

# DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND *INCLUSION*

## The Jury Is Out

### Evaluating Diverse Music For The Competition Stage

By Leah Claiborne

**W**ith a new competition season quickly approaching, many teachers not only have students entering various music competitions, but many of us are also invited to judge these events.

When our colleagues ask us to adjudicate competitions, we are not only being asked to help create a ranking for the prizes, but arguably, our most important role as an adjudicator is to provide valuable and constructive critiques to help the contestants further develop their artistic skills. Competitions can be viewed

as another learning opportunity for our students, and we, as adjudicators, must be prepared to evaluate the musical and technical abilities of the music presented—no matter the composer.

It is our hope that students will bring more diverse music to the competition stages this season, and adjudicators must be prepared to help give scholarly critiques for all music presented. Presented here are the most used comments I have seen from judges

when evaluating diverse music. This article aims to help facilitate better language and objectives to focus on when critiquing music that we may not have heard before.

#### *“Thank You for Introducing Me to This Piece”*

The most popular comment I have seen written is when a judge thanks a student for exposing them to a piece of diverse literature for the first time. This comment alone is not problematic. What is problematic is when this is the only comment that is written. Far too many times judges write long paragraphs of critiques for Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, but leave one sentence for diverse literature.

Although adjudicating is a wonderful way to be exposed to more music that you may not have within your own teaching studio, our role is not to merely thank students for this exposure but to evaluate the musical performance that was given. If there are notes on a page that a student has studied that is presented to us, we ought to have the tools and means to offer more than a word of thanks for the musical performance.

#### *“I’m Not an Expert on This Music”*

In the same light, oftentimes adjudicators comment that they are not “an expert” on the music or composer and refrain from providing critiques.

One of my favorite exams I took in graduate school (which I now give to my own pedagogy students) was when I was given several pieces of music without knowing the composer, and I was asked to level the music and describe the technical and musical challenges that a student would need to be able to master when learning the piece. I loved this task because it made an



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equal playing field for evaluating music. No matter if we have heard of the composer or it is our first time listening to a piece, there are so many universal elements with music making that can be discussed. The way a performer structures a melodic line, the way a performer handles dance rhythms, the way a performer executes a technical passage, the way a student observes the dynamic or tempo markings on the score are all areas that can be discussed, evaluated and given critiques to further help the students' development.

This comment is also two-fold because it is also our role as educators to continue to develop more scholarship on diverse literature. The way we do this is by teaching this music, learning about the composers, learning about the stylistic performances and creating pedagogy around diverse literature. My hope is that one day there will be as many interpretations of Manuel Ponce as there is Puccini or as many

interpretations of Peixun Chen as there is Clementi.

## Final Thoughts

It is important that we take time to evaluate each piece with the same amount of importance when we are critiquing diverse repertoire. Our students have spent hours preparing this music to the best of their abilities and we must also come to the table with our best expertise and not shy away from giving feedback due to our unfamiliarity with the music.

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