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Considering Choral Competition: Perspectives on Motivation

David W. Langley, Georgia Southern University
Shannon Jeffreys, Georgia Southern University
Savannah and Statesboro, Georgia

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The singers nervously walk single file into the empty, cold concert hall. As they turn to the audience from their places on the risers, they see that instead of seats filled with enthusiastic supporters, there are a few people scattered about the back rows. Near the front, seated prominently at three tables, are the adjudicators.

These three strangers have the power to shape the memory of this experience for each singer. One choir member recalls the rehearsals preparing for this moment, how the director insisted upon making sure that the crescendo started on beat 2, not beat 3, since that was what was written in the score. Instead of relaxing and enjoying the moment, she could only focus on singing that crescendo with technical accuracy. Even after the performance was finished, that singer would not know how she felt about the experience until she saw the score given by each judge. Everything hinged on that particular number.

To many directors, this is a common image. Adjudicated performances, whether at competitions or local festivals, can be a stressful time for all involved. All too often, the director's emphasis is placed on a ranking with little thought about the musical experience of the moment or what each performer might learn from that experience. This particular philosophy has driven many directors to avoid adjudicated opportunities altogether. Other individuals in the field seem to be driven by

competition. They claim that it brings about motivation that pushes ensembles to achieve their very best. What about the singers in these choirs? Are they as motivated as their director? If such competitions are to have a place in the concert cycle of a choir, how can we make them a positive experience for all involved?

The authors do not intend to prescribe what a choral teacher-director should and should not do. Instead, we hope to bring to light different viewpoints about choral competition to help directors make the best decisions regarding their choirs. The experts who were interviewed for this article did not present a unified position. As you will note, all three experts find both beneficial and negative aspects of attending adjudicated choral festivals and competitions. The difference in their attitudes toward an adjudicated festival (or contest) lies in their motivation for participation. This has led them to different conclusions. Our hope is that the ideas presented here will help directors refine their philosophy concerning choral competition.

Phillip Copeland of Samford University continues a tradition of competition based on his experiences as an undergraduate student singing with Jerry Jordan at the University of Mississippi. Jo-Michel Scheibe has served as an adjudicator for international competitions, but he has chosen not to compete with his choirs from the University of Southern California. Kent Hatteburg, choral director at the University of Louisville, is a frequent competitor whose choir is currently ranked third in the world by Interkultur Choral Competitions.

For some choral directors, adjudication is not a choice but a requirement. While the three people listed here represent primarily university choirs, much of the same debate surrounds K-12 competitions, festivals, and performance evaluations. Most middle and high school programs are encouraged or required to take part in district/state adjudication. For many of these teachers, employment decisions and even merit raises are based upon adjudication results. The insights of the conductors presented here may help frame these experiences as an educational endeavor as opposed to simply a performance that is given a numerical value.

The authors feel that it is important to share both the benefits and the challenges from our experiences involving adjudication. Our backgrounds include a decade at small liberal arts colleges as well as thirteen years of public school music teaching experience. We have judged similar events at the district, state, and national levels, and we have seen both positive and negative effects from adjudication and competition. Consequently, we hold differing views of the benefits

and drawbacks of adjudication. These effects originate in the mind-set of the director and the choir members prior to participating in the events. Creating a positive experience can begin with the decision to participate in such events and may continue well after the final chord is struck.

Weighing Your Options

Choosing whether or not to participate in a choral adjudication is a question of personal philosophy. Making a well-informed decision may come through considering exactly how all of those involved may benefit from adjudication. We have chosen to look at this decision from diverse perspectives. Our experts will offer their insights into the benefits and drawbacks from the perspective of the teacher-director, the individuals in the choir, and the program as a whole.

Benefits for the Teacher-Director

When considering whether to take part in a competition or adjudication, the director may begin by considering her own motivation. Is she competing for personal gain? For the betterment of her craft as a conductor? For recognition within the school? For consideration for a better teaching position? Each teacher-director must weigh the decision to take part in adjudication from three important perspectives: what feels right for you as an individual, what feels right for the singers in the choir, and what feels right at this point in time for the choral program or the institution as a whole.

Motivation within the choir is often established by the attitude of the teacher-director. The decisions directors make, both positive and negative, are multiplied when reflected by each individual in the ensemble. Because of this, motivation to attend adjudicated performances may be most effective when focused on personal growth, not personal gain. A teacher-director's desire for fame and prestige through success in competition may be quickly identified by choir members. Such discovery may stifle true learning opportunities for students.

It is imperative that we address the elephant in the room: the element of competition within the art form of choral music. Many individuals maintain the fact that music and the other arts should not be quantified through competition. Kohn (1996) advocated for competition, whether musical or not, being discarded since it reduced the "sense of interdependence with, responsibility for, and caring about each other."¹

For many directors, this is simply too much to overcome. That is a valid position, in our view. It may go directly against one's philosophy as an educator, or it may be an issue with the

idea of comparing one artistic performance to another. After careful consideration, some teacher-directors may feel that the negative aspects outweigh any positive virtues. When asked why he chooses not to compete, Jo-Michael Scheibe shared the following ideas:

"What comes to mind is a discussion by Howard Swan ... where he says 'we're not an athletic team; we're an art form; therefore we should never compete. Music is not competitive by nature.' That has always sat in the back of my mind, and I say that because I think it really fits my choirs."

Philip Copeland offered a differing viewpoint, pointing out that there are elements of competition that are understood. "An ACDA conference is a competition in which you are trying to get your choir onto that stage. To me, it is real life, and I have found that it inspires my students to do their best. Who doesn't want that?"

When considering these two opinions, one may see a difference in the competitive elements between attending a live adjudication and submitting a recording that is juried and possibly selected for live performance. The latter seems to have a certain leniency to it, since the singers do not have to stand in front of adjudicators. Live adjudication seems to involve a very different experience.

One expert found value not only in the competition itself but also in the constructive criticism of peers. Kent Hatteberg, who frequently competes and adjudicates, sees teachable moments in the feedback from fellow conductors:

"Teachers go to festival assessment or large group contest in middle school and high school. Why? I think the thrust should be to have someone telling us how we're doing. Don't we all want to do the best job that we can? We need to get educated as conductors. There's a lot to learn."

The motivation for a director to take part in such an event is crucial for shaping the experience for singers. Each director has to determine if adjudication supports or conflicts with his/her philosophy as a musician, as a conductor, and as an educator. Directors may be best served by reflecting on their intentions and motivations so they effectively communicate a clear purpose, learning, and growth within the choir.

Benefits for Individuals in the Choir

Making the correct decision for the individuals in your choir should also be considered. No matter if you are thinking about an international competition or an adjudicated festival at a nearby school, the decision may reside in the musical and social needs of the individuals in your ensemble. While singers may be allowed some input into the decision-making process, the teacher-director should consider the implications before proceeding to that point in the planning phase. Some planning can come in the form of research into the effects of competitive events on participants.

The impact on individuals has changed over time in high school students. When asked about the most impactful elements of adjudicated performances, Stamer² found that high school sophomores tended to favor the competitive outcomes, while seniors valued the experience for its musical aesthetic. Age and musical development were factors identified by Wolf,³ but musical background and culture also affected students' perception of competitions. These perspectives may shed light on whether the individuals in a chorus would benefit from a competition or whether a different musical/cultural experience would be more advantageous. Above all, Scheibe believes that whatever the experience, it should meet the musical and social needs of the choir members:

“I think it’s each director’s decision to consider what would help her/his program. If it is truly helping his/her program and not feeding his ego, then it is perhaps a better thing to do. If it is going to help her students, if it is going to give them world experiences, if it is going to open doors for the students and maybe the school and maybe open eyes of administrators, then I think it is worth doing. But I believe that everybody has to make that call on their own.”

The developmental, social, and musical needs of the choir are essential elements in making the decisions as to whether or not to take part in an adjudicated evaluation. If the teacher-director, with input from the singers, feels that these needs will be met, then one should also consider whether it is the right time in the trajectory of the choral program.

Benefits for the Choral Program

Garnering support from family, peers, administrators, and the community is an important aspect of a successful experience. At times, the art form may not be fully understood by those outside the choir. For one reason or another, ratings and

scores may translate and have more meaning. If support from those individuals is necessary, adjudication may be one path to getting it. Scheibe agrees that for some individuals, competitions might translate into newfound support:

“In some situations, I understand that [competition is] an important avenue for getting support for your program. There are administrators who have a lack of understanding of the arts, and so for some schools, it’s necessary to raise the profile of the choir and to continue cultivating the people who fund the bands. Marching bands go to competitions all the time. But how many orchestras do you know that do that? How many choruses?”

While administrators may be supportive if the chorus returns with accolades and high ratings, what happens if that is not the case? Rohrer⁴ considers this when looking at a history of festivals and competitions:

“Despite a rating system that replaced a ranking system, success at competition-festivals became a unit of measure for many communities and school systems for evaluating music programs and directors. Thus, the presence or absence of a ‘superior’ or other high rating influenced the perception of non-music administrators and parents in the evaluation process.”

This approach appears to be a high-risk, high-reward strategy and would be a factor for teachers to consider when considering competition.

Teacher-directors should consider the experience of attending a competition from their viewpoint, the chorus members' viewpoints, and the status of the choir program as a whole. If one chooses to participate, our three experts agree that a successful musical experience comes from approaching the preparation period with a healthy mind-set that is focused on personal growth, not on trophies.

Preparation, Performance, and Reflection

No matter whether you choose to perform at festivals/competitions or if you are required to do so, it is possible to create valuable teaching moments if the experience is properly framed. Everything begins with preparation, continues through the event itself, and concludes with student reflection upon your return home.

The teacher-director sets the tone for how the singers view the experience. If the focus is solely on winning, then the singers' experience will likely be focused on the competitive product while discounting the process of preparation and the learning experience while at the competition.

Finding an authentic type of motivation and helping your students understand its necessity is a key issue. Hatteburg frames his rehearsal process as follows:

“My choir will never hear me talk about winning. In fact, what they would hear me talk about is ‘worry about what you can control.’ You can only control your level of performance on any given work. You cannot alter what anybody else thinks, so why worry about it? My emphasis in going into a competition is can we really perform at a high level? Can this activity allow us to focus on those musical aspects of singing in a choir that will thrust us forward? Long-term goals take precedence over short-term goals. There is always something to work toward.”

According to Schiebe, a good exercise for getting focused is to “ask yourself if this event is useful and productive for my program. What value could my students gain that will last beyond the event? Is this the most effective use of our time and resources?”

For many people, the most effective experiences come when singers are motivated to improve themselves. This can begin with the process of preparation of the music in rehearsals.

The Preparation Process— Developing Healthy Student Motivation

Successful modeling with an educational focus will most likely lead to a similar response from the participating singers. Hatteburg realized that his students were focused on the educational experience when recalling a reaction from a student in rehearsal.

“We were preparing for a competition, and one of my students raised his hand and said, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if we came in last? That means we’d hear some really great choirs!’ I have never forgotten what that student said. It summarizes my thinking about competition. We’re going to hear some great choirs; we’re going to have literature to examine and assess

plus conductors to watch. Every bit of that is worth every penny of the flight, the cost to go.”

These words come from students who are motivated to learn and grow from the experience. When considering the goals of competition in general, Csikszentmihalyi⁵ states that “what each person seeks is to actualize his potential. This task is made easier when others force us to give our best.”

In terms of encouraging motivation during the preparation process, Weber & Hertel⁶ found that during group competition, the most likely increase in motivation belongs to those group members who are considered to be less advanced. This seems to stem from a sense of duty and commitment to success for the group; however, the same idea may serve to squelch the motivation of other choir members. No matter how well the teacher-director motivates the choir, some singers may feel discouraged by the idea of competition. Copeland shared a story of one such case:

“One of my students performed in our first competition and really worked hard, and then when she came back as a senior, she had a different attitude about it. She didn’t want to lose, and she didn’t want her last experience to color the rest of her experiences.”

Although his experience with this student was disappointing, he respected her negative opinion. This caused him to reconsider his motivation for participating in competitive festivals. The situation described above has been shown to occur more often in female students than in males.⁷ Issues of motivation can be examined through Attribution Theory—people tend to attribute success or failure to three factors: stable or unstable situations, controllable or uncontrollable situations, and internal or external situations.⁸

The preparation process can help singers overcome a fear of being unprepared (a stable response to failure). Preparation can also help individuals understand what can be controlled (work ethic) versus what can’t be controlled (opinions of the adjudication process, performances by other choirs) and how to use these issues for personal growth. Finally, the preparation process can be used to reflect on internal matters such as ability level and external issues such as level of instruction. While these two factors are always interrelated, they can be realized through the social environment that is set up in the preparation process.

In reaching out to students who may struggle with these factors, Hatteburg reflected on his outlook. “If I have the

means and the capability of opening up new worlds to my students, why wouldn't I? If it's fear, I have to get over it. At the core of who I am and how I think about education is opening students' eyes and my own."

Experiences at the Competition

For some students, the act of competing and winning awards is the external motivation that drives them to seek excellence.⁹ Such external motivation may be a catalyst to help singers develop intrinsic values. This may come to fruition as these singers experience the competition as a whole. For several expert teacher-directors, the true value of the experience was only realized when they arrived at the event. For Copeland, the exposure to choirs from diverse backgrounds and who sang varied repertoire was among the most valuable lessons learned:

"It challenges me to think of my literature in a unique way. I end up learning more literature. I'll study the literature that other conductors have chosen for competition, and I know that they are trying to bring their best, so whenever anyone is trying to bring their best, you are exposed to inspiring literature."

Exposure to other choirs can be viewed both positively and negatively by singers. It is the job of the teacher-director to frame the experience as a learning opportunity. Instead of singers comparing their choir to other choirs, they can be encouraged to view them as an opportunity to experience a different tonal approach, unique repertoire, or new friends with different perspectives on choral singing. *Everything depends on the framework offered by the teacher-director.*

For Hatteburg, that framework is often drawn from the shared experiences of touring cultural and historical sites with his choirs.

"I want singers to think of the day we visited the demilitarized zone and put on hard hats and went in as far as we could into the tunnels blasted out by the North Koreans for their invasion back in the 1950s. Students will remember that every bit as much as what it was like to be named the grand prize winner."

Finally, a sense of connection to peers throughout the world can be a motivating factor for some directors. Hatteburg looks at choral competitions as an opportunity for connection and collaboration with peers.

"I would say that there's a strong possibility of feeling isolated as a choral director. You feel like you're alone until you go to an ACDA convention, but then, who is mentoring you? We could all use that good friend to whom you can say, 'I'm thinking about this music or our tour. What do you think?'" In my experience, I don't do it enough, but the more I travel, the more people I meet across the world, I have a connection there with people. Music is the avenue, but it truly is people who make all the difference."

In this view, the focus of the experience is not on success at the event but on the ideas and connections that the choir and director will bring back home. This impact, according to Hatteburg, is much more powerful than receiving a trophy.

Alternatives to Adjudicated Performances

Those who disagree with the competitive nature of such events may feel that the positive outcomes can be accomplished in other ways. For instance, can a choir exchange meet many of the same goals? This could bring about growth through the input of peers that Copeland advocates. High-profile concerts in historical venues could motivate the choir to perform at their best. Choir trips and tours could also achieve the cultural experiences that are so important to Hatteburg.

Many critics of competitions may find that the experience is centered on the musical product and not on the process that brought about the musical achievement. For many, this emphasis devalues the learning experience. Scheibe shared his opinion:

"I think it's important not to tell directors what they can and cannot do and what works best. If my focus is on the number of trophies on the wall in my classroom, is that really necessary to motivate students to make great music? If we're talking about high school, it may be, but if we're talking college-age groups, perhaps not."

The teacher-director could consider competition events that allow for social interaction between choirs and other educational components. This could include workshops, choir exchanges, informal feedback, or simply a social event.

Deciding whether or not to take part in competitions may also be an opportunity for self-reflection by the teacher-director. Whether or not you choose to compete, examining

your teaching philosophy can be helpful. Why do we, as directors, make the programming and aesthetic choices that we do? What influences those decisions? How are our past personal experiences affecting our worldview today? It is good to reassess our individual philosophies from time to time to make sure that our actions still reflect our intentions. These times of reflection might include considering competitive adjudications. Hatteberg offered advice to those dealing with this issue:

“If you are staunchly against it, try and think about the reasons why. If those reasons are quantifiable and objective, fine. If deep down you are fearful, don’t be. It can be a growth opportunity for your students.”

There are valid and justifiable reasons for either side of this debate. One could rightfully choose not to participate due to the financial burden, time constraints, or simply a different philosophical position. Others might choose to participate because of the musical challenge, the opportunity for expert feedback, and the artistic/cultural experiences involved.

Conclusion

The choir confidently takes the stage without even a glance toward the adjudicators’ table. As the director enters the stage, he gives a wink to the choir, and several singers begin to smile. One choir member thinks back to all that she has learned through the preparation process and how this action has helped her to grow musically and personally. She thinks about the emotional experience she had just hours ago when she heard a spectacular performance from another choir at the competition. The performance was so striking and inspiring, a different side of choral music than she had ever been exposed to made itself known. She takes a deep breath and tries to savor the experience that awaits as her choir begins to sing. She thinks back to the words of her director. “This performance isn’t for them, it is for you.”

Determining whether competitions will benefit your choir is a decision that you, your individual singers, and perhaps a trusted mentor or two, should decide. Decisions should be made while considering your philosophy, the needs of your individual singers, and your choral program.

If you choose to be adjudicated, setting a healthy frame of mind for your singers is necessary from the first rehearsal until you return from the event. Many experts in the field believe that a successful experience does not depend on returning with a trophy, prize money, or fame. It simply means

bringing home something bigger than yourself, bigger than your choir. It means bringing home an experience that will serve the people involved, primarily the singers, well into the future. If you can ensure those results, then you have achieved something much greater than a grand prize.

NOTES

- ¹ Patricia Sheehan Campbell, and Carol Scott-Kassner, *Music in Childhood* (Boston: Schirmer, 2010), 272-299.
- ² Rick Stamer, “Changes in Choral Student Perceptions of the Music Contest Experience,” *UPDATE: Applications of Research in Music Education* 25, no. 1 (2006): 46-56.
- ³ Debbie Lynn Wolf, “Student perceptions of choral festivals in China and the USA,” *ISME Commission on Research* (2014): 346.
- ⁴ Thomas P. Rohrer, “The debate on competition in music in the twentieth century,” *UPDATE: Applications of Research in Music Education* 21, no. 1 (2002): 29-39.
- ⁵ Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 73.
- ⁶ Bernhard Weber and Guido Hertel, “Motivation gains of inferior group members: a meta-analytical review,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93, no. 6 (2007): 973.
- ⁷ Daniel Bar-Tal, “Attributional analysis of achievement-related behavior,” *Review of Educational Research* 48, no. 2 (1978): 259-271.
- ⁸ Bernard Weiner, *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion* (New York: Springer, 1986), 159-190.
- ⁹ Mark Hugh Malone, “Competition; A Step Toward Excellence” *Choral Journal* (March 2006): 51-52.

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