

The piano competition that fosters a festival spirit of musical celebration



David Kettle

@DavidKettle1

Aaron Shorr, chair of the Scottish International Piano Competition (and also head of keyboard at Glasgow's Royal Scottish Conservatoire), is keen to stress the crucial role that listeners play in his three-yearly contest, whose 2017 outing kicks off in Glasgow next weekend.

"It's the audience that really makes or breaks it," he says. "It's an extremely collaborative experience. Live performance, the communication between performer and audience – those are the essence of the competition."

These kinds of music competitions are a far cry, certainly, from more conventional concerts, where there's little at stake. Here, audience engagement is of a very different kind. The SIPC is not a million miles away, in fact, from an elite sporting contest like Wimbledon, with a gaggle of 30 young piano hopefuls gathering to display their prodigious talents in opening solo recitals, and fighting to progress to the glories of the concerto final, in which the lucky final three are joined by the RSN. And like Wimbledon, it can generate a similar sense of excitement and support from those attending.

"We have really good audiences who follow it very enthusiastically," says Shorr. "There's a real festival feeling – we'll have all 30 competitors here, playing over four days, so it's a celebration of piano music and of playing at a very high level." Rule changes introduced in the 2014 contest have encouraged this festival atmosphere, he says. "In our new structure we have two recital rounds, with no elimination, so that competitors play two contrasting 30-minute recitals on two different days. The jury gets to hear them twice, with two different programmes, before making any decisions."

But despite all the talk of festivals, at heart this is a competition. And the inescapable fact is that the competitors are being judged and compared by a jury – one which this year includes pianist Steven Osborne, along many other eminent



Aaron Shorr with pianist Edward Cohen. 'There's a real festival feeling'

Photograph: KK Dundas

international names. "We had over 100 initial submissions," continues Shorr, "and the sub-jury spent about a month listening to everyone, and finally whittled them down to about 30. I'd say they have the hardest job, because the 70 or so pianists not selected are absolutely worthy players."

How does the jury make its decisions when it comes to the live rounds? Shorr tells the story of another well-known musical contest, where jury members ended up talking themselves out of their final decision in last-minute discussions,

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almost deciding on a winner that nobody wanted. "If you have one or two persuasive voices, it can sway the whole thing. That's why our rules are very strict – no discussion, everything by voting, and completely in private."

What they're looking for in the SIPC winner, however, is something quite special. "We spend a lot of time working with our jury to get first-class performers with great integrity, but who are also open-minded, so that they're not so judgemental that they close down a talent who might not quite fit every academic norm. Rather than picking someone who's just note-perfect, we're hoping to

encourage individualistic, exciting talents who have something to communicate, rather than just a technically correct but ultimately unmemorable performance."

There's a strong roll-call of previous SIPC winners and finalists – from Tom Poster to Katya Apekisheva, Susan Tomes to Graeme McNaught. But, with his RCS educator's hat on, how crucial does Shorr feel contests like this are to today's young performers? "Thankfully they're not the only route to success," he accepts. "But they certainly have a place in terms of pianists' artistic development – they can prepare and measure themselves, test themselves against being under pressure." It's essential, he feels, for young players to go into the contest with the right attitude. "These things are not make-or-break. You should be doing it for your own self-development, and not taking it so seriously that it could hurt you or destroy you – which is when it would become counterproductive. But if you use the experience positively, even if you don't win a prize, it can mark the start of an amazing career." ■

The Scottish International Piano Competition runs from 1 to 10 September, with the preliminary rounds (1-4 September) and semi-finals (6-7 September) at Glasgow's Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and the concerto final (10 September) at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, www.scottishinternationalpiano.com