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Teach to the test!

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As most of my friends and colleagues know, I've retired from full time choral work in the public schools; now working primarily with a community chorus, a church ensemble, and as a member and manager of Male Ensemble Northwest. I'm asked occasionally to judge choral contests. The article following represents some musings on many years of preparing groups for contests and from listening to choirs in that venue.

Educators nowadays talk of establishing rubrics for students to use as a guide for preparing their work. This is probably not “teaching to the test” exactly, but who’s splitting hairs? I suspect there are those who look down on teaching to the test as some form of cheating. Call it what you will, a rubric, cheating, or just common sense; I think we’ve got something here.

Whether we use the MENC forms I remember using over 30 years ago or forms such as those developed in Oregon and in Washington with check lists with descriptors, these forms all provide a pretty fine guide (rubric, if you will) for preparing a choir for a contest. Yes, even the old MENC forms do that fairly well.

What kinds of things would you like your singers to know if they are to contribute their best to the performance of their and your group at contest performance time? On what material will they be tested? Look at the form. The test will evaluate tone quality, intonation, diction, phrasing, interpretation, appearance, and matters of technique. The test will get into fine points of breath management, purity of vowels, crispness of consonants, togetherness, and (above all) musical effect.

Why not teach singers to “hear the difference?” Let’s not allow our singers to be vague and ill-informed as to the factors which enable a choir to sound great. Teach them to hear with the ears of a judge, insofar as possible at their experience level. Why not become familiar with the terms, the criteria by which they will be judged? More than that, why not give them some practice in listening for the factors by which they will be judged?

I’ve placed copies of the whole form in the hands of my choir members. Why should this be a mystery to them? What kind of tone quality is a judge looking for? Model the good and the bad. Play recordings. Let them hear the difference! What makes for good blend? Talk about pure and uniform vowels and help

them develop a fanatical ear for good intonation. Make them totally aware of how important their individual contribution is to the sound of the choir. Hiding or “faking” is not an option for any contributing member. Rehearse in small groups, preparing the piece in those groups and then asking each group to sing while others evaluate using the judging form or a modification of it. (Caution your choir members, and take care yourself, that the atmosphere of these “performances’ and critiques remains positive and always encouraging. It is important that the student “judges” look for good points as well as problems.) If it is too difficult to cover the wide gamut of factors for good performance concentrate on one, two, or three at a time.

As further reinforcement in developing a trained ear, ask your choir members to write comments regarding intonation, tone quality, blend, balance, diction, etc., as they listen to other choirs perform at the contest. This kind of assignment provides the motivation for some critical listening and also for some stimulating discussion at the next rehearsal.

Some pretty clear thinking has gone into the preparation of the adjudication forms. Use them as a teach tool. Teach to the test!