

North American Brass Band Association  
Judging Philosophy and Process

*The Importance of the Development of a Professional Assessment Team  
Educated in the NABBA System*

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### Historical Context

Generally speaking, the responsibility of adjudicators in the brass band world has been to rank bands from perceived best to worst. Numbers may have been used but were randomly assigned based on a judge's professional paradigm or assigned based on a forced number system (ie. 1st ranked band on the test piece receives 50 points, 2nd ranked band receives 47, 3rd ranked band receives 44 and so on). Detailed criteria reference rubrics have also been developed and used, but research (and common sense) informs that *the more detailed a rubric, the more likely it will be that the judge will be overwhelmed with the verbiage, ignore the rubric and revert to their own personal paradigm. In addition, the more complicated the rubric the more opportunity exists for discrepancy in common understanding of key words.* Finally, any number of judges from one to three may have been engaged to evaluate the performances of the bands. The above listed issues resulted in outcomes that at times were ambiguous at best and suspect at worst. This is reflected in comments made for decades in surveys by participating bands following NABBA's competitive events.

To address this issue, a complete overhaul of the NABBA adjudication system was undertaken following the 2019 NABBA Championships. The resulting updated system and evaluation tools are informed by those used for decades in other evaluated music performance arenas. The concepts are time tested, descriptive, have clarity and defined meaning. The system is empirically based, and criteria referenced. *The judge assigns numbers that have meaning based on universally understood standard criteria.*

### How the NABBA's System Was Developed

After examining other music performance evaluation arenas and a review of the established research in this area, NABBA adopted the concept of evaluating and rewarding **achievement** of a band's performance as the **essential** and **only** responsibility of the adjudicator. Achievement is the result of the adjudicator evaluating **what** an ensemble has chosen to perform, the technical and artistic challenges present in the chosen repertoire, and **how** they are performing their chosen repertoire reflected by the quality of realization of the written score. It is this process of *intentionally* considering the *content* (the *what*) being performed that separates the current NABBA adjudication system from previous NABBA evaluation systems. The judge continually asks: "Which band is being artistically and technically challenged to a higher degree?" Coupled with this is the judge's assessment of the quality of the realization of the challenges. The judge is NOT counting mistakes or errors.

Research in many evaluative contexts informs us that a disproportionate emphasis is placed on “initial impressions.” Therefore, it is important to apply the concept of “judging through time”, which is the **intentional evaluation** of the entire performance, as opposed to the passive reception and initial impression of the performance as an audience member might do. The judge actively listens, samples and evaluates the entire band and their performance.

### **Process of Determining a Band’s Score**

The system requires the judge to actively listen to the performance, sampling all elements, and evaluate the quality of the realization of the written score. The development of this skill takes practice and differs from the type of pedagogical listening and evaluation one might do from the podium as a music director. There, one is listening for mistakes and how to make the ensemble better. What the NABBA system requires the judge to do is actively listen and analyze the quality of the performance relative to the challenges being presented to the performers. **The function of the adjudicator is not to count mistakes. Their function is to recognize and reward achievement.**

Content (What) - the technical and artistic challenges present in the chosen repertoire *plus*

Performance (How) - the quality of realization of the written score *equals*

Achievement

The band’s score is based on **what** the band is performing (the artistic and technical challenges) and **how** (the judge’s perception of the degree of success) they are realizing the written score.

The process of **Impression - Analysis - Comparison of the WHAT and the HOW** is the essential process to derive a band’s score.

Each judge employs the process of **impression, analysis and comparison**:

1. **IMPRESSION** - The judge’s reaction to the band’s performance based on their professional experience.
2. **ANALYSIS** - The judge’s analysis of the band’s performance presents reasons to support and modify the impression of the judge. This is the objective part of the evaluation.
3. **COMPARISON** - The mechanical process of cross checking the judges’ impressions and analysis with the scores of the other bands in the contest. *For the first band in the contest, comparison relates to other contests and the paradigms within the judges’ experience.*

The judge assesses the performing ensembles assigning a numerical value (rating) and places them in order of perceived **achievement** (ranking). A second but equally important part of their responsibility is to evaluate the **relative numerical distance** between bands **so that the given number has meaning**. *Number assignment is guided by the specific verbiage a judge uses while providing real time commentary to the ensembles. (See Box Descriptors document).* The judge's verbiage must match the score assigned. The numerical spreads between bands, *must have uniform meaning*. In other words, a spread of three points in Box 4 must have the same relative meaning as a spread of three points in Box 3 or in Box 5. Over time, an understanding of numbers and their meaning will be developed between the performing community and the adjudication community. A shared understanding that a score of "95" means something fairly specific will be established. This has been the case in other performing arenas that utilize music assessment.

Evaluation of **WHAT** the band is performing involves the judge asking:

What is the **Depth** and **Range** of **technical** skills required to realize the composer's intent?

*The breadth of the technical elements and challenges embodied in the composition.*

What is the **Depth** and **Range** of **artistic** skills required to realize the composer's intent?

*The breadth of the musical elements and challenges embodied in the composition.*

## The Details

Evaluation of **HOW** the band is performing involves determining the **quality** of the **realization** of the **repertoire** (written score) through observation of the band's:

**Artistry:** *The ability of the band to convey the expressive qualities of line, shape, intensity, and artistic sensitivity to produce clarity of compositional intent in style, interpretation, and phrasing.*

**To what degree does the performance of the artistic elements in the composition contribute to achieving the composer's intent?**

### Detailed Considerations

**Expression:** *The ability of the band to convey a musical performance which is something more than mere notes. The performers make appropriate use of dynamics, phrasing, timbre and articulation to bring the music to life.*

**Style:** *Ability of the band to make aesthetic musical (stylistic) choices that are appropriate and consistent.*

**Interpretation:** *The ability of the band to arrange sounds in time so as to produce a continuous, unified, and evocative performance of the composition.*

**Phrasing:** *The ability of the band to perform in a manner in which the musicians shape a sequence of notes in a passage of music expressively and with emotion.*

**Musicality:** *The ability of the band to bring the music on the page to life, expressing more than the mere faithful reproduction of pitches, rhythms, and composer dynamic markings. The performers express something greater than the sum of their individual parts.*

**AND**

**Technique:** *The ability of the band to convey the technical qualities of balance, blend, sonority, and control through all dynamic ranges, fidelity, articulation, pulse control and rhythmic stability to produce clarity of compositional intent in style, interpretation, and phrasing.*

**To what degree does the performance of the technical elements in the composition contribute to achieving the composer's intent?**

**Detailed Considerations**

**Sound production:** *The ability of the band to present clearly the composition through the mastery of characteristic sounds.*

**Intonation:** *The ability of the band to produce, maintain, and control pitch with consistency and accuracy.*

**Balance:** *The ability of the band to perform with equilibrium between parts and sections producing clarity and transparency in the performance.*

**Blend:** *The ability of the band to produce characteristic tone without individual instruments that stand out.*

**Sonority:** *The ability of the band to produce sounds that have resonance, vibrancy, and consistency of tone color and timbre.*

**Articulation:** *The ability of the band to have uniformity and appropriateness of the manner in which a single note or other discrete event is sounded. Articulation choices primarily structure an event's start and end, determining the length of its sound and the shape of its attack, sustain, and decay.*

**Ensemble cohesiveness:** *The ability of the band to establish and maintain pulse control and rhythmic stability both vertically and horizontally and also exhibit recovery with immediacy, clarity, and control.*

Finally, a perfect score of **100** in each sub-caption is reserved for the finest performance that the adjudicator has ever heard or imagined hearing. *This performance transcends and transforms the adjudication paradigm.*