

# The New York Times

## [New Kind of Online Dating: Classical Competitions](#)

by Will Robin

*The New York Times*

February 12, 2012

Mendelssohn swore off them permanently. Debussy called them “a purely arbitrary affair.” Bartok said they were for horses, not musicians. The charges against classical music competitions are familiar: art is not a sport; the need for jury consensus rewards conformism; fear of losing stifles innovation; actual losing can cripple morale and, potentially, a career.

But several new endeavors challenge these complaints by tweaking the competition concept and using the Internet to create an open dialogue among composers, performers and the public.



On Nov. 15 the violinist Hilary Hahn announced the Hilary Hahn Encore Contest in a YouTube video. Until mid-March anyone may submit a short piece for violin and piano, and Ms. Hahn will perform and record the winner alongside 26 other encores she has already commissioned. Contestants enter by uploading a PDF of a score and a MIDI sound file to Ms. Hahn’s Web site ([hilaryhahn.com](http://hilaryhahn.com)).

The same day the composer David Lang, a co-founder of Bang on a Can and a Pulitzer Prize winner, announced a similarly crowd-sourced competition. In conjunction with a new CD of Mr. Lang’s piano works, entrants could download a free score of his short piece “wed” and post their own performances on YouTube until Dec. 31. The winner will be flown to New York to play in a concert of Mr. Lang’s music at Le Poisson Rouge in May.

A big-name performer setting up a contest for composers and an acclaimed composer setting up a contest for performers: the International Tchaikovsky Competition these are not.

“I always wanted to do something that involved a contest,” Ms. Hahn said in a telephone interview. “Not because I wanted people to compete but because I wanted the

opportunity for someone from the public or for a composer I might have not heard work by.”

As important as choosing a winner, Ms. Hahn said, is encouraging a stronger and more diverse repertory of encores. “In the course of the contest, more encores are being written, whether by students, or by amateurs or instrumentalists who are trying writing, or by composers,” she added.

Mr. Lang, too, has motives beyond setting pianists at one another’s throats. “I think of it as it being the ability for me to date more people,” he said recently in an interview. The contest allows Mr. Lang to expand his circle of musicians and friends. “There’s going to be somebody from this competition who I’m going to end up becoming fast friends with,” he added, “and I’m looking forward to that person.”

Mr. Lang’s “wed” — an exercise in rhythmic counterpoint with hardly any dynamic or tempo indications — is open to a variety of interpretations. “I’m not looking for something in particular in this,” he said. “Sometimes if the point of a piece of music is to open a conversation with other people, it’s really hard to open that conversation if you’re telling people exactly what to do or feel or think.”

Opening a conversation is one of the main benefits of competitions conducted on the Internet. In 2010 the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra started Orpheus Project 440, a commissioning contest, through the classical radio station WQXR’s Web site ([wqxr.org](http://wqxr.org)). A panel of industry experts selected 60 young composers, and 4 winners were chosen to write pieces for the ensemble. Though the committee made the final decisions, the project aimed to create an “open dialogue” with classical music’s Internet audience, inviting all to comment on online profiles created by the composers.

“To see the public engage in that kind of discussion was fascinating,” said Andrew Norman, one of the competition’s winners, “to see how they process these musical examples and what they have to say about them. Our field has a very long tradition of being sort of elitist. And in that certain sense, I think, for a long time people in our field were very uncomfortable with the idea of the public having a say in things.”

Project 440 generated hundreds of comments on WQXR’s Web site and provoked a conversation that also extended onto Twitter. “It was really good here to see people feeling empowered to say what they thought of this,” Mr. Norman said, “to see how all these different people who might not be trained musicians think of our work.”

Competitions have long been a focal point for heated public debate. The classic historical example is the piano duel, like the 1837 smackdown between Franz Liszt and Sigismund Thalberg in Paris. With the aristocratic audience split between conservative dilettante supporters of Thalberg and the elitist artistes who worshiped Liszt, it combined the partisan politics of an election season with the fiery fan worship of a Subway Series.

Though the contest supposedly ended in a draw, the surrounding discussion foreshadowed the familiar terms of aesthetic judgment underlying today's competitions: drama versus polish, virtuosity versus lyricism. Thalberg may be forgotten to history, but the same language is resurrected in any debate about the merits of finalists in the Van Cliburn or Tchaikovsky competitions. (Many of those finalists, too, are forgotten to history.)

The International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow last year brought accusations of insulting remarks by a conductor and allegations of jury unfairness. Most big competitions have at least one verdict debacle: the audience disagrees with the jurors; the jurors disagree with one another.

Mr. Lang's contest welcomed, even encouraged, iconoclasm. "I'm assuming that someone is going to post a video of them playing in a giant bunny costume," he said early on, "and I'm going to vote for that person."

Of the 39 YouTube videos submitted, most consisted of conventional, thoughtful interpretations of "wed." But one entrant played the entire right-hand part by plucking the strings of the piano; another prepared his piano à la John Cage, adding clinks and buzzes to Mr. Lang's placid harmonies; a third hazily recomposed the work for electric guitar.

Ms. Hahn is equally open-minded. "Don't write for what you think I want, write what you want to write," she advised entrants. "I think that it's really important. When I work with composers, that's what I always try to convey."