

Music competitions - why, when, and how

Music competitions can be a very rewarding and motivational experience for young musicians. But when is it right to start thinking about them? What should a student expect to gain from the process, and what kind of work will go into creating a winning performance? These are important questions to ask, and the answers will guide you and your young musician to good choices and appropriate timing.

Why compete?

Many people assume that the point of competition is to win, or to earn honors, or to bolster a college resume - and these are certainly valid motivators. But most students who compete will not be winners. For any given competition, only a handful of students will earn top prizes. The value in competing is found primarily in the challenge, and the focused work on creating an expressive and polished performance. Students often find a renewed enthusiasm for playing and performing, and an increased motivation to practice that takes their music to a higher level. For most competitions, professional musicians serve as adjudicators, providing valuable feedback and constructive criticism that can improve student performance. For the serious musician, competitions offer a sense of validation, and a concrete reward for hard work and accomplishment. For those who fall short of the first prize, there is a new understanding of what is possible, an appreciation for the growth that comes from concentrated practice and focus, and perhaps a renewed commitment to their music studies!

Students in competitions also reap other, non-musical benefits - most notably, finding a community of other young musicians who share their passion and interest. This valuable peer support network can help motivate students, and encourage them to set their own goals and aspire to excellence.

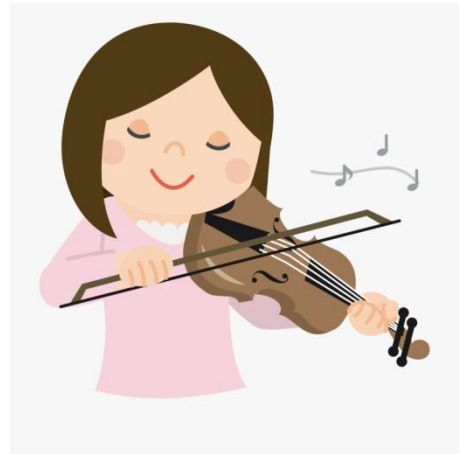
When - and where - should you start?

Certainly if your young musician is eager to progress, it's time to start finding ways for them to challenge themselves. Competitions are conducted at local as well as national and international levels. For a first competition, it's wise to aim small and local. Typically students will compete in their own age and experience level. Most teaching organizations (NJMTNA, NATS, etc.) sponsor small, local student competitions tailored to the needs of progressing musicians. Repertoire requirements are modest and broad, entry fees are minimal, and prizes are plentiful. Some organizations offer scholarship competitions, or performance competitions, where the prize is a concert or a rebate in tuition. These are great places to start - the risk and outlay are minimal, and the spirit is inclusive. These sorts of local programs often promote open auditions and winner's recitals, so students are able to hear their peers and gain an appreciation for a well-prepared and polished performance.



There has also been a recent trend toward web-based competitions, where students record a performance and upload it to a website where it will be adjudicated. These are often very inexpensive to enter, and may offer finalists an opportunity to perform in person. It's usually a good idea to find applicant videos from previous years so you can get an idea of the level of the participants, but there is usually no downside to just uploading a homemade video.

Many organizations conduct pay-for-play competitions, offering winners performances in prestigious venues. These are often excellent experiences, if you go in with the understanding that you are paying for a special



event. There are many winners, and often a requirement to purchase tickets depending on the award level. For many students, the opportunity to play at Carnegie Hall is exciting enough to make this an excellent option.

For students who are fearful of performing in public, or not motivated to practice or polish a performance piece, entering competitions would likely be counterproductive. Better to encourage friendly recitals and low-pressure or group performance experiences that cultivate interest and appreciation for making music.

How do we choose a competition?

When choosing a competition, try to keep your priorities in line. Will the time and money outlay justify the quality of the experience? Will it require hiring a pianist, paying for travel, purchasing multiple scores or taking time away from school or work? Is the required repertoire unusual, or outside the student's current repertoire? Are the prizes offered worth the work and sacrifice to earn them? Will the experience be rewarding without a win? Will it challenge the student, and encourage a bit more hard work? Can the repertoire be used for a number of competitions, allowing for growth of experience and insight? Is this an educational event that also offers lectures/master classes/recitals in conjunction with the event that will add artistic value and enrichment? These are important decisions to be made in conjunction with your young musician, and his or her teacher.

How do we prepare?

A competition performance should showcase the best of the student. Repertoire should show off the particular skills and personality of the performer, and perhaps offer a small challenge beyond what is currently easy. Choosing pieces that are exceptionally difficult or flashy are exciting only if they can be played with ease and musicality - a student who struggles with a piece too far beyond current capabilities will just be showing the judges what they don't do well. Judges would rather hear a beautiful performance of a simpler piece than a flawed and sloppy performance of a piece that offers too many challenges.

Once repertoire is chosen, practice should be organized with an eye to accomplishing benchmarks at planned points in advance of the competition date. Work a section at a time, and make sure the entire piece is memorized well before the competition. The first public performance of a competition piece should **not** be on the day of the competition! Find opportunities to perform the piece beforehand, using student or school recitals to gain experience and polish. This is also a great way to highlight rough spots, and find what aspects of performance falter when faced with nerves. Rushing, memory slips, shaking knees, sweaty hands, dry mouth - everyone gets nervous, and nerves affect everyone differently. Understanding how a performance may be impacted is the first step in learning to overcome and triumph.

In conclusion ...

Most teachers will encourage their students to try a competition when they're consistently able to present solid, polished performances. For most students, this will be a good experience and a valuable learning tool. Students who enter hoping only to win, or to gather honors for college resumes, may find some success and will certainly gain experience. But the true value of a competition can be found in the sense of accomplishment, the pride in a fine performance, the reward of hard work, and the knowledge that continuous progress and improvement is worthy of life-long pursuit.

For further information, Westminster Conservatory will be hosting a parent-teacher panel discussion on competitions. Watch *Conservatory Connections* for the date and time, and how to register.

