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So you want a good rating at the spring contest!

by Connie Branton, NW-ACDA President



As we move into the second half of our choir year, we are faced with competitions, festivals, concerts, trips, and extra performances that characterize a typical choral conductor's life.

This column is NOT directed at those of you who are veteran choral directors who have your own system of preparation for choral works. It is more for my choral friends who have experienced frustration at trying to take care of all the details of the music and who never quite get everything done to their own satisfaction or that of the festival adjudicators.

This is for you who come away from contest/festival with apologies to your students and perhaps even animosity toward a judge who just doesn't seem to understand what it is to be in the real world.

I teach junior high school choral music where I see six different choirs every day and where over half of the school population is on free or reduced lunch. This is the real world.

When I select music for the spring season I must challenge the students to stretch their abilities but not frustrate them with music that is too difficult. In adjudicating many choirs, I have heard groups where the director did not really know the abilities of the choir and chose music that was not of high quality or that was beyond the ability of the singers. The first step is to make sure you have the right piece.

After the conductor has chosen a quality piece, it should be prepared with utmost attention to detail. It has taken me several years to figure out a hierarchy of preparation that works for me. I share it with you with the stipulation that it is always flexible depending on the demands of a particular piece or the abilities of a certain choir.

1. Sight-read the piece all the way through. Mistakes don't count in sight-reading. The only thing I don't accept from students is not trying.
2. Divide the piece up into achievable bites. This can be a single phrase in particularly difficult music. Learn notes and rhythms on just one section the first day. The next day review the first bite then take another. Some directors hammer away on phrase after phrase of the same piece for the entire class period. Working many weeks in advance

in small bits is much more satisfying for me and my students. We can experience success every day.

3. Fix vowel colors of all vowels in every phrase. Get them to open their mouths!
4. Work on diction so that consonants are in the style of the piece and correctly placed rhythmically.
5. Teach students to follow ritardandos, rubatos, etc.
6. Work with blend and balance in every phrase. As a new conductor many years ago I remember how hard it was to hear those inner voices. Concentrate on them to make sure that the students don't wander to the melody.
7. Work on the mood of the piece by asking the students to show the audience what they are singing about.
8. Make sure students are exhibiting ensemble discipline, i. e., watching conductor, not scratching, flipping hair, etc. (these kinds of things drive me crazy!)
9. Practice getting on and off the risers.
10. Prepare for the unexpected (someone faints, for example). Talk students through hypothetical situations.
11. Last of all - go out and enjoy the experience.

We must take care of our own students first and show them how to learn from the experience, especially from listening to other choirs. They learn little if we show up for the warmup time prior to our performance and then leave immediately after.

Above all, we need to take ourselves a little less seriously. (I am, of course, talking to myself when I say this!) Most of us worry too much about what others think about our choirs. Find some people you respect and ask them for advice. Then go about expanding your own horizons. Go to workshops, listen to others, invite conductors in to work with your students, be open to new techniques.

GO TO THE NATIONAL ACDA CONVENTION AND LEARN BY HEARING. Take all your experience and learn at the convention and share it.