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A Critical Review of Violin Solos Section of the *NYSSMA Manual*

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Abstract

The New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA) runs an annual evaluation of students' musical performance. The purposes of the evaluation are to promote music programs in the schools and communities of New York State, and to provide a means of objective evaluation of musical performance. The evaluation is influential because the selections of participant for All-State, All-County, and other music festivals are mainly based upon NYSSMA scores. To familiarize the evaluation criteria and to prepare students to meet the requirements, New York State music teachers use the *NYSSMA Manual* as an important teaching guide. Aiming at future revisions, this article discusses the requirements in the Violin Solos section of the *NYSSMA Manual*. Two types of sources are used for comparison purpose. One is traditional literature with emphasize on music theory and method books. The other is similar publication from other music organizations. From the author's point of view, some requirements could be simplified while others could be enhanced.

KEYWORDS. Manual, New York, NYSSMA, violin

A Critical Review of Violin Solos Section of the *NYSSMA Manual*

INTRODUCTION

One of the common tasks of music associations at state-level is to offer official evaluation of musical performance in the form of audition. New York State School Music Association, or NYSSMA, runs an annual evaluation of students' musical performance statewide. The purposes of the evaluation are to promote music programs in the schools and communities of New York State, and to provide a means of objective evaluation of musical performance. As "a resource of Graded Solo & Ensemble Music Suitable for Contests and Evaluation Festivals,"¹ the *NYSSMA Manual*, currently in its 28th edition effective July 2006, serves New York State music teachers as a crucial reference source.² Excluding the Sight Reading requirements, this article reviews the requirements of scales and pieces in the Violin Solos section of the Manual. Two types of sources are used for comparison purpose. One is traditional literature with emphasize on music theory and method books. The other is similar publication from other music organizations. From the author's point of view, some requirements in the Manual could be simplified while others could be enhanced. Suggestions are offered at the end of the article. Other sections in the Manual are beyond this discussion. It is hoped that this article would be useful to music teachers in general, and to violin teachers and manual editors in particular.

SCALES

Are fifteen major scales necessary?

The Manual requires Levels V-VI students prepare fifteen major scales although it does not indicate which fifteen.³ It is assumed that the fifteen major scales are based upon the following method: C Major + 7 sharps + 7 flats = 15. It would be helpful for teachers to know the rationale of the selection of fifteen rather than twelve or any other numbers. To assess the effectiveness, it would be useful to know the practical usage of those rarely used keys. For example, it is worth finding out the statistics on how frequently, say, C \flat major had been selected by the adjudicators in NYSSMA Solos auditions. The practice is different in examinations run by other music organizations. For example, the New Jersey Music Educators Association uses nine major keys,⁴ while the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (United Kingdom) lists twelve.⁵

If major scales are derived from a chromatic scale, there are twelve of them: C, C \sharp , D, D \sharp , E, F, F \sharp , G, G \sharp , A, A \sharp , B. Among the twelve, nine of them can be each transposed, without accidentals of double sharps or double flats, into a different key but with the same pitches: C=B \sharp , C \sharp =D \flat , D \sharp =E \flat , E=F \flat , F=E \sharp , F \sharp =G \flat , G \sharp =A \flat , A \sharp =B \flat , B=C \flat . Thus, there can be as many as twenty-one major scales although some of them are more meaningful in music theory than in applied music. In reality, however, a twelve-major-scales system seems to be more common in traditional teaching methods as we see in Carl Flesch's *Scale System*⁶ (C, F, B \flat , E \flat , A \flat , D \flat , G \flat , B, E, A, D, G); and Ivan Galamian's *Contemporary Violin Technique*.⁷ (G, A \flat , A, B \flat , B, C, D \flat , D, E \flat , E, F, F \sharp). An exception is Johann Hrimaly's *Scale-Studies for the Violin*,⁸ in which thirteen major scales are found because of the presentations of both G \flat and F \sharp . In performance and as

indicated on a piano's keyboard, C# major equals Db major, B major equals Cb major, and so on.⁹ Since it is visually easier to read, say, B major than Cb major, a student might as well use B major fingering pattern for Cb major, Db major for C# major, and so on. There should be no problem as long as no particular fingering system is required. In conclusion, it is reasonable to believe that twelve major scales are sufficient to evaluate a student's ability.

Minor scales and arpeggios

On the other hand, there is no requirement of minor scales in the Manual. Yet, a large number of pieces in the Manual's repertoire are in minor keys. Some of the well-known pieces include Vivaldi-*Concerto in a minor*, Op.3, No.6 and *Concerto in g minor*, Op.12, No.1, Bach-*Concerto in a minor*, Tartini-*Sonata in g minor (Devil's Trill)*, Bruch-*Concerto No.1 in g minor*, Op.26, Corelli-*La Folia* [in d minor], Dvorak-*Concerto in a minor*, Op.53, Kreisler-*Praeludium & Allegro in the Style of Pugnani* [in e minor], Lalo-*Symphonie Espagnole* [in d minor], Op.21, Mendelssohn-*Concerto in e minor*, Op.64, Prokofiev-*Concerto No.2 in g minor*, Op.63, Saint-Saëns-*Concerto No.3* [in b minor] and *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* [in a minor], Op.28, Sibelius-*Concerto in d minor*, Vieuxtemps-*Concerto No.4 in d minor*, Op.31, Viotti-*Concerto No.22 in a minor*, Vitali-*Ciaccona in g minor*, and Wieniawski-*Concerto No.2 in d minor*, Op.22. It is evident that minor scales are as important as major ones in violin literature.

Also missing in the Manual is the requirement of arpeggios, i.e., broken chords, which are essential in developing a student's technique. In comparison, the New Jersey Music Educators Association requires arpeggios and minor scales for the High School

Orchestra audition,¹⁰ and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music requires arpeggios from Grade 1 and minor scales from Grade 2.¹¹

PIECES

Repertoire grouping

Within a same level, some pieces are much more technically challenging than others. For example, Level VI contains Sibelius Concerto, a rather difficult piece, and Mozart Concertos, relatively easy ones. It would be more reflective if there was a separate higher level, perhaps designated as Level VI+ or simply Level VII, for more difficult pieces. Furthermore, students participate NYSSMA audition from elementary school to high school, six levels may not be always sufficient in some cases. After all, why should we limit ourselves by a certain number of levels?

Cadenzas

The Manual states “Cadenzas, Ossiases and Recitatives are to be performed at the discretion of the soloist unless otherwise indicated in the Manual listing of the solo.”¹². Although acceptable, it will be less than satisfying if a student decides to omit a famous Cadenza, say, in a Mozart Concerto. Furthermore, it will be an incomplete piece if the Cadenza in Mendelssohn Concerto or Vieuxtemps Concerto is omitted, since it is an inseparable part of the composition. For this kind of compositions, the following criterion in the Manual itself should be utilized, “Musical reductions...are not considered standard editions.”¹³ Nevertheless, throughout the Manual one of a few pieces of instruction on Cadenzas is not about the obligation to play but the permission to omit.¹⁴ Naturally, to include Cadenzas or Ossiases may require regrouping of the repertoire. For example, if the

Cadenza had been mandatory, then Mozart *Violin Concerto No 3 in G Major*, K.216, would have stayed in Level VI as in 25th edition (1997) instead of being demoted to Level V since 26th edition (2000).

SUGGESTIONS

Since the Manual is usually revised every three years, a new edition, 29th, is anticipated in 2009. To update and improve the Manual, it will be beneficial to consult with published guidelines such as the American String Teachers Association's *String Syllabus*¹⁵ and the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music's *Complete Syllabus, Violin*. The following is this author's wish list.

Scales

The number of major scales for Levels V-VI may be reduced to twelve to eliminate unnecessary confusion. Other requirements may be added to scales audition, such as minor scales (be it natural or melodic or harmonic), basic arpeggios, slurred bowing, tempo (which is indicated for the Piano Solos in the Manual¹⁶), and simple double stops for the higher levels, so that a student's technique level will be corresponding to the piece he or she performs. It is hard to imagine that a Level VI student, who plays, say, Tchaikovsky Concerto, is unable to fulfill these requirements.

Pieces

Considering the popularity of Suzuki method, the Manual may include Suzuki pieces for Level I students, suitably, the first twelve pieces in *Suzuki Violin School* Volume I. At present, a Suzuki student has to choose a non-Suzuki book if he or she intends to audition for Level I.

The Manual provides a wide range of repertoire. However, some masterpieces in violin literature are regrettably missing. Examples are Bériot-*Concerto No.7 in G Major*, Op.76, Ravel-*Tzigane*, Sarasate-*Introduction and Tarantella*, Op.43, and Wieniawski-*Polonaise in A Major*, Op.21. While the current designation of difficulty levels for selected J.S. Bach's unaccompanied sonatas and partitas is debatable, the omission of Chaconne from *Partita in d minor*, BWV 1004, is undoubtedly a great pity.

An inclusion of some well-known student pieces would enhance the repertoire, such as Rieding-*Concerto in b minor*, Op.35, Rode-*Concerto No.6 in Bb Major* and *Concerto No.8 in e minor*, and Seitz-*Concerto No.3 in g minor*, Op.12.

For the higher levels, certain famous Cadenzas or Ossia's may be required. Memorization of concertos and solo pieces may be encouraged.

The audition may also add a standard study piece, which would serve as an effective measurement of a student's technique level. Some common ones that may be of consideration include Wohlfahrt-*60 Studies*, Op.45, Kayser-*36 Elementary & Progressive Studies*, Op.20, Dont-*24 Studies*, Op.37 and *24 Etudes and Caprices*, Op.35, Kreuzter-*42 Studies*, Mazas-*Melodious & Progressive Studies*, Op.36, Fiorillo-*36 Etudes or Caprices*, Rode-*24 Caprices*, and Paganini-*24 Caprices*, Op.1, (No.24 has already been included as a performing piece rather than a study piece.)

REFERENCES

- ¹ New York State School Music Association. Title page, *NYSSMA Manual XXVIII*. New York State School Music Association, 2006.
- ² The *NYSSMA Manual* will be referred to as the Manual thereafter in the article.
- ³ “String Scale Requirements and Information,” *NYSSMA Manual XXVIII*, p.1-1.
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- ⁹ Due to the nature of this article, it is unrealistic to discuss the difference between Pythagoras’s Circle of Fifths and Equal-Temperament systems.
- ¹⁰ “High School Orchestra Scale Requirements. Revised 3/08.” *Tempo*, May 2008, p.86. New Jersey Music Educators Association. <<http://www.njmea.org/OrchScaleReq.pdf>>. (Accessed: October 14, 2008).
- ¹¹ There are eight Grades in ABRSM system. See *Graded Music Examination Syllabuses*: <<http://www.abrsm.org/?page=exams/gradedMusicExams/latestSyllabuses.html>>. (Accessed: October 14, 2008).
- ¹² “RULES & REGULATIONS,” *NYSSMA Manual XXVIII*, p.R-8.
- ¹³ “EVALUATIVE PERFORMANCE FOR A RATING,” *NYSSMA Manual XXVIII*, p.R-2.
- ¹⁴ “Khatchaturian, A. -Concerto (Mvt. 1–Omit cadz. resume at m. 221).” *NYSSMA Manual XXVIII*, p.1-18.
- ¹⁵ American String Teachers Association. *String Syllabus: Violin, Viola, Cello, Double Bass, Ensembles*. United States: The Association, 2003.
- ¹⁶ “Piano Scale Requirements and Information,” *NYSSMA Manual XXVIII*, p.8-1.