

THE 2000 LEEDS INTERNATIONAL  
PIANOFORTE COMPETITION

(CONFESSIONS OF A "CIVILIAN" JUROR)

by Malcolm Bilson

When Fanny Waterman, founder and chairman of the Leeds Competition, called me in 1999 and asked if I would serve as a juror in the Leeds International Pianoforte Competition in September, 2000, I was absolutely delighted. I often feel that I live outside the "normal" piano world (and not merely because I play on other pianos than the Steinway model), and here was a chance to hear the best young players today's world has to offer.

One can hardly imagine a better, more sympathetically run contest than this one. Leeds is a large and important industrial city in the North of England, and the entire town seems to get engaged in this event, with endless volunteers to chauffeur judges and contestants hither and fro and help in all manner of ways. We were 14 judges in all, most of whom serve as regular jurors at many of the world's most important piano competitions; I had judged at only two others, neither of such significance, and I felt honored to have been invited. We were put up in the elegant Meridien Queen's Hotel in the center of town; almost all our meals were provided (and very elegant ones at that); on our free day we were taken on a marvellous outing to the stately Harewood House, again with a wonderful feast. The candidates were likewise especially well treated; most were housed in Tetley Hall at the University of Leeds (in whose excellent concert hall all but the final rounds were held); there were fine pianos all over town that they could use for practicing, etc. And one of the greatest benefits of such a beautiful setup is that both the judges and the candidates strike up new friendships, many of which prove to be lasting.

In the matter of judging it likewise seems to me that an unassailably fair system has been developed at Leeds. Two features of many competitions are not to be found here: a point system (such as a maximum of 25 for a given candidate, all points to be counted up at the end to see who comes out on top) and any sort of coercion between the judges (there are notorious cases in other competitions of judges endeavoring to convince colleagues to vote for their students or favorites). In Leeds there was no official discussion about the candidates in any of our meetings (although of course some of us did chat among ourselves - how could we help it?) and all voting was done by simple lists, as follows:

In the first round we heard 72 pianists play a half-hour each. The judges were then each asked to make a list (in no particular order) of 33 candidates we would like to see continue. The 33 candidates in the second round played 45 minutes each, after which each of us submitted a list of 12 names to go further. In the semi-finals each of those 12 then played a 75-minute recital after which we made lists of 6 to go on to the finals. Those took place in the Leeds Town Hall, packed to the gills, and the finalists played their concerto with Sir Simon Rattle and the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. At the conclusion of the second evening of the finals (three concerti per evening) we each voted for First Prize, Second Prize, etc. down to the Sixth Prize. Leeds is unbelievably generous; not only do all six finalists get prizes, but so do many semi-finalists and second-stage contestants.

There was an extensive repertory list from which to choose, with a good admixture of required pieces and free choices at every stage right up to the finals (where one could select from a list of 26 possible concertos), so that the recitals of the various candidates at each stage were for the most part varied and interesting. Of course there were the inevitable repetitions, and they do tend to wear the jurors down: "Here comes that one again!" These included the Haydn Sonata in C, Hob. 50, the Beethoven Sonata Opus 109, the "Wanderer" Fantasy of Schubert, the Liszt B minor Sonata, and the Rachmaninoff Bb Minor Sonata.

Each of these turned up at least 5 times and the finals boasted three Brahms D minor out of the six concertos! (Yet we didn't hear one "Appassionata" or "Waldstein;" just imagine!) So much for the set-up of the competition. Here are my impressions from those three weeks of intensive listening.

If this represents the standard of piano playing in the world today, it surpasses anything I could have imagined; it is of a level I would not have believed, and I'm by no means simply referring to fast and clean octaves. Out of the 72 excellent candidates we heard, I think there must have been at most 2 or 3 where any of us could have shaken our heads and wondered "How did that one get in?"

On the other hand, the number of fresh or interesting or original interpretations we got to hear could be counted on one hand! Five Beethoven Opus 109s, for example, not one of which paid the slightest attention to Beethoven's careful and detailed articulations in the *Adagio espressivo* of the first movement, all of which played the *Andante* of the third movement *Adagio*. And even more devastating is the fact that these interpretations seem virtually *interchangeable*! The same can be said of the "Wanderers" or the Liszt Sonatas we heard. Of course some of these performances are "better" than others, but the standardization of conception is for me rather frightening. One comes to the inevitable conclusion that they all listen to the same recording as a basis for their interpretation! Might this perhaps have to do in some way with the standardization of the modern piano?

A single instrument was used for all contestants in all rounds, a Hamburg Steinway that was basically a fine instrument but which, to my mind, changed completely in the top two octaves into something some would call brilliant but I found metallic and headache-producing. I complained a few times to the very nice piano technician, but perhaps I was alone; most pianists today seem rather used to a different voicing balance at the top. Of course for me the idea of a piano competition where

only one type of piano is available seems very bizarre, yet to most pianists it is normal, and I was careful not to bring this up with my colleagues, knowing they would think I was an oddball. Yet can one imagine, for example, a cooking contest where only one type of tomato and one kind of wine are allowed? (And of course, the majority of our contestants will never have tasted any other kind of tomato nor variety of wine...) After the winners were announced I met Simon Rattle at a final dinner over the salad buffet, and he said to me "Do you know that *none* of these players have *ever* played earlier pianos? Don't you think they would play differently if they had?" I did ask one of the contestants (actually one of my favorites of the lot - Paavali Jumppanen from Finland, although he curiously didn't make it into the finals) if he had played on old pianos. Jumppanen's playing had, I thought, shown decidedly original interpretations, and I was very surprised that he didn't make into the finals. He said "Of course I've played old pianos, and the clavichord, too." It certainly told in his manner of handling that Steinway, more varied and colorful and certainly different than most of the others.

It was Béla Bartók who said that "competitions are for horses, not artists." But Fanny Waterman, founder and still, at age 80, a sprightly and lively chairman of the competition (I just love her and her wonderful husband Geoffrey de Keyser) believes that they can provide opportunities for young artists, opportunities previously offered only through patronage. I think Fanny is right on, and was pleased at the idea that I might be able to be helpful in the process. Such competitions are, as I see it, first and foremost an *opportunity to be heard*. In the case of the Leeds many of the some 100 sponsors of the various engagements promised come to listen. (They are, by the way, in no way obliged to take only the top winners.....)

But in the final analysis I have qualms about what such contests promote. Should the world's greatest cooking contest not bring forth new and exciting recipes? What good is a contest that brings forth still more pianists to play Opus 109 in the same manner it has already been played for years on end. If there's

nothing new or better or more interesting to be learned about it, why should we keep training more young people to do it *exactly the same way*?

I presume that this is mostly due to the "standard" recordings to which they all listen. Often, in a lecture-demonstration I play a few recordings, sometimes of a piano piece, sometimes a symphony movement, sometimes a Schubert Lied. I play recordings from about 1935 and compare them to recordings from about 1960. The difference in playing style between a 1935 recording of the Chopin f minor Ballade by Raoul Kocsalksi (student of Mikuli) and an early 1960s recording by Vladimir Ashkenazy is so great one could almost speak of different activities altogether! Yet Ashkenazy's recording remains typical for what most young pianists would do today - very little has changed in the some 40 years since that recording was made! Are we to suppose that in 2040 pianists (and singers and orchestras) will *still* be playing in the same style as in 1960, and furthermore: *Which of these versions, Ashkenazy's or Kocsalski's, are really closer to something Chopin might recognize and value???* Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger's *Chopin, Pianist and Teacher as Seen by his Pupils*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, can shed a lot of light on this subject. Chopin was an avid teacher, and we know a great deal about the kinds of things he valued and stressed in his lessons. (By the way, this is by no means to criticize Ashkenazy's gorgeous recording of the Ballade - whenever I make such comparisons of two recordings I try only to take the very best of each version I can find.)

Thus with almost all the very high level of playing I heard at Leeds, the majority of performances represented a modern middle-of-the-road approach (even though often beautiful and occasionally even inspired). Risk-taking of any kind, however, was at a minimum. The little Mozart playing we heard was simply awful, for the most part, and of course not one candidate risked varying a repeat or ornamenting or introducing a cadenza. One only hopes that at least *some of them know that they should* but were afraid of being eliminated by uninformed judges. And what was genuinely devastating to me was the fact that not one of

them ever came out onto the stage, looked at the audience and smiled as if to say "I'm very glad to be here, glad to be playing for you, and I hope you'll like it." There was an audience in the hall at all times (during the semi-finals and finals very large ones), that often got very excited and clapped and stamped their feet. Yet most of the candidates simply bowed stiffly, barely acknowledging the applause. It was as if they had been instructed to eschew everything "extra-curricular," as if anything at all could get them eliminated!

At the finals I found this even more demoralizing. Simon Rattle throws himself into the music with zeal and passion and joy. The greatest pleasure I can think of in chamber music (and concertos certainly qualify as such) is that my partner plays a melody so exquisitely that when it comes to my turn I have to play it even *more* exquisitely; this should be very inspiring to any player. Simon Rattle offered such a possibility to all six finalists, and to my mind none of them ever allowed him/herself to be really carried away, all of them just seemed to execute very carefully what they had practiced. **So given what I witnessed at Leeds what advice do I have to any young pianist in regard to contests?**

First of all, really good contests give one the possibility to play, uninterrupted, repertoire of your choice. Consider that an opportunity to play a recital, not to carefully execute an obstacle course in order to get through without tripping up. This is your chance to play as beautifully and as deeply as you know how, *for an audience eager and ready to hear something inspired and beautiful*. If you have something original to say about the music, say it to the fullest - what more important thing can you do in life than reveal something new about whatever you are playing, some beauty or truth that no one has perhaps yet thought of? The late Georges Enescu described an ideal performance with the words: "*Vibrer et faire vibrer*." (I must myself vibrate with the music, and then possibly I can make others vibrate too.) Put yourself into the music with every fiber of your being, and maybe someone there will be genuinely moved. Some may of course not be moved, and

you could be eliminated. But that's *their* job; I can only do *mine*! Meanwhile you have had the opportunity to play in a wonderful hall for an audience you would not have reached before, and *someone may have heard you*. (I could fill another article with stories of students of mine and others who were eliminated early on in some contest or other, yet were heard by someone important who happened to be in the audience and subsequently went on to get far more engagements and to have a much bigger career than any of the prize winners.)

And when you go out on that stage, look at the audience and let them know that you are, and if they applaud, make sure you let them know that *you appreciate it*. I know this sounds obvious and mundane, but I was amazed at how little of it I saw in Leeds, from any of the candidates in any of the stages. I, and I'm sure many of the other judges as well, were craving for beautiful and inspired performances. There were a few, and they made us happy.

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The winners: I was personally not in complete agreement with the final outcome, but I suppose that was to be expected. I based my votes on the highest number of deep or moving interpretations of individual works by the various performers I heard. (I don't know whether or not there are acting contests, but if there are the winners would certainly be the ones that gave the most convincing interpretations of Hamlet or King Lear....on what else could the judging be based?) First prize went to 22 yr.-old Alessio Bax of Italy; this was a great disappointment to me, for although a fine pianist I had not noted any of his interpretations in any of the stages as being really telling or moving. Second prize went to 24 yr. old Davide Franchescetti, also from Italy, whose Diabelli Variations and most especially Davidsbündler were high points of the week. A true romantic! Third prize went to 22 yr. old Severin von Eckardstein from Germany, whose Prokoffief 2nd

concerto in the finals was rather amazing - Eckardstein also received the Contemporary Music Prize for a remarkable *Rousserole effarvate* of Messiaen. (There was a Schubert prize which was not awarded.) 4th prize went to Cristiano Burato, also from Italy and 5th prize to Britisher Ashley Wass, age 23. Wass had been my first choice out of the finalists; his Beethoven 101, Franck Prélude, Aria and Finale and Berg Sonata had all been highlights for me. Finally 6th prize went to 15 yr old Tatiana Kolessova, perhaps most extraordinary of all. Pianistically fluent, beautiful, and very inspired. A combination of naturalness and warmth, brilliance and ease hardly matched by anyone. I conversed with her for a brief moment (she spoke good English) and advised her to husband her enormous talent carefully. 15 is dangerously young to be as good as that; it can be difficult to "get through" the next years. I told her "Clara Haskil managed it; Mozart managed it!" She laughed charmingly. Watch out for her in the coming years.

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