

Who are We Playing for? Fairness in Piano Competitions

*It's like [the] Olympics of piano.*¹
—Leonora Armellini, Competitor, 2021 Chopin Competition



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*Competitions are for horses, not artists.*²
—Béla Bartók, composer

Introduction

Few areas of classical music are as controversial and popular as music competitions. While many musicians see the competition as a necessary evil that violates the ethereal and unquantifiable nature of music, audiences enthusiastically support these competitions as an entertaining and helpful means to identify young talent. The tension between aesthetic values and audience enjoyment is further compounded by the wide range of competing interests and biases held by the various stakeholders in competitions (organizers, jury members, performers, and audience members). My research examines the current state of piano competitions as a reflection of major trends in the classical music industry today.



Locations of WFIMC piano competitions, colour-coded by namesake (61): blue—city (21), red—composer (19), yellow—pianist (13), purple—other (9).

Research Questions & Methodology

1. Are piano competitions fair, and what purpose do they serve?
2. How do jurors balance transparency and fairness against their personal biases?
3. How are competitors portrayed in traditional and digital media narratives?
4. How have increasing globalized contexts and the World Federation of International Music Competitions (WFIMC) affected how competitions function?

While drawing on scholarly research (primarily that of Lisa McCormick), I will also use official documents, promotional material, and journalistic commentary to analyze three WFIMC piano competitions: the Chopin, Cliburn, and Hamamatsu competitions.

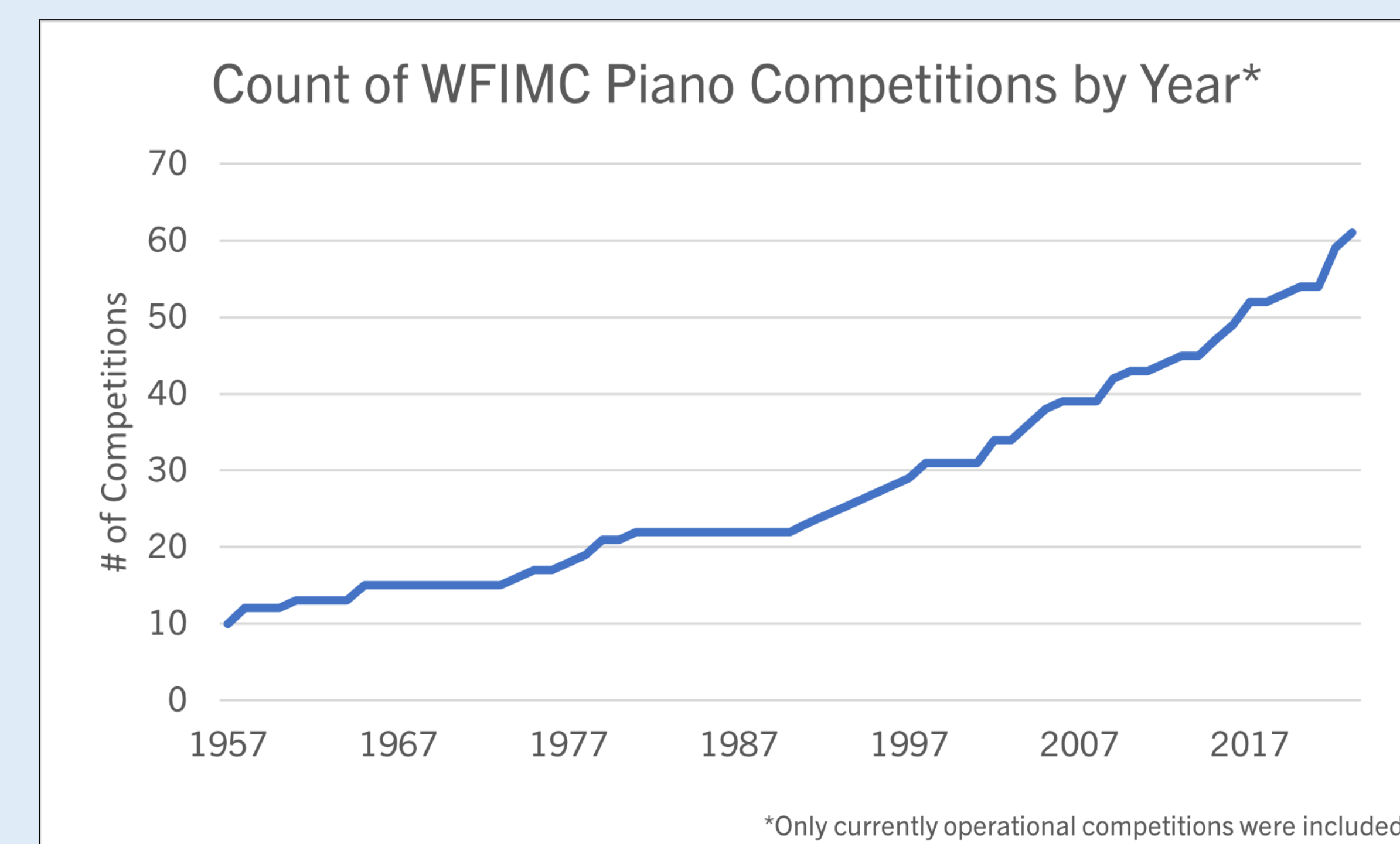
Judging Winners

Competition juries have been subject to much scrutiny. One reason is a juror's perceived national bias. The Chopin competition's original mission was closely connected to Chopin's unique reputation as a Polish virtuoso, so juries were particularly sensitive to national schools of technique and interpretation.³ Furthermore, the first jury featured all Polish members.⁴ The WFIMC now recommends that all juries must contain a majority of international judges.⁵ Voting and scoring systems have also been criticized because of their alleged propensity to produce uncontroversial and uninspiring winners. In recent years, the Chopin competition has devised an algorithm to remove outlier scores, whereas other competitions like the Cliburn favour a simpler, yes/no/maybe closed-ballot system. At the Hamamatsu competition, juries deliberate openly to promote consensus before announcing their results. Finally, critics also scrutinize jury selection. So-called "career judges" adjudicate many competitions and may favour the same competitors.⁶ Due to the limited transparency of the jury process, these criticisms are impossible to prove or falsify.⁷

	Country	Hamamatsu	Chopin/Cliburn	More competing?
Olga Kern	RUS/USA	3rd (2000)	1st (2001)	No
Rafal Blechacz	POL	1st (2003)	1st (2005)	No
Seong-Jin Cho	KOR	1st (2009)	1st (2015)	No
Alexander Gadjevi	ITA/SVN	1st (2015)	2nd (2021)	No
Daniel Hsu	USA	3rd (2015)	3rd (2017)	No
Hyuk Lee	KOR	3rd (2018)	Finalist (2021)	Yes
Tomoharu Ushida	JPN	2nd (2018)	Round 2 (2021)	Yes
Can Çakmur	TUR	1st (2018)	—	No

Perceptions of Performers

Jurors are not the only group analyzing competitors. Performers must also juggle the competing demands of competition organizers, journalists, and in-person audience members, not to mention online listeners. With the emergence of livestreaming and social media, the public now has a larger role than ever before in propelling promising musicians to stardom.⁸ Scholar Lisa McCormick identifies four recurring competitor archetypes that pervade competition media: the prodigy, the fire-breathing virtuoso, the conquering hero, and the intellectual.⁹ Portrayals of competitors in the documentaries *Pianoforte* (Chopin) and *Virtuosity* (Cliburn) largely support McCormick's archetypes. These films use these generalized stereotypes to fashion comprehensible narratives based on cult personalities precisely because they stress the omnipresent social and civil frame that surrounds competitions and the disrupting effects of controversial or transgressive acts on this frame.



Global Contexts

During the 20th century, winning a piano competition had global implications not unlike the Olympics. For example, the American pianist Van Cliburn shot to international fame by winning the Soviet-organized Tchaikovsky Competition during the height of the Cold War. Whereas past competitions pitted national piano schools against one another, modern competitions swing between championing diversity and enforcing homogeneity. The Hamamatsu competition celebrates its local musical culture as being a unique site of international cultural exchange, and yet it must contend with the complicated legacy of European musical colonialism in Japan. The WFIMC contributes to this homogenization by providing a set of universal guidelines for member competitions to follow, regardless of their place or tradition. While this consistency allows for competitions like the Chopin to offer automatic qualification for prizewinners of select WFIMC competitions, such actions may serve as barriers to newcomers.

Competition Data:



Endnotes & References:



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Table 2: Overview of Selected Piano Competitions

	Year est.	Mission	Structure	Repertoire	Jury	Competitors	Prizes	Size
Int'l Chopin Piano Competition (Poland)	1927, every 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Named after Polish composer "Apart from its huge role in popularising Chopin's music, it discovers the greatest pianistic talents."¹⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video pre-screening, 5 rounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only works by Chopin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2021: 7/17 jurors were Polish 8/17 jurors were previous prize winners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age: 16-31 2021: 1/8 prizewinners Polish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1st prize: €40,000, tours, recordings, management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2021: >500 applications 37.5 million online views
Van Cliburn Int'l Piano Competition (USA)	1962, every 4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Named after American concert pianist "Share excellent classical music with the largest international audience possible" and "launch the careers of its winners."¹¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video pre-screening, 4 rounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free choice + provided list Mandatory work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2025: 4/9 jurors are American 1/9 jurors is previous prize winner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age: 18-31 2022: 0/3 prizewinners American 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1st prize: \$100,000 USD, tours, recordings, management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2022: 388 applications 25 million online views
Hamamatsu Int'l Piano Competition (Japan)	1991, every 3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Named after Japanese city "Encourage the development of music and culture, to promote international cultural exchanges and to contribute to the nurturing of musicians."¹² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video pre-screening, 4 rounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free choice + provided list Mandatory Japanese work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2024: 3/11 jurors are Japanese 1/11 jurors is previous prize winner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age: <33 2018: 4/6 prizewinners Japanese 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1st prize: ¥4,000,000, tours, recordings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2018: 382 applications 24,811 live attendees