

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor



## Students, Teachers, Parents, Adjudication and S-T-R-E-S-S

*The following editorial appeared in the January-February 2008 School Music News. It is reprinted here as a reminder of the importance of helping our kids who plan to go to NYSSMA\* solo and small ensemble festivals this spring. As music educators we know the value of adjudication and also know that the experience can be made that much more valuable if we help our students (and parents) to better understand the process and preparation needed to make this experience a valuable and positive one.*

**H**appy New Year! OK, now let's get back to the business at hand. The theme of this month's editorial has to do with stress and adjudication.

The stress factor of teaching and the school environment in this era of high stakes testing, concerns about GPA and class rank, college acceptances, etc., has made life tough all around for kids (and us too).

We have all certainly heard and read about the stress endured by teacher and administrator colleagues in the profession. This column is not about that concern (although it certainly is an issue we live with every day and rightly deserves attention). Instead, I'd like to focus on some of the indicators of stress in kids as it relates to adjudication.

Adjudication festivals become one of the primary focal points of each school music program across the state as we approach the spring thaw. This is as good a time as any to think about the stress factor of adjudication and the potential toll it takes on students, teachers and parents.

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### Pros and cons of adjudication

The fundamental question that needs to be answered by all of us is this: why adjudicate? Don't get me wrong. I thoroughly support the concept of adjudication and the variety of "good" ways in which it can be used to motivate and challenge students, provide a means of authentic assessment, help decide who is chosen for honors performing ensembles, etc.

The problem is that sometimes kids are coerced to perform at adjudication festivals. This involuntary coercion can occasionally be traced to parents who view NYSSMA\* adjudication as a competition in which their child is vying with other kids for the highest "test" score.

Sometimes the "arm twisting" is self-created on the part of the kid and is more a manifestation of the competitive spirit. This is a social and peer group thing but it does have the ability to stress kids out. I know too as an adjudicator that sometimes the coercion for a student to be adjudicated can come from the child's teacher. For whatever reason, this may not be necessarily in the best interests of our kids.

We have an obligation as music educators to educate folks about why we adjudicate in the first place. This includes a serious attempt to make folks correctly understand what adjudication is really about and why it is important for some (not necessarily all) student musicians.

The expectation that all kids can benefit from adjudication is not necessarily true. It's easy to appreciate why many school districts encourage adjudication participation. The wholesale music adjudication of kids (like we do with other

high stakes testing), however, can lead to some very disastrous consequences. The effects of a student's poor test results on a standardized test can be minimized. However, it isn't so easy to bounce back from a poor solo adjudication.

Kids are not as resilient in a one-on-one (judge / student) solo adjudication situation as they would be, let's say, taking their college boards (especially when they know that kids can squeeze in one or two more shots at the S.A.T. in the same year).

### Managing the experience

It is a good idea to think about individual students and their capacity to adequately prepare for adjudication, let alone benefit from a positive, or in some cases, not so positive experience. Many of us prefer to shoulder the responsibility of preparing a kid for adjudication, and we willingly devote countless hours of time above and beyond the norm hearing solos, critiquing, going over scales and sight-reading, coaching sessions with accompanists, etc. In the end you want to believe that regardless of the outcome, kids will have learned something or benefited from the whole experience.

When kids approach the adjudication experience honestly and freely, and the practice time and preparation has been diligent and carefully monitored by a teacher (school, private or otherwise), it is often something the adjudicator immediately senses when a youngster enters the room to perform his or her solo. On the other hand, there are also some inherent roadblocks that kids need to navigate around in order to put the whole experience in better perspective. You and I, as teachers, administrators, and/or parents, can help kids to better prepare musically AND psychologically for this experience.

*"It is a good idea to think about each individual student and his or her capacity to adequately prepare for adjudication, let alone benefit from a positive or in some cases, not so positive experience."*

As you now might find yourself deeply involved in the process of preparing kids to be adjudicated, use this opportunity to address ways in which student musicians can relax and focus more. "Stress" the importance of a regular practice routine and be optimistic, but most of all, realistic about expectations and the variety of outcomes. Don't add "fuel to the fire" by adding stress to an already stressful situation. The idea here is to encourage kids and to look for positive signs (even if the experience turns out to be not as positive as you had hoped for in the end).

We want kids to look forward to adjudication and the hope is that each will have as positive an experience as possible. There will always be a stress factor. The key is to help each student make it a positive journey from beginning to end. See you at festival! ||