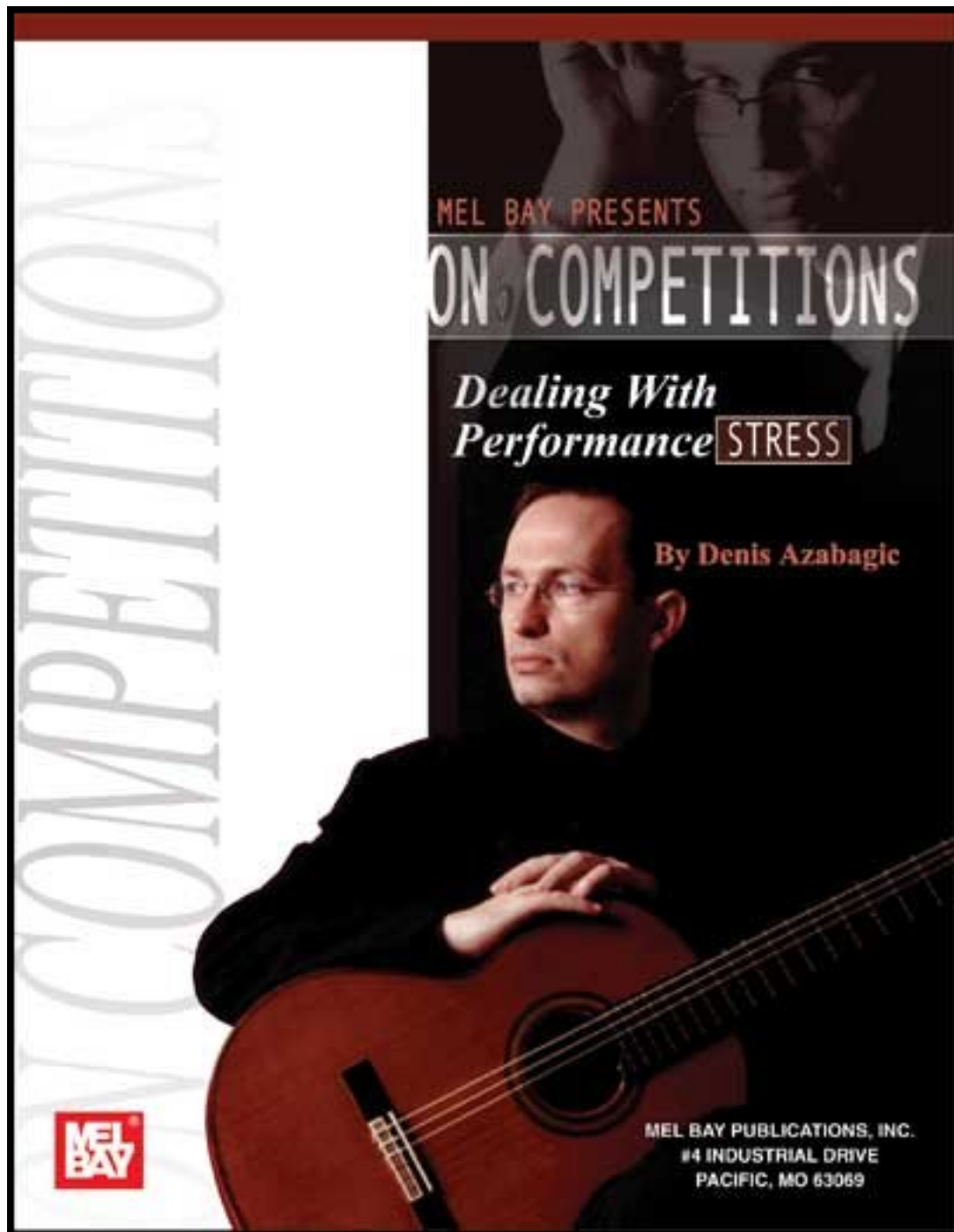


On Competitions (Azabagic)



During the preparation of my first amateur competition, now three years ago, I attended a workshop given by Denis Azabagic. When he found out that I was preparing for a competition, he pointed out to a book that he had written on the subject, titled *On Competitions*.

Three years later I came across the book on the reading table of Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn after a beautiful concert by Annette Kruisbrink at that location. I had some pocket

money left, so I bought the book, because I was curious to compare Azabagic's experiences against mine after two competitions.

The book is primarily aimed at professionals and students of music. That's why there is a list of major guitar competitions world-wide at the back of the book, plus a lot of remarks by Azabagic about smart selection of competitions and judging prizes and allowances. This matter is less important for me as an amateur.

After reading the book, I found the following hints and remarks that I found relevant to myself:

- Participating in a competition is a conscious choice.
- Technique: The better the vehicle, the smoother the ride will be.
- Imagination nurtures your music.
- Accept the fact that you feel stressed.
- Try-out your programme before an audience.
- Your own play is the only thing you can influence during a competition.
- Do not listen to other participants before you have played yourself.
- Music is all that matters.

Participating in a competition is a conscious choice

Competitions are not compulsory. If you participate in them, it is your own choice. Lots of musicians do, just search the Internet for musical competitions, musical contests and so on. You will get quite a number of hits. On the other hand, if you search for the motivation of musicians to do so, you will find very little information, for amateurs it is almost none. Unfortunately, that was the thing that I was curious about: why are people doing this?

The origin of the word competition, which is a common ingredient in musical contests, is the Latin word *com-petere*. Remarkably this word literally means *achieve something together*. Obviously, this is more in the clashing than collaborative sense. In *On Competitions* Azabagic stresses that competition and comparing yourself against others is a part of human nature.

Azabagic mentions a lot of reasons why it is useful for a professional or music student to participate in competitions and contests. Because I am an amateur, most are not relevant to me. Fortunately, he does mention a reason that is applicable to me: getting an experience of making music in a special (stressful) environment and having the possibility of getting a notion of your disposition as a musician and a person, and to grow in musicality.

I never participated in competitions because of several reasons.

First of all, I did not see the fun to compete on a musical instrument. I had no ambition that I should be "better" than another guitarist, or that I had to "beat" someone, playing my guitar.

In the second place, I did not consider myself able to be more skilled than somebody else on the guitar, particularly not in public performances, because I found playing before an audience sufficiently stressful. The thought of a jury that judges my humble play would cause me to freak out.

In the third place the sense of competition did not always bring out the best with me. In the first school of competition –playing games in the family at home- I appeared to be a bad loser, the word sportsmanlike was not in my dictionary yet. Looking back at that time, I did wrong things to win nevertheless. Part of this attitude was caused by the fact that the others in the family were bad winners too. A loss becomes more unpleasant if a winner gets personal and laughs at your defeat, causing a sharp sense of revenge. When I was young, the games in our family were much too serious and the original meaning of the word competition (*achieve something together*) got completely lost in the grim atmosphere of our mutual rivalry.

As a consequence, I did not really like competitive games with other people at a later age. In that aspect, the computer appeared to be a more neutral adversary, so I did start to like computer games. As a consequence, I found out how much fun collaborative games are (like pen-and-paper adventure games according to the *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Das Schwarze Auge* rule system). I even started to write scenarios for our adventure nights, which formed the basis for my Fantasy writing later.

In any case I did not want that a sense of compulsive winning that I used to have in my young years affected my guitar playing. I loved music too dearly, you see. Hence, I completely refrained from any music competition.

At the guitar festivals from 2006 I attended examples of competitions every year, for both professionals and amateurs. At those occasions, I discovered the major advantage of a jury. You are not battling each other on the six strings directly, there is an intermediary, a third party. ;-) That's why the jury always gets the blame if the result is different from a placement in the finals or the end victory. As a player, you play alone, the confrontation with your "adversaries" is no full contact.

That was an experience that I wanted to go through myself on a humble scale. Thus, I played my first amateur competition three years ago and I landed on rank last. Azabagic is right, participation is your own choice. ;-) So, if I happen to be complaining too much...

Technique: The better the vehicle, the smoother the ride will be.

This is an obvious statement that appeared to be an impediment for me after all these years. Azabagic is right and many of my teachers have mentioned it, but I never gave myself the time to fully concentrate on technique. So now I have a mixed bag, and I will have to get along with what I have. So, at places some extra attention is required, like with the right hand fingering of *Barbarian Dance* by Stephan Rak

Imagination nurtures your music

Azabagic is quite right with this statement, a background story in your imagination helps the performance of a piece of music. For historical pieces like *Onder een Linde Groen* and *Vaterlandsblüthen Nr. 2*, I study the spirit of their age and the history of their composers and

their time. Particularly with *Onder een Linde Groen*, the seventeenth century lyrics were great background information to spark the imagination.

The contemporary pieces by Rak are less subject to history, but some fantasy may help nevertheless. Titles of the pieces may provide clues. I play *Venezuelan Dance* in the tropical and lazy atmosphere that I picked up listening to the beautiful CD *Haitian Suite* by Alberto Mesirca. Playing *Spiritual*, I imagine a black man with a deep bass voice that sings *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* at a funeral on a plantation. With *Barbarian Dance* I think of the atmosphere of *Riverdance* with the tap dancing.

In this way, I translate the music to the atmosphere that I try to play during the performance.

Accept the fact that you feel stressed

For me, performance stress resembled “dentist-anxiety”. This funny yet unpleasant pressure in my stomach started days before the event and slowly became worse, causing me to be literally in a sweat. I remember drops of transpiration slowly slithering down along my back during a performance. Concentration is hard under these circumstances!

I think that many people have a stressed relation with stress. Stress (or even call it anxiety of fear) should not be there during the heroic deed of a public performance, at least many people think so. Yet every musician is stuck in the middle with it some way. In that case, you design the weirdest rituals to remove the sting from stress.

Azabagic remarks that it is best to just accept your performance stress as a component of yourself, the performing musician. Stiff resistance against your own stress takes more energy than accepting it and getting (and playing) along with it.

I noticed that stress is always there, but the effect is not the same for every occasion. You can exercise getting along with stress –that is the start of acceptance- by means of practicing under a certain pressure. Record yourself and listen and analyse how you did afterwards, play before for family and friends, or (that was a funny thing I noticed myself) use a stopwatch to find out the duration of your programme. Observe yourself, make a note where the stress affects your concentration and experiment to find ways to feel yourself safe nevertheless. Do not forget that practice makes the world go around, even with coping with stress during playing!

Try-out your programme before an audience

An excellent hint. If you don't practise performance, you will not know what happens during playing before a critical audience (a jury). I already described how try-outs helped me to make the finishing touch.

Your own play is the only thing you can influence during a competition

You might be afraid of the judgement of the jury, but you are not able to change their attitude towards your music in advance. You might be afraid of the skill level of the others that play on the competition (I intentionally do not use the term *adversaries*), but you will not change that without -hypothetically speaking- beating them up. You might be afraid that you are disturbed by the air conditioning or blinded by the lights so that you will not be able to play comfortably, but you cannot rebuild the concert hall to suit your needs.

The only things that you can influence for the best is your own play and your state of mind to support it. Be kind to yourself, concentrate and play your own game. Leave the rest to jury, audience and the concert hall management. All fretting about external circumstances will neither help you nor benefit the quality of your play.

Do not listen to other participants before you have played yourself

I consider this a very useful hint. On my first competition I did listen to the other candidates before playing myself and I felt inferior right away. One of the candidates played *Capricho Arabe* by Tarrega, A piece that I never have played in front of an audience, hearing the title was already enough to demoralize me. Later I heard that the player had risked too much with this piece. So, the reputation of a piece is no guarantee!

On my second competition, I have heard no one of the candidates. To be fair, there were not that much candidates indeed, but that makes no difference for the concept. Before I hit the stage I had heard no one and afterwards I went drinking some coffee on a quiet spot to relax.

I will do that again this year. Just sit and wait on a quiet spot until I am called forward. That provides me with the best chance to remain in my own play.

Music is all that matters

Azabagic writes on this subject “I always tell myself that music is all that matters, the music reaches beyond prizes, career, success, money, etc. Music is all that matters!”

That’s a thing to concentrate on when you are on stage. Then you will reach the audience with your musical message. If you are considering your bank account instead, the price will be higher than a few lost notes.

Considering this, it is really a shame that the neoliberal spectre has “taken care of” much of the musical world. The fact that music is part of commercial interests might add some stress to the business indeed! Fortunately, we have musicians that go beyond and just play their music.

Finally

Reading *On Competitions* was a useful and rewarding experience to me. Denis Azabagic provides a clear impression of his experiences with competitions.

In his expression of gratitude in the beginning of the book he indicated a very important factor in a musician's life. The support of the home front. He is quite right! Additionally, he has the good fortune that his home front –his wife and duo partner in music- is quite aware of the things you come across during competitions and supports him accordingly.

Just one thing, I do find that the publisher of the book made a slight exaggeration on the front cover. It reads *Dealing with Performance Stress*. OK, Azabagic writes on that subject, but he does so with his own experiences. He does not provide a detailed method to deal with performance stress. If you expect this from the book, as I initially did, you will find it disappointing. If I had been the publisher, I would not have created the impression of a text book on performance stress.

Fortunately, there are other books on that subject. I would like to suggest *The Inner Game of Music* by Barry Green and Timothy Gallwey. In this book, you learn more about motives and anxieties while playing music under pressure.