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Dismantling of the Star Machine: New Media and the Shifting Balance of Performance and Production in Piano Competitions

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RUNNING HEAD: New Media and Piano Competitions

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Abstract

The piano competition, once held under aristocratic patronage, evolved into a mechanized system as the industry clamored for objective evaluations to create bona fide piano stars. Critics, and fans pushed back, complaining that the homogenizing system of production crushed individuality. The piano competition is evolving again, as the social media and interactive technologies have presented new latitudes to various actors. The subsequent re-posturing by them has led to the emergence of a new type of competition, wherein the focus is not on the final product (the winning pianist) but on the selection process, which has become a highly publicized spectacle that is profitable for the organizers and rewarding to other actors including contestants who do not win. This shift dispels the tension between production and performance by turning the stage into the star of the show, effectively freeing pianists to express their musicality by appealing directly to the audience.

Key words: new technologies, ICT, piano, music, competition, superstar, Van Cliburn
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The network mode of interaction is not a totally new phenomenon. There have always been communities such as those of writers, scientists, and artists who have sought connectivity and interaction in non-hierarchical modes. What is different now is our technological infrastructure that enables network mode of interaction on an industrial scale.

Earlier communities of shared interests had to make a concerted effort to create and maintain connectivity. Scientists would travel hundreds of miles to establish acquaintance with other scientists working on similar problems and maintain connections via the postal correspondence. Such associations required considerable effort. The Internet and related technologies have reduced the threshold. Today we see communities of shared interests on the Internet even on obscure topics. All that is now needed is a few spare moments and clicks of the mouse, as opposed to long treks and long waits for letters.

This lowering of threshold has prompted expression of abiding tendencies that were earlier inhibited by costs and structural constraints. As Agre (2002) notes, “the Internet changes nothing on its own, but it can amplify existing forces” (p. 317). We see the proliferation of virtual communities on the Internet because there has been a long abiding tendency for association with like-minded people. The barriers typically have been distance and costs. By bridging distances and lowering the costs of such associations, the Internet has enabled like-minded people to create virtual communities. On the other hand, the Internet has not increased democratic participation because the prior tendency for civic engagement was already weak. In the political realm, the amplification has mainly been in communication among activists, who were strongly motivated to start with. Therefore in our studies we need to be mindful of the fact
that “in analyzing new uses of information technology, the [social and institutional] forces are analytically prior to the tools” (Agre 2002, p. 319).

Even the amplification of prior existing tendencies is not unique to the Internet. That happens with each new technology. What is new is that Internet’s architecture is significantly different than that of earlier technologies. The Internet has a geodesic structure with manifold lateral lines, in sharp contrast to the pyramidal structures of earlier technologies. While early amateur radio and the Citizens’ Band radio also allowed for unbridled lateral connections, their reach was small and use often limited to subcultures, most notably technologically savvy teenagers in the case of the former and truckers in the case of the latter. By vastly enhancing the scale, the Internet brought the capacity for easy lateral communications to the mainstream society. This new capacity has allowed for the amplification of prior existing tendencies in ways that are quite different from those seen before.

In this paper we study how these changes play out in the arena of piano competitions. We are drawn to piano competitions because their delicate production-performance balance makes them particularly sensitive registers of the broader shifts in industrial societies of tensions between the institutional demands for compliance with system logic and the individual’s need for self-expression – no matter how idiosyncratic. In the arena of piano competitions the organizers, on the one hand, need systemization to ensure fairness and objectivity, and performers, on the other hand, have the artistic impulse for self-expression.

By “production” we mean imperatives that further the interests of the organizers of the piano competitions. They could be reputation or economic or some mix of the two. In the realm of activity on the ground, they play out in the processes leading to the selection of the winners – the products of a competition – and their presentation to the audience to elicit a response that
furthers the interests of the organizers – prestige for the reputationally inclined, profits for the economically inclined, or desired mix of the two. By “performance” we mean the artistic satisfactions that the artist and the audience derive from playing of music.

In the heyday of TV, the stakeholders tended to perceive the imperatives of production to be not aligned with the imperatives of performance, with the pianists as the sites of the tension. Changes in the format that enhanced production of the economic sort capacity irked critics, fans, and performers for being too mechanical. More rules and regulations to ensure objectivity and perceptions of it, which legitimized the competition to mass audiences, were seen as decreasing individuality and musicality. Conversely, competitions that placed more emphasis on performance irked producers, record label executives, and promoters for the difficulties it presented for maintaining objectivity and perceptions of it. With the development of social media, the stage is now the point of contact between production and performance, as opposed to the pianist. This shift dispels the perceived tension between production and performance.

This new arena was not borne of a vision. Like many new forms of communal activities on the Internet, it emerged out of a complex interaction between the new latitudes presented by social media and interactive technologies and motivations of human actors, many with newfound capabilities to further their interests. As Zuboff (1988) notes, “Technological change defines the horizon of our material world as it shapes the limiting conditions of what is possible and what is barely imaginable” (p. 87). During the heyday of television, the configurational potentialities of communications networks were limited and the point-to-multipoint modality of broadcasting reinforced the asymmetry of power between the organized institutions and the fragmented populace, including contestants and audience (Sawhney 1996). We thereby got the “industrial” piano competitions with the organizers calling all the shots, the contestants working within
prescribed parameters, and the audience consuming the product – the star – thus manufactured. The social media and interactive technologies have offered the contestants and the audience opportunities for interaction that were barely imaginable during the heyday of television and they have capitalized on them in unexpected ways.

The contestants, like all performers, seek appreciative audiences. Under the “industrial” regime, there was only one window and a winner-takes-all payout. Today social media and interactive technologies have opened numerous windows and even non-winners have opportunities to build sizeable fan followings. Correspondingly, the audience takes delight in access to the backstage. Under the “industrial” regime, that access was highly regulated and via professional intermediaries, e.g. a journalist’s interview with a star published in a magazine. Today the audience is able to access the contestants and the backstage much more directly. The organizers, on their part, find this emerging multi-windowed stage profitable. They therefore they embrace it.

This new re-ordering made possible by the latitudes provided to various actors by the social media and interactive technologies has transformed the piano competition from a zero sum to a non-zero sum game on two levels.

One, the new configurational potentialities enabled by social media and interactive technologies have eased the perceived tradeoff between production and performance and opened spaces for actors to do their “own thing” and in the process enhance the competition as a whole. In effect, the production is not enhanced at the cost of performance and vice versa.

Two, the competitors themselves are not locked in a zero sum game, as good performance by a competitor enhances the overall grandeur of the spectacle, which benefits all the stakeholders. Furthermore, as discussed above, each competitor has direct access to the
audience via social media and interactive technologies and thereby opportunities to cultivate career-enhancing fan followings. The element of the zero sum game that still survives is the medal, which can only be awarded to one or two competitors. But then, while the medal still brings with it significant financial and career management support, its relative importance in the grand scheme of things has relatively diminished, as the competition is no longer a winner-takes-all system. All other competitors have opportunities to win in various other ways.

The combined result is often an open-ended non-zero sum game, which pays off everyone as long as the spectacle is interesting and attracts audiences.

In the following sections we examine these changes at depth and discuss their implications. We start by discussing the extant literature and its preoccupation with the perceived tension between production and performance. We then move to early competitions under the patronage system and the transition to the rule-governed “objective” competitions. Thereafter we examine the recent transformation and discuss its implications for our theoretical understandings of labor in a hyper connected world.

**The Perceived Tension Between Production and Performance**

Thousands of competitions exist for every age, instrument, and skill level. They serve an important function, as contestant benefit from critical feedback and exposure that helps them benchmark themselves vis-à-vis their peers. They also serve as filtering mechanisms for identifying the performers with professional potential (Kriechel and Barmby, 2009; Glesjer and Heyndels, 2001).

Considering the importance of music competitions, the dearth of published research on them is surprising. To this point, researchers have approached competitions from the production perspective, focusing in particular on factors that affect the objectivity of the jury. Elaborating on
the figures reported in scale development and validation studies on evaluations of musical
performance by Abeles (1973), Bergee (1997), Cooksey (1977), Fiske (1975), and Zdzinski and
Barnes (2002), which demonstrated that judges could reliably evaluate performances in their
specialization, Smith (2004) examines the ability of jury panels to not only evaluate
performances, but rank performances as required by music competition. Using a panel of five
judges and a 9 point scale, Smith demonstrated that a five judge panel showed high inter-judge
reliability, and as few as three judges are sufficient to reliably rank order musical performance.

However, as Wapnick, Ryan, Lacaille, and Darrow (2004) rightly critique, evaluations
from jury members may be reliable but not valid. In fact a number of biases affect jurors in a
consistent manner, decreasing the validity of juror evaluations regardless of jury size. Elliot
(1995), in his study of flute and trumpet evaluations, finds that gender associations with
particular instruments influence juror evaluations of performances by women. For instance,
female trumpeters, a stereotypically male instrument, were scored significantly lower than
female flutists. Race also played a factor as black performers typically scored lower than white
performers. In a study of violinists, Wapnick, Mazza, and Darrow (1998) analyze how an
individual’s attractiveness, stage behavior, and dress can sway evaluator’s opinions. Comparing
taped audio performances to the same performance with visuals, performers rated highly in
attractiveness, stage behavior, and dress scored noticeably better when they were evaluated based
on the audiovisual performance compared to the audio performance. Although those rated highly
in extra-musical factors received a benefit, those not rated highly in extra-musical factors were
not punished, as the audiovisual and audio evaluations were the same. Interestingly, they do find
that those rated highly in extra-musical factors scored higher than those not rated highly in extra-
musical factors when only the audio tracks were evaluated. Based on their findings they even go
so far as to speculate that attractive players maybe on average better players because attractive players receive more opportunities to train and more encouragement than non-attractive players.

While non-musical factors like gender, race, dress, stage appearance, and attractiveness can bias jury evaluations, so too can music choice and performance order. In their study of Van Cliburn competition performances, where the differences between performers in terms of skill are minimal, Wapnick et. al (2004) find that evaluation of performances is very difficult, and differences in evaluations could be linked to song selection and tempo. For instances, they found that evaluators gave higher scores to performances of Russian pieces than those of classic period pieces. Interestingly, evaluators also tended to score slower passages higher than faster passages. Among such non-musical factors, they found that the most influential one was the order in which the contestants perform. Analyzing the results of the Queen Elisabeth piano competition, Flores and Ginsburgh (1996) find that pianists who play towards the end of the round rank higher than pianists who play towards the beginning of the round. These findings are supported by Hann, Dijkstra and Dijkstra (2005) in their study of Eurovision which finds a systematic effect on the final rankings of participants in jury evaluations due to the order of appearance.

A few studies investigate the economic impact of those who perform well in competitions. Ginsburgh and van Ours (2001), find a positive correlation between high rankings in competitions and economic success but are unable to determine causality. However, in a later study, they argue that if the order of performance affects ranking, and ranking affects economic outcome, arbitrary changes in the rankings, independent of true quality, may have a significant influence on economic success (Ginsburgh and van Ours, 2003). In another study Ginsburgh (2003) observes that while a ranking may positively influence economic success, rankings are a poor measure of aesthetic quality and chances for long-term survival.
There is an implicit assumption in these studies that music competitions exist to produce, as they are preoccupied with factors that determine the outcome – rankings. What if the jury awards the first prize to the wrong pianist because the jury was affected by a performer’s revealing red dress or preferred Rachmaninoff to Bach? Likewise, studies on the economic impact of competitions focus on another outcome – economic again for the winner and other highly ranked pianists. No attention is paid to the specific musical performance, or the context of the performance. In effect, piano competitions are treated as machines designed to launch careers, rather than venues for musical performance. However, if, as Wapnick et al. (2004) argue, music competitions are meant to be predictive, why are competition rankings a poor measure of aesthetic quality and long term survival as Ginsburgh (2003) suggests?

At the heart of the debate on music competitions is a discursive tension between those who view competitions as a method of producing stars, and those who view competitions as a stage for musical performance. While most of the literature centers on competitions as star machines, very few studies investigate competitions as performance spaces. In fact, only one sociological investigation of classical music competitions exists so far. McCormick (2009) takes the first step in deconstructing music competitions as “professionalizing institutions” which focus strictly on output. Arguing that if sociologists were to study music competitions they would adopt the production perspective, McCormick redirects our attention to the narratives at work. Where competition organizers and audiences read the event as a game, often drawing Olympic comparisons, competitors attempt to jettison game metaphors in favor of discourses couched in the ritual and the sacred. As such, a discursive tension exists between the performers, who see music competitions as concert spaces where they can establish legitimacy through
musical performance, and the organizers, who see competitions as a game by which a winner is determined.

This tension plays itself out in a number of arenas. While scholars tend to view music competitions from the perspective of production, the popular press tends to see competitions from the perspective of performance. As Horowtiz (1990) points out, competition bashing is such an easy sport for performers and reviewers that it becomes hard to stop. Critiquing competitions has become so popular that it even motivated a 2011 documentary entitled Why Competitions? What binds the critiques together is a fundamental distrust of the assumption on which the music competition apparatus is built: that artistic performance can be quantifiably and objectively evaluated. As such, music competition critique has made Bela Bartok’s timeless quote “Competitions are for horses, not artists” its clarion call. As Eichler asks in a review of a festival featuring competition winners, “Can something as complex and subtle as a musical performance be judged like a track and field event? And what exactly do we measure when we try?” (Eichler, 2005: B9).

For many, piano competitions embody a mechanism that stifles imagination and musicality in favor of a predictable, formulaic performance. It emphasizes endurance and technicality over originality and creativity. As Alford and Szanto (1996) warn, “pianists have to play perfectly because a wrong note sticks out like a sore thumb” (Alford and Szanto, 1996: 10). William Wolfram, a veteran of the competition circuit argues that the competitions put pianists in survival mode. “You bleed too much, if you’re sensitive. You just die a little bit every time you compete. You get so tough your musicality is blocked. Meaning you’ve got scars and scabs where the blood was; you lose the freedom to take risks. Your frame of mind is self-protection: let me get through this thing without breaking down” (Horowitz, 1990: 138). In the 2009 Van
Cliburn documentary *A Surprise in Texas*, pianist Di Wu finishes her final performance of the final round, a stirring Rachmaninoff 3. As the camera follows her backstage, she brushes off questions about the quality of her performance and expresses excitement about getting through 3 hours of piano’s most challenging repertoire in a single week. Like a marathon runner in the final few miles, the only thing that matters is actually getting to the finish line. In 1989, to further emphasize the mechanic nature of the competition format, Bernard Holland (1989) wrote a column in *The New York Times* laying out the 5 rules for winning a competition: (1) Play an unarguable repertoire with unambiguous pieces that have assumed a generic tradition of interpretation that would not upset the judges; (2) Choose pieces that work on all different pianos as all pianos are different; (3) Play loud, fast, and accurately, because that draws the most attention; (4) Know the judges. They have pieces they want and expect to hear; (5) Be ready for anything, especially variations in the professionalism and ability of the orchestra. For those who do not follow the rules, he warns, “young artists like to say that they immerse themselves in music of their choice played to their standards – as if no jury existed. Wry observes of the system place few bets on those who proceed accordingly” (online).

Even for reviewers and pianists who support piano competitions, their agreement is lukewarm at best a shoulder shrugging acceptance of the least evil filtering method. French pianist and gold medalist at the Barcelona International Competition, Bernard d’Ascoli thus captures this sensibility:

> It’s still the fairest way of trying to make oneself known to the public. . . . I would much prefer to be assessed by a group of people all looking for different things from different viewpoints; a record producer will be looking for immaculate playing, a concert promoter will want someone absolutely reliable, a teacher will
be looking for someone who respects the score, and another performer will look for electricity. There are now too many performers for the available work and competitions are the least unfair way of selecting the best players (Thompson, 1990: 86).

**Fading of the Patronage System: The Shift from Performance to Production**

Music competitions are by no means a new phenomenon. Even the Greek mythology features a legendary showdown between Pan and Apollo judged by King Midas. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries aristocratic patrons invited celebrity musicians to their palaces to play for private audiences. In 1708 Frideric Handel and Domenico Scarlatti famously dueled in a keyboard competition at a Venetian ball. In 1781 Mozart and Clemti competed before the Grand Duke of Russia and his wife. Beethoven took on Steibelt in an improvisational competition in 1800 and Liszt and Thalberg, in a more public setting, competed before an audience that had purchased tickets in 1837.

Despite the name, the music competitions then were very different from those of today. Often pitting two musicians against one another, competitions served as part sport and part entertainment. A musician’s pride may be on the line, but little else. As such, competitions embodied the spirit of performance. Not until 1886, with the founding of the Anton Rubenstein International Piano Competition, did the music competition evolve into a mechanism for discovering talent. The early twentieth century saw the founding of notable follow-ons to Rubenstein such as the Queen Elisabeth Music Competition and the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition, but the World Wars disrupted international musical cooperation, putting competitions on hold until the mid-forties.
The first major American competition to garner international acclaim was the Leventritt Competition. Like the Rubenstein, the Leventritt focused on discovering and promoting rising stars. However, the competition clung to a patronage similar to that of yesteryears, and forwent the rigid structure and regulations that would shackle competition juries in the future. Administered by the Leventritts, a well-connected New York family with a love of classical music, the competition was held in the sitting room of their Park Avenue apartment. As Horowitz (1990) richly details, the competition was held irregularly and planned with the informality of a dinner party. The jury, always of an uncertain size, consisted of family friends who often happened to be some of the world’s most important musicians. Leventritt had no formal application process as most of the contestants were already known to the jurors. Contestants were advised to select “important solo works” and each competition featured different rules to suit its particular possibilities. Much like the Venetian audience in 1708 who found Handel the best organist, the jury would deliberate informally to select a winner or not award anyone. The Leventritts kept the competition extremely private and only released a short announcement in The New York Times declaring the winner (or lack thereof). Likewise, the competition awarded little to no money to the winners, as the Leventritt’s would use their influence to place winners with leading American orchestras.

Until mid 1950s the Leventritt maintained a balance between production and performance. On one hand, the competition successfully discovered talent and the influence of Leventritts got their careers started. On the other, the competition retained the aristocratic texture with aspirants performing in exclusive settings for Leventritts and their friends gathered for an evening of music.
In the late 1950s a number of competitions, including Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, popped up that invited the public, sold tickets, and turned the event into a spectacle with extensive TV coverage. They effectively ended the monopoly of the elites to identify and promote new talent. In light of these changes and the critique that the Leventritt was a cliquish affair, the Leventritt moved to Carnegie Hall in 1959 and sold tickets to the public. Thereafter the Leventritt began to fizzle. Competitions occurred with less frequency and the juries were not as eager to crown a winner, afraid of bestowing the prestigious Leventritt title on an undeserving performer. Things came to a head in 1976. Feeling the pressure of rival competitions, the Leventritt hired a professional arts manager to handle publicity. The new arts manager committed a CBS team to produce a *Sixty Minutes* segment. Horowitz documents the mayhem:

The crush of cameras and reporters spread discomfort and confusion. Helen Epstein, covering the event for *The New York Times* Arts & Leisure section, felt she had invaded a fiefdom: “The way the Leventritt family reacted to me was just insane. They wanted to exercise complete control. They didn’t know what they had gotten into.” When the CBS crew, which had been promised complete access, began setting up lights in the jury room, Serkin (renowned pianist and then director of Curtis Institute of Music) disappeared. CBS left, but Epstein, who had been smuggled in, remained. She was “astonished by how mean and catty some of the jurors were” (Horowitz, 1990: 74).

To top it off, the competition that year refused to award a winner, much to the dismay of the audience. Although the Leventritt quietly funded performers after 1976, they never again held the competition.
In the face of the growing popularity of competitions such as the Van Cliburn, the balance Leventritt struck between performance and production crumbled, as both the audience and the performers clamored for more winners and an unbiased system of selecting them.

**The Heyday of Television and Superstars: The Swing of the Pendulum towards Production**

As piano competitions were transformed into sites of mechanical production that employed rigorous rules to churn out hopeful superstars with industrial consistency, the pendulum swung towards production.

Film and popular music studies literature on superstars offers a useful lens for understanding post-Leventritt piano competitions. Dyer (1979), in his study of Hollywood, acknowledges the distinction between stardom as a phenomenon of consumption, and stardom as a phenomenon of production. Yet, the much of his study, and most of the work on stars for that matter, focuses on the former. The dominant perspective then is that stars, rather than films themselves, are the primary product for consumption.

McDonald (2000) attempts to rectify this imbalance by focusing on Hollywood’s system for producing stars. He finds that stars do not exist separately from the system from which they emerged. How the star is selected, groomed, and managed is largely determined by the structure and of the system.

Not surprisingly, we see both stardom as a phenomenon of consumption, and stardom as a phenomenon of production reflected in the piano world. The superstar pianists become the product, the primary motivation for audience members to attend performances. The attention is drawn to the individual pianists rather than the composers, the repertoire, or the orchestra. On the other hand, the strict structure of piano competitions that resulted from the demand for an
objective method of evaluating pianists results in the production of competition winners who embodied, for better or worse, the same qualities.

At the forefront of the production model was the Van Cliburn, which is often referred to as the Olympics of the musical world. Van Cliburn Foundation itself has on occasion officially adopted Olympic symbolism in its promotional material, stage design, and presentation (McCormick 2009). Moreover, the Olympics metaphor runs thickly through its discourse.

Over the years the Van Cliburn implemented a number of rules and regulations designed to eliminate subjectivity in favor of objective assessments that could be reliably reproduced. The first move towards mechanization was membership in the WFIMC (World Federation of International Music Competitions). With a laundry list of requirements with regard to the competitors, the application process, the jury, the repertory list, lodging and transportation, performance conditions, adjudication of performances, prizes, and the competition’s external impact, the WFIMC standardizes the format and process for over 120 competitions.¹ As such, the Van Cliburn’s rules closely resemble the rules of the other member competitions.

In addition, the Van Cliburn competition itself imposes a heady list of rules and regulations. In order to eliminate any potential bias from poor recordings, differences in pianos, or inconsistencies in video, the Van Cliburn Foundation sets up remote studios in the US, China, Germany, Russia, and Switzerland for recording of screening recitals under the watch of Van Cliburn engineers on Van Cliburn equipment. Aspirants play in accordance with the competition’s specifications, typically a number of pre-selected pieces or a certain style by particular composers.

After the initial screening, selected candidates advance to the preliminary round. While the screening process whittles down the list to a manageable number – no more than 35 – the
competition officially begins with the preliminary round. Here each candidate has two opportunities to perform and must select from a strict repertoire. After the preliminary round, 12 candidates move onto the semifinal round, and 6 advance to the final round.

Gone are the days of the Leventritt where the competition organizer could phone up her friends and colleagues for their opinion. Under WFIMC regulations, competitions must assemble a jury that has at least half of its members from countries other than the host country in order to minimize bias. While many competitions boast of world-renowned jurors with long and distinguished careers, such claims tend to be embellished. With many jury slots to fill each year, the honor of serving on a jury has declined. Likewise, most world-renowned pianists are too busy jetting around for playing engagements to commit to serving on a jury. As Horowitz (1990) quotes one pianist as saying, most jurors are mid-level piano teachers who do not play concerts. Many jury members become career jurors bouncing from competition to competition.

The jury voting process relies on a “sophisticated computer software program that calculates results based on numerical scores.” In the preliminary round, jurors can give a performer a score between 1 (lowest) and 25 (highest). A zero is given when a juror has to abstain. After the round, the scores are entered into the computer, which normalizes the scores so that the votes of a juror who tends to give higher scores do not outweigh the votes of a juror who tends to give lower scores. In the semifinal round the scale changes with the lowest available score being the average score of the lowest performer advancing to the semifinal round. If that score is 12, the scale would be set between 12 and 25. The same system applies to the final round as well.

A failsafe protects controversial candidates from early elimination. If any juror’s top three candidates do not secure enough votes to get to the next round, that juror can request
discussion of a candidate if at least two other jurors also ranked that candidate among their top three choices. Then each member of the jury considers whether the candidate at the bottom of his or her list for advancement is a better choice than the controversial candidate. If any juror agrees that the choice of his or her bottom-ranked candidate is not significantly superior to the controversial competitor, and does not mind deferring to the sentiments of the three or more jurors favoring the controversial candidate, a re-vote will be taken for the last spot.

At the end of this systematic process, a winner is crowned. However, despite the promises of fame and fortune that accompany a Van Cliburn win (thousands of dollars in prize money, hundreds of engagements, and a recording contract), few winning pianists ever achieve superstar status. Tommasini (2001) writes: “With striking regularity, Cliburn gold medalists have been anointed in Texas with much fanfare and sent on tour amid great promise only to drop from visibility” (p. 19). Even those who experience a little success have to constantly look over their shoulder as, “the constant demand for more winners means that many shooting stars will be created, whose light will vanish forever as soon as a successor appears” (Thompson, 1990: 89).

With the pendulum swing towards production, music competitions mechanized the competition format. The pianists became the products, and the gold medals around their necks signified, much like a USDA approved sticker, that they had successfully endured the rigorous inspection process and were safe and ready for consumption. The actual production process mattered little to consumers, as long as they felt it was objective and reliable. But, on another level, that did not matter, as the great majority of Van Cliburn winners did not go to achieve stardom. In fact the overwhelming bias against competitions in music circles tends to actually hurt those who win competitions. As Thompson (1990) observes “life is especially tough for
competition winners: many critics have a preconceived idea that you may have a good technique, but no originality” (p. 87).

Modern music competitions like the Van Cliburn reflected instruments of mass production, churning out winners by forcing them through a standardized process that ensured reliability and regularity but squashed innovation and musicality.

Social Media and Participatory Culture: Rebalancing of Production and Performance

Van Cliburn’s new incarnation resembles popular music competitions such as American Idol, Eurovision, and Britain’s Got Talent. Rather than focusing on the product – the superstar – that results from the competition, the new system presents the competition itself as the product – the spectacle that attracts the audience.

Starting with the 2009 competition, the Van Cliburn streamed the entire event live over the Internet (11 hours daily for 17 days). Furthermore, fans could choose camera angles, access off-limit backstage areas and rehearsals via webcams (something paying audience attending in person could not do), and catch up on missed performances via the Cliburn.tv archives.

Much like Ryan Seacrest in American Idol, host Jade Simmons introduced concerts, provided commentary on the pieces, and interviewed the contestants. An optional running commentary by Buddy Bray of the Forth Worth Symphony Orchestra provided insights into key moments, themes, and moods of various pieces, and for those looking to learn more about the contestants, there was a library of video profiles. The live blog, one of the more popular features, created a space for lively discussion. There was also an online audience vote. While this vote did not have a bearing on the selection process, the audience favorites were recognized during the awards ceremony. All this encourages fans to listen more intently and judge more thoroughly than they might at the competition venue itself (Thompson, 1990).
With that level of visibility and interactivity, performers have to give what amounts to two performances simultaneously. On one hand, pianists must perform for the judges, whose votes determine whether or not they advance and stay in the limelight. They therefore must still exercise some caution when it comes to wildly individualized performances. On the other hand, they have more liberty to exercise creativity because the competition awards them visibility and access to the audience. Even if they get bounced early, it is not a total loss when they leave behind an impression with the audience. Furthermore, with behind the scenes access, biographies, and interviews the pianists are no longer solely judged on their musical ability. Although judges may not take extra-musical factors into account, the audience certainly will. Here performers with memorable personalities and styles gain advantage.

By this relocation of production from the pianist to the competition format itself, the tension felt between production and performance is eased. As such, pianists’ success is no longer solely dependent on the vote of the jury. They can appeal directly to the audience members, attracting fans with memorable performances. Consequently, the zero-sum game of winner and non-winner of the earlier model starts to lose meaning. Audience members can express allegiance to a number of different competitors regardless of who gets the gold medal. For pianists, not winning but doing well enough to be remembered is a bigger victory than winning and not making an impression.

We have thus far looked at the rebalancing of performance and production through the lens of the music world establishment – Leventritt and Van Cliburn⁵. We will now look at it from the lens of a new type of Internet enabled music competition – YouTube Symphony Orchestra.
The first YouTube Orchestra performed at Carnegie Hall in 2009. On the day of the concert and the following day it attracted a total of 6 million views (YouTube 2011). The second YouTube Orchestra performed at Sydney Opera House in 2011. On the day of the concert and the following day it attracted 30.2 million views (Lesnie 2011). YouTube Orchestra is a new type of global phenomenon. What is important for our analytical purpose is the process leading to it assemblage.

For the sake of brevity we will focus on the 2009 concert, as it brought into play a new modality. Moreover, the differences between the 2009 and 2011 concerts were on matters of detail. The 2011 concert had a pre-concert group practice period of 7 days, as opposed to 3, and in addition to auditions for orchestral musicians it also had auditions for soloists.

For the 2009 concert, 3000 applicants across the world uploaded videos for the audition. A panel of experts selected 200 of them for further consideration. Subsequently, the audience voted 96 of them for the final concert (Tommasini 2009, YouTube 2009a). The finalists were flown to New York where they practiced for 3 days and then performed at the Carnegie Hall (YouTube 2009b).

What about the concert itself?

Its enthusiasts enthralled by its non-hierarchical modalities. Grammy winning conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, who emceed the concert, declared that the new path to the Carnegie Hall was “upload, upload, upload” (quoted in Service 2009, online). Gramaphone, a prestigious British magazine, placed it among the ten most inspiring orchestras and lauded it for "for democratising classical music on a global scale, making it truly all-inclusive" (Quoted in Associated Press 2009, online). Carnegie Hall Executive Director Clive Gillinson praised it for getting millions around the world to talk about and engage with classical music (Associated
Huizenga (2011) was taken by the fact that “there were no golden-toned voiceovers introducing the music with hallowed reverence” (Huizenga 2011, online).

The critics pointed out that all the visual effects in the world cannot make-up for the fact that music making is an intimate activity for which a few days of practice is simply not adequate (Adair 2011, Service 2009, Tommasini 2009). The performance therefore had little subtlety (Tommasini 2009). In their view the overall program was “magnificent in its diversity, but low on coherence” (Service 2009, online) and featured “several small, forgettable pieces” (Adair 2010) from “15 wildly diverse works” (Tommasini 2009). Adair (2010), who felt that YouTube Orchestra was for the participants and not the audience, called it a “band camp” – participants had loads of fun and in the end put a concert of the sort one sees at the end of a summer camp.

There is some truth to this criticism as Michael Tilson Thomas himself said:

"We're meeting a lot of different worlds: the real time world, the online world and the experience of getting acquainted. For us it's been something between a classical music summit conference (and) scout jamboree combined with speed dating" (Quoted in Associated Press 2009, online).

YouTube Orchestra has opened up a new stage for prior existing tendencies, which were earlier constrained by cost and distance, to play out. Whether this stages hosts an orchestra or something else remains a question mark.

Van Cliburn and YouTube Orchestra represent two ends of the range we see in today’s transformation processes. Van Cliburn represents the opening up of the hierarchy. YouTube Orchestra, on the other hand, represents building afresh with the new configurational potentialities opened up by the Internet. They also highlight limitations of each mode. The
hierarchies fight opening up but they need to open up and profit from it. The enthusiasts of bottom-up processes consistently underestimate what it takes to achieve coherence – the number of days of pre-concert practice and their increase from 3 days in 2009 to 7 days in 2011 for YouTube Orchestra shows the limited imagination on that score.

The production and performance tension stems from the institutional imperative for system coherence and the individuals’ need to express their unique selves. In case of both Van Cliburn and YouTube Orchestra, the pressures for system coherence have been reduced – for different reasons. Van Cliburn participants now have the latitude to choose their own sweet spot between production and performance, as losing can now also mean winning and vice versa. YouTube Orchestra has reduced pressure for system coherence to start with.

**Conclusions**

Impulses for production and performance are ever-present in the world of piano competitions. They can burst forth in various ways. But their consequence is greatly dependent on the socio-technical assemblage of the day, which can tamp down or amplify their vitality.

Aristocratic assemblages such as the Leventritt were not highly systematized. So much so, the competitions were not even held as per a set schedule. While an aspirant had to be mindful of pleasing influential others, there were no explicit criteria or a scoring rubric of sorts. In such a setting even if an aspirant was willing to surrender performance to the production imperative it was not clear what exactly needed to be done. Within this highly contingent environment, the performance impulse got a relatively free play.

When Van Cliburn and others moved the piano competitions from aristocratic living rooms to the public stage, the informal consensus of elite cliques had to be replaced by an explicit system. We accordingly saw the development of rules and procedures for every element
of the competition. At the same time, television, the centerpiece of the new socio-technical assemblage, structurally tamped down performance impulses by not allowing interaction with the audience and amplified production impulses by showcasing the final product – the star. In such a setting aspirants knew exactly what they needed to do to satisfy the production imperatives. On the other hand, they risked success if the performance impulse took them beyond the acceptable bounds. The pendulum therefore swung to the production end.

The Internet provided a more open architecture on a society spanning scale. The impulse for interaction with audience was always there but the TV-centric social-technical assemblage had tamped it down. The Internet, on the other hand, amplified it. Since the odds of developing a fan base are higher than winning the competition itself, artists started seeing production as a necessary evil to stay in the game as long as possible and performance as the key for sealing the deal with the fans. Conversely, the fans got opportunities for greater and greater engagement with the process – to get acquainted with artists, interact with them, follow their progress, and discuss the merits of their performances with other fans. In effect, we saw the emergence of a forum somewhat akin to the Leventritt living room – but on an industrial scale with its attendant impersonal qualities.

These shifts in piano competitions are reflective of larger changes in society. Their import lies in the fact that piano competitions are particularly sensitive registers of the tension between production and performance, a source of chronic contestation since the rise of industrialization. Our analysis of piano competition suggests that we need to place the process center stage, as opposed to products of the process. This re-centering will open up new thinking on the increasingly fuzzy lines of our times, such as those between laborer and fan, professional and amateur, and competitor and collaborator.
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Notes

1 Taken from the World Federation of International Music Competitions’ Recommendations for An International Music Competition, available at:

2 Van Cliburn Jury Handbook 2005, available at:

3 In the case of the Chopin competition, Horowitz (1990) writes, “Not since Krystian Zimerm won the Chopin competition in 1975 has a gold medal launched a major career” (p. 66).


5 We see similar elements in the evolution of the biennial BBC Cardiff Singer of the World, world’s premier operatic competition, which started in 1983 with 18 singers nominated by their local broadcasting organization. The BBC broadcast the final live for the first time in 1989, wherein Bryn Terfel and Dmitri Hvorostovsky won awards and went on to have very successful careers. Other major milestones in its evolution were institution of worldwide auditions in 1993 and audience prize in 2003 (BBC 2012, BBC 2013, Opera Chic 2013). According to the BBC (2012) “It is intended for singers at the beginning of their professional career having probably studied at a conservatoire of music or equivalent” (p. 1). For the 2013 competition, eligible contestants had to submit their performance of 2 arias on DVDs. Thereafter a panel of judges selected 50 or so entrants for live auditions. After the live auditions, 20 entrants were selected
for the final competition in Cardiff. Like the Van Cliburn, the character of Cardiff has greatly changed and that change is nicely captured in Opera Chic’s (2013) recommendation to the contestants: “Forget the hard-and-fast opera competition rules for overcoming stage fright, remembering your arias and melting into character … Kill the stage, sing like your ex is watching and dress like you're going to be murdered in your clothes” (online).