

Some notes on the adjudication of harmonica festivals or competitions: what we are looking for

by David Beer

Solo Chromatic

The first class in the first harmonica festival I ever adjudicated was solo chromatic and I heard the most beautiful rendition of Faure's Pavane. There are lots of semitone shifts in the melody (in Faure's orchestration played first on flutes, then oboes and clarinets) and it makes it an ideal choice for the chromatic harmonica. Semitone trills can also be achieved on the chromatic, which suits some classical styles. Other styles that work well in this class are Irish or Scottish folk tunes. (Listen to Brendan Power for good examples)

An orchestral wind instrument such as a flute can achieve legato phrasing by using long breaths, and notes are simply changed by moving the fingers over the keys. It is very difficult to achieve a true classical legato on a harmonica because some note changes need a change in breath direction from blow to draw, or vice versa, or they need a shift of instrument position in the mouth to reach higher or lower notes (note, I said change of instrument position NOT change of head position), and so there will inevitably be a small gap between notes. A skilled player can make these intervals between notes appear seamless.

So an adjudicator will look for several things here, in whatever the style of music:

- 1) a melodic line that is as smooth and flowing as possible, (no gaps, no broken lines, and no unwanted notes in between, when the position is changed for a large leap)
- 2) notes having the same emphasis (no unwanted accented notes; for example the tone quality of a blow and a draw note should be as close as possible to being identical)
- 3) correct holding of the instrument, - moving the instrument, not the head.
- 4) complete synchronisation of slide movement, position change and breath direction. This takes skill, and, if achieved, will be rewarded by high marks.
- 5) From a general musical point of view - the questions are: is it music? Does it flow? Does it have a sense of style? Does it have expression and dynamic variety? Is there a good tone?
- 6) The use of vibrato is an advanced technique - and can be done by diaphragmatic breathing, or by moving the hand over the air holes of the instrument. Vibrato enhances the playing, but choose when to use it, use it wisely and make sure it is appropriate to the style of music.
- 7) Playing at a fast tempo is much harder on a harmonica than on almost every other instrument, because of the way it must be played, i.e. breathing in and out! Irish jigs and reels require good dexterity. Skill in this area will be rewarded.

Solo diatonic melodic

This instrument is also ideally suited to folk tunes (see George Currents's notes and examples in the Harmonica World magazine, and listen to Brendan Power).

In addition to most of the points above (under solo chromatic) the adjudicator will award marks for advanced techniques such as tongue blocking to achieve clean single notes, and to achieve certain intervals or octaves

and therefore allow for the playing 2 or 3 notes at a time in harmony (note, I said “in harmony” - not random notes in parallel but specific notes that work in the context of the harmony that underlies the tune).

Also, chromatic notes can be achieved by skilled players on the diatonic by careful changes in embouchure (mouth position) and any player achieving this will be awarded high marks.

Again, musical questions apply: is it in the correct style? Are the correct modes or scales being used? (or, putting it another way, is the correct instrument being used? (e.g using a C harp in second position to play a G blues/rock piece to give you the notes of the G pentatonic scale and blues scale)

Diatonic Blues and Rock

Here, there are opportunities for additional advanced techniques which will all be rewarded highly:

- 1) draw bending to give that authentic blues feel - the adjudicator will look for careful bending that stays within the parameters of the key or scale being used
- (2) the playing of upper melody notes with chordal accompaniment in the lower octave. A skilled player can make one instrument sound like two by skilful interweaving of solo and chordal lines.
- (3) if using a mic, good effects can be achieved by close mic technique. Distortion, wah wah (similar to the way in which a trumpeter uses his plunger or hand over the bell of the instrument) and other effects are all possible. Two years ago in Bristol one player played a Hendrix tune to great effect using distortion, in the style of the great guitarist, by getting up close to the mic.
- (4) variety of tone can be created by varied breath pressure, growling, mouth position and changing the hand position in front of the instrument too.

Solo Jazz - any type of harmonica

As well as the skills and techniques outlined above, here we are looking for an understanding of the jazz style and hopefully some improvisation. Improvisations have to have an adherence to the chordal progressions (the “changes”) and make musical, harmonic and melodic sense in order to achieve the highest marks. A skilled improviser will make reference to the original tune (or “head”) in the improvisation and use and extend the notes of the chords to make a cohesive whole before returning to the “head”.

Overall, to sum up: we look for good technique, tone quality, breath control to achieve melodic line, a sense of style, an individual quality to your playing (something that makes you unique or special) or your playing is seriously reminiscent or influenced by one of the great harmonica players (Little Walter, Sonny Terry, Brendan Power, Toots Thielemans etc etc)