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Dissing The Competition

Yet another "pay to enter" composer competition is making its annual rounds. It appeared in my inbox the other day and became part of the groggy ritual of email sorting and morning coffee reading. Scanning it, my eyes made their way through an increasingly ridiculous list of random requirements. My grogginess rapidly shifted to anger, which effectively shifted me from my deck to my desk where I could begin typing. Utter dismay at terms and conditions I've seen too many times before has moved me to caution any composer living on a budget about scenarios that at best are foolish ways to spend money, and at worst, are exploitive: the expensive lottery of some competitions.

Let me begin with The Moral Of The Story, and then if you're interested, you can read the specifics that had me spit-taking my espresso. To wit:

> Rather than pay fees to competitions that one is statistically unlikely to win, a composer's efforts and money will be far better devoted to improving their bio and professional opportunities by spending money to do things like attend music conferences and new music concerts, at which they will be surrounded by professionals eager to learn about new compositions. It is ALWAYS better—and will make a composer feel better about the worth of their work—to take the initiative to introduce oneself and one's music, instead of passively waiting around in the hope that maybe, even though the odds are always against them, they'll "win" an opportunity.

Create opportunity. Do not wait for it to be created for you.

> When people engage with you as a person, they are that much more inclined to engage with your music.

Music-making is a human, social activity. When people engage with you as a person, they are that much more inclined to engage with your music.

Beware These Competition Terms

Let me be clear: I am not vilifying this or any other such competition in particular. I don't think that the organization mounting the one that most recently riled me up is making much money off of this, if any. And I don't think that it's intentionally, nefariously trying to take advantage of eager composers. Thus, I don't find it necessary to name the competition, because I'm simply using it in this essay as an example that will open the eyes of composers to undesirable terms too often found in many similar calls.

This competition-du-jour has four categories, from which three first prize and three second prize winners will be selected. It touts a process that pays "at least" two [well known, top-flight] composers each year to be the judges for chamber works of no more than five players. Four of six winning pieces will be performed on a concert that will also be recorded.

Okay. Sounds all right, until one reads the requirements:

—The competition does not accept digital files and/or links. Instead, it requires the mailing of THREE physical scores. To submit a score, it's required that the entrant spend what I guarantee ends up being a notable amount of money on printing, binding, packaging materials, and postal fees.

—The organization gets to keep one of the scores. So rather than receiving money in exchange for a score that cost a composer time and money to produce, the entrant is paying to have that score stored in someone's file cabinet.

—Assuming the composer would like the other two copies of their expensive materials returned, then they must include an "appropriately stamped return package envelope for return of scores and recordings."

—Instead of a simple mp3 upload or link, the competition insists on receiving THREE nearly-archaic physical CDs. There are many computers that no longer have CD drives. New cars haven't had them for years and many homes no longer have them. "Compact Discs," those round shiny things commonly seen dangling in fruit gardens to deflect pesky birds, are an artifact of a decade ago, and even then, competitions were using links to digital audio.

—The scores and CDs must be anonymous. That means a great deal of extra hassle and expense for the composer, since one can't just grab existing materials off one's shelf to send in.

> Has the Department of Homeland Security suddenly developed a love of contemporary music?

—This international competition, based in the U.S., requires a "copy of state ID, driver's license, birth certificate, or passport for all but Professional Division entrants." What is this, ICE? Has the Department of Homeland Security suddenly developed a love of contemporary music? This requirement makes no sense and is highly invasive. I understand an organization's desire to know where the composers come from, but a simple entry line for country of origin would suffice. Any further personal information should only be needed for the six cash award winners, and that's all. I cannot stress this enough: I highly discourage anyone from sending copies of their personal identifying documents to strangers running a competition that they have not yet won.

Photo by **steve sawusch on Unsplash**

The Math

As arcane, expensive, time consuming and frustrating as these submission terms are, the eye-opener is the total cost.

The competition has four levels that range from children (no age limit, maximum age 15), to students, to career professionals. The four awards for the young people are either $75 or $150. It will cost a student $30 to enter, in addition to the significant costs to prepare and send all the physical materials.

The two awards for the adults are $500 or $1000. However, that cash will evaporate, because the competition states that, "University and Professional finalists must be prepared to travel to the [out of state or country, for most] venue for the concert." It does not indicate anywhere that the travel expenses will be covered.

It will cost professionals $75 to enter, in addition to the significant costs to prepare and send all the physical materials.

All in, I'll estimate that the total outgo for this "opportunity" is a roll of the dice of about $200: the $75 fee, plus 3 printed scores (about $60), 3 CDs (about $10), packaging materials (about $10), mailing postage (roughly $16-$25), and return postage (roughly $16-$25; because a composer will want to get those shiny CDs back in order to dangle them, well, somewhere).

Across all categories, there will be just 6 winners, with only one person receiving $1000. At most, the organization will pay out a total of $3,225 in award money if all six awards are given.

The competition announcement makes it clear that "funds received are devoted exclusively to competition activities, primarily to fairly compensating world- renowned composers for ample time and effort in judging new works."

That's great that they are up front about this; too many competitions hide the intent for all those entry fees. I've been told that the judging honorarium has historically been around $1,000 or a little more. Reviewing the past competitions listed on their website, they've never had more than two judges. So let's add $2400 to the organization's expenses.

But a red flag appears with the words, "primarily to fairly compensating." If most of an entrant's time, utter patience, and $200 is going toward being judged by experienced composers—presumably without receiving much or any feedback from them—wouldn't spending that same amount of time and money on one or two private lessons or professional career consultations be far more helpful to a composer?

The organization is a non-profit 501(c)(3), and touts its board and its donors on its website. While it states that most of the money is going to the judges, it's unclear how much of the competition concert is actually paid for from the money collected from the [mostly absent, non-winning] composers' fees.

Let's say, hypothetically, that there are 100 entries: 60 of whom pay $30 and 40 of whom pay $75.

That's $1800 plus $3000: $4800 of income to the competition.

The awards cost $3,225.

The two panelists cost $2400.

That's $5,625 in expenses, not including concert expenses.

That leaves a shortfall of $825, which I'll guess is covered by donors and, more significantly, by ticket sales, which, according to this group's past such concerts, are at least $20 a piece, and $10 for seniors. If 250 people pay to attend the concert, and 200 pay $20 and 50 pay $10, that's income of $4500.

> The organization is outrightly asking that the submitting composers participate as investors of the competition.

The hosting organization will presumably incur concert, reception, and recording expenses. Consider this: since the organization is outrightly asking that the submitting composers participate as investors of the competition and concert whether or not they win, it would be more transparent if the organization also listed the rough expenses it plans to incur in mounting a concert of four chamber music pieces: Is the university performance venue free, like some? Is a house recording engineer included at no extra cost? Are the performers faculty musicians who aren't asking for much?

Also note, the concert will include not six new pieces, but four: the first and second prize winners in the two younger categories will not receive either a performance or a recording, so even if they win, they will have spent all this money on a byline in their bios that benefits the competition with free publicity and legitimization from inclusion in that composer's bio, as much as it might lend legitimacy to the young composer. The upside, however, is that those composers will avoid the stale bagels and hard boiled eggs of questionable chronology that comprise the free breakfast in the motel lobby, since it won't be necessary for them to spend any additional money to travel.

Being Proactive

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, I don't think that the organization is making much money off of this, and I don't think that it's intentionally trying to take advantage of composers. I get the impression from its website that it genuinely wants to present a concert of exciting new chamber music and recognize a few gifted composers.

> An investment of time and about $200 or so would be far better spent on any number of positive things.

I do think, however, that as I wrote earlier, for most composers, rather than surrendering precious hours of one's life piecing all these materials together, and flinging money haplessly at an anonymous and risk-drenched "opportunity," an investment of time and about $200 or so would be far better spent on any number of positive things, such as:

—Attending a conference or concert series, etc., at which they could meet performers and conductors and generate opportunity for themselves, rather than waiting powerlessly for one that is statistically highly unlikely to ever transpire;

—Hiring a performer or two to come over to the house or use a school's recording setup and record a piece, and have them grant permission for the composer to use the resulting recording on their website and social media;

—Purchasing software or hardware that will enable the composer to create their own excellent demos and advance their writing and production skills;

—Hosting a gathering of local music peers (pizza and beer party, etc.) to create a social environment that bolsters everyone's connection to each other.

—Paying for private lessons or consultations from an expert who will be directly engaged with the composer's needs.

And maybe we should add paying for therapy sessions to this useful list, to bolster composers' self-worth and confidence so that they realize that the only artist with whom they are in competition is... the one in the mirror.

Your odds are always better when you invest in yourself and in outcomes over which you have more control!!!

A lone gambler playing one of a group of slot machines (Photo by Carl Raw on Unsplash)

Photo by **Carl Raw on Unsplash**

A Glimpse Inside The Process

> I have yet to witness any winner be selected because of a resumé stuffed with Important Sounding Awards.

I have served as Chairperson and panelist for countless composer competitions and residencies over the course of the past twenty years. I have yet to witness any winner be selected because of a resumé stuffed with Important Sounding Awards. Not one. When the panelists and I looked at someone's attached C.V., it was often just a passing glance. The composers who received these juried opportunities were selected because of one marvelous thing: the excellence and creativity of their music.

Imagine that. And keep it in mind.

There is some logic in the theory that by entering a competition, even if composers don't win, they're getting their work seen and heard by judges who may be impressed enough to remember their names in the future. This is, however, a remarkably passive and oblique manner by which to choose to make a professional introduction. It would be more effective to politely say hello to admired composers at a concert or conference, and in the course of oh-so-respectfully chatting with them, inquire whether they might be willing to have a look at a short piece. The odds of being met with, "yes, absolutely, please email me a link!" are by no means 100 percent, but they are guaranteed to be higher than the percentage of panelists who will remember your name from that of a hundred other composers to whom they very momentarily gave their full, coffee'd-up attention once upon a time.

Another Perspective

Without question, some composers reading this essay are thinking, "I entered a competition like this and I won, and it had a very positive effect on my career." That's terrific!

I'm sure those winners were aware of the slim odds, making the win that much sweeter.

I also hope that when a composer wins a competition requiring an entry fee, they understand that just like any lotto winner, their award comes from the thousands of dollars paid into the lottery by their equally hopeful peers. I don't state this to guilt anyone: those who entered and sent in their money did so willingly and chose to spin the wheel. It's just like playing poker: everyone antes up, everyone hopes they've got the winning hand, and everyone knows that at the end of the night, one person will walk away with the big pot—filled with everyone else's money.

The analogy stops there, however, because when I ante up for a fun night of cards with friends, I'm paying not just for the hope of winning, but mostly for the experience of having a fun night of cards with friends.

I'm not sure where the "fun" or even "mildly enjoyable" part of "separating myself from $200 with the faint hope of winning" actually is.

But Wait, There's More

> Composers in academia receive pressure from administrators to provide "proof" that their music has been peer-reviewed.

During a recent conversation about the problems with many composer competitions, a friend of mine who's a composition professor at a major U.S. university conservatory raised the touchy issue of requirements for annual academic peer review. She made several sagingly accurate points about the quest for tenure, noting that composers in academia receive pressure from administrators to provide "proof" that their music has been peer-reviewed. Something as useful for a composer's career and their ability to expand the horizons of their students— such as organizing a well-attended, recorded, and videoed concert of their works —isn't deemed to be as "tenure worthy" in the eyes of a research institution as winning a judged competition.

The message is a sad one: composers who are professors shouldn't spend whatever free time they have pursuing their writing careers and gaining important experiences outside of the hallowed halls of the university. They should spend their time seeking the approval of random, often powerless colleagues within a small, self-referential circle.

The concept of "publish or perish" has plenty of merit; of course an academic institution wishes for its faculty to remain relevant in the world. Yet pushing professors into the often myopic corners of competitions and questionable "publishing" deals for the sake of adding these trinkets to their resumé is misguided. Just as those shiny objects called CDs have gone the way of the buggy whip, so has the opinion that the traditional method of music publishing—via major or established companies—is the only legitimate meter of a composer's worth. It is not. That belief is a vestige of pre-digital days.

The vast majority of composers currently pursuing their careers will never have a contract from a major publishing house. It is not because the new works lack excellence, but because those businesses can no longer afford to take on new names in a world in which it's getting trickier to earn money off even the most established ones. This is a stark departure from the norm of previous generations of composers, many of whom serve on university faculties, and some of whom continue to push the publishing myth on their students because it was their

personal reality. The not-so-new reality is that of self-publishing (either as a lone composer or as part of a collective), along with creating direct business arrangements for physical and digital distribution.

Academia must awaken to the realities of the 21st century, in which artists are in control of their own careers. When the internet allows everyone to publish and distribute their own music, and discover and build their own audiences, and subsequently reap the financial benefits of these relationships, the concept of waiting to be approved of by a panel of "experts" seems quaint at best, and professionally debilitating, at worst.

> Academia must awaken to the realities of the 21st century.

Rather than encourage student and faculty composers to hold their hands out to people and circumstances beyond their control, universities should encourage them to hold their hands out to shake a lot of other hands at music and arts advocacy gatherings.

My professor friend continued with these keen observations:

—Many competitions that charge entry fees are open to every composer and every instrumentation category, thus unfairly pitting students against professionals.

—The parameters of some fee-based competitions are so broad (e.g. any instrumentation, duration, etc.) that discerning between excellent submissions is akin to comparing apples and bicycles.

In both of the above examples, it could easily be inferred that the organizations are actively trying to entice the maximum number of submissions and entrance fees, regardless of quality.

—Some competitions and calls for scores from ensembles are blatantly exploitative: they ask for pieces of a highly specific instrumentation to be written for the submission, after which the ensemble then selects the piece they wish to perform. In these instances, composers pay their money for the "honor" of writing a piece for free, work hard with the slim hope that it will be chosen, and then have the additional "honor" of giving away the sheet music.

Think very carefully before you invest your time and creative heart into composing a work specifically for the slim chance of it being accepted by musicians with whom you have no relationship. Should you choose to proceed, make certain that it's an effort that genuinely moves your muses—especially if, like too many of these calls for scores, it's for something along the lines of, "oboe, tuba, harp, and pipe organ." Just how many performances and score sales of that magic combo do you believe you'll get?

Another sketchy scenario I've seen and cautioned against countless times is one whereby "the winning work will be published by [a completely irrelevant, unknown, and clueless publishing company]."

> Ensembles and organizations who act as though they are professional publishers do a great disservice to the composers they claim to represent.

If a composer is to assign their most valuable asset—their copyright—to another entity, they had better be certain that the recipient of their work has the wherewithal to promote and distribute that piece. Widely. Publishing is hard, constant work. It's not—as some of these competitions and ensembles appear to believe—a casual side hobby in which simply performing a piece once or a few times, owning the sheet music, making it available to anyone who might occasionally ask for it, and sending 10% of the sales money to the composer, counts as anything worth a composer relinquishing control and income. Many ensembles and organizations who act as though they are professional publishers do a great disservice to the composers they claim to represent, because they neglect to nurture the music in the long term, nor do they nurture an ongoing relationship with the composer.

A composer must be extremely circumspect about giving their copyright to any publisher, whether established or fly-by-night. If the piece turns out to be popular—or, for instance, licensed for use in commercial media—there could be a substantial amount of income generated. Particularly before agreeing to a publishing arrangement with a competition-related entity, ask a lot of questions about how they conduct business. How often do they display at conferences? How broad is their distribution network? What kind of regular promotion do they invest in for their catalog and their composers? What are the terms to which they agree to adhere on your piece's behalf, and will they return the copyright to you if they are in default?

Rather than jump at what looks like an important-sounding chance to be "published" by one of these competitions or calls for scores, I recommend that a composer asks that the entity instead agree to non-exclusively distribute the piece for a standard 50/50 discount. The distributor will still earn money from any sales, but the composer's potential income from the exploitation of the work remains protected.

Charity

Finally: if a composer does choose to enter an expensive competition, he or she should always think of it not as a potential career move, but as a charitable contribution to assist in the performance and recording of the music of their peers. Remember, if there are 4 competition winners out of 100 applicants, and for the sake of argument each of the entries is pretty decent, the odds against winning are 96% (and should there be notably more than 100 applicants, well, one will need a magnifying glass to perceive the chances of winning).

Such a charitable offering is wonderful, actually: many of us often contribute to the wellbeing of others. But few in our field ever openly speak or write of these pay- to-play competitions in the frank terms of socialized subsidization. As that stormy cloud of my indignance rose to the surface in my coffee, I felt it was time to do so.

Long live charity, it's a beautiful thing.

Just don't confuse it with professional opportunity.

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