

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH THROUGH PMEA MPA

By Tom Snyder, MPA Coordinator

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One of the core aspirations of PMEA Music Performance Assessment remains “to establish PMEA MPA’s as a must-do, priority event of choice each year for all directors throughout the state due to the significant educational benefits for their participating students”. Just as an NFL replay official often states, “upon further review.....”, I feel that the words ‘and themselves’ need to be added at the end of that statement given how much participating directors also benefit from participation with meaningful professional growth.

Each adjudicator is asked to identify areas of strength within the performance to reinforce what went well and what successful pedagogy is evident. Directors welcome this feedback as it helps validate rehearsal teaching efforts, is reassuring, and, realistically, also helps them be more receptive to any accompanying critical observations and suggestions for improvement. A balance between positive observations and constructive criticism best enables professional growth to occur.

Inherent to assessment is that adjudicators are also asked to identify areas of concern that emerge throughout the performance. Directors should also welcome those comments as opportunities for learning for themselves as well as for their students. We urge any director with anxiety or trepidations of any kind to do their best to set aside those barriers to growth and not consider them as professional or personal affronts. Instead, they should realize that both positive and negative feedback can be quite powerful in the direct relevance to approaching future rehearsals and ongoing growth as a conductor and teacher.

The ‘play by play’ audio commentary from the adjudicators is particularly valuable for directors. While some observations about the performance at a given moment simply state the obvious----a clearly evident wrong note, early entrance, or other ‘oops’ of some kind----most dig in much deeper with insights that are both relevant to the given moment in the performance and transfer for future use. The specific feedback on the director’s own ensemble reflecting both his teaching and conducting are powerful in immediate relevance and applicable ‘next steps, often much more valuable than a rehearsal pedagogy or conducting session at a conference. The wrap-up audio comments after the performance are often particularly valuable as an opportunity for adjudicators to speak at length, to convey a holistic perspective about the entire performance, and to include positive highlights, encouragement, and focused ‘next step’ strategies for directors to use right away in their subsequent rehearsals.

The scores and ratings themselves indicated on the assessment forms offer defined, quantitative feedback in each of the key assessment areas with numbers and descriptors that provide a snapshot of that performance. The +/- column enables the adjudicators to provide additional overall input on the significant criteria within each assessment area. I feel that the scores and the ratings along with the audio and written feedback combine to provide truly meaningful performance assessment along with significant growth opportunities for both students and directors.

Band and orchestra directors also benefit from the sight-reading component. The challenge can be exhilarating. Developing pedagogy and a system to prepare for sight-reading combine to benefit both individual students and the ensemble as a whole that definitely transfer when rehearsing concert music. We plan to develop and pilot a choral sight-reading component soon.

Don't forget the powerful relevance of adjudicator comments about the director's conducting in real time, particularly applicable given that directors are conducting from scores they've prepared and ensembles they've rehearsed. Comments involving the 'art of conducting' that reinforce effective technique and suggest adjustments at a particular moment in the music provide direct insights quite different from other learning opportunities. As an aside, DO seek out conducting master classes as amazing opportunities to deepen understanding and develop technique separate from rehearsal pedagogy and other areas involved with directing an ensemble.

Also, don't overlook how feedback on student performance in solo/ensemble assessment can also provide professional growth for directors. Comments from an adjudicator who is often a specialist on the given instrument should reinforce what the director already knows about the pedagogy involved with that instrument while also providing additional focused insights and improvement strategies.

I found my MPA experiences as a high school band director to be among the most profound of my career in terms of practical, relevant, professional growth opportunities. I'll always treasure the overall artistic and educational gratification regardless of the range of ratings received. I regret that I didn't start participating when PMEA Adjudication was launched in 1986, as I mistakenly thought for too long that I 'wasn't ready'. Thankfully, other directors and adjudicators convinced me to jump in. Subsequent years of participating with two or even three bands led to hosting several instrumental and choral MPA's, adjudicating both sight-reading and 'in the hall', and serving as the state PMEA chair since 2004. I strongly recommend directors of any age or career stage to consider participating to reap the benefits for themselves along with their students and ensembles.