

INSIDE

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Why on earth would you want to devote months to learning a collection of predetermined pieces—some of which you might not even like—in preparation for subjecting yourself to enormous pressure and intense scrutiny?

On top of this, throw in the unknown. You're going to perform on an instrument you don't know. There may be little or no practice time available before you perform. You'll be in a foreign country where you don't speak the language. You have no idea what the food or accommodations will be like. You might have terrible jet-lag. You might feel very lonely, uncomfortable, scared, or nervous, yet you'll have to rise above it all and do your absolute best in order to have any chance of success.

Why bother? Because so many of us thrive on challenges. The chance to measure yourself against others is intriguing—especially people from all over the world. But, for most people there is a strange curiosity just to see if they can indeed stand up to the pressure.

Pressure, intensity, fear—the atmosphere at an international music competition is pretty freaky. But it's not just the contestants who feel it. The judges are nervous, too. Will the process be difficult? Will anyone stand out? Will the jury be fair? Will we argue?

These were some of the issues I wondered about when I was asked to be a judge at the International Marimba Competition, Belgium 2001, which was held August 12–18 in the Academiezaal in the town of Sint-Truiden, near Brussels. (A Percussion Festival was held August 17–19 in conjunction with the Marimba Competition.) Sixty-nine solo marimbists and eighteen marimba duos competed. The event's Artistic Director was Ludwig Albert (Belgium), who served as a judge and assembled the other seven jurors: François Glorieux (Bel-



MARIMBA

COMPETITION

By Nancy Zeltsman

gium, President of the jury and composer of the set piece), Angel Frette (Argentina), Momoko Kamiya (Japan), Leo Ouderits (Belgium), Ney Rosauro (Brazil), Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic (Germany), and me (Nancy Zeltsman, USA).

The sixty-nine soloists were first narrowed to a field of forty. Following the second round, we named fifteen semifinalists, from which five finalists were chosen. Finally, three prizes were given: Hidemi Murase (first), Keiko Kotoku (second), and Mayumi Sekizawa (third).

In the duo competition, eighteen duos were narrowed to six semifinalists, then two finalists, then one prize was awarded to the duo of Juan Martinez Cortes and Miguel Gonzaléz Zaragosa.

The process of judging this competition was fascinating and inspired me to examine this event with the broader aim of providing insights into competitions in order to help future competitors. My thanks to the jurors and candidates who contributed their impressions and experiences.

A COMPETITION'S SOUL

For several jury members, it was our first time judging an international competition. I had heard how competitions were run and winners decided, but I had no idea how this one would be run. As it unfolded, I was very im-

pressed by the conscientiousness of my colleagues and the fairness with which the competition was administered.

Ludwig Albert assembled a diverse group of jurors including marimba specialists from different backgrounds, a few percussionist/composers, and a seasoned concert pianist/composer. We came from various parts of the world, with about one-third of the team from the host region. Ludwig often deferred to us to make general policy decisions, which ultimately strengthened our personality as a group.

We initially agreed on guidelines as to how we would approach a point system. After the first round, we considered whether or not to add the second-round points to the points candidates had accumulated in the first round; we unanimously agreed it would be fairest to only count fifty percent of those points in order to give the people with less points more chance to catch up. In the semi-final round, we agreed to start scoring from zero and to eliminate the high and low scores given to each candidate.

While starting from zero ostensibly erased scores from the first two rounds and gave all the candidates an equal footing, in all honesty, our recollections of previous performances

probably figured into our judging of the later rounds to some extent. Regarding the dismissal of the highest and lowest scores, this is a common practice to protect against any juror trying to unfairly advance or derail a candidate. We gathered to vote any time one of us took issue with any situation. In the final, we agreed not to give points, but to simply rank the five finalists from one to five. The finalists' numeric ranking was clear, and any juror who was disappointed refrained from trying to argue on any candidate's behalf. We absolutely adhered to the numbers.

I learned that a jury really is a team and, to some degree, the soul of a competition. In the end, I think there was no doubt in the mind of any juror that the Belgium winners perfectly reflected our taste as a group. It was a consensus; the winners were the personal favorites of some, but not all, of the jury members. I think this is something important for future competitors to recognize. If you enter a competition and *don't* win, take heart; you may not be the kind of player who is universally loved, but may still be very much loved by *some* people!

THE JURY'S PERSPECTIVE

"This was the first time I was part of



First-place winner Hidemi Murase

a jury in a marimba competition," said Angel Frette. "I had no idea about the competitors' standard, and I was amazed to discover it was extremely high. I felt a great joy to know that so many young people love the marimba and are so eager to play it."

Ludwig Albert agreed, "This competition was of a very high level. It makes me happy that the final laureates showcased the instrument as I believe it needs to be played in order to give it a chance to develop in the next century and to be loved by a growing audience."

I asked my fellow jurors to reflect on what they were looking (i.e., listening) for, and what made certain performers stand out. Frette replied, "What made certain performers stand out was musicality, since, regarding other issues—technique, sound, appearance, etc.—it is very difficult for the jury to reach absolute agreement."

"Musicality" was the overriding response from the others as well. "I was hoping to find a good musician and listen to good music. That's basically it," said Momoko Kamiya. She elaborated that she was impressed by "someone who had some strong virtue in their music." It could have been a single, striking feature, or a combination of interesting attributes. She realized that those judgments were very subjective, and might well be features no other jurors would appreciate.

Ludwig Albert said that he was looking for "candidates who were capable of communicating musical sensations and those who, aside from their technical ability, could also convince me they were mature, honest musicians—or even surprise me by their choice of free pieces. I was looking forward to hearing players who were aware of the beautiful nuances available on the marimba and who gave a view of the marimba's prowess as a lyrical instrument."

"I asked myself, 'What actually matters?'" wrote Nebojsa Zivkovic. "Is it that which makes one feel, 'Wow, *this* was a performance!' or '*This* was an artist'? By this I am referring to the overall artistic charisma and general musical message an artist produces when performing. For me, this was a phenomenon I did not see at this competition so much, except in a very few

cases. Of course, it is fascinating to see and hear all the incredible perfect runs and notes and secure strokes, but to bring something really personal and original in connection with the music one interprets—this is very rare and most important."

Momoko Kamiya and I joked during a break one day about how heartlessly we found ourselves marking someone down if they missed a few notes in a very difficult piece. It struck us funny because so much of the playing was at a technical level that would be difficult for the jurors to match ourselves. But those were the players for whom technique was the overriding feature of their playing. "Most of the current compositions are approaching the instrument in a percussive way that requires the players to have very advanced technique or even a related playing grip," said Albert. "Most of the young players are succeeding at it."

However, Albert is concerned that many young performers are seeking to become soloists only by showing their technique. Kamiya senses that some performers are "forgetting to think about the musical language, or to respect the score. I tried to check whether the person read the music carefully enough—whether they were not only playing correct notes, but also dynamics, expressions, etc. However, if someone was playing very well, lots of small things—playing some wrong notes, for example—could be forgotten very easily!"

I, too, found I took a different approach to scoring when someone intrigued me on a deeper level. I was charmed, in some cases, just by how someone took the stage, or their performance presence as they played. Like Momoko, I was happy to forgive a few wrong notes when the phrasing really delighted me. As a performer myself, I know how incredibly difficult it is to carve your way into real music-making during a short performance, especially in such a pressured situation. So, when someone could do that, that person's extreme poise stood out. I think that was a large determining factor in who became a semi-finalist and who didn't.

"I tried not to inflict my own taste on my judgment," says Kamiya. "I thought in this way I could be more fair to the

participants.” Sometimes, she felt, “the person played great, but I personally hated his or her way of expressing music.” She still gave good points in those cases. I did the same, if it was within reason of what I considered tasteful playing. Momoko continued, “The only thing I always said ‘no’ to was a bad sound, even if someone played very musically. But each jury member had different taste on sound as well as other things, so I found sometimes that my opinions were not reflected in the result.”

JUDGING IS NOT A SCIENCE

I already mentioned that the results of the competition reflected a consensus of opinions from our particular set of judges. With a different panel of judges, the outcome might have been different.

Also, we are only human. Grading performance after performance is extremely demanding. At certain times, I’d face the next blank point sheet and feel my vision going cross-eyed, or I was so tired I wasn’t sure I could lift the pencil any more. However, at several points when it was clear I wasn’t

the only juror who was feeling utterly saturated and in need of a break, suddenly there would be a player who not only got our attention, but who completely took our breath away! Something about the player’s sound and approach had true freshness and clarity of intent.

I think there probably is some luck involved in terms of when a candidate plays. Sometimes I worried that a reasonably good player might, unfairly, seem “pale” playing after someone who really “wowed” us. We certainly tried to remain fair at all times, but there was no doubt I felt fresher after a lunch break, relative to the way I felt after hearing many candidates in succession. Furthermore, my scoring was probably a little looser (that is, reflective of more emotional reactions) on the second day than the first day, when I was a bit cautious.

Scoring was difficult. “It was extremely exciting and difficult for me to try to remember the details and performances of all those competitors,” says Zivkovic. I realized, not far into the process, that scoring comparatively would be almost impossible, especially in the first two rounds. The best I could do was keep some notes about my personal standards for different scoring levels, and try to adhere to them person by person. It felt like I was painting a picture with numbers of my reactions to each player’s strengths and weaknesses.

The categories on which we scored in Belgium were:

- Overall level of playing a piece or pieces;
- Instrumental technical (including sonority and rhythmical articulation);
- Musical technical (including dynamics and “sentence structure”);
- Interpretation (including analytical reproduction and sensitive impression);
- Performance presence.

As conscientious as I struggled to be with the points I gave, I know I probably wasn’t absolutely consistent. We heard the sixty-nine solo candidates play the first round over two days, judging about ten hours a day! If it were possible for me to go back and re-evaluate candidate 4—who played at 10:30 in the morning on the first day—side-by-side with candidate 57,

who perhaps played last out of fifteen in a row before our dinner break the next day (when we were utterly exhausted), I might tweak their scores relative to each other. But I did my best at the times those candidates played.

By the third (semi-final) round, with the introduction of a free piece into the requirements, the candidates had more flexibility in their repertoire choices than in the first two rounds. With fewer people involved, it was easier to judge comparatively, and I began to recognize the challenge of judging people who played repertoire of vastly different levels of difficulty.

The jury almost always followed scores as people played; however, sometimes the degree of difficulty can be deceptive unless you have personally played a piece. There were pieces I had played and knew very well that other jury members did not know, and vice versa. There were also a couple of jury members who might not have heard *any* of the repertoire before.

To some extent, the degree of difficulty was probably factored in through the jury members who knew a particular piece. To the extent it wasn’t, I came to feel that it probably didn’t matter. If someone could deliver a medium-level piece with fabulous artistry, and someone else couldn’t deliver an extremely difficult one in a meaningful way, I feel the artistry should win out. However, there is a great deal to be gained by playing a technically difficult piece *if* it is played musically.

With eight jury members, a lot of these issues were probably evened out in the scoring. Still, it is not a science! I reflected hard on all this afterwards. In some cases, the difference between moving to the next round or not was a score as small as .7. Gold medals are decided at the Olympics by hundredths of seconds, but clocks are absolutely consistent. Our case was more like the figure skating scores, where it is a matter of subjective scoring.

SOME JUDGING DANGERS

Many people may wonder what happens when a jury member knows a candidate. I had a number of students in the competition and checked and re-checked how I should handle this.



Nebojsa Jovan Zivkovic

Ludwig kept saying, “We’ll trust you.” My students’ presence sometimes challenged me. I confess that I found myself especially looking forward to their playing opportunity, but then, when it came to scoring, I really wrestled with myself about whether I was being fair. It was tremendously difficult to give a score to someone with whom you have a long relationship, whom you know a lot more about beyond what they might present in the performance, and for whom you might feel a lot of affection—compared to a total stranger. But I really searched my soul to be fair!

Momoko Kamiya confided to me that, having also faced that predicament a number of times, she wondered if she didn’t end up judging her students more critically than she judged complete strangers. She also pointed out that many of her students had traits she really liked—which made sense because she had taught them! And she realized, “Well, whether or not I influenced this trait, I *do* like it, so I’ll reward that.” I felt the same.

Ultimately, in spite of situations where we knew people, there was really no way for a jury member to “throw” the voting toward a student of theirs—not with eight people judging. So I think Ludwig made the right decision to let us all score everyone and not make a big deal of who our students were. I really don’t think it would have changed the outcome if we had done so.

What *could* have skewed the scoring a bit was if the jury had talked among themselves about the candidates. But we didn’t, and I’m very glad we didn’t. We talked *a lot* about the process during the competition, but very rarely—and only as we headed into the finals—were names of contestants mentioned. Still, most of us were quite guarded with our opinions. I think this was a critical factor in achieving a fair outcome.

DOS AND DON'TS

Most candidates performed their music by memory, but not all. As my students were preparing, they imagined that it might look bad to play with music. As someone who plays with music all the time, I knew it wouldn’t

bother *me* if anyone did. And at the competition, I saw no negative reaction among my fellow jury members when someone did use music. So, unless a competition clearly states that memorization is required, playing with music may not bring any demerits, so do so if that makes you more comfortable.

Some candidates brought their own marimba bars. As a result, there were several breaks in the rhythm of the event while a semi-elaborate bar-changing ceremony took place. Often, the person who was about to play was involved in this. Especially for the shorter rounds, I wondered how much was really gained by players using their own bars. Was a slight bit of

“It is fascinating to see and hear all the incredible perfect runs and notes and secure strokes, but to bring something really personal and original in connection with the music one interprets—this is **very rare** and most important.”

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added comfort with their own bars worth the trade-off of the physical exertion of hauling them around and changing them, plus the emotional stress of seeing that all the logistics were handled smoothly? Could all that energy be better channeled into mental preparation to *play*, even if not on the ideal set of bars? But if it’s worth it to you, then I think it’s fine to bring your own bars.

One thing more candidates could have done to present themselves better was to smile at the audience before and after they performed, to bow confidently, to move slowly and gracefully on stage, and to gratefully acknowledge applause afterwards. Many performers looked extremely shy, never smiled, and rushed on, around, and off stage. You may be scared to death when you are about to perform, but one of the best things you can do to get past it is to *act* like you aren’t—and

it makes a good impression, too!

In a competition, you may feel a bit rushed by the people back-stage whose job it is to keep things moving along. But once you take the stage, *command it*; don’t rush. Chances are that the judges will appreciate an extra few moments to catch their breath, and you may benefit from their having a few extra moments to readjust their focus to you.

No matter what behind-the-scenes problems may exist and emotionally throw you at a competition, let it all go when you get on stage. I know the organizers in Belgium deeply regretted their miscalculation as to how long the second-round play would take. Their aim was never to compromise

anyone’s performance, but it ran extremely over-time and late into the night. For many foreign candidates battling jet-lag, it was difficult to play their best. But some allowed their weariness and irritation to show on stage even

before they began to play, which did not make a positive impression. Whether in a competition, audition, or a recital, seldom, if ever, will the details be exactly to your liking.

Playing with extremely hard mallets can really turn off the judges. One candidate’s mallet choice made us wince, gasp, and hold our ears. Personally, I felt he should have been stopped, but he wasn’t. We ran a real danger that he could have ruined an instrument for other candidates. Luckily, that didn’t happen. Nevertheless, it is difficult for jurors to score a candidate highly if they have their ears plugged throughout the performance.

Be careful what you wear. You want to make an impact, but marimba playing is physical, and you don’t want to impede that. In the second round, one young woman performed in a fancy dress with spaghetti straps. First, one strap gradually slid down her shoulder,

then the other. She managed to carry on amazingly well despite the distraction, and she made it to the semi-finals, but I would wager that's the last time she'll perform in that dress! It's funny now, looking back on it, but at the time, everyone felt absolutely horrible for her. (By the way, Janis Potter taught me a trick for getting spaghetti straps to stay in place; spray your shoulders with hair spray, and then the straps will stick to your skin!)

I want to touch on the issue of whether or not it's acceptable to enter a competition if you are not prepared to play all the music required for every round. Momoko Kamiya had been to one competition where someone who made the semi-finals retired, confessing that they were not prepared to continue. She said the news sent shock waves through the competitors. In that case, and as is frequently done, another semi-finalist was not advanced to take the place of the one who retired. The reason it was so upsetting was that it meant that someone who did prepare completely was denied a chance to continue.

In Belgium, a young candidate made it to the semi-finals and then retired, citing not being prepared for the third round. The jury decided that the next person in line could compete in the semi-finals. The only awkward thing about it—which is perhaps why this is not done more often—was that then everyone knew this candidate was number sixteen, while the other fourteen semi-finalists had no idea what



Angel Frette

their standing was thus far. Since we were beginning to score from zero at that point, it was really a moot point. And I'm sure that the new number fifteen was happy to trade that little bit of confidentiality for a shot at the finals.

One marimbist who is now making a wonderful career for herself told me that she had entered three competitions in her late teens and early twenties for which she was not completely prepared. She had never considered that she might get to a point where her not being completely prepared might have negative repercussions (nor did it); she just wanted to get the experience of competing. That experience helped her tremendously later in life, so clearly there are two sides to the issue.

A COMPETITION'S HEART

If the jury is a competition's soul, the candidates are its heart. The electrifying element of the competition was the candidates' energy, determination, and hope. The atmosphere in a place where so many people are trying to do their best is tense and nerve-wracking, but really wonderful.

I invited a number of the candidates to answer the following questions:

What surprised you about the actual event?

"First of all, I was amazed by how greatly and quickly technique on marimba has been improving," wrote Hark Fujii, a semi-finalist who currently studies at The Juilliard School. "Also, the number of good Japanese marimbists is growing! It is also interesting that more and more of us are studying abroad or planning to." Thirty-three of the sixty-nine solo candidates were Japanese.

Aya Kaminaguchi, a semi-finalist who currently studies with me at The Boston Conservatory, felt overwhelmed by the atmosphere when she first arrived. "Everyone was very, very serious. I thought, 'Oh my God, everyone is a marimba MONSTER!'" To her, *everyone* looked like a prospective winner. But she realized that other people could have been just as easily imagining the same when looking at her.

The dorm was the same building in which the contestants could practice.

In the days before and during the first round, Aya and many others found it very unnerving to hear the set piece—François Glorieux's "Oriental Dance and Toccata"—being played incessantly from 7:00 a.m. to midnight. It was really difficult to relax. (Interestingly, Hidemi Murase, the winner, didn't stay in the dorm.)

Because of some practicing sign-up confusion, Naoko Takada, the fourth-place finalist, only got to practice one hour in the first two days before she performed. She was forced to do mental practice and to rely on preparation she'd done beforehand.

Shinsuke Ishihara, another semi-finalist, thought there were too few people organizing the Belgian event. He said that at a past competition in Okaya, Japan, there were hundreds of people organizing things. (In Belgium there were twenty or less.) "The organization [of the competition] wasn't perfect," wrote Evgenia Kavaldjjeva. "But it's something that I have already forgotten. The most important aspect for me was that I met a lot of young and talented marimba players."

How did you prepare?

Second-prize winner Keiko Kotoku wrote, "I practiced first-round pieces first, then second, third, and final pieces. But final pieces included a marimba concerto, so I practiced the concerto harder than others. It was difficult for me to remember every piece."

Kavaldjjeva wrote, "This was the first time I'd taken a part in such a competition for solo marimba. I heard about this competition just a few days before the deadline. At that time, the music to be prepared was completely unknown to me except for 'Two Movements for Marimba' by Tanaka. My preparation lasted about five months, during which I enjoyed the understanding support and help of Prof. M. Lutz, who I would like to thank. I went to Belgium not to take the first place, but with great desire for a good presentation."

Another Lutz student, semi-finalist Jacek Pawelek, said he put special emphasis on the first round, given the large number of contestants. "Stress was everyone's foe," he wrote. "Those who were able to cope with it best were able to advance to the next round. What helped me the most was

playing the competition pieces at concerts beforehand. I think it's really important to practice on stage beforehand, to gain confidence. The conditions are similar to those at the competition. I was also able to record my performance on videotape, which proved very helpful, since I could then objectively analyze my playing."

Shinsuke Ishihara said he spent six months preparing all the pieces. At the same time, he decided he wanted to learn to play with the Stevens grip, so that eventually he could play with and teach both Stevens and traditional grip. He decided to learn two pieces for the competition—Stevens' "Rhythmic Caprice" and Schwantner's "Velocities"—with the Stevens grip. Shinsuke said, "Between traditional grip and Stevens grip, my teacher and I found some difference in sound. I thought, 'It's going to be nice if I can play with both grips; I can make a certain kind of sound depending on the piece.'" I think it's very interesting that Shinsuke combined a new area of study with competition preparation.

What would you do differently to prepare next time?

"Start preparing sooner," said Haruka Fujii.

"Not stay in the dorm," said an anonymous candidate.

Aya Kaminaguchi and Naoko Takada both said that, next time, they would try harder to get a little time to play in the hall beforehand. In Belgium, some candidates had a chance to do so (often because of the logistics of which instruments happened to be stored on the stage), but many didn't. Naoko said, "It was really scary to perform the first piece for the first round because I had no idea how the mallets and the instrument would sound in that hall." The Academiezaal was a very lovely-sounding, resonant hall, but the acoustics were surprising to people who heard themselves in that setting for the first time during the competition.

Takada performed the Bach "Chaconne" in the final round as her free piece. I think she was the only person we heard play Bach in this particular competition, and it was one of the only adaptations. It turned out to be a longer and more treacherous solo

than others played in the finals, and it was a risky choice, perhaps, since judges often have very strong opinions about how Bach should be played.

"I think that bringing one's own marimba greatly increases one's chances of winning, since one is not limited by the assigned amount of time," wrote Jacek Pawelek. "In my case, one hour of practice is definitely not enough to get to know an instrument, especially in conditions that are not very comfortable."

Describe your emotions during the competition in terms of how you tried to handle pressure and nervousness.

Ishihara said, "I have such a nervous feeling when I have to play in competition. But sometimes, I suddenly really enjoy playing and don't feel any pressure, like when I played 'Rhythmic Caprice' in the third round." The performance he is referring to was absolutely stunning!

"I tried to approach every round as a performance, not 'the competition,'" said Fujii. "Of course, it was hard to do, since I knew some people from Japan, and also from New York. So I sure felt a little bit of pressure."

Aya Kaminaguchi said it was very difficult waiting to go on to play because you would often hear someone else performing a piece you were about to play and think, "That sounds nice! She sounds different than me. Maybe I should try to do that." So, she would try to not listen right before she was going to play.

If you got to go to different rounds, how did you mentally prepare for each performance?

Shinsuke Ishihara has participated in several competitions and said he tries to do the following: "First round: To play clear. Not to show myself too much. Keep it cool. No mistakes. Second round: Be nice. Third round: Start to think about personality and more music and to be honest against my music. But not too much. Final: Do my way."

Kaminaguchi said the first round was the most scary and competitive. Each successive round got easier for her. It was much different to already have an idea what the atmosphere would be like. By the semi-final, she also felt she could try to show more originality and personality, and approach it more like a concert.

Pawelec wrote, "This was my first marimba competition. As the only participant from Poland, I wanted to represent my country well. Luckily, I was able to reach the semi-final round, which I consider a great success. Because of the great amount of participants, certain rounds went into the late hours of the night. In the second round, I played at 12:30 a.m.! And after me there were still five people! Playing at this hour was trying, but it was another new experience at the competition."

Naoko Takada also had to cope with the unfortunate, overly-optimistic scheduling of the second-round performances. When she arrived at the hall ready to play and found out we were two hours behind, she went running! Smart idea!

In the semi-final round, the yarn of Keiko Kotoku's top mallet gradually began to unwind. She somehow continued to play

(Zivkovic's "Ultimatim I," no less), but by the time she was dragging around nearly three feet of loose yarn, it was getting ridiculous. Ludwig stopped her and asked her to change

her mallet. She even had a false start getting back into the piece and, on top of that, dropped a mallet later in the same round. Naturally, by then, she thought there was no hope of going to the final—but she did! Despite all these misfortunes, she maintained her composure. It was absolutely clear to the jury that she knew her music very well and was very determined to make music, and that these were just fluke events. Overall, she said, "I was not scared to play marimba. I tried to relax. I thought, 'Not being afraid is a good way in the competition.' I tried to play my own music!"

"What made certain performers stand out was musicality."

Angel Frette



The jury of the International Marimba Competition, Belgium 2001: (L to R) Ney Rosauro, Angel Frette, Leo Ouderits, Francois Glorieux, Ludwig Albert, Nebojsa Zivkovic, Nancy Zeltsman, Momoko Kamiya

Takada added that it was amazing to her how the size of the audience grew with each round. In the first round, many people were off practicing because they were about to perform, so the number of people listening was quite small. By the finals, Naoko felt quite shocked to see the concert hall was crowded. The jury was sitting up high in the back and didn't feel particularly intimidating to her. The audience members who unnerved her were the people sitting on the sides (in clear view when a candidate went to pick up a different set of mallets) and those in the lower levels of the graduated seating. Many sat with arms folded. Under pressure, Naoko felt their faces seemed to say, "Okay, impress me." She also noted that the larger audience soaking up the sound in the hall made a noticeable difference in how her mallets sounded. (She went to harder mallets in her second piece.)

If you didn't get as far as you'd hoped, was it still a valuable experience?

"Yes, of course," wrote Fujii. "I think it is always great to have a chance to listen to others. It gives me ideas about what I could do for my future study."

Keiko Kotoku, who was thrilled with second place, commented that she had hoped to get more opinions about her performance from the judges. In fact, competitions are not generally a forum in which you will receive detailed comments from the jury. "But I got really great experience in the competition," she said.

Any feelings/impressions about being in a foreign country?

Favorite foods were widely reported: chocolate, Belgian waffles with ice

cream, fruit or chocolate sauce, beer, and steamed mussels.

An anonymous contributor wrote, "While I went over to Belgium with the view of the competition as only a forum to be heard and judged, I returned with a much different idea, both of it and other international events, musical and otherwise. Competing turned out to be only a small portion of the whole experience. Listening to others play throughout the week was both exciting and educational. Most of all, though, I enjoyed sitting at cafes with musicians from all different backgrounds. Everyone I encountered was open and friendly, and just glimpsing what they were about, what they hoped to do in life, and how they viewed music was enlightening. We shared, learned, and understood each other despite the sometimes daunting language barriers. As cliché as it sounds, we really were communicating in a common language—one that used good intentions as a means of understanding."

LIFE AFTER BELGIUM

The competition helped many candidates sharpen their sense of what they should work toward. Evgenia Kavaldjieva said, "There is something I will never forget. During the competition, very often

I was listening to Nebojsa Zivkovic's pieces: 'Ultimatum I,' 'Ultimatum II,' 'Ilijas,' and 'Concerto No. 2.' As a Bulgarian, I was deeply impressed and excited by this music, which is full of Balkan folklore and rhythm. My colleagues' performances demonstrated perfect technique and artistic presentation, but I had the strange feeling that something was missing. Something deep inside of me was not pleased until I heard those pieces played by Zivkovic himself! Then I realized what was missing: the soul! Nebojsa made his pieces breathe his Balkan temperament and made them come alive!

"As far as what I will change about my preparation for the next competition," Evgenia continued, "as much as the regulations allow me, of course, I'd like to present only pieces I will be able to feel with my whole being. These I can bring to life and, through them, give my emotions to the public. I realized that, if I want to win the sympathy of the public, I ought to use what is deep inside of me, what I've possessed from the day of my birth: the Bulgarian temperament. After this competition I feel more confident, and my aim for the next competition won't be just 'good presentation' but the final!"

Ria Ideta, who is only 19 years old and finished sixth, wrote, "That competition was a really good experience for me. I studied a lot of things. Also I am



The Academiezaal in Sint-Truiden, near Brussels, where the Belgium International Marimba Competition was held.

quite satisfied with the result. My goal was to perform with all my energy, listen to my notes, and be expressive with my music. So I was not thinking about any result. I played my best, and was so happy that I went to the semi-final round. After I went back to Paris, I listened to the recordings of my performances many times to review them. It's difficult to listen to one's own playing objectively, but it's really important. Sometimes I play too desperately, which perhaps causes disorder or nothing for the music. To overcome this, I think I need to be more flexible, and gain more confidence and concentration. This will be my theme now."

Jacek Pawelek wrote, "After the competition, I took a vacation, since the long preparations took their toll on me. In sum, I'm glad I took part in this competition. Five months of hard and systematic work paid off. I met interesting people and I was able to compare my playing and interpretations with other contestants. The workshops given by the jurors were very interesting and presented important aspects of performing on the marimba. This was an interesting experience, and now I am even more motivated to play this amazing instrument."

For Hidemi Murase, the first-prize winner, one of the highlights was her hour-long rehearsal with the piano accompanist, Geert Callaert, on the Kopetzki concerto, which she performed in the final round. She was excited by how well they could communicate musically. They discussed their common interest in jazz. Murase is now studying jazz vibes at Berklee College of Music.

I asked Hidemi if she plans to enter another marimba competition. She said, "No, I thought it was really hard." Also, the competition put a "period" on her study of classical music. At least for the time being, she is interested in changing her main focus to different genres: jazz, Latin, pop, funk. In the future she hopes to combine these with her prior study of marimba.

THE VALUE OF COMPETITIONS

I asked my fellow jurors how they felt about competitions in general and what their feelings were on making music a "competitive sport." Angel

"If someone was playing very well, lots of small things—playing some wrong notes, for example—could be forgotten very easily!"

Momoko Kamiya

Frette replied, "Competitions are necessary; proof of that is the great number of competitions involving different instruments. I believe we can think of music as a sport basically if we acknowledge the technique over the music. But when, in addition to a good technique, a competitor is able to move you, as it happened to me with many of them, here again the most important thing is the music."

"The question is whether, in our field (percussion/marimba), competitions hold the same meaning as they do in the 'established' classical music world," wrote Nebojsa Zivkovic. "With piano or violin the 'important' competitions are more or less established, and there, winning a first prize *could* easily result in a good management contract and furthered career.

"In our percussion world, we actually have, at least as far I know, the opposite situation. There are many well-known marimba/percussion artists who never went to any competition—partially because there were almost no competitions ten to twenty years ago—and there are enough examples of artists who did win some competitions (like Munich), and have neither received a management contract nor made any particular 'career.' With this in mind, it is amazing how many people do practice specially for and fly to the competitions over the globe."

Nebojsa is correct that there is no

guarantee that winning a competition will do anything to help your career except perhaps create a "buzz" of interest about you in the percussion world. This may lead to some opportunities, but it's not going to make you any kind of overnight sensation. There are some exceptions. Momoko Kamiya said that she doesn't really like to admit it, but having had the experience of winning a prize in a competition, she has seen it prove to be helpful, especially to people who are trying to negotiate on her behalf. When there are some kind of promoters in place to make use of the win, and advance it beyond a mention in percussion circles, it can help both the performer and the marimba, by perhaps stimulating broader interest in the instrument.

I never participated in a marimba competition myself (none existed when I was in my twenties), but from seeing some of my students prepare and compete, I understand the allure of the challenge. A big part of it is that competitions are something to work toward. Momoko agreed, "To many people, it's good to have something they could focus on when practicing. Especially for the students, competitions could be a great goal. If they do it seriously with the right idea, they would learn so much from doing it. And if they have enough luck, they would get a prize!"

"The idea of 'competitive sport'? I'm against it for sure," wrote Momoko Kamiya. But if someone can use the experience as a guidepost in their training, as so many of the Belgium competitors did, it can be extremely valuable.

The reality of the Belgium Competition was that people were not really competing against each other, but against themselves. It's a cliché, but true. The judges' consensus showed who was generally felt to be the best, but there were many "winners" who

"Everyone was very, very serious. I thought, 'Oh my God, everyone is a marimba MONSTER!'"

Aya Kaminaguchi

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didn't get a prize. There were so many beautiful performances, and others which were perhaps a personal triumph for that player. I think all performances have a way of being incredibly emotionally charged snapshots. So the Belgium Competition was perhaps, most importantly, a place where one of those incredible landmark performances took place for many of the competitors—something they can look back on and remember, and deeply cherish.

Certainly, competition winners and finalists deserve to feel very proud of their accomplishments. But I think they need to be put into perspective. A good showing at a competition is *not* the only stepping stone to improving your musicianship, building a career, or "proving" yourself. (I find Hidemi Murase's move to go a new direction and study jazz for a while really wonderful, and very refreshing.) As Nebojsa pointed out, plenty of people have accomplished a great deal and gained notoriety for their accomplishments who never participated in a competition. By the same token, some people have won competitions and it didn't change anything in their lives.

A musician's career is built on project after project, event by event, which attract us because of the challenges they present. Competitions are just one worthwhile pursuit. Concerts, joint recitals, chamber music partnerships, study with a particular teacher, study of a new discipline, and study of a particular piece are also career builders. I don't use the term "career builder" because I think any one of those challenges will make someone famous, but because they help one mature as a musician. True musical maturity is nourished only by a wealth of experiences.

Nancy Zeltsman is a solo marimbist who teaches marimba at The Boston Conservatory and Berklee College of Music, and will also join the faculty of Temple University in the fall of 2002. In the summer of 2001 she directed the first Princeton Marimba Festival in Princeton, New Jersey. For further information, visit:
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