



[Winning is more than taking part](#)

Striving for excellence by [Denis Joe](#) August 2013

Back in June of this year, Israeli pianist **Boris Giltburg** won the prestigious **International Queen Elisabeth Competition**

, held in the *Chapelle musicale*

, in Brussels. He reached the finals despite having, what he calls a 'blackout' during his performance of Mozart's Concerto n. 15 in B flat major KV 450. In fact when he watched a recording of his performance he discovered that he had continued to play, even though he had a memory lapse part way through.

This competition is for musicians who have completed their training and who are ready to embark upon an international career and despite being 25,000 euros better off, and the prospect of more than 80 concerts worldwide, Giltburg was not happy. He told [Rueters](#) that he

was "a bit angry at the world for not having come up with another way of discovering talent other than competitions". Claiming that the stress he and his fellow competitors were put under was too great. He vowed “

he would never be on a jury, making the kind of decision that determines someone's future

”.

Such competitions are not popular amongst classical musicians. The great Hungarian composer **Bela Bartok** is reported to have said: “***Competitions are for horses, not for artists***” and the legendary pianist,

Glenn Gould

claimed that they left their "ill-advised supplicants

forever stunted

, victims of a spiritual lobotomy". Admittedly, piano competitions are notorious for their inability to pick winners. The last piano competition winner who went on to be successful was

Van Cliburn

who won Russia's International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958. He retired after two decades at the age of 43 – young for a classical musician, with most observers suggesting he was ‘

burnt out

’ as a result of being catapulted to stardom.

In an article for the Wall Street Journal (4 July 2013) headlined ‘Why Piano Competitions Will Never Yield a Superstar’, **Terry Teachout** suggested that it was because the jury “is at bottom a committee . . . [who] . . . exist to generate and perpetuate consensus views. They can't make great art, and it's all but impossible for them to agree on great artists. Such disagreement inevitably leads to compromise, which more often than not produces B-plus winners who please all of the jurors but thrill none of them” (this is rather disingenuous to Gilburg, I think). But the same can be said of all juries, including the jury who in 1989's BBC Singer of the World Competition awarded first prize to

Dmitri

Hvorostovsky

and

the Lieder prize to

Bryn Terfel

, both of whom went on to have very successful careers (and show no signs of ‘burning out’) and there are many examples that one could find not just in music competitions but in many

competitions in the world of art.

Teachout then goes on to ask why they hold music competitions in the first place, saying that, unlike 1958, the road to success for classical musicians is no longer as well defined. Whilst I would not even hazard a guess as to why juries, especially in piano competitions, are not particularly successful at picking out stars, I would say that in 1958 classical music was far more popular than it is today, especially in the US, where, in the post war years conductors such as

Arturo Toscanini

and

Thomas Beecham

, and musicians such as

Jacqueline du Pre

and

Glenn Gould

, were the 'superstars' of the day. Very few classical musicians these days could command such adulation. But that is no reason why society should not strive to find the very cream of classical musicians.

If one looks at the world of poetry for instance – an art that is far less popular than classical music - there are hundreds, if not thousands, of poetry competitions each year, in Britain alone. Most will have competent jurors and some, such as the National ***Poetry Competition***, will attract the bigger names in the poetry world, such as

Carol Anne Duffy

. Yet this has done nothing to sell the volumes of poetry and the poetry magazines (vastly supported by Arts Council grants) into the hands of the general public. The vast majority of contest winners will enjoy their moment in the spotlight, and then disappear into obscurity. Not even redefining poetry to include Slam (where whoever can shout the loudest is deemed by fellow 'poets' to be great) which is an umbrella term for performance poetry such as rap.

What is really behind Giltburg's and Teachout's criticism is a disdain for competitiveness and the search for excellence in general, which not only reflects a society that is uncomfortable with judging and value systems, but also shows contempt for individual achievement? This is not a recent phenomenon. In his 1978 book *The Culture Of Narcissism*, the historian and social critic, **Christopher Lasch**, lamented the degradation of sport.

Among the activities through which men seek release from everyday life, games offer in many ways the purest form of escape. Like sex, drugs, and drink, they obliterate awareness of everyday reality, not by dimming that awareness but by raising it to a new intensity of concentration. Moreover, games have no side-effects; produce no hangovers or emotional complications. Games satisfy the need for free fantasy and the search for gratuitous difficulty simultaneously; they combine childlike exuberance with deliberately created complications. By establishing conditions of equality among the players, Roger Caillois says, games attempt to substitute ideal conditions for "the normal confusion of everyday life." ¹ They re-create the freedom, the remembered perfection of childhood and mark it off from ordinary life with artificial boundaries, within which the only constraints are the rules to which the players freely submit. Games enlist skill and intelligence, the utmost concentration of purpose, on behalf of utterly useless activities, which make no contribution to the struggle of man against nature, to the wealth or comfort of the community, or to its physical survival.

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Like art, sport has no intrinsic value, except what the spectator brings to it. For Lasch it was the very uninspiring nature of work that led men to seek meaning in sport. It was this very ideal that Lasch saw as being undermined by the commercialisation of sport, which had reduced it to mere entertainment, on the one hand and the social reformers on the other, such as **Dorca Susan Butt**

, who believed that sport should promote competence not competition. But as Lasch pointed out: "the attainment of certain skills unavoidably gives rise to an urge to show them off."

Yet it is these very same groups who continue to destroy the ideal of games and hence competitiveness. Modern day football is nothing like the game of the 1960s and 70s. So many reforms make me wonder why anybody bothers with football anymore. For instance in the sixties and seventies it was common practice for teams to have a 'leg breaker' in the squad. This was the man who would chase after the centre forward who was heading for the goal. The leg breaker would then incapacitate the forward, sometimes ending their career. Unfortunate yes, but those were the risks that you took in any sport. Well known leg breakers at the time included **Nobby Stiles** (Manchester United), **Charlie George** (Arsenal) and, perhaps the 'dirtiest bastard' of all **Billy Bremner** (Leeds United). These players were nonetheless as skilful on the pitch as the best goal scorers.

The changes in the offside rule (which is now totally incomprehensible to me) and penalising players for certain behaviour, to take two examples, means that competitiveness takes second place to the rulebook and it can sometimes be the referee who determines the outcome of a game rather than the skill, or lack of, of the teams on the pitch. But the overriding factor that has taken competitiveness out of football is, ironically, the creation of so many competitions. English teams compete in 27 different competitions (spread over the various divisions). That does not include the 22 UEFA tournaments or the World Cup. This glut of competition means that it is impossible to gauge who the real champions are and it is not unusual for managers to decide that they would rather chase the title of league champions than the FA Cup (which a few decades ago would take pride of place in the trophy cabinet).

Another sport that suffers from an abundance of tournaments is professional boxing. The last Heavyweight to be regarded as the undisputed world champion was, perhaps, Mike Tyson nearly two decades ago. But with so many organisations awarding "world championship" belts, no boxer, in any of the 17 weight categories, can claim to be the undisputed world champion. The problem of so many competitions arose with the demands of cable and satellite TV and the creation of new channels, and it has turned this most noble of contests into a meaningless spectacle.

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And whilst there was to be no more references to creativity and theory in PE it will be interesting to see how creative school will be in fulfilling this objective. Even in the home parents anguish over the effect a competitive approach will have on their children. In an article for the [New York Times](#)

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Matt Richell

wrote about how he used to take a relaxed attitude towards competition until he started to do the research and came across the work of Alfie Kohn, whose view is that competition is “a toxic way to raise children.”

Yet **Po Bronson**, co-author of "*Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing*" speaking to [Michael Krasny](#)

believes that “losing is a lesson everyone should learn”.

“If kids don’t learn to lose they’re going to feel entitled to win. They’re also going to make a connection that fear of losing is going to prevent them from taking the risk in the first place. And what kids do need to learn is losing is not that big a deal. They need to learn to lose and go ‘Oh, whatever,’ and move on and keep playing.”

There is a myriad of experts ready to give parents advice on the effects of competition on their children. Bronson’s view is one of the more sensible contributions. For centuries competitiveness has been the spur for innovation and improvement, whether on an individual level or within the economy. Society, at large, has benefited from the results of

competitiveness. Competition is the only method of gauging excellence. But winning should be the only goal, whether in sport or the arts.

To return to Boris Giltburg's dream of a world where competition is eradicated: it's not going to happen! Neuroscience may well come up with an explanation that would allow a computer to measure excellence, but it would never be as effective as a panel of professionals, who have been through the process themselves and have years of experience and expertise to inform their judgements, allowing them to objectively judge the ability of an individual whilst at the same time inferring a standard of excellence for others to attain. As **Eric Cantona** put it "The pressure people put on themselves and the rivalry between the teams is much more marked. And I think that's a good thing. As long as that rivalry remains within the spirit of competition, it can only spur everyone on."