Who the devil was Paganini?

We reveal the secrets of the virtuoso's demonic genius

Tomb with a view
A tour of the world's most remarkable composer graves

Jaap van Zweden
We meet the New York Philharmonic's new maestro
In safe hands

The World Federation of International Music Competitions ensures fair play and high quality and provides an arena for discussion and mutual support amongst its members.

Taking part in an international competition is a terrific investment for a young musician. Self-discovery, repertoire rehearsal and developing confidence on stage require disciplined preparation and offer the potential of life-changing rewards. But how best to select the competition to enter – one which is dedicated to you and your musicianship? The World Federation of International Music Competitions (WFIMC) is the governing and standards body which maintains a wide and influential network of membership. Each and every WFIMC Member Competition has your interests at heart – look for this stamp of excellence.

Benjamin Woodroffe
CEO World Federation of International Music Competitions

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The matter of WFIMC membership is decided by the votes of existing members.cast during the Federation’s annual General Assembly. It’s a process designed to guarantee quality and uphold standards.

“This is a not-for-profit industry body that, over the past 60 years, has codified and refined a set of binding Statutes and advisory Recommendations,” Woodroffe notes. “Those have been built primarily to ensure that the competitions are fair to their competitors, that they give adequate rehearsal time, for instance, and engage the majority of their jurors from outside the host country. Any competition wishing to join must meet criteria that relate to artistic and operational excellence. Our governing documents are public, available on our

Deborah Kelleher: ‘It’s not about success or failure’
website for any prospective members and competition candidates to read. It’s a transparent and democratic organisation.

The Federation’s rules and guidelines cover everything from competitor age limits to the prompt payment of prize money and fees, but they do not prescribe repertoire or musical disciplines. ‘We don’t want to see “cookie-cutter” competitions – all the same wherever you go,’ says Woodroofe. ‘We’re looking for each one to have a different character – to have its own artistic personality.’ The Federation’s 122 members comprise competitions from the classical mainstream – with pianists, violinists and singers well served by them – together with events for conductors, composers, percussionists and brass. It presently has expressions of interest from competitions devoted to choral music and Baroque opera, and recently received an inquiry from a Chinese Opera competition.

Today’s WRMC offers a blend of venerable institutions (its 13 founder members among them), relative newcomers to the competition scene and others still in their infancy. Two brand-new competitions have approached the Federation within the past few months, following an upward trend in awareness of the benefits of membership. ‘They want the stamp of WRMC quality, to show prospective competitors that they’re serious,’ Benjamin Woodroofe explains. ‘They see that the Federation is the reference point for music competitions worldwide.’ Those seeking membership must follow a formal process, complete with a fixed annual application deadline.

‘The Federation gave me confidence to connect with my peers and share ideas’

vice president, says that the importance of competitions is not lost on its 300-plus members. ‘Competitions give young musicians a sense of performance standards among their peers and offer invaluable experience,’ she says. ‘From the AEC’s viewpoint, the mentoring and professional opportunities that many competitions now provide are equally invaluable.’

Keleher notes how the conservatoire sector helps students to treat competitions as stages in their artistic development, rather than make-or-break career definers. ‘It doesn’t have to be about success or failure. It’s about the learning process. That’s where the conservatoires can kick in. At the Royal Irish Academy of Music we have performance psychology, career counselling, professional mentoring and so on. Conservatoires must respect how important competitions are as a learning curve, but to be able to help students if they’ve had a bad day in a competition or think that a jury decision has been unfair.’

Federation members are encouraged to shape the future of competitions as part of a dialogue with WRMC peers, associate organisations and other industry partners. Benjamin Woodroofe highlights the Federation’s function as a forum for the exchange of best practice and a space where colleagues can discuss challenges and opportunities. Recent analysis of the WRMC membership has deepened the Federation’s knowledge. It has also helped the organisation’s secretariat form a strategic view of the geographic spread of competitions, the range of disciplines they cover, and the reach among musicians.

Before arriving at the WRMC’s Geneva headquarters in 2013, Woodroofe ran the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition for a decade. He recalls seeking guidance from the Federation and tapping the collective experience of its membership. ‘Tried to lean on the Federation for contacts, advice and connections with media in different parts of the world. It gave me a great deal of confidence to connect with my peers and share ideas. This sharing of knowledge is becoming increasingly valuable, especially as the established European competitions learn from newer competitions in Asia and the Americas, and vice versa.’
The company of friends

The World Federation of International Music Competitions is always on the lookout for top-quality new members. We meet the competitions who have made the grade and recently joined...

Globalisation may be under heavy fire from right and left. But the ideal of international cooperation and cultural exchange continues to burn bright among those born over the past quarter-century. The World Federation of International Music Competitions understands the value of uniting young people from different countries, of bringing together the next generation of musicians under conditions that test their talents and build lifelong friendships.

The Federation’s campaign to reach potential competitors has been repaid by steep increases in competition entrants. This year’s Honens Piano Competition, for example, saw an almost 3% increase in applications, while the last edition. The WPMC’s new smartphone-friendly website, meanwhile, attracts its largest share of visitors from the key 18-24 age group, self-motivated members of Generation Z, the most coveted constituency among competition candidates.

With its networking opportunities and deep reach into the talent pool, the WPMC also proved irresistible to the Bamberg-based Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition, San Antonio’s The Gunwitz and the Zhejiang International Mozart Competition. Each was elected to membership in April. During its formative years, the Mahler Competition and its beletters, the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra, were too busy establishing the event to apply. The matter of membership arose when the orchestra’s chief executive, Marcus Rudolf Axt, spotted the omission. “We had to be there,” he notes. “Membership allows us to connect easily with others. There are few conducting competitions and not so many outstanding...

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talents to take part in them. The Federation is a very good way for us to share information and coordinate our activities with other organizations.

News of the Mahler Competition’s First edition in 2004 reached a virtually unknown candidate from Venezuela. Gustavo Dudamel’s winning performance of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony achieved legendary status and put the Mahler Competition on the map. Subsequent laureates include Ainäis Rubino, a former conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. They were all judged against that big symphonic repertoire, observes Marcus Avt. “You have to show personality and charisma in Mahler beyond technical ability. This is the repertoire where you can really see if someone is gifted or not.”

Competition candidates work only with the Bamberg Symphony. As Avt puts it, they get their hands on the full orchestra from the first round. “You can see they’re thrilled, especially when they’ve been used to working with a student orchestra in the early stages of other competitions. Our players have their own interpretation of Mahler’s music in their genes, so the young conductors must work hard to create a blank sheet on which to project their interpretation. That’s when you can really judge the candidates.”

Marina Mahler, the competition’s honorary jury president, insists that its repertoire must include new works in addition to the music of her grandfather. She also plays a role in making competition candidates feel at ease. “Bamberg is a friendly place,” notes Avt. “Every candidate stays here until the competition ends. They talk to jury members, get tips for practice, mingle with the players. And the Mahler Competition is a good PR opportunity for the orchestra, as it’s the only time when key people in the music business come to Bamberg.”

Music industry leaders appear set to add the Chinese coastal city of Zhuhai to their top travel destinations. The biennial Zhuhai International Mozart Competition has achieved remarkable success since its launch in 2013, thanks not least to the biennial event’s partnership with Salzburg’s University Mozarteum and the Salzburg Chamber Soloists. Lu Yao, the International Mozart Competition’s inspirational founder, says it has been a great help to her Zhuhai enterprise to be accepted by peer organisations. “The Federation takes very few new members every year, so the other competitions created something special in Salzburg. It’s an honour that they chose Musical Bridges and invited us to take it forward.”

Grobokhovskii trained as a pianist in Moscow in Soviet times. She became a professor at the city’s Gnessin State Musical College before settling in the US 30 years ago. Musical Bridges, established in 1998, exists to promote cultural diversity and ‘unite, educate and inspire’ through musical and visual arts. Its influence is reflected in the commission of a new chamber work for piano and world music instruments for the 2020 edition of The Gurtwitz. The revamped competition offers significant prize money and a final round concerto date with the San Antonio Symphony.

“We’re all looking at ways of making classical music more accessible and ensuring that it stays alive for centuries,” comments Grobokhovskii. “We hope that by becoming a member of the WFMIC, we can attract outstanding pianists from around the world. It’s always good to have contact with like-minded people.”

For more info, visit www.wfmic-fmcim.org