



Promise: Catherine Hewgill with young competitor Johnathan Bekes. Photo: Kate Geraghty

Catherine Hewgill is a firm believer in the value of music competitions.

The cellist still well remembers one of her earliest competitions, which she won at 14 in her home town, Perth.

"It was a big deal for me to win that and realise that maybe I had something worth pursuing," she says.

Now principal cellist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Hewgill finds herself on the other side of the fence as one of nine judges in the inaugural Australian Cello Awards. Entries open this week and close in mid-August.

The national competition is open to Australian and New Zealand professionals and students, and offers combined prizemoney of \$40,000 as well as opportunities, including the chance to study in Israel and perform with the SSO.

Unusually, first-round entrants will be judged on recordings they submit. "It's a pretty modern approach and it's great because there are a lot of Australian and New Zealand musicians studying overseas," Hewgill says.

"It avoids the expense of having to fly to play for a live panel."

Players who reach the second round perform live for the judges and that performance will go on YouTube. "That's terrific for the competitors. To be able to see what kind of people are getting through is a great learning tool."

Hewgill says she is looking for performers who can put their own stamp on the music.

"Say we hear 20 Dvorak concertos ... you are sort of going to start snoozing off until you hear something that is really unique and has some personality.

"It's not all just about technical fireworks. The person doesn't necessarily have to have arrived already. Promise is very important.

"You can always pick up a musician rather than just a technician. I would be looking for a player who is, of course, proficient technically but who is also a fine musician and a thinking player. Someone who basically just has the 'wow' factor and really moves you."

In competition, unlike performance in front of a sympathetic and supportive audience, there is nowhere to hide from the critical ears of the judging panel.

"It'll be pretty brutal," Hewgill says. "You have to be. You want to get the very best person. You can't be too kind, unfortunately."

One young cellist hoping to impress Hewgill and her fellow judges is Jonathan Bekes, 20, from Campbelltown. Bekes, who is studying cello at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and is principal cellist with the Sydney Youth Orchestra, is equally excited and intimidated by the task ahead.

"It's daunting seeing the repertoire and the adjudication panel," Bekes says. "My dad talks about the mindset that you should bite off more than you can chew and then chew like crazy. That's what I'll do."