

SOLO & ENSEMBLE ADJUDICATION

Michigan School Band & Orchestra Association Solo & Ensemble Adjudication Workshop & Clinic

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Solo & Ensemble is:

An MSBOA performance event and teaching extension of school band and orchestra programs. It is organized, operated, and taught by school instrumental teachers who promote student participation hoping for some or all of the following:

- ❑ A quality musical experience for students
- ❑ Heightened development of instrumentalists, individually
- ❑ Improvement of large ensembles through student investment and engagement
- ❑ Positive reinforcement of what is being taught, correctly
- ❑ Correctives and suggestions that benefit student development
- ❑ Exposure to a different type of literature than large ensemble literature
- ❑ Extension activity for advanced students
- ❑ An equitable evaluative environment for students
- ❑ Judges who are supportive of their efforts and who provide extensions to their teaching

Solo & Ensemble is not:

- ❑ "Playoffs" for private study students
- ❑ An opportunity to evaluate public school teachers
- ❑ Recruiting grounds for private students by private teachers and college teachers
- ❑ An opportunity to right all musical wrongs
- ❑ The "end all" of musical evaluation

Potential Issues and Items for Discussion.

- ❑ The private "studio" teacher judging general instrumental students who perform without the benefit of private lessons
- ❑ The college teacher who deals with a different level of student with singular focus
- ❑ Consistency and equity
 - Consistency from section to section adjudicating the same instrument
 - Equity in ratings when comparing instrument to instrument
 - Equity in ratings when comparing one location to another
 - Does a "First Division" in an urban "rim" equal a "First Division" hundreds of miles away?
 - Diverse districts converge to the same "State Festival"
 - Rating students from a range of grade levels at the same festival—Should a ninth grade performer be evaluated in the same manner as a senior? Should a seventh grader perform like a ninth grader?

- The “8:00 a.m. event” adjudicated by inexperienced adjudicators – Should the best event of the day be penalized for playing first? (It might be smart to “hold” a few of the earlier sheets and mark the grades on a secondary sheet.)
- The “only” instrument or instrument from an instrumental family in a program
 - The only tuba
 - The “only” string bass (the only string) in a band program
 - Low clarinet or double reed
- Ratings:
 - What is the “district first division” or the “state first division”
 - Should a “first division be 94% and above in the flutes and 80% and above in other sections?
 - Is the “district first division” now 85% in Michigan Festivals?
 - What does a I, II or III really mean? Is there a rubric?
 - Does a solo I = 85% and above
 - Does a solo II = an average (C) performance?
 - Does a solo III = a below average or (D) performance?
 - Does the solo IV and V exist, or did those events stay home?
- Literature and your bias toward what should be performed
- Dealing with students prepared by inexperienced teachers
- Constructing comments directed toward students who may overly simplify, distort, or misconstrue
- Parents in the room and what they perceive from what is said—where does it go?
- District solo & ensemble has become the “gateway” to state solo & ensemble which is the “gateway” to state proficiency, the state honors band, Michigan Youth Arts Talent Screening, and one of the only formalized evaluations for instrumental students in Michigan. Rightly or wrongly, our festivals have become the “Musical ACT” in Michigan—with one judge. District is a “qualifying” festival or a “disqualifying” festival without the benefit of student or director challenges.
- The same judge at district and state
- Events progressing to state festival with obvious disqualifiers (time for instance).

The Adjudication Process

- Welcome the student
- The performance adjudication and sheet mechanics
 - Listen first, then write
 - Work the sheet
 - Fill the sheet
 - Remember that people read the sheet and the sheet should read. Avoid those adjudication sheets with little slashes, measure numbers, then a listing of errors. These might be appropriate for a conductor as he listens to a rehearsal tape and plans a rehearsal, however, this type of sheet does not provide much benefit to students. Often, they are not read.
 - Write general comments pertaining to the captions and reinforce comments with examples from the performance. These comments should mix criticisms and praises at the same time that they provide solutions. The comments also support your marks.

- For example, next to the tone box you might write: “Your tone is very characteristic and beautiful in the low register. Bravo to you! Be careful of the range above the high f. You tend to pinch a little. Use that same positive air support in the high register as you do in the low register and your tone will improve.” *You have established a concern for tone; provided positive reinforcement for the low register tone; provided hope for solving the problem; and supplied a plausible solution.*
- The following comment frames the issue differently: “Your tone is poor in the high register.” *You have pointed out the obvious. The student probably knew this because he or she hears other players. You have reinforced the negative, provided no support for that which is good, and you have provided no solution and worse yet—no hope. Would you want this judge judging your students?*
- The following adjudication style is sometimes used:
“M. 10—out of tune, M.37—wrong notes, MMS. 100 – 105—poor technical execution, etc. *These comments might follow general comments that seek to support the student, but point out performance issues supporting your decision to provide a poor rating. Don’t write the entire sheet in this manner.*
- Balance the comments to the captions. Though there is no “one way” to construct an adjudication sheet, if you begin your evaluative comments pertaining to a caption next to the box by the caption, you will visually construct a balanced sheet. Fill in additional reinforcement for the various captions in the areas established on the sheet.
- Leave a space for final comments
- If you make verbal comments, briefly recap those comments.
- The verbal evaluation/mini-clinic (if you have time)
 - Some festivals operate with many cancellations in some sections due to weather problems or other issues. Bringing your instrument might fill the day with quality instructional sessions in your section.
 - If you don’t have time, don’t ignore the student or coldly say, “thank you”.
 - Do not get behind
 - If you model with your instrument, center on specific performance techniques.
 - You can’t solve all of the problems, so center on one or two main issues. The student will leave with a “plan” to improve.
 - Avoid the perception of “showing off.” Be professional.
- Final and supportive comments to the student.

Adjudication Viewpoints

Avoid judging with improper bias toward one caption

- Tone does influence many aspects of the total sheet. (Should all flute students who perform without a vibrato receive a “II” regardless of other performance accomplishments?)
- Tuning issues might permeate an entire performance or they might be isolated. Be careful that the entire sheet is not a tuning critique. Be sensitive to factors that are not the fault of the performer. (Examples: Faulty piano tuning, braces, poor instruments)
- Rhythmic stability and even the concept of beat are developmental. Nerves sometimes complicate performance of proper rhythm. Interpretation of rhythm is interpretive and

reflects the proper understanding of style. This caption is complicated because incorrect rhythmic performance is highly distractive to accomplished musicians. Don't be too severe when minor rhythmic errors enter the performance, they might be momentary.

- ❑ Technique covers a range of skills. Evaluate the range of skills required by the solo because the solo selection might have included or avoided certain technical aspects considered developmental by the teacher. The general technical level of students often changes quickly.
- ❑ Interpretation overlaps into several categories.
 - Be careful of "interpretation bias" or rewarding only the way that you play the solo or were taught the solo. Other interpretations might be valid and yours might be a teacher's or school's opinion.
 - Be very careful when you critique embellishments. (A little knowledge might be a dangerous thing.) Often, editors insert embellishments. Experts don't always agree on the proper execution of certain trills, turns, etc. Performance practices sometimes change due to recent research or historical findings. Embellishments were possibly performed with less exactitude in some periods than suggested by some of today's teachers. General comments like, "This trill was probably performed on the beat from the note above" is a better comment than "You performed all of your trills, incorrectly." (In spite of what you think, you might be incorrect in your criticism.)
 - Editor's markings might change established and preferable performance aspects of a composition.
 - Articulations are sometimes changed to benefit the transcription from one instrument to another.
 - Subtle interpretive gestures "penciled in" by a teacher are appropriate. Unless they are outlandish, accept them.
- ❑ Accompaniments might make or break a performance—try to sort it out (Remember that "Grandma" might not play like she used to, but she might be the only reason that a student is performing. Be sensitive!) Generally, the student performance should be judged apart from the accompaniment.
- ❑ Stage Deportment comments are appropriate if presented correctly and sensitively. Students are to respect the performance environment and they should present themselves in a manner fitting to the festival performance.

Additional Comments & Suggestions

- ❑ Most instrumental teachers do their best with the resources and time available. Be careful and gentle with criticisms that imply director incompetence.
- ❑ Students often view the S&E judge as the "higher authority". Though the opinions are expert, present opinions as opinions.
 - Comments like, "Better versions of this solo are available" mean to students "Your director chose a poor version of your solo." A better approach might be to suggest, "This selection is offered in a variety of versions. Some performers prefer...because...this might work for you."
 - Though you might have a bias toward a certain technique, present it as an alternative. Comments like, "Your saxophone embouchure is like a clarinet embouchure. Who, on earth, taught you that"? A better approach might to suggest, "Though many saxophonists use a little more lip over the bottom lip (like

- you do), performers have solved that upper register sharpness problem (you haven't), by a little different embouchure.”
- Equipment opinions might help a student. Be careful with your suggestions. Comments like, “That 12c trombone mouthpiece has been banned in my school because it creates tight sounds and poor tone” might be presented “You might be ready to move to a little larger mouthpiece. Check with your director and he will let you try one of his 6 ½ AL or a 5G mouthpieces.” (Rather than deflate the student and undermine the teacher, you have made the student feel like he or she has progressed to the “next level” and preserved the teacher’s integrity. The teacher will probably figure all of this out and strive to get students on larger mouthpieces sooner. Everyone wins!)
 - Though necessary, equipment concerns and mouthpiece discussions must avoid bias because equipment selection might be made for a specific reason or the equipment used might reflect financial exigencies.
 - Students performing trumpet literature might use cornets.
 - Grandpa’s old clarinet might be the only way “Junior” could play in band.
 - Never get into the “trap” of taking your time with several events, then hurry or “cut off” events that follow. Students are entitled to their minimum performance time and it is unprofessional to cut them at two or three to recover from someone’s lack of organization. (Festival officials need to be considerate of you, also. For example, when large numbers of students don’t show in the morning, then appear in the afternoon, you will be challenged to provide quality adjudication in the time provided.)
 - The first and last event of the day deserves the same quality experience
 - Professionalism as an educator in an educational environment
 - Spelling – bring a “mini” dictionary and musical term dictionary
 - Handwriting—print if your writing is impossible to read
 - Use of language and punctuation—review a handbook of style
 - Maintain your “people skills.”
 - Be pleasant to the workers—they are volunteers
 - Make eye contact with students and smile
 - Nearly anything can happen in an educational setting involving students.
 - Don’t be afraid to ask for rulings when you are uncertain of rules
 - Avoid circumventing festival rules. Rules provide for consistency from section to section. (Examples include: Rules pertaining to copied music, and timings.)