



75 years of shared music

Text edited on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 2012.

‘Competitions are for horses’, said Debussy. That was more than a century ago, but his remark is still popular today (especially with musicians who have been unsuccessful in competitions). The question is, it must be admitted, a complex one that can be approached from a variety of angles. It is permissible, moreover, to see it simply from the point of view of those music-lovers to whom the Queen Elisabeth Competition has – for 75 years now – offered such a wide range of emotions. Passion, joy, sadness, identification, dissent, and more, as well as an opportunity to share the experience of ‘great’ music, in a world that has changed so much and in which this ‘great’ music occupies a less prominent position in the everyday world of the media and thus of people generally. The Queen Elisabeth Competition is, for many, a slice of life, an enchanted interlude in which culture seems to make some slight inroads into the gloom cast by crises, rationalisation, epidemics, rain, and conflict.

The audience, like the participants and their repertoire, defies generalisation: it is not a single audience, but thousands of individual audience members and tens of thousands of others watching television or listening to the radio. There is no single group of laureates/racehorses, either, but young people, each of whom has come with his or her own past, present state, and potential – still fragile and dependent on an infinite variety of factors. Finally, it is not *the same concerto again and again*, but a repertoire that, overall, is rich and varied, open both to its own century and to the intimacy of the sonata and the lied.

Of course, it has not always been a ‘calm sea and prosperous voyage’, every year, every day. A look back at the past, however, reminds us – whatever our generation – of deep-rooted and happy memories: Kogan, Fleisher, Senofski, Ashkenazy, Laredo, Frager, Michlin, El Bacha, Volondat, Znaider, Samoshko, Lemieux, von Eckardstein, Katchatryan, Vinnitskaya... Let us stop there: the list is a long one, all the more so as local pride – national or regional, and that is a debate we do not intend to get involved in – swells as we recall the achievements of Thomas Blondelle, Jean-Claude Vanden Eynden, Lorenzo Gatto, Yossiv Ivanov, and others.

It all began around 1900, when an encounter between two outstanding personalities led to a series of innovative, highly promising projects. On the one hand, Elisabeth von Wittelsbach, a Bavarian duchess, who had recently married Crown Prince Albert of Belgium and moved to Brussels. Through her father, a military man turned eminent ophthalmologist who was a pioneer of cataract operations, she had inherited, among other things, an overwhelming passion for music and was herself a very good violinist. A forceful personality, she was keen to make her mark on her age. On the other hand, Eugène Ysaÿe, a violin virtuoso who was just reaching the pinnacle of an exceptional career, worthy of his great talent. The first performer of Franck’s Violin Sonata, of Debussy’s Quartet, and of Chausson’s *Poème*, he had also founded a memorable quartet, a duo with Raoul Pugno that revolutionised the traditional recital, and a prestigious symphonic society that explored the modern repertoire. He also taught at the Brussels Conservatory and performed on every continent; he was hailed as the most famous virtuoso of the day.

When Albert I became king, Belgium acclaimed a queen whose love of art was not the least of her qualities. In 1912 Ysaÿe was appointed Royal Music Director, although his real ambition was to take a more active role at the helm of the Brussels Conservatory, an appointment that escaped him. His decline as a virtuoso saw him gradually abandon the concert stage after the War had driven him from



Belgium. As the Music Director of the Cincinnati Orchestra from 1918 to 1922, Ysaÿe was never again able to find a suitable position in post-war Belgium. An apostle of post-romanticism and a virtuoso-composer and, moreover, ageing and ill, he was not looked on with a favourable eye in the period of the Groupe des Six, Stravinsky, and the Viennese... Ysaÿe composed a musical testament of considerable importance (the six sonatas for solo violin) and, surrounded by the warmth of his intimates, including Queen Elisabeth, Thibaud, Kreisler, Cortot, Casals, and Szigeti, he enjoyed the life of a retired virtuoso, punctuated by regular appearances as a conductor and by the composition of works of varying importance. Not all of his projects, however, came to fruition.

As early as the early 1900s Ysaÿe had a clear idea of what he felt an international competition should be like. As a friend of Anton Rubinstein, he was acquainted with the competition that bore his name; several of his friends and partners had been laureates, including Ferruccio Busoni and Émile Bosquet. The Rubinstein Competition, held every five years and open to pianists and composers, had no successor after the Russian Revolution. As for the Warsaw Chopin Competition founded in 1927, though it might have been considered a model piano competition, it was essentially and exclusively intended to cultivate the best performers of Chopin; the Liszt Competition, founded in Budapest in 1933, was similar in nature.

What Ysaÿe wanted was a competition for young virtuosos, with extremely broad-ranging programmes, including contemporary music, that would highlight the technical and artistic maturity of the candidates and launch them on their careers. It was with this in mind that he thought of including an unpublished compulsory work that would be studied in seclusion, without help from any quarter and in particular from the candidate's teacher: the ultimate test.

Queen Elisabeth could not set up such a competition overnight. Ysaÿe died in 1931, shortly after the establishment of the Queen Elisabeth Music Foundation. Subsequently, the economic crisis and the accidental death of King Albert, followed by that of his daughter-in-law Queen Astrid, temporarily put into abeyance any large-scale artistic projects. It was only in 1937 that the first Ysaÿe Competition took place. An international jury of exceptionally high standing eagerly accepted the invitation. The sessions included compulsory – but not unpublished – works; applications poured in. The prestige of Ysaÿe's name, coupled with that of the Belgian court – Queen Elisabeth and the late King Albert were among the most universally admired heroes of the First World War – brought the elite of the violin world to Brussels.

The results of the competition made a profound impression: the Soviet school, with an assurance that bordered on arrogance, carried off all the prizes from the first down. The latter was awarded without the slightest discussion to the great David Oistrakh. Everyone else had to be content with crumbs; the Belgian violin school, though still a source of pride, failed and its absence from the final was much commented on; Arthur Grumiaux and Carlo Van Neste, both young and inexperienced, were unable to convince the jury.

The success of the first Ysaÿe Competition was decisive for subsequent events. Broadcast on the radio, the competition immediately found an audience, and its blend of sporting event and artistic quality at once created a following of loyal music-lovers. The second competition was held in 1938, this time featuring the piano. The lessons to be drawn were identical: although Moura Lympany (then still known as Mary Johnstone) slipped in between Emil Gilels (1st) and Jacob Flier (3rd), and although the prizes overall seemed more equitably distributed (a Belgian, André Dumortier, did brilliantly, finishing just behind a very young Italian pianist, Arturo Benedetti-Michelangeli, who was ranked 7th), the Soviet school once more emerged with head held high, looking at the rest with a somewhat condescending eye.

It was too much. Before war broke out, thanks to the support of an enlightened and generous patron, Baron Paul de Launoit, Queen Elisabeth inaugurated a boldly conceived musical institution, based on



the Soviet model and intended to make a noticeable improvement in the training conditions of young Belgian artists: this was the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel, whose good health nearly a century later bears witness to the soundness of the idea behind it. As for the Competition, circumstances led to its suspension for the time being. Belgian cultural life, while remaining intensely active during World War II, had entered an obviously difficult phase. Charles Houdret, the administrator and manager of the

Queen Elisabeth Music Foundation, which implemented the Queen's musical plans, became embroiled in financial scandals and the foundation sank into oblivion. Times were uncomfortable and unpredictable for the Belgian royal family during the immediate post-war period: two of Queen Elisabeth's children – Léopold III and Marie-José, an ephemeral Queen of Italy – lost their thrones. A third, Charles, held the Regency of Belgium for five years, but, though he was a princely artist, this period was unavoidably marked by one overriding priority: the economic and social reconstruction of the country.

In the spring of 1950, nonetheless, it was decided to relaunch the Ysaÿe Competition. Marcel Cuvelier, director of the Brussels Philharmonic Society and founder in 1940 of the youth-music organisation known as the Jeunesses Musicales de Belgique and in 1945, with René Nicoly, of the International Federation of Jeunesses Musicales, persuaded Queen Elisabeth to lend her name to the competition. Paul de Launoit loyally gave his total support to the venture, of which he became president. Alongside them, Jean van Straelen, administrator-secretary of the Royal Brussels Conservatory, played a more discreet – but no less essential – role; the competition was in good hands. The first qualifiers took place in the spring of 1951, in accordance with the principles directly inherited from the Ysaÿe Competition. From now on, the prestigious buildings of the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel would host the finalists for the period of seclusion. These buildings, indeed, were very quickly to become one of the competition's symbols, to the extent of overshadowing their original function, which was only revived in 1956.

The Competition developed rapidly. A founder member of the World Federation of International Music Competitions in 1957, ever since its foundation it has been considered the world over to be one of the most prestigious, but also one of the most demanding, in existence. It is restricted to the violin (since 1951), the piano (since 1952), composition (since 1953), and singing (since 1988). In each category, for half a century a period of four years separated each competition. Since 2007 the sabbatical year has been abolished (a universally welcomed move) and the competition has become annual, with a sequence of piano, singing, and violin. Need we go into more detail here? The history of the Competition, after all, is one of images, sounds, and memories, and while memories can be transmitted after a fashion from generation to generation, today images and sounds are available thanks to sound recordings, video, and archives – on which considerable effort has been expended in recent years, thanks to the support of our benefactors and sponsors. In this context, the key role played by Jacques Vaerewyck, director general of the Philharmonic Society and a member of the Competition's board, deserves recognition. He brought the competition into the modern era: starting in the 1960s he helped it to achieve financial independence and gave it solid foundations in society through sponsorship and via the media. Jacques Vaerewyck was also a highly respected vice-president of the Geneva-based World Federation of International Music Competitions.

It may, however, be useful to say more about certain particular aspects of this story, which is of such importance to the country's cultural life.



The competition venues

There have been three symbolic locations for ‘the Queen Elisabeth’.

The first of these is the **Royal Brussels Conservatory**. Its *Grande Salle*, inaugurated in 1876, bears its name uneasily: it is in fact small, though this is one of its great qualities. This Italian-style concert hall, designed for pure music with a stage rising in tiers up to the Cavaillé-Coll organ, is a dream venue for a chamber music concert or a recital. And, indeed, the Competition semi-finals are often more like a concert than a competition round; like the first round, they have played to full houses at the Conservatory down the years. And yet the semi-finals were long handicapped in the eyes of true music-lovers by programmes that set too great a store on technical difficulty, especially as far as the violin was concerned. A notable change took place in the 1970s and today the semi-finals are seen as a highlight of the competition in many ways.

The second of these venues is the **Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel**. This functional and elegant building was inaugurated in 1939 in Waterloo as a higher institute for music teaching, in which resident pupils would study the piano, the violin, the viola, the cello, and composition with their chosen teacher in exceptional comfort and tranquillity. The Chapel was given a complete revamp in 2004 and now operates with masters in residence. For each edition of the Queen Elisabeth Competition for violin or piano, the Chapel gives its pupils leave and places itself at the disposal of the Competition for the period of seclusion of the twelve finalists. The purpose of this seclusion, which lasts one week, is to allow the candidates to master the unpublished compulsory concerto, without any assistance from outside. Warm and convivial despite the tension of the ordeal, the Chapel usually leaves an indelible impression on the finalists.

The third and last of these locations is the **Brussels Centre for Fine Arts (Palais des Beaux-Arts)**. One of Queen Elisabeth’s great artistic projects, it was opened in 1928 and was designed by the architect Victor Horta. Its great concert hall (which seats 2,052), with its unsurpassed acoustics, is the venue for all the finals and for the first singing competitions also hosted the semi-final recitals and performances with orchestra. Seats are almost impossible to obtain for a final, for despite the live broadcasts on television and radio, it is, without doubt, ‘the place to be’. In order to be up to date? No: in order to be sure not to miss the kind of musical event only ‘the Queen Elisabeth’ has the secret of.

Three locations? Three, that is, if you overlook the ‘beehive’, the Competition’s offices, where a dynamic and efficient team beavers away, under the presidency these days of Count Jean-Pierre de Launoit and under the leadership of Michel-Etienne Van Neste, the Competition’s Secretary General. And if you also overlook one of the Competition’s distinctive characteristics, one greatly appreciated by the candidates: the host families that offer ideal, welcoming accommodation to young men and women who find themselves in *terra incognita*, sometimes at a distance of ten hours by plane from home.

The year 2012 sees the addition to these symbolic, historic locations of Flagey, the former national radio premises designed by Joseph Diongre that has hosted the great names of the musical history of the 20th century, with the early rounds of the Competition taking place in Studio 4 while awaiting the renovation of the main auditorium in the Conservatory.

Weathering time

Some languages, such as French, use the same word to indicate ‘time’ and ‘weather’. And yet, precision is necessary when estimating the influence of a particular context and of the electric tension that pervades the concert hall during certain competitions. A Soviet candidate winning in the city where



NATO has its headquarters (1951), a first Israeli laureate, defeating a Soviet candidate in 1971; a laureate and future winner, Nai-Yuan Hu, playing the Elgar concerto at the very moment in 1985 when British football fans were creating, just a few minutes away, a frightful human tragedy: events like these can fill the hall at the Centre for Fine Arts (Palais des Beaux-Arts) with unique vibrations of a kind that can be lost in recording.

The weather, on the other hand, can push the thermometer up to 40° C or more onstage, strip the jackets off an orchestra under the threat of strike action, and make the piano ivories glisten with sweat. The television spotlights of the 1970s and 1980s were merciless. Belgian spring weather – believe it or not – can also be merciless. Some finalists owe their failure or, less dramatically, a variety of minor hitches to this heat – experiences discs and the radio inevitably overlook.

The competition, of course, takes place over time – and those competitors who end up occupying the top places show immense powers of resistance: they have lived through a whole month of tension and testing. Others may have cracked up during the final, failing to achieve the ranking their talent promised. The word ‘exhaustion’ invariably recurs in laureates’ recollections. But that is not all: for those who achieve the highest places, the declaration of the results heralds further fatigue: a succession of laureates’ concerts, including a gala performance with orchestra – the climax of each edition – in the presence of the Belgian royal family. After that there are the concerts that external agents hasten to organise with the leading laureates, with the active support of the Competition; these are numerous and go well beyond the borders of Belgium. Here too, over the years, the organisation has been able to help provide optimal assistance to the laureates and to offer them many artistic opportunities.

East and West

Although the U.S. kept a low profile in the two Ysaÿe Competitions of 1937 and 1938, the country has been present from the very first edition of the Queen Elisabeth Competition. In view of what this prestigious competition meant to the Soviet authorities, a real rivalry developed from 1951 on. That was certainly the way audiences – far from indifferent to East-West relations – and the critics saw it, despite the occasional half-hearted denial.

The tone was set in 1951. Even more than before the war, the attitude of the Soviet laureates, perceived as arrogant, and the generally partisan way this was portrayed in the Belgian press were not without influence on the course of events. Leonid Kogan flew through the competition and on his return to Moscow gave interviews in which he was anything but tender towards the Competition, the Queen, and Belgium and its middle classes. Tension rose as the menace of war grew, while the Korean War created a violent shock in Belgium; this led to a complete absence of Soviet participants in 1952. Later, however, and over a long period, the Soviets, with Oistrakh at their head, were to be among the most loyal supporters of the event, Kogan even serving on the 1971 and 1976 juries; Queen Elisabeth, moreover, was the guest of honour at the first Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958, which caused quite a stir in Belgium.

The U.S.S.R.-U.S.A. contest at first seemed to be well balanced. The U.S. victors Senofski (1955) – whose victory over Sitkovetsky caused a sensation – and Frager (1960) were joined by Laredo (1959) who, although Bolivian, was trained by the U.S.-based Ivan Galamian. So Vladimir Ashkenazy’s win in 1956 was welcome to the Russians. From 1963 on, however, the Soviet steamroller really got going and it seemed that nothing could stop it. The sequence of Michlin, Mogilevsky (1964), Hirshhorn (1967), Novitskaya (1968), Afanassiev (1972), Faerman (1975), and Bezverkhny (1976) was interrupted only by



the Israeli Miriam Fried (1971) – another sensational winner. The U.S. rout was particularly crushing in the violin competitions: in 1967 and 1971 the U.S.A. had no laureate in the final.

At first, the media showed an almost caricatural interest in the candidates from the East. Who were they? What did they do? What did they eat? How many hours a day did they work? This fascination, however, gradually faded. The Russians of the Brezhnev era no longer had the same mass appeal and no longer seemed to flourish. Flight to the West became the rule for the representatives of the East: in the wake of Ashkenazy, Berman, and Markov, it was the turn of Hirshhorn, Kremer, and Nodel, followed later by Novitskaya, Leonskaya, Afanassiev, Faerman, Egorov, and others who fled their native land under the horrified gaze of Oistrakh and Gilels. For some it turned out well, although not for all. The focus was no longer constantly on the international rivalry, but often more on the rescuing of artists in distress who felt almost asphyxiated behind the Iron Curtain. The U.S.S.R. was in disarray, and, mired in a political impasse, shut itself off from the outside world and announced a boycott of the Competition. There were no official Soviet candidates from 1978 to 1987.

This was a time of some uncertainty and disappointment for the Competition, which made great efforts to persuade the Soviet authorities to change their minds. The Russians were missed; but they came back. The year 1989 and Vadim Repin marked the grand return of the Soviet bear. However, though the youthful violinist was remarkable and appeared to be detached from political preoccupations, the bear was sick and events in Berlin soon afterwards seemed to bring the Russian-American conflict to a final end, all the more so as U.S. policy led to a shortage of fine U.S. artists, for whom Europe no longer seems to be a priority. One hopes to see this trend reversed in our own time.

Violin, piano, and voice

Born for and through the violin, the Ysaÿe Competition bequeathed its tradition to the Queen Elisabeth Competition. Inaugurated by the violin in 1951, the Competition celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1976 (which was also the centenary of the birth of Queen Elisabeth) by changing the usual competition sequence in favour of the instrument. And the 50th anniversary in 2001 would also be celebrated with the violin. Nonetheless, it was the piano that, starting in 1952, became the other spearhead of the Competition and perhaps even – although with only a slight edge – the most popular. Although attempts to arouse popular interest in the composition competition, as we will see, were not successful, the considerable national and international success of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in the violin and piano categories soon led people to wonder: why not broaden the concept and create new categories, in particular for the cello?

The answer to these questions was provided by an unhoped-for revival of singing in Belgium (which owed much to the success of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie/Koninklijke Muntchouwburg in the 1980s under the management of Gerard Mortier). Thanks to personalities such as Mortier himself, José Van Dam, and Jules Bastin, and with the active involvement of the Competition's President, Count Jean-Pierre de Launoit (himself a keen opera buff), a singing competition was set up on an experimental basis in 1988, between the piano competition and the violin competition.

Since the public and critical reception was on the whole enthusiastic, the new competition was repeated. Its success and its quality have grown steadily since then. Following the traditionally demanding nature of the Competition's rules, the application of which has been the subject of passionate debate (are there really singers who can excel at once in a lied by Wolf, an atonal set piece, a bravura scene by Donizetti, and a Handel aria?), the singing competition worked very hard to find its bearings and its emergence as one of the great competitions in this domain, with a proud record to point to, is today beyond doubt.



Compulsory works and the composition competition

The Queen Elisabeth Competition made it a point of honour, from its foundation, to be involved in the world of contemporary music and the compulsory unpublished concerto in the final was a great step in this direction. However, in the post-war atmosphere of renewed optimism this was regarded as insufficient. Whereas before the war the Queen Elisabeth Music Foundation had planned an expansion of the Ysaÿe Competition to include orchestral conducting (an idea still-born because of the imminence of war), the new Competition management, from 1950, envisaged a major composition competition. Hopes were high, in 1953, for the first edition. Yet a prestigious jury (Nadia Boulanger, Malipiero, Frank Martin, Martinů, Panufnik, Absil, Poot, and others), performances of the scores by an excellent orchestra, and the unconditional support of Queen Elisabeth, were all of no avail: the competition failed to find an audience. Despite a succession of changes, the following editions (1957, 1961, 1965, and 1969) confirmed the insurmountable difficulties of organising a public composition competition. Further modifications, followed by total abandonment, led, however, to the adoption in 1991 of a formula that was undoubtedly far removed from the original idea but was clearly more realistic. The Composition Competition is now held to choose the compulsory concerto for the violin and piano competitions. Open to candidates from all over the world, it has been quite successful in this format, with the winning composer's work assured of extensive international exposure.

For a while the set concertos were reserved for Belgian composers – with one notable exception. From 1951 to 1956 a national competition was held, but from 1959 to 1989 (except for 1987, when the restriction to Belgian composers applied once more), the works were commissioned. These twenty or so Belgian concertos have been much talked about: too modern, not modern enough, too difficult, not difficult enough, and so on. What has not been said about those concertos! They aimed, most of them with undeniable qualities, to be both a faithful reflection of the composer's style and a vehicle for showing off the talents of very varied performers. Listening to them again today, at a time when aesthetic dictates are clearly less forceful, one feels keen to release most of them from their purgatory. A significant selection was included in the releases to mark the 50th anniversary of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 2001; this made it possible to evaluate them and to realise that they were often better than had been reputed. Belgian composers, it should be pointed out, have continued to be commissioned to write compulsory works for the semi-finals.

Orchestras

Orchestral accompaniment has formed part of the final ever since the first Ysaÿe Competition. At the time, the recently formed symphony orchestra of the public broadcasting authority (the Grand Orchestre Symphonique de l'INR/Groot Symfonisch Orkest van het NIR) fulfilled its mission gloriously under the baton of its conductor and founder Franz André. A talented violinist and a pupil of Weingartner, the tyrannical André had imposed himself as a conductor of great stature, conducting the premieres of numerous works by Stravinsky, Milhaud, and the finest Belgian composers. He it was who in 1951 became the conductor of 'the Queen Elisabeth', this time at the head of the National Orchestra.

Officially founded in 1936, the National Orchestra of Belgium had got to off to a fine beginning. Before the war it had benefited from the regular collaboration of Erich Kleiber and it reached its apogee about 1960, with André Cluytens as its music director. 'The Queen Elisabeth', however, makes great demands on a conductor's time and Cluytens only made sporadic appearances in the context of the competition. So from 1951 to 1964 it was Franz André who was solely identified with the 'Competition orchestra'. His vast experience, his familiarity with contemporary musical idioms, and his flexibility as an accompanist worked wonders, while his composure earned him the eternal gratitude – or ingratitude – of candidates who were helped to recover from a memory loss, a broken string, or a 'stuck page'. As a



member of the jury in 1967, Franz André no longer appeared on the podium, ceding his place to René Defossez. A page had been turned.

The gradual devolution of Belgian cultural affairs to the country's linguistic Communities affected subsequent decisions. The Orchestre de la Radio Télévision Belge/Orkest van de Belgische Radio en Televisie (RTB/BRT) was the successor to the National Orchestra, at times with a Flemish conductor (Daniel Sternefeld, 1968), at times with a Walloon conductor (René Defossez, 1971). While the National Orchestra reappeared in 1972, with Defossez as conductor, it was intended that the orchestras of the broadcasting authorities (now split into the RTB and the BRT) would accompany future competitions. But the participation of the (Flemish) BRT orchestra in 1975, conducted by Irwin Hoffman, proved to be a one-off. The National Orchestra returned in 1976, conducted by Georges Octors, himself an excellent violinist whose qualities as an accompanist were highly appreciated and strengthened his position as artistic director of the Brussels-based ensemble. (Octors would return to the Competition at the head of the Orchestre Royal de Chambre de Wallonie for the 2001 and 2003 semi-finals.) The best days of the National Orchestra appeared by then, however, to be over. So nobody was surprised when, in 1993, the decision was taken to turn to the symphony orchestras of Liège and Antwerp, which, thanks to the support of the Flemish and French-speaking Communities, had developed into orchestras of international stature: the Liège Philharmonic Orchestra (whose artistic director, Pierre Bartholomé, conducted the 1995 competition) and the Royal Flemish Philharmonic Orchestra (1997). Starting in 1999, however, the National Orchestra of Belgium, which had been reborn under Yuri Simonov, once more became a regular partner of the violin and piano competitions, performing with guest conductors. Among these, Gilbert Varga became a regular favourite between 2001 and 2009, while Marin Alsop made her presence felt in the 2010 piano competition. The closing concert of the 50th-anniversary year, 2001, conducted by Lorin Maazel, also deserves special mention.

The voice competitions found an ideal partner right from the start (1988) in the La Monnaie/De Munt Symphony Orchestra. Under Sylvain Cambreling (1988) and, later, Marc Soustrot (1992, 1996, and 2000 – he also conducted the 1997 violin competition with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic Orchestra and the 1999 piano competition with the National Orchestra of Belgium), the orchestra of the Brussels opera house succeeded in the delicate operation of providing accompaniment of the quality required for candidates to be heard at their best. It was the opera house's music director himself, Kazushi Ono, who conducted the 2008 finals; he was followed in 2011 by Carlo Rizzi. For the baroque repertoire, the need for appropriate accompaniment was felt, as Belgium was one of the historical centres of the baroque revival. Having opted in 1992 and 1996 for an ensemble that used modern instruments (Patrick Peire's Collegium Instrumentale Brugense), the Competition management took the long-awaited step of choosing an ensemble that used period instruments, the Academy of Ancient Music under Paul Goodwin, which created a sensation when it accompanied the 2000 singing competition. The same approach was taken for the 2004 semi-finals, but lieder and French art songs came back into their own at the Conservatory subsequently and the finals are now exclusively accompanied by the La Monnaie/De Munt Symphony Orchestra.

The quest for the ideal accompaniment is never-ending: for the 50th-anniversary edition in 2001, featuring the violin, in the semi-finals candidates were able to perform a Mozart concerto with what is now the Orchestre Royal de Chambre de Wallonie; since 2005, with a Mozart concerto having become compulsory for both pianists and violinists, this orchestra has been conducted by Paul Goodwin. The accompanists provided for those violin and singing candidates who do not have their own official pianist are of excellent quality. Some are former laureates of the Competition, including Jean-Claude Vanden Eynden and Daniel Blumenthal; others are first-class international accompanists, selected by the Competition.



The juries

The juries of the Queen Elisabeth Competition are legendary. Perfectly silent, their members – the ‘killers’, as Isaac Stern mischievously called them – are the eyes and ears before which the candidates try to forget their nerves, the penholders who give marks that are secret and that cannot be changed, and the masters who have designated some forty first laureates from 1951 to today, whether or not posterity has confirmed their judgements.

The prestige of these juries is undeniable. How could a connoisseur of violin history not swoon on browsing randomly through the list of jury members in, for example, 1971: Avramov, Bobesco, Calvet, Francescatti, Gulli, Kogan, Kurtz, Menuhin, Neaman, Octors, Odnoposoff, Raskin, Stern, Szigeti, Uminska, and Vegh? Examples like that could be multiplied, but this is not the place for lists of that kind: the Competition’s excellent website does that job. There is one unquestionable certainty: the judging capacities of such a jury are clearly enormous. Which only makes the questions raised by the lists of laureates all the more fascinating. Listening to the Competition archives, one is obviously greatly tempted to enter a belated appeal against a historical verdict. Goodness! How could those great masters have classified Entremont 10th and Hans Graf 11th in 1952? Why did Vasary only come 6th in 1956? Did Zakhar Bron, who taught both Repin and Vengerov, really deserve to be only 12th in 1971? Was it right to place Egorov 3rd in 1975, behind two compatriots who are today hardly heard at all?

The jury always has its reasons. The number of members and the absence of discussion are solid guarantees. And the jury judges what it hears in the final, though coloured by the memory of the first round and of the semi-finals (with the latter becoming ever more important). True, Emmanuel Ax, James Tocco, and Cyprien Katsaris (7th, 8th, and 9th in 1972) were already great artists. Yet some aspects of their performances that evening – whether on the artistic or on the technical level – were less convincing for the likes of Annie Fischer, Alexandre Brailowsky, Leon Fleisher, Emil Gilels, Vlado Perlemuter, and company, who listened to them most attentively. This is the unbending law of the Competition. Subsequently, as careers develop, the cards are reshuffled, with the help of Lady Luck; revenge – peaceful, of course – is, thankfully, frequent.

It should be added that the Competition management could not, with understandable greediness, resist the pleasure of getting some of the jury members to perform during the competition; during the candidates’ week of seclusion, for example, some memorable concerts have taken place – as on the evening in 1959 when Oistrakh, Menuhin and Grumiaux joined forces under the baton of Franz André. The likes of Oistrakh, Gilels, and Frager made many an appearance at such times, to the great delight of their admirers. In recent years the emphasis has been more on helping the candidates, with master classes given by members of the jury during the week of seclusion, thanks to the Competition’s benefactors.

Chairpersons of the jury

First among equals, the chairperson of the jury has a key role. This involves acting as the go-between between the prestigious judges and the crowd, publicly thanking the royal family for its presence, the orchestra for its dedication over six consecutive evenings, and announcing, in an indescribably electric atmosphere, the final result in the course of the Saturday night. This role was first filled by a great organiser, Marcel Cuvelier, director of the Competition and also director of the Brussels Philharmonic Society. After his death, logically enough, the task was taken up by leading Belgian musicians, starting with two directors of the Royal Brussels Conservatory, Léon Jongen and Marcel Poot.



Though Léon Jongen's reign was short (he was 76 when he succeeded Cuvelier in 1960), that of Marcel Poot was long. Up until 1980 this mischievous, elegant man of short stature, his nose invariably surmounted by thick round 1930s-style spectacles, a cigarette glued to his lips, and endowed with a famously dry sense of humour, officiated with authority and competence. Thereafter it was the turn of Eugène Traey, a first-rate pianist, pupil of Casadesus, Leimer, and Gieseeking, partner of Grumiaux, and a well-known teacher. Most recently, since 1996, the current director of the Koninklijk Conservatorium Brussel, Arie Van Lysebeth, has taken up the torch with the elegance and competence for which he is renowned.

The media

Honour where honour is due: without radio and television, the prestigious archives of the Queen Elisabeth Competition would not be what they are today. The public broadcasting service, the Institut National de Radiodiffusion Belge (INR/NIR), installed in an ultra-modern building (today's Flagey) in 1938, was considered one of the most outstanding of its day for live music. Urged on by strong personalities such as Paul Collaer and Franz André, live broadcasts of concerts at first considerably restricted the broadcasting of the '78' records that less well-run institutions had to settle for. So it was quite natural for the Ysaÿe Competition to be broadcast live in 1937 and for the Queen Elisabeth Competition to be broadcast from 1951 on, with the radio broadcasting the finals in full and carefully recording them for future broadcasts. Starting in 1955, the interval commentary was entrusted to a specialist, the composer and music critic Jacques Stehman (whose memory was kept alive long afterwards by a prize awarded by the listeners of the RTBF), who surrounded himself with journalists in order to make the Competition a popular radio event, which soon came to be rebroadcast thanks to the European Broadcasting Union. Flemish radio followed suit and also started to broadcast the Competition, with appropriate commentary, to the Dutch-speaking part of the country; it also established a prize awarded by its listeners, the Sternefeld Prize; from 1978 to 2011 the journalist Fred Brouwers was 'the voice of the Competition' for Flemish radio listeners and television viewers.

Media coverage received an extra boost from television, whose interest in the Competition dates from 1959. Technical limitations, however, and suspicion of the new medium meant that things got off to a slow start. Initially, the gala aspect, such as the awarding of the prizes by Queen Elisabeth, received more attention than the music. Neither the original audience at the Centre for Fine Arts (Palais des Beaux-Arts) nor the management of the Competition were prepared to put up with the cumbersome set-up and harsh lighting required by the cameras of the time. From 1964 on, however, television filmed the rehearsals in the Palais des Beaux-Arts as an item for the evening news programme. Starting in 1967, a fixed camera made it possible to immortalise a selection of moments from the semi-finals and finals; these were supplemented by a great many reports and interviews. Live broadcasting started in 1972 with partial coverage, which became total in 1978. This has continued without a break on French-speaking television, but since 1997 Flemish television has replaced this coverage with reports and with broadcasts at a later time, much to the regret of thousands of Flemish music-lovers, who look forward to the return some day of the previous, more satisfactory arrangement.

This international media coverage, combined with the sustained interest of some of the print media, is unique in the world. It has given the laureates an impressive popular base that has led a number of them to settle in Belgium.

The Competition has also reached music-lovers through the favourite medium for musical emotion of most of them, the disc. In 1967, the Discothèque Nationale, founded in 1956 by Jean Salkin, thanks to the support of Queen Elisabeth, issued – as a homage to the late queen – a record devoted to the history of the Competition, with recordings of its first three laureates. From then on the Belgian subsidiary of Deutsche Grammophon issued, after each edition, a series of records produced with the



greatest care. Local subsidiaries of major recording companies, however, would soon stop releasing classical music productions of their own. In 1983 an independent Belgian label run by René Gailly took up the baton; he was followed between 1996 and 2005 by other private partners, before the Competition took recording matters into its own hands in 2007. The live recordings of the Competition, traditionally released a week after the results are announced – quite a technical feat – are still today among the biggest commercial successes of the classical sector in Belgium.

Since 2001, finally, thanks to close collaboration with the public broadcasting services and Belgacom, the Queen Elisabeth Competition has been one of the first international competitions to offer surfers live streaming of its successive rounds. Thanks to the Internet, the Queen Elisabeth Competition has extended its media presence well beyond the frontiers of Belgium, enabling it to reach an ever wider audience of music-lovers and professionals.

All of these sound and audio-visual recordings, as well as a large number of photographs that capture the atmosphere of the Competition, have been the subject for almost ten years now of a complex labour of stock-taking, restoration, and digitising, thanks to which some are already available on this website. But this Herculean task is still in its early days: new material will be added on a regular basis to this multimedia library, the Competition's virtual memory.

Michel Stockhem