



Contest and Judging Manual

Published by the
A Cappella Education Association

Current revisions to this document are online at
www.acappellaeducators.com

December, 2015

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Adjudication Practices

A Cappella Education Association (AEA) judges will score each song individually, with the understanding that within a single performance, songs can be at different levels. Using this method, stronger songs will receive higher scores, rather than a weaker song pulling down an entire performance's total score.

Judges will score from 0 to 10 for each element, basing their scores on their lifetime live listening and viewing experiences; judges will not compare performances to professionally recorded and edited recordings/videos when scoring. It is rare that a performance will be absolutely perfect, and an absolutely perfect live performance would seem inhuman and emotionless.

Categories

The AEA judging system is separated into three major categories: Vocal Elements, Musical Elements, and Performance Elements. The Vocal Elements judge will focus mostly on elements involving the ensemble singers' voices; the Musical Elements coach will focus mostly on elements involving the ensemble's performance of the music; and the Performance Elements judges will focus mostly on the visual aspects of the performance as well as the general entertainment effect of the performance.

Below are category and element descriptions with details to assist the judge in honing in on the correct score for each element.

Musical Elements

The Musical Elements judge evaluates the degree to which the performer brings the song and arrangement to life. This is accomplished with consistent and aligned rhythm and groove while the music exhibits exceptional musical contrast and clear phrasing, with energetic, creative, and appropriate background vocals.

Rhythm and Groove

The “Groove” is both the division of the meter and the general order of sounds used, particularly in the percussion part. The groove should be appropriately simple or complex for the song being performed and the sounds used should be creative but also appropriate.

The beat, within the meter, should stay steady and “in the pocket”.

All rhythms should line up metrically; complex rhythmic patterns should be transparent and seamlessly executed.

Bass and Vocal Percussion, in particular, should be well coordinated and seem to be as one instrumental unit throughout the performance.

Musicality

Musicality includes natural, artistic, and contextual use of dynamics, articulation, and phrasing.

Dynamics should vary according to the emotional and dramatic content of the lyrics, harmony, and texture, and will often times follow the contour of the tessitura of the arrangement.

Articulation should appropriately vary through a performance to accent the meaning of the lyrics and the feeling of the arrangement. In some cases a more legato style is more appropriate, while in others a more marcato or staccato will be more appropriate.

Phrases should have appropriate length to the type of song and should very rarely feel ploddy or noty. Breathing too often in a phrase, either for soloist or backgrounds, will break down the strength of the phrase. Word and metrical stress play a strong role in the clarity of phrasing so care should be taken so that their use is effective.

Vocalization

Vocalization refers to the sounds made particularly by background singers (non-rhythm section and non-solo). This can refer to words sung by background singers, but mostly refers to syllables

like “ooh” and “ah” that create texture, other syllables that imitate instrument sounds or create different textures within the music, “white notes”, and echoes.

Vocalization should all be appropriate to the song, the performance and the ensemble and should not overshadow the soloist unless that is clearly the desired effect and a moment in the performance.

Vocalization should be energetic, even in long and sustained tones, and should be creative and contribute positively to the overall performance.

Suitability

While this element does not garner a score, it may be important that the judge comment on the suitability of a song or arrangement for the performing ensemble. It may be that the content of the song is simply inappropriate in some way for that ensemble. It may also be that the arrangement is too simple or too complex for the given ensemble.

Performance Elements

The Performance Elements judge evaluates the degree to which the performer delivers the song visually and emotionally. This is achieved through performance aspects including ensemble movement and emotional connection, stylistic solo singing, and the overall execution of the intended plan.

Visual Presentation

The visual aspect of the ensemble's performance should be well thought out and match the music that is being performed. The group should feel as one cohesive whole following and executing the planned visual presentation. This includes emotional connection to the song, physical energy and presence, formations (triangle, staggered lines, double rainbow, etc.), choreography, instrument imitation, etc.

It is important to note that complex choreography is not always necessary to make a performance visually compelling. Even in an up-tempo song it is possible to perform at a high level, visually, without much planned and unified choreography.

Solo

The solo singer should have clear understanding of the lyrics and feel of the song being sung. The soloists' vocal performance should be stylistically appropriate for the genre. The soloists' movements should also be stylistically appropriate to the genre, and should also either match or clearly contrast, as necessary, the visual performance of the rest of the ensemble.

The soloist should be emotionally accessible and believable and allow the audience to connect with them. A perfect performance would feel as though the soloist were writing the song on the spot, born directly from their immediate thoughts and emotions, and the audience is simply experiencing real life.

The vocal quality and technique of the singer will not be taken into account in this element, unless it directly influences the style of the song, as that is included under the Tone Quality element of the Vocal Elements category.

NOTE: If there is no soloist, then there is likely to be a group of people or a voice part/section singing the melody. Treat the entire melody group as the soloist, and apply all of the above to the section. The solo section should be unified in its emotional delivery and stand out as the main "story-tellers" in the performance.

General Effect

The entire performance of the song should have a clear sense of cohesion. It should be engaging, interesting, and creative and should make the audience feel as though they are a part of the performance. No element (Vocal Quality, Intonation, Rhythm & Groove, Visual Presentation, etc.) should stand out as most important, but instead the performance should feel like one piece of artwork with every element playing its balanced role in the outcome. The audience should not see or feel any of the technique or plan as it should all feel like a natural part of the performance.

Look & Style

While this element does not garner a score, it may be important that the judge comment on the overall confidence and demeanor of the ensemble as well as the way their look matches the performance they are giving. Entrance, exit, and apparel and accessories are all an important part of the look of a performance as a whole and its effectiveness.

Vocal Elements

The Vocal Elements judge evaluates the degree to which the performer achieves artistic singing in the a cappella idiom. This is accomplished with quality, resonant, healthy ensemble and solo singing that is well balanced and unified and consistently in tune.

Ensemble Tone Quality

The voice should at all times be freely produced, utilizing good breath management and should use the natural resonance of the vocal tract (throat and mouth). The ensemble tone should be consistently rich and full. There should be no signs of difficulties.

Vocal tension is only to be used for deliberate effect, usually when imitating certain instruments and only briefly. Otherwise the voice should be free of tension.

The vocal quality and vocal choices of the soloists will be taken into account as a part of this element, but the style and visual/emotional elements of the soloists will not be.

Intonation

The accuracy of the intervals in each individual line should be accurate, confident, and unwavering. All notes and intervals in the melody should feel natural and pleasing.

Harmonies, especially homophonic sonorities, should be instantly vertically tuned to the root of the harmony.

The AEA generally prefers just intonation for harmonic (vertical) tuning to allow for the most match and unity of an ensemble, while melodic (horizontal) tuning will most likely be much closer to equal temperament to remain true to the tonal center.

The soloist may bend the pitch or alter the melody as he or she sees fit, provided those embellishment choices match the style of the song and arrangement.

Balance and Unity

The various musical layers of the piece should be clear and hierarchically balanced. Similar lines should be unified in vocal texture, style, and articulation. Synchronization of voices on the same or similar line is a key factor in the unity of the performance. All lines should be combined such that the ensemble feels as one cohesive whole.

Blend must not be achieved through the weakening of any given voice (again, voices should all be fully resonant and efficiently produced), rather it is through proper volume balance and

vowel/syllable choices that the correct mix should be achieved. The listener expects to hear the ensemble as a unit, free from distractions by individual voices.

Note on scoring: All elements are initially scored on a scale of 0 to 10, however Ensemble Vocal Quality and Intonation, having been deemed most important to the AEA's standards, will be multiplied by 1.5, essentially making their scales 0 to 15.

Scoring

Judging sheets

Each judge will score each song individually according to their category, using a separate judging sheet for each song. The top of the score sheet includes lines for the ensemble name and song title.

Below that is a scale from 0 to 10. This scale can be used in a number of ways, discussed later in “Scoring Methodology”. Directly below the scale are associated words to help the judge appropriately rate each element of the performance.

Each element is separated into its own space on the sheet. For each element there is list of keywords and descriptors on the left below the title to help guide the judge’s thoughts and comments while analyzing the performance and give them common vocabulary to use in comments. On the right side of the sheet is where the score for each element will be written. In between those is ample space for judges to comment on the performance.

Near the bottom on the right of each sheet, in the bold box, is where the composite score for the category will be written. At the end of the entire performance this number, for each song, will be transferred to the scoring form.

At the very bottom of the sheet there is room for the judge to make note of two or three strengths of the ensemble and then two or three areas in which the ensemble can improve. These are to assist the judge in the evaluation masterclasses after the competition has concluded.

Scoring Sheets

The Scoring Sheets are half sheets with space on them for writing up to 4 scores per performing group. At the end of the performance, the judge will take the scores written on the bold box of each judging sheet and write it in the appropriate box on the scoring sheet. This sheet will be given to the Contest Administrator to be entered into the system. The judge keeps the judging sheet for review in the deliberations about special awards and for the evaluation masterclasses.

Objective Scoring

It is easy for judges, as humans, to be very subjective about a performance and about the scores given. These guidelines are given to make each element as objective as possible through lessening the influence of the factor or personal preference.

Judges should take care to follow the rubrics and definitions given to come to their final scores.

Judges should also learn to be aware of their “hot buttons” and be careful not to over-reward or over-penalize a group based on those. For example, a judge may be very picky about tuning, and may lower a score every time an ensemble sings a chord out of tune. Instead, the judge should

take into account all chords sung and consider if the whole performance really was rarely in tune, or if it was actually frequently in tune but those few instances of out of tune singing were too heavily weighing on them.

Scoring Methodology

There are various ways of coming to a score and every judge will find their own methods. As long as the score that comes out is consistent with the current standards of the AEA judging system, and the judge is then able to give an effective evaluation workshop, then each judge may use whatever method works best for them. The evaluations are the largest educational benefit to the performers and, as such, are most important to the mission of the AEA.

Use of the score sheet:

1. The scale and box below it are reminders of the judging ranges and the concept of the overall effect. The judge may wish to circle or flag certain ranges on the scale or particularly appropriate phrases within the box.
2. The lists of ideas and trigger words on the left are to be circled or checked off for later comments. Consider them to be for reference; they can serve as an abbreviation list for comments as well.
3. During the performance the judge will identify two or three of the most significant opportunities for improvement in the performance and several “fixes” for each. The judge will also point out the most successful aspects of the performance, giving the performer a chance to relate to the good experience firsthand.
4. Each judge will determine, through practice, how much detail is necessary to trigger recollection of the performance and focus on the major items. Flaws in the smallest sense are not relevant the judge will be looking at the broader perspective. The judge will find elements of the performance that, if changed, would most significantly result in improvement.
5. The cumulative score for each element on the judging form will be written in the bold box at the bottom right of that form, and that number will then be copied into the appropriate song box on the judging form. The judging form is then retrieved by the Contest Administrator at the end of each performance.