

How can we objectively rank and rate musicianship?

Jeff Bolduc

The concept of musicality as we interpret it in the 21st century has its roots in music aptitude tests developed in the early 20th century. Its use and meaning have been adapted to fit a wide variety of philosophical viewpoints over that time. The process of testing a person or ensembles musicality has seen many transformations. The term musicality is presently used in the context of an advanced stage of technique and expression, and appears on grade sheets used to test and evaluate individuals and ensembles of all types in music classrooms, and festivals and music competitions around the world.

How can vague words such as musicality or musicianship be expected to bear any consistency in the assessment process of musical ability?

The development of musicality testing.

Carl E. Seashore at the University of Iowa conducted the first widely used studies of musicality in the first four decades of the 20th century. The result of these studies was the Seashore Measures of Musical Talents. These 'Measures' consist of six tests covering pitch, loudness, rhythm, time, timbre, and tonal memory and were used to evaluate a subject's musical aptitude. This type of approach, where overall ability is measured by testing each element separately is known as 'atomistic'.

Seashore was criticized by some of his peers for this system. In his book *The Psychology of Music*, first published in 1938, Seashore spends considerable space justifying the usefulness of his work as an elemental skill determinant. Each element is tested separately and the results are just that, a measure of that element alone. These results don't project future musicality of the person. "The purpose of these measures is to see whether or not a given measure indicates any probable impediment" to future musical ability¹. In other words, someone who performs poorly on the pitch test would most likely struggle as a violinist.

Seashore's biggest critic at the time was James Mursell. Mursell and his followers believed in a more 'omnibus' approach to testing. This advocated a more holistic view which took into consideration the aesthetic and sociological influences of the examinee, and incorporates the musical elements into a more integrated test of musicality and music aptitude. If a trumpet player displays good tone but bad rhythm, it is a direct measure of their level of musicality. Unless tested together, a complete picture of their musical aptitude is impossible.

Mursell, a prominent leader in the MENC in the mid-20th century, was the editor of the *Music Supervisors Journal* in the late 1930's. He used this position to question Seashore's atomistic Measures in the *Journal* in October, 1937. Mursell believed that atomistic testing held no validity in assessing a person's musicality. Seashore revised his measures in 1938 with the previously mentioned book, *Psychology of Music*. In the appendix he chose to respond to Mursell's "aggressive and lucid formulation"². As stated earlier, Seashore didn't feel he had to defend his Measures, but that James Mursell was misrepresenting the purpose and usefulness of the results. A collection of separate criteria can lead to a holistic assessment. Mursell would go on to a distinguished career as a psychologist and teacher of music education at Columbia

University and leave a lasting legacy with numerous articles and publications, and through the many influential students who continued his work and beliefs.

The leader in current musicality testing is Dr. Edwin E. Gordon, a retired professor of music who still performs research at the University of South Carolina – Columbia. Dr. Gordon studied tests of aptitude and achievement that have been used in the past and developed his Musical Aptitude Profile (MAP), published in 1965 and still used today. His research indicates that music aptitude is developmental during the early years of life. A child's musical aptitude can be influenced and developed up until about age 10, after which it stabilizes. He has spent considerable time as an educator advocating for formal musical activities for young children through age five. His belief that young children can increase musical aptitude if given regular exposure is shared with such educational pioneers as Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze and Suzuki.

Other highly regarded aptitude tests Dr. Gordon developed are the 'Primary, Intermediate and Advanced Measure of Music Audiation'; the 'Iowa Tests of Music Literacy'; the 'Instrument Timbre Preference Test'; and the 'Harmonic and Rhythm Improvisation Readiness Records'. Professor Gordon continues to explore music development with infants and to refine those skills in children to age three. His current research includes his continued development of the Music Learning Theory, and studying rhythm in movement and music. Modern scholars consider Gordon's approach atomistic, as they test aptitude by assessing musical elements separately to arrive at an overall picture of a subject's musical aptitude.

The concepts of intelligence and musicality continue to evolve. In 1983, Howard Gardner, a Professor of Psychology at Harvard University "argued that 'reason, intelligence, logic and knowledge are not synonymous...', setting forth a theory of multiple intelligences".³ Gardner defined seven distinct intelligences: logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal, and musical. Over the past five years he has added a potential eighth intelligence – naturalist. Gardner's theory pushed school administrators to rethink curriculums focused on mathematical and verbal understanding, which for years have been the center of school scheduling and standardized testing.

This interconnection of disciplines, which prescribes that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses in each of the intelligences, validates the results of musical aptitude tests mentioned earlier. Some people are more 'music smart' than others. The one conflict is that Gardner prescribes that people can continue to develop these intelligences as they go through life. Gordon's notion that the development of musical aptitude stabilizes by the age of ten runs counter to that thinking. Gardner is a founder of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's 'Project Zero'. Project Zero's mission is "to understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity in the arts, as well as humanistic and scientific disciplines, at the individual and institutional levels."⁴

So What Is Musicality?

By definition, musicality is: the quality or condition of being musical; having musical sensitivity, knowledge of, or talent; or the property of sounding like music. A variation is musicianship, which is defined as 'Artistry in performing music'.

It would appear that in the time Carl Seashore was establishing his Measures of Musical Talents, words such as musicality and talent were applied to basic tonal and rhythmic aptitude. An examinee could score extremely high on all levels of the Seashore test and still not develop

into a 'musician' of virtuosity. Measuring how successful that person will express him or her self musically once given training is not possible with aptitude type tests alone. That is the difference between the term musicality as it was used in early assessment projects, and in current context when associated with measuring skill achievement in musical performance. The term musicality no longer applies to possessing basic musical skills, but to a certain level of achievement in expression, stylistic integrity, and technical excellence. *It is a term that has vague connotations, making it difficult to standardize by definition, and difficult for teachers and adjudicators to interpret and quantify in the wide array of competitive musical events that are graded, ranked, or rated.*

Musicality has become a matter of aesthetic judgment on the part of the listener. What makes something beautiful, pensive, scary, sad, fun, cute, entertaining, pretentious, discordant, harmonious, boring, humorous, or tragic? Ultimately everyone, whether trained or untrained, can decide for them selves what is musical to them. In a testing situation however, it is imperative that the evaluator is well versed in musical techniques (instrumental, composition, educational, theoretical, etc.). They must also possess a firm grasp on what makes musical genres different from each other, and how these should be performed from a technical, expressive, and aesthetic standpoint. As important is the ability to be indiscriminate and not allow their own personal biases or tastes to taint their assessment of the level of musicality being displayed.

One also has to allow certain leeway for personal tastes and techniques to be displayed by the performer. What makes two great performances of the same piece different yet effective? Carl Seashore spends an entire chapter in his *Psychology of Music* on vibrato. These types of individual interpretive enhancements give each performer elements of uniqueness to add to their performance, even if they play the notes exactly as written. "...of all the ornaments, it (vibrato) produces the most significant changes in tone quality; and because it is the factor on which artistic singing and playing are most frequently judged, whether the factor is consciously recognized as vibrato or not."⁵ Leonard Meyer likewise discusses performance uniqueness in his book *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. His discussion of 'Performance and Deviation' mentions the use of rubato and inflection of pitch. He also notes the freedom of the performer to embellish in Western and non-Western musical traditions.⁶ Such elements add another layer of subjectivity in testing musicality. It is difficult to quantify such an emotional and expressive ornamentation as vibrato.

A similar interpretive device that is a matter of subjective preference more than objective quantification is improvisation. Certainly a teacher well versed in improvisational techniques and history can rate the sophistication, technique and harmonic accuracy, but the performer must be afforded some expressive freedom. Tone quality should also be afforded some leeway in critical analysis. We can identify good, characteristic tone, but the reed choice and brightness a Saxophone player prefers to work towards is their choice.

The final consideration in defining musicality is the inherent differences in evaluating individual musicianship versus the musical qualities of an ensemble. Many of the aforementioned methodologies established in the early part of the 20th century focused solely on individual measurements. In the latter half of the 1900's, the charge was to develop systems that could accommodate the testing and rating of ensembles of all types and sizes. This challenge occurs in all genres, ensemble types (vocal, string, concert band, marching band, jazz and rock ensembles, drum and bugle corps, etc.). How can one come to a singular score when presented

with musicians of varied talents performing together at the same time?

Ensemble Grading.

The most significant connection to make from this brief history is that the debate between 'atomistic' and 'omnibus' approaches to testing, ranking and rating has continued in various music circles and associations. Atomistic is a concrete approach but does not offer a complete picture, while omnibus is subjective and open to individual interpretation. The tick system was truly atomistic; break the performance down to basic technical elements, and equate a score. Only in the 1980's did the 'omnibus' Achievement system come into widespread use at ensemble competitions. This concept of evaluating and quantifying the 'What vs. the How'⁷ is used in some form in most ensemble festivals being organized and evaluated today. It still leaves the question of "what is musical?" up to the vagaries and quirks of whoever is assessing these performances. There are many aesthetic variables in equating demand or excellence. Because of this, it is widely accepted that the higher the number of judges used to quantify a performance, the more reliable the results. Many ensemble competitions have from three to nine judges scoring the performance at the same time. Conversely, there are still many solo audition processes that have one judge for each instrument, with them having sole responsibility for the results. How do these associations strive to ensure some sense of fairness and equity for groups who participate in several graded performances in the course of a school year? Let's look at a few of the most common layouts for music adjudication sheets.

Edwin Gordon notes in his book *Rating Scales and Their Uses for Measuring and Evaluating Achievement in Music Performance* that there are "essentially three types of rating scales: Continuous, Additive, and Numerical".⁸ 'Continuous' features a checklist of achievement. You would have to achieve the basic level before moving up through the next, until reaching the top rating. 'Additive' is basically a checklist of skills. Some areas would be achieved competently while others might not. 'Numerical' would give a scoring range, with the highest number referring to excellence, and the lower numbers extending down towards a poor or insufficient level. Gordon does acknowledge that there are many ways of designing rating scales.

Most ensemble evaluation sheets include a Musicianship or Musicality caption for judges to quantify. The following descriptors, or 'dimensions' as Gordon calls them, are typically found to clarify the terms meaning:

MUSICIANSHIP

- Expression
- Style/Idiomatic Interpretation
- Phrasing
- Communication/Involvement
- Interpretation.

There are variations and other combinations in the wording, but these presently define "Musicianship" to most adjudicators evaluating individual or ensemble performance.

This category usually stands next to another caption for Technique or Excellence. This would allow the judge to score technical skills and training separately from the Musicianship of the group. This box would typically include many of these descriptors:

TECHNIQUE

- Uniformity of Articulation/Enunciation
- Tuning/Intonation
- Breath Support & Control
- Pitch Control/Accuracy
- Rhythmic Control/Accuracy
- Appropriateness of Timbres
- Consistency and Accuracy
- Ensemble Cohesiveness
- Balance and Blend
- Technical Proficiency

Rarely would you see all of these descriptors on any one sheet, but this list represents assessment areas that may be collectively found under 'Technique'. A judge would typically award up to 50 points in each caption (Musicianship and Technique), and give a final score or grade based on a 100 point system.

You see in these lists many words that require clarification if they are to be implemented by an educator: uniformity, accuracy, appropriate, proficient, etc. The interpretation of these terms could each be the topic of further investigation. I will leave the vague connotations that these imply to others, or to the associations who employ them. However, they are used frequently and create another layer of subjectivity when put in the hands of educators and adjudicators.

There are many variations in the way that various associations word and weight these two primary captions, but in surveying music adjudication sheets from 10 regional and national associations, as well as two competitive music circuits in Europe, this general approach can be considered fairly universal.

The concept of weighting scores has been applied to utilize this scoring system when dealing with varied age groups or skill levels. It is common to see Jazz Ensembles broken up into 'classes'. This allows adjudicators to adjust the scoring norms as needed to keep scoring in similar ranges. The International Association of Jazz Educators sponsor Jazz festivals at state and district levels all over the country. Most prescribe to a 'national norm', where bands perform to achieve a rating in line with groups of comparable ability across the country. The reason a middle school jazz band and a high school jazz band can both receive Gold Medals is the weighting of the norms as 'class norms'. (Excellent for high school versus excellent for middle school). The criteria used to arrive at these rankings would be different. Although scores are based on a national standard, adjustments may be made to accommodate the specific needs of the groups at particular sight. Certain regional festivals may prefer a 'show norm'. This prescribes that the best group at that festival gets gold, regardless of their skill level compared to outside competitions, and others are rated in comparison with that band. Standards are adjusted to suit the abilities of the performers at that site. This is also a common classroom technique.

One way that associations justify this weighting, and assure consistency in the process as it is carried out at various festivals sites with different judges, is by changing the wording of the criteria reference on the back of the assessment sheet. Criteria Reference is similar to a rubric, with scoring ranges boxed off and descriptors that describe what type of performance would fit

into that grade range. For a high school sheet, the wording may require a consistently excellent achievement in the caption being graded. (Always in tune, always expressive). In utilizing these sheets for a middle school group, the wording may appear as “usually achieves”, or “in tune most of the time”. With criteria reference, the scoring system and descriptors can be used at all events, but the level of achievement required to score in the top percentile, or in any of the scoring ranges in the delineated scale may change based on the wording of the criteria reference.

This approach to grading can also be quite effective in assessing a special needs student in the mainstream music classroom. The descriptors and numbering system can be the same, but the criteria reference may be changed to accommodate a special needs musician that still allows them to achieve a good grade based on their potential, not the norms of the rest of the ensemble.

Concerns with Present Systems.

The major difference between tests of ability and tests of attainment is in the way the scores from both types of test are used. A test of attainment cannot be directly correlated to ability. Auditions are one example of measures of achievement or attainment, and while we might draw some conclusions about an individual's ability on the basis of the results, we would not use them as a direct measure of their ability. A less talented student may work harder than a more able student to produce a higher score. This isn't a bad thing, and in fact bears out one of the developmental positives of competition. Hard work and planning can offset talent. The concern is the ability of evaluators to recognize high achievement based on the criteria in front of them. The results may be different if given criteria where the wording and weighting are different (technique over musicality). A teacher needs to recognize that when implementing various systems.

There should be concern with the lack of training available for inexperienced adjudicators, and in the inconsistency of wording and use of criteria reference in establishing norms for assessing musicality. Simply having a degree in music, or being a music educator isn't enough. There are many adjudicators working today who perhaps give constructive and motivational commentary, but are not capable of understanding the use of criteria reference to reward achievement. The opposite holds true as well, getting the rating and ranking correct, but not being able to offer useful critical commentary to the participants. Most ensemble competitions require judges who are competent in wind, percussion, and string pedagogy. These qualifications are rare in most music educators, who typically specialize in one of these families, but not all. This leads their commentary towards those categories that they feel more comfortable critiquing, and not recognizing excellence in sections that they are unfamiliar with. Training and experience are the only way to ensure that adjudicators at contests and festivals are capable of being subjective in evaluating and understanding the entire ensemble.

The testing, grading, and especially ranking of groups is difficult when the term “Musicality” is to be evaluated. Here are a few of the most common variables and questions that need to be considered when rating, testing, or grading musicality.

- Can we quantify musicality with a number? What makes one performance better than another? How much does the demand of the literature effect the value of the musicality?
- Is it an Individual or an Ensemble performance? - If it's an ensemble, are there varying degrees of musicality being displayed at the same time? (Winds vs. percussion) How much does one offset the other?

- Medal Ranking or Placement Rating - Are the performers going for a rating against a district, state, or national standard, or are they competing directly against each other? Is each performance compared and rated against the other performances?
- Are there diverse demands in the literature being performed? - Are we comparing music where the technical demands of the literature being performed changes the value of the level of musicality between groups?
- Are the groups performing repertoires that are diverse in genre which may effect the technical facility required to perform them at a high level?
Are we fluent and knowledgeable enough in these genres to understand what makes each easier or more difficult to interpret and perform “musically” than the others?
- Are we comparing groups who are at different developmental levels?
Can we adjust our rating tolerances to accommodate a fair assessment of each of these groups based on the norms of their level of experience?
Is it possible to recognize excellence at the elementary level as well as the high school level?
Can we change our criteria for excellence from one group to the next?
Can we weight our numbers based on varying descriptors found in the boxes of an assessment rubric from one test to the next based on skill level?
- Can we fairly and objectively compare ensembles that are different in instrumentation, or have a large discrepancy in size? It is quite common at a festival to have a vocal group followed by a wind ensemble, and then perhaps a jazz band.
How can we stay subjective as we are presented with the challenge of rating quality and excellence in comparing such diverse performances?
Is anyone truly qualified to evaluate every type of ensemble found in schools today?
Can we equitably compare a small string group to a large wind ensemble?
- Are there related arts that are connected to the overall aesthetic of the music?
Is it possible that the addition of movement, dance, color, uniforms, lighting, or a script to the music change the overall aesthetic of the music? Can external factors make a group more musical? Can we assess that?

This list is just a glimpse of the concerns presented teachers and adjudicators when assessing musicality in the classroom or at music festivals and competitions. As these events continue to grow in popularity, the integrity and quality of the judging pool available - qualified people who understand these questions and can take into account the consequences of these considerations and still accurately come to educationally sound and objective conclusions - seems small.

How can we improve the consistency in interpretation among adjudicators?

Can we ‘standardize’ an aesthetic term like Musicality?

Recommendations.

I have had the opportunity to put into practice most of the scenarios presented in this paper. As a band director, I have presented assessment workshops at four all-state conferences, and two regional conferences. I have been an adjudicator for many district and all-state auditions, and have regularly judged marching, concert, jazz band and drum corps competitions throughout the northeast. I have also had the great pleasure of being a judge/clinician at a few music festivals, where groups perform as part of their major ‘music trip’. This has given me not

just experience, but the chance to speak with teachers and learn what their expectations are when attending individual and ensemble performances where musicality is being evaluated. With that in mind, I would like to offer a few recommendations for improving the implementation of these current systems used extensively to rank and rate individuals and ensembles in music performance.

For associations who contract adjudicators to assess, grade, score or rank musical performance:

- Hire contractors who have taught the age level being evaluated. A college professor will most likely struggle to assess the level of musicality of middle school students.
- Research criteria used by other circuits. The wider the sampling, and the more that systems move toward uniformity, the more consistency in the results when sub-contracting judges with experience using varied systems.
- Design sheets and criteria that suit the educational needs of the examinees. To develop sheets that, by wording, require near perfection to rise to the top of the scale may not make fair measurement possible. Deciding what the norms of your association are, will allow an equitable distribution of achievement scoring. A middle school jazz festival should not have the same criteria reference and descriptors as a high school contest.
- Offer training before participation. Produce a manual of guidelines, which clarifies terms, grading scales and criteria reference. Make sure these are sent to the adjudicators before the festival. What does 'often' mean? Break down and define any word that is subjective such as 'technique' or 'interpretation'. List guiding questions that may relate to the specifics of your auditions, festival or competition.
- If you have a system in which demand is inherent in the final score, initiate a discussion among evaluators before the event so that everyone is able to make informed decisions on the overall weighting between demand and achievement.

For judges:

- Understand that every system is different. Do your homework, read and investigate terms, and ask questions of the organizers of the events.
- Evaluate with the best interests of the students in mind. Use commentary that promotes improvement and growth in the level of musicality, as opposed to continually pointing out mistakes to qualify your score. Your role ultimately is to assist in raising the level of musicianship in all students, not to punish bad performance.

For teachers who use musicality as a vehicle to grade students:

- Develop criteria and grading sheets that meet the needs of your program and the ability limits of your students. Using generic sheets or criteria designed for regional auditions will never give the evaluator the weighting and wording to fully accommodate your students. "Teachers have different objectives, no two groups of students have the same musical backgrounds, and the extent that students achieve criteria on a dimension of a rating scale will be interpreted differently from a small to a greater extent by different teachers."⁹
- Be prepared to make adjustments in the rating scale or the criteria reference as the system is implemented over the course of the school year, or the length of your career – things change.

For teachers who's groups participate in judged festivals:

- Know the strengths and weaknesses of your musician or ensemble before going to the event and program accordingly. If the festival uses an assigned music list, focus on those areas while preparing the pieces that are most likely to expose the weaknesses of the musician(s) in the performance. If you can choose the music, purposely choose music that highlights their strengths.
- If you have the chance to have a follow up conversation with judges after the festival, hold them accountable for crediting those areas that make your group stand out. Did you get credit for them? Kindly advocate for your students strengths realizing that judges are making subjective decisions, usually on a 'first read' situation. No judge could possibly grasp all the levels of technique, musicality, and demand of the literature in one listening.
- Know the criteria before going to the festival. What terms are being used? How are the captions being weighted? Discuss the assessment process with your students, and relate the program being prepared to the system used to evaluate. If intonation is one of five main categories, make sure that tuning becomes a big part of festival preparation. If demand and literature are inherent in the final results, make sure you program appropriate music to meet the standards expected. If demand is not a consideration, program music that allows your students to reach the highest performance standards possible for their skill level.
- Be honest with your group. Many teachers, in their quest to motivate their groups in rehearsal, make predictions or promises that they can't control. "If you fix these three spots, I don't see how they can't give us a gold medal", will ultimately make participation frustrating if the promises aren't met, and raise questions about a teachers credibility. You cannot control or predict the subjective opinions of judges.

For students participating in tests of attainment:

- Ask questions of your teacher. What skill sets am I being evaluated on? Of these areas, which are the biggest concerns and need the most attention.
- Practice! It is the biggest guarantee to achieving the highest performance level. If you don't, be honest with yourself and don't blame judges or your teacher when you don't achieve the attainment or rating you desire.
- If possible, ask evaluators – "Do you any advice on how I can improve?" Don't ask them: "How did I do?" or "What did I get?" Respect the process and wait for the results and commentary.

For students who are members of performing ensembles:

- Compete for the right reasons – to push your self, not to win. You have no control over judges' opinions or the criteria that is used to rate your group. If you perform at your highest level, you are successful. Competitive awards are subjective and complicated in how they are decided. Focus on what you can control, and don't let exterior forces deter you from realizing your full potential.

Conclusion

Musicality is the greatest variable when evaluating music performance at the highest level. Most groups can achieve technically proficient performances. The value put on the demand of the literature being played, the context of the performance, and the expressive and stylistic qualities – the musicality – can make one performance better than another. Assessing musicality

is ultimately an aesthetic judgment on the part of the evaluator and is at least partly intellectual and interpretative. By creating rating scales and systems that serve to enhance the understanding of the criteria for the evaluators and the participants in the assessment process, musicianship can be quantified fairly and objectively.

Endnotes

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| 1 Seashore, Carl E., pg 385. | 2 Seashore, Carl E., pg. 383. |
| 3 http://www.testcafe.com . | 4 www.pz.harvard.edu . |
| 5 www.pz.harvard.edu . | 6 Meyer, Leonard., pg 199-204. |
| 7 Oliviero, George., pg 7. | 8 Gordon, Edwin E., pg15. |
| 9 Gordon, Edwin E., pg 13. | |

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- Choice Music Events www.choicemusicevents.org/Resources/Downloads
- Idaho Music Educators Association www.idahomusiced.org/forms/forms_lists.php
- M.E.N.C. www.menc.org/information/prek12/score_sheets/sesheets.html
- Minnesota Band Directors Association www.mbda.org/honorband.asp#audition
- Mississippi Music Teachers Association www.msmusicteachers.org/competitions-precollege-auditions.php
- National Federation of State High School Assoc. www.nfhs.org/web/2004/02/music_adjudication_forms.asp
- New England Music Festival Association www.nemfa.org/sePage.aspx?id=2070
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| Drum Corps United Kingdom | New England Scholastic Band Association |
| Great East Festivals | United States Scholastic Band Association |
| International Association of Jazz Educators | |
| Mass. Instrumental and Choral Conductors Association | |

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