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A Nationwide Overview of Sight-Singing Requirements of Large-Group Choral Festivals

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The purpose of this study was to examine sight-singing requirements at junior and senior high school large-group ratings-based choral festivals throughout the United States. Responses to the following questions were sought from each state: (1) Are there ratings-based large-group choral festivals? (2) Is sight-singing a requirement? (3) Are there specific levels or classes of difficulty? (4) Is musical content specified for each level or class? (5) Is there an overall rating that includes both the performance and sight-singing ratings? Data revealed that less than half of all states require sight-singing at large-group festivals at both the junior high and high school levels. Fewer states delineate levels of difficulty, outline musical content to be assessed, and use the sight-singing rating in an overall final rating. Frequency of “yes” responses to all questions was consistently lower at the junior high level. The author suggested further analysis of the most evolved state sight-singing assessment systems to develop a more uniform, sequential system of content, materials, and assessment.

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A Nationwide Overview of Sight-Singing Requirements of Large-Group Choral Festivals

Sight-singing is a vital part of choral music education. The proliferation of instructional materials and manuals (e.g., Baugess, 1984; Munn, 1997; Snyder, 1993–1994; Telfer, 1992) devoted to sight-singing instruction is an indication of its value in the choral music education profession. Furthermore, numerous choral methods textbooks (i.e., Brinson, 1996; Collins, 1999; Garrettson, 1997; Hoffer, 2000; Hylton, 1995; Phillips, 2003) commonly used by choral music teacher educators affirm the importance of providing choral students instruction in music reading by summarizing commonly used methods and materials. One of the most recent methods textbooks (Demorest, 2001) is entirely devoted to the teaching of sight-singing, evidenced in complete descriptions of commonly used instructional

methods, reviews of available materials, and procedures for implementing assessment, all in the context of history and research.

The importance of sight-singing instruction is also manifested in the form of research studies in peer-reviewed publications. Topics of exploration include factors related to sight-singing ability (Daniels, 1986; Demorest & May, 1995; Henry & Demorest, 1994), context of instruction—harmonic and melodic (Boyle & Lucas, 1990; Lucas, 1994), materials/methods (Daniels, 1988; Dwiggins, 1984), and assessment (Demorest, 1998).

The crystallization of and the professionwide mandate for national standards in music education (MENC, 1994) has continued to underscore the importance of music reading. Specifically, the fifth content standard insists that all students (depending on their level of skill and knowledge based on previous musical experience) be able to read and notate music at increasingly difficult proficiency levels:

Achievement Standard

For grades K–4 (pp. 14–15), Students

- a. read whole, half, dotted half, quarter and eighth notes and rests in 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 meter signatures
- b. use a system (that is, syllables, numbers, or letters) to read simple pitch notation in the treble clef in major keys
- c. identify symbols and traditional terms of referring to dynamics, tempo, articulation and interpret them correctly when performing
- d. use standard symbols to notate meter, rhythm, pitch, and dynamics in simple patterns presented by the teacher

Achievement Standard

For grades 5–8 [p. 19], students

- a. read whole, half, quarter, eighth, sixteenth, and dotted notes and rests in 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 6/8, 3/8 and alla breve meter signatures
- b. read at sight simple melodies in both the treble and bass clefs
- c. identify and define standard notation symbols for pitch, rhythm, dynamics, tempo, articulation, and expression
- d. use standard notation to record their musical ideas and the musical ideas of others

Students who participate in a choral or instrumental ensemble class

- e. sight-read, accurately and expressively, music with a level of difficulty 2, on a scale of 1 to 6

Achievement Standard, Proficient*

For grades 9–12 [p. 23], students

- a. demonstrate the ability to read an instrumental or vocal score of up to four staves by describing how the elements of music are used

Students who participate in a choral or instrumental ensemble or class

- b. sight-read, accurately and expressively, music with a level of difficulty of 3, on a scale of 1 to 6

Achievement Standard, Advanced*: Students

c. demonstrate the ability to read a full instrumental or vocal score by describing how the elements of music are used and explaining all transpositions and clefs

d. interpret nonstandard notation symbols used by some 20th-century composers

Students who participate in a choral or instrumental ensemble or class

e. sight-read, accurately and expressively, music with a level of difficulty of 4, on a scale of 1 to 6

[Two levels of achievement, "proficient" and "advanced," have been established for grades 9–12. The proficient level is intended for students who have completed courses involving relevant skills and knowledge for one to two years beyond grade 8. The advanced level is intended for students who have completed courses involving relevant skills and knowledge for three to four years beyond grade 8. Students at the advanced level are expected to achieve the standards for the proficient as well as the advanced levels. Every student is expected to achieve the proficient level in at least one arts discipline (that is, music, dance, theatre, visual arts) by the time he or she graduates from high school.]*

Although teaching music reading is seemingly accepted and recommended as a viable part of choral music instruction, the existing body of research, primarily in the form of graduate theses and dissertations, offers mixed reports on the amount of time actually devoted to sight-singing instruction in the choral rehearsal. Johnson's (1987) survey of instructional practices of choral directors in the North Central region of the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) indicated that although teachers may agree on the importance of music literacy, little time is devoted to sight-singing in ensembles. Johnson suggested that to begin assessing sight-singing at interscholastic choral festivals and contests, music educators might increase instructional time devoted to the teaching of sight-singing.

Ambiguous attitudes regarding the inclusion or exclusion of sight-singing as part of rehearsal regimens may be gleaned from Szabo's (1992) analysis of self-reported journal entries of 10 choral music educators from throughout the United States. While data indicated total exclusion of sight-singing instruction, said data were collected during the latter weeks of the school year, likely a time after which most adjudicated festivals took place. Furthermore, four instructors did provide information suggesting that sight-singing was a component of the instruction given throughout the remainder of the school year. Definitive positive attitudes toward sight-singing were identified in May's (1993) study of Texas choral directors, which revealed that 80% of his survey respondents provided sight-singing instruction at least 4 days per week. Brendell's (1996) observations of 33 Florida choral directors revealed that 22% (3.146 minutes of their average 14.3 minutes) of opening activities was devoted to sight-singing instruction. Further valuing of instruction in sight-singing was identified in 97% of Smith's (1998) choral directors (also from Florida), whose convictions included the belief that sight-singing instruction results in the ability to learn music faster.

The aforementioned studies, while indicating that sight-singing instruction seems to be viewed in a positive way, point to the possibility that both attitudes toward sight-singing and the instructional practices undertaken may be influenced by requirements for assessment, specifically those given in large-group festival situations. Attitudes and practices identified by Brendell (1996), May (1993), and Smith (1998) involve choral music educators from Florida and Texas, where choral ensembles are required to sight-sing in a classed system of adjudication. On the other hand, choral music educators surveyed by Johnson (1987), who included little or no time for sight-singing instruction, were likely influenced by the absence of assessment in large-group festival settings.

The efficacy of sight-singing assessment in large-group festival settings has been challenged by the assumption that a few singers could be leading the remaining members of the choir in reading activities (Bennett, 1984). This skepticism is further magnified as a result of studies that compare group and individual achievement. A study of two Texas high school choirs (Henry & Demorest, 1994), both consistently rated as superior in adjudicated sight-singing events, revealed modest achievement (66% accuracy) in a sight-singing assessment of individual members. In a similar study with a larger number of choirs ($N = 8$) who were also rated as superior in adjudicated sight-singing events, Demorest and May (1995) found a similarly modest individual mean score (8.79/15 or 59%) for students who were instructed in the fixed-do method. However, students who were instructed by way of moveable-do achieved a significantly higher and more impressive mean score (12.89/15 or 85.9%). (The authors were careful to attribute the resulting differences in methods to other variables.) In a more recent study (Nolker, 2001), sight-singing achievement of individual students ($N = 220$) was evaluated in two testing contexts—isolated and within an ensemble. Like participants in previous studies (Demorest & May, 1995; Henry & Demorest, 1994), subjects performed better on sight-singing tasks when these tasks were undertaken in an ensemble.

Further evidence of substandard individual sight-reading ability was noted by Scott (1998), who in developing a singing test for high school sopranos based on content standard five, found that her subjects ($N = 120$, grades 9–12) were able to sight-sing literature at a difficulty level of grade I, falling below both the grades 9–12 proficient (music at a difficulty level of grade II) and 4–8 (music at a difficulty level of grade III) achievement levels outlined in the National Standards (MENC, 1994). Low individual student achievement (25% accuracy) was demonstrated in another study (Henry, 1999) devoted to the creation of a sight-singing test that measured students' ability to read increasingly difficult tonal patterns embedded within melodies found in typical choral literature.

Although individual sight-singing assessments have yielded less accurate performances than those administered in large-group formats, it is also logical that large-group assessment, complete with spe-

cific music-content guidelines, at professionally endorsed events would provide greater impetus to include sight-singing in choral curricula, which in turn would likely lead to greater individual achievement. This notion is supported in the opinions of Armstrong (2001), who described and advocated adjudicated choral sight-singing as an incentive to provide instruction in sight-singing during school choral rehearsals. Studies by Battersby (1995) and Rittenhouse (1989) revealed that ratings-based festivals not only provide motivation, opportunities for musical growth and education, a means to reinforce teaching techniques, and elevation of ensemble standards, but also can be used as a means of evaluation of groups for any given year.

Additional support for the motivating force of festival sight-singing is found in Demorest's (2001) discussion of his informal Web survey on choral sight-singing methods and materials. Demorest noted a significant difference ($p = .0001$) in the number of minutes spent teaching sight-singing by directors ($n = 89$) who compete in adjudicated sight-singing events (mean time of 10 minutes) and those directors ($n = 89$) who do not compete in said events (mean time of 7.22 minutes). Because Demorest (1998) also hypothesized that imminent individual assessment resulted in greater sight-singing achievement, it is possible that similar finding would be obtained in group settings. Varying state expectations of sight-singing at large-group festivals may not only affect the emphasis sight-singing instruction receives in choral programs, but also determine the standards of achievement related to specific musical reading skills.

With the exception of Rentz's (1999) analysis of literature performed in state choral contests, there has been no study of coast-to-coast practices associated with adjudicated choral festivals. The purpose of the present study is to survey the nationwide emphasis placed on sight-singing in light of whether and how it is assessed in state-organized large-group festivals (at district or regional festivals rather than state festivals), where the greatest number of choral music students might be expected to demonstrate music-reading proficiency.

With regards to large-group festival sight-singing at both the middle and high school levels, answers to the following questions were sought for each state:

1. Is there an organized system of ratings-based (i.e., I, II, III, etc.) inter-scholastic choral festivals (contests) that are administered and overseen by an MENC affiliate or other state school activities association?
2. Is there a required sight-singing assessment at large-group festival events?
3. As recommended in content standard five of the national standards, are there varying degrees of difficulty as delineated by certain classes or levels of proficiency in the sight-singing assessment?
4. As recommended in content standard five with regard to music reading, is there specified content (rhythms, pitch patterns, meter, keys, etc.) for each of the proficiency classes or levels?
5. Is the sight-reading rating combined with the performance rating for an overall rating?

Awareness of issues related to festival sight-singing could provide further understanding of findings from the existing body of research as well as give direction and focus to future research.

METHOD

Data were collected via a survey designed during the summer of 2003. Initial attempts to obtain responses to the above questions were made by surveying each MENC affiliate Web site, state ACDA Web sites, other state music associations, and/or state interscholastic activities associations. Links related to interscholastic competitive activities, specifically those related to governance of large-group choral festivals, were sought first. The most common documents found were current handbooks pertaining to the organization of festivals and all-state activities. This search yielded 10 complete sets of responses to the research questions.

When clear answers or information related to the research questions was not available via the Web site documents, e-mails explaining the purpose of the study and the research questions were sent to the primary executive officers of each remaining state ($n = 40$). After 2 weeks, unanswered e-mails were followed up with telephone calls to executive officers and choral chairpersons of the remaining states ($n = 8$). In the end, a 100% response rate was obtained.

Two states, California and Tennessee, are organized a bit differently than the other states in that festivals were run by semiautonomous geographical regions within each state. As a result, an overall general practice in these two states was determined to provide answers to the research questions.

Frequencies and percentages of "yes" responses were tallied for each research question. Percentages for Questions 3, 4, and 5 were figured in relation to those states that actually require sight-singing at their large-group adjudicated festivals.

RESULTS

As to Question 1 [Is there an organized system of ratings-based (i.e., I, II, III, etc.) interscholastic choral festivals (contests) that are administered and overseen by an MENC affiliate or other state school activities association?], 40 of 50 or 80% indicated that large-group festivals are offered at the junior high/middle school level, a number similar to the 43 states or 86% that provide large-group adjudicated experiences for high school singers.

Analysis of the data related to Question 2 [Is there a required sight-singing assessment at large-group festival events?] indicates that 17 of 40 states (41.5%) offering adjudicated choral festivals for junior high choirs also require a sight-singing assessment. Of the 43 states providing adjudicated festival experiences for high school choirs, 25 states (58.1%) require participation in adjudicated sight-singing.

Two states, North Carolina and Wisconsin, offer adjudicated sight-singing but do not require it; therefore, these states were categorized as not requiring sight-singing. Also of note is Oregon's practice of requiring sight-singing at the state-level choral festival only. Oregon was also classified as not requiring sight-singing because the sight-singing requirement does not affect the "greatest number of choral students" (in other words, those students participating at district or local festivals) as suggested in the purpose section of this study.

Examination of data related to Question 3 [As recommended in content standard five of the national standards, are there varying degrees of difficulty as delineated by certain classes or levels of proficiency in the sight-singing assessment?] reveals that of the 17 states requiring sight-singing at the junior high level 13 or 76.4% have established varying levels of proficiency. Of the 25 states that have compulsory sight-singing at the high school level, 20 or 80% have prescribed classes or levels of difficulty.

Responses to Question 4 [As recommended in content standard five with regard to music reading, is there specified content (rhythms, pitch patterns, meter, keys, etc.) for each of the proficiency classes or levels?] indicate that of the 17 states requiring sight-singing at the junior high level, only 8 or 47.1% have established content guidelines. Of states requiring high school sight-singing, 13 of 25 or 52% have developed parameters for musical content for varying levels of proficiency.

Finally, tabulation of positive responses to Question 5 [Is the sight-reading rating combined with the performance rating for an overall rating?] revealed that 9 or 52.9% of the 17 states requiring junior high adjudicated sight-singing use the sight-singing rating in determining a final rating. Fourteen (56%) of the 25 states that mandate sight-singing at the high school level also engage in this practice.

Overall, more states offer festivals for high school choirs and more states require sight-singing for high school students than do their junior high counterparts. Furthermore, of those states requiring sight-singing the provision of levels or classes of difficulty and the specification of music content is more frequent for high school singers than junior high singers.

Summaries of frequencies of "yes" responses are shown in Table 1; these include frequency of "yes" responses in relation to all fifty states. Additionally, a state-by-state comparison for all research questions is available in Table 2.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The data suggest that assessment of sight-singing at large-group interscholastic festivals is currently neither consistent with research-identified generally positive attitudes about the importance of sight-singing instruction, nor in accord with the expectations for instruction and assessment outlined in the National Standards (MENC, 1994). Only 17 states currently provide for sight-singing assessment at

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of "Yes" Responses to Each Research Question by Grade Level.

	Junior High (n = 50)	High School (n = 50)
Is there an organized system of inter-scholastic large group choral festivals?		
"Yes" responses	40	43
% of all states	80.0%	86.0%
Is there a required sight-singing assessment at large-group festival events?		
"Yes" responses	17	25
% of states that hold festivals	42.5%	58.1%
% of all states	34.0%	50.0%
Are there varying degrees of sight-singing difficulty as delineated by certain classes or levels of proficiency?		
"Yes" responses	14	21
% of states that require sight-singing	82.3%	84.0%
% of all states	28.0%	42.0%
Is sight-singing content specified for each of the proficiency classes or levels?		
"Yes" responses	8	13
% of states that require sight-singing	47.1%	52.0%
% of all states	16.0%	26.0%
Is the sight-reading rating combined with the performance rating for an overall rating?		
"Yes" responses	9	14
% of states that require sight-singing	52.9%	56.0%
% of all states	18.0%	28.0%

the junior high level, while a more impressive but still relatively modest 25 states make the same requirement at the high school level. The lack of sight-singing assessment is further complicated by the still lower number of states that provide for levels of difficulty (junior high, 13; high school, 20) and guidelines for what specific musical content might be assessed at any particular grade or proficiency level (junior high, 8; high school, 13). In a time when accountability is a major concern for all educational entities, it seems odd that there are so few state-delineated guidelines for achievement in what is commonly perceived as a most important musical skill.

24 NORRIS

Table 2
Analysis of Sight-Singing Requirements by State

State	Junior High/Middle School					High School				
	FE	SS	LE	CO	RA	FE	SS	LE	CO	RA
Alabama	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N
Alaska	N	—	—	—	—	N	—	—	—	—
Arizona	N	—	—	—	—	N	—	—	—	—
Arkansas	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N
California	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Colorado	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Connecticut	N	—	—	—	—	N	—	—	—	—
Delaware	Y	N	—	—	—	N	—	—	—	—
Florida	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Georgia	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Hawaii	N	—	—	—	—	N	—	—	—	—
Idaho	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Illinois	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Indiana	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Iowa	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Kansas	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Kentucky	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Louisiana	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Maine	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Maryland	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Massachusetts	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Michigan	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Minnesota	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Mississippi	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	Y	N	Y	N
Missouri	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Montana	N	—	—	—	—	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Nebraska	N	—	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Nevada	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
New Hampshire	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
New Jersey	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
New Mexico	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N
New York	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
North Carolina	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
North Dakota	N	—	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Ohio	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Oklahoma	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Oregon	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Pennsylvania	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Rhode Island	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
South Carolina	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y
South Dakota	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Tennessee	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Texas	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Utah	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—

(Continued next page)

Table 2 (*Concluded*)
Analysis of Sight-Singing Requirements by State

State	Junior High/Middle School					High School				
	FE	SS	LE	CO	RA	FE	SS	LE	CO	RA
Vermont	N	—	—	—	—	N	—	—	—	—
Virginia	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Washington	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
West Virginia	N	—	—	—	—	N	—	—	—	—
Wisconsin	Y	N	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—
Wyoming	N	—	—	—	—	Y	N	—	—	—

Note. FE—Is there a festival? SS—Is sight-singing required? LE—Are there levels or classes? CO—Is there content specified? RA—Is there an overall rating that includes sight-singing?

Research results have supported the idea that group achievement in sight-singing at interscholastic choral festivals and contests is not indicative of individual achievement (Demorest & May, 1995; Henry & Demorest, 1994; Nolker, 2001). However, it is possible that imminence of assessment may result in increased time given to sight-singing instruction. Support for this idea is evident in studies regarding the positive attitudes of instructors in the states of Texas and Florida (Brendell, 1995; May, 1993; Smith, 1998) where sight-singing achievement has been identified as not only being assessed at large-group choral festivals, but also designed for varying levels of proficiency and specific content (Table 2).

Further support that presence (or absence) of assessment affects the amount of instructional time devoted to sight-singing has been noted in states of the ACDA North Central Division, where both absence of assessment and lack of provision of instructional time given to sight-singing seem to have gone hand in hand (Johnson, 1987). The results of the current study support Johnson's conclusions in that not one state in the ACDA North Central Division (comprising Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) at present requires sight-singing assessment at large-group festivals (Table 2).

The aforementioned conclusions are supported by results from Demorest's (2001) informal Web survey, which suggested that instructional time spent in sight-singing instruction was related to whether choral ensembles would be assessed in adjudicated festival situations. However, caution must be exercised in making generalizations about the imminence of assessment and instructional practice. Not all schools in all states attend choral festivals, and there may be schools whose choral directors are dissuaded from participation in festivals as a result of sight-singing requirements. However, for

those who choose to attend festivals, a sight-singing assessment seemingly would increase the likelihood that some form of instruction is taking place. Moreover, awareness of specific content standards concerning pitch and rhythm would make instruction and assessment more directed and efficient.

Henry (1999) noted that teachers lack time and resources for regular, ongoing assessment of music-reading skills. Large-group festival adjudication, when organized and administered effectively, perhaps can serve as an important and informative component of not only school choral directors' larger assessment plans, but also their music-reading curricula.

While the information gleaned from this study provides an overview of the sight-singing requirements associated with adjudicated choral festivals, additional study might delve into other issues related to sight-singing practices, such as procedures for the selection of sight-singing literature and exercises, the formulation of policies regarding the inclusion or exclusion of sight-singing assessment, and the attitudes of choral music educators towards adjudicated sight-singing. Furthermore, future analysis of the most structured state sight-singing assessments may lead to exemplary music reading curricula and assessments that include levels of achievement delineated by specific, increasingly difficult melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and expressive concepts. Of course, instructional materials that will most efficiently serve as means to the assessed sight-singing ends should be identified and developed. With these tools in hand, choral directors might be better equipped to define, implement, and assess music-reading curricula, giving their students a vehicle through which lifelong music-making is made more possible.

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