



Violin

The Value of Competitions

by Sally O'Reilly

How can we utilize competitions for the benefit of our students? What dynamics are necessary to prevent damage to our students' egos — inflated egos if they win, deflated egos if they lose? Too many times I have heard teachers and parents say, "He's just entering for the experience." Well, that's fine if the level of preparation has been high enough to guarantee that the experience is a good one. Students need to play their best. There are a few "musts" that will help students achieve that goal.

1. Begin working on the required repertoire well in advance of the competition. Students need adequate preparation time so that the learning process is thorough and a level of maturity and confidence has been reached.

2. Give students opportunities to perform in informal settings where they can identify possible weak spots in their pieces.

3. Emphasize the value of preparing pieces at their highest level. Acknowledge that, while winning is fun, there is a long-range goal as well — that of being an accomplished musician.

Talk to the parents of your students and stress the importance of being supportive without adding undue pressure

to the situation. Encourage them to resist "Little League" mentality. Help them understand the concept of competitions as goals in which the most valuable returns are performance experience and judges' comments.

When I was ten or eleven years old I became eligible to enter the elementary division of a big piano competition at SMU sponsored by Mu Phi Epsilon. At the same time I was lobbying my parents for a croquet set. My mother struck a bargain with me. If I won the contest I'd get the croquet set. Well, I didn't win first place, I won second place and I didn't get the coveted croquet set. I still remember the keen disappointment. Instead of being able to take pride in a second place in a very large field of young pianists, I experienced a double loss — the loving cup and the croquet set. Moral: It is better to let any prize be what it is: a prize. After the fact it is perfectly all right for parents to add on additional rewards if they choose to. By the way, the following year I won first and got the croquet set!

As teachers we can use judges' comments as reinforcement of our own knowledge. Often I say to a student, "You see. I am not the *only* person who can hear

you 1) rush, 2) play out of tune, 3) fail to observe dynamics, etcetera." Of course, there are times when judges' decisions can create crises in our classes, i.e., a lazy student is ranked higher than a diligent one. It happens, and we can only try to turn it to an advantage. After all, the judge is usually hearing each student for the first time. I tell my students that luck has nothing to do with how they play and everything to do with whether they win. For the lazy winner this might just be the event that tips the scales in favor of more and better practice if you point out that the judges obviously recognized the talent.

Most students are goal oriented and will work better for us if they have something specific to strive for. The very least they will receive in the process are judges' comments and at the winner's end of the spectrum may lie cash rewards and solo performances with orchestra. It's worth the effort!

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