

What is a NYSSMA Solo Festival?

NYSSMA is the state professional organization for music educators. It stands for New York State School Music Association and is the state component of MENC which is the National Association for Music Education, formally known as Music Educators National Conference. One of the major events that NYSSMA sponsors is the Solo and Ensemble Evaluation Festivals held each spring across all of New York State. The Festival provides the opportunity for student musicians to perform a musical selection before a professional adjudicator and receive a rating and feedback on their performance. Utilizing a rating system based on several musical categories (tone, intonation, technique, accuracy, interpretation, scales, and sight-reading) each student receives a summative rating as well as written constructive criticism. When students enter a NYSSMA Festival, they are not competing against anyone but themselves. This is an authentic assessment which has been utilized for many years and has become the model for many other state assessments in other academic areas. Preparing a NYSSMA solo is an optional, extra task, above and beyond the regular band, chorus, or orchestra work.

Students who register for the solo Festival are required to prepare a solo chosen from the NYSSMA Manual which is broken up into six ability levels. Students studying privately should make sure their teacher is using the most recent manual and are familiar with NYSSMA rules and regulations that cover everything from the use of photocopies to accommodations for students with disabilities. In addition to their solo, students will also be required to memorize scales: three for levels 1&2, seven for levels 3&4, and fifteen for levels 5&6. The last component to the performance is a sight-reading section. Students are presented with a short musical excerpt equivalent to their level of difficulty and asked to briefly study it, and then play it to the best of their ability. Students who perform on levels 1-4 are scored out of a possible 28 points and are rated as either "Outstanding," "Excellent," "Good," "Fair," and so on. Students performing at levels 5 and 6 are scored out of a possible 100 points and rated as "A+," "A," "A-," and so on.

While the NYSSMA Solo Festival is a wonderful opportunity, students should be aware that this is an extra time commitment and will require consistent home practice to be successful. NYSSMA evaluations are very useful tools for the student and teachers as they work to improve individual performance skills. NYSSMA Solo Festival grades are also used in the selection process for ALL County Music Ensembles, Suburban Council Music Ensembles, All-STATE Ensembles (grades 10 and 11), Empire State Youth Orchestra applications, and Saratoga Springs Youth Orchestra applications. Participation in these festivals can also be listed on college application and are often put on student resumes to highlight student musical participation and achievement.