
History of the RAISSA TSELENTIS COMPETITION

by Matthew Harre

In the late 1980s, I got a call from Raissa Tselentis, who was the founder of the prestigious International Bach Competition held in Washington, DC. It was held at intermittent times with competitions for differing instruments including piano, violin and organ. At that time I was treasurer of WMTA, and Raissa called because she wanted to start a local Bach competition for young students in the Washington area.

I first met her a bit later. She was diminutive, less than 5 feet tall, but consistently over the next three years, as we arduously worked on this competition together, she reminded me that “Raissa” meant “queen” in Greek. Clearly she expected to be treated as such.

We worked very hard establishing this WMTA competition and both my children remember her name with a certain amount of dread because of her many calls to discuss this or that small point. I wrote many drafts of the competition rules and none seemed to quite capture her intent. Finally, her husband wrote the rules and included many things she and I never discussed.

I was not happy and ready to abandon the whole venture but a new WMTA president had come into office; I called Rosita Kerr Mang and told her if she didn't help, the competition was a lost cause because I was frazzled beyond endurance. Rosita came to the rescue and she (whose name also means “queen”) helped complete the task I may not have finished.

I will never forget our final meeting with Raissa at her home in a tiny Georgetown house on Potomac Street. Somehow she turned the conversation to her furnace. Detecting a trap, I excused myself because I had a student coming soon (which might actually have been true) and left poor Rosita to descend into Raissa's basement to examine the furnace.

Such is the life of WMTA presidents.

New Developments

All three of us worked so hard on the Competition because we deeply believe in the importance of J. S. Bach's music for all pianists. Over the years, teachers have complained about some of the rules of the competition so I was quick to volunteer to chair a committee to reexamine the Bach Competition. My interest has been to preserve the basic intent of Raissa's thinking. I believe our revision has done so. The result was presented to the board and approved at the June 3rd meeting. I would like to examine some of the changes we've made.

One is the omission of the requirement that the Henle edition be used. When we worked on this competition in the late 1980s, Raissa lived in dread of the Schirmer and Busoni editions of the Bach works — and not without reason. Since then, numerous responsible editions of the Bach works have become readily available so there is no reason to preserve the initial Henle restriction.

We have deleted the requirement that no pedal be used in the Inventions. Raissa, being so tiny, was very aware of the problems of short people and recognized that a youngster of the junior division may well be unable to reach the pedals and thus be at a disadvantage against a taller, older entrant of the same division. With pedal extenders now freely used, this justification no longer seems necessary.

We have deleted the requirement that judges be from out of town. WMTA and the Tselentis Bach fund cannot possibly afford the travel fees necessary for this luxury. In all honesty, being from out of town does not necessarily mean being better.

Finally, we have expanded the repertoire choices. Teachers noted that when students wanted to be part of the competition for a second time, they still had to play the same required piece. With the new repertoire choices, they can learn new repertoire as they again participate in this most challenging competition. I don't think Raissa would have minded students learning more Bach works.

There was considerable debate about adding various Suites as repertoire possibilities but this was resisted. Instead, a new event has been added that will include such pieces and be open to pianists and strings.

Raissa left a small grant to insure the competition's life. Alas, the interest from the account is far too small to adequately fund even the prizes offered. WMTA has become a 501(c)(3) organization, so that any contributions to WMTA can now be tax deductible. For those who support this competition and the keyboard music of J. S. Bach, any contribution to pay for a judge's fee, a prize or hall rental would be enormously helpful, and at the same time it would be a tax deduction for the donor.

The Raissa Tselentis Award of Excellence in the performance of the Clavier Works of Johann Sebastian Bach

Date: **2011**

This Competition is also open to students of non-WMTA members. Fees for non-members of WMTA are double the above amounts.

Repertoire Requirements:

NOTE: This was the repertoire for the 2009 competition. Please refer to page 1 of this PDF for the changes in repertoire that will come into effect for the 2011 competition.

- Junior Division: Contestants, age 12 or younger, are required to play the Bach Invention No. 2 in c minor and a second piece of the contestant's choice selected from the remaining Two-Part Inventions.
- Intermediate Division: Contestants, age 17 or younger, are required to play the Bach Sinfonia No. 9 in f minor and a second piece of the contestant's own choice selected from the remaining Three-Part Inventions.
- Senior Division: Contestants, age 20 or younger, are required to play the Prelude and Fugue No. 4 in c-sharp minor from the Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, and a second selection of a Prelude and Fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier Book II.