

Arthur Athan, a successful pianist and entrant in many past Waverley Music Eisteddfods, kindly accepted our invitation to speak at our Annual General Meeting earlier this year (20 March 2023). We were honoured to hear his thoughts on why music is important on so many levels. Below is Arthur's wonderfully insightful speech.

Speech for the Monash Youth Music Festival's 44th AGM (20 March 2023)

As many of you may know, I am a Family Lawyer at Maeve O'Brien and Associates, a local practice specialising in Family Law in Balwyn North. I studied a double degree of law and music at Monash University - not too long ago. I was privileged to have studied piano with Tamara Smolyar, and prior to that, Majella Drew - who you all know. I was born, raised and bred in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, participating in all local music festivals/eisteddfods during my childhood. I remember participating in the Monash Youth Music Festival- then known as the Waverley Music Eisteddfod in around 2004 to 2011.

As a Family Lawyer, I help clients address the inevitable issues that come from a breakdown of a relationship - including divorce, financial issues and child custody. Many people ask me whether I have seen an increase in separations and divorces as a result of the covid pandemic. My honest reply has always been - not really. A relationship that has broken down was always going to break down due to deeper internal issues, rather than an external issue like a pandemic. For many, the pandemic was simply the last straw. Relationship issues are not new. Where there are people and relationships, there are always going to be issues. That's why we need the family lawyers, the psychologists, the counsellors, the social workers, accountants and financial counsellors of the world.

I am sure that we are all very aware of this moment in time - in which we live. It's a complex moment - we think of the **Ukraine war**, the rising cost of living, the interest rate rises, the tough property market, employment issues, the economic and health impacts of the past few years of the Covid pandemic - these are all too familiar issues that may be on our minds to varying degrees.

However, like the relationship issues that I see every day, these issues are not new. Generations past have lived through times such as this. Importantly - countless musicians have lived through times such as this.

By way of a flitting anecdote, we can look back and remember the struggles of musicians and composers in the 1900s, in times of political upheaval. Whilst increasingly frustrated with political turmoil in Russia, Rachmaninoff and his family left Moscow so that he would be able to live a peaceful life to compose. Whilst a supporter of the Stalin communist regime on paper, Shostakovich expressed the terror, fear and frustration of living under the regime through his music, often in sarcastic, cynical tones.

In 1958 and in a moment where art transcended politics, the American pianist Van Cliburn won the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow, at the height of the Cold War.

It was Van Cliburn himself who said: **“If you hold onto the beauty and inspiration and the clarity that is music, you will have an anchor, you will not be too far swayed by what the world is.”**

Last year, the 16th Van Cliburn Competition took place in Fort Worth, in the US. The competition was compelled to address the Ukraine situation and released an address on 3rd March last year. I read the following excerpts for you:

- The invasion of Ukraine by Russia is reprehensible and heartbreaking. The Cliburn stands firmly against and condemns this tyranny. The Russian-born pianists who have applied for the Sixteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition are not officials of their government, nor is their participation in the Cliburn state-sponsored. Therefore, in the vision of our namesake and inspiration, Van Cliburn, and our mandate to support young artists—which is the very core of our mission—the Russian-born pianists will be allowed to audition for the Cliburn Competition.
- The story of Van Cliburn and his Cold War victory at the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow inspired the world as a testament to the transcendence of art, even at the most tense of times between two superpowers. As he himself said: “Since we know that classical music is timeless and everlasting, it is precisely the eternal verities inherent in classical music that remain a spiritual beacon for people all over the world.”

So, coming back to us, here at the Monash Youth Music Festival - why music as a school-aged musician in Melbourne in 2022? Why is the Monash Youth Music Festival so important?

To answer this, I'll explain three reasons why it was so important to me.

Firstly - the learning and performance of music at Eisteddfods taught me so much of communication, expression and emotion. Performers are communicators of feeling. Every word of encouragement received by judges in report sheets and from kind audience members were little points of affirmation to me that built my confidence in communicating and my love for people. Every day in my work, I strive to communicate well and I strive to understand people well, often through and despite the emotions they are experiencing. As you know, the invaluable transferable skills from music to any other profession are never ending.

It was Shostakovich who said: "Music is a means capable of expressing dark dramatism and pure rapture, suffering and ecstasy, fiery and cold fury, melancholy and wild merriment – and the subtlest nuances and interplay of these feelings which words are powerless to express and which are unattainable in painting and sculpture." This is one of my favourite quotes that just so aptly summarises the depths of emotional intelligence derived from music, taught through music and communicated through music.

Secondly, Eisteddfods provided me with a performance practice environment in which it was safe for me to learn confidence, but most importantly - humility and resilience. I remember performing at an open recital section, playing 2 of my AMusA pieces in 2006. I had a complete memory lapse of my first piece, I turned to the adjudicator, apologised, and proceeded to play my second piece. I was completely embarrassed, nerves had clearly gotten the better of me.

Moments like these helped me learn the value of preparation, and to learn mental resilience and focus. It helped me to face my weaknesses bravely, with motivation to overcome them. I remember on that particular occasion, I had competed at a swimming competition in the morning, prior to attending the Eisteddfod in the afternoon. Suffice to say, swimming took a back seat from that day forward as I began to prioritize music more and more, the more I fell in love with music - both in practice and performing.

Thirdly, Eisteddfods provided me with an environment of excellence where I could meet and see other like-minded young musicians. It was invaluable performance practice for me. Each eisteddfod whetted my appetite for performance and for excellence in performance. This became a passion of mine - I remember excitedly planning out my calendar of Eisteddfods each year in my early years of high school.

As a previous Eisteddfod-obsessed music student, I cannot emphasise how important a role each of you will play in the music journeys of the participants of the Monash Youth Music Festival this year. I wish all of you the very best as you run this year's eisteddfod - and thank you for the work that you do!

Arthur Athan

[Maeve O'Brien & Associates](#)

Senior Associate Lawyer / Parenting Coordinator / Pianist / Teacher
LLB, BMus, DipLang (Monash), GDLP (College), AMusA, LMusA