
Good Competition v.s. Bad Competition

By Barry Green



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Competition can be inspiring, and it can also be an alarming distraction. I believe good competition is the kind of competition that promotes your best concentration, your best potential, and the best version of what you have to offer the music world. Bad competition becomes a contest between your own skills and the skills of other competitors. It's dedicated to winning prizes, impressing the judges, and playing faster, louder, and with all the correct rhythms and pitches.

It's ironic that many things that we strive to do can be the opposite of what really works. If we keep repeating a difficult passage that has never sounded right, then how can we expect a different result? Have you ever noticed that the harder we try, the worse we seem to get? Trying fails, but pure awareness can cure many technical and musical problems. For example, if you stop trying to play every note in tune but instead just *notice* what notes are sharp or flat, the body can easily correct the faulty pitches.

When we strive to win competitions, play perfectly, and outshine competitors, we are playing an *outer game* of music that deprives us of our precious concentration on the music that is going on at the present moment. Have you ever noticed your state of mind when you were successful in your best performances? Were you thinking about winning or losing? Or were you so involved in the music that you forgot to make any mistakes?

At the highest levels of music making, most performers are not thinking of prizes and awards. Their thoughts are either synonymous with the music, or they aren't thinking of anything at all.

They're just playing music. Many of these concepts are discussed in my first book on *The Inner Game of Music*.¹ The technique is simple: Instead of listening to the inner voices of doubt, fear, anxiety, and competitive judgements, just notice the sights, sounds, and feelings that are in the music. That's it.

WHAT'S OUR GOAL?

Bobby McFerrin told me (quoted in my book *The Mastery of Music*² that when he conducts, sings, talks or tells a story, he wants the audience to take a trip with him. He wants the audience to *feel* the same things he feels. I believe our purpose in playing music is to communicate *feelings* or different forms of *energy*. If we don't feel it, we shouldn't play it. If we are playing from our analytical head, then the audience gets cerebral. If we are playing only with technique and "just the notes," the audience hears that and becomes bored. *But* when we are expressing feelings such as joy, excitement, tragedy, sadness, lullaby, beauty, action, or dance, then the audience and judges alike will feel much of what we are feeling as performers.

Competing for prizes and awards is quite different than performing with the goal of projecting a composer's feelings. When we become a vessel for transmitting inspiration, that's quite different than competing with another musician.

FEELINGS VS COMPETITION

In the International Spenger Competition, you might have several contestants playing the same Spenger concerto. What separates one performer from the next? Everyone must respect stylistic accuracy, tempo, dynamics, and character. But if you listen to world-famous cellists or bassists play Bach suites, you may notice differences in performances of the same piece. Some performances can be more exciting, others more dance-like, courageous, elegant, powerful, beautiful, or carefree.

¹ Barry Green with W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Music* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

² Barry Green, *The Mastery of Music* (New York: Broadway, 2003).

Each one of these established and successful artists have mastered something unique about communicating how they *feel* when they play. I believe this is very different than competing for prizes, fame, or money. This is a very good kind of competition. It's competing with yourself, to be at your best in expressing your feelings to the audience.

Here are some examples of virtuoso bassists sharing their unique voices to the performance of Bach suites on the bass. When I hear the incredible virtuoso composer/bassist **Xavier Foley** play Bach, I'm in awe of how he expresses so much emotion in his playing. He is also unique in taking incredible pauses between phrases using silence in a memorable way. **Edgar Meyer** plays Bach with the purest tone quality without vibrato and plays slow movements so slow that we hear and feel the music with more serenity. **Joel Quarington** plays Bach with an effortless virtuosity, minimal vibrato, and a seductively beautiful sound. **François Rabbath** makes Bach sing with his beautiful tone, and when he plays his original music, he communicates a trance-like meditative and emotional state. And **Gary Karr**, known for his unique sound playing close to the bridge with a wide vibrato captures the heart and soul of the listener. He can bring tears to his audience with this unmistakably personal sound.

When bassists play music from classical, romantic, or contemporary periods, it provides opportunities for each artist to express their own style and personality. For example, **Gary Karr** is quite the showman as his hysterical antics amplify the humor in the music of Shubert, Bottesini, van Goens, or Paganini. **Christine Hoock** brings such undeniable conviction, power, and physical body energy to her performances that is felt by her audiences. She is also a dramatic champion of the Avant-garde composers in her contemporary programming. **Glenn Grossman**, honored at the 2020 International Double Bass Quarantine challenge has a remarkable gift of humor and technical mastery performing Bottesini while also singing and whistling with endless string, brass, and wind instruments in his delightful multiscreen performances.

The 2017 Bradetich Competition winner is the Austrian bassist **Dominik Wagner**, who performed Andres Martin's Latin-inspired double bass concerto. His uniqueness is in the remarkable integrity of his interpretations and his impeccable playing. Korean bassist

Mikyung Sung has evolved from her beautifully expressive and virtuoso playing of Bottesini to being one of the world's most creative and diverse masters of contemporary styles, including folk music and seductive tangos recorded with captivating videography. She is a joy to watch and to hear.

The future of the solo bass playing includes a sampling of great artists like **Donovan Stokes** and his journey into heavy metal; the Daft Punk creative American bassist **Sam Suggs**; the sensational Argentine composer bassist **Andres Martin**; the great Rumanian bassists **Catalin Rotaru** and **Petru Iuga**; the operatic and Frank-Zappa-inspired Italian bassist **Valentina Ciardelli**; the charming and captivating Chinese soloist/professor **DaXun Zhang**; and the amazing Brahms-ambassador bassist from Sarajevo, **Božo Paradžik**. And not to forget **Szymon Marciniak**, known for his fierce intensity and virtuosity as well as his lyrical melodic playing.

This small, incomplete list represents mature bassists, each of whom are unique in their own style, personality, technique, character, and programming. Listen to these wonderful musicians on YouTube and be inspired by their individuality and gifts of communication. They are animated, authentic, passionate, disciplined, joyful, creative, emotional, persuasive, hypnotic, funny, brilliant, and virtuosic. They are master communicators of energy and feelings. They will be remembered, honored, hired, or loved for sharing their musical gifts and personalities both on stage and with the world. These successful artists are not competing with other bassists for fame, awards, or prizes. They are striving to be the best version of themselves every day, month, year, and beyond. This is a very good kind of self-competition.

Three final questions:

- 1) What inspires your heart and soul when attending a concert?
- 2) What personal and musical qualities do *you* want to share with your audiences?
- 3) What steps can you take to becoming this best version of yourself?

It's not about the other competitors; IT'S ABOUT YOU!