Since Adorno, the sociological literature on music has shifted from a production-oriented to a reception-oriented focus, reflecting the common sense view that music has migrated from the concert hall to the iPod. There is some truth to this observation; the predominant form of musical engagement today is not the same as it was fifty years ago. But much can be gained by investigating other environments where music occurs, not only for their intrinsic empirical interest, but more importantly for the insight offer into musical performance. The international music competition is one such undeservedly neglected musical environment. Since the first modern competition was held in 1890, they have only increased in number and importance, and are now considered a standard phase in the career of an aspiring professional musician. The prevailing view in the classical music world is that winning competitions is the fastest and most effective way to build a career in music. Their effectiveness in career-launching hinges on their visibility and legitimacy. Music competitions must create highly publicized events that assemble a distinguished jury to evaluate competitors’ performances in concerts that are open to the public and reviewed in the media. Those competitions that succeed in combining these elements are among the highest stakes and highest pressure environments for musical performance.

Performance theory describes social performance as “the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation.” (Alexander 2004) If we understand music as a mode of social performance rather than an object produced by an industry (Peterson 1997) or a resource used in social action (Bourdieu 1984; Eyerman and Jamison 1998), the music competition can be approached as a ritual-like event and analyzed through the six elements of social
performance: the system of collective representations, actors, audience, mise-en-scène, the means of symbolic production, and social power. (Alexander 2004) In previous work, I have addressed the first element of performance by identifying the dominant metaphors and narratives used to construct and interpret the meaning of the competition event. On one level, the competitive aspect of the event is emphasized, and sports and combat metaphors come into play; while on another level, the musical ritual is emphasized, and a discourse of transcendent musical experience emerges. These narrative frameworks are evoked by different segments of the audience and used in different ways to create competing interpretations of competitors’ performances and of the event’s purpose. Elsewhere, I have addressed the role of the audience in the music competition, arguing that it acts both as listener and critical public (in the Habermasian sense) to the musical and social performances enacted in competitions. More than any other musical environment, the competition creates a context in which all audience members, regardless of their level of expertise, are encouraged to compare performers and discuss their musical experience with others. While the outcome of a competition rests purely on the evaluation of the jury, its legitimacy ultimately depends on the audience’s ability to harmonize their musical experience with the jury’s decision.

In this paper, I will address the primary actors performing in the music competition: the competitors. Performance theory defines actors as the people who encode meanings and put patterned representations of cultural texts into practice. This requires mastery of the necessary skills to encode and display meanings. In the case of musical performance, actors are the creators of music, composers and performers. While these roles have remained fused in other musical genres, Western art music represents a unique case where these roles are both professionalized and specialized. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the virtuoso tradition reached its peak, it became increasingly common for musical labour to be divided between composers of musical texts and performers who enact them. This has remained the standard practice in Western art music to this day, even in the case of music by living composers. This division of musical labour presents a problem of performance for both musical actors. For the composer, the lack of technical proficiency forces them to entrust to others a competent
and faithful presentation of their text. For the performer, they must convince their audience they have truly fused with the meanings of the text and that their interpretation is authentic. This problem is further compounded in the case of historical masterworks which constitute the majority of the repertoire for classical musicians. Since the separation of composing and performing roles, the responsibilities, skills, and style expected of the performer has been subject to historical variation. In other words, the role of the performer is an ongoing project of social construction.

The music competition is an institution that serves this purpose. It creates a public forum for an art world to define its criteria of excellence and reinforce its fundamental values through the identification and rewarding of “good performers.” But rather than simply create solidarity, this process has proven to be highly contentious. Because different segments of the art world are differently-positioned and differently-invested in the event, they often disagree about the ideals of performance and their manifestation in competitors. The music competition is further complicated by inherent contradictions and tensions. It aims to be objective, but the evaluation of musical performance is unavoidably and inherently subjective. It aims to be democratic by following rules and procedures, but it lacks transparency; jury deliberations are carried out in secret and sealed for all time. It aims to be democratic in the other sense of appealing to a wider audience; but the authority of the jury is enforced, and the designation of winners is based purely on their expert opinion. It aims to create the experience of a recital, but unlike ordinary concerts, the event produces a ranking and concludes with the designation of winners and losers. It is no wonder, then, that competitions have been controversial and intensely debated since they began. I am interested in how this context influences the performance of competitors. What particular performance challenges does this musical environment hold, and what are performers’ strategies for coping with them? How do competitors present themselves as good performers in such a treacherous environment?

*Method*
I have attended three competitions on three continents involving the three major solo instruments: the 12th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition that took place in Fort Worth, Texas in June 2005, the 6th Michael Hill International Violin Competition that took place in New Zealand in June 2006, and the 9th Rostropovich International Cello Competition that took place in Paris in November 2005. As an audience member, I was able to observe the structure of proceedings for all official competition events including the drawing of numbers (tirage au sort), competition performances, and the announcement of results. On one occasion I was permitted to sit backstage for an afternoon session of the semi-final round. While each competition reflected the local musical culture and its unique institutional history, all are members of the World Federation of International Music Competitions and therefore conformed to standardized rules and regulations followed by over a hundred other competitions around the world.

In addition to ethnographic observation, I have been conducting semi-structured interviews with musicians who are preparing to participate or have recently participated in an international competition. The interview typically takes an hour to ninety minutes. To date, I have interviewed nine musicians between the ages of 20 and 30. Only two in my sample are women, which is in part a recruitment problem and in part a reflection of the male dominance typical of classical music competitions. Five respondents in my sample are European, four are North American, and one is Asian. Five are pianists and four are cellists. All respondents were ensured confidentiality. Some were disappointed that their name would not appear in any publications, while others were indifferent. Only one respondent refused a recorded interview.

The analysis of my findings is organized into three sections. In the first, I will describe the complex musical/social performance required of musicians in competitions and the multiple layers of meaning at play in both the musical and visual aspects of performance. In the next section, I will describe the aim of musical/social performance and the performer’s ethics of aesthetics. To conclude, I will explain why the competition environment is problematic for the performer by identifying how it undermines fusion and compromises musical values.
The presentation of musical self

Competitions have become commonplace in every art world, from literature and poetry, to painting, architecture, and photography. Indeed, it has recently been argued that the most striking development in cultural life in the last hundred years has been the wild proliferation of prizes and awards. (English 2005) In these competitions, competitors attempt a complex social performance: each wants the audience to believe he or she is a great artist. What distinguishes classical music competitions from its analogues in literature and visual art, however, is that this judgment is based not on the creation of original art works, but on how well the artist performs works created by others. But that does not mean it is any less of a presentation of artistic self. How the performer approaches every aspect of performance reveals his or her character.

In a music competition, the primary aspect of the competitor’s social performance is musical. First and foremost, competitors must demonstrate skill in the display and communication of musical meaning. It is for this reason that competitors take so much care in selecting musical texts. A skilled performance of a musical work requires technical proficiency, intimacy with the text, and a clear conception of the collective representations it indexes, while bearing in mind the musical environment in which it will be performed. If any of these is found lacking, the performance fails.

While this is true of any musical occasion, the competition introduces an unusual challenge: a time limit. A musician’s social performance usually expands over a range of performances on a number of different occasions including many different musical texts, much in the way that a painter’s merit is never based on a single canvas but on their “body of work.” But at a music competition, the competitor can only count on performing in the first round, and must display artistry through the performance of two or three works. Repertoire must therefore be selected very carefully so that the social performance, however brief, is effective. The most common strategy is to demonstrate proficiency and versatility by including sample of every major style period and genre. Another is to convey a particularly powerful image of musical genius. For example, a
performer might reference generalized tropes of musical genius, such as the “fire-breathing virtuoso”, the prodigy, or the quiet intellectual. To succeed in portraying these images, musical texts must be congruent with the desired image; they must supply the performer the appropriate meanings with which to fuse. For example, a pianist wanting to come across as a fiery virtuoso will do better to program Liszt transcriptions, while a pianist desiring to be seen as a “cerebral” or intellectual performer will program Schubert and late Beethoven. Competitors might also try to convey musical genius by emulating famous icons of performance. So for example, a pianist might select repertoire associated with Horowitz and imitate his personal style.

Recognizing that the selection of repertoire carries such significance, some competitions allow competitors free choice in programming solo recitals. This is far more preferable for the competitor. As one respondent explained, “it’s nice to be able to present yourself in a way that you think is artistically and musically pleasing. Of course you express yourself while you play, but also you express yourself in the pieces that you choose.” Programming involves not just the selection of musical texts, but also their arrangement into a meaningful sequence. One respondent described the program of a first round recital:

“I programmed [those] three pieces because they were related. They were all in the grand Romantic spirit, but also, the first piece ends on a G. And the second piece begins on a G. The second piece ends on a B-flat major chord. And the third piece begins enharmonically on the same thing. In the history of performance, Rachmaninoff produced this generation of pianists [that] would modulate between pieces. They’d end a piece, and they’d probably bow, and then they’d start in the key that they’d finished and work their way to [the key of the next piece] and then they’d start the next piece. So there’s some kind of precedent for having that sort of harmonic link between the pieces. And probably nobody was listening for that or noticed it. But I noticed it and I enjoyed it.”
This excerpt demonstrates how programming holds multiple layers of meaning. On the surface, this program was quite conventional. It brought together three works from the golden era of the solo piano literature. Because pieces in the “grand Romantic spirit” provide a mixture of poignant and virtuosic writing, they are ideal (and popular) choices for a competition environment. But the program also held together on a deeper level. The succession of pieces was determined by a musical logic, specifically, the beginning and ending tonality of each work. While admitting this was probably imperceptible to most audience members, the performer felt it added another dimension to the program. It was also personally meaningful because it aligned him with a particular historical tradition, and performance icon, he admired.

Most competitions, however, employ a carefully-designed repertoire lists that restrict the choice of repertoire in each round as well as require the performance of certain works. For example, the competitor might have to choose from five particular sonatas in the second round, or be required to play a piece commissioned for that competition. From the point of view of the performer, the list is an asset because it articulates the committee’s concept of a great artist. But at the same time, the list places a significant constraint on the musical actor’s presentation of self, which is why it is often the first factor considered when deciding whether to enter a competition. Since a repertoire list never perfectly matches a performer’s existing repertoire, each must decide whether they have the time and desire to gain intimacy with new pieces. One competitor described obtaining the application and repertoire list for a competition nearly two years in advance:

“I looked up the repertoire list and saw what I would need to learn, because you really need to start that far in advance. If I had to learn most of the repertoire, it probably wouldn’t have been possible. Things like Elfentanz, I started working on three years ago. And it’s still going. The same with Bach. These are all ‘life pieces.’”
In this case, the repertoire list did not present too much of a constraint because it overlapped with her own; many of the required pieces in the competition were also pieces she intended to perform for the rest of her career.

Even more revealing than the performer’s choice of repertoire, however, is how they perform it. The performer’s character is most exposed in the interpretation of musical texts. Due to the inherent ambiguities of notation, musical scores are not a series of instructions that can be followed to the letter. Although Adorno used the misleading term “re-production” for musical performance, even he recognized that the musical “text is merely a coded script which does not guarantee unequivocal meaning.” (Adorno 2002: 412) Performing music is inherently and necessarily an interpretive act. It requires the ability to grasp patterns of musical signifiers in an abstract manner and realize them in a contingent performance situation. This is not simply a matter of refining motor skills. As musicologist Nicholas Cook (1990) explains, what distinguishes the accomplished musician from the novice instrumentalist is the coordination of motor sequences with the analytic capacity to interpret musical texts. Indeed, an appreciation for the fundamental connection between the two is the basis of a musical training. For musicians, the technical aspects of musical performance, such as fingering, are never simply practical solutions to navigating an instrument; they are the means by which musicians embody an interpretation of musical structure: “To adopt a fingering is to take up an interpretative stance in relation to the music in question.” (Cook 1990: 81) This principle applies equally to every technical decision, from bowings and articulation, to tempi and phrasing. Because each piece requires countless decisions of this kind, the presentation of a musical text becomes for the performer an unavoidable presentation of the self. In the context of a music competition, this is an even greater risk:

“I feel like I show my personality and who I am when I play. It’s very much me, it’s very honest. So if they don’t like it, to me, that [means] they don’t like me. So I take that very personally.”
Another aspect of social performance in the music competition is visual. Unlike auditions for orchestras or management companies, candidates do not perform behind a screen. And while the screening round is typically done through submitted recordings, the competition event involves three rounds of live performances that conform to the concert ritual: the performer enters the stage to the sound of applause, bows to the audience, performs the program, bows again to the audience, and finally departs the stage. Despite being heavily ritualized, the manner in which the competitor accomplishes these actions also communicates meaning to the audience, of which some competitors are keenly aware:

“The fact that you’re up on stage already implies that not just your aural senses are put the test, but your visual [senses] as well. If the visual weren’t you might as well just be a recording artist. So of course your hand gestures, how you sit at the piano, how you even walk onto the stage, how you address the audience when you bow, everything of that sort comes into play. It’s a given.”

Performers know this as the issue of stage presence. In their training, musicians are taught that this is an especially important mode of communication for those segments of the audience who are not as knowledgeable about classical music. A musician with stage presence can convince a distracted or “uneducated” audience member that they want to listen before even playing a note. But this is not to suggest that stage presence is only meaningful for the musically naïve. It is believed by some performers that the jury anticipates the quality of musical performance by the manner in which the performer takes the stage. It can also be a performance for the musician himself:

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1 This was practiced by some competitions in the 1950s. See Alink, Gustav A. 1990. International Piano Competitions, vol. Book 1: Gathering the Results. An introduction to books 2 and 3: Drs. Gustav A. Alink.

2 There is one notable exception, the piano e-competition, which was created to promote a particular recording technology by Yamaha. Competitors in this competition never perform live for the jury. Instead, they perform a program in a recording studio on a special piano that records every nuance of their performance from their touch on the keyboard. Even if the performer advances to the final round, they never perform again for the competition. Instead, their first round recording is played again and synchronized with a visual recording.
“When I’m walking up on stage, I don’t run to the piano. I shouldn’t walk quickly because I need to get to the piano fast because the piano’s like a security blanket. I shouldn’t feel vulnerable just walking.”

The performer can also communicate to the audience through facial expressions:

“I always smile when I bow. Even if I had a bad performance, I still smile to the audience to acknowledge [them, to say] “thank you very much for listening.” It’s not supposed to be the smile of “Oh, it was a great performance! I performed really well; hence I’m going to smile now.” Even though it doesn’t matter if it was a bad performance, it’s sort of “thank you so much for listening”, hence you must smile. There are people who, after a bad performance, have this frown on their face. And it puts the audience in a solemn mood too.”

Stage presence does not cease to be a concern as soon as the music begins. Performing music is an embodied action. There is, as Leppert has suggested, a “sight of sound.” The interpretation of a musical text, and the competitor’s social performance, is communicated both aurally and visually, through gestures and facial expressions. Part of the great performer’s skill is knowing how to be convincing in both aspects of performance and bringing the two into congruence.

*The good performer*

Whether in the theatre, on the concert stage, or in social life, the aim of the actor is *fused performance* – the “fusion” of the elements of performance from script to actor to audience. Performers strive to obscure the constructedness of their performance, encoding the meanings of the cultural text so effectively that the audience can believe the performer is effortlessly embodying those collective representations. The audience, in turn, must be able to decode the meanings performed and be inclined to identify with the performance. When all the elements of performance fall into alignment, a cultural
extension can occur, allowing a ritual-like event to achieve the affect and effect of a ritual. If none of the elements fall into alignment, the performance comes off as contrived, meaningless, and empty.

In musical performance, it is more often the case for fusion to occur in some but not all elements of performance. For example, a musical actor can fuse with the text and enact it flawlessly, but fail to move a distracted, overburdened, or resistant audience. The reverse is also common. The musical actor can have an “off night”, failing to fuse with the text or producing a sloppy performance, while the audience still identifies enthusiastically with the performance. Completely fused musical performances are rare, which is why musicians recognize them immediately and remember them well. One respondent described a feeling of pulling in the audience. Similarly, another described sensing the audience’s close attention:

“If they’re very quiet, and everything is quiet, then it’s a wonderful feeling. Somebody told me once that a standing ovation is not the greatest compliment an audience can give. The greatest compliment is silence while you’re playing. Then they’re really listening. When you feel like they’re really listening, it’s wonderful.”

The experience of being pulled in as a listener is equally treasured:

“There are musicians who are capable of performances - they don’t do it necessarily every time they sit at the piano or take their instrument - but there are people who are capable of really changing an audience, changing an individual. It’s happened maybe a handful of times in my life. I had that kind of experience when somebody played Schubert B-flat sonata in recital four or five years ago. I don’t even know how I would describe it, but it was heavenly. It was divine. It really was! Your outlook on life is different when you’ve heard something so transcendently beautiful.”
Creating fused performance is often described through a discourse of power:

“Sometimes I would know right before, this is going to be it. Like one time when I played in studio class, I just knew I was going to, like, dominate. I don’t know why. And I played, and my teacher still talks about it to this day.”

The best performances are where the performer feels they have the most power – control over the instrument, mastery of the text, and command of the listener’s attention. A flawless performance is often described as “nailing it.” One respondent described performances he’d enjoyed the most in terms of the threat of violence:

A lot of playing is moving and emotional, but something that’s really gripping, like it’s going to jump out and kill you or something – that’s fantastic!

For the general audience, it is this power to achieve fused performance that makes someone a “good performer.” Their ideal musician is someone who is able to embody musical meaning and convey it in such a compelling way that they are drawn into the performance. But musicians have slightly different criteria. While fusion is certainly important, it also matters how effortlessly musical meaning is embodied and the manner in which this meaning is conveyed to the audience. To be a “good performer” means that an effective performance was produced – and for all the right reasons. It is not just the recognition of skill, but a moral evaluation as well.

A performer demonstrates moral worth through the choices they make in every aspect of performance. These are interpreted and evaluated through a binary discursive structure that contrasts admirable and reprehensible motives for the musical actor. The binary code outlined below structured respondents’ discourse about their own performance decisions, and their evaluation of others:
Generally speaking, musicians most admire performers who are authentic in both senses of the word – who present strikingly original interpretations of musical texts while still being faithful to the score. Equally valued is the ability to communicate musical meaning to any kind of audience in a sincere and unaffected manner. Technique is regarded as a means and not an end in itself; while technical ability is necessary to encode musical meaning, it alone is not enough to produce an effective performance. An over-emphasis on technique produces emotionless performances that are note-perfect, but forgettable. Technique might impress, but it will never move an audience.

A minor offence is a confusion of priorities. The musical aspect of performance should be without question the highest priority of the performer, while the visual aspect of performance is neglected with pride. The most common attitude is that the visual should never distract from the music and that the performer should only do what is “natural.” To cultivate or emphasize the visual is inherently superficial. For example, the use of exaggerated gestures and facial expressions while performing is derided as “emoting”, and an untraditional choice of attire is dismissed as a gimmick. To a certain extent this is gendered. Female performers are expected to conform to more traditional standards of femininity in their social performance which requires a different attention to

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the visual aspect. But even among women who enjoy gender performance, the prevailing view is that the visual should never eclipse the musical dimension in terms of importance.

Among the more serious offenses are manipulative musical choices. For example, programs can be carefully designed to disguise technical weaknesses or musical immaturity. Equally serious are calculating musical choices, for example, choosing repertoire in order to be eligible for an award, or works that sound more difficult than they really are to trigger enthusiastic applause and impress the jury. But the most profane quality of all is arrogance. Performers can betray arrogance by ignoring the composer’s intentions and distorting the score. For example, one respondent expressed distaste for a cavalier use of ornamentation in baroque music on exactly these grounds:

“I’m not into these people adding trills left and right. To me, that’s an ego thing. ‘Oh I can just add trills wherever I want.’ [Laughs] I could handle like one or two TO-TAL. Maybe that was in [the score] and I just missed it. But adding twenty?! That’s just like woah! I didn’t know that was okay!”

Arrogance also compromises the communication of musical meaning to an audience:

“I feel like if someone’s really pretentious, I don’t know how they can make really beautiful music. And sometimes you listen to recordings and you hear people play and it’s pretentious, and it’s so terrible. Nothing upsets me more than that. Even talking about it my toes are curling. I really can’t stand it.”

Conclusion: An unfelicitous context

The music competition is an especially treacherous context for the performer because it undermines fusion by altering the normal power dynamics of the concert ritual. The jury, not the performer, has the power to define the situation. And the jury, not the audience, declares whether the performance was successful by their decision to allow the competitor to advance to the next round. Jury members are granted this authority because
they are accomplished performers themselves; they are skilled instrumentalists who are intimately familiar with most of the repertoire performed, and can easily detect flaws and dispute interpretive decisions. But for the performer, the presence of the jury draws unwanted attention to the constructedness of performance. This has a potentially defusing effect by encouraging performers to emphasize technical accuracy over the communication of musical meaning. While other musical environments allow the performer to take risks, mistakes matter more in competitions. They provide the jury with an excuse to eliminate a competitor, since accuracy is the most objective or measurable aspect of performance.

The presence of the jury also has a defusing effect by distorting the aim of the performance. In a competition, musicians are not just playing for the audience’s pleasure; they are trying to survive to the next round. This encourages competitors to become more calculating in their musical decisions. One respondent complained about how all these factors interact to produce a completely unsatisfying musical experience:

“With a competition you’re adapting the repertoire to what you think they’re going to want, and that kind of sucks. If I want to give a recital, it’s up to me. I do what I want. I’m not adapting to anyone else. I’m not programming something for a specific set of people or anything. I’m just doing exactly what I want to do. And then the other thing for a competition is there’s a certain need to show your chops really early in a competition so it’s known that you have ten fingers right away. You have to program it in a way that you have something technical in at least your opening round. You can’t play a Brahms Ballade, a Mozart Sonata, and a Bach Prelude and Fugue and expect to get past. They’ll be, like, “well I don’t know if this guy can wiggle his fingers fast enough.” We all have to put something in that’s really fast and flashy, [laughs] even if they’re trashy pieces. That’s why so many pianists play Islamey in their first rounds, which is the biggest piece of garbage in the world. But it’s the hardest thing ever written. And it really, it’s just a piece of trash.”
Some performers try to regain dominance by performing obscure repertoire, such as contemporary music, music by women composers, or lesser known composers from earlier periods. It is more likely that judges will not know every note of an obscure work, forcing them to approach the performance as a regular listener and focus on the overall effect rather than the details of execution. While this strategy gains some freedom for the performer, it can easily backfire. If the performer strays too far from conventional repertoire, the performance can become meaningless to the audience. To be identified as the embodiment of an ideal performer, the audience must be able to decode the musical meanings displayed by the performer. It will not matter how expertly or honestly a work is performed if its meanings are incomprehensible or have no resonance for the listener.

Contributing further to the performer’s feeling of powerlessness is the lack of transparency in competition institutions. Even the most prestigious competitions carry out deliberations in secret and never releasing judge’s scores to the public. It is also common for competition juries to display a conflict of interest. The most sought after judges for competitions are also the most sought after teachers, and for this very reason, it is nearly impossible to assemble an impartial jury with no relationship whatsoever to competitors. Rumors of corruption and favoritism abound because there are no norms of public accountability or channels for resolving grievances. Musicians enter competitions knowing full well that politics can work for or against them, and correspondingly, that they can never publicly criticize the institution because any accusation will either de-legitimate their achievement or be dismissed as jealousy and poor sportsmanship. And if this were not enough, they fear that the general public places too much faith in competitions are indicators of talent, as they are in some fields of sport. One respondent related with bitterness how taxi drivers often ask about his world ranking is, as though classical music were organized by the same system as tennis. Musicians want to believe that in other musical environments, the listener is more inclined to trust their own ears and their own musical experience. But the endorsement by a distinguished jury carries considerable weight beyond the competition event. Performers become frustrated when
their career is undercut by the result of a competition that was likely more a reflection of politics than the quality of their musical performance.

Ideally, the result of a music competition is redundant. It should merely reinforce an already convincing social performance by bestowing an award or a title. And occasionally, it does work out this way. For the performer, however, it is impossible to imagine a more unforgiving environment for performing music or an institution more inclined to cast doubt on their social performance. As such, the music competition provides a natural breaching experiment for musical performance, identifying what is taken for granted in more felicitous circumstances.

References