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COMPETING WITH ONESELF

– Aspects on preparation for a piano competition



BACHELOR'S THESIS | ABSTRACT

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- Aspects on preparation for a piano competition

This thesis consists of two parts: the concert performance: Solo Piano Concert in Betel Church (Appendix 1 and 2) as a part of the competition preparation.

The weight value of the artistic part is $\frac{2}{3}$ and the written part is $\frac{1}{3}$ from the whole thesis.

The written part will give the reader a closer look at the whole process, starting from describing the competition itself and finishing with the performance day. The focus will be set on the preparation process and mental attitude of those who want to present themselves at their best in a competition. Each chapter, in a chronological timeline will provide the reader with the author`s experience gained during the participation in the Leevi Madetoja Piano Competition, in 2018, Oulu.

KEYWORDS:

Music competitions, piano playing, mental preparation, public performance

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Lacrimioara Galagan

MUSIIKKIKILPAILU ITSETUNTEMUKSEN KEHITTÄJÄNÄ

- näkökulmia pianokilpailuun valmistautumisesta

Tämä opinnäytetyö koostuu kahdesta osasta. Taiteellinen osio on konsertti (Solo Piano Concert in Betel Church, (liitteet 1 ja 2), joka oli osa kilpailuun valmistautumista. Taiteellisen osion painoarvo on 2/3 ja kirjallisen osion 1/3 koko opinnäytetyöstä. Opinnäytetyön kirjallinen osa avaa lukijalle lähemmän näkymän koko prosessiin kilpailuvaatimukseen tutustumisesta ohjelmiston valintaan ja aina esiintymishetkeen asti. Päähuomio on valmistautumisprosessissa ja mentaalivalmennuksen merkityksessä kilpailuun valmistautumisessa parhaalla tavalla. Aikajanaa apuna käyttäen kuvataan kokemuksia valmistautumisesta Oulussa tammikuussa 2018 järjestettyyn XI Leevi Madetoja-kilpailuun.

ASIASANAT:

Musiikkikilpailut, pianonsoitto, mentaalivalmennus, musiikin esittäminen

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Fortissimo	A passage performed or marked to be performed very loudly. (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fortissimo)
Presto	A movement or passage marked to be performed in a quick tempo. (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/presto)

1 INTRODUCTION

*Practice like you've never won,
Perform like you've never lost."*

Bernard F. Asuncion (poet)

The "experience" of frequent playing in public was essential for my musical development. It made me overcome the stage fright and undue nervousness. When it comes to competitions, the question of whether these are good or bad for both musicians and art itself have been debated for years.

I believe it all depends of how you approach a competition, how you prepare for it. In this thesis I present my observations upon the ability to prepare for a competition with the help of the sources and the knowledge I gained on the way.

"All piano entrants need to cultivate the skill to perform at the top of their ability at any time, at any place, on any instrument. The life of a viable competitor is not for the timid, the unprepared, or the temperamental. A fine teacher can help by simultaneously offering repertoire the compositions of varying levels of difficulty, and requiring the student to have always something ready to play. In this way a less difficult "finished" composition can acquire playing experience and polish while a more demanding work is receiving attention on the "back burner". Eventually this last work will be put through the difficult birthing process of "trial-and-error" performances until it becomes a smooth, effective "show piece," while yet another potential "blockbuster" is being prepared. In this way, students acquire a more diverse repertoire base. No would-be artist has the right to say "No" to what can be a valuable playing experience. "I 'm not in the mood" is an unacceptable excuse; the duty of an artist is to create a mood for listeners. Doing one's best at all times should become routine; this will permit the aspiring mind to soar to further horizons." (Chopin.org)

A difficult question — to compete or not to compete? Piano teachers and parents often challenge their children and students to go outside the limit of practice and piano performances by taking part in piano competitions. This is how they take part in one, choose the program, practice for hours daily and finally travel there to present themselves as good as possible.

Taking part in competitions can often provide new opportunities, networking connections and scholarships. Still, we cannot ignore the fact that it is a mental marathon. How to approach a competition with the right attitude, how to take the best out of this experience, how to reduce the stress, the fear of failure and the stage fright which may come unexpectedly during those moments? Reflecting upon this topic I came across different ways to prevent this from happening.

2 WHAT IS THE LEEVI MADETOJA PIANO COMPETITION ABOUT?

The Nationwide Leevi Madetoja Piano Competition is a meeting place for young players and their backgrounds. It is organized by the Oulu University of Applied Sciences in cooperation with the Oulu Conservatory, Centria Polytechnic, the Tampere University of Applied Sciences and POTKU - North Ostrobothnia Arts and Culture Support Association. The competition can be attended by people studying piano at Finnish music institutes, professional secondary schools or Universities of Applied Sciences (polytechnics), including the present foreign exchange students during the academic year 2017–2018. Students of Sibelius Academy or of the University of the Arts cannot participate in the competition. (Tötterström, 2012)

2.1 Background of the competition

At the introduction section, I told my reader that the main focus of this thesis would be set on the competition preparation process. Still, I cannot continue writing without mentioning which competition was the one that inspired me to write this topic and what was also serving me as a guide to writing this thesis.

The first Leevi Madetoja Piano Competition was held in Oulu for pianists in December 1988. The event arose from the need to give the opportunity for the students of the school to make a public call in their own competition. Thence with the experience gained, it would be natural for young callers to appear more often and will later take part in other competitions. After the first competition, other music institutes in Northern Finland will communicate with the Oulu Conservatory telling that their students would need to compete also on their own soil. Therefore, it was decided to expand the competition for all the music schools in Oulu and in Lapland counties. In this form, the competition took place in 1991 and 1994. Since the three competitions organized by the Oulu Conservatoire were running well, was encouraged to take the next step and change the competition in 1997 to the national format excluding the students of Sibelius Academy. (Tötterström, 2012)

Approaching the 2000s, the “redistribution” of piano competitions in Finland began to take shape. Since 1975, the Ilmari Hannikainen Piano Competition in Jyväskylä was organized nationally in 1996, changing partly to the international competition. Then the Baltic countries had the opportunity to participate in two different series.

The competition was changed however, back in 2001. The following year, the Maj Lind competition organized by the company in the Sibelius Academy became international. (Tötterström, 2012)

From now on, the division of labor between the Finnish piano competitions has been clear: The Leevi Madetoja Piano Competition is directed to the young players who study in the Finnish music schools, Conservatories and the University of Applied Sciences. The National Piano Competition of Jyväskylä is meant for all at least 15 year-of-old players and the Maj Lind competition is an international event, the flagship of the Finnish piano competitions. In 2000, the conservatory of Oulu and Oulu University of Applied Sciences (Oamk) serve as the fifth Leevi Madetoja piano competition organisers together. After that Oamk alone has been responsible for organizing the competition. The competition is held every third year. The cycle of the piano competitions in Finland has become such that there are no overlapping events during the piano competitions. (Tötterström, 2012)

2.1 Importance and nature of competition

When it comes to music contests, consider whether art can be measured? How can the following aspects may be evaluated commensurate with the competitors: the artistic vision, technical know-how and overall quality of playing? How do young people experience competition? There are no universal answers to such questions. Still, the Leevi Madetoja Piano Competition has been avoiding too much competition, especially by naming two competitions, which are meant for younger players, dealing incentive and recognition awards. These series do not share investments unlike the 17-year-olds and their parents who are already young adults. Many of the winners of the competition are remembered after years. It has been great to follow for example, Mika Rännäli or Maija Väisänen in the career of a musician. In addition, the winners and many young callers have received additional sparks in their studies and performances. (Tötterström, 2012)

The competition is divided into three series: a) children under 13 years, b) 13-16 years old, c) 17 years and over. The range of each competitor is determined by the start date of the competition (22nd January 2018). Classes a) and b) are of the type of review and share different awards. The prizes in the series c) are defined in the prize list, but on the basis of their assessment, the committee may also award the prizes. (Tötterström, 2012)

“Competitors and their teachers have to take care of their trips, accommodation and meals themselves. Competitors will have the opportunity to receive feedback on their performances as time permits, according to the timetable announced by the members of the artistic committee: Jouko Tötterström, Eeva Havulehto, Hannu Hirvelä, Paavali Jumppanen, Markku Pöyhönen. Competition events are public. The organizers have the right, without compensation, to record, broadcast, video, broadcast or broadcast on the Internet their competitors' performances, including their own music. Photographing and filming without the permission of the organizers is prohibited during the competition. The jury has the right to interrupt the call if the set maximum call time limit is exceeded and to limit the playing time if the competition schedule so requires. Based on its assessment, the jury can also share the prizes. (Tötterström, 2012)

The Madetoja Piano Competition makes a great stimulating atmosphere. In the series of younger pianists, the non-allocation of prize money is a brilliant feature, as it is likely to reduce competition and create a more relaxed mood for a young caller. A positive and supportive atmosphere creates a feeling of belonging for the whole week, with competitors being friends rather than resistors. During the week, young pianists, their teachers and others who are interested in the competition and who discuss the competition and other common issues, are the cultural unit in the Oulu University of Applied Sciences. The situation seems more like a common feast than a serious competition. (Tötterström, 2012)

2.2 Program arrangement

After getting to know the program requirements I decided to choose a repertoire that combined fresh, rarely played music and famous pieces. On the table below, I presented my program chosen together with my piano teacher for all the three rounds.

First Round	Second round	The Final
1. J.S.Bach Partita in C minor, BWV 826, Sinfonia	1. L. Madetoja: Berceuse (Kuoleman puutarha, no 3)	J. S. Bach: Concerto nr 4 A major BWV 1055
2. S. Rachmaninov: Etude-tableaux op.33 no 4	2. F. Schubert: Impromptu F minor op 142 no 4	
3. J. Tötterström: A look to a distant Nebula	3. L. Janacek: In the mist	
4. C. Debussy: Etude "Pour les degrés chromatiques"	1. Andante	
5. J. Brahms: Intermezzo Es minor op.118 no 6	2. Molto Agitato	
	3. Andantino	
	4. Presto	

Table 1. Program Arrangement

Choose the repertoire that really suits you, which resonate well with your current abilities. The number one piece of advice from adjudicators at every competition is: "Choose repertoire that suits you". It takes a long time, often with the help of teachers and your own experiences to know what the right repertoire for the next competition is that you are going to attend. Sometimes it happens that you chose a piece thinking that it would be impressive due to the degree of difficulty, but in the end did not perform it the way you wanted and the results reflected that. Choosing the right program which suits your level of artistic development will give a much stronger performance. But, beyond that, there should be a variety in the character of different compositions: the classic, the romantic, and the modern compositions should all be given representation. To play several slow movements or several vivacious movements in succession would tend to tire the listener.

Never risk anything in front of audience or do so with the condition that you are not sure it will work. Take responsibility and face the consequences. Be realistic. Do not take others as an example in learning. We all have different speeds in learning, quickness does not mean good, slowness does not mean bad. The best thing to do is to get to know

yourself and know how quickly you can memorize a piece, how long it takes for you to learn the passage after changing the fingering, pedal, nuances, markings and so on.

2.3 Profitable practice versus wasted practice

“Practice as long at one time as you can practice well, and do not try to crowd one or two months’ work into one hour. Do everything you do as finely as you possibly can, even though you succeed in learning no more than a few measures.” (*Cooke 2013, 382*)

There are hundreds of methods of how to practice during competitions, I believe the most important is to personalize this practice and make your own conclusions whichever of these methods suits you the best. I completely agree with Alexander Lambert when it comes to my personal experience during the preparation for the competition - having a regularity in practice is something we all pianists want to achieve, but I consider that practicing without mental involving is a waste of time. I had moments during the preparation time when I was practicing for hours and there were no great achievements. Simply because my mind was exhausted and the concentration was absent.

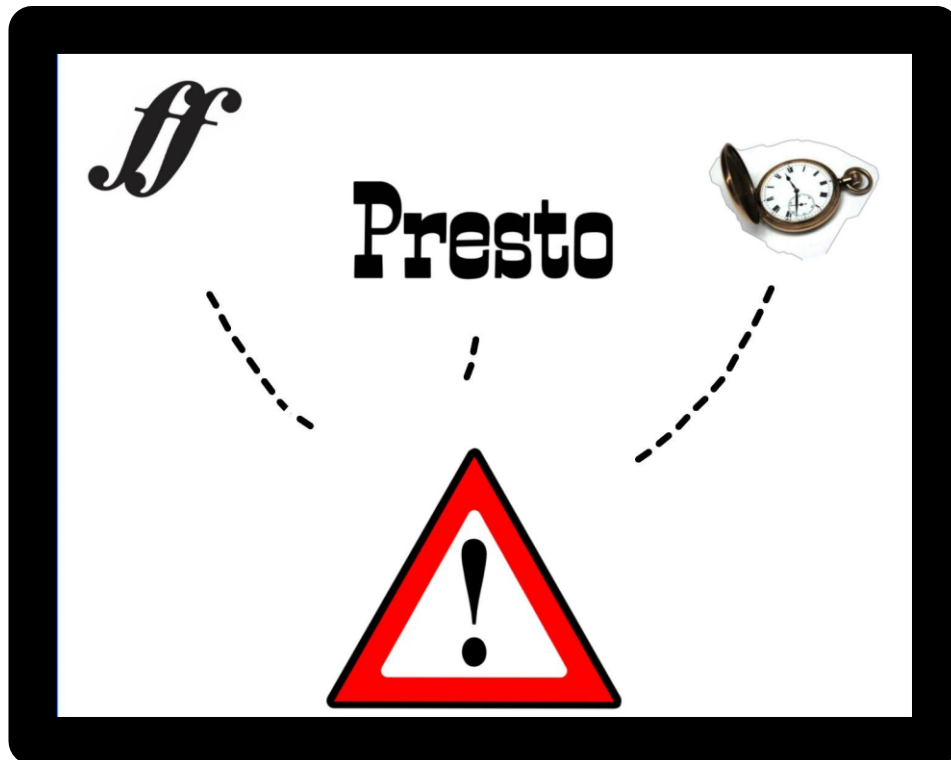
Slow practice & the secret weapon:

Rachmaninov was a dedicated and driven perfectionist. He worked incessantly, with infinite patience. Once I had an appointment to spend an afternoon with him in Hollywood. Arriving at the designated hour of twelve, I heard an occasional piano sound as I approached the cottage. I stood outside the door, unable to believe my ears. Rachmaninov was practicing Chopin’s etude in thirds, but at such a snail’s pace that it took me a while to recognize it because so much time elapsed between one finger stroke and the next. Fascinated, I clocked this remarkable exhibition: twenty seconds per bar was his pace for almost an hour while I waited riveted to the spot, quite unable to ring the bell. Perhaps this way of developing and maintaining an unerring mechanism accounted for his bitter sarcasm toward colleagues who practiced their programs ‘once over lightly’ between concerts. (*Abram 1967, 44*)

So, when do we use this sort of ultra-slow practice?

- Use it when learning new pieces, in order for the brain to move faster than the fingers.
- Use it for passages requiring fine motor skills that are uneven or that lack control.
- Use it for places that sound dull and mechanical, exaggerating the dynamics, hairpins and balances.
- Use it to maintain accuracy and finesse in pieces you already know.
- Use it to command control of every single note, inflection, dynamic and expression mark, and pedal.
- Use it for memory work (if you can play slowly from memory, you know every atom and molecule of the musical structure).
- Do not use it when you are forming the reflexes for fast playing after the initial learning stages. Let us say you have spent some time learning a fast piece slowly and you want to get it up to speed. Now is the time to lay off the slow practice for a while, even though it will feel very comfortable to go back to it each day. Resist this, and make a plan to do a little bit fast. (Fitch, 2019)

After attending the webinar “Physical and mental preparation for piano competitions” organized by the International Cochran Piano Competition and held by Jadwiga Smieszchalska, an esteemed specialist and researcher in music physiology, on 27th February 2016, all attending piano students agreed that practicing *Fortissimo* and *Presto* for a long period of time is not beneficial for anyone. (Smieszchalska, 2016)



Picture 1. The webinar “Physical and mental preparation for piano competitions” (Smieszchalska, 2016)

Now, moving on, imagine for a second, that you are supposed to give a speech in the public and the topic is not relevant to you in any way. Are you ready to face the moment? How do you think you will perform? Do you have good acting skills to make this topic resonate within you? If you do not have, then it will not resonate with the public either. Being in touch with the composer’s full emotional message can only be achieved by understanding what is written between the lines in the score. (Smieszchalska, 2016)

“What is the virtuoso’s most indispensable attribute? I would answer “sincerity”. If the artist is not sincere, he is nothing more than a showman. Every time he goes to the platform he should go with a message. If this spirit is cultivated during the student days all the better. The public has a right to expect the sincerity of the artist. If the artist falls before the blandishments of the public, and plays merely to catch pennies, he will surely suffer in the long run. The public now is too highly educated not to distinguish “clap-trap”. The student should be encouraged to approach every piece with all possible sincerity and earnestness. Do not think that anything that Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann

or Chopin has seen fit to write is too little to deserve the very best for you. Be sincere in all you do and your art will advance finely.” (Cooke 2013, 348)

Recording yourself can also help in improving your future performances, although this is not my personal preference. The recording devices can be useful when practicing alone for improving a hard passage, a tempo, your posture on the stage. Still, when it comes to the musical spirit, sound nuances, brightness and colors, phrasing and accentuation - I do rely more on myself, my teacher, it all goes through the public ears - if I am performing in front of people. This is why I encourage everyone to ask for feedbacks and musical “visions” your listeners each time after your performance is over. As many people as possible, paying attention to the teachers and the professionals in this field, of course, but not neglecting other listeners. Everyone has something to say - which is wonderful!

“A pianist's sound exists only in the performer's brain and inner ear. Before a pianist touches the keyboard of any instrument he must internally "hear" the wished-for sound, then produce it. A personal quality of sound is unique, an aural fingerprint. A good pianist will be able to make an unresponsive piano sound at its best, and will make a good piano sound superb. To do this the inner ear must be a consummate listener that continually monitors the hands to produce what the music demands. This is a somewhat different task than that of the instrumentalist who usually performs on his own instrument and knows in advance what sound it will, or can, produce. To achieve this personal sound, it is helpful to practice on any piano, regardless of quality, without the pedal. Two listening ears and well-practiced hands must be responsible. Later, the pedal can be used to enhance and supplement the already established sound. So often a young pianist will begin compositions such as Chopin's Bb minor Sonata, or Rachmaninoff's C# minor Prelude, or Beethoven's Sonata "Pathetique" by coming down with all his strength from above the keyboard. This practice creates a harsh, short-lived, ugly, loud sound, which will turn off any sensitive listener. Instead, push your body weight into the piano to obtain maximum volume with warmth. Actively, unceasingly, and critically listen to and create your own sound. Franz Liszt said, "Listen as if you were a rival pianist in the next room." (Chopin.org)

3 ACING THE COMPETITION

During my own research about mental attitude in a competition I came across couple of sport articles where the trainers were preparing the athletes for their performances. It surprised me how important for them is to have a right mental attitude before the event. I discovered that music and sports have many things in common, one of them being public performances and competitions. This is why my chapter will include some of their strategies during the competition period.

3.1 The meaning of the goal

“Come with a clear performance goal in mind. There is a significant difference between having a competition “Performance” and a competition “Experience”. A competition “Performance” implies a clear focus on the task at hand and a commitment to choices that will give the best possible chance for optimal performance to occur. Conversely, a competition “Experience” implies taking the sights and sounds of the competition without a clear goal or focus. Ultimately, it will be important to find a balance between the two and allow opportunity to absorb the event atmosphere. Still, to succeed on a performance level, you will need to direct your focus on the task.” (sportmedbc.com)

No doubts, when you attend to a competition, every single detail matters. Avoiding stress during the trip is crucial for your ability to focus on yours “soon to be” performance. It is very beneficial to make a checklist with all the information and things you will need during the competition, such as including audition date, audition time, audition room, rehearsal room, rehearsal time, contact information and phone numbers. Every single thing should literally be written down in a notebook, so there is no chance you can miss or forget something while acing the competition.

3.2 Get familiar with the surroundings

From my own experience, when travelling to a competition, getting familiar with the surroundings and planning ahead how you will reach to the venue, it is going to save a

lot of energy and time for the following days of your preparation. “Psychologists recommend often personalizing particular areas of the room you stay while taking part in a competition. Bringing things from home, placing posters in sleeping areas or dressing rooms can help create feelings of comfort, familiarity and a sense of control.” (sportmedbc.com)

3.3 Daily routines

Do you have a consistent routine that you go through day-in and day-out before practice? It is important to treat every pre-competition time period just like you would practice - keep the routine the same! You will stay more calmer relying on a consistent maintained ritual, continuing to approach meets in the very same way you would practice.

“Sleeping plays an essential role in your health and wellbeing. The harm caused by not getting enough sleep can be immediate - tiredness, headaches, poor memory, difficulty focusing and anxiety are only a part of these consequences. To restore your sleep balance, you need at least two nights in a row of unrestricted good quality sleep.” (health navigator.org).

During the Leevi Madetoja piano competition, I decided to take my electric piano in the trip as an additional tool for practice while staying in the hotel room. This decision has made a big impact in my upcoming performances. It saved my time and energy for the days when I was exhausted between the rounds.

4 THE PERFORMANCE DAY

In a series of deeply personal interviews, Claudio Arrau, one of the greatest pianists of the twentieth century, was asked by Joseph Horowitz, a music critic: “What precisely do you do before a concert?” and he answers: “First of all, I always sleep - usually two hours. Resting is very important before a concert. And through sleep you get to the core of your creative subconscious. Then I like to get to the hall an hour before starting. And I wake up an hour before that - two hours before going on stage. Backstage, in the hall, I look

at the music. I go through at least half the recital, mentally. Then at the intermission I look at the rest. That way, when I go on stage, I have a feeling of elation - that something wonderful is going to happen.” He also adds earlier when asked about the warming up before the recital: “I can’t understand these people who practice until the very last minute. And it ruins something really marvelous about the experience - the spiritual energy you start out with.” (Horowitz 1992, 108)

The intensity of your nervousness on the day of your performance is not equivalent with the quality of your performance: being very nervous but having the right mindset and preparation before the performance can make you perform colorful and brilliant. On the other side of the fence it may happen that you have no fear or nervousness and your performance goes monotone or even bad.

Nervousness, before the concert, should be considered by the performer as a natural phenomenon, which will fade from the first flourishing phrases. While students still have these common thoughts “I am so nervous, I will fail...”, “When I will stop being nervous, I will perform much better “, it is predictable what their performance will sound and look like. The only right mindset is: “Regardless to anything, I will do my best to perform better than at the general rehearsal”. Some students before getting on the stage are already thinking about the end of their performance and the release they are going to feel as soon as everything is done. This is another mindset, which predicts its consequences.

“Saying to yourself that “I will be here for a long time” (which means - no hurry in your movements, the enjoyment of your upcoming performance), is a much favorable thought while waiting to get on the stage.”, says Arseniy Petrovych Shapov, a Russian musicologist and distinguished piano teacher of Leningrad (St. Petersburg). He continues by saying: “On the day of your performance it is important to save your neuropsychological energy (do not read, talk excessively). It is also recommended to rehearse your program in slow tempos for a short period of time, emotionally restrained. Reflecting about the program with the score in front of you has also shown a positive influence.” (Shapov 1968, 238)

Develop refocusing strategies. For challenging and unexpected moments during the performance in competitions, the teachers and the pianists can use different methods to learn refocusing strategies. One way is by simulating the competition and adding

different challenges within the practice hours. Mental training should be included in the routine for achieving confidence and concentration during the performance. This and other strategies can help the pianists to focus and refocus their attention beyond the moment of performance and the most important – will develop the ability to concentrate on their performances under any circumstances.

5 CONCLUSION

There are different ways to approach a competition. I believe that everyone should discover for themselves what works best in their individual cases. From the experience, I gained, I believe that mental training is of equal importance to daily piano practice. I learned that no amounts of hours spent in the practice room can make me perform better if I am not prepared for that event mentally. Everything comes from within our mind and we shall train it as much as we train our fingers. It is important to train yourself to include planning a clear goal for the event. There is no right or wrong in my opinion in choosing what the goal may look like – if you have a competitive personality and you really wish to win or if you just want to take a step forward in your musical development. Whatever you choose – go for it and be consistent. Follow your plans and preparation habits and try to reduce other distractions as much as you can. Remaining confident and positive even in the face of unexpected moments, being able to control your emotions and following your goals, can make a huge difference once the competition starts. Being mentally prepared for this experience can give you the chance to showcase your talent and can strengthen your endurance.

It is easy to compare yourself against other people, especially when you take part in competitions. I believe that people who compete against themselves are more successful than those who compete against others. They find satisfaction in pursuing self-development. I hope that my thesis work can serve as a guide to help other pianists and instrumental players.

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APPENDIX 1: Solo Piano Concert, Betel Church. Poster



*Piano Concert of
Lacrimioara Galagan*

17th of January 2018, 18:00

*Music composed by J. S. Bach, S. Rachmaninoff, Cl. Debussy, L. Janacek,
F. Schubert, L. Madetoja, J. Brahms and others.*

Betel Kirkko, Yliopistonkatu 29 a, 20100 Turku

*Free Entrance
Program: 5-10€*




TURUN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU
TURKU UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

APPENDIX 2: Solo Piano Concert, Betel Church, DVD recording of the Performance

Recording of the Thesis Concert is situated in Turku University of Applied Sciences, Library of Music Academy, Linnankatu 60.