

Beautiful Victory

BY MILES HOFFMAN

ROMANTICS STILL DREAM THAT musicians and other artists toil nobly in a golden realm, oblivious to the worldly fray. Human nature, though, has a way of asserting itself: Like everybody else, musicians discern and discriminate, compare and compete. Musical competitiveness—and competition—starts the moment a young player is able to tell the difference between the kinds of sounds he or she is making and the sounds someone else is making. Soon enough, players find themselves grouped by ability: The better players sit closer to the front in the school orchestra or band, and the best players are assigned the solos.

Sifting and sorting continues inevitably in one form or another at every age and every level of accomplishment, from grade school to graduate school to professional life. Is it a good thing? Should the best players always get to play the solos? Sure. The solos sound better that way. The music is more beautiful, which is to everyone's advantage. The stronger players set standards, show what's possible,

and inspire the weaker ones to work harder and to improve—or to shift their focus to areas in which they'll be more successful. And the stronger players have an incentive to stay on their toes.

In music, as indeed in all fields, and among composers and instrument makers as well as performers, competition has been a crucial factor



Survivor: Classical musicians such as Grammy Award-winner Joshua Bell reach the pinnacle of their art only after years of grueling practice and many competitions.

in most great accomplishments and all great progress. Each generation of artists, like each generation of scientists or athletes, attempts to match and if possible surpass the preceding generation. Such striving is a hard-wired human phenomenon, and how delightful for all of us when the attempts succeed.

But of course it's no fun to try and

fail, or even to feel that you may not be keeping up. Here we come to the less rosy, occasionally destructive byproducts of competition: disillusion and discouragement. I don't think there's a music student (or professional musician) in the world who hasn't at some point sunk into the misery of these afflictions, either partway or profoundly. There's always at least one

person who can do at least one thing better than you, and somewhere along the way most of us find ourselves confronting more daunting numbers in both respects. Yes, ability blossoms into accomplishment at different rates for different individuals, and in our most lucid moments, we remember that—or have the good fortune to be reminded of it.

With courage, luck, hard work, and moral support from whoever is able to offer it, we frail mortal musicians may find a path that suits and satisfies us. But there are no guarantees.

The fact remains that some people are simply more gifted than others, endowed with talents that are readily apparent. And the words "readily apparent" point

directly to one of the reasons competition in music may *seem* more intense and more jarring than competition in other fields: Music is made out loud. It's a performance art, a public art; differences are obvious, and there's no way to avoid comparisons. Many scientific disciplines, for example, are as intensely competitive as music, but for the most part the work is done in private, and the answer to the question "Who's better?" may not be obvious for years. Music affords no such luxury and—with today's remarkably high performance standards—no respite.

Then again, competition in many fields is even more overt, with much more dramatic consequences than in music. Think of athletics, or politics. Yet in these areas competition seems normal to us, not at all questionable or philosophically disturbing. Why?

The answer lies in an apparent paradox. Psychologically, competition inevitably involves some form of aggression, even sadism, and certainly the will to dominate, to *beat* the opposition. But the way you "beat" the other guy in music is not just by playing (or singing) faster or more powerfully. It's also by playing more movingly, more beautifully, more sweetly. And the idea that sweetness and loveliness can somehow be instruments of aggression and domination can seem strange, dissonant, almost immoral.

The paradox appears most glaring—and arouses the strongest "moral" objections—not in compe-

tion per se, but in competitions, those events great and small in which young musicians play *against* one another for money and prizes. Some people are convinced that competitions by their very nature reward qualities extraneous to beautiful music-making—physical endurance, for example, or nerves of steel, or ambitiousness. And many frankly feel that Art is high and competition low, or that at the very least the two are somehow antithetical. Béla Bartók, for one, once said, "Competitions are for horses, not artists."

I've only attended one competition that was strictly for horses, I admit, but I've judged or observed many music competitions, and participated in my fair share (with happy results in some, less happy results in others). At the risk of puncturing preconceptions, I have to say that far more often than not, the musicians who win competitions are those who play the most beautifully. It's really true. It's also true, however, that there are invariably people who play beautifully who *don't* win, which is very disturbing. Can it ever be right to call someone who plays music beautifully a "loser"? Isn't the very idea of winning and losing a kind of pollutant, best kept well away from a pristine and precious art?

Perhaps. Beauty, after all, is a market that can't be cornered. And the psyches of competitors can indeed get bruised, sometimes badly. Still, if you've entered a competition you've accepted the frame-

work, and voluntarily forfeited your right not to lose. You can always enter other competitions, in which you may have better luck or where the judges may have different tastes, and fortunately there are ways to make a career *without* winning competitions. The best news is that, win or lose, the many hours of pre-competition practice will have brought you to a new level of accomplishment, improving your chances of success on whatever musical path you choose to follow. Right and wrong, good and bad? Take your pick, because in musical competitions, as in competition in general, they're all there, mixed together.

A brief coda: The desire to play music beautifully is by no means rooted solely, or even primarily, in competitiveness. We seek the satisfactions of music for their own sake, and if we try to play or sing more movingly, it's usually because we want to be more moved. Given our nature, however, we're entirely capable of wondering what the audience thinks, or what the nasty critic will write, or whether Competitor #32 can possibly match *that*, at the very same moment our souls are absorbed in beauty and delight. This is not a paradox or a contradiction. It's just how human beings work.

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