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THE INTERNET AND TRANSITIONS OF INSTITUTIONALITY IN ART MUSIC

Case Study of the *Internet Music Competition*, an Online Music Competition Founded by the Association of Primary and Secondary Music School Teachers in Serbia

ABSTRACT: In this paper, we are analyzing in what ways the transition of music competition as an important institution in the world of art music to the digital world of the Internet is changing in view of how we understand some important aspects of music performance and music excellence. The paper deals with a case study of the *Internet Music Competition*, an online music competition founded in 2011 by *Udruženje pedagoga osnovnih i srednjih muzičkih škola Srbije* (Association of Primary and Secondary Music School Teachers in Serbia). This new form of music competition mirrors many aspects specific for the Internet as a communication medium, and as such represents an interesting case of transitions that art music is going through in the information age, as well as possibilities and opportunities that the Internet as a medium brings forth. It opens an important question of value and characteristics of digital sound in music performance. Is it possible to get a clear impression of artistic and music excellence through a digitally recorded sound? What is being evaluated in an *online* performance, and what is lost with digital sound? This kind of interdisciplinary study is significant both for understanding heterogeneous transitions of art music discourses, which are happening on a global scale, and for beginning to question and analyze the specifics of Serbian society and culture as part of the new digital, information age.

KEY WORDS: The Internet; music competition; art music; institutionality; digital

(Internet) Music Competition

The particular subject of music competitions as part of the formal music education system such as we have here in Serbia, has not been analyzed in depth. Part of the reason comes with this composite of music education that is more often found in Eastern European countries, as well as in the countries of former Yugoslavia – the so called *Soviet school* music education system. Most Western countries of today have not developed such modern educational formal frameworks for teaching art music from early childhood, but have expanded on teaching music as primary and secondary school subjects as a preparation for university studies of art music. These differences also become relevant in the analysis

of the global nature of the *Internet Music Competition* and possible application and significance such practice has for participants in different countries. To satisfy the need for introducing the role that music competition has in these unique systems I will turn to my own experience as a flute teacher in primary and secondary music school *Živorad Grbić* in Valjevo, Serbia, and also as a flute performer. As part of a six-year primary education, and two four-year periods of secondary and university music education for flute in Serbia, music competitions, which here are numerous and with long traditions (for example *Susreti flautista: Tahir Kulenović* is celebrating 17 years of activity this year), represent an educational tool conventionally used from the first year of studying music both with goal of motivating the students to work harder and to introduce competitive environment in which students can get a clearer view of their own progress and prepare for auditioning in later careers. These competitions are significant because for most students they mark rare opportunities for public performance outside their schools and will continue to be part of the educational system up until the end of university studies, after which they will take form of prestigious high reward competitions that make or unmake careers in art music performance. What showcases how significant and impactful these competitions are is that for advanced students one third (in some cases more) of a school year is devoted to preparation for such events. Music competitions undoubtedly occupy the central role in the *Soviet school* system of music education. For other educational systems this form becomes similarly crucial on the university level, so our analysis of the *Internet Music Competition* and its effect on the music competition framework remains relevant throughout the Western hemisphere.

Internet Music Competition was founded in 2010 by *Udruženje pedagoga osnovnih i srednjih muzičkih škola Srbije* (Association of Primary and Secondary Music School Teachers in Serbia). In 26 different instrument and group categories, including jazz and national music, by its fourth year the number of participants of this competition reached 4000 competitors and over 100 members of the jury in 25 different countries, making this competition the largest of its kind. This competition also seems to be for now an only example of such online practice. The complete process from jury selection, registration of competitors, and final judging and awarding prizes is being conducted through the Internet. The participants are requested to make and send a video of a two-piece performance made solely for this competition. With the video, participants send scanned evidence confirming their identity, as well as a proof of payment. Jury members are notified by e-mail, Skype or telephone when all competitor videos are online, which is done at same time so that they can start assessing the material on the website. The judging process is conducted without consultation among the jury members, and only after each member has sent his/her scores do the organizers declare a winner in each category. The winner of the whole competition is decided among those prize competitors in a *Master final* of all

categories. The competition fee is 20, 25 and 30 Euros, depending on the category. The collected amount covers complete competition, as well as a prize fund of 3000 USD in total which is used for organizing a master class or concert performance for the winner.

The founders of *Udruženje pedagoga osnovnih i srednjih muzičkih škola Srbije* and the *Internet Music Competition*, Natalija and Milomir Dojčinović, stated in an interview conducted for this study that the main idea behind the competition was inspired by a festival event in which their son had participated, that had seven or eight jury members and a small audience, and where they felt that “with all that work and talent of professors, students and parents, it was all finished in half an hour”.¹ They found on the Internet the possibility to prolong and materialize the effort and time put in preparing of a performance, as well as the results of the long and demanding *Soviet school* music education system. The promise for participation in the *Internet Music Competition* is that your performance will be available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for many years to come. Such a performance becomes a part of a large archive of the past and present performances on the competition website, but also part of the biggest database, the Web itself, bringing the opportunity for performances to be heard by a much wider audience. One outcome of such archive is better understanding of the performance style and technique of the student by the teacher, and as such serves an important educational function. By participating year after year in this competition, teachers and students both gain the possibility of tapping into this database for a much more detailed assessment of student progress, and also using this database as a valuable tool for analyzing performance and education styles of other performers around the world. What we find here is the first notable transition in the institution of music competition I find closely related to what Lev Manovich called a new symbolic form of the computer age, the *database*. For Manovich, the database has largely become a way in which we already structure and understand our everyday experience. As defined in computer science, a database is a structured collection of data which are not only stored but *programmed* for retrieval and manipulation. It is exactly this high functionality that makes the database such an important element of the information society. It seems we can literally apply to this music competition the new cultural algorithm which, according to Manovich, is: reality – media – data – database (Manovich 2002, 199). What cyberspace offers the music competition practice is getting free of limitations of physical space and borders. As Dojčinović asks, “can you imagine organizing a live music competition event for 26 disciplines? It is impossible.”² This idea of bringing performers together without them having to spend money and time travelling, works wonderfully on a level

¹ Vera Mevorah, An Interview with Natalija and Milomir Dojčinović, 17th April 2014

² Ibid.

of young school age musicians. Although the *Soviet school* system highly prizes music competitions as part of the curriculum, it does not assume the practice of taking students to faraway places to compete with other nationalities. This, granted, is existing practice, but only for the very few exceptionally talented. However, talking about more seasoned musicians, what they search for in any music competition is prestige and a financial reward included (in some cases the rewards reach thousands of Euros). The competitions reach this level almost exclusively with long tradition and high performance criteria. It is understandable why this event has not yet reached this ultimate goal of every music competition. Though music competitions worldwide use the Internet for disseminating information, for application and in some cases even first round elimination (with audio recordings of performances), there is still much distrust when it comes to evaluating performances via technology, as well as getting rid of the physical frame of the system. This is something that can be said for any purely online activity. Secondly, this competition primarily finds participants in primary and secondary school level performers and competitions on this level are of a generally lower status. Nevertheless, there are many aspects the Internet offers even for high competing levels that its offline counterpart cannot.

The Internet is prized by many technological enthusiasts for being a space of plural and diverse voices, an environment with a promise of pure democracy and equality. Today we know that this is an impossible promise. The Web may be a new space for opportunities, but it is very much a place of conflict and power struggle. The Internet makes sharing of events a practice for millions of people. This competition has opened the opportunity for performing and participating to many people who live in small and cut off communities. For these teachers and students the Web offers rare opportunity for recognition and improvement. There is no age limit in this competition. Organizers mention a case of two 70-year-old performers who applied purely for their love of performing and leaving a memento for their children and grandchildren. What is perhaps most interesting is how the Internet opens multitude of perspectives and gives an ever-changing context to the music competition itself. Far away from institution gates (and the gatekeepers), the non-space of the Web calls for hybridity and loosening of borders. With inclusion of performers on traditional music instruments, as well as jazz music programme, we find overlapping of discourses which are in lots of ways still strongly divided, especially in the case of traditional and art music. Moving beyond the institutional context in which music competition operated allows a wide and diverse participation and more significantly brings to light the dominant ways by which we consume art music today.

In the present information age and especially on the Internet we are mostly talking about *users*. The term user is there to denote an active participation and communication on the Internet different from the idea of a passive consumer of media. Michele White states: "An active and empowered Internet *user*

who is in control of the interface, situated within the screen, and moves actively through Internet *space*" (White 2006, 1). The development of the *Internet Music Competition* is in many ways dictated by the participants. On the *NEWS* page of the website we can find sections that both give feedback and strive to communicate with and include the participants in the competition development, such as *Guest Book*, where we can find user comments, and *Got a suggestion?*, as an invitation text for partnership options and ideas for the competition. Even though the website or the *Internet Music Competition* itself does not include many of communication practices which characterize the social sphere of the Internet today, like live comment section or linking with significant social platforms, it paints a picture of a future where judging music excellence becomes woven into the social fabric of the Internet, a form of sociality that is getting more and more difficult to ignore. The organizers themselves state that the website is outdated and needs to be changed. Here we have an interesting example of collision of the need for continuity, for becoming a valued and respected tradition, and on the other hand, the ever-changing needs for the new and updated content by the users. Yet Internet is still far away from a "consensual hallucination" shared by all, described by William Gibson in his famous novel *Neuromancer*. Today there are close to three billion Internet users worldwide, which accounts for about 40% of the planet's population, where countries like Brazil, Egypt, Turkey and even Russia still have only around 50% of the people using the Internet. In Serbia it was 47.5% according to a 2012 survey. Many teachers stated that it was this competition that first brought them to the world of Internet. There is a fundamental instability to the idea of the Internet as global, incorporeal and equal for all media. There was an interesting case of a participant from Japan who had to travel 600 km to the closest bank in order to make the payment for competition. Also that of a student who needed to send a second video of the performance, but was unable because the helicopter he used to meet with his accompanist, as well as the accompanist were unavailable. We still deal with the Web in many different, sometimes painfully corporeal ways. Even though cyberspace is no real place, as Stephen Graham writes, "the cumulative effect of spatial metaphors means that they become visualizable and imageably reconstructed as giant, apparently territorial systems." (Nayar 2010, 91) Such a case of reconstructed territorial system is apparent in this case. With its double Web domains, *musiccompetition.rs* and *musiccompetition.eu*, this competition dwells in between two signifiers, one of Serbia and its *.rs* domain where, given the insignificant participation from Serbian teachers and students, as well as the status of a rather small country with bad reputation, the competition feels out of place. The other domain is the one representing European Union, an attempt to overcome prejudices about the Serbian identity, and move its virtual centre to greener pastures. The absence of physical place gives us freedom to conjure new ones, but the plane in which we operate is still that of the physical spaces and their signifiers, here especially if we talk about the col-

lision of the Internet logic and the institutions of art music. There are only few true novelties with the *Internet Music Competition* marked mostly by those aspects of the Web that could not be avoided. This competition has acclaimed jury members, but not the voice of the Internet multitude that we are so used to seeing online. Their web addresses are hyperlinked to the rest of the Web, but the same is not true for the content itself. One has to visit the web site in order to hear numerous archived performances, so the analogy of creating a separate space for a competition is still very much in place. This competition abides by *copyright* philosophy, keeping the rights for all performances on their web site.

Jonathan Sterne states an important fact today when he writes that “communication technologies are a fundamental part of what it means to speak, to hear, or to do anything with sound” (Sterne 2012, 10). This is why I want to take this study a little further as an occasion for asking the questions of the role and impact of digital sound technology in listening and understanding music today.

Is It Live or Is It “Memorex”?

Performance videos submitted to the competition by participants as a rule must not be larger than 50 MB. The process of making this kind of file is called *perceptual audio coding* and is related to audio recording and compression technologies informed by psychoacoustic theories developed in the 20th century. According to psychoacoustic theories, there are many qualities of sound which are irrelevant for hearing habits and capacities of the human ear, and can therefore be excluded. These types of compressions, referred to as *lossy* compressions, populate most of our current media sphere, from Mp3 files and *YouTube* videos to the performance videos of the *Internet Music Competition*, with some of them characterized by up to 90% reduction of the original sound or video information. The performance videos are subjected to three different reductions of sound quality, from live performance to their being reproduced by the jury or the Internet audience. Even though most recording devices support the frequency range of sounds of musical instruments, the first reduction of the sound quality nevertheless happens with the process of recording itself. The characteristic of a live performance sound includes all vibrations present in the room and not only the sound of the instrument itself, and it takes multiple technological devices to capture the whole of the sound produced. None of the performance videos is made in this way, so the sound quality the sound is reduced on the spot. The second reduction happens at the point of video file compression so that the requested 50 MB file can be created. For comparison, an uncompressed video file of a ten-minute performance would take around 1 GB (1000 MB), depending on the amount of sound sources being recorded. This compression removes all very high and very low frequencies that aurally define the

sound event, as well as other sound frequencies deemed unimportant by the technology. The final reduction of sound quality is caused by reproduction technologies used for listening to performances. There is a qualitative difference between listening to a recorded performance in a studio setting or through quality headphones and on small computer or laptop speakers. The technology for high quality listening today includes a staggering amount of equipment from turntables, equalizers, subwoofers, headphones to acoustic room treatment. Let's take the example of one of the master final competitors, Fillipova Maria (flute player). After analyzing the sound frequencies with the *Penguin Audio Meter* software, we can see that all frequencies above 4 KHz cannot be heard. For comparison purposes, the flute frequency range can go up to 10 KHz. There are many other videos of similar quality, as well as those of optimal frequency range for the instrument in question on the website, but none of them exceeds the quality of a lossy compression audio file. Technical sound analysis dictates the question: is there a difference in the expressive nuances and technical acumen in our experience of listening to a digital recording and what are the elements we assess in a music competition that need to be heard?

There is a study conducted by Bruno Repp titled *Individual Differences in the Expressive Shaping of a Musical Phrase: The Opening of Chopin's Etude in E major*. The study was performed on 115 recordings of piano performances. It analyzed the differences in performances and aesthetic judgment related to them. The author compared the ratings of these recordings to MIDI mediated digital piano reproduction of the same performances in addition to one played separately on a digital piano, and found that individual variability in performances is found not in the distinct structural interpretations but in individual timing patterns which represent "different expressive shaping of the musical surface" (Won Yi 1999, 246). This means that music expressivity is found in those small deformations of musical structure, the expressive nuances of the performance. The rating of recorded sound performances themselves in Repp's study showed that timing patterns variables did not amount much in the rating, from what he concluded that the judges simply found all the patterns aesthetically viable. For his starting point, Repp takes the very form of recorded sound and adds to the argument of possibility for virtuosity and expressivity of recorded performance being successfully differentiated and rated. We are only beginning to understand also in part with the help of technology how we judge music excellence. In addition to the recordings of the performances, one of the judges was given a task of assessing a *synthesized version* which was "generated by substituting the measured timing patterns for a timing of a good MIDI – recorded performance and resynthesizing all performances on a digital piano" (Won Yi 1999, 246). Given a synthesized MIDI digital piano recording, the aesthetic preference would be given to conventional timing patterns, or to less expressive performance. Bruno explains: "Tone and texture are less satisfying in synthesized performances, which is why listeners prefer more conventional timing

(and perhaps also dynamic) patterns in such performances" (Won Yi 1999, 253). There is still a difference between a recorded performance and a synthesized one, but these findings bring the question what the quality of tone and texture in recorded performances really is – more specifically, the recorded performances made for the *Internet Music Competition*, and if Rapp conducted his research on live and recorded performances, would the results be similar? In his study, Repp instructed the judges to ignore the recorded sound quality as much as possible. This is exactly how the jury assesses the performances on the *Internet Music Competition*. The jury professor of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade Miomir Simonović states that "it's undisputed that there's a difference between a live and this kind of performance, but we can hear all that needs to be heard."³ Assessing music excellence is governed by a long tradition of teaching and emphasizing certain aspects of music expression and technique as more or less important. There are perceptive cues, a kind of a shared consensus about these important elements of style and structure in the music performance and its judging. They start to form in a musician from an early age, which makes recognizing them in a video recording of the lowest quality a simple case of recognizing a familiar language in a crowded place. The performance in music competitions is not perceived by most members of the jury as a music performance meant to be enjoyed. Simonović mentions that "the competition brings a charge in energy which is somewhat negative",⁴ and nobody can deny the palpable stress this situation usually brings. There is always the question of specific contexts that different kinds of performances bring, which cannot be overlooked in any analysis.

In sound studies and music studies related to technological and ontological questions, there is an inherent disagreement or a polarity of views on the question of what sound is. Is it inseparable from human cultural experience or is there some inherent characteristic by which we can measure the quality and meaning of one that is then recorded. In his study of digital sound, Jonathan Sterne reminds us of Plato purging flutists and flute makers from his perfect state and how 17th century Londoners complained about noise filling their city, in order to point out how there were always transitions in our understanding of sound and music. As he writes: "In most times and places sonic culture is characterized by tensions held within its configuration of difference and sameness" (Sterne 2012, 1). The title of this section is a reference to a famous audio cassette commercial starring Ella Fitzgerald where the *Memorex* company invites us to witness the complete fidelity of their sound product. From the very beginning of the sound recording technology, the ideal was always achieving this *high-fidelity* standard, a recording indistinguishable from live performance.

³ Vera Mevorah, An interview with Miomir Simonović, Belgrade, 16th April 2014.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Recorded music was compared to live performances from its very beginnings, but it is the cultural change of listening which mostly determines how we listen to sound and music today and for some theorists is what has always determined how we listen. As Emily Thompson writes: "A soundscape's cultural aspects incorporate scientific and aesthetic ways of listening, a listener's relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what. A soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilization than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change" (Sterne 2012, 117). Mp3's and other lossy compressions are what we could call a *user's* choice. It is the technology that enabled practical and widespread consummation and manipulation of sound and music, and these aspects remain the most favoured qualities of sound culture today, having a significant impact on art music discourses. The *Internet Music Competition* organizers stress this aspect of the contemporary listener when they explain that the competition would hardly have any participants if there was a serious demand for audio and video quality. Here we find this most obvious transition of art music institutions, that which is apparent in all forms of online activity – the transition from a traditional art music subject (be it a student, performer or listener) to the Internet user.

It is interesting how we can only closely relate to the idea of audiophilia within a wider discourse of technologically mediated sound with prioritizing live performance in art music discourses. Both are related to that which we judge as the highest quality. Yet the pinnacle of high-fidelity in practice is the sound completely freed from all accompanied sounds produced in the room where the performance took place. As Aden Evens writes, relating both to technical, as well as to perceptual aspects of live performance: "As long as the instrument is actually operating in that space, there is no criterion that would differentiate sharply between the sound of music and the other vibrations in the room" (Evens 2005, 7). It is exactly this mixed soundscape that we prize in live performance, which makes its *liveliness*. We can then conclude that when talking about sound culture of cyberspace and sound culture of art music, we are actually manoeuvring in two very separate discourses, especially if our goal is to examine the judgment of excellence. What happens when these two combine anew in the example of the *Internet Music Competition* (anew because there are many well-known encounters of technology and art music, from experimental music to contemporary highly developed market of art music recordings) is perhaps a typical example of a transition that has not yet taken a stable form, a clash of discursive identities. This conflict is less pronounced in signifying practices which are further apart, so in those aspects of the *Internet Music Competition* that are more related to the Internet discourse and less to the sound itself, and also what makes the question of *sound* a problem that needs to be treated somewhat separately and with more care in such analyses. We must not forget that historically two fields were tasked with thinking about

sound in Western societies, those of art music and of medicine, upon both of which the technological thinking about sound is inflicted. The end result of this study brings us to a very contested view of both the possibility of *performance* in all its complexity as mediated through *low-fi* web environment and the undeniable changes that bring both the high-tech sound culture and the information age in our perception and ways of listening. It is perhaps proper how the title of the conference this paper was presented at formulates the many changes and fluctuations in art music world today and the issues we have spoken about, the one we in Serbia are perhaps all too familiar with – transition.

SUMMARY

The goal of this paper is the analysis of the *Internet Music Competition* – a music competition founded in Serbia and based on the World Wide Web platform on the Internet. The multifaceted practice of music competitions has a crucial role in formal music education and continues to play its part in professional life of musicians in the forms of auditions and job applications. The main questions I ask here is what kind of changes the institution of music competition is going through on what we mostly think of as global, interactive and plural space of the Internet. Also, how are these changes reflecting the transitions of art music discourses in the age marked by digital technology? The first part of the paper deals with interloping discourses of both the Internet and music competition, presenting some of the significant changes which come with music competition as an online practice, while the second part of the paper examines closely the issues with judging the music excellence mediated by digital sound, and how equally the important institution of listening goes through transformation in the information age.

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