



VIOLA

Adjudication: Listening and Observing Beyond the Notes

by Korey Konkol

Whether it be judging solo and ensemble competitions or conducting orchestral seating auditions, adjudication is an invaluable service to the profession in which organizations entrust individuals to use their experienced skill sets to identify and award standouts. While the subject may be a bit controversial,

I'm willing to put myself "out there" to share some of my own thoughts on the topic since I'm frequently invited to serve in this capacity. Within the past year alone, I've been privileged to accept several judging assignments including seating violas in the Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies, judging both the preliminary and final rounds of the Saint Paul Chamber

Orchestra Youth Chamber Music Competition, and most recently sitting on the jury panel of the William C. Byrd Young Artist Competition in Flint, Michigan. While each appointment is unique unto itself, there is always a common question that I ask myself when listening to candidates, "Are they ultimately connecting with their audience?"

While determining a balanced baseline of technical and musical must-haves is crucial to fair and objective judging, there is also an esoteric component to any performance. A judge may have a checklist or numbering system of prescribed fundamental categories such as rhythmic accuracy, tone, intonation, ensemble, etc., but what about the intangible that engages the listener on another level...that mysterious

quality which "grabs" you and perhaps even gives you goose bumps?!?! I may be a little more forgiving of a few missed notes than other judges (maybe because I'm a violist!), especially if the performer has other gifts to consider such as a palpable positive energy, projected sense of self confidence, spon-

taneity, imagination, or natural body language that enhances the music. These are just a few examples of the subjective side of evaluation, and they shouldn't be lumped into just one "creative" or "musicianship" score. Don't presume that these aforementioned qualities are only evident when hearing the most advanced or mature players; a less-sophisticated, younger performer may surprise with glimpsers of the fully-formed artist they have yet to become! Recognizing the potential of future artists is one of the true pleasures of adjudication.

Preliminary rounds of competitions are often times audio-only or held behind a screen, therefore, listening with the utmost attention is necessary as there is no visual component to assess. The recording quality of today's audio-only prescreening submissions is of paramount importance for a candidate to be heard in their best light. This doesn't mean that a recording should be made in a boomy bathroom echo chamber, but rather an acoustic space that allows the listener to discern as many of the candidate's artistic qualities as possible.

Being able to witness a live performance provides the richest experience for weighing

the full impact of candidates' artistry. One can observe how well the mechanics of both left hand and right (bow) arm are in order and working together along with stance/posture and readily identifiable extraneous motions and tension. Purely pedagogical playing is appreciated of course; however, there are on occasion candidates that defy some of the basic academics of string playing yet are still able to produce a stunningly beautiful tone and display a formidable technique. These candidates should not be discounted in the evaluation process. Not everyone is built for (or capable of) the hand shapes of Heifetz or Rostropovich! Another aspect of live performance is attire. I couldn't care less if a candidate is wearing designer shoes, but an overall untidy appearance can negatively impact a performance. My own pet peeve is a particular dislike of performers allowing their hair (both girls and boys) to totally cover their shining faces. I prefer to see clearly the *joie de vivre* in people's visages.

Sometimes there is an obvious winner that will unanimously blow a jury away. But I can say with some assurance that this phenomenon is generally against the norm and, more often than not, lively deliberations ensue before finalists and place winners are determined. Adjudication isn't always an easy task, and the art of diplomacy when serving on a jury panel is a topic unto itself (perhaps calling for a future article in *String Notes!*). If all things are equal, everyone is playing at the same level and you can't nitpick enough to justify one candidate over another, then the rare tie or co-principal designation is appropriate. This kind of ruling just goes to show how difficult it is at times to choose a clear frontrunner. To me this is a win-win situation. The outcome demonstrates a willingness of judges to let candidates share the spotlight, and co-winners optimistically feel as if they are in good company.

For anyone involved in adjudication on either side of the process, judging and the being judged alike, my hope is that this article is sufficiently thought provoking to incite further conversation.



Korey Konkol with prize winners violinists Noelle Naito and Daniel Ziesemer at the 2020 William C. Byrd Young Artist Competition

I encourage readers to open dialogues with as many string enthusiasts as possible in order to foster healthier attitudes toward and promote a more mindful understanding of the many facets of adjudication. I frequently speak with other judges inquiring what they specifically listen for. One renowned colleague replied, "Engagement at all costs!" In discussing audience engagement with *String Notes* editor Faith Farr, I was delighted to learn of Faith's own reflections involving judging high school students. She wrote, "Inexperienced students who participate in school contests often want to play a 'hard piece' because 'the hard piece always wins.' But in my experience as a high school judge, the 'hard piece' wins

only because the student has mastered the technical requirements and is able to enjoy communicating their musicality. A student struggling through a 'hard piece' is not going to win anything."

Like many other string judges, I am thoroughly committed to my assignments, and I try to concentrate on the task at hand just as intently as performers are most surely focusing on their own presentations. Perhaps if auditionees/competitors knew how difficult it can be for judges to do their jobs, they would feel more at ease when stepping onto the concert stage. Believe me, I know how tough it is to get up to perform and be scrutinized as if under a microscope. I've been there many times myself!

Celebrating his 27th year as Professor of Viola at the University of Minnesota, Korey Konkol is often praised for his dynamic, award-winning teaching and performing styles. The first winner of a McKnight Performing Artist Fellowship in Minnesota, Korey has also been recognized nationally with an American Viola Society Founders Award. A MNSOTA Master Studio Teacher Award and Schubert Club "Teacher of the Year" designation are also to his credit. Having held year-long positions with both the Minnesota Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra in the past, these days Korey is in frequent demand as a clinician, master class presenter, chamber music collaborator, and of course, adjudicator. ‡