

The NYSSMA Call for Compositions: An Evaluation Program for Student Composers

Dr. Daniel Deutsch

Not just a competition

Every year, more than 100 students submit compositions in response to the NYSSMA Call for Compositions and Call for Electronic Music Compositions. The Winter Conference features two student composition concerts that showcase outstanding works selected from those submissions. Therefore it is understandable, but inaccurate, to regard the Calls for Compositions solely as competitions. In fact the emphasis of the NYSSMA program is not on competition, but on feedback and evaluation – in other words, *education*. (This article focuses on the “acoustic” Call for Compositions, not the Call for Electronic Compositions, which is administered by the Technology Committee.)

Written evaluations for every submission

Each submitted composition is assigned to an adjudicator for evaluation, and all student composers and their teachers receive written evaluations that contain positive feedback and suggestions for future growth. (Our team of evaluators has recently included Dr. Rob Deemer, Dr. Daniel Deutsch, Frank Doyle, Dr. Mark Filsinger, J. Peter Hansen, Steve Kessler, Matt Lovell, Dr. Daniel Ott, Dr. Patricia Riley, Dr. Margaret Schedel, Dr. Stephen Shewan, Dr. Alden Snell II, Dr. David Stringham, and Brian Zeller.)

The aim of the evaluations is to nurture students, affirm their achievement, provide constructive criticism, and encourage them to keep composing. The evaluations are narrative in form and do not include letter grades or numerical scores. The evaluators work according to a set of guidelines designed to educate, inform, and support the students. Because most of the students’ sponsoring teachers do not specialize in composition, they too can learn a great deal from the evaluations.

The NYSSMA composition evaluators use a friendly and supportive tone in the evaluations, evoking the character of a friendly conversation. They try to remember how they felt when they were the same age as the composers. The evaluations begin and end with positive comments, and especially with very young composers, the comments are overwhelmingly positive. Because the submitted compositions are completed work, the evaluators often focus on the future, showing how the lessons learned can improve future projects. This makes the assessment feel less like criticism and more like helpful advice.

The evaluators try to draw a distinction between objective and subjective factors. For example, it is an error to write four beats in a $\frac{3}{4}$ measure, so the evaluator will point out the mistake. But in other areas that are not so cut-and-dried, the evaluators will use phrases such as “you may wish to” or “in my opinion.”

Because many students have a limited grasp of theoretical terms, the evaluators explain the terms as they use them. They also include analytical insights that help the students to understand their own compositions better. Evaluators often include musical notation in their assessments to illustrate notational issues or suggestions for revisions.

Many evaluations include recommendations of repertoire for the student to study in scores and recordings, based on the interests shown in the submitted compositions, with the aim of broadening the student's perspective.

Examples of evaluations

To provide a sense of the tone and substance of the evaluations, here is an excerpt from Dr. Stephen Shewan's evaluation of a piano piece submitted by an advanced second grader (named here with a pseudonym):

Dear Jane,

WOW!!! What a FABULOUS composition. I absolutely LOVED listening to *The Lonesome Fairy*. Congratulations, Jane!!!!

You set a sad yet magical mood right from the beginning. This is strengthened by using only right hand with the sustain pedal. The treble (high notes) sustained sound is magical. When you add the left hand at the end of the phrase, it creates a whole new texture and adds interest. WELL DONE!!

Even more "Fairy magic" happens in meas. 25-37, because you put the two hands up the octave. Wonderful contrast! I love it when composers use the extreme range of the piano.

Your B section is absolutely stunning! The use of the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter AND the shift to C major (the relative major) strongly contrasts the A section. Nice shift to E major setting up the dominant chord (the V chord) to bring you back to A minor. By the way, if I use any terms that you do not understand, please see your outstanding teacher. The material that you wrote in your description was so advanced, however, I think that you just might understand all of the musical jargon!

Very smooth transition back to the A section. I like that you used a little time and space almost like a mini cadenza. Your final A section ends differently than your original A, giving it just enough contrast to keep it fresh (and the coda is great)...

The evaluation continues with musically notated suggestions for some tweaking of the composition and concludes with encouragement for the future.

Notice how different the tone is in Dr. Daniel Ott's evaluation of a work by a high school student:

Dear Peter,

Thank you for taking the time to submit your work! I enjoyed getting to know your piece by playing through it on the piano. You, your parents, and your teachers should all be proud of your work.

Please allow me to share some thoughts about your piece from the perspective of a composer who remembers very clearly what it was like to be in high school writing my own music!

First of all, your piece has a wonderful sense of drive and determination. Part of this is created by the constant eighth-note rhythm in the left hand of the piano. For the most part, you do a good job of creating variety in the way in which those eighth notes occur in the score. However, I think you could go even further in that direction, perhaps by shifting the accompanying eighth-note figure to the right hand and moving the melody to the left. Perhaps you may even wish to remove the eighth note part altogether in certain places (which you've done here and there a little bit) to give the listener a little break. That way, when it returns it can be surprising and refreshing.

I find composing for the piano always very difficult. This is partly due to the fact that I am not truly a pianist—I can fake it pretty well, but I'm not a pro! So when I have to write for the piano, I am somewhat limited by my own technique on the instrument. Now, I'm not sure whether you are a pianist or not, but if you're like me and play some piano, something that can be very useful is to try and play through your own work very carefully as you compose it. Some of the things that you've written lie a little uncomfortably on the keyboard for the hands. Again, this is not a criticism, but just something that composers have to deal with in writing for this particular instrument. My own solution is to always refer to the great composers for the piano: Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, and Ravel (to name a few among many). It has always been a huge help for me to have some of their scores handy when I am writing for the piano, not only to get inspiration from their amazing music, but also to see how exactly certain types of passages are notated. This is especially true in today's age of computer notation software (like Sibelius or Finale). While those applications are absolutely amazing in so many ways, there is a danger in using exclusively, which is that while the computer can play back whatever we write perfectly, often a real, live human being can have trouble. I always like to say that we're composing for *people*, not just instruments. Therefore, I really recommend sitting at the piano and trying everything out first—a painstaking process, but well worth it in the end.

Finally, on a more directly compositional level, I must say that I really enjoyed some of the more surprising elements that you incorporated in the piece. These helped capture my attention. I'm talking about places like m. 108. The chord there sets up an expectation that the music might move to a new key. And also places like m. 116, where you use a truly interesting harmony in your choice of chord. (Incidentally, you might wish as E flat as the top note of the left hand

there, since you have an E flat in the right hand simultaneously—that would make the passage easier to read for a pianist.) In some ways, I wish you would have even more places like those, and perhaps even move to more different keys throughout the music. I find that, when I base a piece on a recurring rhythmic pattern, it's really important to keep the harmony moving to new unexpected areas so the listener doesn't get lulled into a trance!

Thanks again for your work and for sharing it with us. I hope you continue to compose and look forward to hearing more of your work!

Positive responses from students, parents, and teachers

NYSSMA has received much positive feedback from students, parents, and teachers in response to the composition evaluations. One parent remarked: “I wanted to thank you and all who worked on evaluating the student compositions. This was our son's first experience with the NYSSMA Call for Compositions, and we are so impressed with the comprehensive feedback that was returned for each composition. It is so nice for the students to receive such detailed responses!”

A high school student said: “I wrote two solo piano pieces and submitted them to the NYSSMA Call for Compositions. I received back thorough, well thought out, sensitive, and carefully written comments that showed a depth of thought about my music that was incredibly inspiring. His comments helped me take the music in new and previously unanticipated directions.”

Finally, a teacher responded: “The teachers’ comments were excellent, and specific and instructive, and I appreciate their having taken the time to learn and understand the pieces. I will review and follow-up with David here. I try to encourage my eligible students to apply to NYSSMA each year, and I appreciate your efforts in running this program.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the NYSSMA Call for Compositions is not merely a competition for performance at the Winter Conference. It is a broad-based evaluation and mentoring program that supports all of the students and teachers who submit compositions. It is well known that NYSSMA encourages instrumentalists and vocalists of all levels to participate in NYSSMA Festivals – not merely those students aiming for All-State. Similarly, the Composition/Improvisation Committee encourages teachers to submit compositions by students of all levels of achievement in order to receive encouragement and validation, not merely to win statewide recognition.

For further information about the NYSSMA composition program, please visit www.nyssma.org/composition, or contact chairperson Dr. Rob Deemer at deemer@fredonia.edu.

Dr. Daniel Deutsch is past chair of the NYSSMA Composition/Improvisation Committee and of the National Association for Music Education Council for Music Composition. This article appeared in the January-February 2017 edition of School Music News.