

SO WHAT WAS THIS MUSIC TRIP ALL ABOUT, ANYWAY...

By Kathleen Vadala

No matter how often we music teachers make the point that it's an educational activity whose primary purpose is performance, most people think that a music trip sounds more like a giant party on a bus: everyone gets to go to an interesting destination to sightsee, stay in a hotel, go to a theme park, and incidentally do a little singing or playing of instruments.

While bus rides and sightseeing and hotels and theme parks certainly make up part of the picture, the reality of a music trip is somewhat different. Students are expected to cooperate with schedules that include 5am wake-up calls, to get along with multiple roommates and chaperones, to remember at all times that they are representing the school and to act accordingly, and, especially, to find the focus and commitment to give solid performances in front of judges against a background of much excitement and little sleep. Seven separate Seton ensembles competed against groups from nine other schools at Heritage Festival Atlanta on April 9th and 10th. Their assigned performance times ranged from 4:45 until 9:30pm on Friday, and from 8am until 12pm on Saturday. Whether they were performing or not, the members of all seven groups attended all of the Seton performances, in addition to performances by other schools interspersed between the Seton groups.

At a typical music festival, three judges give each group a rating based on the points system on a score sheet. The judges are usually experienced college band and choir directors, whether current or retired. Elements like a group's tone, expression, intonation (whether you sing or play in tune), blend, and even appearance are factored in. Much like a report card, scores in the range of 90-100 are the top marks, 80-89 are the second group, etc. In addition to score sheets and recorded comments, the practice of this particular festival was to have one of the judges work with each ensemble onstage after its performance. Their comments and suggestions were made in a very positive way, and if we didn't necessarily agree with all of them, there was still a great deal of helpful information to work on.

While most festival companies use some form of points system, the issues get more complicated when it comes to awarding of prizes. I have observed that there is some element of deliberate obscurity when it comes to the dividing lines between award categories: after all, the festival company wants your return business, and you are not likely to return to a festival from which you didn't take home some kind of award – and the more awards you get, the more affection you will feel toward the festival that gave them to you. Often, the groups are placed in rather indefinite category divisions to create more opportunities to be “winners.” One of the positive things about the Heritage Festival system is that, despite some category juggling for this apparent purpose, they do emphasize that each group's individual scores are the most important aspect of the competition.

Basically, awards are determined by some variation on four basic factors: the size of the school from which each group comes, the category into which the individual performing group is entered, the number of groups competing in each category, and the individual score of each group. Accordingly, on the awards table at the ceremony that followed a dinner for all the participants, we could see a lot of hardware: piles of plaques and trophies of several sizes, including one great big one in the middle.

The Heritage Festival Atlanta first gives big, impressive plaques to each group, representing their average scores. 90-100 is considered “gold” and 80-89 is considered “silver.” We don't have to talk about bronze, because Seton didn't get any awards in that category! Concert Choir received a “gold” score, and the rest of the groups (Symphonic Band, Concert Bands I and II, Orchestra, Seton Chorale, and Chorus) received “silver” scores in that point range.

Next, category winners were announced. Trophies were awarded on the basis of point totals to those who competed against a certain number of other groups in their category. (At some festivals, huge trophies are given to the only group entered in a particular category since they are considered to have “won”!) Groups which won their individual categories were: Seton Chorale, Symphonic Band, and Chorus.

At this point there were still some pretty big trophies left – including the BIG one. The next group of awards was given to groups which had average scores of 95 points or higher. Recipients of these Adjudicators’ Awards, including Concert Choir, were also invited to compete in an elite Heritage Festival next year.

At last, there were three trophies left: two small ones and – the great BIG one. The announcer proclaimed that awards would be given to two students chosen by the judges for outstanding individual performances. Imagine how proud and excited we were when he invited two Seton students to come forward! Out of twenty-four ensembles from nine schools – bands and choirs and orchestras – Gabriela Sotomayor was recognized for a difficult and extended vocal solo, and Cara Hamel was recognized for her impressive work as pianist for Seton Chorale and Chorus.

Did other schools get awards? Of course they did --in particular, the school that placed ahead of Concert Choir in its category won a bunch of choir awards. Now, however, there was only that one BIG trophy left! The announcer explained that the BIG trophy, representing the festival’s top award, would go to the school with the highest point total that included a traditional choir, a traditional band, and the highest score of the school’s remaining groups. We all waited –steeling ourselves for possible disappointment – when he declared that the top award for the festival would go to... Elizabeth Seton High School!

Did we jump around and shriek and high-five each other? You bet! Three days on the road, listening to one another perform and standing up to applaud each group, sharing meals and rooms and experiences and space on the bus, knit us, for that breathtaking moment, into one entity – the Seton Music Program. And we had proven that we were the best!