

A part of Graham Lloyd Music's aim is to interview notable musicians. In this article, I have asked a dear friend of mine, Eric Andersen, to write down his thoughts on adjudicating. In Eric's comments he covers a number of important issues regarding adjudicating that I am confident you will find both informative and interesting. While Eric's comments have a Victorian Bands' League flavour about them (given he's adjudicated more for that organisation than virtually any other), the principles of adjudicating that he covers, I believe, are insightful and right on the mark. I find myself agreeing whole heartedly with everything he has written. Later in his article, Eric makes a few observations about point scoring (this is a uniquely brass band 'feature' that is sometimes employed in concert band orchestral contests).

Eric's 28-year career as an Army musician included Bandmaster training at the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall, in London. As Major Andersen, he led army bands in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne, and headed the Defence Force School of Music for five years, where he was responsible for all musical training in the Services. He retired from the Army in 1999, and has returned to playing again, both chamber music and for stage productions, which he had to neglect whilst a conductor and administrator in the Services. He has conducted civilian bands Darebin City Brass 1993-97, and Mitchell Shire Concert Band since 1999, and is a much sought after adjudicator for band contests and festivals across the country.

Eric enlisted into the Army in 1971 and he and I spent 12 months together in 1972 as Army Apprentice Musicians (he was my 'senior'). After graduation, we spent a number of years in the Army Band in Adelaide before our careers changed paths. Eric initially trained as a clarinetist but, on posting to Adelaide, there was a dire need for an oboist so Eric chose to 'change' to oboe, which became his principle instrument.

Eric, like me, spent three years training to become a Bandmaster at the British Army School of Music, (Kneller Hall). He completed his course in the early 1980s. On his return to Australia, he saw postings as the Officer Commanding of Army bands in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne before accepting the position as Officer Commanding of the Australian Defence Force School of Music. His involvement in the brass band movement alone as a performer, conductor or adjudicator spans some 40 years.

Eric's initial comments may also be interpreted as a guide for those who may be considering becoming adjudicators (someone's got to replace people like Eric and me in the future!!!). He then adds comments on things that he, in particular, looks for in performances—both ensemble and solo.

Graham Lloyd Jun 2010

HOW TO JUDGE A BAND/SOLO CONTEST

One adjudicator's approach

By Eric Andersen

Introduction

I have been asked by Graham Lloyd to provide a short paper outlining how I go about preparing myself to adjudicate at a band or solo contest.

However, there are some basic points which must be made about the role of ANY and EVERY adjudicator. These points have been extracted from a document prepared by me for the VBL (Victorian Bands' League) regarding the role of the adjudicator, which conclude at the second dotted line. After this point in the text, I will provide more specific information regarding what I look for in each performance when trying to sort one contestant from another.

Firstly, there may be several reasons for wanting to become a Victorian Bands' League accredited adjudicator, but doing so for the lure of money is hardly a good one. One must also be prepared to be cooped up behind a screen for some hours at a time with no opportunity to move about. Then there are the hours of score preparation necessary prior to the contest itself.

Secondly, the ideal adjudicator is one who cares about the musical performance standards of bands and soloists, and who aims to give constructive comments that will assist in improving those standards.

There are times when a performance will go so badly astray that a temptation exists to make exclusively negative or destructive comments. In such cases, comments on the "what and why" reasons for errors should always be balanced by remarks aimed at "how it can be fixed".

Whether the adjudicator's comments at a given contest are recorded on audio tape or disc, or are solely written remarks on a critique sheet, comments are always to be directed to the following two aims:

1. To improve performance standards, by identifying strengths and weaknesses, and highlighting in which ways performances can be bettered;
2. To encourage performers to continue to enter competitions.

The adjudicator must be seen by the public and by the contestants to be utterly free of bias, and not displaying any allegiance to any particular band, or to individual players.

Once the adjudicator has accepted an engagement to judge at a particular contest, certain obligations and restrictions apply to the way that adjudicator deals with other parties under the VBL/NBL umbrella.

Once engaged, an adjudicator is prohibited from attending rehearsals of any band involved in that contest, or from providing advice to those bands, or to their conductors or members. Private students, currently studying with that adjudicator, should not enter solo sections of any competition at which the adjudicator is judging.

Whilst the above restrictions are lifted immediately that the contest results have been made public, care should be taken in providing post-mortem advice to members of band X and Y, (but deliberately not to band J and K) within earshot of the public or other contestants. This is not simply a matter of fairness, but will reduce any possibility of potential friction that can occur immediately post-contest. Advice provided in private, out of public earshot, is not subject to this restriction.

CONTEST SCORING GUIDELINES

a. Band Contests

There are two primary differences in the way Open grades and Junior grades are scored by accredited adjudicators, whether in band or in Solo contests.

Bands or soloists in Open competition are expected to have prepared themselves thoroughly for each competition, and adjudicator comments should freely highlight both strengths and weaknesses in the performance. However, it must be remembered at all times that comments, oral or written, should not stop at a mere mention of a particular weakness without some comment of how that particular weakness can be overcome.

Junior bands (or soloists) should not be subjected to any negative criticism without detailing how that particular problem can be overcome. In general, Junior performers are to be encouraged to improve, and any positives in their performance should be highlighted, along with any suggestions for improvement.

1. Open grades

Comments should be, in the main, positive and encouraging, and aimed to assist the band and its conductor to improve the standard of their next performance. This in no way precludes criticism of matters of style, accuracy, intonation, dynamic texture, or fidelity to the score – provided that some suggestion of how that particular area could be improved.

Whilst particularly poor performance can not be let go without comment, the wise adjudicator will provide assistance to the band and conductor, if only so as not to have to sit through such a performance again. The poor quality can easily be reflected in the marks which that band will receive, as seen relative to their competitors.

It is obvious that a D Grade band will not be as consistently accurate or as musically expressive as an A Grade band. A seasoned adjudicator will tailor his/her remarks to fit the standard being encountered, whilst all the while trying to suggest to the contestants better ways to perform the music.

2. Junior grades

Bands in Junior grades are the future of the banding movement, and ergo of the whole competition scene. They generally lack the experience and stamina of Open Grade bands, and all comments need to be aimed solely at assisting each band to improve their levels of performance. This applies equally to solo contests.

Solo and Party contests

The remarks above regarding band contests apply equally to solo and party contests. As these events are normally unscreened, it is usually easy to make comments that are suitable for the perceived age and experience of the competitor, whilst remaining pertinent, helpful, and which highlight strengths and weaknesses.

Some degree of commonsense needs to be applied depending in the circumstances. For instance, it is not unusual in solo contests for a young (for example a 16 year old) to perform very well at his/her age level, and then also appear in the Open sections later. When compared to the more musically mature and experienced contestants in that section, the 16 year old's offering may pale into musical insignificance – but this is an example of where the most encouraging of remarks will be required, and let the points score reflect the comparative level of achievement.

In this example, the 16 year old's best performance may easily be the worst in the section. Yet on its own terms it may be a highly worthwhile achievement for that player, given the lack of experience, and therefore worthy of encouragement.

Point scoring

1. Point range – general guidelines

There can be no absolute guidance in exactly what point score to apportion to a given performance. No two adjudicators will use exactly the same system of points, and there is no set method of doing so.

Some adjudicators use a system where each A Grade band will begin with the perfect score of 200 points before the first note, and will gradually lose points as the performance goes along. A B Grade band will start with (say) 190 points, C Grade with 185, and D Grade a maximum of 180.

Other adjudicators will allow each band in each grade with the full 200 points, and this can see a D Grade band winning its grade with 190, whilst the A Grade band may win its with 192. Does this mean in absolute terms that the D Grade band performed almost as well as the A Grade band? Obviously not, but it does mean that the D Grade band played very well within the expectations for D Grade.

It is important that the adjudicator devise a system of points with which they are comfortable. This system must retain a measure of flexibility, particularly for the first couple of bands/soloists in a contest, where, in this writer's experience, one is "still working out just where the standard of 'X Grade' is for today". The dividing line

between each grade cannot be clearly defined by use of a point score alone, nor does the divide remain constant from day to day.

2. Points to reflect differences between performers

The points awarded should accurately reflect the differences between performances, despite any restrictions mentioned below.

Even with the performance of a single band within a contest, a relatively poor performance of one of their items, as compared to the other items they played, should be reflected in a lower mark. For example, it is not uncommon for a band to play the Test and Own Choice very well indeed, but not to do such a good job on the Hymn or March.

3. Range width should not be too wide

As a general rule, it is neither necessary nor desirable to have an artificially wide range between the top and bottom marks in a section.

It is unnecessary to have the winning band with 189, and the lowest competitor in that grade with 125, even if the adjudicator really believes that these two bands were that far apart. In this example, the top band is probably headed for promotion to the next grade, whilst the other for relegation.

Further to that example, the oral comment to the winning band will be mostly complementary and discussing the high standard of playing. The oral comments to the other band will need to dwell on the positives (such as they are) and be mainly aimed at explaining how the ensemble can improve its performance deficits.

Band scoring poorly in a contest will get the message that they have done so by being 20 points behind the winner - they don't need to be marked 60 points for it to sink in. Any 60 point result is likely to be discouraging of that band entering competition again, and this is an undesirable consequence of artificially low scoring. In addition, the band 60 points up may get an inflated self-opinion of exactly how well they actually went.

Screening of adjudicators

Although it is unusual for adjudicators to be screened for Solo and Party contests, the majority of VBL organised Band contests will require the adjudicator to be screened throughout the event. The use of the screen prevents any reasonable grounds for competitors or the public to believe that there is a bias on the part of the adjudicator. The screen also serves to keep him/her largely shielded from the audience, contestants or other distractions.

However, on common-sense (if not Occupational Health and Safety) grounds, the conditions behind the screen should be as comfortable as is practicable. If the section is to be a long one [*GL: I have adjudicated for up to six hours on a number of occasions behind the screen*], and/or conditions are cramped, it may be necessary to make arrangements with the organiser to allow for a short period outside the screen.

Special care needs to be taken to ensure that no players are visible on stage during any such break.

COMMENTS ON AUDIO TAPE

In most Band contests the adjudicator's comments will be recorded [*GL: the band's performance on one track and the Adjudicator's comments on the other*] and a copy of that recording made available to the competing bands immediately after the contest.

Comments to be clear, honest and helpful

Comments made on audio recordings are to be clear, honest and truthful, but above all, helpful and encouraging.

Musical errors can and should be highlighted, but in each case helpful suggestions about how the error can be fixed should also be made, even if it has to wait for the concluding remarks.

Individual mis-pitches are a matter for individual adjudicators at the moment of occurrence. At A Grade standard, the player generally knows before the adjudicator that the note has not come out as intended, and probably needs little guidance from the judge. This may not be the case in D Grade or Junior Grade bands, where a helpful comment may be of great assistance to a player.

Similarly, it is not uncommon in A and B Grades that the band produces a very high standard of performance, with very little to criticise over long stretches of many bars. In this case comments on improvement are difficult to find, or even simply superfluous. However, it is important for the band to realise that the judge is still listening to them, and a simple comment, such as "that section was beautifully played", will be sufficient to prevent them from wondering if the adjudicator has left the box (or fallen asleep).

It is important that bands in all grades receive positive comments for fine playing, both of tuttis and of solo parts. Not so fine playing should also be commented upon, but always ending with constructive thoughts on how the band can overcome the problem.

SCORE PREPARATION

Adjudicators should expect that copies of all scores to be performed at a band contest will be made available to them prior to the contest. In theory, a "reasonable time" should be allowed for score preparation. However, adjudicators need to be aware that this will not always happen, and often for reasons that are not within the Contest Manager's control.

Because different adjudicators will have different methods of learning scores, and will take varying amounts of time to do so, it is impossible to define exactly how long "a reasonable time" is, or how much extra time should be added for each extra score.

I hope that you have a this has given you a better understanding of the sorts of things that each adjudicator is required to consider, and the conditions under which they operate.

I will now outline the sorts of things that I do whilst preparing the scores prior to the contest, and how this preparation will help me in the difficult task of comparing apples and oranges, pineapples and bananas, which are the norm in the fruit salad of contest day. Even a common test piece can throw up many surprising differences between bands of equal ranking, which often illuminate how the conductors see the music, and in how many often fascinatingly different ways the piece may legitimately be prepared.

PREPARING THE SCORES

Thorough score preparation is critical to giving a fair and informed judgement on each band's performance.

Even here, there can be problems. For example, some scores are in fact simply a solo cornet line with a few cues here and there, which requires an element of guesswork on the part of the adjudicator. Short scores (which look like a piano part, or perhaps on three staves) give a better indication of what the parts are doing, but still requires the adjudicator to make some assumptions. Thankfully, full scores are now becoming more common, where each part is clearly displayed.

TEST PIECES

The test piece, being the one common element within each grade, is the one piece that must be learned *thoroughly* by the adjudicator. This is the only piece where all bands can be directly compared against one another.

I will spend some hours with an unfamiliar score, and when I am at the stage of learning where I feel I could conduct a rehearsal on the piece without having to keep my eyes on the score, I *may* consider listening to a recording, if one is available.

However, in the brass band competition scene, listening to the recording is often helpful in other ways. If it is the *only* available recording, it will probably become the 'blueprint' for all the performances heard in that grade. This is because many band MDs will follow whatever happens in the recording, even if it isn't written by the composer. Even if I haven't heard the recording, by the time the third band has played and added, for example, an identical unwritten *accelerando* 4 bars before letter D, I know that the recording must have had the same characteristic. Not that the *accelerando* would be "right" or "wrong" in itself, but each example like this will invariably be accompanied by a non compliance with the written *rallentando* after letter J, simply because the conductor on the record chose not to obey it.

In every score specifically written for contesting, and especially in A and B Grades, there will be certain critical passages where there is the possibility of many things going wrong at once. It could be argued that many test pieces have passages in them

that are there simply to be as difficult as possible, and which may be quite incidental in the actual flow and logic of the overall structure of the music.

These are the places where I will be especially careful to note, and be very sure to listen intently to (by this I mean I will ensure that I am not talking on the tape about some other earlier aspect of the performance just at the time the critical passage occurs).

The way these critical passages are played can be, and *often* are, the difference between two otherwise perfectly matched bands.

How do I locate such critical points? Generally they will be in a tutti or a near tutti passage, but where clarity between parts and absolute rhythmic accuracy is required.

They may involve solo spots tucked within the fabric of the music, perhaps involving parts that normally only play tutti parts. They are the points where, were I the conductor of that piece, extra special care and attention would be given to ensure that they are clearly audible. Or they may be intricate accompaniments where parts overlap constantly in the background, yet require clarity to make that musical section work properly behind the soloist.

Each piece is different, hence the need for *thorough* score preparation.

OWN CHOICE ITEMS

Regarding the own choice scores, I would still prepare them well enough to be able to rehearse a band, and would know where the pitfalls (and other critical moments) are located.

Then comes the task of grading the relative difficulties of each and every own choice item in that grade against each other. I will make notes and give each score a ranking, based on my study of the scores, my experience in rehearsing such scores, and background knowledge of the composer's other works. This ranking of scores from "hardest" to "easiest" will later help me in deciding the scores allotted to each band in this segment of the contest. Somewhat akin to the way different dives are scored in an Olympic diving competition. The easiest dive will need to be really good to outdo a much more complicated dive that was only 95% perfect in its execution.

Sometimes, a band will attempt to play a particularly difficult piece, but not quite bring it off that day. Another band in the same section might give an outstanding performance of a less complex piece, so how is one to choose between them? This is where ranking the scores in their relative difficulty becomes a vital part of the preparation. For the record, my preference is probably for the band which gives a wonderful performance of music within their grasp, but I have heard some magnificent attempts which haven't quite come off, and they must be given the credit for the effort..... Adjudicating this section of the competition is not easy for any adjudicator, but careful study of each score and applying the ranking process does make a decision, which might seem highly subjective to the outsider, quite a bit more a deeply considered one [*GL: Eric's comments here are particularly noteworthy and reflect my own approach*].

HYMNS AND MARCHES

The above points (about comparing marches and hymns within the grade) apply here, too.

As an example, in an A Grade contest, a band playing a relatively simple march like “Slaidburn” would need to really “get it absolutely right”. Another band playing a more technically difficult march will always be given more latitude when I am comparing the two for marking purposes. Conversely, if one D Grade band does a good “Slaidburn” but the next makes a mess of a more technical march, I would still probably favour the good performance [*GL: I strongly agree with this comment*].

There are many right ways, and even more wrong ways, to play a march. Suffice to say that I look for crisp rhythmic playing throughout, at all dynamic levels. Two bands playing the same march may find that the difference between them is as little as some poorer/better intonation, or sloppy rhythmic playing.

The hymn seems to have developed over the years. Originally a simple two or three verse rendition from the hymn book, which allowed the performers to get a feel for the performance space and to warm up thoroughly before playing the test piece, it has metamorphosed into an extravaganza, requiring multiple percussion and invariably *ffff* ending. Many of these pieces are very interesting in their own way, but most of them simply don’t allow the adjudicator to listen for the (not so) simple things like playing a hymn with good balance and intonation. I don’t decry any band playing their “hymntacular” but the scant bit of hymn-like ensemble playing will need to be good, as it is this which I will be concentrating upon for marking purposes! [*GL: I challenge any band to perform a simple two-verse hymn beautifully in tune. Most bands simply can’t and it’s due to a lack of understanding about how intonation works from both conductors and performers*].

SCREENING THE ADJUDICATOR

I confess that I was anti-screening in my early experiences as an adjudicator, as there are many things about a performance that can easily be explained simply by watching the performance. There is also the issue of the sound being somewhat muffled.

However, my mind was made up at one particular event, where I was providing guidance to a new adjudicator at his first outing as a judge. I sat behind and listened to his commentary in the first bands, then moved outside the screen as I was confident that he was doing and saying all of the right things. The next band had the ability to win the contest, but was held back in one vital area – one which would not have been obvious behind the screen. The “conductor” of this particular group was well out of his or her depth, and, if I had been unscreened, I certainly would have been making more comments about how the “conducting technique” needed improvement rather than concentrating on the music itself. Whilst this would be laudable enough as an attempt to aid the band’s improvement, it is not what the contest organisers would be wanting from the adjudicator, who has been engaged to adjudicate *the band’s performance*, and not merely rate the competence (or otherwise) of the conductor.

I have never had a problem with the screen since that particular day. And yes, I can confidently surmise that a problem a band is having with certain aspects (attacks and releases, etc) will be more to do with what is being waved at them than an actual lack of ability to play together.

SOLO CONTESTS

The one big difference between Band Contests and Solos is that there is no screen. The demeanour of the player is on display as much as the musical ability. This doesn't always matter to the overall marks, but can go a long way to explaining how/why a player seems to be approaching the task.

Only rarely are solo competitions recorded, and generally an assistant "known as a "scribe") will be provided to transcribe comments made by the adjudicator. Personally, I prefer to write my own comments as I go, as it is less distracting than being asked how to spell "adagio" or some other term.

Irrespective of the level of the grade, the aim of the written comments – which will be brief – is to assist the player to improve his/her performance.

There is seldom time to study each piece, and in the junior sections some pieces are only 16 or 32 bars long, so there isn't even much time to write. In the very lowest grades, I know the general form that the comments will take - invariably it will go something like:

"Use more air, which will help to decrease the mispitching. Listen very closely to what the piano is doing and count every beat of every bar as you go along. See if you can vary the volume a little more, and please play softly where it says *p*, and loud where it says *f*, rather than the other way around" etc etc.

In short, I will aim to say exactly what the player's teacher will have said in every lesson the performer has ever had.

In the Open grades, expect to hear one or two players at or very near professional standard. I would hardly try to give technical advice to those players, but can always find something encouraging to write – plus highlight any aspects that I thought could be improved. At this level, just one poor entry might be the final arbiter in separating two evenly matched players.

Scoring solo contests runs a bit like this. At the novice level, the player that can get the highest number of notes in approximately the right order, at the right time will win. At the open level, the one who plays with the highest degree of musicality will win, but sometimes there may be two or three playing at much the same level, so "picking a winner" is not always easy.

Strangely, I find the middle tier of contestants the hardest to judge. Players may have been contesting for 4 or 5 years, don't necessarily have a wonderful or utterly reliable technique just yet, but can play with flashes of true musicality. Pitted against them may be others who have fairly dazzling technique, but play so mechanically that the

music behind the notes is missing altogether. Deciding the winner here can be very difficult, but my rule of thumb is always that the “most musical performance” must get the award.

Points scoring principles outlined above apply. I would never score the winner on 96, and the lowest in the section on 55, even if that is what I *really* thought was an accurate indicator. The person on 55 may be utterly discouraged as a result, and that is not my aim – all comments to that player would be as encouraging as I could make them.

A one point margin is enough to win the contest, and I would rarely have more than 5 points separating the first and second place getters. Number Two knows there is work to be done to catch number One, but One can’t afford to become complacent at the next contest, as Two might have caught up. This way both contestants will (hopefully) be encouraged to keep practising.

Usually the adjudicator has the opportunity at the end of each section, to make comments to the audience and performers. If time is not a great issue, and the section isn’t too large, then it is possible to make (a) general comments about how the section went (b) comments highlighting especially good parts of various players’ performances (c) comments regarding the suitability (or otherwise) of the music chosen. These comments will reinforce whatever has been written during the performance, and the whole aim is to try to help the contestants do even better next time. And it might also help those contestants, about to play in the next section, to focus on what this adjudicator has been looking for on that day.

KEEPING TRACK OF POINTS SCORES

In a small section of up to about five contestants, it is relatively simple to keep a track of the marks allotted.

In practice, I always allot a “provisional number” for the first contestant. This may alter up or down, depending on where the level of competition is for that day (i.e. in relation to all the others in the grade.) The reason for this is that the first competitor might just be head and shoulders above the rest, OR they could be easily the ‘also rans’, but this isn’t known until at least three have competed.

In larger sections, I will do up a grid sheet with room for various notes and other hieroglyphics, which will hopefully assist me to remember what contestant one was like, just after hearing contestant eleven’s performance. It might look something like this:

Band 1	Tone	Attack	Articulate	Intonation	Balance	Dynamic/ texture	Musicality
Item 1	So so	Hmmm	Yep	blah	Good	No	sometimes
Item 2	So so	sloppy	Hmmm	Yuk	Ok	Better	poor
Item 3	Yes!	Better	Good	Better	Good	Ok	better
Band 2	Tone	Attack	Articulate	Intonation	Balance	Dynamic	Musicality
Item 1	Ok	Poor	VG	Ok	VG	So so	Ok

Item 2	Yes	Hmmm	Vg	Better here	Great	Better	VG
Item 3	Good	XX	Good	Yes	VG	Yes	VG

Rather than words, I will often use a series of ticks and or crosses. One tick is ok, 4 ticks is great! Naturally, I will have more space than in the example, and can write some quite detail info where necessary.

I have found that this system really does help, especially in a really large section of contestants. The most I can recall having in a solo contest was 19, so things do become a little more simple – the first few bars will usually determine whether that contestant will be in the placings or among the also-rans. Careful use of the matrix helps to at least split the apples from the other apples. In a section of this size, many an adjudicator has resorted to prayer so that player number 18 or 19 will be so clearly ahead of the rest of the pack. Sometimes, those prayers are answered, but careful use of this system does provide back-up.

Naturally, any written comments would reflect these aide-memoires, although I would hardly use the adjudicating term “blah” in a written comment to a contestant.

CONCLUSION

We all use our judgement in a number of ways in everyday life, using our own views, experiences and prejudices, in our very own subjective way, which helps makes us who we are.

“Musicality” of a performance, or of a performer, is terribly difficult to define, except that a good example is as easy to identify, as is any obviously poor example. Most people with “an ear for music” could certainly identify poor performance, but the threshold of where they would say “really *great* playing” differs, I suspect, in all of us. Many performances proffered for adjudication will contain some fine playing, a number of errors (how rare would *any* live performance by *any* performer be without some minor mishaps...)

The adjudicator will produce a result - which will never please all of the audience - through the application of his/her acquired musical knowledge and experience. The adjudicator will *always* bring his/her own set of musical standards to the contest, and the results are merely the thoughts of that judge on that day, and may not necessarily be agreed by another judge with similar experiences.

I do hope that this paper has given you a better understanding of some of the things the adjudicator must do prior and during the contest.

One final thing. Although the adjudicator is only human, and the task is daunting, contests DO encourage music making, and DO encourage individuals in their pursuit of excellence. The well prepared adjudicator is necessary for the contest to come full circle – the players prepare, give of their best on the day, and the comments of the judge should encourage them to do it even better next time. The sensible adjudicator realises that the key to his/her role is to serve the organisation by acting, for that day, as Quality Control Officer, and as an agent for continued improvement.

Eric Andersen
June 2010