ALLARD WILLEMSE

Jury at the Franz Liszt Competition in Utrecht

Confessions of a Piano Juror

I've been on many juries.
Inevitably someone in the audience will ask the judges how they could possibly choose a winner from among the group of extraordinary talents on display.
It's always an awkward moment.

To point out in response that jury members are music professionals who discern more acutely than most the differences between performers has a tinge of arrogance – though it is true. Yet the question really is a good one. Several years ago, at one of the American Pianists Association contests in which I was a judge – the organization alternates between classical and jazz competitions – my fellow evaluators and I discussed our decisions at the end, and it was clear that we had all heard exactly the same things. And yet each of us assigned slightly different weights to the qualities we noted.

How does one value a wildly talented but impetuously irreverent pianist against a more mature one whose restraint was marred by a streak of sentimentality? Each exceeded the bounds of good taste, but in different ways. The age of the performer can become

GUSTAV ALINK

Jury in full transparency at the International Johannes Brahms Competition in Pörtschach (Austria)

a determining factor here: it is natural (even important) for young people to sow wild oats, and that is forgivable – the rough edges will likely smooth out over time, and hopefully a creative spark will live on.

In a jazz competition, one might imagine different issues, but in fact the two arts are closely connected. For example, the jury who chose the five jazz finalists one year engaged in a vigorous debate about the legitimacy of a well-known performer who seemed to have severed all connections with tradition. Signaling an awareness of the history of the art can be important.

For that reason, it has often been noted that renegade pianist Thelonious Monk could never win the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition. Indeed, these contests rarely predict future stars. Pianist Bill Charlap, who was on the jury once, told me, "You can shuffle a different set of judges – or even the order in which the contestants appear – and the outcome would be different."

So why have them? There are myriad reasons: the exposure, the experience, the opportunity to connect with new audiences, the feedback from others "in the know," the money, the marketing, the ensuing concerts and the recordings.

So a short checklist of the criteria that will come into play for these competitors seems worth considering. The most basic requirement is "playing the instrument well," according to Mr. Charlap.

"If it is a classical competition, the winner should be ready to play Carnegie Hall. In a jazz competition, it should be someone who can play with anyone in the world. You have to be able to make the gig. What do you do if you get a call from Phil Woods? What if you have to play a duo piano concert? In these players I want to hear the language of jazz – rhythmic freedom, phrasing, the blues, clarity within the improvised line, an awareness of the roots."

What's more, most jurors are looking to discover someone with a personal perspective. "The finalists we picked," relates pianist John Salmon, "each had a compelling individual voice. They put their stamp on the music." That has always been essential in both classical and jazz contexts.

Many jurors over the years have expressed a similar sentiment: they search for someone musically intriguing – an artist they want to hear again. However, this idea is sometimes misconstrued.

I was once on a panel at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition when the frequently held assertion was made that the most "interesting" players tend to be eliminated early. I turned to pianist Claude Frank, who was also on the panel, and asked him how he would feel if someone came to him after he had performed and announced, "Claude, that was … interesting." He laughed. "It would be a disaster," he said.

Listeners don't want music to be merely interesting. They want to be knocked out of their seats, transported, taken on a journey, led through pathways to a deeper understanding. To accomplish this, pianists must learn the secret of the instrument's sound (every pianist sounds different, even on the same instrument), master dramatic form and texture, probe musical meaning, become familiar with the great models of the past. And they must acquire enough self-knowledge and courage to truly reveal who they are.

It may seem like a tall order. But that's what art is about.

STUART ISACOFF