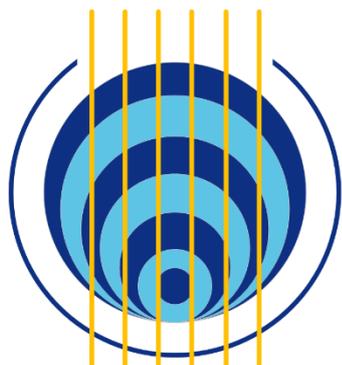


Amateur Competition 2014

Amateurconcours



Gitaarfestival Nordhorn 2014

After my success in 2013, the temptation to subscribe again got the better of me. At many guitar competitions, you are excluded from participation once you have won the first prize. That's not so with the Amateur Competition of the Nordhorn Guitar Festival.

Normally speaking you should stay away from a competition that you have won, because matching that result imposes considerable pressure that adds to the usual competition stress.

Alas, I was Young and Foolish and even subscribed to two competitions, the one in Nordhorn and the one in Enschede. As a consequence, besides my preparation diary notes, you can read about my biting more off than I could chew.

Click the chapter titles to find out more!

10-3-2014: Subscribed

My results from last year encouraged me to subscribe to the amateur competition of the Guitar Festival Nordhorn again. At the moment that I should start preparing, however, to be honest my good spirits were considerably less.

Particularly the second half of 2013 was a stressful time. My youngest daughter went backpacking in South America, a not completely risk-free operation, fortunately she returned safe, sound and wiser. My father passed away after 19 years in a nursing home. Our cat died while we were on vacation. My oldest daughter became pregnant after a long medical treatment, she got married and would have her baby at the end of the year.

In the winter, I found out that the stress, mourning and joy had taken quite some energy and for the first time I experienced the effects of a winter depression. I felt tired, sometimes exhausted, and at times even despondent. I gave in to endless fretting which made me restless at times, which effected in a poor night's rest and further loss of energy.

That affected my guitar playing. It was all a bit less. Less motivation to practice, playing before audiences took more effort and stress, I felt a bit of a haze. Consequently, I had difficulty to select a repertoire for the competition. At times, I felt despondent and considered withdrawal. Moods like this were unsteady like the weather. Fortunately, I had more optimistic moments too. In the end, I decided to take up the gauntlet any way.

As a consequence, I can write a little chronicle of my preparations and performance for his year as well.

17-3-2014: Why am I doing this?

The question why you participate in a music competition is quite important. Why would I work myself into stress as a consequence of the idea that I am playing in a competition and that I meet competitors rather than fellow-players? In itself the idea of competition does not encourage me, the motivation to be better than another person is no inspiration for a better guitar playing performance as far as I am concerned. On the contrary, the idea would be counterproductive.

So why am I getting involved with this competition?

Over time there have been numerous discussions about why a music competition or contest is beneficial or outright bad for players and music. The supporters will claim that a competition can motivate you to get better, improve yourself and will help you to get stage experience and exposure. Objectors will claim that competition brings out the worst in yourself, because competition is at the cost of yourself and others, causing hardly any positive effects for the music and the musician.

Wikipedia quotes an interesting discussion, with Denis Azabagic as a supporter (he wrote a book about preparation for competitions) and John Williams and Timothy Kain as objectors. The latter does admit that the competition is caused by the commercialization of music, one of the necessary(?) evils of our days. *First Prizes* of Competitions are *Assets* that might boost your career as a musician. What about the competitions that were completely or nearly lost? Well, people tend to forget about them.

I guess, because of this career asset aspect, music competitions are immensely popular amongst conservatory students and professionals. You expose yourself to the possibility of success, contact with impresarios, contact with colleagues (sometimes on a war footing) and to experience to excel under extreme stress conditions. The first prize on the GFA competition definitely is an asset for your curriculum vitae and impresses the buyers of your CDs. Competition prizes offer extra opportunities too if besides the prize money concerts and CD recordings are part of the deal.

A curiosity with competitions is the judging. How does one judge a musician? There are a few objective things that are part of the assessment, but under normal circumstances you enjoy (or dislike) music in a subjective way. That's not unusual, an audience listens in the same way. Consequently, it may happen that, despite all algorithms for counting points, given by the jury to safeguard objectivity, with the same piece and the same quality of playing you will reach the finals in one competition and drop out in the preliminaries in the

other. It even happened to top players! It's not the first time that these cases cause discussion concerning interests and bias. It's a commercial world too!

What about the amateurs? What do they gain from competitions? I have played two competitions myself up till now, and my conclusion is that it's a useful experience. Maybe it borders to masochism, but I was curious about how I performed under stress conditions, how I judge myself in that situation and how someone else does. The first time I was overoptimistic (result was the last place), the second time I was too pessimistic (result was the first place) and I am curious how I will feel now. For me it looks like a growth process, just like learning to perform in front of an audience.

I think that an amateur competition is beneficial for those who want to be a professional musician in the end. In professional music competition is a *fact of life*, and willy nilly you will have to get used to it in order to be able to cope with it. But for amateurs with good intentions that earn their living in another field of work? If you like contests, a competition is a kind of match for sport. If you just like to play music for enjoyment, however, I doubt the benefit of a competition.

What about myself?

Because apparently, the sense of competition does not motivate me, starting with the last time I concentrate on the playing itself. I want to play a complete and well-prepared little recital –including announcements- that aims to entertain the audience. The effect of the presence of a jury is that I pay even more attention to performance and finishing than with an “ordinary” presentation. This stimulates me to finish pieces, so in this way I work a little on my weakness that I do not study pieces sufficiently long to finish them.

The final result on the competition of this attitude is a bit of a gamble. Because it's not winning that counts, it should not bother me. I hope so. Let's see if I am a bad or good loser. I hope the last.

21-3-2014: The Repertoire

We are in the last weeks before the competition. Time to discuss the repertoire...

I like to present pieces from various musical eras and styles. In the first competition I only played from the classical literature, gradually I began to interest myself for (moderately) contemporary sounds too.

One of the first questions for selection of the repertoire is the level of difficulty. I am inclined to choose the level not too high. A brightly played relatively easy piece comes across much better than wrestling and stumbling with a complex and difficult Bach Prelude. Using my experience how much of my intentions are actually realized on stage, I could estimate which repertoire is suitable for a stressful situation like a competition.

This time it looked nice to me to start with a quiet piece of Renaissance music: *Onder een Linde Groen* by Nicolas Vallet. Then I will play three or four *Minutova Sola* by Stephan Rak as the moderately contemporary section and I'll conclude the programme with Mertz, *Vaterlandsbluthen Nr. 2* to be specific.

Onder een Linde Groen was a popular song in the time of Nicolas Vallet (~1583 - ~1648). The tune originated from England where it was known under the title *In a Garden Green*. Proof for its popularity is the arrangement of the song that is made by Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck and the version for recorder by Jacob van Eyck. Vallet published his version in his book *Le Secret des Muses*.

I came across *Minutova Sola* (Minute solos) van Stephan Rak on my search of playable contemporary music. My guitar teacher lent me the book together with works by David Pavlovits. After that I had been busy with one of the *Amethystes* by the latter, I got fed up and took the seemingly easier work by Rak. The 31 *Minute solos* appeared a pleasant surprise. I promptly made my own setting in Sibelius, because the original was not clear at some points. I choose five pieces as candidates for the competition: *From the Far East*, *Spiritual*, *Venezuelan Dance*, *Gypsy Dance* and *Barbarian Dance*. After some playing and consideration *Venezuelan Dance*, *Spiritual* and *Barbarian Dance* became the pieces for the competition.

I do like to play music by Johann Kaspar Mertz (1806-1856) and via the Boije Collection I discovered a few of his early works, amongst others *Vaterlandsblüthen*, *Nachtviolen* and *Cyanen*. Relatively short pieces with a true Mertz-sound. For the competition, I choose *Vaterlandsblüthe Nr. 2 Adagio Patetico* because of its mix of a romantic beginning and a more virtuoso end.

These pieces have been my homework for about three months.

Onder een Linde Groen

Onder een Linde Groen is a humoristic observation of an amorous couple by a passer-by. The conclusion is that while being in love the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak concerning "virtuousness".

The song text is an indication for the tempo and the atmosphere. The question is if the tempo that we would assume corresponds with the spirit of the Renaissance. I have played the piece for years and I played it pretty fast. Yet I got the hint to slow down a bit, to give the piece the sound of a vocal piece.

The result is a quiet start of my competition contribution. The main challenges are keeping it quiet and remaining on tempo, so I should not accelerate and play a bit 'laid-back'. That means that I will have to grant the semiquavers their time, because they usually seem to be so long that I am inclined to play them a little shorter. An additional challenge is the breathing, using the text of the song

Maybe it is an idea to include the text in the score. In that case, I can read the desired atmosphere right away.

Minutova Sola

Stephan Rak's *Minutova Sola* contains 31 pieces that –according to specification- each take up to a minute. 31 minutes is far too long for a competition that by rule disqualifies you if you exceed the 8 minutes playing time.

I was looking for a balanced set to fill about three minutes. One fast piece, a slow one for the middle section and another fast piece as the conclusion. This approach resembles the classical sonata form. At first sight I choose *From the Far East*, *Spiritual*, *Venezuelan Dance*,

Gypsy Dance and *Barbarian Dance*. After consideration, I stuck to *Venezuelan Dance*, *Spiritual* and *Barbarian Dance*.

Venezuelan Dance is a waltz that is noted down in 3/4 meter, yet it has some excursions to a 6/8 meter. This provides the piece with a definite swing that requires a bit of a tropical laziness and relaxation. The piece has three section, D major corner sections and a D minor middle section for contrast. The middle section has a weird yet still waltz rhythm that provides a nice effect. I will play it twice instead of only once in the original in order to exploit the effect.

Spiritual is built around a melody line in the bass. Provided that I am able to play the piece in a calm and quiet mood, it will sound almost sacral. Challenge is maintaining the quiet atmosphere; the melody line must remain leading in this unconditionally. The accompaniment should not cause acceleration!

Barbarian Dance is a little challenge for rhythmic playing. Besides the change in meter between 5/8, 7/8 and 3/4 the piece shows variations in accents. This subdivides the piece in four sections, with sections 2 and 4 as a kind of mutual reflection in rhythm. It is an effective piece indeed, that requires a great deal of concentration throughout.

Vaterlandsbluthen Nr. 2

This charming early work by Johann Kaspar Mertz clearly shows its Hungarian roots. The accents give the piece a folkloristic atmosphere.

The piece has three repeated sections. The first two provide the opportunity for romantic playing and to exploit the typical Mertz sound and effects like glissandos. Contrast in volume and sound makes it very interesting. The last section invites to increase the tempo a bit for more virtuosity. In itself that is OK, but hurrying is forbidden! So, I will not exaggerate too much.

Steady rhythm and freedom are the field of tension in this piece. Particularly in the last section it is important to play the triplets and the following "straight" passages in the correct proportion. I found out that the sixteenth notes cause hurry, so I must take care.

Practice

Practice and Annoyances

Like every year before the competition I am diligently practicing the competition repertoire. A novelty this year is that I am more uncertain about the results, which yields me annoyances if I consider my progress too shallow. One day I play my pieces much better than the other, but even on the good days I consider the result not yet sufficient for the competition. At times, I am sighing: "Where is my motivation?"

It makes things more difficult this year, I am too easily distracted. If I have my laptop started up on the attic –my guitar playing spot- the temptation to start surfing if my guitar playing does not succeed is too strong. I guess I should leave it off during playing.

I had better results with playing the pieces very slowly first and then up to tempo. That's also a good thing to consider my right-hand fingering with care. That's OK until impatience strikes again....

Just a guess: Am I too focused on this competition?

Practice and Satisfaction

Fortunately, I have days that I can perform the competition pieces much more convincingly. I truly succeed to play them as I intended. A much better sensation that I experience on the bad days!

What is the difference between bad days and good days on the guitar? Concentration, focus and feeling good about it.

On some days I have worked intensively, or I have attended meetings with subjects that I experience as difficult, or I am just unquiet. On days like that I often notice that my concentration for guitar playing is pretty low or even absent. At its turn this lack of concentration causes a grimness to play well. That looks like focus, but in fact it is distraction.

A good feeling about it is important. I do notice if I am restless. In that case the feeling is absent and I concentrate on the wrong things. For instance the tuning of the guitar, I fail to get her in tune and I hear it in every piece, or the tuning seems to deteriorate on the run. So annoying!

Under normal circumstances I am less bothered by these blockades, I just put aside the guitar (tomorrow there is another chance) or I play on the best I can. Yet a competition with a clear deadline to feel confident about myself is quite a difference. That's a struggle between frustration and satisfaction.

That struggle raises the question with me again: "Is a competition beneficial for someone that plays for his or her amusement only?" Two weeks from now I will know the answer for his year!

14-4-2014: Live Try-out

The open stage guitar nights at the Kulturhaus NIZH in Nordhorn, Germany, are a fine opportunity to play the competition pieces before an audience. Doing so you get an idea of your stress factor and of the aspects in the music that suffer from it. Additionally, you get an impression of your span of concentration and where in the programme it is (almost) broken.

Playing before an audience can be a bit of a confrontation, because the result is an indication of your progress with the pieces. If you are able to perform on stage to everyone's satisfaction –both yourself and the audience- you have made an important progress towards a good performance in front of a jury.

This time I was the second player of the night. Unfortunately, I had not had the time to unpack and tune the guitar. Don't worry, just unpack and tune, and take it easy. Consequently, I did not hurry.

I had prepared my announcements on paper, the text was on the music stand, just like the scores. Unfortunately, I had not been able to practice the announcements in German, so I had some trouble with the pronunciation at times. It appeared awkward to pronounce English titles well in a German speech! Moral of this story: Practice your announcements I like you practice your music.

By chance I had read the little book *On Competitions* by Denis Azabagic the day before (I'll write more about that later) and remembered a very important hint: Do not resist your performance stress, accept it as an inevitable part of your performance.

This mindset was helpful for me. Normally you experience performance stress as something awful, something you don't like and don't wish either. Acceptance helps you to make a start and save the energy in rejecting it by force.

I started *Onder een Linde Groen* well. Points of attention remain keeping the peace and staying away from acceleration. *Ritenuto* is fine, provided you return to a tempo later, but acceleration does not match the atmosphere of the piece. I noticed where I made the little slips and creaks, but it did not distract me, I succeeded to keep the cadence of the music.

The pieces by Rak present a clear change of atmosphere. Fortunately, I remembered to take a breath before I started *Venezuelan Dance*. I kept the tempo, deliberately played the D minor section slightly slower for contrast and maintained the Latin American cheer of the corner sections. Points of attention are dynamics and some accents to clarify the 6/8-3/4 effect.

Spiritual appeared an effective piece, particularly because I got the courage to play the bass-line in a contrasting way: powerfully and tenderly. Point of attention is keeping the atmosphere.

Barbarian Dance is a fun piece because of its weird and changing rhythm (measure changes are quite frequent) but it requires a lot of concentration during playing. Under stress conditions, concentration appeared fragile, it slipped away from me for a moment, resulting in a hesitation that was noticeable for myself (and of course for a jury too). It is easier to keep the concentration with a logical and consistent fingering of the piece. My right-hand fingering did not feel safe, so I have got some homework to do.

After the Rak pieces, I started *Vaterlandsblüthe Nr. 2 Adagio Patetico* too fast. Consequently, I did not pick up Mertz's romanticism right away. So, I will take an extra breath in the competition to switch atmosphere! The first two (repeated) phrases were OK, apart from a little hurry at times. With the last and more virtuoso phrase I noticed that I should not exaggerate it into hurry. Virtuosity must remain clear too!

The audience reacted positive and enthusiastic. I noticed afterwards that I had warmed up considerably as a consequence of the effort during playing. Using the experience of this performance, I will be able to practice the details. The general tenor is that I got some confidence that I can play well during the competition too.

21-4-2014: A little Timing Problem

The competition regulations state that the playing time for amateurs amounts 8 minutes, exceeding the playing duration will lead to disqualification. Eight minutes, that's a loong

time, so it seems. I am sure that my programme will fit. When I started rehearsal last month, I watched the clock and it looked all right.

This week I got a Smartphone from my boss. That's part of the *Alternative Working Practices* strategy, all wired phones on the desks are discarded. On this little phone-toy you will find all kind of Apps, and thus I discovered a stopwatch. "Let's measure the duration of my programme," I thought in good spirits.

Onder een Linde Groen – small breathing pause – The Three Pieces by Rak – small breathing pause – *Vaterlandsblüthen Nr. 2* – ready! (Announcements not included). The stopwatch caused stress with me, but I did not hurry nevertheless.

What was the readout on the Smartphone? *Eleven minutes, 56 seconds*. O gosh, that's a bit too long...

I had to adapt the timing. I had to throw overboard all ballast to keep the balloon in the air. Skip the nice contrasting repeat of the second phrase in *Onder een Linde Groen*. Remove the meditative Da Capo from *Spiritual* that was an addition of myself. Prevent myself from hurrying to save time.

I measured anew, Less than ten minutes, but not much. Do I have to skip more sections from pieces or even cancel a complete piece? Or should I take less breathing space? No, leaving out and playing breathless will remove the balance from the programme. I will have to chance it! Less than ten minutes should do!

The thought kept nagging. My rehearsal did not proceed very well today. I guess it's time to follow Azabagic's advice and accept my stress for the time to come. Two days left to adapt my programme and accept the omissions. Pfff, this looks like working!

26-4-2014: Competition Nr. 3

The competition day is upon us, it is the third time that I participate. I will write on in the present time.

The draw was on Thursday, I am the first one to hit the stage.

There are all kinds of theories concerning the placement and its relation with the chance of winning. Listening to the preliminaries of the professionals on yesterday, I observed the peculiar phenomenon that the first candidates in the row seemed to play less secure than the guitarists in the middle and last entries of the competition. It looks like the players (and the jury as well, some people claim) gain concentration and eagerness as soon as the competition atmosphere has spread. Considering this, starting as the first player is a disadvantage.

Well, draw is draw, so I will have to be keen and eager in advance. An advantage for me is that now I am able to listen to the others without being stressful, my race has been run. That's a good thing for the report on the web site.

I get up reasonably early in the morning. To my relief, I find that I do not feel that bad, at least much better than the description Denis Azabagic gives in his book *On Competitions*. I still can enjoy my breakfast without getting sick by the thought that I have to perform at 13:00.

Possibly I am more relaxed because this competition is no hanging-matter for me, I already have a job to cover my daily expenses.

My wife Erna helps me with Bach remedies. She used a pendulum to select two of them: *Mimulus* "Known Fears" and *Wild Oat*: "I'm insecure about what to do"

I experience "*Known Fears*" with every performance to a certain extent. Do I still remember what and how to play? Will my fingers start sweating inconveniently? Or will my fingertips swell, causing the impression that my nails are too short? Will I "look forward" to trouble spots again so that the stress starts measures in advance? Will I have this troubled look so that everyone can see that I am making mistakes? Will I remain firm?

This appears normal to me, I guess that anyone that presents something, or plays music before an audience experiences this kind of anxiety. With regular performance practice and the acknowledgement that this tension is just normal and not insurmountable, I can cope with it much better than in the past.

"*I'm insecure about what to do*" was a new one for me. Although, I guess it's just the reflection of my indecision and insecurity concerning the selection and adaptation of my programme and my insecurity during the preparations. According to the Bach remedy theory, *Wild Oat* helps with concentration and building up trust in intuition.

At half past eight I drive off to Nordhorn. The ride is a nice opportunity to practice my announcement, I can raise my voice sufficiently to shout down the noise of the engine and tyres.

Ladies en Gentlemen, welcome!

I arrive at the same time as Fred and Angie Rootveld, their minibus turns into the Mittelstrasse at the same moment that I walk there with rucksack and guitar case. More than 35 years of on-stage experience in a single car!

The best way to cope with competition-nerves is to roll up your sleeves and do something (in brief distraction). Thus, I take a look first if the breakfast mess has been taken care off yet. Carrying stuff a few stairs up and down provides a nice warming-up.

Time to take a look at the mood of my guitar. I go down to the basement to sit down and browse through the music. I tune the guitar, but the guitar tuner reacts weirdly. It indicates A B as a B-flat, and turning the tuners does not help. Is the battery of the tuner empty? Or is the guitar sensitive for the way I am feeling and behaves accordingly?

It takes a while before the tuning is stable. I pick up the music and put in on the floor right in front of me. Apparently, I do not have the presence of mind to look for a music stand. The papers on the floor do not permit comfortable reading.

I play through the programme. *Barbarian Dance* remains risky with measure and pattern changes. I experience more pressure than this morning. At a certain moment, I am a little fed-up, the longer I stay here, the more issues of concern I am generating. That's no use for me. I close the case and walk upstairs.

I have ample time until 12:40, the moment that I am supposed to report at the competition desk. I feel to be at a loose end. I look around to do something that has nothing to do with the guitar. I drink a cup of coffee with Fred Rootveld behind the counter. I hop upstairs to say good morning to the ladies of the catering (Angie, Pallavi and Eve) and carry some sandwiches downstairs for the lunch time sales.

Fred Rootveld has some hints from his rich stage experience. "You have got a nice announcement for your pieces (he remembered it from the try-out), but do not spoil it with a poor volume. Speak up, let people know that you are there. The last row will be grateful to you!"

Then he suggests to eat meatball and soup. "The best remedy against competition-stress", he announces. I follow his advice and the sense of uneasiness in my solar plexus diminishes. Another alternative for a bunch of bananas or a bag full of KitKats!

The clock ticks forward and here and there (and everywhere) I meet roaming competition candidates. It looks like that we all are in the same boat. Everybody is more or less in conflict with him- or herself. Funny enough that creates a bond. My stress increases a little, but it remains acceptable. In fact, I would like to play right away.

It becomes more crowded in Kulturhaus NIHZ. A few extra candidates with their sympathizers enter the premises. This year we have 9 contestants, so there is more competition.

It is time. I report at the counter and I am escorted to the warming-up cellar. There is a little stove there, so I am not bothered by cold hands. I tune my guitar again (she is in tune better than I expected) and pluck some strings. I do not pick up my scores on purpose. This music is for later. The only thing I do is some practice for the fingers and for tone production. I integrate some fragments from the competition pieces that I remember. I leave the scores alone.

My stress has diminished to a level of increased watchfulness. That's useful at the moment, I have to be ready to go as soon as the competition leader comes to pick me up. That takes a while, the warming-up time looks an eternity while in reality it is only ten minutes, so weird! Finally, I hear the sound of footsteps, it is time!

My increased watchfulness remains. When I arrive at the concert hall, some people are busy with looking for a chair which cause some hustle and bustle. I take cover a bit and wait. After a while I can hit the stage. The applause starts and I hold my head high. The arrival must show some energy. My bow is sufficiently elegant.

I sit down and tune again. I make my announcement loud and clear, I have the impression that my voice actually reaches the back row. During the announcement, I observe my notes and feel a bit of doubtfulness: Is my story too long? On-the-fly I leave out a few sentences. I find it weird, I have practiced the story as a whole and it is not very smart to change that in the last minute. I feel some insecurity. Next time I will stick to my plan!

I take a breath and start playing.... *Onder een Linde Groen*, OK, just a tad faster than I had practiced at home. The piece goes well.

Venezuelan Dance: The rhythm is OK, I play the middle section slightly slower on purpose. The contrast is effective. *Spiritual*: I start at a very low volume and gradually play louder. That is effective too, the bass-line gains strength and power. Oops, a little slip that I did not know yet, fortunately it's only the accompaniment. Yet this increases the tension a bit. I take a deep breath, the risky piece is up. I appear to be right, I do not succeed to get the best out of *Barbarian Dance*, my thumb nail suddenly seems to be too short to play all accents in the bass line. Bad luck! The next time I should not integrate *Self Fulfilling Prophecies* in my programme!

All of a sudden, I notice that I should have taken my reading glasses with me. The score on the music stand is just above the reading section of my multi-focal glasses and the music stand is at its lowest position, so I do not see the notes quite sharp. Point of attention next time!

I take a deep breath and wait a few seconds. I just want to play Mertz well, so I claim some rest to get rid of the tension of the previous piece. This moment of concentration is very helpful, I make a good start. The *Vaterlandsblüthen* are flourishing. I play the piece in a haze. I decide to enter the last section slightly slower than I practiced at home. Consequently, I make no mistakes during the ascent of the fingerboard up to the 12 th fret and back. Just one glissando out of four is less optimal. The flow goes on and the end of the piece is almost a surprise for me with its A major chord as the conclusion of an A-minor piece.

Applause! I get up, make a bow and walk to the exit with great relief. I do not feel frustration, just relief and a sense of achievement. Job completed, I did not make a lot of failures and I have a good feeling about how I played most pieces.

I have to wait for another round before I can enter the concert hall again. Consequently, I could not hear the candidate that turned out to be the winner. After a while I can enter and I hear good performances but also nerves that bother my fellow-contestants. For some players, the requirement that one should announce him- or herself is quite a surprise.

Involuntarily I am musing a bit on my possible qualification. That is disturbing during listening, because I do no longer pay attention to the things the player on stage does well, I -again involuntarily- concentrate on his or her failures instead. Strange that this ranking pulls me to the negative side. I try my best to leave this thought behind. I guess that somewhere in myself this negative winning compulsion from my younger years still is hidden. On the other hand I don't have reason to think about winning, I miss the convincing confidence that I have played well enough for the first prizes. I should have heard all candidates to make a calculation, but I have missed one.

After the last applause, it is up to the jury to draw conclusions. Time for coffee, the next concert and the stairs-up/stairs-down service between kitchen and dining room vice versa. In the meantime, I get many positive reactions that I do appreciate indeed!

The results are announced at the start of the evening concert on the same day. The organisation wants to honour each participant with a certificate and a keepsake. First the five candidates are announced that did not win a prize. I am not one of them, so I have at least a qualification amongst the first three!

I don't have to wait long. Third prize this year, a good performance against the background of the increased competition this year. So, the last shall be first, and the first last does not apply to me, even though I was the first last year and the first one to play today. I am quite satisfied with the result.

The number one was Filip Optolowicz a very good young player that just had reached the required minimum age for the competition. He surprised the jury with a performance that I missed, a pity that I could not hear it.

I could make a fair comparison with the number 2 of the competition, Nandini Sudhir from India. We played a more or less similar programme, both a Renaissance piece (I did *Onder een Linde Groen* by Vallet, she played *Frog Galliard* by Dowland) and both a piece by

Johann Kaspar Mertz (I played *Vaterlandsblüthen Nr. 2* and she performed *Tarantella* from *Bardenklänge*).

Nandini has a clear advantage in the level of difficulty, because she played very well, the *Minotova Sola* that I played extra did not contribute much, particularly because I failed *Barbarian Dance*.

So, I agree with the jury. Next year I will appear again!

1-5-2014: To the next Competition

Besides the Guitar Festival Nordhorn (GFN, with a blink to GFA) we have the Twente Guitar Festival (TGF) in the region that I live in. Both festivals have an amateur competition.

During my preparations for the Nordhorn competition, both Jaap, my guitar teacher (he is connected to the TGF organisation) and Bobby, the owner of Kulturhaus NIHZ and organiser of the GFN (he has an emotional connection with the TGF) asked if I would join the amateur competition in Enschede too.

I have attended the Twente Guitar Festival from the very beginning in 2006, but I never had the idea to participate in the amateur competition. The first years I was not considering competitions at all and the last two years the quality level of the Enschede competition appeared too high for me to make any chance, various aspirant-conservatory students were participating. There must be at least a little chance of a prize, nobody likes to fight a losing battle.

Now that I have played three competitions with satisfying results, maybe it is time to give it a try and play my programme on another stage too.

An extra motivation is the fact that it is probably one of the last possibilities to play in the Concordia Theatre, the crime scene of the Twente Guitar Festival. In 1990 I had one of my very first solo performances in a real theatre there, in the progress of the then Segovia Guitar Festival, and I played *Gerbe des Fleurs* by Jose Ferrer. This year it was announced that the main theatre hall would be converted into a cinema, so the stage will be removed. It would be fun to play solo again on this very stage after 25 years!

The outcome is, that I have subscribed for the amateur competition in Enschede too, it is planned on the 30 th of May. Let's see if I can implement the hints from my master classes for that purpose.

7-5-2014: Maturing a bit

Maybe you would have expected that I would plunge on my competition repertoire in an attempt to implement all remarks from the master classes in Nordhorn after my subscription to the second competition this year.

Well, I will not. I was in the mood to play something different for a while. My idea is that the pieces need to mature a bit, I will pick them up in a week or two and make them ready for the competition in Enschede. In the meantime, I will enjoy myself with a few pieces by Louis

Ignatius Gall (part of my third prize at the Nordhorn competition) and I'll study *Birds flew over the spire* by Gary Ryan and an arrangement of *Alfonsina y el Mar* by Ariel Ramirez.

No, I am not being lazy or fed-up after I have been practicing the same repertoire for a long time. Although... If I go on too long, aversion may step in. I do notice that it becomes more difficult to take a step back to implement things, or even start completely anew with a piece that I have played so long.

In that case, it is time to let things mature a bit. Just relax for a while.

18-5-2014: A step back

Today we had a meeting of the Guitar Circle, a nice opportunity to play the competition repertoire live before audience.

It was strange, but I did not feel in the mood today, I did not feel quite good, I felt the stress already in the morning. Apparently, I had a day with low self-confidence in general. Erna's test with the Bach remedies gave an indication, she tested *Larch* today, a remedy against low self-confidence. I took it and I guess it worked, but still I was not over-confident.

Besides stress I had some haste in my play and the concentration was not optimal. I noticed it a bit with the Renaissance piece (it went too fast), a bit more with the pieces by Rak (in the faster pieces I was a bit restless) and at some places in the Mertz piece (I made some half misses). I did not have the peace to breathe properly in the music. I did not slip all the way in all pieces, but it felt awkward.

Biggest challenge again were the rhythm changes in *Barbarian Dance*, somehow I was not sufficiently concentrated. An instant I thought about removing it from the program because of its risk, but if I do, the balance is gone from the three Rak pieces. I will require careful study of the right-hand fingering in this piece. Maybe I should start all over.

This "final" rehearsal did not proceed satisfactory. Consequently, I have some homework to do the next week, I will have to take a step back. I will start with playing each piece very slowly and analyse the right-hand fingering. Then I will have to solve the trouble spots without marking them as such in my mind!

And very important: Relax! I am taking things too seriously.

29-5-2014: More room to play

The step back has not changed into two steps forward yet. It looks like that the closer the date gets, the more errors I start to introduce. I made a few recordings. The *Minutova Sola* are all right by now, but suddenly Mertz appears to show some quirks.

The last rehearsal on my guitar lesson was not too good. Well, that was not caused by the pieces or the competition, I just was a bit absent-minded because I was going to announce that I wanted to stop the guitar lessons after six years with my current teacher. I found that difficult to say.

A good hint from the lesson was to abbreviate my announcement a bit. I now wrote it down as a catchword list and started to practice a short announcement together with the music and the appearance on stage.

Doing so, I (temporarily) moved my playing spot on the attic, to have more space for my voice and the sound of the strings. To my surprise, my nerves got more room too! It is remarkable that a small displacement from the intimacy of the study spot to the larger space of the playing spot has an impact like this!

In this context I remember a statement of my old teacher Ed Westerik who suggested to use different spots for studying and playing, sometimes a quarter turn is already sufficient. It is true, somehow your attitude is different. Any way, it yields a few extra marks in the score where I should take a rest and a breath.

My wife asked me why my relatively extended announcement was absolutely necessary. For a performance, I like to do some announcement, maybe in a competition setting it is less necessary. But I like to tell something about the music, it directs my focus towards the pieces and it turns the event into a performance rather than a competition leg.

Two days to go, now!

31-5-2014: C-Day!

30 May 2014, the C(ompetition)-Day! I will continue writing in the present tense.

I wake up by the sound of the alarm clock. I had to set it, because Bobby Rootveld (Duo- and Kulturhaus NIHZ) wanted to pick me up at nine. I take a shower and eat some breakfast.

My wife Erna test Bach remedies for me. *Rescue*, *Wild Rose*, *Larch* and *Mimulus*. A few of this trio are familiar to me. *Mimulus* helps against known fears (I know these for performances), *Wild Rose* is helpful against apathy and over-acceptance of seemingly inevitable circumstances. *Larch* helps in case of fear for failure or lack of self-confidence.

I always think a while about the Bach remedies apart from *Mimulus*. Known fears in some mild form are always there if you want to perform. Some say that it's part of the necessary adrenaline. A little help with these fearful performance experiences and practicing in going through them (by means of performance practice) helps you cope and their effect diminishes in the end, at least I found this out for myself.

Larch and *Wild Rose* are inter-related. If you have less confidence in yourself, a more or less apathetic acceptance of the fact that you will not succeed is a more or less natural escape reaction to avoid the pain. I intend to go for it and to refuse that apathetic acceptance.

We are right in time for my first master class of the day with Alexis Muzurakis of Duo Melis. Nice lesson with a few handy tips that give me practice material. This time the master class is before the competition, so I will have to put some improvements on hold deliberately. I hope that I can make tat.

I have got plenty of time. It is bright weather outside, so Bobby and I decide to kill some time. That's much better than sitting down and give nerves the chance to develop.

Bobby shows me some folklore from the city of Enschede. First the emergency exit stairwell of the conservatory. He used to practice here when he was a student, because there were excellent acoustics there. Unfortunately use as a practice room was forbidden after an inspection by the Fire Department. The next stop is the Enschede market place. Here they sell treacle waffles XXL. Another method to keep the nerves out of your stomach! Finally we enjoy the sun on a pavement café and extensively discuss the music, the past and the present. Time flies and I almost inadvertently skip the lunch concert at Concordia.

Time to go back. I spend some time in the canteen of the Conservatory with my bread bin and water bottle. It is quiet, everybody has gone to the lunch concert. The Swedish music retailer that has a stand over there is trying out a few guitars at the stands of the luthiers. To my pleasure, I hear a few measures of *Gavota Madrigal* by Barrios, one of my wife Erna's favorites. I guess I should try this piece in the near future after I stop with the guitar lessons at the end of this season.

I feel tension rising, but I want to live with it. Inadvertently I start thinking about all things that can go wrong, but I do not want to submit to this sense of uneasiness. Therefore, I decide to pay a visit to Bobby's practice spot, the emergency exit stairwell. A perfect spot to practice my announcement, I guess. I use my keyword list and make my announcement. The first time my voice is in the back of my throat. I readjust and start over again. It is clearer, yet not perfect, apparently, I have some nerves in my vocal cords left. The third time I am satisfied. I notice that the stress is still there to a certain extent.

In some way, I suddenly decide to sing aloud my pieces in that stairwell. I am a far from perfect singer, but that is not my purpose at that time. I breathe with the music, sing the dynamics and feel how the phrases should be timed. Surprisingly it seems that I exhaust my nervousness for the main part too! That's a weird effect! I pick up a few phrases from the other pieces and continue to do so even when someone enters. Bobby was right, this spot has a particular helpful energy. In that mood, I walk towards the Concordia Theatre and continue singing on the go.

Time to play in. I make my guitar ready and tune her strings. I do not forget my reading glasses! Then I make some arbitrary exercises, just like I did in Nordhorn, and I leave the competition pieces for a while.

I ask the competition manager if there is a music stand in the hall. It appears that there is none and he does not know if he can get by one. For a change I am assertive, I play from the score, so I need a stand. The guy mutters a bit and says that I he cannot find a stand, I have bad luck and he cannot change that. Then he leaves in search of the thing.

Well, that's an unexpected mishap! The solution is to put a chair besides me to put my scores on. Now I practice my repertoire, because the reading angle is different from a normal music stand. After a few minutes, it appears that it's all right. The guy returns with a music stand. Well done!

Onwards to the concert hall! I descend the stairs in the direction of the catacombs below the stage. I need the elevator to reach the basement. It looks quite a bit smaller than the first time that I got here in 1990, when I played in the Concordia Theatre for the first time. Very quietly I sit down in the small dressing room. It's funny, I can hear the candidate that is currently playing. *Lagrima*, it sounds OK.

It's my turn! The steps towards the stage are narrow and dark. I straighten my back and walk the arena. Fortunately, the music stand is there. I put my papers down and to my alarm I notice that I cannot read my keywords for the announcement, the lighting is quite poor and does not illuminate the stand sufficiently. I will have to do it by heart.

The audience welcomes me with applause and I bow to let them know that it's quite welcome to me too! I introduce myself and announce the pieces. The announcement is shorter than I originally planned and at a certain point I feel hesitation. I take a breath and continue.

Time to play. The repertoire sounds and mixes into a fuzzy memory in which I cannot say precisely what the details are, at least that's how I feel at the moment I write this report. *Onder een Linde Groen* plays well, but it is faster than I intended. It must be the influence of this morning's master class! During *Venezuelan Dance* I feel a slight hesitation. To get into my game again I secretly repeat the first four measures in the second repeat. Nobody is reading along, I guess! *Barbarian Dance* is completely OK this time. I do take less risk in the dynamics to prevent slipping with those nasty rhythm changes.

The last piece! In the end, Mertz appears to be the biggest challenge. I play it in a haze, a weird mood of increased alertness. To my relief, I do not include the errors that I seemed to introduce during practice the last week. I reach the last a major chord without slips and succeed in preparing this chord in a natural way.

Warm Applause! I make the bow. Ready! Relief, mission completed!

Then the adventurous travel to the catacombs await me, in the pitch dark. I put away my guitar in its case and sneak back to the concert hall again through the dark again. Now my role has changed from player to listener and I hear some music by the candidate that entered when I left.

Slowly my heart rate and my level of alertness return to normal. I notice that an adventure like this consumes a lot of energy. I am relaxed again when the next candidate enters. The other participants are youngsters that have a full guitar life ahead of them. They play pieces with a particular reputation of complexity. *Tango en Skai* by Dyens, *Leyenda* by Granados, *La Catedral* by Barrios. Nandini Sudhir from India is here too, I met her at the competition in Nordhorn. At this moment, she plays *Frog Galliard* by Dowland and the *Tarantella* by Mertz even better than she did at Nordhorn and leaves an excellent impression.

Listening to the others, I hear that the reputation of the pieces is appropriate and implies some challenge too, because I hear various slips and even interruptions in the play and I observe stress. I just can say "I have been there!" and I wish them luck and strength. Competition stress affects your performance and makes quite a difference between the study and the concert hall. In that case, your (high) expectations become an extra pitfall.

The wait for the results is brief. It appears that there is one first prize and two second prizes. This setup cancels a prize for the "lower regions", because the third prize is skipped. Intuitively I conclude that there is no prize for me. To my great pleasure and relief, Nandini wins the first prize. She deserves it!

My final placement? Last place, sixth position. But I did not get that without a good fight, like Paulo Coelho describes it in *The Pilgrimage*. I am satisfied with the fact that I reached the finish line without obvious slips or interruptions in a musical way.

The jury wanted to have a word with everyone. They told me that they had appreciated my announcement and selection of repertoire. Well in that aspect we do agree, for me the

announcement is part of the show, and I like to choose my own (and not mainstream) repertoire. Issues were a few technical aspects and the dynamics in one of the pieces. I recognized the tension between stress and risk in the *Barbarian Dance*.

I will be working on that, even though the tension between risk and stress requires careful attention, because risk avoidance sometimes is natural for me. On the other hand, why shouldn't I go for it all out? In music there is ample room for that!

An extra experience for me in my amateur competitions is the clear demonstration of the fact that every jury has got its own aspects of emphasis that contributes to your placement. In one competition, I had the experience that the jury emphasizes musicality and performance, with less stringent focus on the technical complexity of the pieces. In that case hesitation or even stopping during playing will yield penalty points. In the other competition, I noticed that the technical complexity level of the pieces was rewarded more, while the jury was much more forgiving towards hesitation and slips that even an amateur like me could hear during the performance. Point of interest is the level of "technical award" for the pieces. Will *La Catedral* by Barrios get a higher or lower rating than *Tango en Skai* by Dyens? ;-) Maybe it becomes time for a *World-Wide Guitar Technical Level Index*?

What is better? A difficult question and I do not have a final answer. I only know my preference for specific aspects. Considering my writings about preliminaries and finals, I recognize (and I have) a clear preference for a musical performance that is clear, transparent, emotional and breathing, with technique that is in service of the music and no goal in itself. That does not imply, however, that I do not appreciate a technical performance.

This aspect of preference, of subjectivity makes each jury unique. So, it's just like Denis Azabagic described in his book *On Competitions* with the conclusion: "The only thing that you can influence during competitions is your own play."

Summarizing, it was a useful experience for me to play in a theatre and a competition atmosphere that I had not experienced before. Next time, however, I will not play two competitions in a row. In the end, it did appear a little stressful to play two within a month's period.