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## *Make Your Life Easier*

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*(Editor's note: Though this article was written in 2003, and we no longer use "tape recordings," the suggestions Laurie gives should help immensely when preparing student recordings as they audition for honor choirs. You are "hearing" a voice of immense experience. Listen to what Laurie is telling you.)*

This past October I had the privilege of flying to Oklahoma City and joining the seven other Junior High/Middle School Divisional R & S Chairs and a few other selected music educators from across the United States. We were there to listen to almost 1900 audition tapes for the 2003 National Junior High Honor Choir to be held in New York City. In the end, over 300 students were chosen to be a part of this choir. We would like to congratulate all the students and their directors that were selected to be a part of this honor group.

We would like to share with you the process used to select the students. This was not an easy or fast job, but a very "enlightening" one, nonetheless.

Two judges were assigned to each voicing. We all met together before beginning to listen to tapes. We went over the scoring guides and criteria that we would use to as we listened. It was our job to score each tape based on a 100-point scale that corresponded with the printed audition requirements that all students and educators received.

- Scales: Sung in tune and accurately
- My Country 'Tis Of Thee:
  - Sung in tune and accurately
  - Diction
  - Voice Quality
- Solo: Art Song/Folk Song
  - Sung in tune and accurately
  - Diction
  - Voice Quality
  - Degree of Difficulty

Sandi Gesler, the R & S Chair from the Central Division and I paired up, went back to our room and began listening to over 500 tapes. We took the job

seriously because we knew what it meant to the students who were to be chosen for this choir, as well as the disappointment to those who wouldn't be. We have taught at this level long enough to know the emotional commitment that the students make to these audition tapes. All student names and scores were placed in a database. Scores were tallied and the final selection was based on the following criteria:

- Highest scores
- A balance within the ladies voices and men voices
- A balance between the ladies and gentlemen within the choir
- A representation of students from across the entire United States.

There were many, many wonderful voices that we had the opportunity to hear. These tapes or CDs were done with thought and care. It was obvious that the auditionees were prepared and ready when the tape/CD was made. Unfortunately, there were many more that did not make the final selection, not because they weren't qualified, but because the directions were not followed thoroughly.

Additionally, there were many that didn't advance in the selection process because the student and/or their tape were not prepared to the level of a national honor choir. The saddest part was that there were some tapes and CDs that were sent that were completely blank!

The following statements are areas of concern that all of the judges discovered as we listened to tapes. We feel these suggestions would be some great guidelines to follow when you make the next set of tapes with your students.

1. First and foremost, "READ DIRECTIONS." Don't do anything until you and your student auditionees have read through all the rules, qualifications and standards in the application form, together and alone. It will be well worth your time and effort. There were numerous tapes that were disqualified because the directions were not followed. Basic standards and rules for the tapes are put there to make it easier for everyone.

2. Label all of your tapes correctly. Once again, follow the directions to the letter!

3. Major scales consist of eight notes, not five, nor twelve. You may think this is an obvious statement, and not worth stating, but not so. Many students sang a 5-note scale, a 12-note scale, or other various scales. Please give the starting pitch on the tape to allow the judge to know exactly where the singer is beginning. Sing the scales at approximately 72 beats per minute, not largo, nor presto and use quarter notes.

The highest and lowest pitch of the two scales you and your student choose should be attainable. It should be a singable, accurate, pleasant, solid tone with breath support. Many students sang high just for the sake of showing how “high” they could sing, not how “well” they could sing.

4. The required scales and song are meant specifically to be “a cappella.” There were quite a number of teachers who accompanied their students on the scales and “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” This automatically disqualified the tape, no matter how great the vocalist was. (A real shame on this one...many of those students would have been selected.)

5. The first note that the student sings must be IN-TUNE and have a well-supported tone quality. Your student only gets one chance to make a first impression, so make it good. The first impression sets the tone for the listening of the entire tape. When it doesn’t start out with quality, one begins to wonder whether or not this tape was done as a last minute decision.

6. Digitally altered tapes and/or CDs can result in disqualification. There were actually tapes and CDs sent in that were obviously digitally altered. (In this day and age of technology, what are we really teaching students when we use technology to alter their real sound and make the student sound better than they actually are? “Integrity” is the real issue here.)

7. Please take the needed time to listen to the tape before you send it in, beginning to end. As you and your student listen to the tapes, ask yourselves the following questions:

- Did the recorder actually work? Is everything you recorded actually on the tape?
- Are you and your student happy with the quality?
- Does this tape represent your student in a positive manner?

- Is the student proud of his/her efforts? This is imperative!
- Make sure the quality of the recording is good.
- Is there proper balance between singer and pianist?
- Can you hear the singer, or just the piano?
- What was the overall volume of the recording? Too loud? Too soft?
- Was the tape or CD recorded on a quality recorder?
- Is the voice or piano distorted?
- Is the piano in tune?

Tapes that were incomplete, bad tape quality, too much piano, too little voice, distorted, etc. numbered quite a few. YOU, as the music educator, are ultimately responsible for the tapes. Do not allow students to make the tapes on their own.

8. The use of foreign language is not necessary at the junior high/middle school level. An English art song or folk song done well in English will get you further than a tune done badly in a foreign language. Many students performed literature that was way beyond their ability. Think of the student's age, the tessitura of the song, the repertoire and ability of your student. Are you doing it for the student or for you?

9. Broadway show tunes, pop, gospel, or contemporary pieces are not suitable, especially at the national level.

10. If there is ANY chance that your tapes may not make it on time by using snail mail, send them overnight express! You took all the effort to make the tapes, spend the extra money to make sure they get to their final destination. E-mail the chairperson in charge of the tapes, let them know that the tapes are coming. Cover all of your bases. This is especially relevant to those directors who mail their tapes on the final day allowed.

We hope this gives you some guidelines when you prepare to make tapes for the next conference you would like your student's to experience. The extra effort you take will make a big difference in the long run in helping your students to perform in an honor group.