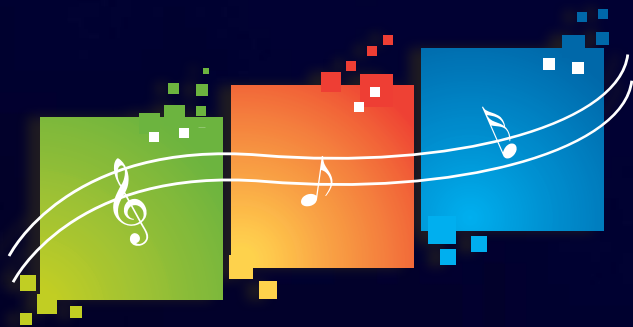


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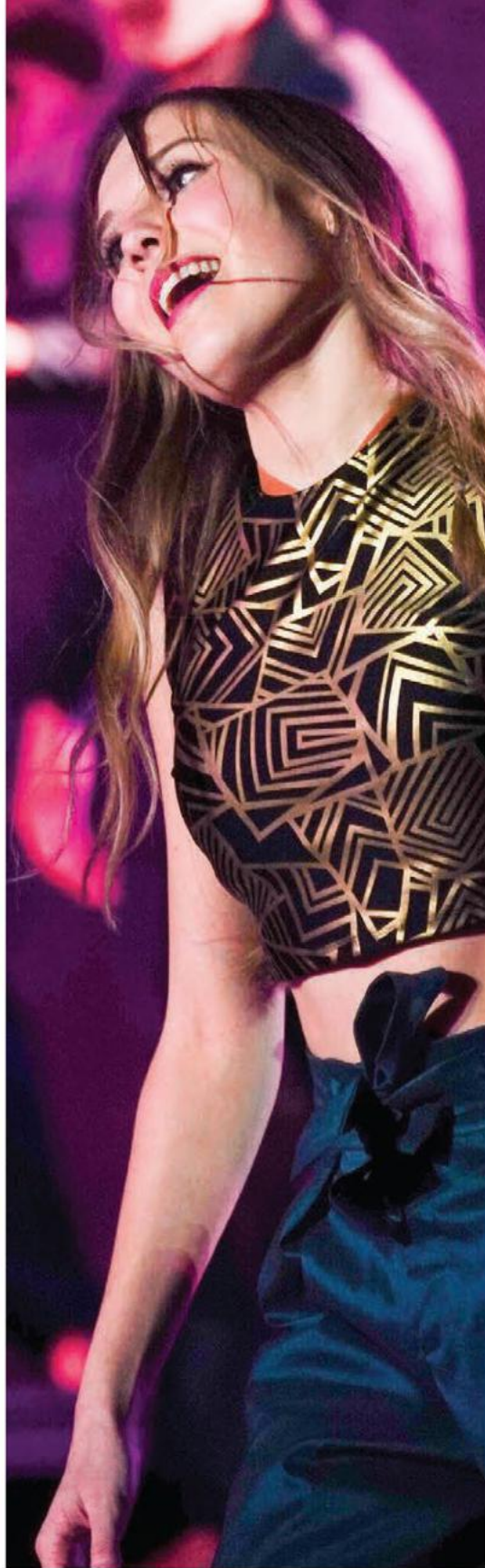
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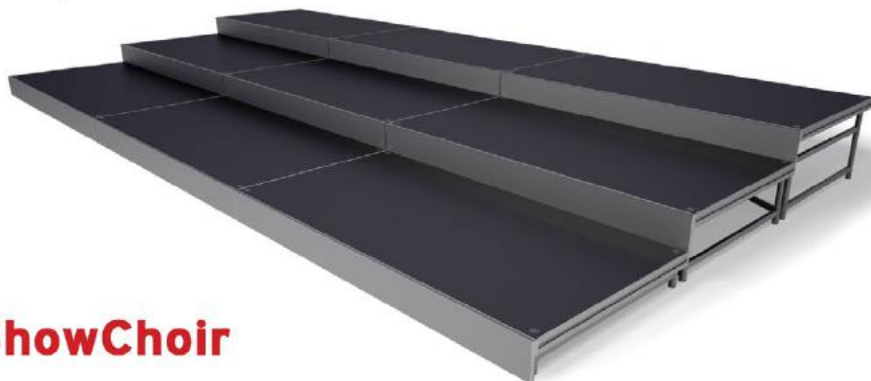


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Speaking as a show choir director, contest producer, and frequent adjudicator, the conversations I most often hear in the competitive show choir world are those centered on score sheets and the subjectivity of adjudication. Many competitions end with more questions than answers.

# editor's letter

Happy competition season!

We all wait for this time of the year, and many national competitions are getting ready to kick off as I write this letter. All the hard work your groups have put in are going to be rewarded as you receive the appreciation that you have worked for since August. You have all spent countless hours practicing, rehearsing, building sets, raising funds—and even before that, there were hours of planning out the show, choosing costumes, and designing choreography to tell your story in song. I live for seeing the results of all of this hard work!

When I was in school, the closest thing we had to show choir was a program called “Up with People.” Few people probably remember that program, but I am reminded of it when I see the amazing shows you all put together. I am impressed with your originality every year.

I also watch video after video on *YouTube* of your performances since I obviously cannot get to each one. It is such a gift that you put them out for others like me to enjoy. I appreciate both the people who have been doing this for years now and the new blood coming in. I also admire the respect and love that is held for the ones who came before by the ones coming into their own.

This issue is a resource guide for you to connect to others who have your passion and love for the world of show choir. We are selective with the vendors we include for that very reason. Please let us know when you have a wonderful experience with these vendors so we can tell others about the help they can receive.

In the upcoming issues, we are going to be doing a new series of interviews called “Heroes of Show Choir.” We will be reaching out to many people over this year and in the years to come to talk to some of the names that you all know and love. I would appreciate your help in giving us suggestions of who we should reach out to and who you, our readers, would like to know more about in depth and personally. Please contact me with your feedback.

I look forward to hearing from you—and maybe even seeing some of you at the competitions. Good luck to all of you! Please know that you are all wonderful people and that the world is a brighter place because you share your gifts with us.

Until next time—

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Published by Flaherty Media  
PO Box 1903, Pelham, AL 35124  
Toll Free: 800-705-5280  
Fax: 855-239-8093

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# SET DESIGN

## ENDURING ADVICE FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

by Terry Voss, Keith Stevens, Michael Sferro,  
Rick Lunt, Kaitlin DeSpain & Brett Carroll

Hear from some of the best names in  
the business about winning techniques  
for stage design and show design.





## Five Building Blocks for Award-Winning Show Design

*Rick Lunt, Director, Evolution (UT)*

Evolution, American Leadership Academy's mixed show choir, was awarded the Best Show Design in April 2014 at the FAME Nationals in Chicago. As a director, I saw this award as a great accomplishment which required much foresight, planning and development. Brainstorming a show design starts in the spring after our final competition. For the past couple of years, we have centered our shows after two movies: Willy Wonka and Monsters, Inc. The choir members often provide ample ideas; however, final decisions are up to the director and show design team.

We first determine if the design will have a storyline, theme, or typical Midwestern show with five songs. Having designed each of the above show styles, I have determined five building blocks that will aid in providing an award-winning show choir set design.

### 1 Pinpoint a Theme

Many directors may find a specific song to plan a show around. However, I have determined that it is important to motivate and teach a life skill. My advice is to find a story, movie, or musical that has a great plot with an even better lesson. While you will not have time to tell the complete story in twenty minutes, you can design a show that will motivate, move, and inspire your choir members and their audiences.

### 2 Select Appropriate Music

Each year, my wife asks why I have purchased nearly fifty songs on iTunes. It is important to look at a variety of music that will not only aid in the plot but will also provide diversity and musical variety. It is important to select some current repertoire that the students will be excited about, as well as selecting others that mature audiences may relate to also.

### 3 Collaborate

It is imperative to share the new show design with the production team,

allowing more eyes on the show design and a critical evaluation of the project up to that point. Someone might have a clearer vision, a different song choice, or a twist to add. Allowing others to participate in the process is not only vital in engaging all stakeholder, but it also helps them choreograph or write arrangements with the complete vision in mind.

### 4 Plan the Costumes, Set, and Band

Considering your costume design, costume changes, and band members' abilities is crucial. Thorough set designs that have included costume design, costume changes, band abilities, and solid band arrangements will produce excellence.

### 5 Share

Alumni often will share life lessons they learned in choir. I advise directors to provide opportunities for this sharing by allowing students to tell each other what they are learning from the text, from the plot, or this year's choir experience.

## A Technical Designer's Planning Process

*Keith Stevens, Technical Designer,  
John Burroughs Powerhouse (CA)*

The most important thing technical directors can do is to first, do no harm, just like the doctor's creed. Our goal is to ensure that what we do will only add to the experience in a way that stays within what was originally envisioned. Booster Club members at John Burroughs are incredibly supportive, with people giving hundreds of hours a year to make our shows possible. We are also fortunate to have an amazing ROP technical program run by Jon King, including two classes with over fifty students enrolled whose main focus is stagecraft: lighting, sound, set construction, painting, and rigging.

We consider several things in planning our backdrops and effects. First, we evaluate the venues that we will be performing in, the size of the stage—width, depth, and height—and the



dimensions of the entrances, including possible elevators. We ask ourselves how we will transport the equipment, and we determine electrical wattage and number of amps. We ask if the venue will allow atmosphere compressed gas (HAZE), fire extinguishers (co2), dry ice (fog) and confetti. Just as importantly, we learn how long we will have to set up and breakdown, and if workers at the venue will assist. We ask if riser setup will count in our time, if we will encounter a union house, and if there are steps. This is just a partial list of items that goes through our minds when designing a production.

Through the year I often find myself daydreaming, staring at something on the street (a billboard, some new lighting effect, etc.) that catches my eye. I look at it in a way that few probably do. Will that work on stage? How will it look? Will it fit? How fast can we set it up and break it down? I look forward to going to professional musicals and CIR QUE

types of shows just so I can see what they are using. Sometimes I just watch in awe and wonder, “What if?”

### **Set Design as Show Design**

*Terry Voss, Director,  
Company of Singers (MN)*

Show Design is one of the areas I enjoy the most. Even though I work with several other instructors, I primarily come up with the show ideas. Sometimes the idea can be drive by costume, theme, or even a particular song, but it always has the same thread: audience appeal.

I have usually been successful at choosing shows that appeal to the “masses” because I try to keep my audiences in mind. For instance, when we perform for senior citizens, I find something that is nostalgic; for younger crowds, I arrange something hip enough for “kids” and then something reminiscent for parent-aged audiences.

Of course, costuming and staging are important considerations as well. Though many groups sometimes push the “is it appropriate for high school?” envelope, the intention is for the costumes to “light-up” the stage; color and creativity appeal to all types of audiences. I can also say that my show designs are planned to entertain participants and audiences; I do not plan with the judges or ballot in mind. Lastly, under strong consideration in the planning of a show is this question: Can I live with this show for up to a year?

### **The Show Drives Set Design**

*Brett Carroll, Director,  
Burbank's In Sync (CA)*

At Burbank High, the show drives what we do with our set design. Rather than getting stuck doing a “this is what we do every year” set design, we try to think about what fits the show

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aesthetically and how we can fit those ideas into our budget. Each year is such a different animal, and it almost feels as if we reinvent the wheel each time! This demanding work pays off when we know we have helped communicate the show's story.

Designers must consider what the set design is going to do for the show. Is it going to merely be a static scenic background, or is it going to have a fluid integral role in the performance? In the past, our shows have used set designs as simple as "nothing" (literally nothing on stage except risers) all the way to a full wall of LED panels that are choreographed to the show's music. Usually, we try to use something that propels our story and sets the atmosphere.

Once we know what our show is about and what we want to portray, we decide what we can build and how it will transport. Getting on and off stages quickly is probably the toughest part of designing a visual set. During competition season, we never know how difficult the venues will be and how we will load in/ out. Most of our California

competitions are held in auditoriums, presenting challenges due to limited backstage storage space and maneuvering through backstage doors; we have done "gym style" competitions in the Midwest, which often offer more room to get to a stage and to exit the performing venue. Basically, we have to be prepared to get everything through a standard size doorway. That can be tough when you have a full row of footlights for downstage, multiple light trees lining the sides of the risers, and an entire truss system in back with a full LED wall!

Speaking of LEDs, our Burbank team used one of the first fully programmed and choreographed LED displays in show choir. Using that kind of technology isn't for the fainthearted. I was terrified the entire time that something would go wrong and that they wouldn't be "synced" correctly throughout the performance. We were fortunate we never had a major disaster, and the show (with themes of man vs technology) was enhanced by the lighting. A few years later, our "Prodigal" show pushed the

technology even further and featured video content that was programmed to perform non-stop throughout the show. This content was customized by a video content designer and created to follow exactly every change in the music, including choreography accents. It was a huge undertaking but, once again, it fit a show that featured futuristic "robot toy" kids in a fantasy world.

However, the year after "Prodigal" we produced the "Civil War" set which was the "anti-technology" show. The only physical backdrops were two big flags that represented the North and the South. That was it. The biggest movement back there was when the flags dropped during the song "Crossroads" (which was when the soldiers decided which side to fight for)! The show wouldn't have made sense with overwrought lighting and lots of technology; it was better served by something simple and symbolic. The point really isn't to see how much money gets spent; decisions should be driven by what supports the show and enhances the performance. In the end, it IS all about the singers and



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what they are doing on stage. Whatever you do, no matter how big or small, if the design complements the performers, it's a winner!

### Parents as Set Designers

*Kaitlin DeSpain, Director,  
Red Hot Show Choir (WV)*

Regarding show design, I do not have a formula to follow as a director, and that extends to set design as well. The purpose of the set is always to enhance the show but not steal focus. I maintain that a choir should be able to perform their show without a set and flashy costumes and still be just as interesting. If they can't do that, they aren't doing their jobs as performers.

**Our work has evolved over time, but the approach has always been that our scenic designs were never the focus; they only enhanced the overall show, providing a backdrop that would drive the story and message of the show that the singer-dancers were working to tell. With that approach in mind, we were mindful to provide designs that were never distracting.**

I personally have almost no hands-on involvement in the building of the set, though this was not always true. During the beginning of my directing career (with the ARTS All Star Show Choir), I remember staying up until the morning light working on last-minute set building and repairs! These days I have a great group of parents who make my visions come to life. This year I literally handed them a sketch (very poorly drawn, mind you) and said, "Make this happen." If I still had that sketch, I would include it here as a picture; they practically pulled the picture off the page!

Jim Fankhanel, the parent in charge of the set committee, says that "our motto this year was measure twice and build three times!" He also shares that the choir is "blessed with a great crew of dads that work tirelessly to make the set the best they can" as their way of showing support and love for their children.

### A Collaborative Approach to Scenic Design

*Michael Sferro, Scenic Designer,  
Encore Entertainment Co. (OH)*

Scenic design in Medina is relatively new to us. James Welch and I began working with Encore in 2009, after one of the Encore parents enjoyed the work that we provided to the musicals at Medina. Our work has evolved over time, but the approach has always been that our scenic designs were never the focus; they only enhanced the overall show, providing a backdrop that would drive the story and message of the show that the singer-dancers were working to tell. With that approach in mind, we were mindful to provide designs that were never distracting.

One of the most critical aspects of our work is that the student tech crew assists in creating the set and is 100% on their own when assembling it at competitions. We decided that our kids would be trained well enough that we would only support them from the audience, while they did everything on their own during the show. They are split between costumes and scenic duties, and each has an assigned task. We rehearse the crew just like the singer-dancers rehearse, training them on every contingency when we are at a competition and how to back up one another's jobs if the need arises.

Over time, James and I have crafted our own design-language in set design. It began with wooden scenery and traditional sparkly fabric and has evolved into the sculptural/metallic designs we have used since 2011. My primary background is in lighting design, and in 2014 I was able to bring this expertise into our set with "The Phoenix." The set was



all plasma-cut metallic “feathers” that James created, along with the ingenious system to transport them so they would fit on the truck and through doorways, all while being quickly assembled and torn down while the crew is on the clock. I incorporated a full LED lighting system into this year’s set, and James, Katie (our assistant director) and I programmed the hundreds of light cues required to complement the show.

We were incredibly careful that the lighting—just like the set itself—assisted with the story, never coming out of the texture. The color choices, fades, bumps, and two short chases we used were all intentional and carefully planned, down to the measure of music each corresponded to. We trained a student to execute the light cues during the competition show, which she did flawlessly all season. Consistency and reliability were critical as we created this design.

Both our set and tech crew were recognized with awards this past season, which was thrilling for us. We are mindful, however, that we can’t have one without the other. An incredibly strong, professionally-trained crew and a high-level set design only exist if they work in concert.

*Revised and Updated; this piece originally ran in June 2014.*

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:** Rick Lunt is Director of Fine Arts at Eastern Arizona College. Brett Carroll is Director of Burbank’s “In Sync.” Terry Voss retired in 2019 as the Choral Director of Totino-Grace’s “Company of Singers.” Keith Stevens is the Technical Director of John Burroughs’ “Powerhouse.” Kaitlin DeSpain was Director of Hurricane High’s “Red Hot Show Choir.” Michael Sferro was the Scenic Designer for Medina’s “The Encore Entertainment Company.”



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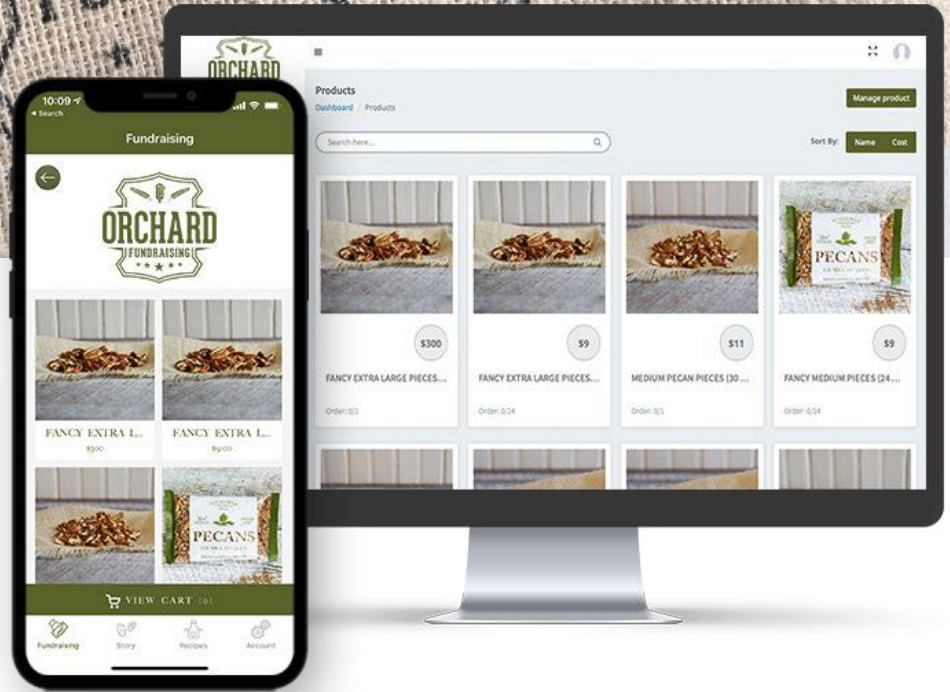


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Aron Wimberly can be reached at [aron@schmerpecans.com](mailto:aron@schmerpecans.com) or by calling 1.800.841.3403. Contact Orchard at [info@orchardfundraising.com](mailto:info@orchardfundraising.com), call 833.850.8324, or visit [www.orchardfundraising.com](http://www.orchardfundraising.com)





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15.0  
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15.0  
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15.0  
Rhythm (10.0)  
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15.0  
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15.0  
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15.0  
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20.0  
Interpretation/Musicianship (15.0)  
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- Observance of musical markings  
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10.0  
Dynamics (10.0)  
- Use of full range  
- Use of subtle dynamic changes

10.0  
Tempo (10.0)  
- Appropriate observance  
- Execution

50.0  
VISUAL PRODUCTION (50.0)

50.0  
Visual Presentation (15.0)  
- Choreography/Staging  
- Difficulty of movement  
- Variety of visual style

50.0  
Visual Presentation (15.0)  
- Showmanship  
- Facials  
- Strength and vitality of movements

15.0  
Visual Technique (15.0)  
- Spacing has clarity  
- Rhythmic precision and movement  
- Body carriage/posture  
- Visuals compliment the vocal presentation

50.0  
Overall Show (20.0)  
- Posture  
- Pace

15.0  
Visual Production (50.0)  
- Choreography/Staging  
- Difficulty of movement  
- Variety of visual style

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- Posture  
- Pace

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Visual Production (50.0)  
- Choreography/Staging  
- Difficulty of movement  
- Variety of visual style



# CONFESSIONS

## OF A SHOW CHOIR JUDGE

### FINDING THE LINE BETWEEN OPINION AND STANDARD

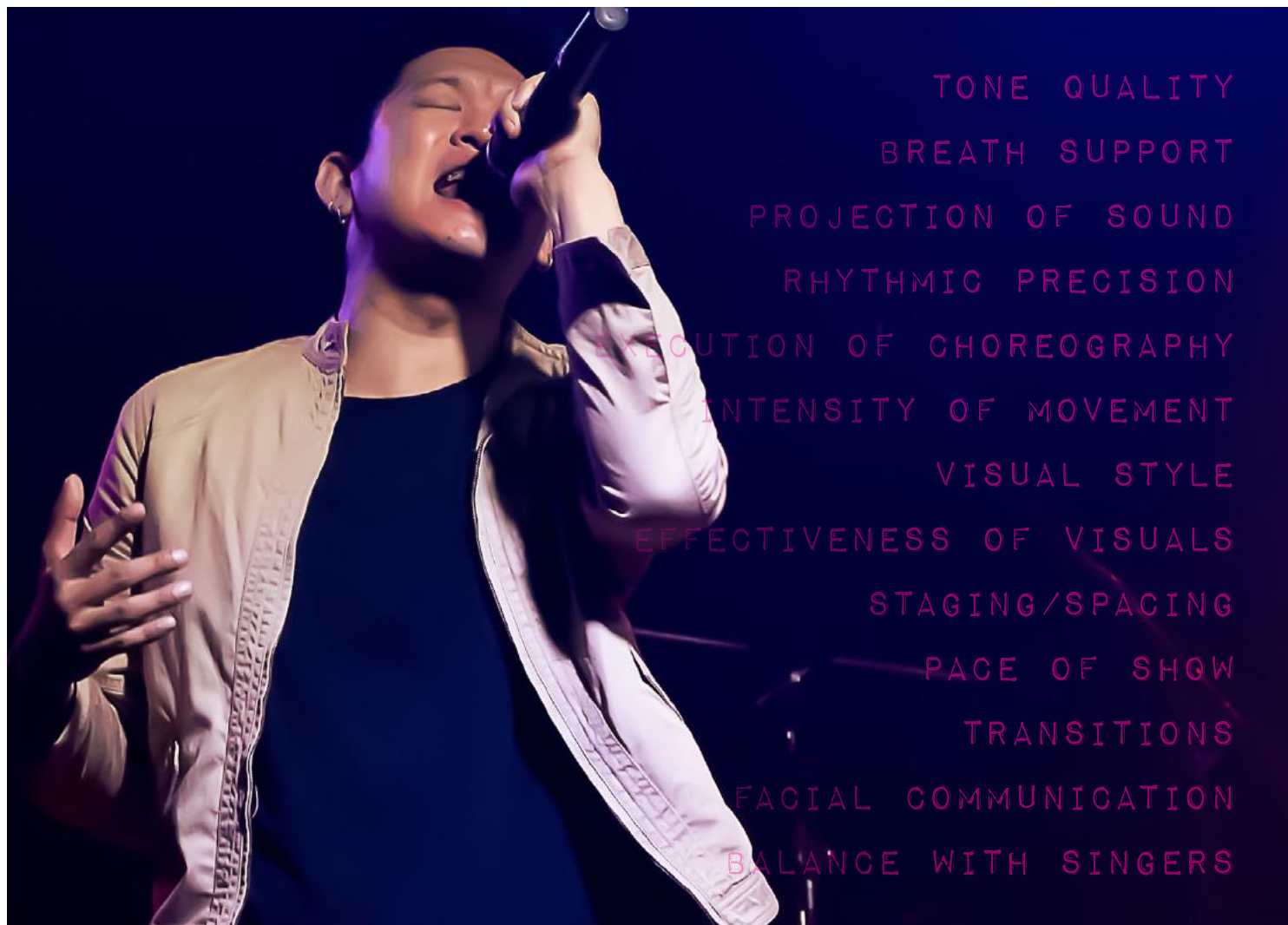
by LaDona Tyson

Speaking as a show choir director, contest producer, and frequent adjudicator, the conversations I most often hear in the competitive show choir world are those centered on score sheets and the subjectivity of adjudication. Many competitions end with more questions than answers. Why did THAT group win? Did you hear that one of the judges knows their director? Do judges prefer shows that are theatrical or thematic in nature, and does that affect score? How can a group receive both 4s and 9s in the same category from different judges?

#### What and Who Do We Trust?

While many conversations of this type are heard among parents and students and amateur musicians with personal biases, I have to admit that we as directors of show choir competitions have not done an acceptable job in providing students and teachers with valuable and reliable feedback from a standardized score sheet. From week to week, show choirs are being evaluated on different score sheets with different point systems and categories, and few if any attempt to qualify scores in any sort of objective manner. While adjudicators strive to be as consistent as possible, it is difficult when many score sheets do not qualify what kind of performance is deserving of 6s and 7s, rather than 9s and 10s.





**Furthermore,** why do we often use a ten-point scale with categories that are all worth the same number of points? Wide gaps in scores between judges could suggest that they may be unqualified to adjudicate, but more likely indicates the lack of any sort of validity or common standard. In the fall of 2016, I decided to develop a rubric as a part of a doctoral project, in the hopes of improving adjudicating measures in my own state of Mississippi.

**Weighty Matters:  
 Inconsistency Breeds  
 Frustration**

In order to create a weighted rubric, I first had to determine what categories should receive the most weight. I developed a survey that asked raters to rank the typical subcategories in order of importance, most to least. The only exception was the Overall

Effect category, in which respondents chose the most important of the three subcategories. The survey link was emailed to show choir directors, choreographers, and adjudicators within the Southeastern region of the United States. A link was also posted on my personal Facebook page, as well as the group pages, “Show Choir Directors and Choreographers” and “I’m A Choir Director.”

Of the seventy-four people who responded to the survey, 75% reported that they were currently teachers in a K-12 music program and 74% reported that they currently direct a competitive show choir. The teachers were equally distributed between the South and Midwest regions of the U.S. Teachers were given the opportunity to answer an open-ended question regarding the parts of the current scoring methods with which they are most dissatisfied.



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Some general themes were revealed in this question. The most common source of dissatisfaction is the inconsistency of scoring rubrics between competitions and the lack of a more universal scoring method.

In addition, teachers feel that the current methods do nothing to attempt to alleviate adjudicator bias and subjectivity. Another common theme was the qualification, experience, and training level of the adjudicators. Teachers were also asked to rank in order of importance the categories from a typical score sheet.

### **Knowing It When We See It: Defining the “It”**

Though the survey results certainly informed decisions made regarding category weights, my own experience as an adjudicator and director also

a text narrative that is detailed in what differentiates a 9-10 performance from a 7-8 performance was time-consuming and thought-provoking.

### **Exploring Outcomes and Implications**

This project began as a way to improve the adjudication procedures of show choir contests. The finished product, however, has implications for use other than that of its original intent. As discussed earlier, competitive show choir is a wonderful environment for exploring educational outcomes. Students who participate in this particular arena have the potential to become not only outstanding musical performers, but also educated critics of musical performances. Evaluative tools are useful outside of the role of the adjudicator.

In trying to improve adjudication methods, the educational value of scores and feedback should be kept at the forefront of the discussion. A more reliable and less subjective scoring process can ensure that students receive valuable and consistent feedback on how to improve, even if they do not receive a trophy. Keeping education at the center of adjudication makes the competitive experience meaningful regardless of the final placement.

### **Unresolved Issues**

While this rubric arguably moves toward improving standardization and fairness in show choir adjudication, it does not resolve all of the issues with show choir contest adjudication. Most of the survey respondents were from two regions of the United States, the South and the Midwest. Show choir in these regions is similar in nature, but for East and West Coasts, values and scoring methods may differ greatly. This rubric may not be representative of the aspects of performance valued in those geographic regions.

The issue of adjudicator training cannot be resolved with this rubric. Many survey respondents suggested that a main problem in the realm of competitive show choir is the lack of qualified and

**In trying to improve adjudication methods, the educational value of scores and feedback should be kept at the forefront of the discussion. A more reliable and less subjective scoring process can ensure that students receive valuable and consistent feedback on how to improve, even if they do not receive a trophy.**

contributed to the development of the rubric. I also spent time interviewing trusted colleagues—fellow directors and adjudicators—in person and through email.

Those reviewing the rubric generally agreed upon the resulting rubric, although interesting discussions and arguments were made for and against the inclusion and weights of some categories. Furthermore, the operational definitions for each subcategory and qualifications of each were more difficult than anticipated. Though we “know what it is when we see it,” putting that into

adequately-trained judges. The hiring and training of judges is the responsibility of each contest producer. Opinions on this matter vary widely and would be a good subject for future research.

The most obvious limitation to the rubric is that it is reflective of my own personal philosophies. Though the survey certainly informed the creation of the rubric, I placed a higher value on some aspects than what the survey results indicated. As musicians, we have personal preferences that are reflective of our own beliefs and experiences with music. These constructs played an influential role in the creation of this rubric.

### Stepping in the Right Direction

While further research and discussion is needed to continue to improve adjudication measures in the realm of competitive show choir, improved assessment tools are a step in that direction. Rubrics provide specific

feedback that allow for subjectivity while providing reliable justification of objective numerical scores. This specificity allows for greater discussion in the classroom and more distinction between strengths and weaknesses of a performance. I am hopeful that as the rubric is put into practice, it will be discussed and edited to make it an effective tool that is widely utilized.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** LaDona Tyson is in her fifteenth year as Director of Choral Groups and Assistant Director of the Brownstone Center in Poplarville, Mississippi. LaDona holds a Bachelor of Music in Music Education from William Carey College, along with a Master of Music in Choral Conducting from the University of Southern Mississippi, where she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Music Education. View a sample scoring rubric at [www.rooseveltchoirs.com/scoring.html](http://www.rooseveltchoirs.com/scoring.html)

Though we “know what it is when we see it,” putting that into a text narrative that is detailed in what differentiates a 9-10 performance from a 7-8 performance was time-consuming and thought-provoking.



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## CENTER STAGE LOAD RATINGS AND WHAT DESIGNERS SHOULD KNOW

by Chad Parrish

When you're choosing a new portable staging system for your auditorium or performance space, there are a variety of things to consider: stability, strength, flexibility, and safety, to name a few. But one of the most important considerations that people forget to ask about involves the different types of load ratings. There are three main load ratings to consider: the standard uniform load, the point load, and the dynamic live load.

### Standard Uniform Load

The standard uniform load rating is a measure of how much weight a portable stage has been rated to support safely, if the weight were equally distributed across the span. This specification is typically in pounds per square foot. For example, a portable stage that measures 10 feet by 10 feet, with a uniform load rating of 125 pounds per square foot, may safely support 12,500 pounds of weight (10ft x 10ft x 125 pounds) evenly distributed across the stage. The higher the standard uniform load rating, the more weight a stage will safely support. Most building codes require that portable stages support a minimum of 125 pounds per square foot, but—depending on the number of people and equipment on stage—you may need more than that. Portable stage manufacturers will often have several different designs that offer additional legs, beams, or other support structure to increase the load rating. When deciding on a portable stage, make sure that the load rating is high enough for all of the people and equipment you plan to have on stage at any given time.

### Point Load

The point load rating for a portable stage lets you know how much weight you can place on a single point without leaving a permanent mark or dent in the stage surface. This information is important in the case where you may want to set a grand piano or really heavy prop on the stage. Manufacturers will often give this specification as a weight applied by a pin or a caster, for example: 1500lb applied via 1 inch diameter pin. What this formula means for

that stage surface is if you set 1500 pounds on a 1 inch diameter pin, it will not leave a permanent mark or dent in the stage surface. It is important to consider this number when looking at portable stages even if you do not intend on placing a grand piano on stage; a higher point load rating will mean a more durable surface that may better resist damage, such as in the case of an accidentally-dropped hammer. But there's another load rating many people don't think about. And it's not often included in the manufacturer's information.

### Dynamic Live Load

The standard uniform load rating is often static, but a group of high school students performing during a concert is never static. That is why it is important to consider the dynamic live load rating. The dynamic live load rating is the amount of lateral force a portable stage has been tested to safely support while supporting the maximum uniform load. For example, a 10 foot by 10 foot portable stage that has a standard uniform load rating of 125 pounds per square foot and a 15% dynamic live load rating, the side load is calculated as 15% of the total uniform live load, or 1875 pounds. (10ft x 10ft x 125 pounds x 0.15) The higher the dynamic live load rating, the greater amount of lateral force the stage can safely support without bending or collapsing.

### Ask the Right Questions

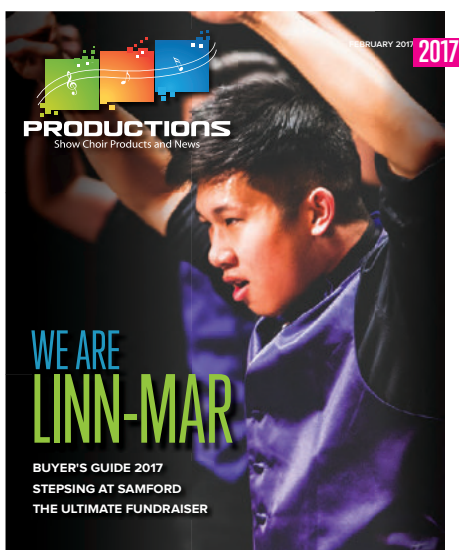
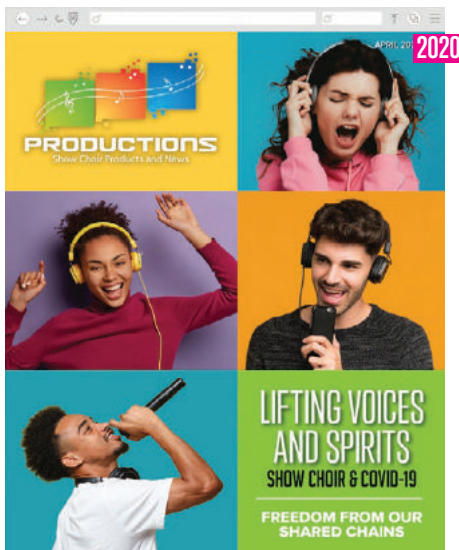
The bottom line is this: after you've considered everything you need in a staging system, ask about the load ratings and make sure you know that you have a sturdy, safe, reliable staging system that will last you for years to come. The load ratings should be a part of your criteria.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Chad Parrish is Product Manager at Wenger Corporation in Owatonna, Minnesota, working with design engineers in product development, customer service, sales and technical support.

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