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Music Educators Journal 2009 95: 62
DOI: 10.1177/0027432109335852

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://mej.sagepub.com/content/95/4/62.citation>

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Michigan State Adjudicated Choral Festivals: Revising the Adjudication Process

Solo and ensemble festivals and competitions can serve many musical and educational functions—and can be enjoyable for all participants.

Each year in the United States, thousands of middle school and high school music students and their teachers participate in state or regional solo, ensemble, and large-group vocal activities. Students pursue involvement for various musically extrinsic and intrinsic reasons.¹ Music educators report pressure from parents and administrators as a deciding factor in entering their students and musical groups in evaluative events.² Typically, these adjudicated events result in written feedback and summative ratings from one or more adjudicators. Administrators and music educators are often at odds with each other regarding the purpose and value of rated events. In a study of attitudes and perceptions of choral directors and their high school administrators published in 1989, researcher Jacob H. Rittenhouse found that choral directors were primarily interested in musical and educational growth factors related to participation in competitive or rated events, while their administrators were more interested in the final rating and associated honor.³ In addition, administrators perceived the final rating

important as a summative evaluation of the choir's performance over time, while the choral directors strongly opposed this view.

Related to the perceived importance of participation in rated events by students, parents, administrators, and music educators is the concern for consistency and reliability of judges' scoring and final ratings. Research into musical and extramusical influences on interjudge reliability frequently verifies the importance of adjudicator training⁴ or suggests the need for more specific training.⁵ Evaluative criteria as specified on adjudication forms also influences interjudge reliability.⁶ Researchers Charles E. Norris and James D. Borst⁷ examined the reliability of two choral festival adjudication forms. The first was a traditional form specifying seven categories for judges' scoring and comment (tone quality, diction, blend, intonation, rhythm, balance, and interpretation). The second was a rubric with each of the seven categories described in relationship to one of five achievement standards (excellent, good, satisfactory, poor, or unsatisfactory). Interclass corre-

lation coefficients, a measure of consistency or conformity for multiple group data sets, were found to be stronger on all dimensions of the rubric with the exception of rhythm. These results suggest that the more clearly delineated achievement levels in the rubric led to more closely aligned individual standards and stricter ratings, further supporting the use of dimensions and descriptors in rubrics.⁸

Recognizing the importance and potential value of adjudicated events, the Michigan School Vocal Music Association (MSVMA) has persistently pursued means to provide an educational focus, consistent and fair judging, and relevant written and verbal feedback within the state choral and vocal adjudication system. The rest of this article provides a description of MSVMA's purpose and mission, revitalization and educational revision process, adjudication components, and adjudicators' clinic and in-service day for their potential usefulness in offering verification or possible revision of other state music adjudication systems.

Purpose and Mission

The Michigan School Vocal Music Association, founded in 1937, is a nonprofit professional organization of vocal and choral music educators. Operation of the full board, which consists of more than sixty members, is structured by means of an executive director, officers, activity supervisors, and various committees that serve the greater membership in various ways.⁹ The guiding focus of the organization is "improving, promoting, and assisting vocal music education in the middle, junior high, and senior high schools of the state through a program of clinics, festivals, workshops, contests, and conferences, regulated by legitimate and effective means."¹⁰ Toward these ends, MSVMA provides educational opportunities for students through adjudicated events, including district and state festivals, related sight-reading events, state and all-state honors choruses, and the Michigan Youth Arts Festival, as well as nonadjudicated events, such as chamber choir and pop and vocal jazz festivals.

Professional development opportunities are available to teachers through music conferences and workshops, consultant and mentoring programs, adjudication clinics, videotape and DVD libraries, and publications. (See the MSVMA Web site and related links.)

Revitalization and Revision

As an out-of-state adjudicator for MSVMA large-group festivals, I have noted an intentional focus on creating and affirming an educational atmosphere. Executive Director Virginia Kerwin confirmed my observation and explained that action was taken to facilitate change toward this goal.

The initial step was the revitalizing and refocusing of the Adjudication Committee. The committee consisted of choral musicians and educators from middle school, high school, and college settings since adjudicators were invited from these three areas. The task of the committee was to revise the festival program to be more musically comprehensive and educationally viable. The resultant adjudication philosophy included important guiding principles that influenced subsequent revisions (see the Adjudication Philosophy sidebar).

Adjudication Philosophy

1. Promote healthful vocal technique, expressive singing, and a lifelong love of singing.
2. Provide a student-centered, interactive learning assessment while maintaining established performance standards.
3. Balance rubric assessment standards with developmental level of student musicians.
4. Maintain the process of performing and learning as the most important aspect.
5. Clearly articulate positive performance outcomes as well as provide ideas for growth and development.
6. Inspire a desire for students and teachers to return to future festivals.

The committee then looked closely at the existing operational framework of the festivals to determine the positive aspects of the program as well as what needed revision toward the new focus. Positive elements included the adjudication evaluation sheet, the clinic component, and the sight-reading requirement.

Adjudication Evaluation Sheet

The adjudication evaluation sheet (Adjudication Forms) contains five categories for assessing the performance of a group.¹¹ These are (1) tone quality, (2) pitch elements, (3) rhythm elements, (4) vocal technique, and (5) interpretation/presentation. Each category has a list of subcategories to guide the adjudicator's observation and comments. The adjudicator summarizes achievement relative to each category by means of the following rating scale: 1 = *excellent*, 2 = *good*, 3 = *fair*, 4 = *poor*. The numbers are tallied, and division ratings are assigned, with division 1 being the highest and division 4 the lowest. A checklist for writing evaluation sheets is provided in the Adjudicator Handbook. Helpful suggestions include beginning with a positive comment, directing comments to students and not the teacher, following a constructive criticism with a suggestion for improvement, and conferring with other adjudicators to maintain consistency.

Looking for a means to provide more specific feedback from adjudicators and instructive guidance for teachers and their students, the Adjudication Committee began the development of a rubric inclusive of the five categories with associated descriptive statements. Verified by findings from Norris and Borst's study of four choral educators' use of a similar rubric that supports the inclusion of dimensions and descriptors in rubrics for their usefulness in providing more guidance and greater specificity in performance scoring,¹² the Adjudication Committee diligently pursued development of its rubric. Input was solicited from MSVMA members through publications, Web site postings, and professional development in-services. Based on feedback received,

a final draft was crafted and submitted to the executive board for review. This draft was recommended for approval to the full board and was approved for implementation in 2008–9.¹³

Choral Clinic

Adjudicators serve the choirs on a rotating basis. Three are always providing feedback via the Adjudication Evaluation Sheet. One is listening to the performance and taking notes in preparation for serving as a clinician. A break is provided to the adjudicator immediately following the clinic presentation. The clinic is a time of instruction and interaction with the students and teacher. The intent and focus of the clinic are articulated in the Adjudicator Handbook, and suggestions (some of which follow) are offered to promote a positive learning experience. The clinic is a setting for trying and improving and should include more than a reiteration of written comments. Active participation of the students is encouraged. The adjudicator is better able to direct the course of the clinic and support student learning by inquiring about the students' perceptions of what they did well, what could improve the performance, what was particularly challenging in preparing for this event, and what was the most important thing learned in preparing the literature. Information of this type provides a springboard for the adjudicator to engage the students in the assessment and learning process. Reinforcing the efforts of the teacher and students in this way also helps the students to hear and accept the adjudicator's instruction and suggestion while acknowledging their hard work.

Sight-Reading

Sight-reading is considered an important part of the educational process. Sight-reading is required at the district level whether the group is participating for a rating or for comments only. High school choirs must sight read examples at the same level as the required performance selection. Middle school teachers choose

the level at which their choirs sight-read. A numerical system that allows for some error in sight-reading is used to determine the score and composite sight-reading rating. However, the process of sight-reading is considered more important than a flawless performance. Adjudicators are encouraged to recognize and support the process in their written comments. In addition, if the initial sight-reading is unsuccessful, a second attempt may be allowed and taken into consideration in the final rating.

The sight-reading clinic is twenty minutes long. Each choir reads three eight-measure exercises. The teacher may discuss any musical elements without singing, clapping, or performing the piece in any way. Tonality is established by having the students sing scales or chord patterns. Tempo and steady beat may be maintained by snapping, clapping, or foot tapping. Speaking aloud the solfège, numbers, or letter names is permitted prior to sight-reading. During the preparation time, students are allowed to discuss or vocalize without teacher assistance in groups of two or three.

Adjudication Clinic and Festival In-Service Day

The Adjudication Committee takes the position that since school choral teachers and their students invest so much time and money (in 2008, \$160 for state festivals; variable cost per district festival site) into the festival experience, it is critical that adjudicators are educationally aligned with the festival philosophy and procedures set forth by MSVMA. In light of this, the adjudicator certification process for district festivals has been significantly revised. (State choral festivals are adjudicated by non-Michigan choral musicians.) Previously, a two-hour training session, along with observation of experienced adjudicators, was required. Currently, adjudication certification requires attendance at an all-day clinic. All aspects of the adjudication process are discussed. The clinic features master adjudicators working with student ensembles and their

teachers to model methods and strategies for providing constructive feedback and positive interaction. In addition, attendees use adjudication forms and note taking to guide their observation of the performance. Mock clinics for both literature performance and sight-reading are presented.

While attending a 2006 clinic, I observed Executive Director Kerwin guiding the applicants' listening, comments, and discussion. She set the tone for their observation and reflection as she described the adjudicator's role. In short, she said, adjudicators are hired "to listen," "to affirm," "to help the students grow and improve," and "to be constructive and instructive." Ways to accomplish this through use of the Adjudication Evaluation Sheet were discussed prior to the first mock clinic. Following the mock performance clinic, Kerwin led a discussion of the applicants' observation and written comments. She asked that they read exactly what they wrote so that participants could assess the comments from a student and a teacher perspective, offer better wording as appropriate, and provide suggestions for other areas of performance to be addressed. It was noted that during the clinic, the master adjudicator never talked down to the students, understood the students' level of musical understanding and development, and used a variety of means to involve and engage the students. The master adjudicator reflected on the clinic and offered additional suggestions and strategies. Providing closure, including the use of summaries, was noted as being helpful in conceptualizing musical learning for future reference.

Kerwin also addressed the numerical component of the adjudication process. Applicants provided their ratings and were reminded of the importance of supporting their scores with written comments and of offering strategies for each ensemble's continued improvement. Scoring across the three performance adjudicators was discussed. Some dialogue among adjudicators is expected in an effort to align their decision-making process and musical priorities. Wide splits in final ratings are discussed with the adjudicators before

releasing the evaluation forms to the teacher and posting the final rating. Starting in fall 2008, a new rubric replaced the existing evaluation sheet and is used in the mock clinics.

Prospective adjudicators are also required to complete an in-service program at a district festival. The focus during the morning is to develop the ability to write comprehensive evaluations—providing feedback and suggesting ways to improve. The emphasis is on instructive narrative related to specific issues noted in the music, general vocal or musical concerns, and constructive feedback and strategies for addressing concerns. During the afternoon, the applicants attend adjudication clinics with an official adjudicator. In addition to observing and reflecting in writing on the adjudicator's work, the applicant acts as clinician for multiple sessions. The official adjudicator offers written feedback and summarizes the applicant's work by means of an evaluation form.

Process Outcomes

The certification sessions emphasize the following abilities: (1) hearing and observing at substantial musical levels, (2) writing evaluation sheets from an educational and comprehensive musicianship perspective, (3) providing performance clinics that engage students in musical learning and are instructive to the students and their teacher, and (4) encouraging present and future sight-reading efforts by means of supportive feedback and useful methods and strategies.

Documents collected from the adjudication clinic and in-service program that reflect these abilities are submitted for review by the Adjudication Committee. Other supportive materials, such as a biography of educational background and teaching experience, prior adjudication experience, and previous festival ratings, are also included in the applicant's portfolio. The committee considers all of these factors in evaluating the applicant's readiness to adjudicate. If the evaluation is positive, the applicant is approved to adjudicate at a district festival the next

year. If the applicant does not meet all assessment criteria, he or she is assigned to an Adjudication Committee member who is serving as an official on-site adjudicator. This person acts as mentor to the applicant, offering practical coaching and suggestions that will assist in improving the areas of deficiency. In the unlikely case that applicants are not able to adequately address areas of concern, other ways of productively serving the organization are suggested. Ongoing assessment of adjudicators is provided through adjudicator evaluation forms distributed to participating teachers at the festival and submitted following the event.

Coda

The extensive certification process necessary to becoming an adjudicator supports and advances the desired educational focus advocated by MSVMA. Previously, the structure and emphasis of the festival experience encouraged musical and educational reflection mostly from a post-event review of the evaluation sheets. The revisions and refocusing as described earlier nurture involvement, investment, and long-range commitment to musical learning and improvement—positive educational pursuits for all involved.

NOTES

1. Harold E. Fiske, "Judging Musical Performances: Method or Madness?" *Update: Applications of Research to Music Education* 1, no. 3 (1983): 7–10.
2. George Rogers, "Attitudes of High School Band Directors and Principals toward Marching Band Contests," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 33 (1985): 259–67.
3. Jacob H. Rittenhouse, "Competitive and Noncompetitive Choral Festivals at the Secondary Level" (DMA diss., Arizona State University, 1989), abstract in ProQuest, file DAI-A 50/06, AAT 8919644 (accessed February 2008).
4. See, for example, William K. Guegold, "An Analysis of the Adjudication Results in the 1986–1988 Ohio Music Education Association State Marching Band Finals with an Emphasis on Adjudicator Consistency" (PhD diss., Kent State

- University, 1989), abstract in ProQuest, file DAI-A 50/09, AAT 9006128 (accessed February 2008).
5. As was found in studies completed by Martin J. Bergee and Melvin C. Platt, "Influences of Selected Variables on Solo and Small-Ensemble Festival Ratings," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 51 (2003): 342–53; Barry R. Garmen, J. David Boyle, and Nicholas J. DeCarbo, "Orchestra Festival Evaluations: Interjudge Agreement and Relationships between Performance Categories and Final Ratings," *Research Perspectives in Music Education* 2 (1991): 19–24; and Bret P. Smith and Gail V. Barnes, "Development and Validation of an Orchestra Performance Rating Scale," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 55 (2007): 268–80.
 6. See studies by Edwin Gordon, *Rating Scales and their Uses for Measuring and Evaluating Achievement in Music Performance* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2002); Charles E. Norris and James D. Borst, "An Examination of the Reliabilities of Two Choral Festival Adjudication Forms," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 55 (2007): 237–51; and Harold Jones Jr., "An Application of the Facet-Factorial Approach to Scale Construction in the Development of a Rating Scale for High School Vocal Solo Performance (Adjudication, Evaluation, Voice)" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1986), abstract in ProQuest, file DAI-A 47/04, AAT 8613727 (accessed February 2008).
 7. Norris and Borst, "Festival Adjudication Forms."
 8. Gordon, *Rating Scales and their Uses*; and Rachel Whitcomb, "Writing Rubrics for the Music Classroom," *Music Education Journal* 85, no. 6 (1999): 26–32.
 9. See the Constitution and Bylaws section of the MSVMA Handbook available at <http://www.msvma.org/images/pdf/handbook/bylaws.pdf> for more information.
 10. Ibid, "Preamble."
 11. See http://msvma.org/forms_new.shtml.
 12. Norris and Borst, "Festival Adjudication Forms."
 13. See "New MSVMA Choral Festival Adjudication Rubric" at www.msvma.org.