

TIPS FROM THE JUDGES

Here are some suggestions from composer Elizabeth Alexander, summing up past judges reasons why some pieces did not score better. We hope you will find them helpful in preparing this year's entries:

1) Score was unreadable.

In particular, some of the most common difficulties for both "judges" and performers, are 1) vertical alignment of notes 2) horizontal spacing (e.g. having notes crammed in at the end of a line) and 3) words which are too small, messy, or under the wrong notes.

2) Part writing was basically 1 or 2-part rather than four-part.

While not every SATB choral piece HAS to contain 4-part harmony, it is one of the things that mixed choirs do very well; thus I consider it one of the "staples" of choral writing. The interplay between sections of 1, 2, 3, and 4-part writing is usually, for me, one of the most interesting and expressive things about a choral piece.

3) Text accents were set inappropriately.

This is probably my own biggest "pet peeve." An extremely weak or unimportant syllable placed on a strong and prominent beat drives me up-the-wall crazy, as does the reverse of that. Say the text over and over, walk to it, dance to it, cook to it and shower to it, until you know which syllables contain the ESSENCE of the writing, and which simply help out. (Hint: "the" and "a" almost always just help out!)

4) Choir members do not always have as large a range as soloists.

Observe closely the ranges of each part. When a section is singing too high or too low for comfort, it can't be making the best music possible.

Guidelines: Soprano: middle C to high B-flat

Alto: low F to high E

Tenor: low B to high A or B-flat

Bass: low D-E (seconds) or low F (baritones to high D (seconds) or F (baritones)

5) Think about how your music is going to reflect the words themselves.

Don't be afraid to spend a lot of time with your poem making decisions, before you even write a note. Which syllables should be sung on just one note, and which ones on melismas (more than one note per syllable)? Which words should be on high notes, and which ones on low ones? Which sections of the poem call out for a solo voice, a melody in unison or octaves, a rich 4-part setting, etc. If there is a mood change in the poem, consider how you want to reflect this: a change of choral texture? a key change? a tempo change? a change of vocal range or accompaniment?

Do include: Dynamics! Tempo! Articulation! (if applicable) (accents, staccatos, slurs)

Can I offer a piece of final advice to young composers? Consider showing your piece to a composer or music teacher or choral director while it's still in the process of being written. Find out what they think the strengths and weaknesses of the piece are, and consider whether their comments can help the piece. (If the person you go to isn't interested or constructive or helpful, go to someone else!) Even now, I often take my pieces to one of my musician friends before I call it finished, and I listen closely to what they have to say. With brand new pieces, I am often "too close to the trees" to see the forest, and I can really use an objective viewpoint on occasion.

PLEASE choose a high quality text! Find a friend who writes good poetry, or go through anthologies or hymn texts or psalms until something jumps out and inspires your best efforts!

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TEXT Tips from judges Matthew Harris and Anne Matlack:

Finding a text is not that hard. Theme of "Singing" will be interpreted very broadly. This year we will provide some suggested texts.

For public domain poems: look through poetry anthologies but skip the modern poets at the end of the book (unfortunately). (Obviously, an anthology of Elizabethan or 19th Century poems would pose no such problem.)

But getting permission to set a modern poem to music is usually no big deal. If somebody really wants to use a poem by, say, e. e. cummings, they should call the publisher to find out who to write to and how long it will take for a reply. As long as there's enough time for them to wait for the permission before they start composing, it should be OK. Some poetry is completely off limits, like T. S. Eliot's... Others are a royal pain to deal with, like Lorca. But most give permission as a matter of course, especially for something as innocuous as a high school choral competition.

As for the theme "singing," maybe they could do an Internet search for poetry sites, and then search those sites for poems with the word "sing."

Or team up with a friend who likes to write and set an original poem (credit the source--there is a possible prize for original text.)

If you write your own, spend some time working on a poem that will be worth your compositional efforts...run it by an English teacher or a literary friend, speak it out loud and see if the text "sings" well.

Tips from the judges of the IFCB Composition Contest:

Finally, here's a link to the website of the ICB, the bulletin of the International Federation for Choral Music, where judges make suggestions for submissions to their competition:

http://icb.ifcm.net/?page_id=314

Good luck!