



## UIL Contest Checklist!

by Jeff Rice, Past President

UIL contest season is upon us! That statement may make some choral directors break into a cold sweat! It is not my intent to spoil your spring break with thoughts of school. However, this time of year has been known to cause a few gray hairs and sleepless nights. As I prepare for my 28<sup>th</sup> UIL contest this year, there are a few thoughts I would like to share to help make this time of year rewarding and enjoyable for you and your students.

In my opinion, UIL preparation can be one of the most fulfilling processes of the year. The depth of learning that occurs as we dwell on a limited repertoire (3 pieces per choir) for an extended period of time brings a multitude of teaching/learning opportunities. Not only do our students achieve the highest levels of corporate musicianship during this time, but they also develop increased awareness of the value of good rehearsal habits and teamwork as they work toward a specific goal. Maturity is developed during those repetitive, sometimes grueling, rehearsals as we pursue excellence in performance. Magic happens when choir members gel as an ensemble and become one in music making. This is when music making makes a difference for a lifetime!

All professions have benchmark evaluation methods to measure the growth and development of its members. However, most professional evaluations do not depend on the performance of 12-18 year olds on a public concert stage. Although UIL Concert & Sightreading results are not an official part of the Professional Development Appraisal System (PDAS), they can be an indicator of the quality of instruction and, more importantly, learning going on in our programs. As music educators we value the results of UIL competition as a measuring stick of our success.

Whether your choirs earn Sweepstakes Awards or not, it is important to recognize the progress made during the course of the school year. If your choir progressed from a Third Division choir last year to a Second Division this year, then you may consider them successful. The word “contest” is a misnomer for what actually takes place at UIL. Our “contest” format is actually an evaluation of a choir’s performance compared to an accepted standard rubric of choral performance. Although we may employ analogies and anecdotes that compare music to athletics, we are not trying to “win” or “beat the other choirs”. Those analogies and anecdotes can effectively be used to motivate students to higher levels of performance, but we should avoid making choir students feel like they have “lost” if they do not receive a Sweepstakes.

We cannot control every factor that leads to success at UIL. There are unpredictable forces in play when dealing with teenage students. Academic ineligibility, illness, scheduling conflicts, etc. all can impact your choir’s ability to perform their best. However, there are many elements that we CAN control. I hope the following list (in no particular order) of DO’s and DON’TS will help you prepare for successful UIL contest experience this year. This is certainly not an exhaustively researched list so please send me one of your favorites if you do not see it on this list.

- Prepare original judge's copies with measures numbered. Make sure you have the correct edition and voicing.
- Make sure your students know where to stand on the risers. Centered and evenly spaced is best.
- Think about what you will wear to conduct your choir(s). It should be appropriately matched to what your choir is wearing and should look good from the back while you are waving your arms.
- Have you submitted bus requests for all groups?
- Exactly where is your contest? Do you know how to get there?
- What piano position do you prefer on the stage? Do you prefer the keyboard on the right or left? Make sure the contest host/crew sets it how you want it before your choir enters the stage.
- Repertoire selection is critical. Be aware of the performance requirements for your school's classification. Do not over program for your choir. Challenge them, but be realistic and choose music that features your choir's strengths while building their weaknesses. Become familiar with the Prescribed Music List.
- Rehearse your conducting. Ask a colleague to watch you. Plan how you will start each piece. There is no need for more than one or two prep beats. Rehearse breathing together with your choir through the vowel you are about to sing.
- Rehearse with your accompanist as often as possible. Make sure they are clear on tempos, prep beats, balance, etc.
- What kind of tone do you want the judges/audience to hear? Are you teaching and expecting what you want? Lifted, well-placed, buoyant, mature, clear, and round are words I used to describe my ideal tone while judging a recent UIL contest.
- Work out problematic phrase endings for a more polished performance. Take care to finish phrases without clipping.
- Sing every part of every word. In my opinion, pronunciation/diction influences tone quality, pitch, and rhythmic energy. It is not enough to sing the same vowel, but singers must all use the same vowel shape. Sing through voiced consonants. Use the shadow vowel concept for ending consonants (e.g. God{ih}; Love{ih}). Pay attention to diphthongs. Stay on target/primary vowel as long as possible before turning to the secondary vowel.
- Follow the dynamic markings prescribed by the composer/arranger. If you disagree with editorial markings then make smart choices that are appropriate for the style.
- It is imperative that you have a well-rehearsed plan for the sightreading room. Do you and your students know the rules? This is the place where your teaching is really on display. If you have not been sightreading every day in class START NOW! Have a method for contest day and practice it in class often. For example....Thirty seconds self study, three minutes chanting and identifying trouble spots, two minutes audiating, thirty seconds of final reminder/practice for your silent count off, then chant until time is called. Ask a successful colleague in your district/region what they do and make it your own.
- The two-minute instruction time after the first reading must be used wisely. Draw attention to problem spots and answer questions. Chant until time is called. Always use all of your time. Do not make a sound after time is called.
- Keep your game face on at all times. Never let them see you sweat. Do not yell or cuss in the sightreading room no matter what happens.
- Do not fraternize with judges prior to your performance(s). Even if they are your best friend. This is only appropriate after your choirs have sung.
- Do not bad mouth the refs (judges) in public. It makes you look unprofessional.
- Invite your principal, fine arts director, superintendent, and parents to come see what you do at UIL.