

# Performance-Based Assessments in Choirs

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Choirs are uniquely positioned to include performance-based assessments as a part of singer learning and evaluation because performance itself is an integral part of music making. Performance-based assessments (PBAs) are assessments “in which the teacher observes and makes a judgement about the student’s demonstration of a skill or competency in creating a product, constructing a response, or making a presentation.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike exams and quizzes, PBAs are a type of authentic assessment, allowing opportunities for singers to show what they know through activities that mirror the tasks they may encounter in real life.<sup>2</sup> PBAs are applicable to courses in choir because many parallels can be drawn when comparing activities that young choristers engage in with the career of a professional musician.

In addition to concert performances, choral teachers may use PBAs in rehearsal. For example, singers can sight read an excerpt of music as evidence of the ability to read notation in contrast to answering dictation questions.<sup>3</sup> Other PBAs I conduct in my public-school choir rehearsals are asking choristers to perform their parts in quartets (SATB, one voice on each part) and inviting student conductors (students in the choir) for warm-ups. PBAs of this nature provide an opportunity for me to assess music literacy and a knowledge of repertoire; however, they fall short when

evaluating other important areas of musicianship.

According to the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) Music Standards,<sup>4</sup> students in secondary ensemble courses are expected to, in addition to creating and performing, respond and connect to music. One of the objectives provided by NAfME includes the following: Musicians should be able to “support personal evaluation of musical works and performance(s) based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria,” plus “synthesizing and relating knowledge and personal experiences to make music,” and “relating musical ideas and works from varied contexts to deepen understanding.”<sup>5</sup> I set out to design a PBA that would emulate a task expected of professional musicians. It would also give singers an opportunity to show their understanding of these areas and the greater importance of music making.

I teach in a public school on Long Island. The choirs’ programs are thematic, with the themes chosen by choir members. They choose themes that are reflective of their lives and identities. Examples of themes from the last few years include loneliness (inspired by the pandemic), BIPOC composers, songs about liberation, religion, and environmental consciousness. Once the theme is chosen, I design the program with the assistance and approval of the choristers. I choose repertoire that is reflective of the abilities of

the ensemble while connecting to the greater idea offered by the singers.

Naturally, the repertoire and the theme spark conversations pertaining to social and environmental justice and the important role vocal music has in affecting change. In an effort to be mindful of rehearsal time while acknowledging student thought, I began to explore program notes as a platform for choristers to share their ideas about the music and its theme. Program note writing is a relevant task that is often expected of professional musicians. It creates spaces where young musicians can think critically about music and real-life issues. I believe it is a meaningful tool for evaluating student understanding.

The program note writing assignment is multi-modal in order to adapt to the needs of the singers. Some singers choose to write a short essay in the format of what musicians typically expect in a program note. Some write in their home language even if it is not English. Some choristers speak their ideas in a video recording via Flipgrid or YouTube, and some individuals group together to create a round-table podcast in which they engage in discussion about the repertoire and the theme. Choir members have also composed raps and poems and performed them in front of the ensemble.


This activity provides singers with a safe space to connect music with their lives while thinking critically about the repertoire and the topic for the concert. My goal is that afterwards, the singers feel a deeper responsibility for their performance and have greater knowledge of the repertoire and topic than before they began rehearsing. In addition to engaging in the music outside of rehearsal time, I found that there were several positive outcomes from this assignment. Sharing program notes has helped choir members learn about each other and foster connectivity and relationships that may not have existed before. The changes in relationships have positively affected our performance, since singers have a deeper appreciation for their commitment to themselves and each other and their role as choristers. Furthermore, program notes have inspired ideas for action in our community. For example, during a semester when our theme was LGBTQIA+ composers, one student wrote a program note that made connections between the struggles of this community in the music industry and in our school.

This note was brought to the attention of our administration by our former supervisor for fine and performing

arts (who identifies as gay), prompting discussions centered on how our district can support its LGBTQIA+ students and employees. The first course of action was to collaborate with our chapter of GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) and take steps in classrooms, faculty meetings, and other school spaces toward understanding and normalizing vocabulary pertaining to the LGBTQIA+ community across the school district. Choristers were proud to be leaders in this systemic change in their community. As a result, they were more invested in the music because our concert became an opportunity to advocate for their peers.

Through this PBA, singers have found ways to advocate for their school music program. When writing program notes to be presented at the concert, singers consider their audience, which is made up mostly of non-musicians. They recognize that although the audience enjoys the music, they may not understand it or relate to it. The singers engage their audience by speaking about the music at the concert and why it is important to them, inviting their families and even administrators to become invested, too. Through program notes, singers are directly connecting with their audience. In addition, this approach has helped foster positive relationships between the vocal music program and the community.

Performance-based assessments such as concert performance sight-reading checks are valuable but only allow the opportunity to evaluate one part of the holistic musician. Through program note writing, directors can evaluate choristers' understanding of music and its function in society and their culture. Additionally, singers are participating in an activity in which they are exploring how the music is relevant to them and others and thinking critically about its purpose. Singers should engage in critical thinking and reflection. They are also sharing thoughts about musical interpretation based on personal experiences, all of which deepen their understanding of music.

Performance-based assessments can be a useful tool for singer evaluation, an authentic and meaningful experience which builds relationships and program advocacy. They can also be implemented in a variety of different teaching settings, including online learning. Perhaps most importantly, PBAs can exist alongside music performance to mobilize communities and affect change, thus affirming what vocal music has done for centuries. 

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. H. McMillan, *Classroom assessment: Principles and practice for effective instruction*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> G. Wiggins, *Educative assessment*. “Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance” (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> S. Scott, “Evaluating tasks for performance-based assessments: Advice for music teachers.” *General Music Today* 17(2) (2004).

<sup>4</sup> National Association for Music Education (2014). “Music Standards: Ensemble.” <https://nafme.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014-Music-Standards-Ensemble-Strand.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6-8.