

An illustration featuring two hands holding white rectangular signs. The sign on the left displays the number '7.5' in a large, bold, red, italicized font. The sign on the right displays the number '9.0' in a similar large, bold, red, italicized font. The hands are rendered in a cartoon style with orange skin. The hand holding the '7.5' sign is wearing a grey suit sleeve with a white cuff. The hand holding the '9.0' sign is wearing a red sleeve and a gold watch with a brown leather strap. The background is a vibrant yellow with a pattern of red polka dots. At the top of the image, there are two horizontal bands of wavy, scalloped patterns in shades of yellow and orange.

7.5

9.0

CONFESSIONS

OF A SHOW CHOIR JUDGE

**FINDING THE LINE
BETWEEN OPINION & STANDARD**

by LaDona Tyson



6.5

A cartoon illustration showing two hands holding a white rectangular sign. The sign has the number '6.5' written in a large, bold, red font with a black outline. The hands are rendered in a simple, stylized manner with visible fingers and thumbs. The person holding the sign is wearing a dark blue suit jacket and a white shirt cuff is visible at the bottom of the frame.



5.0

A cartoon illustration showing two hands holding a white rectangular sign. The sign has the number '5.0' written in a large, bold, red font with a black outline. The hands are rendered in a simple, stylized manner with visible fingers and thumbs. The person holding the sign is wearing a light pink shirt with a white cuff and a dark blue suit jacket. The background of the entire page is yellow with a pattern of red polka dots.



As a show choir director, contest producer, and frequent adjudicator, the conversations I most often hear in the competitive show choir world are those centered on score sheets and the subjectivity of adjudication. Many competitions end with more questions than answers. Why did THAT group win? Did you hear that one of the judges knows their director? Do judges prefer shows that are theatrical or thematic in nature, and does that affect score? How can a group receive both 4's and 9's in the same category from different judges?

What & Who Do We Trust?

While many conversations of this type are heard among parents and students and amateur musicians with personal biases, I have to admit that we as directors of show choir competitions have not done an acceptable job in providing students and teachers with valuable and reliable feedback from a standardized score sheet.

From week to week, show choirs are being evaluated on different score sheets with different point systems and



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categories, and few if any that attempt to qualify scores in any sort of objective manner. While adjudicators strive to be as consistent as possible, it is difficult when many score sheets do not qualify what kind of performance is deserving of 6's and 7's, rather than 9's and 10's.

Furthermore, why do we often use a 10-point scale with categories that are all worth the same amount of points? Wide gaps in scores between judges could suggest that they may be unqualified to adjudicate, but more likely it indicates the lack of any sort of validity or common standard. In the fall of 2016, I decided to develop a rubric as a part of a doctoral project, in the hopes of improving adjudicating measures in my own state of Mississippi.

Weighty Matters: Inconsistency Breeds Frustration

In order to create a weighted rubric, I first had to determine what categories should receive the most weight. I developed a survey that asked raters to rank the typical subcategories in order of importance, most

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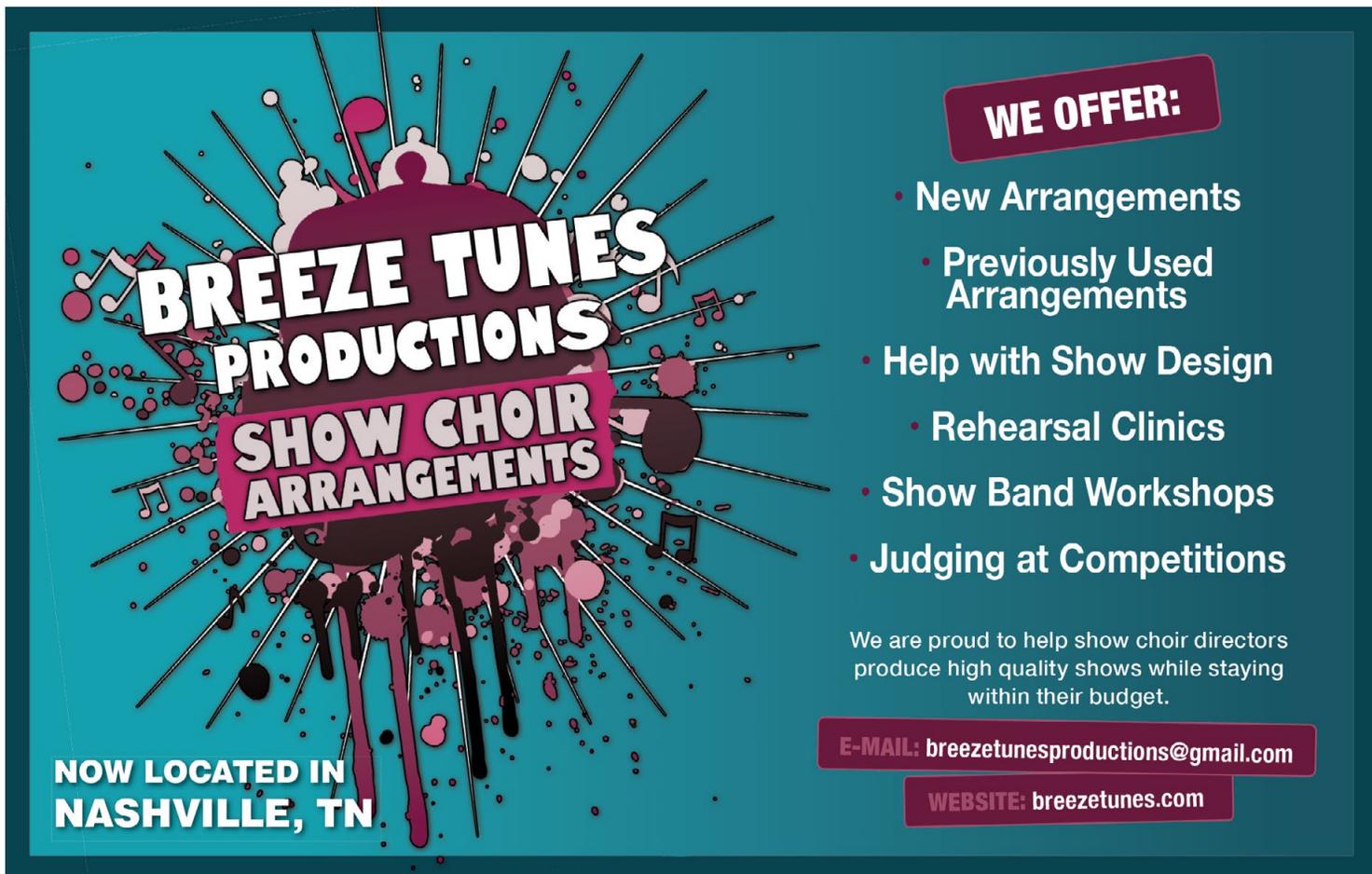
Do judges prefer shows that are theatrical or thematic in nature, and does that affect score? How can a group receive both 4's and 9's in the same category from different judges?

to least. The only exception was the Overall Effect category, in which respondents chose the most important of the three subcategories. The survey link was emailed to show choir directors, choreographers, and adjudicators within the Southeastern region of the United States. A link was also posted on my personal Facebook page, as well as the group pages, "Show Choir Directors and Choreographers" and "I'm A Choir Director."

Of the 74 people who responded to the survey, 75% reported that they were currently teachers in a K-12 music program and 74% reported that they currently direct a

competitive show choir. The teachers were equally distributed between the South and Midwest regions of the U.S.

Teachers were given the opportunity to answer an open-ended question regarding the parts of the current scoring methods with which they are most dissatisfied. Some general themes were revealed in this question. The most common source of dissatisfaction is the inconsistency of scoring rubrics between competitions and the lack of a more universal scoring method. In addition, teachers feel that the current methods do nothing to attempt to alleviate



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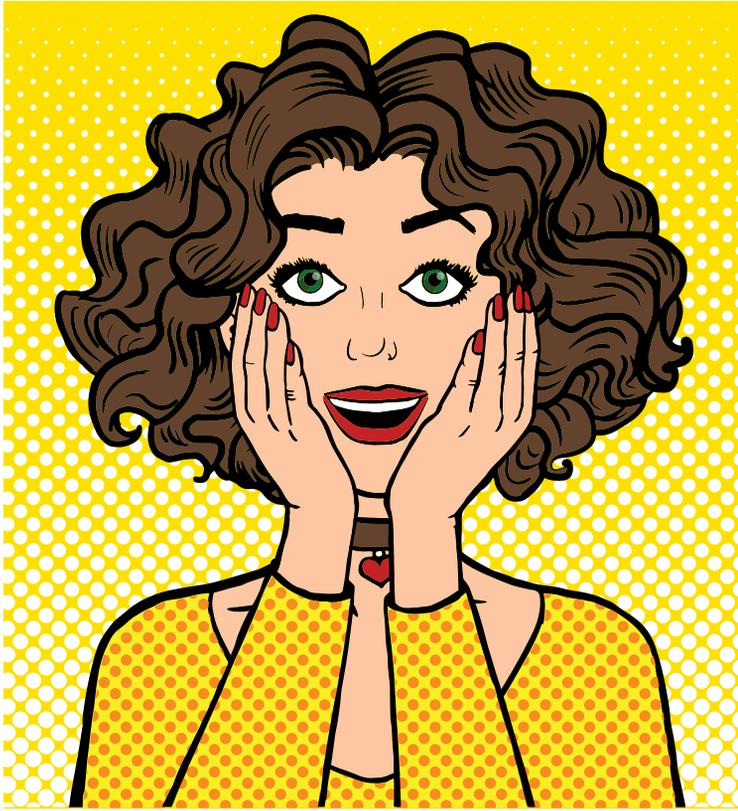
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adjudicator bias and subjectivity. Another common theme was the qualification, experience, and training level of the adjudicators. Teachers were also asked to rank in order of importance the categories from a typical score sheet.

Knowing It When We See It: Defining the “It”

Though the survey results certainly informed decisions made regarding category weights, my own experience as an adjudicator and director also contributed to the development of the rubric. I also spent time interviewing trusted colleagues, both fellow directors and adjudicators, in person and through email.

Those reviewing the rubric generally agreed upon the resulting rubric, although interesting discussions and arguments were made for and against the inclusion and weights of some categories. Furthermore, the operational definitions for each subcategory and qualifications of each were more difficult than anticipated. Though we “know what it is when we see it,” putting that into a text narrative that is detailed in what differentiates a 9-10 performance from a 7-8 performance was time-consuming and thought-provoking.

Exploring Outcomes and Implications

This project began as a way to improve the adjudication procedures of show choir contests. The finished product, however, has implications for use other than that of its original intent. As discussed earlier, competitive show choir is a wonderful environment for exploring educational outcomes. Students who

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"Orange Sensations" (2 Times) Wayne County HS (MS)
"Opening Knight" South Dearborn HS (IN)
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"Class Act" Carmel Middle School (IN)
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"Impressions" Opelika HS (AL)
"Faces" & "Cavaliers" Crete-Monee (IL)
"(m)Pulse" Menchville HS (VA)
"Crimson Heat" & "Diamond Sensations" New Palestine HS (IN)
"Orange Sensations" (2 Times) Wayne County HS (MS)
"Treble Makers" Colonial Forge HS (VA)
"Show Cards" Colerain HS (OH)
"Premier Edition" (2 Times) East Noble HS (IN)
"Rhapsody" Northwest Ranking HS (MS)
"Central Attraction" Pearl River Central HS (MS)
"Femmes Fatales" (2 Times) Plainfield HS (IN)
"Knight Scene" Thomas Dale HS (VA)
"Harmony In Motion" (2 Times) Douglas Freeman HS (VA)

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participate in this particular arena have the potential to become not only outstanding musical performers, but also educated critics of musical performances. Evaluative tools are useful outside of the role of the adjudicator.

In trying to improve adjudication methods, the educational value of scores and feedback should be kept at the forefront of the discussion. A more reliable and less subjective scoring process can ensure that students receive valuable and consistent feedback on how to improve, even if they do not receive a trophy. Keeping education at the center of adjudication makes the competitive experience meaningful regardless of the final placement.

Unresolved Issues

While this rubric is arguably a step in the right direction towards improving standardization and fairness in show choir adjudication, it does not resolve all of the issues with show choir contest adjudication. Most of the survey respondents were from two regions of the United States, the South and the Midwest. Show choir in these regions is similar in

nature, but for East and West Coasts, values and scoring methods may differ greatly. This rubric may not be representative of the aspects of performance valued in those geographic regions.

The issue of adjudicator training cannot be resolved with this rubric. Many survey respondents suggested that a main problem in the realm of competitive show choir is the lack of qualified and adequately trained judges. The hiring and training of judges is the responsibility of each contest producer. Opinions on this matter vary widely and would be a good subject for future research.

The most obvious limitation to the rubric is that it is reflective of my own personal philosophies. Though the survey certainly informed the creation of the rubric, I placed a higher value on some aspects than what the survey results indicated. As musicians, we have personal preferences that are reflective of our own beliefs and experiences with music. These constructs played a large role in the creation of this rubric.

Stepping in the Right Direction

While further research and discussion is needed to continue to improve adjudication measures in the realm of competitive show choir, improved assessment tools are a step in that direction. Rubrics provide specific feedback that allow for subjectivity, while providing reliable justification of objective numerical scores. This specificity allows for greater discussion in the classroom and more distinction between strengths and weaknesses of a performance. I am hopeful that as the rubric is put into practice, it will be discussed and edited to make it an effective tool that is widely utilized.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: LaDona Tyson is in her 11th year as Director of Choral Groups at Pearl River Community College in Poplarville, MS. LaDona holds a Bachelor of Music in Music Education from William Carey College, and a Master of Music in Choral Conducting from the University of Southern Mississippi, where she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Music Education. View the rubric at <http://www.lindsaybrzell.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Tyson-Showchoir-Rubric.pdf>



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