

# And the band played on...

by ELIZABETH TAUFA  
Reporter

## NYSSMA celebrates 75 years in New York

If you attended high school, then you've heard of the New York State School Music Association, or NYSSMA.

Each year, approximately 100,000 students participate annually in NYSSMA's spring adjudication festivals held around the state. About 6,000 students audition for the eight all-state performing groups, and just under 900 are selected to participate annually.

"Our mission is to provide activities for students to promote music in all schools," said NYSSMA President Jim Cassara. "We always have and we always will."

Now in its 75th year, NYSSMA is still going strong.

All of NYSSMA's 9,000 members are music educators in New York State. Membership entitles one to various NYSSMA publications, as well as invitations to music educator conferences in both winter and summer.

The NYSSMA Winter Conference, which is held in Rochester in November, attracts almost 4,000 participants and offers about 190 workshops and showcases. Approximately 160 vendors and colleges are also present at the winter conference.

The New York State Summer Music Conference is devoted to reading music for potential school use and is held in Buffalo in August.

The NYSSMA manual, which contains an extensive list of instrumental and vocal music for solo and ensemble performance, is considered the definitive resource for setting standards and expectations for each instrument and voice part at every level.

All NYSSMA music students, both choral and instrumental, are given the opportunity to prepare a solo, which is chosen from the NYSSMA-approved repertoire, and to perform that solo for a NYSSMA judge.

Judges are, according to Cassara, "experts" on their particular instruments who give the students constructive critiques on the solo.

Students with the highest grades on their solos are then presented an opportunity to perform with statewide groups.

"It's the best way to promote music, for our outstanding students to perform together," Cassara said. State ensemble members play at the Eastman Theatre in Rochester.

NYSSMA, which was founded in 1932 with 22 members, has been in the forefront of the effort to keep the arts in the curricula of schools.

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are making a mistake," Cassara said. "If you look at any strong academic program, they all have strong music programs as well. It's been proven scientifically that music students score higher on tests."

However, Cassara noted that the effect that music has on students' academic performances shouldn't be the reason that school districts keep the arts in the curriculum.

"You shouldn't teach music because it helps math, you should teach music for music," he said. "It's part of what a student needs for a full, well-balanced education. It helps the right side of the brain, the creative side."

Cassara noted that all individuals who serve as NYSSMA president have a theme for their two-year terms. His theme is sound education.

Recently, NYSSMA has created a diversity committee within its own ranks to help and attract different kinds of membership.

An honors piano recital has also been established so that the outstanding piano students may showcase their solos, as choral members and other instrumentalists get to do in the larger ensembles. This past year, 11 students were chosen to play.

"We hadn't really had anything for our all-state piano students," Cassara said. "This is an opportunity for our exceptional piano students to showcase their talents like other instrumentalists."

NYSSMA has also begun a campaign to allow for music lessons for underprivileged students in poorer school systems.

"We want to make music accessible to everyone," Cassara said.

NYSSMA doesn't just help students, it also helps its members — the teachers themselves.

"As a NYSSMA member, I receive useful information through the periodicals that are sent out," said Maureen Reilly, the choral director at Williamsville East High School. "The conferences help you to better yourself as an educator."

Reilly, who has been an NYSSMA member since 1990, noted that NYSSMA conferences have helped her with different choral techniques, as well as rehearsal techniques and how to fix vocal problems both in a full chorus and in individual voices.

As far as the students are concerned, Reilly noted the importance of the evaluations for her students.

"They get to know where their weaknesses are, and the adjudicator guides them on the right path," she said. "It's a learning base because it's a set standard."

She also noted that the time that the students spend with the judge after they are finished with their solos is valuable to the learning process.

With a high score, individuals can be asked to participate in the statewide and regional ensembles.

"They bring in conductors from prominent universities," Reilly said. "Students get to work with other fine

musicians from across the state. There's one common goal — to make beautiful music."

Kenmore West High School band director Ken Belote echoed Reilly's comments.

"The students can make some new friends and learn from each other," he said of the statewide ensembles. "You always want to listen to other musicians."

He compared being selected to play with the all-state groups to making an all-star team with a sport. He noted that the music played by the state groups is much more challenging and stretches students' abilities.

The solos that the students play for NYSSMA adjudicators are taken from the NYSSMA manual.

"The solos are broken down by ability and graded one through six — one being the easiest and six being the hardest," Belote said. "That way, students who are beginners on their instruments can still have the experience of playing a solo."

He noted that the grade-six solos are near transcriptions of pieces of classical instrumental literature.

"It's legitimate classical music that students can use for college auditions if they choose to pursue music in college," he said. "It's a good variety of solos that fit every ability level."

Belote has been an NYSSMA member for 18 years and has attended the winter conference in Rochester in the past.

"The workshops that I attended were run by other band directors," he said, noting that the subjects for the workshops range from how to

improve the tone quality of specific instruments in the band as well as rehearsal and staff development techniques.

"It helps you to learn more outside of the classroom," he said.

NYSSMA also produces several publications that are distributed to all of its members.

"There are articles written by other teachers on everything from band sound to fund-raising ideas to (band) trip experiences," he said.

For more information on NYSSMA, visit the Web site at [www.nyssma.org](http://www.nyssma.org).

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