

# **TEACHERS CORNER**

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Fiddle Teacher/Judge

## **PART I - PLAYING IN THE TOPANGA BANJO-FIDDLE CONTEST**

Here I will explain what the judges are looking and listening for when you have stepped up to the microphone. You have at this point picked your tune and your backup musicians and have practiced your fingers to the bone so that you know the tune inside out and backwards. Take a deep breath, set your time in your head, and play your best. If you accomplish this, you have won your own contest.

## **PART II - HOW TO ENTER THE CORRECT LEVEL**

The following is directed to fiddle players but the same logic may be used for all instruments. Consult with your instructor or someone with contest experience if you are in doubt.

Many will think that being a beginner means being a child - which is incorrect. One who is a beginner does not necessarily do two strings at a time, double stops, vibrato or changing position.

Beginners: Should be able to start and stop a tune and keep a basic rhythm while being true to the melody.

Intermediates: Should be in tune, able to start and stop a tune (intro/outro), keep a basic rhythm with some rhythm changes (i.e., syncopation, etc.), a clear melody should be heard, double stops and/or droning should be done. The tune should be a bit more complicated than a beginner tune and have at least two parts (no Boil the Cabbage).

Advanced: Should be able to do all the above, use of vibrato, double stops/droning, changing out of first position, complicated tunes of at least two parts or more.

It is not uncommon for a contestant to compete at the same level in two or more different years, especially when going to an advanced classification.

## **PART III – THE CONTEST AND JUDGING**

### **STEPPING UP TO THE MICROPHONE**

You are now backstage, tuning and checking with your backup that you are tuned to each other. You've played through your piece 20 times in the last 5 minutes. You are ready. The announcer goes up to the microphone and introduces you. He/She motions to you to advance to center stage and tells you good luck as they leave. The sound crew has you step up to the microphone so they can adjust the height of the stand. Fiddlers, have the microphone curve over the top of your bridge. Guitarists, have the microphone adjusted below and pointing slightly up toward your sound hole. Banjoists, the microphone needs to be placed below the head, pointing up toward the sound ring. These are optimum placements for best sound performance. Step right up to the microphone. If you are back more than 12 inches, the quality of your sound performance deteriorates. Play into the microphone so that the sound people can set the proper level. IF THE JUDGES CAN'T HEAR YOU, THEY CAN'T JUDGE YOU.

## **PLAYING FOR THE JUDGES**

Take a deep breath. Step up to the microphone and **if the Emcee hasn't clearly conveyed the following information**, complete as necessary. In a clear voice, state your name, your contestant number, category in which you are entered, introduce your backup people, and say the name of the piece you are playing. For example, I might say, (again not immediately repeating the Emcee) –

"HI. MY NAME IS SHELAH SPIEGEL. I AM CONTESTANT NUMBER 32 IN ADVANCED FIDDLE. MY BACKUP MUSICIANS ARE JIM COOPER ON GUITAR AND BILL KNOPF ON BANJO. THE NAME OF MY TUNE IS BLUEGRASS IN THE BACKWOODS."

**REMEMBER:** Your time begins when you get the microphone and introductions do count against your total time! (3 minutes for instrument categories)

Take another deep breath. Think of your first note and get your fingers ready. Get eye contact with your backup. Set the time in your head BEFORE you start to play. I suggest that you start the piece *slower* than what you think due to the fact that adrenalin will make you play too fast. Play into the microphone, don't step away from it, and have fun being the center of attention! When you are through with your tune, step off the stage quickly so that the next contestant can get set up.

Good job! You made it through and you can still talk about it. Now you can sit back, watch the rest of the contest, or go out and jam.

## **WHAT THE JUDGES ARE LOOKING FOR**

Each year, as one of the fiddle judges at the Topanga Banjo·Fiddle Contest, I am sent a sheet of instructions which explain what I am to look for in each contestant. This information is pretty standard in the contest judging field, and most judges I know use basically the same criteria in other contests. I have included this information here so that you know what you need to work on when getting ready for competition.

### JUDGING INSTRUCTIONS

**PITCH:** Points: Banjo-10; Fiddle-25; Mandolin-10, Guitar-10 – **TUNE YOUR INSTRUMENT** and fiddle players, place your bridge properly BEFORE playing. Also, make sure your fingers hit the proper place for the specific note you are playing.

**RHYTHM:** Points: All-25 – In addition to measure-to-measure rhythm, this includes the rhythm of the entire piece (i.e., speed-ups or slow-downs). Judging changes in tempo is hard if they do not know if it is intentional.

**MUSICIANSHIP:** Points: Banjo-25; Fiddle-10; Mandolin-10, Guitar-25 – Make sure the performance hangs together, is tasteful and has drive. This is subjective and points are given on the basis of whether or not the judge likes the performance, but generally they end up agreeing by points.

**TECHNIQUE:** Points: Banjo-30; Fiddle-30; Guitar-30, Mandolin-30, – This includes playing cleanly (i.e., bowing, fingering, picking, etc.).

**STAGE PRESENCE:** Points: All-10 – Everyone is given 5 points *except* when a performer does a great job or an experienced performer does poorly.

JUDGING BAND:

| <u>Instrumental</u> |    | <u>Singing</u>       |    |
|---------------------|----|----------------------|----|
| Pitch/ Rhythm       | 20 | Vocal Pitch/Rhythm   | 20 |
| Technical Ability   | 30 | Instrumental Support | 20 |
| Musicianship        | 30 | Harmony Blend        | 40 |
| Performance         | 20 | Performance          | 20 |

**BANDS:** Bands are made up of 3 or more musicians, including at least one banjo or fiddle. They are required to play one instrumental and one vocal within six (6) minutes. The vocal must have at least 2 people singing in harmony.

Here is what a judge's sheet might look like:

| <b>JUDGING SHEET - FIDDLE</b>     |                        |                         |                               |                            |                                     |                         |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>NAME &amp; NUMBER</b>          | <b>PITCH<br/>25pts</b> | <b>RHYTHM<br/>25pts</b> | <b>MUSICIANSHIP<br/>10pts</b> | <b>TECHNIQUE<br/>30pts</b> | <b>STAGE<br/>PRESENCE<br/>10pts</b> | <b>TOTAL<br/>100pts</b> |
| Darrell – 16<br>Beginning Fiddle  |                        |                         |                               |                            |                                     |                         |
| Diana – 23<br>Intermediate Fiddle |                        |                         |                               |                            |                                     |                         |
| Bruce – 32<br>Advanced Fiddle     |                        |                         |                               |                            |                                     |                         |
| Tom – 38<br>Intermediate Fiddle   |                        |                         |                               |                            |                                     |                         |

## **HELPFUL HINTS TO HELP YOU WIN**

Judging Criteria: READ the Judging Criteria document on the Topanga web site. Know what the judges are instructed to do. [http://www.topangabanjofiddle.org/judging\\_Criteria.html](http://www.topangabanjofiddle.org/judging_Criteria.html)

Originality: No credit is given since a judge is not always aware if the piece is copied from a recording or a performance, or is an original piece.

Backup: No credit is given for good back-up, but points are taken away if the back-up is erratic in tempo or out of tune.

Pick Something Well Within Your Capability: A contest is a trying experience. Many people tend to play faster than they intend, speed up, and fluff a tricky spot. Remember, the point system penalizes mistakes and unevenness far more than it rewards dazzling techniques.

Tempo, Mic and Introduction: The first place where being nervous shows up is in tempo. When you get up, start a little slower than you want, then do your best not to speed up. It is helpful to run your number through several times with your back-up *before* going on stage. Notice how others work on stage, how well they come across, and enhance your performance accordingly. Remember, we can't judge you if we can't hear you!

Courtesy to Other Contestants: PLEASE BE ON TIME! If you have an early number, please check in 20 minutes prior or listen to the announcer who calls for numbers. If you have qualified on a playoff stage, report to the Main Stage Registrar immediately to get your new number. If you report late it causes confusion for the Registrar, Judges and Main Stage staff, AND YOU MAY NOT BE ABLE TO COMPETE!

Your Score: If you want to know your score and how you did compared to the first place winner in your category and at your level, the scores will be available at the Judges tent after the contest or may be requested later via a call to the Hotline at 818-382-4819 or an email to the Registrar. Sometimes seeing who won is a surprise to everyone. Thus, remember that the contest is for fun and that the judges, though highly qualified, are human. So, if you did not win after a super performance, well, better luck next time!

I hope this information allows you to have a better understanding of what to expect of yourself and the judges. Work hard, learn new tunes, work with other musicians, and enjoy being center stage.