer than seven volunteer committees coordinating hundreds of people in a range of roles and activities, from entertaining the jury to ushering for concerts, staffing the gift shop, monitoring the practice pianos and chauffeuring participants around town. A

[4] Refer to Appendix A for the complete list of competitions I observed for this research.

delightfully Texan touch is the position of "backstage mother," a woman whose job it is to provide a soothing presence and attend to wardrobe malfunctions and other minor mishaps that might arise in the tense minutes before candidates walk on stage.

To be eligible to compete in the *Cliburn*, pianists must be between the ages of eighteen and thirty, a range that has become standard in the international competition circuit (see Appendix A). So many musicians apply that a screening process was devised to reduce the several hundred applications received to the thirty or so finalists for the event in Fort Worth. During the 1980s and 1990s the initial pool was reduced to 150 candidates, who were invited to perform recitals that were videotaped and distributed to members of a screening jury. Although sound engineers used the best available equipment to record these sessions, jurors insisted that the tapes were no substitute for hearing competitors live. Since 1997 arrangements have been made for the screening jury to travel to five cities around the world to attend preselection recitals.[5] These concerts are open to the public and are free of charge, and have succeeded in attracting appreciative audiences. But it is the competition in Fort Worth that draws the biggest crowd.

Audience members who buy a subscription package for the entire seventeen-day competition have a demanding schedule in store. The official proceedings alone require considerable stamina; those determined to hear every candidate in the first round are volunteering for approximately eight hours of intensive listening a day. Every session is packed with the most demanding repertoire ever written for the instrument, such as Balakirev's *Islamey*, Ravel's *Gaspard de la Nuit*, the *Transcendental Études* and *Hungarian Rhapsodies* by Liszt, the late sonatas of Beethoven, the Chopin *Études*, the Schubert *Impromptus*, the Brahms *Ballades* and *Intermezzi*, the Bach keyboard concerti, and the Rachmaninoff *Études-Tableaux*. Regardless of whether they are playing first thing in the morning or in the final slot of the evening session, candidates perform in their finest concert attire: women in red-carpet-worthy full-length gowns and men in tailored suits, tuxedos, or evening tailcoats. Daytime audiences might be dressed more casually, but the recital etiquette never relaxes; after the announcer introduces the candidate and lists the repertoire order from onstage, audience members know to hold their applause until the end of each work.

Like many competitions, the Cliburn Foundation also organizes a host of ancillary events for insatiable musical appetites. During the twelfth cycle, in 2005, these included symposia on a range of musical topics, a film festival featuring the documentarian chosen to film that year's cycle and "piano marathons" at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth featuring eliminated

[5] In 2009, the five cities were Shanghai, Hannover, St. Petersburg, Lugano and New York.

competitors. Texas Christian University also hosted concurrent programs and provided accommodation for young artists, music teachers and amateurs attending the competition. In what little time was not occupied by competition proceedings, the music department held master classes with members of the jury and organized recitals for program participants, some of whom planned to compete in the *Cliburn* in future years.[6]

For the first ten cycles of the competition, the preliminary and semifinal rounds were held in the Ed Landreth Auditorium at the Department of Music on the campus of Texas Christian University. The modest 1,235-seat proscenium performance space, completed in 1949, offered fine acoustics. But the hall was more utilitarian than inspiring. After attending the eighth cycle, the music critic Joseph Horowitz (1990) wrote that the venue, "with its plain walls and gray metal seats covered in red velour, [looked] more like a high school auditorium than an impending celebrity Mecca" (p. 163). For the final concerto round the competition moved to the Tarrant County Convention Center Theatre, which could accommodate an orchestra and a much larger audience, but the 1,800 seats gained came at the expense of the acoustics. Horowitz (1990) was even less fond of this venue, complaining that the "pale, dry, and soft" sound was further compromised by an audible air-conditioning system, a necessity in Texas during the summer months (p. 223).

In 2001, the *Cliburn* abandoned the university campus and the convention center to take up residence in its new downtown home, the Nancy Lee and Perry R. Bass Performance Hall on Commerce Street.[7] A major impetus driving the construction of this performing arts center was the desire to build a suitable venue for the *Cliburn*. Edward P. Bass, speaking as chairman of Performing Arts Fort Worth, described Bass Hall as "the godchild of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. Throughout the hall's design and creation, the *Cliburn* was its spiritual mentor, with every element conceived and executed with the quadrennial event in mind."[8] The hall, which was

[6] The PianoTexas International Academy and Festival, formerly the TCU/Cliburn Piano Institute, was founded in 1981 during the sixth cycle of the *Cliburn*. Young artists, amateurs and teachers are selected for summer study through an application process typical of high-level festivals. Observers can attend for a reduced fee, which is how I participated in 2005. The executive director since its inception has been Dr. Tamás Ungár, a professor of piano at Texas Christian University (www.pianotexas.org).

[7] American competitions depend on the philanthropy of private entrepreneurs to support operating costs and to create the broader cultural infrastructure of the cities where they are based. As we will see in the discussion of the *Naumburg*, the founder used his fortune in banking to create the endowment for the competition. A major donor for the *Cliburn* competition was the Bass family, which went on to become the very symbol of oil wealth in Texas after inheriting the Sid Richardson estate (Wayne 2006). Nancy and Perry Bass have both served on the board of the Cliburn Foundation, and the gold medal is named after them.

[8] 2013. "First Lady of Fort Worth: Nancy Lee Bass 1917–2013."

built entirely with private funds, has won more than two dozen architectural awards since its completion in 1998, and it is credited with revitalizing the downtown area (Patoski 1998). Visiting artists rave about its fine acoustics, and its ubiquity on postcard racks indicates that the citizens of Fort Worth consider it an icon of the city.

The magnificence of this limestone building is communicated through both its scale and its form. Designed in the style of a nineteenth-century European opera house, it occupies an entire city block in downtown Fort Worth. Any visitor to the hall is immediately struck by the pair of 48-foot limestone angels gracing the grand façade, silently heralding the structure's importance with golden trumpets permanently raised to their lips. The corner entrances open into an atrium illuminated by art deco chandeliers and framed by white marble staircases that lead visitors up to the performance space. The 2,056-seat concert hall, studded with crystal light fixtures and crowned by an 80-foot-diameter fresco-painted dome, rivals the opulence of the exterior. While the style of architecture deliberately looks to the past, the facility is otherwise thoroughly modern. Audience members who might have lingered too long in the gift shop or at the bar during intermission can watch the performance on the television screens installed in every lobby. These modern conveniences are tastefully incorporated into the design of the hall. The television screens, for example, are mounted behind reflecting glass so that any unseemly wires, malfunctioning equipment, or makeshift stands do not clash with the elegant décor.

The official proceedings in Bass Hall are its raison d'être, but that is not all there is to the *Cliburn*. The 2005 cycle was launched by two lavish parties that took place on the same evening. Audience members who had bought subscription packages were invited to an opening gala dinner at the Worthington Renaissance, a four-diamond luxury hotel in the city's historic district, to honor the jury and candidates for $125 a plate. To augment further the grandeur of the occasion, President George W. Bush and the First Lady were listed on the invitation as honorary chairs. Meanwhile, at the "drawing party," the main order of business was the determination of performance order by the drawing of numbers. What could have been accomplished quickly in a straightforward, bureaucratic manner was handled instead as a garden party. Mike Winter, a music critic in attendance, served as a modern-day Charles Burney by giving the following account of the occasion:

> The four and one-half acre estate of John and Lesa Oudt was the idyllic setting . . . Upon entering the pea gravel driveway dividing the superbly manicured grounds overlooking the Trinity River, there is no clue of surrounding Fort Worth, much less the fact there is a grocery store less than a minute away. The 1927 brick Tudor house is long and narrow (kind of like a famous pianist who lives in the neighborhood) and is situated on the