



Online Music Adjudicating: Impactful written and video-recorded feedback

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Because of the COVID-19 crisis, many festivals will be held online in 2021. Adjudicators will need to change the way they deliver feedback in this new format. Performances may be pre-recorded, available on Youtube or other platforms. Adjudicators and students will never actually meet; their physical interactions will be replaced with a virtual one. If writing adjudications, adjudicators will be unable to demonstrate at an instrument. Students will not hear other performances or benefit from hearing other students' adjudications. They will be unable to try new ideas or techniques alongside adjudicators, nor will they receive feedback and encouragement through this process.

Although this new format may be challenging for adjudicators, quality feedback has value, regardless of the mode of delivery. Thanks to technology, students can still benefit from the music festival experience. It's up to adjudicators to pivot to the new conditions and provide impactful feedback through written or video-recorded comments.

Let's consider the following performance of "Coconut Rag" by Christopher Norton." An elementary piece, it is frequently performed at music festivals by young pianists.

Video Performance: <https://youtu.be/HILGyqr1gBc>

Score Preview: <https://www.jwpepper.com/sheet-music/score-preview.jsp?pepnum=10325263E>

The following short, simply written adjudication may suffice at an in-person festival when adjudicators could workshop with the student and explain their feedback.

Written Adjudication #1:

Overall, your performance is clean, steady and memorized. You have securely learned the notes, rhythms, articulation. Aim for bigger dynamic contrasts, sharper staccatos and a quicker tempo. Thank you for playing today.

At a mere twenty-seven words though, this adjudication is sparse, lacking in detail and enthusiasm. The student is unlikely to learn anything and the teacher will probably feel uninspired by the feedback. The praise is faint and generalized. The student has not been given tangible suggestions on how to improve upon the three criticisms and may wonder if submitting their performance to the online music festival was a good use of time and money. This lacklustre experience would not be a result that festival coordinators, teachers, parents or students hope for.

So how does one improve written or video-recorded feedback when no in-person contact is available, when there is no chance to physically demonstrate and explain the criticisms?

Let's apply principles of impactful feedback as documented by researchers David Nicol and Debra McFarlane-Dick in "Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice":

- 1. Feedback provides an opportunity to close the gap between current and desired performance.**
The student's performance in the sample video feels "safe." They may be so focused on making a clean recording that they miss the fun and excitement that should accompany a lively piece like a rag. Or perhaps they don't like the piece and feel emotionally detached from it. There's no way to know and the adjudicator should not infer or project intention (or lack thereof) onto the performance. Instead, the adjudicator should observe the performance and show the student how to finesse their efforts.
- 2. Feedback helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, or expected standards).**
Describing the reasoning behind specific musical characteristics will help the student visualize a more vivid, interesting performance. Also, using specific, descriptive language in an age-appropriate way will have a greater impact than general suggestions. For example, "Aim for bigger dynamic contrasts" is not as helpful or fun for a child as "At measure 9, the left hand is marked "piu forte." Until now, the right hand has the tune and the left hand only has harmonic. This is the left hand's chance to play a melody line. Let it sing out!"
- 3. Feedback delivers high quality information.**
As tempting as it is to try to address all issues in every performance, the practicalities of time constraints and attention spans will make an overly detailed or lengthy adjudication impractical. An adjudication should start with the basics of the style or genre—perhaps the student is unfamiliar with ragtime piano—and then move onto two or three specific criticisms or challenges that the student can work on, in this case, tempo, articulation and dynamics.
- 4. Feedback facilitates self-assessment.**
Having the student compare their recordings to others on YouTube can provide valuable opportunities for self-assessment. For example, performers often imagine they are playing with more vivid dynamic contrasts than they actually are. Listening to their own recordings and then the recordings of others can help students assess their own work through fresh eyes, or ears, as it were.
- 5. Feedback encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.**
Because of the one-sided nature of written or video-recorded feedback, it is impossible to have a dialogue with students. The music festival adjudicator can't sit at the piano and play a few different examples of articulation, for example, and then ask the student which one is most interesting or faithful to the score. But perhaps a written or video-recorded adjudication can encourage a student to explore new ideas and adopt them if they prove to be effective. Dialogue may not occur between the student and the adjudicator, but it might instead take the form of self-assessment.
- 6. Feedback encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.**
Feedback should celebrate what the student has already achieved and inspire them to build on their success. This will inspire confidence in the student because they have tangible evidence of previous achievements. They should feel encouraged by their proven abilities rather than demotivated by criticisms.
- 7. Feedback provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.**

Teachers often look to music festival adjudicators to affirm their instruction but also to present principles and criticisms from a different perspective. Having a musical concept or technical challenge explained by an adjudicator who uses new analogies, metaphors, or practice methods may be hugely beneficial to students and can support teachers' efforts.

Considering the above, let's attempt a second adjudication, aiming for specific, encouraging, age-appropriate feedback rooted in the principles of self-assessment and positive criticism.

Written Adjudication #2:

Thank you for playing this light-hearted rag. Ragtime has been around since the early 1900s when American composer Scott Joplin wrote pieces like "The Maple Leaf Rag" or "The Entertainer."

This style generally includes a quick tempo, a steady left-hand accompaniment pattern, and syncopated (off-beat) right-hand melodic ideas.

In "Coconut Rag," Norton marks the tempo as "Brightly" and specifies cut time (two pulses per measure). Using a metronome to find 80 on the half note, tap your left hand on the half-note pulse on your left leg while your right hand plays. This will help you feel the half-note pulse. In the opening line, the right hand often enters just after the half note pulse. These patterns are the syncopated, "ragged" rhythms that are typical of the "ragtime" style. Keep the right-hand staccatos crisp around these rests so that the silence and ragged rhythms are especially noticeable.

At measure 9, the left hand is marked "piu forte." Until now, the right hand had the tune and the left hand had harmonic fifths to play. Now the left hand has the melody. Let it sing out! By end of the piece, the dynamics get softer. Four beats of rests in the last line build suspense for the final gesture (marked forte). Record yourself and double-check: were the rests full length so the listener is shocked by the final forte?

You've made fine progress! All the groundwork has been laid (clean notes, rhythms, articulations). Now go further with a quicker tempo, even sharper staccato notes, and vivid dynamic contrasts. Thanks again for playing!

Sample Video Adjudication:

Admittedly, the written adjudication is lengthy (261 words) and the video-recorded adjudication was more appropriate to a masterclass, but the lively language, background information, and encouraging suggestions might be used as inspiration for impactful feedback for online adjudications.

As we move through the Covid-19 crisis, the future of in-person music-making seems tenuous at best. But, by embracing the fundamental principles that underpin all adjudicating, we can improve our feedback skills. We'll be better adjudicators at the end of it!

Nicol, D. J., & McFarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Higher Education*, 31(2), 199-218.