

*Harmony*TM

FORUM OF THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA INSTITUTE
NUMBER 7 • OCTOBER 1998

Masterprize International Composition Competition

by

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In the April 1998 issue of Harmony, we published an essay by Soong Fu-Yuan, in which he proposed much greater involvement of performers and audience in the encouragement, selection, and evaluation of new symphonic compositions. His view was that audiences should be more “empowered” in new music programming and more trusted and respected for their musical judgments, and that these judgments should be more influential in the recognition and rewards of new music composers. In particular, Soong proposed the initiation of a national competition for composers and their works, involving performer nominations and performer/audience voting, through a sequence of orchestral “playoffs,” resulting in “finalists” and a “winner,” with the winning composer receiving a substantial monetary prize, and lesser prizes going to final contenders.

We published Soong’s essay because it provided some interesting and nontraditional thinking, and possible methods of implementation relating to a significant decision-making area within symphony organizations, moving toward greater involvement by all stakeholders, and particularly greater audience and performer engagement.

Unbeknownst to the Institute and to Soong, an international competition of symphonic compositions was under way during the period of the essay’s preparation. The competition’s existence and final procedures came to our attention just as we were going to press. Although different in many details, the Masterprize competition was originated and implemented based on many of the same concerns and objectives that Soong expressed. We decided to acquaint our readers with the main dimensions of this innovative competition in a report prepared by Sara Austin. – The Publisher

The most celebrated riot in music history broke out on May 29, 1913, when the audience that gathered to hear Igor Stravinsky’s new *Rite of Spring* took their stunned reaction from the Theatre du Champs-Élysées into the streets of Paris. The classical music world treasures the anecdote, but John McLaren, founder of the Masterprize International Composition Competition, would like to single-handedly retire it. Music experts, he says, use the tale as “a

battering ram to splinter the confidence of ordinary music lovers. The subtext is clear: don't depend on your uninformed judgement, don't trust your amateur ears . . . composers are rarely appreciated in their lifetime."¹

It's another image of Stravinsky that inspires McLaren: Following a performance of the *Rite* one year after its premiere, the composer was carried on the shoulders of his rapturous audience. "Only time can show which works will truly endure, but music does not require 20 or 50 years to pass before anyone can make head or tail of it," McLaren says. "It needs only an interested audience listening attentively and repeatedly."²

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McLaren designed the ambitious Masterprize competition to provide composers with this kind of attentive audience, and to encourage audience members to hear new music with new ears. By the time the first Masterprize winner was announced in April 1998, the competition had attracted an impressive roster of sponsors, six accomplished finalists, and an unheard of number of listeners participating in a new music event. "For classical music to flourish in the next century, new music has to enter into the mainstream repertoire," says McLaren. "Masterprize has created a uniquely powerful channel for composers to address this with the chance to win over large numbers of music lovers."³

Inventing a Competition

John McLaren makes an unlikely savior for contemporary music. A former investment banker, British diplomat, and the author of two novels, he has no musical credentials to speak of. And he is certainly not the first to point out the disconnect between composers and their audiences. Despite the many premieres of contemporary classical pieces, a lack of repeat performances means that audiences seldom have a chance to form opinions—much less attachments—to new music. The problem is confounded by programming that presents the music without context, and at times by the challenges of the music itself.

If McLaren wasn't the first to identify the problem, he thought he had conceived of a unique solution: a competition in which a worldwide audience could hear the competing pieces repeatedly—through radio broadcasts, a recording, and a concert—and have a voice in who would win the £25,000 (about \$42,000 U.S.) first prize. He took his populist approach to the BBC. "I was sure I would be sent home with a flea in my ear. But I was wrong," he says. "The speed and enthusiasm with which they responded took me by surprise."⁴

BBC Radio 3, BBC World Service, and *BBC Music Magazine* all signed on as partners, joined by EMI and the London Symphony Orchestra. The Worshipful Company of Musicians contributed an additional £10,000 (\$17,000 U.S.) commission for the highest-ranked composer under age 30.

Audio Note provided additional sponsorship, and Coutts, an international private banking group, agreed to finance the Masterprize final concert. Coutts has a reputation as the bank of blue bloods, but chief executive Herschel Post explained that, “Our clients are as likely to have made their money in the new enterprises—media, film, music, and publishing—as to have inherited their wealth. Masterprize is a perfect reflection of where Coutts stands today.”⁵

With the sponsors signed on, McLaren and his staff, Louise Price and Madeleine Milne, put out the call for entries. The chance for international recognition through radio, recordings, and promotion proved an irresistible draw. More than 1,000 composers from 60 countries entered, despite restrictions that the pieces be between eight and twelve minutes long and not be previously broadcast.

In August 1997, a panel of 11 music experts (including composers Andrei Golovine, Steen Pade, and Colin Matthews, and conductors Mischa DAMEV, Richard Bernas, and Joel Sachs) pared the entries down to a shortlist of 15 semifinalists. At least two members of this panel evaluated each score, and the entire panel reviewed about 100 scores to agree on the shortlist. The semifinalists’ works were recorded by the BBC Symphony and regional orchestras, and broadcast in autumn 1997 on BBC Radio 3 and 35 radio stations worldwide. Short-listed composers were from the United States (5), Australia (2), United Kingdom (2), and one each from Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, China, and Russia.

Finalists were selected by a second jury of classical broadcasters, composers, soloists, and conductors, including conductors Andrew Davies, Kent Nagano, and Riccardo Muti as well as Masterprize’s patron, Mstislav Rostropovich. They were:

- ◆ Victoria Borisova-Ollas, 29, a Russian-born composer now living in Sweden. Her Masterprize entry, “Wings of the Wind,” was inspired by Psalm 104: “He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind.” The pulsating piece combines complex orchestration, minimalist influences, and a powerful use of brass and percussion.
- ◆ Italian composer Daniele Gasparini, at 21 the youngest finalist. His entry, “Through the Looking Glass,” is a set of variations that recalls “Rite of Spring” as well as the writing of Lewis Carroll.
- ◆ American Stephen Hartke, 46. A well-established composer in the United States and a professor of composition at the University of Southern California, Hartke entered “The Ascent of the Equestrian in a Balloon,” originally commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra. The playful, rhythmic piece describes two bumpy rides: an 18th century aviation experiment and Harke’s nightly ordeal of tucking his two-year-old son into bed.

- ◆ Andrew March, 25, a native of Warwickshire, England. March's piece, "Marine—à travers les arbres" (Marine—through the trees) draws its inspiration from a scenic bay in Guernsey that the composer visited early in 1997. A slow, impressionistic tone poem, "Marine" shows the influence of Debussy and Elgar.
- ◆ Established Australian composer Carl Vine, 44. His entry, "Descent," was originally commissioned by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to accompany scenes from Fritz Lang's classic silent film *Metropolis*. The piece presents Lang's futuristic city as seen from the viewpoint of the downtrodden workers who live and toil beneath the city's surface.
- ◆ Zhou Long, 45, born in China and currently living in New York. Like all of Zhou's work, "Two Poems from Tang" merges Eastern and Western musical influences; The reflective piece conceives of the string section as an expanded ch'in, an ancient seven-string Chinese zither.

Selecting a Winner

The six finalists were given the broad exposure McLaren promised. EMI produced a recording of the pieces by the London Symphony Orchestra under young British conductor Daniel Harding; *BBC Music Magazine*, with a worldwide circulation of 200,000, made the recording its covermount CD for the February 1998 issue. Music fans were given an opportunity to vote for their favorite piece using a form in the magazine or over the Internet on the BBC World Service Web site. Radio stations and music publications in Western and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and Asia also organized national votes. In all, 35,000 people from 45 countries sent in votes for the final.

With the public vote tallied, the finalists gathered to hear the six works performed by Harding and the London Symphony Orchestra at a concert hosted by actor Simon Callow and BBC broadcaster James Naughtie. Broadcast on 40 radio networks internationally, through 250 separate broadcasts, the Masterprize final reached an estimated global audience of 150 million listeners. The celebrity panel for the final included pianist-conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy, composer Michael Berkeley, baritone Thomas Hampson, film composer Michael Kamen, and music producer George Martin. Following the concert the panel cast their own votes, which were split 50/50 with the public vote, with a poll of members of the London Symphony Orchestra serving as the tie-breaker.

In the end, the tie-break was not necessary: both the public and the experts agreed on Andrew March's "Marine—à travers les arbres." Cheri Blair, wife of

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Philadelphia Orchestra Competition

As we were completing the report on the Masterprize competition, we learned that the Philadelphia Orchestra was planning a competition of its own. Simon Woods, the orchestra's artistic administrator, prepared the following to give readers of *Harmony* the details.

The Philadelphia Orchestra has a long tradition of advocacy of new music. This commitment goes back to the Stokowski era, which saw U.S. premieres of Mahler's *Das lied von der Erde*, Schönberg's *Gurrelieder*, and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, as well as world premieres of numerous works by Bartók, Rachmaninov, Barber, and others. But in recent decades, composers have not always had totally creative and constructive relationships with musicians and the public. Our goal now, therefore, is to forge stronger and more creative links among the different constituencies involved, through a composition competition, to take place in 2000, as part of the orchestra's centennial celebrations.

In collaboration with the American Composers Forum (ACF), with whom we are building a successful ongoing relationship, we will start by announcing a request for scores. A specialist panel, organized with the help of the ACF, will evaluate the scores submitted, and will choose a shortlist of three. The Philadelphia Orchestra will perform these three works during the first half of a special concert conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch. During intermission and the second half, votes from the audience, the musicians, and another Philadelphia-based specialist panel will be counted. These results will be collated, with each voting constituency having equal, one-third weightings, and the winner will be announced at the end of the concert. There will, of course, be a cash prize. But our crucial commitment is that we will undertake to play the winning work in a future season (both in Philadelphia and in New York) and on tour, and we will also develop a program for the composer to meet and work with sponsors, musicians, donors, schools, audiences, and other key groups who form part of our musical "food-chain."

The choice of a three-way voting pattern is philosophically carefully reasoned: it says, very simply, that we regard the reaction of our audience, the perspective of our musicians, and educated critical opinion as factors of equal importance. And our commitment to promoting the winning work widely is a demonstration of our faith in these groups to make a challenging and stimulating choice.

the Prime Minister, awarded the £25,000 first prize to March, as well as a £3,000 second prize to Victoria Borisova-Ollas, and a £2,000 third prize to Daniele Gasparini.

Not everyone agreed with the choice, or the competition's philosophy. Critics complained that competition was rigged in favor of safe, tonal music, at the expense of experimentation and originality. Andrew Clements, music critic for *The Guardian*, led the charge: "It might all seem healthily democratic, but great art has never been made by popular consensus. . . . The Masterprize recipe is much more likely to come up with a work that has simple surface attractions."⁶

The choice of March's "Marine"—the most traditionally tonal and melodious of the final pieces—also raised hackles among music critics, several of whom called the piece derivative and mediocre. "Competitions are even more notorious than critics for getting it wrong when it comes to predicting composers' places in posterity," wrote *Times* critic John Allison. "But by any standards the result left me speechless."⁷

Masterprize organizers are unapologetic about the competition's focus on the mainstream. Says McLaren: "We had no objections to atonal pieces, but if we'd chosen a piece which sent the audience out of the concert hall shaking their heads in perplexity, we'd simply have reinforced the problem we are trying to address." Masterprize manager Louise Price adds that vigorous debate was part of the plan: "We wanted to create a debate. We tried to avoid being at the center of it, but we thought we could be a catalyst for discussion."⁸

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For John Lawley, oboe and chairman of the London Symphony Orchestra, the results of the Masterprize competition were less meaningful than the exposure it afforded six worthy composers. "The important thing is that all six composers will now get commissions: It's a platform," he told BBC Music Magazine. "It was great to think that thousands of people from over 40 countries were tuning in to contemporary music. All I can hope is that they thought: 'Hey, this really isn't bad.' Without their interest and commitment to new music, we have no future."⁹

As for the future of Masterprize, all of the principals have signed on for the second competition, scheduled to have its final in November 2000. The format will not change substantially, although McLaren reports that the ban on previously broadcast works may be lifted in order to attract more established composers. EMI plans to rerelease the London Symphony Orchestra's recording of the 1998 finalists, and the Masterprize staff will work to secure additional performances for the finalists.

“We have ambitious plans, but all we can be is a catalyst for a wider process,” says McLaren. “If music is to reengineer a healthy balance between new and old, the bridge with most music lovers must be rebuilt. We should encourage listeners to express their opinions; otherwise they will keep voting with their feet. And when we, the public, are prevented from criticising the bad, we tend not to praise the good either. The result is silence, the death of the word of mouth that is the oxygen supply for the new.”¹⁰

Sara Austin is associate editor of Civilization and American Benefactor magazines. She holds a B.A. summa cum laude from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an M.S.J. from the Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism.

Notes

¹ McLaren, John. 1998. Change of Tune. *Sunday Times* (London), (April 5): II, 6.

² Ibid.

³ Masterprize press statement.

⁴ Change of Tune.

⁵ Coutts press statement.

⁶ Clements, Andrew. 1998. Eye on the Prize. *The Guardian* (London), (April 3).

⁷ What Did the Audience Think? 1998. *BBC Music Magazine* (June): 19.

⁸ Morris, Jane. 1998. New Competitions: Hitting the Right Note. *International Arts Manager* (March): 25.

⁹ What Did the Audience Think?

¹⁰ Change of Tune.