



THE VALUE OF MPAs and How to Prepare For One

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Assessment is an integral part of academic culture. As band directors, we need to embrace and participate in meaningful evaluation that will lend credibility to the Concert Band as a legitimate academic entity (rather than an extension of the marching band) in the eyes of our school communities. Although there aren't PSSAs or Keystone exams for band, PMEA provides a vehicle for large ensemble evaluation - the Music Performance Assessment (MPA) - that serves as a rubric-based assessment of ensemble performance and a surefire motivator to increase student achievement.

MPA Preparation

The benefits of systematic MPA preparation are immediate and measurable for directors and students alike. While compulsory activities for each MPA include filling out registration paperwork, choosing quality repertoire, and having the admin sign-off on the event, engagement in the following activities will have a major impact on your program:

EMBRACE THE RUBRIC

Take the time to familiarize your students with the evaluation rubrics prior to the event. Start by focusing on a single category in each rehearsal and move your students toward being able to evaluate their own ensemble recordings. In addition to developing discriminant listeners, you'll be amazed at how motivated your players will become (and how proactively they will fix their mistakes!) when they begin to evaluate their own recorded performances!

SIGHT-READ

Make sight-reading a daily activity with your group with the focus moving from accurate notes and rhythms to "Reading Around The Notes" for a more musical performance during the first read. Attempt to simulate the MPA model of silent analysis (a systematic approach that is taught early in the year is ideal) followed by director-led instruction and culminating with a full-run of the piece. For better results, record the run-through and have your students evaluate the product as an in-class or written assignment!

CLINIC

Invite clinicians to work with your groups. While college professors are always willing to come and work their magic, you can also invite other music teachers in your district into your rehearsals in order to get another set of ears. Additionally, recordings can be sent to your colleagues in other districts with a request for honest "gloves-off" feedback. At the very least, get off of the podium and walk around the room during rehearsal or rearrange the seating arrangement in order to gain a different perspective and a new listening environment.

DAY-OF: THE PAYOFF!

As with any other concert experience, your stress level on the day-of will be a direct reflection of the quality of preparation during the prior weeks and months. A few suggestions:

- Review ALL materials sent by the MPA host, particularly procedures for check-in and percussion equipment provided.
- Don't overplay in the warm-up room.
- MPAs are typically sparsely attended. If possible, arrive early and stay late to be a GREAT audience for other bands!
- Have a plan for the warm-up room that DOESN'T involve playing! Sizzle, sing, air and valve, whatever...just save your chops for the stage!
- Help out the MPA host director by employing your own "student staff" that will facilitate stage setup and teardown for your group.
- Don't overplay in the warm-up room.
- Kids love the mall! Stop at the mall nearest the MPA for lunch/dinner and let them blow off some steam before or after the event.
- PLAY GREAT!

POST-MPA

Now that you've gone through the preparation and attended the MPA, you will need to determine how to deal with the feedback you've received. The format of the PMEA MPA gives the director a great deal of flexibility with regards to how recordings and scores are utilized within your educational program.

RECORDINGS

During each performance, adjudicators provide real-time feedback by way of recorded comments. Every recording that I've ever received at a PMEA MPA has provided meaningful, insightful, professional, and educationally-appropriate feedback that is fit for consumption by all of our stakeholders. With that being said, it is a good idea to screen recordings prior to playing them for students.

SCORES/RATINGS

Following the performance, each adjudicator assigns a score in each rubric category. These scores are then added up to determine a final rating (Either "Superior, Outstanding" etc. or "Advanced, Proficient," etc. to be more in line with edu-speak). Unlike a marching band competition, scores and ratings are not read aloud at the event or published online for public consumption. It is completely up to the director to find a method of sharing the results with their students that is most appropriate for their program... if you don't want to share the scores, you don't have to!

DEBRIEFING

At Hempfield, we will typically hold a "debriefing" rehearsal following the MPA. Students listen to the performance recording (no judges commentary) and complete a rubric-based scoresheet for the ensemble. The students then listen to each adjudicator's feedback and make notes in their individual parts that are in need of further attention. Invariably, our eyes are opened to new opportunities within the music and we are collectively able to take the next performance to a much higher level!

EXCITING NEW OPPORTUNITIES!

Improvement is only achieved through a sequence of honest evaluation (assessment) and adjustment of practice. As we seek to teach this valuable truism to our students, it is important that we as directors practice what we preach and engage in meaningful activities. While the prospect of having our concert ensembles evaluated more judiciously than concerts attended by our own local stakeholders can be quite intimidating at first, we owe it to ourselves, our students, and our

community to embrace a growth mindset that will lead to immediate and tangible improvement.

To that end, PMEA has made significant adjustments in the format of the MPA with the intent of providing an Assessment opportunity to match the readiness level of every band in the Commonwealth. The following options will be available at PMEA MPA Festivals in 2016:

Traditional Format

choose literature from the list (new and improved!),
sight-read, comments/ratings.

Festival Format

choose from a "menu" of options to customize an experience that best meets the needs of each ensemble: no lists,
optional sight-reading, optional comments/ratings.

FINALLY...

How do we get non-musicians to value the concert ensemble as an academic program? Assess it!

It is essential that we have conversations with our administrators that advocate for the value of the large ensemble adjudication as an assessment tool that leads to student growth. Evaluating our product beyond parent applause will, at the very least, provide those at the helm with a reason to think twice before cutting deeper into schedules and budget lines. Most importantly, it will provide our students (and our directors!) with the inspiration and information needed to continue to develop towards their musical and emotional potential! ▼

Consider hosting a PMEA MPA at your school in 2015-16! For more information, visit the PMEA website and contact Tom Snyder (Adjudication Chairperson) at tsnyder@westasd.org.

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