

February 2017

## Top Competitors Lessons Learned from Winning

By John Fleming

Sam Suggs's bio describes him as an "omnivorous" musician. "I coined that term for myself to suggest an overarching philosophy that a musician should do a lot of different things and shouldn't be overspecialized," he says. "It is meant to describe the fact that I will eat anything that comes my way, musically."

Suggs, who studied at Northwestern and Yale universities and now teaches at James Madison University, does indeed possess eclectic musical talents. They range from playing jazz piano and accordion to writing a scholarly paper on cadenzas in Mozart piano concertos, but it is as a double bassist/composer that he has made his mark in competitions. In 2015, he received the \$2,500 Gary Karr Prize for placing first in the International Society of Bassists Solo Competition [and was subsequently chosen as New Artist of the Month by Musical America]. Then the next year he was named the Concert Artists Guild's New Music/New Places Fellow at the CAG International Competition. At both events, he played some of his own compositions.

For the ISB competition, held at Colorado State University, Suggs researched who was on the jury. "I was going to be playing for an incredibly astute panel of bassists that I've watched perform over the years, and followed on YouTube," he says. "Because there is a lack of repertoire that is idiomatic for the instrument, I decided I'd present some of my pieces in addition to the required program."

He chose Daft Punk Chaconne, inspired by French electronic music duo Daft Punk's dance hit Around the World; and Concerto After Haydn, his realization of a lost Haydn Concerto for violone, a forerunner of the double bass. "I think these entirely new pieces were really refreshing to the jury," he says.



### Upending the jury's expectations

For standard repertoire, he looked for relatively unfamiliar works while keeping the bass's physical demands in mind. "Every competitive bassist plays a piece by Giovanni Bottesini," he says, "so I looked for one of his lesser-known works." Otherwise, he says, "the judges might have preconceived notions or expectations of how the work should be performed. They might be thinking, 'Well, you played it fine, but I'd have done it faster, or slower, or I would have started with the up bow instead of the down bow.' You want them to be thinking of the music you're making and not the decisions you're making.

"That was key for me, to think of the jury not as a panel but as an audience I needed to engage with."

So he ended up with Bottesini's Gavotte, instead of one of the concertos. "I wanted something that the judges wouldn't have strong opinions on, but that also wouldn't burn my technique too much. Something charming and not too much of a strain."

Clearly, it was the right move.