

Norman Spivey

# NATS Student Auditions— Changes and Tradition



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**F**ORMER NATS PRESIDENT ROY DELP BELIEVED that “the idea of constructive criticism along with encouragement” is at the heart of our student adjudications. “Perhaps one of the greatest ties that binds us together as NATS members is the care we have for the students of our colleagues, as demonstrated at our student auditions” (*Journal of Singing* 57, no. 1 [September/October 2000]: 2). I am sure that Roy’s words resonate with many of us, since student auditions have long been at the center of our activities. Back in my student days these auditions provided my first experiences with the Association, and for many students and teachers our auditions are a primary way of interacting with NATS.

As you may have heard, NATS has recently rolled out updated information for all student auditions. By the time this column appears, many of you will already have held your fall auditions and will have used the new model of rules and regulations; for others this may happen later in the year. In any event, all of us will now use the same procedures at all levels. At the chapter and district levels, these will be known as NATS Student Auditions, while at the regional and national levels, they will be referred to as NATS National Student Auditions (NSA), since regional auditions feed directly into the national events.

Once NSA was established, it became clear that, to be effective for students and teachers, the regional and national models needed to parallel one another. No one wanted to find a singer disadvantaged because of conflicting repertoire requirements or category distinctions. Now that we’ve been through two cycles of the national auditions, we’re able to see how having one set of regulations for all NATS auditions can be a help to students, teachers, auditions chairs, and others involved in the process.

Inclusive national guidelines for Student Auditions were first formulated nearly 40 years ago. Since then there have been surveys that assessed changes and trends in audition practices, and committees that worked on mission statements, revisited guidelines, and provided examples of best practices. In 2010, I was asked by Donald Simonson to chair a committee charged with investigating the possibility of a progressive National Student Audition. Among the first steps we took was to pore over all of the chapter, district, and regional audition information we could find to arrive at best practices. It was clear that over the years many a wheel had been reinvented in terms of audition rules and regulations. What we found amidst these disparate practices, however, were common threads from which we could cull the basis of our

work. Deborah Williamson chaired the committee the following year, oversaw the streamlining of the rules and regulations, and shepherded the NSA through its launch at the 2014 Boston conference. Following this, a committee chaired by Dan Johnson-Wilmot (current NSA Coordinator) developed the present national model for student auditions. They were able to draw on guidelines from the inaugural NSA, their collective experience, comments from regional governors and other board members, and feedback from a sampling of chapter officers from throughout the Association. The response from officers throughout NATS was so supportive and positive that we feel the current model can serve us all extremely well. Likewise, the NATS groups and individual members I have spoken with about the new model seem very pleased about the advances. The typical refrain I hear is, "It's about time."

As you can surmise, there has been a small army of members who have participated in the various committees associated with these rules and regulations, read drafts and provided feedback, served as adjudicators, and supported NSA. Drawing on their collective experience and wisdom has been invaluable.

As I've travelled to NATS events in a number of regions, I've had the opportunity to speak with members and understand many of the frustrations they have experienced with auditions. Some of them have longstanding traditions in their chapters, many of which no longer entirely serve the students or teachers, particularly as programs and interests have continued to develop. Others spend energies frequently debating and revising audition rules and regulations. One of the overarching concerns is adjudication as a point of conflict. In many instances it seems that adjudicators may not clearly understand their obligations, or may not score singers thoughtfully to a universal standard. We've been particularly mindful of this as we made choices relative to adjudication, including rubrics that correspond to adjudication sheets, and adjudicator training in the audition packet and online.

The newest changes include standardizing registration processes, categories, and repertoire, and providing common language, definitions, training, and scoring systems for adjudication. It should help create ease

and fluidity across all NATS auditions, and will bring our events to parity with other organizations that have consistent requirements for local, regional, and national auditions. Regional governors and the national office have been active in publicizing these changes, so you may already feel fully versed in the information. Of course, complete audition information is always available on the NATS website.

There is also some flexibility in the new system—from options in numbers of categories to choices in the process for semifinals. We have tried very hard to be as helpful as we can while also leaving choice when possible; but as comprehensive as we have tried to be, it may be that modifications need to be made. Should questions materialize, or if updates need to be made, please be in touch with the NSA coordinator ([dejohnsonwilmot@viterbo.edu](mailto:dejohnsonwilmot@viterbo.edu)).

As you can see, these changes have been a long time in the making with many thoughtful steps along the way. Even though this represents a change in the way we operate, the NATS Board and many others believe it is very much for the common good. Arriving at the new model required goodwill on the part of the series of committees that shepherded the updates through, and will need continuing goodwill from all of us to implement. Even though everyone will have to change a little, adjusting and learning along the way, it is our hope that this new format will help make the process simpler and more effective for everyone participating in student auditions. After all, the bottom line is that we all want the best for our students and their experience.

While there will be changes for everyone, we are hoping that the updates will ultimately create more ease and agreement for all. Rather than spending chapter meetings looking at rules and regulations for auditions, energies can be spent on other matters. Just think of the potential boon to networking and creativity. That will be something to celebrate!

Even though we have done our very best to cull the strongest practices from all NATS auditions and to honor the work that came before, it is a new day for our student auditions. To those of you who have been active, I urge you to embrace the change. To others, I encourage you to come and join us!