

# Assessment in Performance-Based Secondary Music Classes

*Consider these ideas and tools for assessing your students' work and determining grades in your ensembles.*

**Abstract:** After sharing research findings about grading and assessment practices in secondary music ensemble classes, we offer examples of commonly used assessment tools (ratings scale, checklist, rubric) for the performance ensemble. Then, we explore the various purposes of assessment in performance-based music courses: (1) to meet state, national, and school mandates; (2) to provide documentation for grades; (3) to improve individual musicianship and understanding; and (4) to improve instruction. Finally, we conclude with assessment dilemmas and questions for consideration.

**Keywords:** assessment, assessment tools, case law, checklist, ensemble, grading, music education, rating scale, technology

The topic of assessment has been regularly presented in *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)*, a publication of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME).<sup>1</sup> These articles vary in purposes, which include but are not limited to defining assessment terms, offering suggestions for creating your own assessment tools, and understanding the implications of case law on assessment. After sharing research findings about assessment and grading practices of secondary ensemble music teachers and briefly offering examples of assessment tools (ratings scale, checklist, and rubric), we present four purposes of assessment in performance-based music classes: (1) to meet state, national, and school mandates; (2) to provide documentation for grades; (3) to improve individual musicianship and

understanding; and (4) to improve instruction. We conclude with thoughts about technology and assessment, assessment dilemmas, and questions for consideration.

## Assessment in Secondary Music Classes

Researchers have found that fine arts teachers in the United States, in general, tend to favor basing student grades on nonachievement criteria, such as attendance, behavior, and participation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, teachers who teach elective classes often inflate grades using more subjective grading criteria rather than focusing assessment on student achievement.<sup>3</sup> To see if these trends held true in performance-based music classrooms, researchers Joshua A. Russell and James R.

**TABLE 1****Grade Criteria and Weighting on Secondary Ensembles**

| Criterion         | %  |
|-------------------|----|
| Achievement       |    |
| Performance/skill | 28 |
| Knowledge         | 12 |
| Nonachievement    |    |
| Attendance        | 25 |
| Attitude          | 27 |
| Practice charts   | 8  |

*Note.* This table represents Russell and Austin's research findings about what is assessed in secondary music ensembles and how much weight is given to each criterion. This is an average percentage of all teachers who took the survey.

Austin surveyed secondary music teachers (352 responded) who taught in the Southwest region of the United States.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, they found that these trends held true.

Russell and Austin found that grades were determined by a combination of achievement and nonachievement criteria (see Table 1 for examples), with the nonachievement criteria receiving greater weight (60 percent). Also, three-quarters of students received a letter grade of A, while fewer than one in ten students received a C or lower. Another finding was that “music course grades were equally weighted with other course grades in calculating student grade point averages and generating credit toward graduation.”<sup>5</sup> In light of these three findings, Russell and Austin questioned the ethics and validity of using nonachievement criteria as the primary basis for grades in music classes and suggested that music teachers use assessment tools for achievement criteria and that music teachers share and discuss assessment tools and strategies.

## Assessment Tools

Since Russell and Austin recommended using assessment tools for achievement criteria, we offer a brief discussion about assessment tools and share a ratings scale, checklist, combination checklist

**TABLE 2****Ratings Scale**

|  |  |           |         |                  |
|--|--|-----------|---------|------------------|
| Playing Test Rubric:   | A = 41–45; B = 35–40; C = 29–34; D = 21–28; F = 0–20 |           |         |                  |
| 1. Posture was balanced, relaxed, and elongated.   |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 2. Position of instrument to the body was excellent.   |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 3. Left and right hand/arm position was excellent.   |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 4. Tone was clear, resonant, and beautiful. (Strings: Bow placement, weight, and speed were proportional to each other. The bow was straight/parallel to the bridge. Winds and Vocal: Air support, breath control, and embouchure were excellent.) |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 5. Intonation was excellent.   |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 6. Rhythm was excellent.   |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 7. Pieces were played musically.   |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 8. Tempo was appropriate for passage.  |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| 9. Articulations were clear and appropriate for the style and markings of the piece.   |  |           |         |                  |
| 1 Strongly disagree  | 2 Disagree   | 3 Neutral | 4 Agree | 5 Strongly agree |
| Comments:  |  |           |         |                  |

and ratings scale, and a combination rubric and ratings scale. All these examples are directed toward performance and skills tests, as these were the most common achievement criteria used to determine grades for students in secondary ensemble classes. However, these tools can be used for knowledge-based tests and other criteria-based activities and assignments. Additional examples of assessment tools can be found in previous *MEJ* articles, in NAFME assessment workbooks, and in other publications.<sup>6</sup>

Ratings scales make explicit what categories will be assessed. One benefit of rating scales, such as the one in Table 2, is that students are given more information about the degree to which they succeeded in demonstrating a list of specific skills. This makes it easier for a student to act on the feedback given, making the assessment more meaningful to the student's development and thus the overall performance program.

Students can also use this tool for self-assessment. What is lacking in a simple rating scale is the method by which a student can and should improve, so including a section for comments in which a teacher or peer can give input about how to improve can make a rating scale all the more useful.

In a checklist Pellegrino developed for students' individual playing tests, there are nine categories of skills to evaluate: posture, right-hand position, left-hand position, tone, intonation, rhythm, tempo, style and technique, and musicality/interpretation. In addition, each category has specific features that will be assessed. Included is one example from the musicality/interpretation category (see Table 3).

Similarly, checklists can be used as summative reports to students. As shown in Table 4, a list of observable outcomes in a string class can give teachers a quick way of assessing students' demonstration

**TABLE 3****Performance Test Checklist Example**

|  |
|--|
| _____ Musicality/interpretation.   |
| _____ Tone (including vibrato), articulations, tempo, tempo variations, timbre, and dynamics all add to the interpretation of the piece. |
| _____ Phrasing is excellent (notes lead toward or away from appropriate notes consistently).   |
| _____ Musical meaning/expression/mood is readily identifiable to the listener.   |
| _____ Musical meaning/expression is appropriate for piece (sorrowful, peaceful, joyful, meditative, etc.).                               |

**TABLE 4****Summative Assessment, Combination Checklist and Ratings Scale for Assessing Healthy Upper String Technique**

| Behavior                                       | Not Observed | Observed |
|--|--------------|----------|
| Left-hand contact point                        |              |          |
| Effective posture                              |              |          |
| Relaxed thumb                                  |              |          |
| All fingers down—"boxed" first finger          |              |          |
| Knuckle angle toward scroll                    |              |          |
| Clean string crossing (plays one string only)  |              |          |
| Plays low 2 notes (C or F)                     |              |          |
| Interval between low 2 and 3 is a major second |              |          |
| Bow does not travel in the bout                |              |          |
| Tone is balanced on all four strings           |              |          |
| Relaxed bow hold                               |              |          |
| Left wrist gently curved                       |              |          |
| Straight bows                                  |              |          |
| Big bows                                       |              |          |
| Adjusting intonation                           |              |          |
| Consistent tempo maintained                    |              |          |
| Began on correct bow direction                 |              |          |
| Slurs executed correctly                       |              |          |
| Equal amount of bow used in slurs              |              |          |
| Interval accuracy                              |              |          |
| Shifted on correct finger                      |              |          |
| Entire hand moves as one                       |              |          |
| Pitch accuracy on shift                        |              |          |
| Third-position finger pattern accuracy         |              |          |
| Shift in time                                  |              |          |
|  | Total points | /25      |

of achievement while also offering feedback to the student on specific skills that can be improved upon. An additional benefit of these easy-to-use assessments is that they focus on observable and actionable items, leading students to the understanding that musical skill development is incremental and not just an outcome of predetermined "talent," an all too commonly held idea. Checklist items may or may not be combined with a ratings scale.

Rubrics provide narrative information describing how students perform on specific tasks. In recent years, however, the narrative information is most often combined with a ratings scale. Edward P. Asmus defined rubrics as "a set of scoring criteria used to determine the value of a student's performance on assigned tasks; the criteria are written so students are able to learn what must be done to improve their performances in the future."<sup>7</sup> Table 5 shows a portion of an example of a combined rubric and ratings scale.

Despite the large amount of attention giving to rubrics in the current educational climate, teachers are often left to create their own with little guidance. Although this can be daunting, following a few generalized guidelines can help teachers create rubrics that will inform their instruction as well as give meaningful feedback to students:

- Identify all the constructs that lead to success in the given task. By knowing what a student must do to succeed, a teacher will be better able to create rubrics that more accurately assess student achievement (it will also help focus a teacher's observations).
- Decide how important each construct is and assign point values accordingly.

**TABLE 5****Combination Rubric and Ratings Scale**

|                     | <b>0 points</b>  | <b>1 points</b>   | <b>2 points</b>   | <b>3 points</b>   |
|---------------------|--|---|---|---|
| Style and technique | <p>Style and technique need immediate attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music needs to flow (lilt, appropriate accents on strong beats, swing, flourishes, etc.)</li> <li>• Beginnings and ends of notes need to match written and historically stylistic articulations</li> <li>• Every note is not easily heard and/or appropriate in volume</li> <li>• Bow and left hand/tonguing and fingers are not aligned</li> <li>• Vibrato is too fast/slow, wide/narrow, used scarcely/excessively)</li> <li>• Work to develop smoother transitions between registers (shifting, over breaks, etc.)</li> </ul> | <p>Style and technique need work. Please address the 2 or 3 circled issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music needs to flow (lilt, appropriate accents on strong beats, swing, flourishes, etc.)</li> <li>• Beginnings and ends of notes need to match written and historically stylistic articulations</li> <li>• Every note is not easily heard and/or appropriate in volume</li> <li>• Bow and left hand/tonguing and fingers are not aligned</li> <li>• Vibrato is too fast/slow, wide/narrow, used scarcely/excessively)</li> <li>• Work to develop smoother transitions between registers (shifting, over breaks, etc.)</li> </ul> | <p>Style and technique are good. Continue to work on the circled issue:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music needs to flow (lilt, appropriate accents on strong beats, swing, flourishes, etc.)</li> <li>• Beginnings and ends of notes need to match written and historically stylistic articulations</li> <li>• Every note is not easily heard and/or appropriate in volume</li> <li>• Bow and left hand/tonguing and fingers are not aligned</li> <li>• Vibrato is too fast/slow, wide/narrow, used scarcely/excessively)</li> <li>• Work to develop smoother transitions between registers (shifting, over breaks, etc.)</li> </ul> | <p>Style and technique are excellent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music flows appropriate to the style and meter (lilt, appropriate accents on strong beats, swing, flourishes, etc.)</li> <li>• Beginnings and ends of notes are appropriate articulations</li> <li>• Every note is easily heard and appropriate in volume</li> <li>• Bow and left hand/tonguing and fingers are aligned</li> <li>• Vibrato is well developed and used appropriately</li> <li>• Smooth transitions between registers (shifting, over breaks, etc.)</li> </ul> |

- Keep the rubric itself as easy to read as possible while containing all of the most pertinent information.
- Allow students to see the rubric prior to the observed task, and invite student input about what should be included in the rubric. This gives some ownership to students as well as informs the teacher about students' primary concerns.
- Focus the rubric items on observable phenomena that deal with processes rather than outcomes. Focusing on the process gives students actionable information, while focusing on the outcomes fosters the antiquated notion of musical talent as a monolithic entity.

For more specific information about building rubrics or rubric examples, please reference additional resources.<sup>8</sup>

These are just four types of assessment tools. Teachers can choose which assessment tool appeals to them and

develop their own to accommodate what they teach, how they teach it, and what they value most, in general or at a specific time in students' development. Of course, assessment tools can be used to assess more than just playing skills. Other examples include but are not limited to compositions, papers, tests, and projects, to name just a few. Assessment tools might also be used to facilitate peer and self-assessment.

Whatever the preferred assessment tool, teachers should consider whether the tool is both valid and reliable. In other words, teachers should ask themselves, "Does the assessment instrument measure what I want it to measure?" and "Will the assessment instrument yield consistent results?" For example, if a teacher wants to test whether a student can play a one-, two-, or three-octave G major scale in tune, testing whether the student can write the key signature and write the notes of the scale on the staff would not be a valid measurement.

This does not mean that paper-and-pencil tests are irrelevant, only that this measurement format would not assess whether students hear the G major scale in their minds and produce it in tune vocally or on their instruments. Even though this is not a valid measurement to use to assess whether students can play or sing a scale in tune, it would be reliable assessment, as a G major scale will always have an F# in the key signature, and it will always consist of G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, and G.

### Purposes of Assessment

Using data from assessments is just part of good teaching. Many teachers already use informal assessment as part of a "teaching cycle."<sup>9</sup> For example, a teacher asks students to play or sing music while focusing on something specific, such as articulation or tone. Teachers assess their students' playing and then share with them what they did

well and what they can do to improve. John S. Millican and Kristen Pellegrino suggested that informal assessments “should be happening often throughout every class to check on student progress and decide if students need more support in order to be successful or if they have internalized and automated musical skills and knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, assessment illuminates how the teacher should proceed. If students need more support, the teacher needs to modify his or her instruction so that students can better understand concepts and skills. Improving teacher effectiveness and student learning is the prime purpose of formative assessment, which can be informal or formal assessments. Summative assessments help teachers and students understand and document how much individual students or student ensembles have grown in their musical understanding, musical performance, and level of musicianship.

We present four differing purposes of assessment. Some tools and strategies may be used for multiple purposes, but we suggest it is always important for music teachers to be intentional about the purpose and use of any assessment. It is also important to consider who might use these tools, as outcomes will differ with peer, self, and teacher use of these tools. We begin with extrinsic reasons for assessment (meeting stakeholders’ mandates and providing documentation for grades) and then consider how assessment can be aligned with intrinsic reasons for teaching music (promoting students’ individual musicianship and understanding, and improving instruction).

## Assessment to Meet National, State, and School Mandates

Based on the 1994 National Standards for Music Education and the new 2014 National Core Music Standards (see [nafme.org/standards](http://nafme.org/standards) for an overview), it appears that music educators value performing/presenting/producing, creating, responding to music, and making connections between other arts and subjects outside of the arts.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, we suggest that our assessment tools, designed

to inform educational practices, be aligned with these four categories.

Many national, state, and school district mandates include using assessment tools to show student growth. For example, performance exams might involve a pretest/posttest format. It is obvious that students will show improvement from the first sight-reading of a piece to the concert performance, but documenting what specifically has improved is valuable.

We feel strongly that teachers should try to combine efforts to collect these data with efforts to meet other assessment goals. We recommend teachers avoid assessing lower-level cognitive skills, such as content/knowledge, that are not musical and instead measure higher-level cognitive skills, such as improvisation, composition, or writing evaluation or analytical papers (i.e., compare and contrast papers about different performances of the same piece) to show student growth.<sup>12</sup> See the work of Wendell Hanna for specific suggestions that all music educators can use.<sup>13</sup>

Teachers should also consider assessing the affective (feeling) domain, such as writing papers about their emotive responses, and/or psychomotor (kinesthetic) domains.<sup>14</sup> If these types of activities are assessed throughout the year, growth will be documented.

Taking this one step further, NAFME leaders suggest that teachers share all assessment results with stakeholders:

- **Be able to document and explain to colleagues, administrators, and the public the student assessments that you currently use.** Ensure that your supervisors understand the assessments you use to shape your teaching.
- **Take a serious interest in assessment tools that evaluate individual student learning in music,** such as tools that are used by other music teachers, discussed in professional literature, presented at conferences, and available through other in-service education opportunities.
- **Collaborate with other music education colleagues to develop**

**uniform assessments that can be used in your school.** When your district or state develops larger-scale assessments, take an active part in the development of those assessments. Work to ensure that such assessments reflect a balanced program, including not only responding to music but also creating and performing music.

- **Report on the results of your assessments to parents through all available and appropriate means,** including student achievement reports, school concerts, and Parent-Teacher Association meetings.<sup>15</sup>

## Assessment to Provide Documentation for Grades (Evaluation)

It is important to consider the relationship between grading and assessment in performance-based secondary music courses. Asmus stated, “From a teaching perspective, assessment involves not only objectively measuring acquired knowledge and skill over time in order to assign a fair grade, but also identifying future learning experiences that the teacher may offer to enhance student learning.”<sup>16</sup> Alfie Kohn regularly criticizes the practice of grading, and he stated,

Grades cannot be justified on the grounds that they motivate students, because they actually undermine the sort of motivation that leads to excellence. Using them to sort students undercuts our efforts to educate. And to the extent that we want to offer students feedback about their performance—a goal that demands a certain amount of caution lest their involvement in the task itself be sacrificed—there are better ways to do this than by giving grades.<sup>17</sup>

Kohn has written extensively on this topic, and the reader is encouraged to consider his work and the work of others who examine the relationship between grading and motivation. Secondary students need to begin to view learning as the goal and not “good



grades.” However, this is a difficult concept and one that is deeply rooted in experiences they may have had in other courses. In addition, the fact that performance-based courses are often elective courses means that if performance class teachers give student low grades, then students may quit, a concern echoed in the research presented at the beginning of the article.<sup>18</sup>

We suggest that teachers differentiate between grading and assessment. Criteria like concert attendance, practice records, and behavior points may be easy and common grading practices but are not valid indicators of achievement in a music classroom. John W. Richmond warned music teachers that a continued “chronic naiveté” would lead to a greater number of successful student grade disputes as well as increasing court interference.<sup>19</sup> Although showing up is important, it is not an indicator of musical growth, and evaluating (grading) students on such criteria actually adds to the devaluing of music study in schools. Moreover, such grading practices can lead to legal issues and the overturning of grades.<sup>20</sup> Grades should be based on student achievement in music and provide students, parents, policymakers, and the public at large with accurate and appropriate assessment information regarding what students know and can do musically as well as the efficacy of instruction. Regardless of the format any assessment might take, the intent of the assessment should be to provide students, parents, and administrators with information about musical skill and knowledge development.

## Assessment to Improve Individual Musicianship and Understanding

Despite the fact that much of the conversation surrounding assessment now focuses on teacher assessment, the most important mission of the teacher is to help individual students develop their musical skills. Teachers who seamlessly (or nearly so) integrate assessment into their everyday pedagogies are better informed about their individual students’

needs and therefore are better able to help them improve. Too often, we rely on comments to the whole class or large-ensemble feedback (e.g., festival ratings) to give us information about our students. Such feedback, while possibly informative, is less valuable when trying to assess individual musical growth.

We suggest that music teachers seek out additional training in how to create fair, valid, and reliable assessments and how to evaluate their assessment instruments after they are used. Teachers might look to the resources mentioned here, ask district supervisors to provide this professional development, or seek out additional courses, conference sessions, colleagues, mentors, or nearby university faculty members with experience and knowledge in developing the best assessment tools to assess student learning. Given the vast knowledge teachers have of their students and the specific curricula in their schools, they should be the primary test creators and can focus playing tests on the most developmentally appropriate skills and guide students in their ability to peer and self-assess.

We presented examples of ratings scales, checklists, and rubrics in this article to allow students to give specific feedback about their playing. In this way, each student receives individual feedback about his or her overall playing in addition to the general ensemble feedback or individual feedback on the specific issue being addressed at the moment. Students might also compose or arrange a piece, listen to three different recordings of the same piece and write a compare/contrast paper, or write a historical paper about the influence of politics on a composer’s musical choices. They could also compare assessments of the ensemble between rehearsals, between rehearsal and concert, or between the concert and the festival performance. Appropriate assessment tools can be created to assess all of these experiences that lead to improved individual musicianship and understanding.

Despite some concerns over students’ ability to accurately self-evaluate,

self-evaluations can address individual playing, ensemble playing, professional musicians’ playing, or other musical projects and these experiences.<sup>21</sup> Self-evaluations can be connected to overall curricular goals and can be connected to student comprehension, skill development, musicianship, and artistry, which can take the form of written, verbal, aural, and musical performance assessments. To help students develop self-evaluation skills, teachers can ask for student input when defining the self-assessment tool, give direct instruction as to how to use the criteria to evaluate their own work, give students feedback on their self-evaluations, and help students develop action plans based on their self-evaluations.<sup>22</sup> Thomas W. Goolsby also offers examples of self-assessment tools.<sup>23</sup>

## Assessment to Improve Instruction

To help improve instruction, teachers should continually reflect on student outcomes from already-created assessments in order to explore what could be taught more thoroughly, what could be presented differently, and what could be done less of in the future. Teachers can improve their instruction by using a wide array of assessment instruments, including attitude scales, student feedback forms, playing exams, and written tests of musical knowledge. Better understanding what students have and have not internalized and relating it back to your teaching strategies is an imperative part of the assessment process.

## Some Final Thoughts

We would be remiss if we did not at least touch on the use of technology in assessment. Technology (e.g., Smart Music) can be a wonderful tool to use to help evaluate student learning, improve instruction, and store documentation and results (i.e., recordings, spreadsheets). For example, some technology enables us to hear student practice sessions so we can further assess whether students use the practice strategies we

suggest and if they have internalized content we are addressing in class.

There are benefits and drawbacks to the use of such technologies. Students must all have access to any technology used in class, which can be cost-prohibitive. Although the purpose of this article is not to discuss specific technology-based assessment tools, teachers should consider a few questions before using technology as an assessment tool:

- Will all my students have equal access to the technology?
- Will my budget be able to cover any up-front as well as future maintenance cost of any technology?
- Does the new technology really enhance my ability to give individual and group feedback to my students?
- As I am the one who knows the needs of my students best, will I remain in control of what is assessed and how it is assessed using this technology?
- How can the use of technology help me improve my instruction?

If a teacher can answer yes to each of these questions, he or she may have located an excellent new tool for assessment.

When thinking about developing and/or borrowing assessment tools and analyzing assessment data, consider some of the following questions:

- What is the fundamental purpose of assessment?
- How closely aligned are your assessment practices and music teaching philosophy?
- Do you use your assessment practices to improve student learning?
- Do you use your assessment practices to improve your instruction?
- How valid and reliable are your assessment tools?
- Who will see the assessments?
- What is the relationship between your assessments and your grading policy?

Assessment tools are useful for multiple reasons, including improving instruction,

helping students learn what is expected as well as what teachers believe students are doing well and what areas they need to improve, providing data that may be viewed by stakeholders, and providing documentation for grades. Additionally, once students become accustomed to these tools, they can be used as the basis for teaching peer and self-assessment strategies as well. Although we understand that teachers face many challenges, such as concerns about class enrollments (to protect class offerings and/or teaching positions), addressing curricular and extracurricular concerns, and viewing music as an artistic endeavor with subjective elements, we hope that the challenges will not outweigh the benefits and that we have provided some examples and ideas that may be helpful to music teachers.

## NOTES

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