

The Tools of Musical Selection and Evaluation — Auditions, Adjudications and Screenings

An Insider's Look on Different Methods for Student Placement

by Paul K. Fox

Do you know the differences among the terms *screening*, *audition* and *adjudication*?

Listed in order of low to high feedback, these evaluation tools furnish staff, students and parents methods for identifying the talent, level of achievement, preparation and potential success for participation in future music and drama productions, festivals or special ensembles, or for rewarding solo parts, seating placement, musical leads, and other student leadership positions.

A *screening* (sometimes called a *pre-audition*) is the simplest form of selecting students on a quick “pass” or “fail” basis. One or more judges usually listen for one or two characteristics such as overall preparation or a pre-requisite proficiency to determine “thumbs up” or “thumbs down.” In many cases, participants who earn a “passing mark” go on to a more detailed audition to determine ranking for a particular ensemble or part.

Example of a screening: Pennsylvania Music Educators Association (PMEA) District One sometimes sponsors a pre-audition for sopranos and altos auditioning for District SHS Chorus, as well as flute, clarinet and trumpet players for seating in Honors Band and other instrumental festivals.

In some cases, the application form itself is the initial “screening” for a particular event. For example, to participate in PMEA Junior High Chorus, you must be a 7th through 9th grade student, member in good standing of your school’s choral ensemble, and sponsored by the school music director who is a current PMEA member. If a student does not meet these simple qualifications, then he/she is automatically eliminated from the selection process.

An *audition* (sometimes called *try-out*) is the process by which a panel of three or more judges rate a candidate based on a series of specific characteristics or “audition criteria” using a numerical score (usually 1 to 10 or 1 to 5). The sum of these scores from all of the judges reflects an overall ranking, often listed by voice type or instrumental section.

Here are a few examples of audition criteria:

PMEA District One Placement Try-outs: TONE, RHYTHM, INTONATION, TECHNIQUE, MUSICALITY AND PREPAREDNESS

USCHS Spring Musical Cast Auditions: VOICE (intonation, expression, technique, range), PROJECTION (tone quality, dynamics, overall loudness), CLARITY (diction, rhythm, timing, dialect), MOVEMENT (blocking, flexibility, grace, coordination), EXPRESSION (animation, emotion, presence, characterization), ATTITUDE (stability, reliability, desire, takes direction?)

Frequently very competitive, membership in a particular organization or the assignment of solo parts or leadership positions is usually very limited. Auditions are used to select the “very best” from the pool of contestants—a well-defined “cut-off” is made to fulfill the size of the ensemble/group or availability of solo/lead openings. At USCHS each year, hundreds of students audition for competitive festivals, drama/musical leads, scholarships or leadership positions—less than 5% earn recognition or “win” a position at these auditions.

While auditions may select or “deselect” students for an event, they cannot be used as instruments of individual evaluation or “grading.” Judges are not expected to write comments or make “value judgments” about the overall achievement, improvement, strengths or weaknesses of each candidate. There simply is not enough time to provide detailed individual feedback from an audition process or to issue a performance rating

(such as “superior,” “excellent” or “good”). Therefore, since an audition is only a “snapshot” ranking of people at a specific moment in time and for a specific goal, no references should be made about an individual’s aptitude for success.

This is where the *adjudication* comes in. The most costly and time-consuming process of the three evaluations, adjudication provides specific comments, ratings and (in some) rankings for determining the strengths and weaknesses of an individual or ensemble. Judges in an adjudication (called *adjudicators*) are charged with evaluating each candidate or group with a “page” of musical criteria (not just a row or line of scores), defining the assets and needs of the performer(s) and making specific comments about focus areas and methods for improvement.

The best example of group adjudication is the international festival enrolled by USCHS Performing Arts Department during its bi-annual spring trip. The bands, choruses, jazz ensembles and orchestras typically perform in front of three adjudicators who each record personal observations on a digital recorder during the music, write a one-page (or more) report on the positive and negative aspects of the group’s level of achievement (accuracy and mastery of technique, tone—blend and balance, ensemble-playing skills, appropriateness of musical selection and stylistic interpretation, poise, overall appearance, preparation, etc.), score the presentation (usually up to 100 points) and grade each group with “superior” or “excellent” ratings in comparison with all groups at all adjudications. The adjudication process takes more than one day for all of the USCHS groups—thirty minutes per performance, costs at least \$50/student and involves more than ten professional adjudicators and fifteen festival staff for a multitude of adjudication sites.

For detailed individual appraisals, PMEA offers noncompetitive Solo or Small Group Adjudication Festivals (see your school music teacher for details). In addition, the hiring of a qualified private music instructor to evaluate your son/daughter’s abilities is an excellent idea. Pay for a month’s worth of lessons and ask for an analysis of his/her strengths and weaknesses. A list of several local private teachers is available from your school music director or online (see Mr. Fox’s HS Teacher Pages).

EVALUATION TOOL	<i>Screenings</i>	<i>Auditions</i>	<i>Adjudications</i>
Feedback	None	Little	Large Amounts
Scoring Detail	None	One row of criteria (30 pts.)	One page of criteria (100 pts.)
Timing	Quick	Moderate	Lengthy
Rankings	Pass/Fail	First to Last Placement	Optional/Very Detailed
Ratings	None	None	Specific Grades
Comments	None	Few to None	Many/Verbal and Written

In order to build self-motivation, creativity, leadership, self-confidence, teamwork and self-discipline, and to achieve greater skills in problem solving, personal goal setting and stress/time management, music teachers frequently encourage their students to participate in extra-curricular activities. As a further enrichment to the educational program, many musicians, actors and dancers enroll in *screenings*, *auditions* and/or *adjudications*. However, the competitors in these activities need to make realistic self-appraisals and understand the major differences of each evaluation tool. Most of all, we must all learn how to “lose gracefully” and not allow the diminishing of our self-esteem when positive results and recognition are not immediately forthcoming. After all, a football team would look silly at a game with only quarterbacks. Experts say explore your hidden talents, don’t be afraid to try new things, set “reasonably attainable goals,” prepare hard and long, and, most of all, **persevere!**