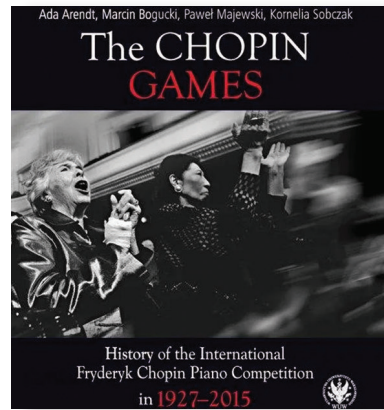


final section, 'Regards amis'. These friends passed along their love and knowledge of Chopin, his music and his pedagogy. In this light, most suggestive is Eigeldinger's addition of a sole appendix section consisting of excerpts from Baudelaire's critical writings on Delacroix. The final excerpt is drawn from the poet's *Œuvre et vie d'Eugène Delacroix* (1863), his tribute to his painter friend, who died that year. This move, at the end of a book on Chopin's friends, hints at, I hope, a next step for Eigeldinger: a book about the quarter-century *after* Chopin's death and the resonance of Chopin in later French music, literature and art.



LISA MCCORMICK

review

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The Chopin Games: History of the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in 1927-2015
Edited by Paweł Majewski;
translated by Tomasz Zymer

Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021.
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When I began researching international competitions in classical music in the early 2000s, the literature available on the topic was sparse. Pianists pointed me towards Joseph Horowitz's journalistic exposé *The Ivory Trade: Music and the Business of Music at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition* (Summit Books, 1990) and to Wendy Thompson's conversations with Fanny Waterman in *Piano Competition: The Story of the Leeds* (Faber and Faber, 1990). String players sent me to the library archives to unearth influential reports published by string teachers' associations and memorable articles by eminent pedagogues published in music magazines. These publications provided colourful anecdotes, strong opinions and the occasional glimpse behind the scenes,

but no systematic scholarly investigation existed to place these in context. Even official histories of the organisations running competitions were rare. A search of the library catalogues returned only one monograph available in English: Thierry Bouckaert's *Elisabeth's Dream, a Musical Offering: Fifty Years of the Queen Elisabeth Competition* (Editions Complexe, 2001). Indeed, the lack of publicly available information about twentieth-century competitions was troubling enough for Gustav Alink, the mathematician who later founded the Alink-Argerich Foundation, that he took it upon himself to compile and publish a listing of participants and results in the three-volume compendium *International Piano Competitions* (G. A. Alink, 1990).

The literature has since expanded. In 2010, the bicentenary of Fryderyk Chopin's birth, three reference books on the Chopin Competition were published: the English translation of Janusz Ekiert's *The Endless Search for Chopin: The History of the International Fryderyk Piano Chopin Competition in Warsaw* (Muza), Stanisław Dybowski's encyclopaedic *The Laureates of the Chopin Competitions in Warsaw* (Selene) and *The International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Photographs 1927–2010* (NIFC), which featured images from the archives. Five years later a trio of academic publications appeared: my book *Performing Civility: International Competitions in Classical Music* (Cambridge University Press), Kiril Tomoff's *Virtuosi Abroad: Soviet Music and Imperial Competition During the Early Cold War, 1945–1958* (Cornell University Press) and Izabela Wagner's *Producing Excellence: The Making of Virtuosos* (Rutgers University Press). These three studies explored the cultural, political and educational contexts surrounding music competitions. Others have since focused on a particular competition victory. Nigel Cliff's *Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story – How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War*

(Harper 2016) and Stuart Isaacoff's *When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn's Cold War Triumph and Its Aftermath* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2017) both examine the significance of Cliburn's win at the inaugural Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow.

The Chopin Games makes an important and valuable contribution to this growing literature by providing a fascinating historical overview of one of the longest-running and most prestigious competitions on the circuit. As the editor, Paweł Majewski, makes clear in the introduction, this is not an 'official' history that filters out missteps, challenges and tensions to construct a flattering narrative about the organisation's rise to prominence. Neither does it seek to enter aesthetic debates about competitors' performances or to recount the personal memories of participants. Instead, this book approaches the Chopin Competition as a cultural event whose significance is not only musical; it is an occasion where the nation is performed for Poles and for a global audience. The contributing authors – Ada Arendt, Marcin Bogucki, Paweł Majewski and Kornelia Sobczak – draw on their interdisciplinary expertise in Polish studies to trace the competition's evolving presence in the Polish public sphere by reconstructing and interpreting the discourse around it.

The primary source material for this reconstruction is coverage from Polish newspapers and magazines, especially in the chapters about the first three cycles. As Majewski explains, most official records from the early years of the competition were stored in the Warsaw Philharmonic Hall, which was badly damaged during the Second World War. Despite this limitation, a vivid picture emerges. From the very beginning, intense debates raged between journalists and critics about the competition results, because they intersected with ideological concerns about the nation, race and 'Polish-ness'. These become recurring themes in future

competition cycles, along with conflicting views about democratisation and the fraught relationship between the jury, music critics and the audience.

In later chapters, the amount and prominence of press coverage provides the authors with a useful gauge of popular interest in the event, just as the number of applications, and the tally of countries from which they were sent, measures its prestige among musicians. Press coverage supplies important details about concurrent events that either coloured or disrupted the competition, such as delays with the construction of Philharmonic Hall in 1949, the flu epidemics in 1965 and 2015, and the presidential elections from 1990 onward; it also allows Bogucki to challenge the received narrative that Blechacz mania started from the beginning of the 2005 competition. When the voices of competitors, jurors and organisers are heard, it is through their statements at press conferences and in published interviews.

The authors also draw on a wide range of data sources beyond press cuttings. Documents as diverse as government reports and personal diaries are used to explain how a shortage of pianos hampered organisers of the first post-war competition in 1949, while survey results convey the demographic composition and musical tastes of competition followers in 2015. To show how Chopin, and the competition, featured in Polish popular culture and everyday life, the authors quote from humorous horoscopes, song lyrics, popular novels, and scripts from pre-war cabaret puppet shows and communist-era student theatre; they also describe cartoons, novelty action figures, public art installations, films made for television and Telekomunikacja Polska phone cards. The competition's gradual transformation into a media event comes through in discussions about how much of the competition aired on Polish radio and television and how internet platforms and technologies were

incorporated in more recent years. It is unfortunate that no images accompanied the authors' commentary on visual elements such as competition posters, the stage décor and the controversial post-war design of the Philharmonic Hall. Ideally, the book should be read alongside *The International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Photographs 1927–2010*, so that more faces can be put to names, the setting for events can be more easily imagined, and references to details such as Krystian Zimerman's hairstyle in 1975 or Yulianna Avdeeva's concert dress in 2010 make more sense.

The book is organised so that each cycle of the competition receives separate treatment in its own chapter. This approach ensures that equal attention is given to all 17 cycles, but it also has a fragmenting effect, making it difficult to discern any overarching trajectory or pattern. Some chapter titles hint at turning points or phases ('In the Shadow of Imminent War', 'The Difficult Transition Period'), but these are interspersed with titles referring to the author's analysis (e.g. 'Chopin Hijacked', 'The Gombrowicz Edition') or a cycle's most memorable feature (e.g. 'In Jasna Street', 'A Rebel's Triumph'). The third chapter is the only one to end with a helpful summary of issues that arose during a phase of the competition's history; the book would have benefited from regular stock-taking exercises of this kind. Indeed, it is only in the concluding chapter that Majewski divides the competition's history into five stages. These would have functioned well to structure the book into parts given that the five stages roughly correspond with the division of chapters among the four authors.

Organising the book into parts would also have made a virtue of the noticeable difference in authors' styles. Each of the contributors adopted their own chapter structure and displayed distinctive preferences for data sources. Some

concentrated more on critical discourse in the press, while others were more eclectic in their choice of materials. Sobczak's chapters were especially compelling, because she took an expansive approach to conveying the cultural and political context surrounding the competition in the 1970s and 1980s. But they stood out for this reason. More framing would have prepared the reader for these shifts in tone and emphasis.

The volume's coherence was also diminished by an inconsistency among authors in the development of analysis. In the introduction, Majewski justifies choosing an anthropological approach to studying the Chopin Competition and explains how this book builds on my research. These remarks successfully determine the central concerns for this history of the competition, but they do not articulate a conceptual framework to be applied systematically throughout the discussion. In some chapters, the story of the competition cycle is told through the presentation and interpretation of archival data. But in other chapters, a layer of commentary is added, and authors introduce new and varied theoretical resources. Sometimes these references are tucked away in a footnote, sometimes they are mentioned in passing, and sometimes they are invoked at the end of a chapter as a parting thought. While many good points are raised in this way, they are not always developed.

The authors also tend to assume familiarity with the scholarly texts referenced in the discussion and provide only cursory summaries of their ideas. This tendency is especially unfortunate in the chapter on the 1980 competition, where Sobczak critiques my analysis of the Pogorelich scandal.¹ Our arguments are not as different as she suggests. Rather

than reduce Pogorelich to a political phenomenon, I claimed that the scandal attained legendary status because the aesthetic controversy resonated with social divisions beyond the music world, some of which had a political character. Sobczak has added welcome nuances to my hypothesis through her keen insight into this moment in Polish history.

The Chopin Games contains a wealth of material that should be of great interest to followers of the Chopin Competition, but its presentation will appeal more to scholars. Every chapter contains dozens of footnotes, many of them quite lengthy, containing bibliographic information for the sources quoted, intellectual asides and factual details, such as the full list of jury members for the relevant cycle of the competition. For casual readers, this format could be off-putting. Academic researchers, on the other hand, will wish that more scholarly trappings had been added to the volume, especially a structured bibliography, subject index, and methodological appendix. An uneven effort was made to provide readers with helpful terms of reference; for example, figures for the average Polish salary were provided as a comparison point for competition ticket prices, but without mentioning whether this salary was weekly, monthly, or yearly. However, the translator, Tomasz Zymer, regularly anticipated what non-Polish readers would need to follow the discussion, augmenting his excellent translation with occasional inserted notes. Nevertheless, *The Chopin Games* is the book I wanted to find 20 years ago when I started my research. It is sure to become a standard reference point for future scholarship on the Chopin competition, and on international competitions in classical music.

1 Lisa McCormick, 'Pogorelich at the Chopin: Toward a Sociology of Competition Scandals', *The Chopin Review*, 1 (2018), 52-77.