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Pogorelich at the Chopin: Towards a sociology of competition scandals

Lisa McCormick

ABSTRACT

Controversies are a regular feature on the international classical music competition circuit, and some of these explode into scandals that are remembered long afterward. This essay draws from the sociology of scandal to identify the conditions that predispose classical music competitions to moral disruption and to examine the cultural process through which a scandal attains legendary status. The case considered in depth is the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition and the controversy surrounding Ivo Pogorelich's elimination from the 10th Competition in 1980. Through an analysis of media coverage in Polish and English, I show how the scandal was discursively constructed through two interpretive frameworks: the collective memory of previous controversies at the Chopin Competition, and a generational divide. I also trace the legacy of the scandal over the decades that followed. Following Durkheim, I argue that controversies at classical music competitions should not be taken as an indication of their decline. Rather, scandals – especially legendary ones – can have positive effects for competition organisations and the wider social world of classical music, as long as they do not become chronic.

KEYWORDS

scandal, controversy, competition, aesthetic evaluation, social norms, morality, collective memory, Poland, music, musicians

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FORUM

REVIEWS

Controversy is widespread on the international classical music competition circuit.¹ The School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh generously supported this research through the Strategic Research Support Fund. News of audience revolts, open jury rows and unpaid prizes is regularly paraded in the classical music blogs, while accusations of jury-rigging and other conflicts of interest feed the rumour mill in music conservatoires and professional circles. These eyebrow-raising accusations are sufficient to shatter any illusions that the classical music world is either irredeemably dull or loftily transcendental. But what is more surprising about the contentious episodes described is that they occur in music competitions of all kinds, everywhere in the world. It appears to make no difference whether a competition is based in the former Soviet Bloc, Scandinavia or North America; young upstart competitions and established organisations are equally at risk of disturbances. Indeed, no major international competition can boast a spotless record in this regard. As any competition follower will attest, controversies have become so common that it is the cycles that pass without incident that are cause for comment because they are the exception and not the rule.

This raises several questions. Why are competitions so prone to controversy? What conditions make moral upset so likely? Why do some misgivings over competitions remain confined to gossip and rumour, while others become public affairs covered in newspapers around the world? Why do some protests fizzle out quickly, while others explode into scandals? Why are some scandals quickly forgotten, while others attain a legendary status and continue to be debated long after the fact?

Answering these questions requires that I revisit a central theme in my previous work on competitions: the tension between music and civility.² While competitions sometimes become public forms 'where civil competence can be displayed, collective representations of civil relations can be broadcast and the expansion of the musical public can be

imagined', this potential is only rarely realised. Competitions inspire acrimony more often than universalising solidarity, and they create more villains than civil heroes. Directors are constantly introducing new procedures to ensure fairness, transparency and openness in competitions, but these do not always insulate them from the distortions of political rivalries. Nor can they completely override the system of organisation in the music world, which centres on the influence of charismatic artistic authorities, the particularism that underpins student–teacher relationships, and the subjective element of aesthetic evaluation.

In the first part of this essay, I draw from the sociology of scandal to devise an approach that can account for the dynamics of typical competition controversies and the conditions increasing the likelihood of moral disruption. This is achieved by combining Adut's general model of scandal with Jacobs' recasting of the cultural sociology of scandal.⁴ The approach is then brought to bear on the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw, a case selected because the scandal that erupted in the wake of Ivo Pogorelich's elimination from the Competition in 1980 continues to be described as the best known and most divisive competition controversy of all time. While I also consider previous turbulent episodes in the history of the Chopin Competition, the focus of my analysis is the discursive construction of the 1980 competition. I identify the interpretive frameworks employed by journalists reporting on the tumultuous events of 1980 and I trace the legacy of the scandal. To conclude, I reflect on the effect of competition controversies, not only on the organisations that run them, but also on the wider social world of classical music.

Scandals from a sociological perspective

Previous work in the sociology of scandal has examined moral upsets in various social domains, including politics,⁵ business,⁶ professional sports⁷ and entertainment.⁸ While some of these studies have adopted a cultural perspective,⁹ Adut was the first to offer a general model that captures the dynamics and cultural logic of scandals across social realms, including the arts. He defines scandal as 'an event of varying duration that starts with the publicisation of a real, apparent or alleged transgression to a negatively oriented audience and lasts as long as there is a significant and sustained public interest in it'.¹¹ This definition contains the three basic elements in the model. The first is a transgression that need not be real to aggravate negative sentiment. The second is a *publiciser* who brings the allegedly offensive act to light. While transgressors sometimes take it upon themselves to flaunt their offences, scandals can also be triggered when someone else makes a public denunciation of the act. In the latter case, the credibility of the denouncer will depend largely on his or her social status, a factor that is especially important when elites are alleged to have broken the rules. The third element is the *public*; scandals erupt only when an audience is outraged by the alleged transgression.

Once the indignation of the public is unleashed, scandals have two possible outcomes: either their profane quality contaminates the individuals, groups and institutions involved, or they provoke change. Provocations have become standard practice in the visual art world; ever since the impressionist painters challenged the Academy, infuriated the critics and fascinated the public at the *Salon des refusés*, artists have gained recognition, and encouraged the evolution of their art, by daring to be unconventional. Change in politics is also achieved through deliberate provocations; civil disobedience is effective precisely because it reveals and challenges weakly held norms that the establishment are unable, or unwilling, to reinforce.¹²

Adut best captures the contingent nature of moral upset in his treatment of publicity. Scandals cannot happen without publicity, but not just any sort of publicity will do. Wrongdoing can be widely known but intentionally ignored; what matters is the pressure of 'collective and focused attention'.¹³ Even open secrets can be transformed into scandals if the offences in question achieve a public status in which no one can credibly deny knowing about them or being aware of the negative orientation of others. Ultimately, the chances of a denunciation successfully producing a scandal depend on coordinated communication. Either the revelation of the transgression must occur when the relevant parties are co-present, or the denunciation must be transmitted by a powerful and saturating media that can reach the right audience. Yet even when the coordination of communication is overcome, the audience's response to the revelation is unpredictable. They might be distracted or respond with indifference. Furthermore, the failure to produce outrage is not the only way in which publicity can backfire. Those who publicly denounce transgressors open themselves up to scrutiny just as much as the provocateur. Once exposed, it is impossible for denouncers to demonstrate the purity of their motives or extinguish all suspicion of having engineered a means of gaining notoriety. In this way, scandal reveals the 'dramaturgical paradox of the public sphere'.¹⁴

While Adut's model has many strengths, it fails to identify the conditions that increase the likelihood of moral upset. This can be corrected by combining it with Jacobs' analytical framework.¹⁵ Their approaches are compatible because they overlap in several significant respects. Like Adut, Jacobs highlights the unpredictable quality of scandals by defining them as 'ambiguous and suspenseful public dramas of the struggle between good and bad faith'.¹⁶ He also agrees with Adut about the importance of publicity in generating a scandal, arguing that the media play a crucial role in amplifying

accounts of wrongdoing, unsettling the presumption of good faith and supplying narrators for the drama as it unfolds. However, Jacobs insists that the media have the power to generate a scandal only when 'conditions are ripe',¹⁷ and the most conducive conditions are the 'cultures of corruption, secrecy and suspicion' which tend to cluster 'along the fault lines of and between' social realms.¹⁸

Knowing where to find fertile ground for the germination of scandals enhances their empirical investigation, but a further advantage to the combination of these two analytical perspectives is that it allows for a fuller account of the 'moral ambiguity at the heart of scandal'.¹⁹ For Adut, this quality is revealed through the observed effects of scandals. Denouncers, and the audience they provoke into outrage, might be emboldened by righteousness at the outset of a scandal, but their efforts risk producing disastrous results because the profane is not easily controlled; instead of a ritual purification, they might instead accomplish the normalisation of transgressions, the enhancement of transgressors' notoriety and the demoralisation of the public. Furthermore, scandals reveal the 'shallowness of the public sphere'; even good deeds are rendered suspect because 'publicity transforms actions into performances and makes all of us into "merchants of morality"'.²⁰ In contrast, Jacobs draws attention to the invisible causes of scandals, invoking Sartre's notion of bad faith to emphasise the moral confusion that can infect social structures at the institutional or even societal level when integrity is compromised.²¹ Bad faith involves a form of self-deception that enables the avoidance of inconvenient facts and the evasion of uncomfortable choices; individuals resort to this when they sense an unresolvable and inescapable conflict between 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself', and a corresponding mismatch between inner self and outer world.²² The source of this unease is the tension between competing cultural commitments, and the lack of guidance in resolving them.

The third and final advantage to combining the two perspectives is that Jacobs' approach usefully extends the temporal dimension of Adut's model to provide better tools for analysing how scandals acquire meaning. In Adut's formulation, scandals are 'usually not single events but episodes' of varying duration.²³ Similarly, Jacobs avoids determining the beginning and ending of scandals, describing them instead as 'sequences of occurrences'.²⁴ However, these sequences are placed and interpreted within a larger chain of occurrences that is actively maintained by the collective memory.

As he explains:

Collective memory helps form – and forms around – the comprehension of scandals not just as discrete events, but as moments in the series of scandals. That is, the narrative understanding of scandals is intertextual: scandals are understood in relation to each other, with the interpretation of earlier ones at once helping to shape, and being reshaped by, that of later ones.²⁵

International classical music competitions provide an ideal setting for the empirical investigation of scandal using this combined perspective. Indeed, a more fertile ground for moral upset is difficult to imagine. Competitions create occasions where aesthetic norms – for example, the interpretive approach to performing Chopin's piano repertoire – can be brought into question and artistic authorities can control their enforcement or evolution through the endorsement and elimination of competitors. In addition to exposing norms, competitions also assemble those who have the most to gain by challenging them; aspiring musicians enter competitions because they seek notoriety and recognition. At the same time, competitions gather an audience invested in the art of music, direct their attention to the aesthetic norms at stake, and impress upon them the significance of the outcome; in other words, they focus the attention of the core public and generate interest through the dramatic structure of a tournament. Because the audience for competitions extends beyond the crowd gathered in the concert hall, directors also invite the national and international press to report on proceedings and comment on the results, thereby installing narrators for any contentious situations along with the communicative mechanisms to produce the pressure of publicity.

If these conditions were not enough to increase the possibility of a scandal, competitions also operate in ways that intensify moral ambiguity. They maintain a level of secrecy by conducting jury deliberations behind closed doors, and, with very few exceptions, the votes or calculations that produce the outcome are not released to the public. Because competitions straddle the artistic and civil realms, they endeavour to maintain legitimacy on both fronts, and their participants must wrestle with pressures coming from both directions. Balancing a commitment to fairness with a dedication to musical excellence is challenging in the best of circumstances, but when competitions become tangled with political concerns, bad faith is even more difficult to keep at bay. As I demonstrate below, controversial musical

performances and unpopular jury decisions can even obtain legendary status if the political context encourages a narrative understanding of occurrences that is shaped not only by the collective memory of competitions, but also by ideological frameworks.

Case and method

The International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition provides a good case for the analysis of competition scandals for several reasons. First, it is one of the longest running competitions in classical music. Founded in 1926, the Chopin Competition has built up a collective memory over successive generations. Secondly, its prizes have considerable prestige, because of the success of many of its laureates; the participation of esteemed musicians secured its status in the professional music world even as the competition field became more crowded after the Second World War. Thirdly, it has been implicated in nationalist projects since its inception. To demonstrate these features, I will describe contentious episodes that occurred in the first fifty years of the Competition's history by drawing from previous studies and official histories.²⁶

For the analysis of the scandal surrounding Pogorelich's elimination in 1980, the main source of data is newspaper coverage. I requested that the University of Warsaw Library conduct a search of their archives of major Polish-language newspapers; this yielded forty-nine articles covering the 1980 competition.²⁷ These articles were supplemented with five articles that appeared in *Ruch Muzyczny*, a music periodical, from issues printed in 1980 and 1981. From these fifty-four articles, the thirteen most relevant were selected and translated into English by a professional translator.²⁸ The complete list of articles translated from Polish to English is included in the Appendix.

English-language articles were also collected using the search term 'Ivo Pogorelich' in the Factiva database, the *New York Times* online archive and Google for newspaper articles published between 1980 and 2015; the longer timeframe was necessary to trace the legacy of the competition scandal beyond Poland in the decades that followed. The forty-eight English-language articles collected include reports on competitions, concert reviews, and reviews of recordings.²⁹³⁰ These were supplemented with two extended comment pieces posted on Bachtrack.com and Slippedisc.com, classical music blogs based in the UK, and three longform interviews posted on the personal websites of music journalists.³¹ Two French-language sources were consulted: Martha Argerich's biography and an article posted on the news website *20 minutes*.³² To enhance my understanding of the debate over musical interpretation at the heart of the controversy, I studied video recordings of Ivo Pogorelich's performances at the 1980 competition available on YouTube and photographs that have been archived at the Chopin Institute in Warsaw. My analysis has also been informed by interviews conducted with four people who attended the 1980 competition in different capacities.³³

The perspective adopted for analysing media commentary is the 'strong program in cultural sociology'.³⁴ The theoretical position defining this meaning-centred approach is the emphasis on the relative autonomy of culture; methodologically, this entails a bracketing of non-symbolic dimensions to achieve a 'Geertzian "thick description" of the codes, narratives and symbols that create the textured webs of social meaning'.³⁵ I used the qualitative analysis software NVivo to facilitate my reconstruction of the scandal as well as the cultural processes through which its meaning was determined and transformed into legend.

A turbulent history

According to Dybowski, the main impetus for founding the Competition was rescuing Chopin's reputation.³⁶ At the turn of the twentieth century, Alexander Michałowski, a prominent Chopin interpreter based in Warsaw, became concerned about Chopin's legacy. His students were easily convinced of the problem, sharing the view that the absence of a Polish nationstate through the nineteenth century had meant that no cultural infrastructure existed for championing Chopin's oeuvre and guiding its reception. Evidence that his music was vulnerable to being misunderstood began to appear in Chopin's lifetime. Critics in London and Berlin wrote disparaging and dismissive reviews. For example:

In search of ear-rending dissonances, torturous transitions, sharp modulations, repugnant contortions of melody and rhythm, Chopin is altogether indefatigable. [...] But it is not really worth the trouble to hold such long philippics for the sake of the perverse Mazurkas of Herr Chopin. Had he submitted this music to a teacher, the latter, it is to be hoped, would have torn it up and

thrown it at his feet – and this is what we symbolically wish to do.
(L. Rellstab, *Iris*, Berlin, 5 July 1833)³⁷

M. Frederic Chopin has, by some means or other which we cannot divine, obtained an enormous reputation but too often refused to composers of ten times his genius. M. Chopin is by no means a putter down of commonplaces; but he is, what by many would be esteemed worse, a dealer in the most absurd and hyperbolic extravagances. [...] The entire works of Chopin present a motley surface of ranting hyperbole and excruciating cacophony. When he is not thus singular, he is no better than Strauss or any other waltz compounder. [...] There is an excuse at the present for Chopin's delinquencies; he is entrammelled in the enthralling bonds of that arch-enchantress, George Sand, celebrated equally for the number and excellence of her romances and her lovers; not less we wonder how she, who once swayed the heart of the sublime and terrible religious democrat Lamennais, can be content to wanton away her dreamlike existence with an artistical nonentity like Chopin.
(*Musical World*, London, 28 October 1841)³⁸

After Chopin's death, in 1849, his style of pianism was distorted by a proliferation of pianists declaring themselves authorities on his interpretive style and claiming to be his pupils, however dubious the connection. As a result, Chopin's music started to fall out of favour, and by the early twentieth century, music students were voicing doubts that it should be included in teaching programmes. Jerzy Żurawlew claimed that he was spurred to organise the competition after overhearing a conversation between two students on a train journey. One student declared: 'In my opinion Chopin is boring and obsolete. One should remove him from concert and teaching programs'. The student's companion concurred: 'And even harmful. His music is effeminate and unhealthy. It makes one unnecessarily sentimental and weakens the spirit.' Mirosław Dąbrowski, *Jerzy Żurawlew: Inicjator Konkursów Chopinowskich* [Jerzy Żurawlew: initiator of the Chopin Competition] (Poznań: Ars Nova, 1995), 41; translation quoted in Lin, 'Myth and appropriation' (2014). Having observed the growing enthusiasm for competitive sports in Poland following the First World War, Jerzy Żurawlew, a piano professor in Warsaw, felt that a competition would be the most effective way to change popular attitudes about Chopin and cultivate a greater appreciation for his music among younger pianists.³⁹

When Żurawlew first pursued this unusual project, in 1925, the Ministry for Religious Affairs and Public Education refused his request for financial support and dismissed his idea as 'unrealistic'.⁴⁰ He found a much warmer reception when he tried a second time after the coup d'état led by Józef Piłsudski in May 1926; the newly installed president, Ignacy Mościcki, pledged his support, agreed to have the first prize named after him, and supplied a gift for the winner. The idea of a competition to promote and celebrate a great Polish composer resonated with the political mood of the early stages of the *sanacja* period initiated by Piłsudski. As Plach argues, the *sanacja* went beyond politics in the narrow sense; through its diffuse avowals of 'cleansing, reform, and strengthening the state',⁴¹ the *sanacja* also raised the issues of moral renewal and national identity. The event also had the potential to establish far and wide that Chopin's music could be played properly only by a Pole.

The Chopin Competition encountered its first controversy during the inaugural cycle in 1927. Convinced that only Polish musicians could truly understand Chopin's music, Żurawlew invited only Polish pianists and pedagogues to sit on the jury.⁴² Poland was also overrepresented in the candidate pool. Of the twenty-six pianists who participated, sixteen were Polish; the rest of the participants were from the Soviet Union, Austria, Switzerland, Latvia, Belgium and the Netherlands. Throughout the competition, the Polish press reserved their praise for the Polish competitors and presented them as the only real contenders for the prize, encouraging the audience at the Warsaw Philharmonic and the wider Polish public to expect a Polish victory.⁴³ It therefore came as a shock when the jury announced that Lev Oborin, a Russian pianist, had won the Competition and that another top prize would go to his compatriot, Grigori Ginzburg.

It was not only the Polish loss that stung, but also the humiliation of a Russian victory. The Polish-Soviet war might have ended six years before, but Poles remained hostile to Soviets and likely saw the Competition as an opportunity for the newly independent Poland to display cultural superiority over their former foe.⁴⁴ The scale of disappointment was expressed in *Świat* by Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, a member of the Competition's organising committee: 'A whole group of good patriots laments that we were defeated by the Russians in the Chopin Competition. The End of Poland [*Finis*

Poloniae] – they say’.⁴⁵ By invoking the phrase attributed to Tadeusz Kościuszko following the defeat at the Battle of Maciejowice in 1794, Kaden-Bandrowski portrayed the competition as an epic event with disastrous consequences for the Polish people that would live on in the collective memory.

It is not surprising that Polish-Soviet tensions surfaced again at the Competition in 1949 given recent events: the Soviets had invaded and occupied Poland in 1939, and the Soviet army and the NKVD murdered thousands of Polish military officers and Polish citizens near Katyn in 1940; when the Second World War ended, anti-communist resistance groups, such as the *Wolność i Niezawisłość*, attracted thousands of members.⁴⁶ For the 1949 Competition, Oborin returned to Warsaw as a member of the jury. This time, however, it was the Soviet authorities, not the Polish public, who would be frustrated by the result.⁴⁷ The steps taken by the competition organisers to fix the outcome are described in a report prepared by I. S. Kuznetzov, a bureaucrat stationed in the Soviet embassy in Poland, which was circulated in the Soviet cultural administration a few weeks after the Competition had ended. Kuznetzov noted, but did not object to, the fact that ten out of the twenty-three jurors were Polish; the Polish contingent became a problem only because they were instructed by the Deputy Minister Włodzimierz Sokorski to be inclined ‘to the complete promotion of Polish and Soviet pianists’.⁴⁸

According to the Soviet jury members, the line taken by the Polish jurors followed only part of this instruction, and Polish competitors were promoted at the expense of Soviet pianists. They described how the chances of an especially promising Soviet pianist, Bella Davidovich, had been undermined; when the jury discovered that she had achieved the highest score in the first stage of the Competition, the Polish jurors deliberately lowered their marks in subsequent rounds. A decisive Polish victory was especially important to them because the Competition coincided with the centenary of Chopin’s death. Initially, their efforts succeeded; when the final results were tallied, Halina Czerny-Stefańska, a Polish candidate, was in first place and Bella Davidovich came in second. But the Soviets protested, accusing jurors of having tampered with Davidovich’s scores. The Presidium of the Chopin Committee resolved the dispute by awarding joint first prize to Czerny-Stefańska and Davidovich. What spoiled this resolution for the Soviet administrators was that this outcome had already been suggested to Kuznetzov by Sokorski weeks before the competition had even started.⁴⁹

In subsequent cycles, jurors’ objections to the results were more public. At the 5th Competition, in 1955, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli left the jury in protest when Vladimir Ashkenazy, the competitor whom he believed deserved to win, was awarded second prize, having lost to Adam Harasiewicz by a fraction of a point. A similar situation developed five years later at the 6th Competition. On this occasion, the outraged juror was Arthur Rubinstein, an honorary chairman of the jury, and the slight against his favoured competitor, Michel Block, was that he was awarded tenth place. Rather than resign from the jury, Rubinstein voiced his objection by awarding Block his own prize of \$850.⁵⁰ While this form of jury protest was less disruptive than a resignation, the controversies over jury decisions were enough to prompt Dmitri Kabalevsky, as vice-chair of the jury, to recommend changes to the judging procedures. He advocated a system in which jurors submitted scores at the end of each round rather than after each competitor’s performance, thereby allowing jurors to gain a better sense of the overall standard before making individual judgements. He also recommended that the jury meet for a day or two after the Competition to discuss the challenges involved in interpreting Chopin’s music and how best to evaluate various approaches to addressing them.⁵¹

The 7th Competition, in 1965, had reached only the second round when controversy erupted. Findlay Cockrell, an American competitor who had been eliminated after the first stage, launched an official protest by publishing an open letter to the Polish Minister of Culture accusing the jury of political bias; the reason for his suspicion was that only three of the eight American competitors had survived the first round, while all five Soviet competitors and all seven Polish competitors had advanced. Zbigniew Drzewiecki, the jury chairman, denied any wrongdoing, but also contributed to the animosity by adding that Americans might start winning the Competition once they learned to play Chopin well.⁵²

According to Cline, Cockrell’s accusation was taken more seriously after Tamara Kaloss, a Russian competitor favoured by the audience and other competitors, was eliminated after the second round. Cockrell turned out to have been right to suspect political bias, but he was wrong to think that it had adversely affected American competitors. Instead, it was a repeat of the situation in 1949: Polish jurors were seen by their colleagues on the jury to have adopted a line where Polish competitors were promoted at the expense of Russian competitors. This time, however, they were heavy-handed in their efforts to undermine the Russians’ chances at winning, and their efforts backfired. When the results were tallied at the end of the second round, the jury discovered that none of the Russian competitors would even advance to the finals and the pattern of low marks from the Polish jurors became obvious. Several members of the jury found this result unacceptable, including Arthur Hedley, a vice-chair from the UK, who proposed correcting the problem by expanding the number of finalists from six to eight; the proposal was turned down, because such an adjustment would have justified the suspicion of wrongdoing. In the end, the Argentine competitor Martha Argerich won the first prize by the narrowest of margins, Polish competitors achieved only third and sixth place, and Polish jurors admitted to American journalists that this had been a ‘bad botch’.⁵³

It was the audience's turn to protest at the 9th Competition in 1975. According to one American observer, the audience that year was (as usual) noticeably cool towards Russian competitors, in contrast responding warmly to performances by American competitors.⁵⁴ Yet while they might always be partial towards their compatriots, the audience was most enthusiastic about a Canadian competitor, John Hendrickson. When it was announced that he had not advanced to the final, the audience was outraged, and demonstrations continued until the end of the competition. Hendrickson received the Polish Music Critics' Prize before the final round had even started, and, in Cline's account, the discontent was strong enough to cast a shadow over the triumph of a Polish pianist, Krystian Zimerman, who was the undisputed winner.⁵⁵

As this section has demonstrated, the Chopin Competition has not been a stranger to controversy. Some form of disturbance has occurred nearly every time that the event has been staged, beginning with the inaugural competition. While these turbulent episodes have shaped the collective memory of the Competition, none can be considered scandals in the strict sense described above, that is, where the denunciation of a transgression is openly declared, thereby creating the pressure of publicity and provoking the outrage of an interested public. On two occasions in the Competition's history, denouncers accused jury members of wrongdoing. However, in 1949, the accusation was not declared publicly; and even when it was, in 1965, its revelation was poorly timed and therefore failed to engage the public invested in the outcome of the event. On other occasions, the audience disagreed with a jury decision, but this was not channelled into outrage by a denouncer's allegation of wrongdoing. As I demonstrate in the next section, the only occasion in the Competition's history that can accurately be described as a scandal is the controversy surrounding Ivo Pogorelich's elimination at the 10th Competition in 1980.

Pogorelich at the Chopin

In keeping with the two previous cycles, the 10th Competition was scheduled to take place in October 1980, which meant that its conclusion coincided with the anniversary of the composer's death. In Warsaw, this occasion is marked every year on 17 October by the laying of flowers at the Holy Cross Church in front of the urn containing the composer's heart, and by a performance of Mozart's Requiem, which was played at Chopin's funeral on his request. The solemnity of the ritual that particular year was mixed with a mood of general optimism. This was not an ordinary October in Poland: the Solidarity movement was in its early stages and there were no indications yet of a crackdown from the pro-Soviet state authorities. The Fryderyk Chopin Society, which organised the Competition, also had reasons to be optimistic. In this jubilee year, the Competition received a record number of applicants: of the 212 applications received, 180 pianists from thirty-seven countries qualified to take part in the first round, up from 120 the year before.⁵⁶ Winners from recent cycles had become renowned artists on the international concert stage, and the Warsaw Philharmonic, which hosted the proceedings, was flooded with correspondence from people around the world hoping to obtain tickets to witness the event in person. Such auspicious circumstances made it all the more shocking when it was announced a few days into the first round that Professor Jerzy Żurawlew, the founder of the Competition, had died. His death would not be the only event during that cycle to suggest the end of an era in the Competition's history.

The standout performer from the earliest stage of the competition was Ivo Pogorelich, a Yugoslav competitor. His virtuosity was undeniable. According to *The New York Times* (21 October 1980), Pogorelich 'played wildly and passionately, striking notes in clusters, banging out the pianissimo and treading lightly on the fortissimo'.⁵⁷ Yet what listeners found especially riveting was his radically new approach to the repertoire. One Polish reporter marvelled: 'Listening to Pogorelich [...] one cannot be bored or "switch off", because every second something in his interpretation astonishes or surprises the audience'.⁵⁸ Some characterised his unconventionality as 'breath-taking',⁵⁹ while others were struck by how his eccentricity extended off the stage.⁶⁰ In any case, he was impossible to ignore. The audience in the hall quickly embraced Pogorelich as their 'favourite',⁶¹ and critics agreed that 'he was the most distinctive among the 180 entrants'⁶² because of his 'unique and great talent'.⁶³

Pogorelich's approach was daring at a competition founded to preserve an interpretive tradition that could be traced back to Chopin. Predictably, he drew fire, and his detractors invariably centred their criticisms on his departure from the tradition. 'Ah, he can play,' a French audience member told *The New York Times* while kissing the tips of his fingers, '[b]ut he killed Chopin'.⁶⁴ He also offended members of the jury. In an interview, Eugene List, a jury member, explained: 'I'm the first to say that the boy is very talented [...] but I voted very low for him. This is a special kind of competition. It's only Chopin. He doesn't respect the music. He uses extremes to the point of distortion. And he puts on too much of an act'.⁶⁵ List was not alone in his reluctance to endorse Pogorelich. Louis Kentner, a laureate from the 1932 Chopin Competition, resigned after the first round, explaining to the chair of the jury that 'if people like Pogorelich make it to the second stage, I cannot participate in the work of the jury. We have different aesthetic criteria'.⁶⁶

While his performances in the first two rounds were controversial, it was Pogorelich's performance in the third

round that amounted to a provocation in Adut's sense. Over and above his unusual interpretations of Chopin's music, Pogorelich flouted the rules of the Competition by performing his programme in the wrong order, leaving the stage part way through, and inciting a reaction from the audience. An eyewitness account helps to explain why this act was so inflammatory:

The recital was to proceed with strict formality; the mazurkas first, no applause, followed by one of the sonatas. All contestants conformed to this with the exception of Mr. Pogorelic [sic], who obviously planned a coup and started with an amazing performance of the Funeral March Sonata, then stood and demanded applause. He then left the stage, which was taboo, and returned to conclude with the mazurkas as if he were playing encores to an enthusiastic and supportive audience. Paul Pollei, quoted in Cline, 'Piano competitions'.

The rebellious quality of this gesture was further underscored by Pogorelich's appearance. He eschewed the usual formal concert attire in favour of a look that was described as that of 'a prince dropped in the middle of the desert':⁶⁸ leather trousers, a frilly white shirt and a black string tie. The deliberate courting of controversy fascinated the public only more. Not only was he showered with attention and flowers, but the younger members of the audience also started to imitate his style of dress. But this brazen defiance came at a cost: Pogorelich was eliminated after the third round.

Pogorelich's form of provocation resembles a gambit typically found in the visual arts, where avant-garde artists deliberately risk losing prestige among their peers to gain such wide notoriety that they can wield the power of celebrity.⁶⁹ But its rarity in classical music circles, and the audacity required to attempt it, are not sufficient to explain the magnitude of moral disruption at the 1980 Chopin Competition; the reason this controversy grew into a scandal is that Pogorelich was not the only provocateur. Following the announcement of his elimination, Martha Argerich, a jury member who had won the 1965 Chopin Competition, resigned from the jury in protest at its decision. She explained her reasons in an impromptu press conference: Pogorelich was a 'genius' that her colleagues could not appreciate because of an entrenched conservatism', which is why she was ashamed to be associated with them.⁷⁰

Although they were essentially equivalent gestures, Argerich's resignation had a much larger impact than Kentner's departure. This differential effect cannot be solely attributed to her use of the media to broadcast her condemnation of the Competition. The two might have had equal status as jury members and laureates of the Competition, and they might have stated similar objections. But when Kentner resigned, he opened himself up to public scrutiny and was found wanting; he was too easily dismissed as self-interested, 'upset because none of his pupils made it past the first stage'.⁷¹ In contrast, Argerich had more felicitous conditions for presenting her objection and amplifying her account. Her resignation came at a later stage of the Competition, which allowed more time for competition followers to become emotionally invested in the fate of their favourite candidates. By the end of the third round, the local audience was enthralled with Pogorelich, and when Argerich aired her grievances after his elimination, they already shared her anger about the result. Although no other jury members followed suit by leaving the panel in her wake, two of her colleagues, Nikita Magaloff and Paul Badura-Skoda, 'announced their solidarity'⁷² declaring in a private jury session that it was 'unthinkable that such an artist should not make it to the finals'.⁷³

Argerich found more sympathisers outside the jury room. Audience members and other participants in the Competition emerged to express their disagreement with the decision and to award substitute prizes to Pogorelich. Stefania Woytowicz, chair of the Warsaw Music Society, personally funded a special prize for him of 50,000 zlotys, and Irena Eichlerówna, an actress, requested that Pogorelich receive her fee of 20,000 zlotys for reciting Chopin's letters at the awards ceremony.⁷⁴

⁷⁵ Twenty Polish music critics covering the event concurred that he was 'the most unfairly treated pianist' in the history of the Competition and arranged for him to receive an award in their name.⁷⁶ Students from the Fryderyk Chopin Music Academy presented him with a certificate on which they had inscribed 'Ivo Pogorelich – our winner',⁷⁷ and the director of the Academy invited Pogorelich to perform Chopin's Piano Concerto in F minor with the student orchestra.⁷⁸ To top it all off, Deutsche Grammophon offered him a recording contract, an opportunity that would usually be granted to the winner alone, if at all.

Pogorelich remained defiant after his elimination, diminishing the importance of the Competition and criticising the jury for its conservative attitude. 'Some of the judges here want to keep Chopin like the Japanese theatre – always the same from generation to generation', he complained to *The New York Times*. 'But Chopin, when he wrote these pieces, could not himself understand the real richness of his music. Time has made it even deeper than he thought. Look, if

someone plays Chopin in 1980, he should use all the knowledge we have attained since the time Chopin composed'.⁷⁹ Moving with the times meant acknowledging that the material construction of pianos had changed and that the advent of recordings had altered how audiences listened to music in concert halls.⁸⁰ If the interpretation that resulted from his study of Chopin's manuscripts amounted to a provocation, Pogorelich insisted that this served a higher purpose: 'I came to Warsaw not to win the first prize, but to take part in the great International Chopin Competition, an arena of great importance for the young pianists of this world. I treat my presence here as a mission, because my Chopin has elements of the new, contemporary view on performing his music. I think that in 1980 such a view is essential', he said.⁸¹ Accordingly, his elimination was much more than a personal setback: it was a great injustice. 'It was not me who had something taken away from them, but the audiences, the competition – because its prestige was diminished – and Chopin himself, because his work was denied an opportunity for reinterpretation'.⁸²

These statements might have been dismissed as arrogance had the critics and the Polish public not rallied around him. Kański's position was that Pogorelich was 'a pianist of such a class, and an artistic personality of such a calibre, that banning him from the finals – regardless of what his final position would be – should be considered a mistake'.⁸³ *The New York Times* described the fervour surrounding his gala performance that was on par with a stadium rock concert:

At least 3,000 people crowded outside the 1,000-seat concert hall,
blocking every entrance and pushing forward in great rocking waves.
About 200 students formed a phalanx in front of the main entrance
to block ticketholders. A backstage door was smashed and 100 gatecrashers
surged into the hall. The star performer, his long curly hair
frizzed around his head like a demonic halo, walked onto the stage.
The audience went wild. 'Ivo, Ivo' – they chanted his name, waving
autograph books and straining to get a better look.⁸⁴

In Poland, Pogorelich became a sensation. Abroad, he became famous for his elimination from the Chopin Competition.

In the immediate aftermath, commentators drew on two different interpretive frames to make sense of the Pogorelich/Argerich double provocation. The first was the collective memory of previous cycles of the Chopin Competition. The Pogorelich affair reminded some followers of the furor caused at the 9th Competition in 1975 when the audience favourite, John Hendrickson, was eliminated at an early stage. One Polish reporter pointed to the praise that Hendrickson received from Witold Maleczyński, a jury member, to demonstrate that the 10th Competition was not the first time that jury members had shared the dissenting opinions of the critics.⁸⁵ Others noted the historical precedents for Argerich's provocation, comparing her departure to the resignations in 1955 and 1960. Commentators debated whether Kazimierz Kord, the jury chair, was right to scold Argerich by describing her behaviour as 'excessive',⁸⁶ or whether her predecessors had dealt an even harsher blow: 'in the 5th Competition, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli insulted the panel in much harsher words, and left without signing the records. At the 6th Competition, Rubinstein was more diplomatic due to his sentiments, but in less official statements he did not hide his disapproval for the criteria and mechanisms for selection'.⁸⁷

Others argued that a generational divide was causing the differences of opinion over Pogorelich's style. This interpretive frame helped to inflate the significance of the scandal by connecting it with social divisions that extended well beyond the Chopin Competition. The split in the jury became a reflection of pianism's evolution in the wider music world, where the old guard would eventually be cast off: 'What may be telling here is the age difference between Argerich and Kentner, which amounts to several dozen years. What was objectionable for an elderly pianist, was not only acceptable but even praiseworthy in the eyes of a younger one'.⁸⁸ The generation gap was also used to explain why younger members of the audience had embraced Pogorelich. Rather than dismiss this as a juvenile rebellion or berate youths for their shallowness and gullibility, some critics insisted that young people were in a better position to appreciate Pogorelich's style and recognise its significance. For example:

What are these crowds of eager, usually young people all about?
Because it seems that this time we need more than clichés like
'youngsters have always opposed judges' decisions' [...] The heart of

the matter lies, I think, a bit deeper [...] What seems more important is that Pogorelich's interpretations, whatever you think of them, with all their explosiveness, are perfectly logical, emanate with suggestiveness, and finally – a rather rare thing – contain some sort of deeply experienced artistic truth. And the present young generation is very sensitive towards truth and falsehood, not only when it comes to music [...] Pogorelich seems to be using Chopin to show the truth of the contemporary era, which is full of restlessness, violent shocks and dramatic tensions.⁸⁹

In this context, the category 'young people' refers not simply to those at a certain stage in life, but to a group whose age indicates how they have been defined by historical experience. For this generation, the Second World War, and the nation-building zeal that followed it, was a distant historical event. Their relationship to the communist regime would also have been coloured by their parents' disillusionment with communism, which had built up over the 1970s as it became increasingly obvious that early aspirations would never be achieved and that the standard of living had sunk far below that of Western countries. Through this interpretive frame, Pogorelich's supporters were much more than infatuated fans, and Pogorelich's performance was more than a break with musical tradition; instead, the young generation was applauded for recognising how Pogorelich's provocation resonated with the ambitions of the Solidarity movement and the desire to break with the past.

The legacy of the scandal

The publicity generated by the scandal initially helped Pogorelich's career by creating opportunities for debut concerts, attracting a wider audience for existing engagements and drawing attention to the release of his recordings. As Henahan commented in *The New York Times* the year after the Competition, 'his elimination seems to have brought him more notice than a first prize would have.'⁹⁰ Henahan's counterpart at *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto concurred: 'it has become a running gag among critics to ask who won the Warsaw Competition that Pogorelich lost. Whatever the winner's virtues really are, it appears that he or she has embarked on a career as one of the great trivia questions of music history'.⁹¹

The price of this notoriety was that either 'controversy' or 'eccentricity' became attached to Pogorelich's name whenever it appeared in print. For example, his debut recital at the Royal Festival Hall in 1981 was announced in *The Times* with the headline 'Gifted Pogorelich strikes a controversial note';⁹² for his American orchestra debut, he was billed as 'the controversial young Yugoslav pianist';⁹³ and in an article covering his North American tour, he was hailed as the 'eccentric pianist' who had set 'the music world on its ear' by doing 'something new and dreadful to Chopin'.⁹⁴ These adjectives were still being used regularly for years after the Competition. For example, the critic for *The Washington Post* conceded that 'Pogorelich's blazing power and technique and his amazing range of articulation and dynamics were extremely impressive', but insisted that 'his *eccentric* interpretation all but obliterated the structure and logic behind this wonderful example of romantic virtuosity and tenderness'.⁹⁵ Nonconformity was considered so much his trademark that when he appeared at Carnegie Hall, the critic for *The New York Times* complained that audience members who came to hear his recital 'expecting shocks and thrills must have gone home disappointed'; 'there were a few eccentricities in the young Yugoslav's playing, but none of them was particularly outrageous, and they seemed not so much bold and poetic as random and listless'.⁹⁶

⁹⁷ The story of the controversy over his elimination at the Chopin Competition was told so often that eventually it became a trope. Understandably, it was included in feature articles about Pogorelich at later stages in his career. For example, Holland portrayed the episode as an important turning point in his life:

Ivo Pogorelich was one more young talent among hundreds until his spectacular failure at the Warsaw Chopin Competition six years ago. Winning competitions means pleasing judges of different backgrounds and prejudices; and where most competitors try hard to offend no one, Mr. Pogorelich's individual playing style, shirt-sleeves and string ties obviously offended quite a few. When he was dropped from the final round, Martha Argerich, the Argentine pianist, quit the jury in

publicly enunciated disgust. A quickly improvised, counter-concert played by Mr. Pogorelich attracted a big crowd of young people in Warsaw. The story spread across the news wires – not only of his pianistic prowess but his appearance.⁹⁸

Fifteen years after this article appeared, Tommasini reprised the story to open his review of Deutsche Grammophon's release of a two-disc compilation of Pogorelich's early recordings:

Many young pianists have inaugurated their careers by winning a major international competition. Not so Ivo Pogorelich, who gained worldwide attention and a dream-come-true career boost by losing a competition. Mr. Pogorelich, 22 at the time, was eliminated before the final round of the 1980 Warsaw International Chopin Competition. Though he played with astounding technique and undeniable magnetism, some of the jurors were baffled to the point of outrage by his headstrong interpretive liberties, not to mention his attire: no jacket, tights pants [trousers] and string ties. When the decision was announced, one juror, the pianist Martha Argerich, recognizing a fellow Dionysian in this young Croatian virtuoso, called Mr. Pogorelich a 'genius'. She resigned in protest [...].⁹⁹

The trope also appeared in articles that were not primarily about Pogorelich himself. It was included in coverage of subsequent cycles of the Chopin Competition, especially if Dang Thai Son, the eventual winner of the 1980 competition, returned as a juror, or if one of the competitors performed in an unconventional manner.¹⁰⁰ It was also used as evidence to demonstrate the problems with music competitions. For example, Nicholas Kenyon pointed to Pogorelich as one of several cases revealing that piano competitions were 'a game worth losing'.¹⁰¹ Similarly, when Julian Lloyd Webber, a renowned concert cellist, declared that 'almost all music competitions are corrupt and exist only as a way for teachers to promote their own pupils', Argerich's protest against the elimination of Pogorelich was cited as an example of 'when judges hit the wrong note'.¹⁰²

Pogorelich himself also played a role in helping the scandal to achieve legendary status. On two separate occasions, he has publicly raised the issue of his elimination. In 1993, he told the Los Angeles Times that the contest had been fixed:

The Soviet Bloc authorities had decided months before the competition that it was politically necessary to have a North Vietnamese winner [...] My decision to participate was not at all welcome. I was told I should wait a year, for the Tchaikovsky competition, when I would have the first prize guaranteed.^{103 104}

And in 2008, he demanded an official enquiry into the 10th Competition to find out what really happened in the jury room so that he could put it behind him once and for all.¹⁰⁵ While the Chopin Institute refused to reopen the case and stood by the jury's decision, Pogorelich's accusations succeeded in bringing the issue back to the attention of the musical public. And in this sphere, Pogorelich's elimination in 1980 continues to be debated. It does not take much to revive the discussion, even decades after the event. For example, after a long absence from the British concert scene, Pogorelich performed a recital at the Royal Festival Hall in 2015. The occasion was widely (and negatively) reviewed, prompting Peter Donohoe, a pianist who won the silver medal at the 1982 Tchaikovsky Competition, to write an extended essay entitled 'Was the Chopin jury not right to eliminate Pogorelich?'¹⁰⁶ It quickly accumulated more than 60 comments.

Conclusion

Durkheim famously argued that crime is a normal feature of society, not an indication of its decline or a pathology that

can be eliminated. It can be found in all societies because it performs the important functions of demarcating the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and creating cohesion among those who were not found to have crossed them. In this sense, controversies should be understood as a normal feature of music competitions. They can be found in every kind of competition organisation, because they are an important mechanism for what Adut calls 'norm work',¹⁰⁸ a term which refers to 'a set of actions that encompass committing, publicizing, sanctioning and responding to transgression'. Through controversies, the musical public establishes which ideals cannot be compromised, which issues do not require consensus, and which practices must not be allowed to continue.

In the history of music competitions, there have been periods when scandals became chronic. In the mid twentieth century, recurring disturbances and unresolved moral upset had a polluting effect that extended beyond the particular organisations experiencing the turbulence. These conditions led to the founding in 1957 of the World Federation of International Music Competitions. Fearing that the confidence of the musical public was being undermined and that abuses of privilege had become routine, thirteen competitions, including the International Fryderyk Chopin Competition, agreed to cooperate on defining and reinforcing professional standards.¹⁰⁹

However, a controversy that occurs in isolation often has positive effects. An allegation of wrongdoing that proves to be well founded can spur purification rituals that eventually restore an organisation's legitimacy through reparations and reform. Not only does the moral outrage provoked by competition controversies serve as a gauge for the egregiousness of the alleged transgression: it also measures the depth of the public's commitment to the art of music and its emotional investment in the occasions believed to determine a young artist's future. In the case of the scandal surrounding Pogorelich, the widespread interest in the controversy served to demonstrate and reinforce the status of the Chopin Competition. Members of the Polish public could be proud that 'their' competition mattered so much that the elimination of a competitor part-way through the event was considered newsworthy around the world. And in the long run, the publicity surrounding the scandal enhanced the reputation of the Chopin Competition, distinguishing it from its counterparts and establishing it in the minds of young pianists as an arena where legends are made.

Appendix

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1. I would like to thank the staff at the Chopin Institute, especially Ewa Bogula and Wioletta Borowa, for their invaluable help locating and scanning archival materials. I am also grateful for the assistance and advice received from Beata Kowalczyk, Dorota Peszkowska and Dominik Zelinsky.
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27. Polish newspapers included *Slowo Powszechne, Sztandar Młodych, Życie Warszawy, Trybuna Robotnicza, Express Wieczorny, Slowo Polskie, Trybuna Ludu, Trybuna Odrzańska, Kurier Lubelski, Kurier Polski, Polityka, Głos Wybrzeża, Przekrój* and *Literatura*.
28. The selection was made under the guidance of Ewa Bogula, a native Polish speaker and senior specialist in the research and publications department at the Chopin Institute.
29. Publications included *The Times, The Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, The Guardian, The New York Times, The Globe and Mail, Maclean's,*
30. *The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, American Record Guide* and *The Jerusalem Post*.
31. The journalists were YuanPu Chiao, a musicologist and broadcaster based in Taiwan; Bruce Duffie, an American journalist who has appeared on public radio; and Frances Wilson, a London-based pianist whose website is called 'The Cross-Eyed Pianist'.
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35. Ibid., 14.
36. Dybowski, *The Laureates*.
37. Quoted in *ibid.*, 17.
38. Quoted in *ibid.*, 17.
39. According to Lipoński, competitive sport did not play an important role in Poland until after independence because it could not be represented at international events such as the Olympic Games. Polish athletes did participate in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, but as members of other teams, despite Poland's inclusion on Pierre de Coubertin's list of countries that should be invited. In 1920, a Polish team was assembled, but the Polish-Soviet war prevented their participation in the Olympic Games in Antwerp. It was not until 1924 – two years before the founding of the Chopin Competition – that Poland was finally able to participate in the Olympic Games. See Wojciech Lipoński, 'Still an unknown European tradition: Polish sport in the European cultural heritage', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 13/2 (1996), 18.
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70. Kydryński, 'Gdybyś ich widział', 17.
71. Darnton, 'Despite love for Chopin', A1.
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74. Zygmunt Broniarek, 'Wręczenie nagrody WTM Ivo Pogoreličovi' [Ivo Pogorelich receives the Warsaw Music Society prize], *Slowo Powszechne*, 22 October 1980, 1. According to the *Treasury Reporting Rates of Exchange*, as of 30 September 1980, 30 zlotys equalled 1 US dollar. Therefore, the fee would have been worth roughly \$660, and the special prize was worth approximately \$1,650. www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GOV-PUB-T63_100-3a1c412279b-9d41760aeb975bfc3fe27/pdf/GOVP-UB-T63_100-3a1c412279b-9d41760aeb975bfc3fe27.pdf, accessed 23 June 2017.
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