



Adjudicating Young Performers

By Amy Boyes, April 2024

Our goal as music festival adjudicators is to encourage all levels of performance and contribute to students' musical growth and development. It is essential that we communicate well with young performers, connecting at their developmental level and inspiring them to build on their skills and abilities. We should give all feedback with kindness and sensitivity to performers' feelings.

Although focused on piano performances, these suggestions are intended to inspire adjudicators of all instruments.

Limitations

When assessing early years performances, music festival adjudicators should consider the attention spans and musical understanding of young performers (four- to six-year-olds).

Child psychologists generally agree that four-year-olds typically have an eight to twelve minute attention span, and six-year-olds have twelve to eighteen minutes.

Although the total length of a music festival class is often determined by the number of performers, adjudicators should be mindful of the time spent writing and delivering feedback. Certainly, if five-year-olds have already quietly listened to ten minutes of performances, the adjudicator has approximately eight minutes to delivery feedback before attention spans will become exhausted.

First-Year Performances

Most first-year performances feature just a few musical elements –simple rhythms, stepwise melodic patterns, and little or no contrasts of touch and tone.

Adjudicator Tip: When the performance repertoire offers few points for discussion, instead focus the adjudication on:

1. **Praise for beginning steps.** Young performers have begun practicing an instrument, performing, and sharing their skills. Celebrate these early steps.
2. **Performance skills.** Young performers sometimes rush the process of settling at an instrument, finishing the piece with patience, or bowing after a performance.

Make it a game: Ask the performers to help you improve your stage manners. You might rush onto the stage and sit too close to the piano, leave the piano bench while still playing notes, or omit bowing. Encourage them to tell you how you could improve. The point is to engage with the students, never mocking, but allowing them the opportunity to teach you.

Then, have the students return to the stage. Through simple things—saying hello to their parents in a loud, projected voice; bowing; clearly announcing the name of their piece—the students will gain confidence on stage.

Second- and Third-Year Performances

Second- and third-year repertoire will likely feature a greater variety of touches, tones and rhythmic complexities. However, young performers require many months (if not years) of review before they remember definitions of musical terms and notational features.

Adjudicator Tip: Define terms as you give feedback. Even if a child confidently performs a staccato, they may not remember what it means to play staccato.

For example, when adjudicating V. Rebikov’s “The Bear,” saying “The tenuto notes—those note with bars in the right hand—could be played with a grumpier tone. Maybe our bear has just woken and he’s feeling a bit hungry” is more impactful than saying, “Explore a more emphatic tenuto marking.” Most children would struggle to define “emphatic” or “tenuto.” Applying the imagery of a grumpy bear will help them remember the terminology and achieve the desired tone.

Adjudicator Tip: Show rather than tell. For more abstract concepts such as “musical flow” or a “dancelike feeling,” demonstrate at the instrument.

For example, “Minuet en Rondeau” by J. F. Rameau has a steady flow of eighths in the melodic line. However, this line can feel tedious if played with a uniform tone or unbalanced hands.

Make it a game: Ask the students to listen for the version that sounds like a dance. Start by playing with little colour contrasts and a staid flow. Then play again with a gentle flow, shaping in the melody line, balanced hands and dancelike feeling. Asking them to actively listen will engage them in the adjudication process.

Adjudicator Tip: Pick only one or two concepts to highlight during the verbal adjudication portion if a class features contrasting repertoire. The written adjudications can still contain a thorough summary of many concepts.

For example, if a Level 3 piano recital class features A. Crosby Gaudet’s “The Stormy Sea,” D. Kabalevsky’s “Clowns” and Y. Nakada’s “The Song of Twilight,” choose articulation/contrasts of touch to discuss. By focusing on only one or two universal concepts, the students may retain more feedback than if many elements of the individual performances are discussed.

Make it a game: The opening line of “The Stormy Sea” has a legato, hand-over-hand pattern which can be challenging to play smoothly. Have the students pick the smoothest version without any “rocks” for an imaginary ship to encounter. Moving swiftly, demonstrate the opening motifs of “Clowns” which have both staccato and legato elements. Again, using relatable imagery, suggest that as the motif expands, the clown is summoning courage to do something silly. This ever-changing articulation contrasts with the legato melodic line of “The Song of Twilight” – a challenge to play with the full phrase in mind. Demonstrating at the instrument, first play with a beat-by-beat emphasis. Then play with more flow over the bar lines to show a long legato line. The students will then choose the most peaceful performance. As time permits, have the students explore these ideas at the instrument.

What Can Adjudicators Expect?

Music festival adjudicators who are parents and/or teachers of small children may find that regular communication and experience informs their adjudication style. However, for those adjudicators who lack regular interaction with four- to six-year-olds, a review of childhood developmental milestones can influence their approach to music festival adjudicating.

[Health Link BC: Growth and Development Milestones](#)



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