

News

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Online-only competitions have become ubiquitous in the past year, and competitors have had to adjust quickly to this new way of assessment. Where does the future lie?

By Peter Somerford



Yuchen Lu performs in the online final of the 2021 Klein Competition

As the Delta variant of coronavirus surges across the world, travel restrictions and local epidemiological situations are forcing some international string competitions to go ahead fully or partly online. In this second year of digital editions, are elements of best practice emerging? And what lessons can jurors, participants and organisers take from the virtual experience?

Going fully online can open up international access to a competition for both applicants and audiences. Such was the experience of this year's Irving M. Klein International String Competition, run by the California Music Center (CMC) in San Francisco. CMC executive

director Marcy Straw says that 2021 was a record-breaking year for the contest, with 128 applications from 16 countries.

When the New York-based Kosciuszko Foundation's 2020 Wieniawski Violin Competition was held online in November, the first, second and final stages were live-streamed in real time. In contrast, the Klein Competition and the 2021 Menuhin Competition had competitors pre-record their semi-final and final programmes, with no editing allowed. These recordings were then put together and shown in public broadcasts. While this strategy arguably lacks the excitement of a truly live situation, it has the advantage of quality control and avoiding potential internet glitches. Violinist Mark Peskanov, a juror for the Wieniawski Competition, says: 'The challenge of doing it live is that sometimes with the internet connection, you lose several notes in a passage. So you have to use your judgement and experience to understand whether the competitor played those notes in a certain way, or if they made an error, or if it was just a technical glitch with the equipment or the internet. I think we all had a certain compassion for the players.'

How do competitors psychologically prepare for these pre-recordings? Violist Yuchen Lu, who won first prize at the 2021 Klein Competition, says he made practice recordings before going into a studio to record his semi-final and final programmes. 'I wanted to try it a few times first, so I wouldn't be nervous when I stepped into the studio,' he recalls. 'When I play in person, I feel a connection with the audience, but in the studio I had to imagine there was an audience in front of me.' Lu found the experience of watching the Klein Competition broadcasts fascinating and unnerving. 'It's the first time I've ever been audience and competitor at the same time. You never get that experience at a live competition. I was too nervous to watch myself!'

Teachers sometimes talk of the benefits to students of recording and listening back to themselves. Violin pedagogue Alf Richard Kraggerud, a juror at the 2021 Menuhin Competition, highlights the potential learning opportunities of this aspect of online competitions. 'How you feel you perform is not always the way it comes out when you watch yourself later,' he says. 'I think you get to be more realistic if you are in the habit of watching or listening to your own performances.' As someone who feels strongly that competitions build resilience and professionalism, Straw argues that a one-take recording tests a young player's strength of character as much as a live performance: 'There's just as much pressure in knowing you're capturing a performance in a recording and can't go back and change it, as there is in walking out on stage.'

While virtual competitions routinely offer guidance to competitors on how best to record themselves, jurors have to take into account that not everyone will have access to ideal recording equipment and venues. 'You have to assess players on their own terms, in their own circumstances,' says Peskanov. Kraggerud's advice to would-be candidates is: 'Try to have the most professional recording you can, so you do not have a big disadvantage.'

For jurors sitting in front of their screens at home, the experience has the potential to be somewhat isolating. Kraggerud says what he missed most was the atmosphere in the hall, though Peskanov suggests that one constructive effect of such isolation is that it cuts out external influences on the judging process: 'In some ways it's even fairer than a live competition, as you don't see other members of the jury, and catch one of them smiling or disapproving. You find yourself paying even closer attention than you would in a live setting.' The jurors at the Klein Competition were able to watch the semi-final and final videos privately in advance, or in real-time during the respective broadcasts, but were brought together in private Zoom meetings after each round to discuss which candidates would advance, and then who would take the top prizes.

As major contests like this autumn's ARD Competition in Munich and the Geneva International Music Competition run hybrid digital-and-live editions as a necessary response to continuing pandemic restrictions, other competitions are exploring which successful elements of the virtual experience can enhance future live editions. At the Klein Competition, after two successive digital-only years, Straw says: 'Our big challenge now as we return to in-person is how to keep that online love going.' >>>