Welcome to the Festival!
How to Have a Fulfilling NYSSMA® Major Organization Festival

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According to the Merriam-Webster Online Collegiate Dictionary, the word “festival” is defined as “a time of celebration marked by special observances; an often periodic celebration or program of events or entertainment having a specified focus, gaiety, conviviality.” With this in mind, let’s take a closer look at our own NYSSMA® major organization festivals.

A celebration

This is exactly what our festivals are intended to be. Once a year across our state we stop. We stop and we listen. We listen to each other and we lift each other up. Our special observances include dressing our best, packing up our things, and traveling to a central location to share our favorite music with one another. It sounds like a holiday, as it should.

Events having a specified focus

Having a focus is what education is all about. We strive to give our students a clear perception and a compelling vision for their own futures. Our whole mission as educators revolves around our students’ self-discovery and their journey to find out: Who am I really? How do I fit in here? How will I make a difference?

Gaiety, merriment and happiness (but not in a trivial way)

A festival can provide the true satisfaction that we are all constantly searching for. It sounds lovely. So why do so many of us stress about the festival? Or choose not to go at all?

How can we come if our ensembles rehearse infrequently or in sections? What if our instrumentation is unconventional? How can we bring elementary students who cannot yet really play Level 1? How can we go if the piece we want to perform in the spring is not in the manual? What if there are too many snow days and we only learn two pieces? How can we take the first step and go for the first time, not knowing if our students will leave feeling like it was all worth it?

We can! In fact, we should all the more because of these reasons. Many of us, it seems, focus on the color of the sticker on the certificate. It can appear that the rating is all our parents, students, and administrators see as well. Let’s teach them otherwise!

The value is really in the comments. It is about teaching our students to work as a team to achieve the highest, most passionate musical moment possible. We do this for our audiences, for ourselves, and for the composers of the pieces we so carefully choose.

How can we risk taking our students? Will they feel bad if it doesn’t go well? We are right to ask these questions. In the words of one great band director, Frank Battisti, “This is risky business, people.” He is right, and it is worth the risk. We are great teachers. We can show our students how to learn from disappointment if it does come our way. How could we possibly give up the chance to give them such a valuable life skill?

And, in the meantime we prepare. When we know we are coming to the festival, when we know we are bringing something for everyone to enjoy, we work harder. It gives us focus, vision and integrity for our entire music community. It moves us all forward. It lifts us all up: composers, arrangers, performers, conductors, parents, students, retired directors, college professors, as well as public and private school districts. It brings us all together. No matter what level or what score, every step in our journey is valid. All of us have a place here, and it is the music that demands our very best.

I invite all to participate. If not for a rating, you may perform for “Comments Only” as this is a fantastic opportunity for any ensemble participating in its first NYSSMA® majors festival. There are so many ways you can be a part of this great experience. Find the one that is right for you. Welcome to the festival!

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