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The Effect of Repertoire Selection on University Interscholastic League Choral Concert Ratings

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“Declaring that competition is important to Texas music educators would be a singular understatement of epic proportions” (May, 1989, p. 6). In the state of Texas, one of the primary means by which the teaching ability of secondary music educators is assessed is their ensembles’ ratings in University Interscholastic League (UIL) Concert and Sight Reading competition. This practice is not limited to Texas, however. Batey (2002) points out that nationwide, competition results serve either as a validation of ensemble directors’ skills, or a testimony to their inadequacy. Further, she states that contest ratings can affect job retention or loss, as well as recruitment of ensemble members for the following school year.

With so much importance being placed on UIL competition, the question arises, “What can directors do to ensure that their ensemble will be successful?” Many educators (Crocker, 2000; Batey, 2002) agree that choice of repertoire is the single most critical factor in determining an ensemble’s rating. Superior musical performance is strongly affected by choosing music that is suitable for the vocal requirements of a particular group (Crocker, 2000). Adjudicators weigh the choice of music heavily, noting whether the literature is appropriate for the technical skill and maturity level of the singers (Batey, 2002).

Research (Forbes, 2001; Reames, 2001) indicates that effective choral music educators have an extended knowledge of choral literature and a high level of skill in selecting music suitable for their ensembles. Forbes and Reames suggest that in order to create and maintain effective choral programs, it is essential for choral directors to construct a broad repertoire of literature, and effectively match the music to a particular ensemble.

Additionally, Brunner (1992) maintains that careful and critical selection of literature that is appropriate to the physical maturity and understanding of the singer helps facilitate the mastery of a broad scope of choral music skills, including: healthy vocal technique; listening and sight reading skills; music history, theory, and appreciation; and musical expression, sensitivity, and aesthetic response. He says that selection of repertoire that is meaningful and challenging, as well as accessible and successful, requires a director to take into account the singers’ training, ability, and experience. Further, Brunner believes that effective literature selection will enhance the singers’ musical experience and serve as a catalyst for future creative and artistic development.

Failure to select appropriate choral literature can not only lead to failure in musical performance, but also can have detrimental effects on the vocal mechanism. Crocker (2000) states that music that
extends the limits of appropriate tessitura, difficulty level, or texture will likely result in inaccurate intonation, poor tone quality, and inappropriate style. Spurgeon (2002) adds that the selection of repertoire that is too demanding can cause singers to develop inappropriate and unhealthy singing habits. She explains that singing music designed for more mature voices, which demands too wide a range or taxes the tessitura, can result in vocal damage.

Many of the experts in the field contend that the most essential prerequisite for successful repertoire selection is a well-developed philosophy of music education (Forbes, 2001). A teacher’s philosophy influences every decision he or she makes, including decisions about literature. Brunner (1992) affirms that directors must focus on their philosophy, goals, and objectives in the selection of repertoire. Corbin (2001) suggests that the ultimate goal of any ensemble experience should be to attain self-confidence, performance skills, and music appreciation. Apfelstadt (2000) adds that music educators convey what they believe students need to learn to grow musically through the repertoire they choose. Wis (2003) agrees that the student’s musical growth and experience should be the top priority, adding that the quality of the musical experience is directly related to the quality of the repertoire selected.

The obvious question arises, “Is every teacher concerned about musical growth when selecting UIL literature?” Apfelstadt (2000) believes that even when the repertoire selection process is limited to the state list, directors continue to have the responsibility to select music that enables students to develop an understanding of concepts.

Thus, one of the most daunting, yet important tasks faced by Texas choral directors is the selection of the appropriate three compositions to be listed on the UIL Concert competition form. The determination of whether or not the musical challenges in the music are appropriate or attainable for the maturity and experience level of the ensemble is a critical factor in the selection process. Some directors seem to “play it safe” by choosing music to fulfill the minimal requirement level. However, they potentially run the risk of boring students by selecting music that is too simplistic. Other directors may elect to perform one or more pieces at levels higher than required. Yet music that is too challenging may frustrate students (Apfelstadt, 2000).

Because, ultimately, neither philosophical goals nor superior ratings in UIL competition can be achieved by performing inappropriate literature, the question presents itself: “Does the difficulty level of the literature performed at UIL choral concert competitions in the state of Texas have any relationship to the ratings choirs receive?”

The purpose of this study was to compare UIL high school choral concert competition ratings with the difficulty level of literature performed. Further, a comparison of three geographical regions was made to ascertain if the same percentage of choirs performed literature from each level of difficulty.

Method

UIL Choral Concert competition ratings were procured during 2003 from high school contests in three different regions in Texas. Subjects consisted of judged ratings of randomly selected choirs in 3 regions. After noting the school classification based on the size of student population (AAAAA, AAAA, etc.) and the skill level of each choir (varsity or non-varsity), the minimal level of difficulty of literature required for each choir was determined, using the guidelines listed in the Prescribed Music List (PML) (Floyd, 1999). According to the PML, each choir is required to perform three selections, two of which must be listed in the PML. PML categories range from Grade 1 (least difficult) through Grade 6 (most difficult). For example, the minimal level requirement of a AAA
varsity choir is to perform a Grade 3 and a Grade 2 selection. Finally, using the PML as a guide, the grade level of each musical selection performed by the choirs was denoted.

Choirs singing two selections at the minimal level of difficulty required were marked with an $M$. Choirs singing one selection at the minimal level and one selection a grade above the minimal level were marked with a $+1$. Choirs singing two selections one grade above the minimal level, or one selection two grades above the minimal level were marked with a $+2$. Ten choirs from each difficulty level (i.e., $M$, $+1$, $+2$) were randomly selected for each of the three regions. The final sample of the study consisted of 90 choirs.

In accordance with UIL procedure for concert competition, three judges assigned scores to each choir, with ratings ranging from 1 (superior) to 5 (poor). Subsequently, for purposes of this experiment, the total of the three UIL judges’ scores for each choir’s performance was calculated. For example, if the judges’ scores were 1, 1, and 2, then the total score would be $4 (1+1+2)$.

Results

Dependent measures consisted of the final rating of each of the choirs in UIL concert competition. The independent measures were Region (Region A, Region B, and Region C) and Level of Difficulty ($M$, $+1$, $+2$).

A Two-Way ANOVA was applied (3 regions X 3 levels of difficulty). Significant differences were found for Region ($F = 5.92 \ p < .003$) and Level of Difficulty ($F = 3.88 \ p < .024$), but there were no significant interactions.

The Tukey HSD multiple comparison test subsequently indicated that the choirs that performed literature at a $+2$ level of difficulty (mean = 3.83) had significantly higher ratings than the choirs that performed literature at the minimal level of difficulty (mean = 5.16) Those groups that performed literature at a $+1$ level of difficulty had a mean score of 4.8, which was not significantly different from the $+2$ level or the minimal level of difficulty.

Results of the Tukey HSD multiple comparison test (Table 3) indicated that the ratings of the choirs in Region C (mean = 3.73) were significantly higher than the ratings in Region B (mean = 5.43). Region A had a mean score of 4.63. No other differences were significant.

Although statistical analyses were performed on only 30 choirs randomly selected from each region, examination of the total number of choirs competing revealed that the three regions had varying percentages of choirs assigned to each of the three levels of difficulty (Table 1). The greatest percentage of choirs in each of the regions performed music at the minimal level of difficulty: Region A - 46%; Region B - 47%; Region C - 51%, with an overall average of 48%. The smallest percentage of choirs in each of the regions performed music at the $+2$ level of difficulty: Region A - 21%; Region B - 23%; Region C - 15%, with an overall average of 20%.
Table 1

*Percentage of Choirs Performing Literature at Each Level of Difficulty by Region*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>+1</th>
<th>+2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Average</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* M = minimal level of difficulty; +1 = one selection at the minimal level and one selection a grade above the minimal level; +2 = two selections one grade above the minimal level, or one selection two grades above the minimal level.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the level of difficulty of literature performed and the ratings a choir receives in UIL competition. Results indicated that the choirs performing literature at the minimal level of difficulty received significantly lower ratings than the choirs performing literature at the +2 level (highest level of difficulty). No significant difference was indicated among the choirs performing literature at +1 level of difficulty (medium level) and the other two groups.

A further aspect of this study was to determine the percentage of choirs that performed music at the various levels of difficulty. In each region, the largest percentage of choirs performed literature at the minimal level of difficulty and the smallest percentage of choirs performed literature two levels above the required level of difficulty.

The diversity of difficulty levels of music chosen by directors in each of the three regions can only be explained by conjecture in that there appears to be a lack of previous documentation in this area. It might be assumed that the majority of choral directors choose to “play it safe” by doing the least musically challenging literature. Furthermore, it might be assumed that fewer directors are willing to take the risk to program more challenging music. Or, it might be postulated that the level of literature recommended by the PML accurately addresses the ability level of the corresponding choir.

The mean of the ratings in each of the three regions was divergent. There was a significant difference between the mean of the ratings in Region B (5.43) and Region C (3.73). One possible explanation for the difference in the overall ratings among the three regions is the difference in judging panels. Judges for UIL Concert Contest are required to be members of Texas Music Adjudicators Association (TMAA) (2003), which has strict membership requirements, as well as compulsory periodic training sessions. However, due to the diversity of opinion regarding what type
of performance constitutes a specific rating, the contest results can vary in accordance with the judging panel assigned.

Further research in this area could be beneficial to determine if the ratings of choirs that perform more difficult literature are higher due to the skill level of the singers or because the directors set elevated standards for the choirs. A survey of directors whose choirs receive the highest ratings could be done to assess their years of experience and past success in competition, as well as their knowledge of choral repertoire. Further study might evaluate the ratings of inexperienced directors to determine if their lack of knowledge of literature is a factor in their ratings. Examination of the feeder choral programs could also provide pertinent data.

Selection of literature seems to be a factor in earning high ratings at UIL Choral Concert competition. Although the majority of choral directors chose literature at the minimal level of difficulty, the choirs performing literature at the +2 level of difficulty had significantly higher ratings. Perhaps the directors who set higher goals for their choirs in terms of literature, also set higher standards in terms of overall performance. On the other hand, the directors who choose literature at the minimal level of difficulty might also have minimal expectations of their choir’s ability and performance. Ratings might be an indication of a director’s expectation of his/her choir’s performance—the lower the expectation, the lower the performance, and the higher the expectation, the higher the performance. Therefore, selection of literature might be a factor in UIL choral competition ratings because it reflects the philosophy and attitude of the director, which, in turn, affects the level of performance of the choir.

References

Floyd, R. (Ed.) (1999). University Interscholastic League prescribed music list. The University of Texas at Austin.