

Paul Vickers - Director of Music, The Scots College Sydney
September 2015

Adjudicator's Thoughts

In early September Phil Molloy asked me to respond to a few questions about adjudication to help promote discussion at the band director's drinks held in Martin Place. I have heard that the event was a great success and I would highly recommend any such events held in the future. I was disappointed not to have made it myself but was very pleased to be able to contribute in some small way by answering Phil's questions. I have expanded on my answers below for those who may be interested. I thank Phil for his questions that provided the impetus for all that follows.

By way of introduction, I would like to be clear that I don't see musical performance as a competitive space. However, performance at festivals and eisteddfods certainly has a clear educational rationale, with the multitude of benefits including; gaining access to good performance venues, having the opportunity to hear other groups, increasing students' awareness of the greater (global) community of music students, and of course to receive adjudicator feedback. These factors and many more make participation in festivals and eisteddfods very worthwhile irrespective of any competitive element.

This said, healthy competition can also be used to benefit and inspire students. It can help them focus on a particular performance goal and perhaps garner an increased willingness to work towards higher musical outcomes. Personally I am very careful to enter any festival season with a very clear mantra (one that my students probably tire of hearing.): that we are aiming to give our best, most artistic performance and whatever the adjudication may say, we will learn something from it.

As a conductor, I maintain that each adjudicator hears and interprets differently, and any energy spent on attempting to impress them is futile compared with the higher purpose of presenting the best possible performance. In fact, to enter any performance with an explicit goal to impress an adjudicator in particular is simply missing the point. As I take up the standpoint now of an adjudicator, I hope that my comments stay true to this philosophy.

What are the most common issues you a likely mention as an adjudicator?

Musicality/artistry; it all comes back to this!

Two of the recurring issues that impede ensembles giving their most musical performance are balance and tone. This is true at all levels - from first-year groups to the best groups at a festival. Poor balance or poor tone will both undo great work that has been done in other areas of performance. This is because we either won't hear the great playing, or we don't particularly want to hear it when the tone is not beautiful. While assessing or appreciating a group's tone quality, or quality of sound, one must keep in mind the level or standard of the group. I don't, however, feel that this is true of balance; a beginner band can perform with great balance, and many do.

My mind is so often drawn back to memories some of the finest first-year bands I've heard, bands that play so very musically! I purposely say this without giving a qualifier such as saying they play musically *for beginners*. This is not necessary as there really are great beginner bands that are so well trained that they achieve very musical performance outcomes. Some of the very best are here

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in Sydney; our colleagues are proving that it is possible to shape beautiful phrases and make musical statements in beginner band!

Of course, all of this assumes that notes and rhythms are accurate; these things must be accurate!

What impresses you most about a high quality band?

Musicality/artistry; it all comes back to this!

The best groups give gripping performances that bring composers' intentions to life.

Again, tone quality and balance are key aspects that impress me about the highest quality bands in any category. Importantly, note that in saying balance, I mean *appropriate balance*. There are many varied ways of balancing your ensemble and each will be appropriate for different performance contexts; Francis Macbeth's pyramid has very limited application in the repertoire!

It may seem that many adjudicators listen for an ensemble's problems so they can then tell the director what to fix. I'm sure this is true of at least some adjudicators. My philosophy is to listen for the artistic statement(s) a group makes. If I am distracted from this purpose by anything in the performance - be it technical, musical, or otherwise - I will certainly comment on what the distraction was. I will then give an example of how I might fix that issue so that it does not distract future audiences from the artistic statement the band is trying to make. Again, this is true at all levels.

Is on stage presentation important?

Yes, but only to a point. As an adjudicator, I tend not to comment much on this aspect of performance. That said, I do believe that presentation is an integral part of the education of our players. Discipline in dress and presentation go hand-in-hand with discipline for all other parts of the preparation for performance.

Of course, the audience will be looking at the band, just as they are looking at a professional group or soloist as they perform. As a conductor or performer in any group, I'd hate for my personal presentation to distract my audience's focus away from the music I'm making.

What distinguishes a gold award above a silver award in each of the events?

This of course can be varied. This question really alludes to the system in place at the NSW School Band Festival where we do not rank ensembles individually but instead group them into the three categories of Gold, Silver and Bronze awards. When adjudicating at this festival, I have generally felt that I hear the three groupings quite clearly. There will usually be a set of bands that are a cut above the rest who receive a gold award. Then there are a number of bands that struggled in their performance for a range of reasons and they receive a bronze award. The remaining bands sit in the middle and are awarded silver. As there are many sections at this festival, this approach generally works very well but it can be less effective when there is a more disparate field. Obviously

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in this instance, a different approach is required, as it is when having to rank first, second, third placings.

The caveat to this approach exists when there is a band that truly stands out amongst the section. In these instances I always ask myself whether they should have been entered at a higher event level - and the same goes at the bottom of the pack. For a band that has been entered into the wrong section, the policy of most festivals is to adjudicate them as if they were entered into the appropriate section. This requires an adjudication that is based on standards, as there is no immediate comparison to other bands from their section.

The short answer is that it can be any aspect of a band's performance that separates it from the silver pack and puts it in the gold set when grouping bands into these categories. This is because it can be any aspect of performance that distracts me from focussing on the artistry of their performance.

What advice would you give to conductors with young players coming into the ensemble every year (e.g. Y4-6 band or Y6-8 band)?

If possible, hold a second rehearsal each week just for the new kids. This approach gives the less experienced players twice the input from you and helps them catch up quickly! I also like to engage the older players as leaders in this process; with the right scaffolding, section leaders can be running sectionals or providing extra-help sessions for younger players. Year 6 students are often desperate for opportunities to lead and the younger students love the older kids engaging with them in this way. In fact, this remains mostly true right through to university level.

What are your opinions on the repertoire that is selected? Are band directors getting it right?

This is too generalist to answer really; we have a stack of fantastic directors in Sydney who seem to make great repertoire decisions. Then there are perhaps just as many who, in my opinion, could make much better repertoire decisions. The sticking points are usually that works chosen are either not at the right level for the group, or the repertoire was simply a poor work of art.

Further to this is the development of a balanced program. A festival performance is a great chance to present a varied program. This may be a march, a chorale and a significant work, or perhaps an overture, a major work, then a play-out / party piece. There are a number of ways to go and I don't think there is a formula for the right program to play at a festival, as each band has different needs in both meeting the educational outcomes of its students and also in fulfilling the program's other performance requirements.

I will refrain from entering into what would become a lengthy discussion about repertoire choice as there are many great articles about this aspect of our job. Suffice it to say that this is one of the most important aspects of being a band director and there are a numerous factors deserving consideration. I believe an adjudicator should err on the side of caution when making judgements on the repertoire choices made by the director. I try to assume that the director has sound, educative reasons for their choices (if they don't, this is a problem!). Any comment that is more than a simple statement about appropriateness of level can be quite patronising towards the band director and is therefore best avoided.

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How much does the instrumentation of the band play into what award you assign a band?

It doesn't. I will judge the balance based on what is there, but if a band is badly understocked in certain areas I would expect the director to have done something about it musically to ensure the best possible performance. It is not good enough to use instrumentation issues as an excuse for sacrifices to the composer's intent. Directors may need to put extra effort into balancing the group to account for the instrumentation issues. Sometimes editing the score is necessary: cut down to one per part during the flute soli if you have a small flute section in a large band, or write the horn parts into the trombones or saxes if you do not have a full horn section etc. Do whatever you have to do to achieve the artistic statement the composer wanted!

This said, I always make a comment in the adjudication about missing instrumentation for two reasons. Firstly, I say something in case the director honestly just doesn't know. It would be remiss of an adjudicator to simply assume the director is working towards full instrumentation for their ensembles. Secondly - and the more likely scenario - is that my comment can support the director who does know. This is the director who has likely been working their butt off to get a student onto that lone tuba in the storeroom but can't convince either the kids or the parents. My position in the adjudicator's chair is inherently respected by the kids and parents (for the most part), so hopefully by saying "*Gee, it would be great to have more low brass*" or whatever the necessary comment may be, the band director is then supplied with another supportive voice to use in their conversations back at school.

Do you have any tips for small band programs with instrumentation gaps, and how to best present themselves?

Absolutely!!! I face this myself where on certain instruments there are no players ready to join the top group from the tier below. To make our ensemble work, I either bring players up and rewrite parts to be playable or I write lines into other parts as discussed above; often both. In reorchestrating works I strive to be true to the composer's intentions as much as possible. I take great care with the new timbres created and give careful consideration to the ensemble's balance both through dynamic markings and in the subsequent rehearsal process. Such work can take hours but the band sounds much better for it. The players therefore have a better experience with the piece and learn much more.

This extra work by the conductor before rehearsal is particularly important if texturally complex music is to be attempted by an ensemble without a full complement of players. There are many good ensembles that struggle to fill every chair and one must ask why their dedicated players should miss out on performing some of the great works in the literature?

It should be noted that this practice of rescoring elements of a composer's works is usually permissible in festivals where instrumental parts have been transcribed for other acoustic instruments, however, it is often not permissible if reassigning parts to electronic instruments. This shouldn't necessarily stop you writing in a keyboard part for instance, but you may not want to perform the work in particular festivals if you have done so.

Extra Question – Do you have any tips on what festival division (or event) to enter my band into if their level seems to sit between two options?

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This can be a big issue for many directors and I recommend careful consideration of the original motivation for entering the band into a festival at all. By this I mean that a director will usually have a certain need to be fulfilled by the adjudication provided at a festival. Of course, we are always hoping for our ensemble to perform at its very best but depending on the attitude of band members, and other needs of our group, we may in fact be hoping for varied adjudication comments.

The above may be considered a contentious comment – I dare say it would be so among many parent communities. Allow me to unpack this concept a little more: Firstly, I do not see a festival performance as an end point for an ensemble. I'm sure that most directors would agree that a festival performance, as with any performance, is a stepping-stone in educating the musicians who make up the group. I believe that the educative outcomes are more important than the performance outcomes, but both should serve each other. In entering an ensemble into a festival or eisteddfod I am trying to serve a greater purpose in informing and motivating the players in my group. It is always my practice to have students focused on giving their best possible performance rather than on any possible award. I will often say to groups I conduct that the adjudicator's decision is simply one person's opinion of a given day, and while their opinion is to be respected, it does not define the success of the group's performance. Success should be measured by the students and by the conductor based on whatever goals they had set themselves to achieve that year, that season and in that particular performance.

Most of the time, a positive adjudication report will be a great motivator for a performing group but, as their regular conductor, I can appropriately prepare the students in the lead up to a festival if I feel there is a possibility of receiving a more negative adjudication. For example, if I have reason for a band to be attempting a new level of repertoire and I therefore enter the group into a higher division at a festival, I will have made the players very aware of this fact. They will know that they have already achieved great things to have moved up a division, and to be performing more difficult repertoire. An adjudication report will then be interpreted within the context of having achieved well simply by performing in this higher tier. With this mindset established, there is usually improved student willingness to learn from the adjudication. Students in this situation are often thrilled when receiving positive comments from the adjudicator as the comments mean so much more within the context of their performance at a new level!

There is another circumstance where I may utilise a negative adjudication for the purposes of motivating the players such as when an attitude of arrogance pervades the playing group. Particularly in the first years after taking over an established program, a band director may find a level of arrogance exists among the students. This may manifest as students' poor attitude towards attendance or in a lack of home practice and preparedness for rehearsal. In these cases, a shock adjudication can be turned into a great motivator to eradicate poor attitude and to get a group focused back on achieving great musical outcome as a team. This needs to be handled very carefully by the band director who runs the risk of having students (or their parents) disengage with music-making. This reaction would be tragic but, handled well, through careful preparation and transparent goal setting with your students, a challenging group can be turned around through this experience.

In any case I recommend being very open with the students, parents and broader school community about your choice of event for each band. Work hard to ensure that the whole school

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knows how great an achievement it has been that the bands have performed at the festival, and do your utmost to ensure that this aspect of their performance is the focus rather than any award that may be received. After all, we are all in this because we know that involvement in musical performance gives its own inherent reward. The more explicit we can make this for our communities, the more these communities and each individual within them will grow.

Paul Vickers

Paul is well known in Sydney as a dedicated conductor passionate about the delivery of music education through large ensemble contexts. He is a longstanding adjudicator for several major festivals in Sydney including the NSW School Band Festival and the Sydney Eisteddfod. By invitation, he has also adjudicated at festivals in North America and at several smaller events around NSW. Paul is also active as a clinician and performer and is currently Director of Music at The Scots College, Sydney.