

# Who Should Attend Festivals?



**You!**

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The past year has seen festivals curtailed as the world has suffered through the Covid-19 pandemic. The lifting of restrictions and the return to relative "normalcy" will, hopefully, bring forth many choral festivals. Many choral teachers may be facing their first opportunities to attend festivals. Choirs may have lost singers due to online learning restrictions. It may be several years before large choral programs are able to regain their previous performance levels. With this in mind, the competitive nature of festivals may be somewhat lessened. The time is right for every choir to participate in a festival.

Whenever our backs are facing an audience, our credibility is on the line as choral directors. We are a silent instrument in a greater endeavor that makes music, but unlike a soprano or alto section whose many voices work together, we are the only one performing our role. Self-evaluation is a necessary part of conducting. We are constantly checking gestures and making suggestions to our singers. Attending a choral festival gives both the singers *and* their conductors the opportunity to be adjudicated.

In the right circumstances, this exercise can offer possible career enhancement. Some beginning conductors fear festivals or contests because of the possibility of less than favorable comments from adjudicators, but just as a young quarterback learns from actually playing the game, we choral directors learn from our experiences.

A festival presents at least three opportunities for learning in one venue. It gives you and the choir an opportunity to be professionally evaluated. It gives you and the choir an opportunity to hear other ensembles. It gives you and the choir an opportunity to perform for peers. All three of these reasons should be shared with singers and administrators so that they will understand and appreciate the event in advance.

What constitutes a choral festival? Although festivals may vary depending on the sponsor, there are, basically, two types: adjudicated and non-adjudicated. In an adjudicated choral festival, one or more expert clinicians (hereafter referred to as adjudicators) evaluate the performance of the choirs according to certain standards. However specific the standards, there is necessarily an element of subjectivity in this evaluation. Non-adjudicated festivals usually involve choirs performing either for one another or in combination, and while the opportunity to be professionally evaluated may be missing, the dynamics of performance and of

hearing other ensembles make these worthwhile events.

Choral festivals have long been a part of music education, giving student singers a goal in which to achieve a high rating as evidence of a performance of high quality. These events can be sponsored by local, county, regional, or statewide music teachers' organizations such as the National Association of Music Educators or the American Choral Directors Association. Each of these groups has standards for evaluation, which are usually printed on a generic form used by adjudicators at all of their events. The goal is to have all performing ensembles sing for adjudicators whose reputation and expertise are trusted and whose comments and ratings will be shared. Many school choirs nationwide make festival participation an annual expectation. Administrators often see festival ratings as viable and visible evidence of the success of their school choral programs.

From time to time, a community-based choir or collegiate choral department may host an adjudicated festival and may develop a similar adjudicative instrument. These festivals may be on an invitational basis, with the organizing sponsor inviting choirs that are known to be at or above a particular level of proficiency, assuring a quality performance by all who participate. The organizing sponsor of these festivals will usually seek out well-respected choral directors to serve as clinicians. Having experts as clinicians is at once a reason for choirs to attend the festival and an opportunity to meet higher than usual standards.

There are also a number of organizations that run "for-profit" choral competitions, often in conjunction with some sort of amusement park, popular vacation destination, or significant performance venue. While they may employ competent, noted choral experts as adjudicators, the very existence of these organizations is based on having enough choirs pay for the privilege of traveling to the festival site and taking advantage of the non-musical amenities that are offered.

These festivals may attract choirs through a set of rankings (e.g., first, second, third place) in categories that can range from size of school to the style of literature to the make-up of the choir (e.g., mixed chorus, men's chorus, or women's chorus). Needless to say, the cost of attending these for-profit festivals often include the expenses of lodging, meals, and amusement park tickets. These expenses must be a major factor in a director's decision to attend. There are many regions where vocal jazz, show choir, or

popular music festivals offer the same competitive options to ensembles. Some commercially sponsored festivals also offer performance categories for these types of ensembles.

The role of the adjudicator in any of these festivals is to evaluate each participating choir based on a set of criteria that are known to be standards of excellence. At most festivals hosted by a music teacher organization, adjudication can result in an overall rating. The terms "superior," "excellent," "good," "fair," and "poor" are common as are letter grades (A-B-C-D-F). Some festivals select an overall "best-in-show" for the highest-rated ensemble. This is very common at vocal jazz and popular music festivals. Regardless of how the choir is rated by adjudicators, their role is to provide a fair, accurate, and impartial evaluation from which the participating conductor and his or her singers can learn and, hopefully, grow musically.

It has been previously mentioned that an adjudicator is an individual who is selected because of his or her demonstrated expertise in the choral field. Some organizations appoint adjudicators based on the reputation of their choir's performances. While this logic appears sound, not every successful conductor is fair when evaluating the work of other choirs and conductors. Some festival hosts have a training process for their adjudicators, which strives to achieve some sense of uniformity in evaluations. Other hosts, usually of invitational events, rely on the recommendation of other choral teachers for persons to serve as an adjudicator.

The typical festival sponsored by the state or local music educator's association will give ratings that are posted for all to see. Along with the overall ratings are ratings in specific categories of choral skills. Many forms allow for limited written comments by the adjudicator. A number of festivals now utilize recorded comments made by the adjudicator as the choir is performing. This feature adds greatly, since the conductor and singers can hear exactly what the adjudicator is referring to as he or she speaks.

Some schools or districts require their music ensembles to attend festivals. Principals or music supervisors may ask for the adjudication forms. Invitational festivals may or may not give overall ratings or create rankings. Typically, information on adjudication and rankings can be found in the registration materials that are offered well in advance of the event. While most festivals take place during the spring semester, there are a number of organizations that sponsor fall festivals. There are even a few festivals during the first two weeks of December. They can become an excellent opportunity to

share holiday literature with others. Whenever the festival is available, directors should avail themselves of the opportunity to participate. This is especially true for those who are new to the profession, since it affords a great opportunity to share and learn new literature by other choirs while being evaluated in a professional environment.

Hosting a choral festival requires reasonably good organizational skills. Often, a school will be asked by a sponsoring organization to act as the site host. The opportunity to invite a number of choirs to your campus or local auditorium is at once exciting and somewhat daunting, but observation of the mechanics of a well-run festival and seeking the advice of former festival host directors makes this process rewarding for your choir and all of those choirs who choose to attend. Whether you host or travel to a choral festival, there are few if any opportunities that provide so many teachable moments in an hour or two of performances. As your career develops, consider it a responsibility to yourself and your singers to perform at choral festivals and learn from the experience. **CT**