

## Sharing Performance

Rachel Douglas underlines the benefits of Britain's competitive festivals and applauds the achievements of contributing performers.

There is nothing new about competitive events in the performing arts. The ancient Greeks held poetry and drama competitions, medieval minstrels would compete for prizes as well as a maiden's hand and Eisteddfods can be traced back to the 12th century, but in this country it was the Victorians with their enthusiasm for workers' education, chapel choirs, drawing room ballads, moral uplift and teetotalism – among many other things – who systematically started to organise a competitive festival movement in this country. Perhaps it is surprising that this still flourishes: a hundred years ago there neither iPods, CDs, Classic FM nor Radio 3, but every parlour had its piano and the intrusion of wireless, let alone television or computers, was still unimaginable. But today 325 festivals held around the country are established enough to have become

affiliated to a parent body, the British & International Federation of Festivals.

I am Chair of the North London Festival of Music, Drama & Dance, which is one of the largest and oldest in the country, and am convinced how much it has to offer everyone from amateurs to music students, from little children to senior citizens. My passionate belief is that music ought to be heard live as often as possible, and that performance needs to be shared. We no longer live in an age when you are expected to bring your harp to a party, or sing local folk songs in the pub (somehow karaoke is not quite the same thing...), but amateurs want, and budding professionals need, the opportunity to perform and a festival can provide it. So the emphasis in the North London is on the taking part and sharing, not on the prize

winning (although I will admit it is sometimes hard to convince a pushy mum of this when her little darling seems to have been 'overlooked' by the adjudicator yet again).

Nobody reading *news & views* will need convincing of the benefits of a musical education, but some teachers do need reminding that music lessons shouldn't take place in isolation and that it is often useful for a pupil to get feedback from someone else and to see how they compare with their peers. Our adjudicators are all strictly charged only to give positive comments, but it is impressive how much good advice can come in an upbeat form. 'I really like the way you presented your piece, and with a bit more attention to intonation it could become an impressive performance.' Often an outsider can get across a message that the teacher has been struggling to impart for ages. I frequently hear such comments as: 'I've telling him for months to keep his bow arm up, but he only really took notice when your adjudicator said so as well.'

Competitions impose a certain amount of discipline on performers, which I think is genuinely useful, not just character forming in a cold-shower-in-the-morning sort of way. The first time my granddaughter went in for a cello class, she was completely unnerved by the combination of strange hall and unknown people looking at her and could hardly get bow to string. In the following years with more idea of what to expect her confidence increased to the point at which she was able to win a place at Oxford to read music and go on to a career in music administration.

Diana Cummings, leader of the English String Quartet and



*Enthusiastic participants at the North London Festival in 2005*

Professor at both the Royal Academy and Trinity College of Music, remembers her first performing experiences at the North London not only as enormous fun, but also hugely valuable. Two important lessons stand out in her memory. First, however talented you are, never underestimate the competition. After some years of sweeping everything before her, she encountered an irritatingly younger cellist who came first in all the open classes which they both entered; that the little girl's name was Jacqueline du Pré did not, of course, mean much at the time. Second, it became embarrassingly clear on one memorable occasion that grown ups are not always right. Her mother carefully trained her up in actions to go with the recitation she was to give in an elocution class. Despite misgivings the young Diana did her best to give them full dramatic force only to discover that it was emphatically *not* done to be demonstrative in a speech class and the judges felt they could not award a medal to such an unrestrained performance.

From being an outstanding competitor, Diana has now become a staunch supporter of the North London and the fact that she still keeps tucked away in a drawer somewhere the medals she won there all those years ago shows how much it meant to her. In due course she was entering her own children for the festival (but not, I think, the elocution classes!) and her pupils from the music conservatories are always urged to compete in the senior classes to gain experience of playing in front of an audience.

Every year standards seem to go up in our festival and I think this is another benefit of participation. When we first offered a cup for the best pianist of 10 years and under playing J.S. Bach we would get a number of quite nicely performed minuets and gavottes. Now, as children and their teachers hear what is possible, the three-part inventions and sonata movements are common. It's the Roger Bannister effect – once you know it is possible to run a mile in less than four minutes this soon becomes a commonplace – and it works at

a low level as well as a high one. I'll not forget the look on a teacher's face when she realised what other primary school choirs could achieve, and the standard of singing and deportment certainly went up the following year.

The last word should go to Sir Walford Davies, Master

of the King's Music and an influential figure in the festival movement in the early 20th century. He said of it: 'Surely our whole end is what happens after the competition has obtained the excellence we all desire. If we make the evening concert the rule then we shall educate the audience too, and I always heard the upholders of these festivals say that that was one of the glorious things that was happening all the time. I am heart and soul for keeping competitions up for the reason that by means of them you make the players not beat each other but pace each other on the road to excellence.' This sentiment is surely as valuable today as it was when he first uttered it in 1922.

*If you would like to learn more about the North London Festival and how to enter students visit our website at [www.northlondonfestival.org.uk](http://www.northlondonfestival.org.uk) or contact me, Rachel Douglas, at 6 Bellgate Meus, London NW5 1SW. To get in touch with British & International Federation of Festivals visit [www.festivals.demon.co.uk](http://www.festivals.demon.co.uk)*