

ALL-STATE ORCHESTRA

by Michael Lien, Nancy Stutzman and Mary Schaeffle

The MMEA All-State program provides a great experience for high-school students, made possible through the support and involvement of many people. School music educators, private teachers, parents, community ensemble directors, section coaches, guest conductors, MMEA board members, the general music teacher in the elementary classroom who sparked a student's interest in music, and all of the music education professional organizations contribute in some way.

We work hard to balance equity, stability, and being open to change in the All-State decision-making process. The students complete an evaluation each year, including questions about their overall experience, their musical or technical growth, teamwork skills and other logistical concerns. We typically use these evaluations, along with input from our section coaches and board members to drive change. Significant policy changes, such as the All-State eligibility policy currently being considered, include lengthy periods seeking input through notices in *Interval*, the MMEA print journal, the Open Forums at the Midwinter Clinic, and emails to the membership and other constituencies. This is a long-winded way of saying that our processes and policies do have specific rationale behind them, even if it doesn't seem so at first glance.

And times do change, so we need to be open to suggestions and questions about All-State. We encourage any MNSOTA member to contact the MMEA Orchestra Vice President Nancy Stutzman, or Mary Schaeffle, Executive Director, at any time. (See the end of this article for contact information.)

Some specific questions were raised in the fall issue of *String Notes*, and we will try to address them here.

Solos and Color Instruments

Every year, there are significant solo parts in the instrumental repertoire—for the bands *and* the orchestra. There are also important parts on “color” instruments, such as soprano sax or English horn. Once students are placed in an ensemble based on their auditioned instrument, the Vice President then contacts the students and/or their directors about additional instrument requirements. Depending on the literature and that year's students (each of you know

how your own ensemble shifts from one year to the next!), the challenge moves across sections or ensembles. There are years that we don't know the full extent of those challenges until we meet in August.

The All-State Committee (Vice Presidents plus additional MMEA board members) has been discussing solo and color instruments for the past three years, and we did add additional questions to the 2009 audition applications for a number of instruments. We've also moved up our target date for mailing parts to students so they can spend additional time working with their school directors and private instructors.

Wind Player Selection and Placement

Wind players are placed to create strong sections across the ensembles. Although there is a rotation (one year the top flute to orchestra, the next to concert band and the following to symphonic band), it's important to realize that the difference between the scores of the first, second and third players is usually just one to two points out of a total 100. This rotation is in place to provide a good experience for students across all of the ensembles.

Schedules & Coordination with MSHSL

Additional activities and the inclusion of girls' teams have made scheduling more complex over the decades. There are section, sub-section, region or state contests almost every weekend from October through early June. The one possible exception is the month of April, when testing typically occurs, and releasing students from classes is even more difficult.

We think it is essential to schedule our All-State reunion concerts in conjunction with our professional development conference so music educators can enjoy the fruit of their labor. The conflicts between All-State and other activities, whether those activities are sports, the fine arts, work or church, are part of today's environment. We need to find the best schedule for our program, communicate it to everyone involved, and stick with it.

Orchestra-specific Auditions for Winds, Brass and Percussion

The All-State auditions are limited in some ways. You don't get a sense of how a stu-

dent plays in a section (either as a soloist or blending in to the section), whether the student understands and practices rehearsal etiquette, and other things that impact the student's success in an ensemble. In the short time that we have to evaluate the student, only core skills can be evaluated. The jazz auditions do include an improvisation component, since that is core to that genre.

It is also true that many of our All-State wind players don't have orchestral experience, and that's exactly why we want to “spread the wealth.” The students are the best measures of how this intensive one-week experience can have an impact. Comments from the orchestra evaluations are full of references to their learning “really breathing together,” “creating a sound that soars,” “how to blend,” “being a team,” “projecting over,” “breathing rhythmically,” “hard-core listening,” “confidence on entrances,” and many, many more.

Literature Selection

The conductors select the repertoire with input from the Vice Presidents and the last ten years of programming as a reference. Conductors are asked to program a variety of literature and styles, and are provided with the instrumentation of the ensemble. The All-State orchestra is quite large (both strings and winds), limiting the inclusion of baroque or classical works.

MMEA's All-State has a unique schedule. Only Minnesota and Wisconsin hold a summer camp plus school year reunion concerts—creating more in-depth educational opportunities. Other states hold a weekend festival during the school year only. Because there is a longer time to prepare the music, our conductors do at times venture into more challenging works. Selecting literature for a school music program is a challenge, and All-State has the additional challenge of not knowing the individual students' strengths. We are considering how best to provide guidelines to the conductors while still highlighting their individual strengths or knowledge as directors. After all, isn't learning from a new teacher/conductor part of the experience of All-State?

Purpose

A quick, final note about the purpose of the All-State program is in order. While the concerts are the visible, end result of

the camp, we are more concerned with the educational experience the students receive. Did students learn? In addition to musicianship and technique, were the critical skills of leadership or independent living addressed? How can we create an environment where all participants improve and grow?

If you have ideas or concerns not addressed here, you can always contact the MMEA Vice Presidents at www.mmea.org/

[board.htm](#) or Mary Schaeffe, MMEA Executive Director, at 763-566-1460 or schaeffe@mmea.org. Suggestions are forwarded to the All-State Committee for consideration at each MMEA board meeting.

The All-State policies and procedures are available on MMEA's website at www.mmea.org/allstate.htm. Links at the bottom of the page will take you to specific sections on eligibility, the components of the audition,

how the auditions are weighted/scored, how students are selected and more.

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