

How to Win at Music Festival An open letter to students

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By Peter Jancewicz

To: Stuart Dent
From: P. N. O'Teacher
Re: Music Festival

Dear Stu,

It's been a pretty good year so far. You've practiced fairly well, although I have to admit that more would be better. But there were those times where you didn't fix an easy rhythm, or correct that obviously wrong note, or lift your foot off the pedal and clean up the sound... Then there was that eight week stretch where you pinned your ears back like a stubborn mule and refused to memorize. I can still hear the plaintive mosquito-like whine in your voice: "But it's haaaaaarrrrrd...." And how many times did I have to remind you to practice slowly? When you finally got around to it, you acted as if you'd made the discovery of the century and said, "Hey, Mr. P., that slow practice stuff really works." I developed a slight headache on that day, as I recall. And now you've got me whining... dang it! I'd hoped to avoid that... But all in all, not too bad a term. And now it's time to talk about music festival.

So you want to win, huh? OK, that's pretty normal. Everyone likes to win... the praise, the glory... the cash! And the envious looks of other students as you proudly stride to the front of the room and pick up your certificate? Sweeeeet! Now Stu, you're a pretty talented and smart kid, but you seem to think that your talent will automatically earn you a first place certificate, no matter how unprepared you are. Let me tell you... this is not so. While adjudicators fully appreciate talent, they first look for well-prepared pianists. Talent is icing on the cake. Here are a few things they listen for. If you get them all, then and only then, do you stand a chance of winning.

First, you need to master three basic things: right notes, right rhythm, and flow. I would do that as soon as possible, if I were you. There is no excuse for learning wrong notes or rhythm. To do that is like writing a math exam with all the answers in front of you and still

making mistakes. Oops... Learned wrong notes or rhythm tells the adjudicator that you are careless. This is not considered a good thing, no matter how talented you are. Even if you get all the right notes and rhythm, but your playing contains all sorts of little hiccups, stammers and stumbles, this means you haven't practiced properly or enough. Can you imagine if you bought a CD of your favourite band, and every song contained a bunch of little slips, mistakes, and booboos? What would you think? What will the adjudicator think if you play like that? Let me tell you, Stu... they get irritated. And they get irritated because that kind of playing is usually an indication that you have not practiced properly or enough. In other words, you are unprepared. There are many ways to impress an adjudicator. Annoying them with an unprepared performance is not one.

Once you have notes, rhythm and flow comfortably under your fingers, it is time to turn it into a piece of music. No, Stu, I know what you're thinking, but it's not music yet. It's just notes. It's like the ingredients for a recipe. A sack of flour, a pound of butter, a kilo of sugar and a dozen eggs simply lying on the kitchen counter does not make a cake, if you catch my drift. Musical playing requires contrast, colour, expression, and you can do this by paying attention to and mastering a few things. Dynamics and articulation provide contrast in the sound. Loud, soft, staccato, legato, and all points in between make your playing more colourful. A famous pianist, Artur Rubinstein, called the pedal the "soul of the piano". Good pedaling adds magic to your playing. Poor pedaling muddies any magic that may be there. Your playing must be balanced and voiced, so the audience can clearly hear the melody... and the bass line... and the accompaniment all at the same time. It's like depth in a painting, where you can clearly see the subject of the painting as well as things in the background. Musicians call it "transparency". Good phrasing, shaping and breathing properly, makes it possible for audiences and adjudicators to understand your performance. Poorly phrased music is like a run on sentence without punctuation. And no life. It's difficult to understand, and people (that includes adjudicators!) will lose interest. So again, you have to ask yourself: is causing the adjudicator and audience to doze off an effective tactic in your quest to win? I think not.

OK, Stu... let's say you've gotten to this point. The notes and rhythm flow. Your playing abounds with delightful contrast, elegant and eloquent phrasing, soulful pedal, and is as transparent as a fishbowl... is that it? Well... it's pretty good, but you're not quite there

yet. What adjudicators look for, **once the basics have been mastered**, is imagination, creativity, and artistry. This is present when the audience feels something from your playing other than: “boy, is he getting it right...”. They want... no, Stu, they need excitement, joy, melancholy, laughter, unbearable sadness, delight... all sorts of different feelings. You need to make their feet tap.... they want to be inspired to dance in their seats. When you carry the audience off to a different place and tell them a story, this is inspired playing. And this is what adjudicators want to hear. Unfortunately, this is something that is difficult to practice, and it will certainly not appear in your playing if you have not mastered the basics. **But, if you are well prepared**, and you wait quietly while practicing, it will probably come. You are like a great nature photographer patiently waiting for that cute little bear cub to timidly poke his head out of the den for the first time. Like the cub, inspiration is a shy thing, and if you startle it or try to force it, it runs. It's well worth the wait, though, because you feel fantastic when it is happening. You are alive! Never mind the adjudicator and audience! You, Stu, are alive! But this inspiration is what audiences and adjudicators alike wait for and love to hear! And because it is so rare, it is extremely valuable. This is what really makes audiences and adjudicators listen. Be prepared. Be inspired.

To be well prepared and inspired, your best tool is slow, concentrated, aware practice. I know, I know, it sounds boring. But, if you practice slowly and well, you will be able to play quickly and well sooner! Really! You remember, Stu, that I always tell you to pay attention to how it feels and how it sounds? Well, you can be aware of much more when you go slowly. It's like taking a tour – you will see and hear and smell and taste much more when you walk than if you take a bus. This allows you to fix all sorts of stuff, and allow your playing to be comfortable and effortless. Good practice paves the way for inspiration. So, practice slowly, be well-prepared, and make room for inspiration.

Once you get to this point, you are in a strong position to win your class. Yeah! Finally! Glory, praise... buckets of cash! But let me make one final point, Stu. In my opinion, the only meaningful competition you have in music festival is not with your fellow competitors; it is with yourself. Even if you place first, the glory, praise and even cash will be forgotten in a couple of weeks. Here today, gone tomorrow. But if you can overcome the things in yourself that prevent you from playing well: the difficulties that you face, the temptation of the TV, the sinking feeling that you will never get it, the annoying stiffness

in your hand when you play that arpeggio... if you can overcome these things, then you win, whether or not you place first. That is a function of how well you practice. And that stays with you forever. And you did it yourself... not me, not your parents, not the adjudicator. **You** did it, Stu.

So, in closing, I sincerely hope that you win at music festival, whether or not you place first. You have my best wishes. Good luck.

Your faithful servant,

P. N. O'Teacher

Peter Jancewicz is a pianist, composer, writer, adjudicator and teacher. He holds a Masters Degree in piano performance from McGill University and a Doctor of Music Degree from the University of Alberta. Teachers have included Kenneth Woodman, Charles Reiner, and Helmut Brauss. His piano music is published by Alfred and Alberta Keys. His most recent publication is a Christmas duet, "Deck Those Funky Halls" from Alberta Keys and is now available. He is a regular contributor to Clavier, and his articles have appeared in various newsletters across Canada. He teaches at Mount Royal College Conservatory in Calgary, Alberta.