

Calculated Perfection vs. Humanity: The Industrialization of the Piano Competition

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Abstract

The global outcry following young Georgian pianist David Khrikuli's performance at the recent 19th Chopin Competition – where his display of profound artistic authenticity was met with a jury's decision to snub an artist who stood out in an "ocean of sameness" – serves as a poignant case study for a discussion of the current state of classical music worldwide. This keynote explores the tension between Art and Humanity within the high-stakes world of elite piano competitions, such as the Chopin, the Cliburn, the Tchaikovsky, or the Leeds. While these competitions are marketed as the ultimate launchpads for talent, they increasingly function as industrial filters that prioritize mechanical reliability over poetic risk.

I will first examine the dehumanization of a young virtuoso, who is trained from childhood with the singular focus of an elite athlete. This rigorous preparation often leads to a "disposable" career model: namely, young artists are thrust into the competition circuit only to be discarded by major agents and record labels if they fail to secure a top-tier prize. In this ecosystem, the musician is treated as a seasonal commodity, easily replaced by the next edition of the hype cycle.

Another dehumanizing issue is the systemic lack of support for those who do succeed. The case of 2015 Chopin medalist Kate Liu illustrates the fragility of this success; when physical injury strikes, the industry's "sink or swim" attitude offers no safety net, forcing even celebrated prize-winners to claw their way back into relentless competition and concert circuits. This reveals a chilling indifference to the physical and psychological well-being of a human being behind the instrument.

Ultimately, the tendency of juries to favor "safe" candidates – those with flawless technique but predictable interpretations – stifles the very authenticity that audiences crave. By rewarding conformity over originality, the competition circuit risks transforming a living art form into a standardized product. This keynote calls for a re-evaluation of how we value artists, moving away from the "Hunger Games of the keyboard" toward a system that honours the human spirit over the marketable prize.

Keywords: art, humanity, piano competitions, music industry, conformity vs. authenticity, wellbeing of artists

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