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Looking Back at the 27th Netherlands Violin Competition in Utrecht

MARCH 3, 2020

A conversation with its director

By Laurence Vittes

In the aftermath of the [27th Netherlands Violin Competition \(https://stringsmagazine.com/a-fringe-violin-festival-in-utrecht-reporting-from-the-27th-netherlands-violin-competition/\)](https://stringsmagazine.com/a-fringe-violin-festival-in-utrecht-reporting-from-the-27th-netherlands-violin-competition/) in Utrecht, I spoke to its director, [Aart-Jan van de Pol \(https://www.aartjanvandepol.nl/\)](https://www.aartjanvandepol.nl/), about the pressure on the winner [Coraline Groen \(https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/coraline-groen\)](https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/coraline-groen) as her career proceeds, the pros and cons of keeping a competition national on a global stage, and what I had missed from the previous three weeks of competition rounds, concerts, and outreach events.

Van de Pol was at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, where he had just heard Groen give a lunchtime concert in the storied institution's prestigious recital hall. Groen's responsibilities over the coming years will be to fulfill the concerts that come with first prize and meet the expectations raised by her miraculous Mozart K. 218 in the final round. The competition's responsibilities will be to schedule the concerts and provide advice on dealing with the stresses of becoming famous overnight.

The setting seemed particularly appropriate in this case because van de Pol, who resembles *Star Trek's* Jean-Luc Picard as a young man, had served ten years at the Concertgebouw, where he was in charge of programming chamber music and recitals and selecting artists. He was the competition's pick to be its new director starting with the 2020 edition.



A Fringe Violin Festival in Utrecht: Reporting from the 27th Netherlands Violin Competition

By Laurence Vittes During the last week of the 27th Netherlands Violin Competition last month, four young Dutch virtuosos curated four concerts in and around Utrecht that were a virtual fringe festival for the violin. The concerts came while the finalists for the competition's two senior age divisions—Davina van Wely for 14-17 year olds, and ... Continue reading

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How immediate is the pressure on Coraline Groen?

Of course she still wants to do chamber music—she has a piano trio, a duo with bayan player Robbrecht Van Cauwenberghe, also a piano quintet—and recently she joined the second violin section of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. But now she has a unique opportunity to pursue a solo career and discover where that takes her, and the opportunity to play in public the great concertos in her repertoire.

What role do you play in her pursuit?

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My task as the competition director is to help her with what steps to take, how to sort everything out without losing balance, and how to make the most of the momentum from winning the competition to establish her professional career. At the lunch concert today alone she was approached by promoters representing concert halls, recital series, festivals, and orchestras.

How can a national competition serve as a base for an international career?

It is true that our national violin competition is very much owned by the Dutch violin culture, the Dutch violin people, the teachers, the audiences, the players—they all feel ownership. That helps a lot, gives a tremendous core energy to the whole thing. And so we have developed a very extensive network of promoters and artists to initiate concerts in the Netherlands. But at the same time we are working with Ekkehard Jung in Berlin to present the competition abroad. The outstanding quality of the laureates over the years, including Janine Jansen, Jaap van Zweden, Liza Ferschtman, and 2018's winner Niek Baar, has been an additional strong selling point.

It sounds like you are adding considerable value to the competition beyond fame and money.

When I started to work for the competition, I knew that its impact on the professional lives of musicians used to be bigger, even a decade ago. Nowadays the value of a competition just announcing the winners is not enough. There's more impact that can be realized, and much of that impact can come from simple things, like how to negotiate fees for your concerts, how to work with branding, and learning how to be comfortable talking to the public and the media. We discuss the necessity of having a website, of dealing with social media professionally and privately. And all these areas where we can help are already important for the 14–17 year olds. We're also talking about instruments, like what possibilities there might be to upgrade, and in general how to spend their prize money. They expect the competition to be available to them.

Tell me about the multimedia round for the Oskar Back semifinalists?

As part of the semifinal, each of the contestants played about 30 minutes of music including the Richard Strauss Sonata and other traditional classical and romantic repertoire. But each semifinalist was also asked to create a 10-minute multidisciplinary performance to tell a musical story in a different way, working with video, sound and light, and inviting other artists if they chose.

That sounds like a lot to do in the middle of a competition.

It was, but we didn't just challenge them to come up with an idea, we helped them conceptualize it and make it happen. We brought in a stage director experienced with musical theater to help them sharpen up their concepts and how to move. She worked with them on how to behave on stage at all those moments when you're not playing—and the audience is watching every move you make. We discussed how to make sure the audience doesn't applaud when you don't want them to. We brought in a video artist to help make the most of their images, upgrade their online video content, and make the best use of the different spaces young performers inevitably find themselves in. We also had a lighting designer to show them how to draw an audience more deeply into their musical story.

We even offered a special Performance Prize, which was won by Maxime Gulikers. [*See video below.*]

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