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## Undergraduate Musicians' Remembered Benefits and Motives for Participating in Honor Ensembles

Given the prevalence of honor ensembles (Lien & Humphreys, 2001) and the lack of research investigating these ensembles outside of the event itself, the purpose of this study was to examine collegiate musicians' remembered benefits and experiences of such honor ensemble experiences. Participants ( $N = 86$ ) were undergraduate and graduate musicians participating in one of several university ensembles. Four of the top six reasons for participating in an honor ensemble and the top two remembered benefits of participation were musical in nature. Nearly half of all open-response comments about their least favorite aspect of honor ensemble participation addressed the amount of rehearsal time. Results indicated that should music educators wish to promote student participation in such events, they may have the most success by appealing to the musical nature of the events and a general interest in having fun, although follow-up comparisons seemed to indicate that both motivations and perceived benefits may be individual and contextualized. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords: benefits, motives, honor ensembles, musical participation*

### Introduction

Throughout the United States, there are many opportunities for students to participate in select peer groups to demonstrate their talent and hard work. Often, music students showcase their abilities by participating in district, region, and all-state honor ensembles. State music organizations frequently encourage students to participate in honor ensembles by touting the prestige of the ensemble experience. The Texas Music Educators Association (2018) states, "All-State is

the highest honor a Texas music student can receive. This selection is a most prestigious honor.” With state organizations placing a strong emphasis on honor ensembles, it may be of no surprise that music students desire to be a part of such preeminent events.

Many individuals work to create a positive experience for student participants in honor ensembles, but perhaps the most visible role is that of the guest conductor. A guest conductor for an honor ensemble has a large impact on the honor group’s musical growth and experience (Glosser, 2005), and Greenlee (1982) suggested that the ensemble’s guest clinician is a major factor affecting student’s involvement. Clinician concern for the student experience may be indicated by practitioner articles that provide honor ensemble directors with advice to make the experience positive for student musicians, such as that of Freer (2007). The author offered suggestions to guest conductors regarding their rehearsal approaches, stating “When planning and conducting honor ensembles, focus on creating a rewarding experience for all from start to finish” (p. 30). In the same article, Freer also attempted to guide honor ensemble conductors with rehearsal pacing, music selection, rehearsal planning, and concert day reminders. The suggestions came from experienced conductors, but little research has been done on the perceptions that students may have in regard to their experiences. Further research is needed to provide honor ensemble directors with data reflecting student attitude and perceptions regarding their honor ensemble experience. If offered student feedback, guest conductors may be able to make more prudent choices when they are preparing for their honor ensemble.

While the choice of guest conductor may be one motivation for students to join honor ensembles, researchers have worked to explain students’ motivation to participate in honor ensembles in other ways and have investigated the benefits of their involvement. Some students join music ensembles simply for the social interactions (Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003). Participants who perform in an honor ensemble may profit from the experience by developing musically and meeting new friends. Lien and Humphries (2001) found that students may feel more connected to colleges and universities because they have the opportunity to interact with university faculty and because they are frequently offered scholarships as a result of their participation in the honor ensembles. There have also been suggestions that participation in extra events such as honor ensembles may help students learn more about their interests and can impact their future career choices (Brantley, 2014; Rickels et al., 2013).

While there could be musical, social, and educational benefits for the student-performer, honor ensembles typically require a large amount of time and energy from students and may actually be a burden. Some music educators have cited that

parents and administration expect music students to participate in events such as honor ensembles despite the student's demanding schedules (Stegman, 2009). Many students have very active extracurricular commitments and events such as honor groups could add additional stresses to the participant's lives (Sternbach, 2008). Consequently, it seems even more important to better understand the reasons for participation and potential benefits of participation in order to assist directors in communicating with students who may have reservations about participation.

The work of previous researchers has been consistent in demonstrating the weight of musical aspects over social aspects in extracurricular music events. In a study by Kelly and Juchniewicz (2009), instrumental summer camp participants indicated that most students hoped to achieve objectives that were more musical than social. Neill (1997), who looked at middle school honor choir participants, indicated similar findings: "Students thought the best part of the experience was musical rather than social" (p. 39). In another study, Silveira (2013) sought responses from students who were participating in honor ensembles during the final rehearsal for the group. The results indicated that a large majority of students participated in the ensemble for musical satisfaction and growth. The social aspect of participation, while prevalent, was not the highest rated influence. It is possible that social experiences were not rated highly due to the survey distribution being during the final rehearsal of the ensemble. The impact of that rehearsal may have encouraged the students to think in more musically-beneficial terms. It seems beneficial to explore these issues with the benefit of temporal distance in order to better understand the distilled perception of participants without being in the midst of the event.

The purpose of this study was to examine collegiate musicians' remembered motivations for and benefits of participating in their first honor ensemble experiences. Specifically, the researchers sought to answer:

- What musical and social reasons do students recall as being important to their participation?
- What musical and social benefits do students feel they received as a result of their participation?
- Does gender, honor ensemble type, or music major status have an impact on either of these?
- Are there differences between why students participated and what benefits they received?
- What do students perceive as being their least favorite aspect of honor ensemble participation?

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants ( $N = 86$ ) were undergraduate and graduate musicians in a large performing ensemble at one of two universities included in the study. Mean age of participants was 19.5 years ( $SD = 1.6$ ) with 64 (74.4%) females and 22 (25.6%) males. Nearly one-third of the participants were non-music majors ( $n = 25, 29.1\%$ ) and 61 (70.9%) were music majors. Because the researchers were interested in investigating past experiences, participants were not asked for current ensemble enrollment. Instead, students were asked in what type of honor ensemble (band, chorus, or orchestra) they had performed. Band was most represented ( $n = 41, 47.7\%$ ), followed by chorus ( $n = 27, 31.4\%$ ), then by orchestra ( $n = 17, 19.8\%$ ). One participant did not indicate an ensemble type.

Responses were initially collected from 119 students, but 31 responses were eliminated because they provided multiple ensemble types, possibly indicating they were not responding based on their first honor ensemble experience as prompted, and two responses were eliminated because participants were under the age of consent. The researchers decided to recruit from current ensemble musicians because of the convenient access to both majors and nonmajors, although this decision may limit generalizability beyond students who choose to continue playing in ensembles. While the number of students cross-enrolled in multiple ensembles was very small, the researchers did include a request for those who had already taken the survey to not participate again. Appropriate IRB permissions were obtained before the start of the study.

### *Survey Construction*

The survey used in the current study was researcher-designed and largely based on the work of Silveira (2013). The survey included 25 items in addition to demographic questions and participants were asked to consider their *first* honor ensemble experience when answering the questions. In 13 of the items, participants were asked to rate the impact of various musical and nonmusical factors on their motivation to attend an honor ensemble. These items were taken verbatim from Silveira (2013). In 10 items, students were asked to rate their level of agreement with the nonmusical and musical benefits derived from their participation in an honor ensemble and were based upon the previous section. The final two open-response questions provided students an opportunity to write about their least favorite aspect of the honor ensemble experience and any aspect that they felt had not been represented in the survey.

The categorization of prompts as nonmusical or musical was done with high reliability and steps were taken to verify content validity in the original research by Silveira (2013), and the researchers deemed it unnecessary to replicate these steps for the current investigation. Silveira had originally included a prompt for participants to rank their most and least favorite aspects, but this prompt was removed after the pilot test given student feedback that the questions had already been addressed. Providing students in the current study with an open-response opportunity, rather than a forced ranking, might yield different information. However, the researchers only did so for the least favorite aspect, as the most favorite aspects would likely be addressed by the Likert-type prompts.

Each researcher showed the survey to a colleague fluent in research design and minor changes to layout and instructions were made. Internal consistency for three of the four categories was acceptable: musical reasons for participating (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ), perceived musical benefits (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ), and perceived nonmusical benefits (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ). However, the internal consistency of nonmusical reasons for participating was not good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .48$ ), suggesting that the prompts included in this category may represent multiple constructs. However, this was not deemed a problem as the nonmusical category is intended to be inclusive of all reasons that were not musical, as evidenced by the label, rather than representing a single construct.

### *Procedure*

The researchers asked for participation from students in performing ensembles, including band, choir, and orchestra, in an attempt to reach the maximum number of students with as few class interruptions as possible. Ensemble directors were contacted in advance to schedule a time to speak with the ensemble or, in one case, the ensemble was under the direction of one of the researchers. Participants were approached at the end of regularly-scheduled rehearsals and were free to leave if they did not wish to participate. Instructions were printed at the top of the survey to ensure consistency between administrations and so participants could refer to them as necessary. Separate consent forms were stapled to the surveys and were separated before data analysis to ensure participant confidentiality. Surveys took approximately 10 minutes to complete and were returned to the researcher immediately upon completion. Of the 236 surveys distributed to students present in the ensembles at time of distribution, 119 were completed and returned, yielding a 50.4% response rate.

## Results

Of the reasons for participating, four of the top six responses were musical in nature (Table 1). “I want to develop more musically” and “I want to perform with highly talented musicians” were the top two reasons indicated by participants, while the least impactful reason for participating in an honor ensemble was a nonmusical reason: “Another [non-music] teacher encouraged me to attend.” Likewise, as can be seen in Table 2, the top four remembered benefits of participation in an honor ensemble were musical in nature (“I enjoyed the performances,” “I enjoyed the music,” “I enjoyed learning new repertoire,” and “I developed and improved my music skills”) while the least beneficial aspect was nonmusical (“I developed social skills because of my participation”). A comparison of the reasons for participating with the original results obtained by Silveira (2013) indicated that of the 13 prompts included in the current study, 10 of them were within two or fewer rankings of those obtained by Silveira (Table 3).

Table 1

### *Descriptive Statistics of Reasons for Participating*

Reason for Participating	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>
<b>Musical</b>				
Additional performance opportunity	5.78	1.44	6	2
Work with a guest conductor/clinician	4.52	1.90	5	3
Develop more musically	6.48	.94	7	1
Perform with highly talented musicians	6.44	1.07	7	1
Perform new repertoire	5.80	1.49	6	2
<b>Nonmusical</b>				
Travel to new schools	3.52	1.88	3	3
Have fun	6.30	.99	7	1
Meet new people	5.19	1.50	5	2.75
Opportunity to miss school	3.16	2.16	3	3.75
Parents encouraged me to attend	3.95	2.06	4	3.75
Music teacher encouraged me to attend	5.87	1.55	7	2
Another teacher encouraged me to attend	3.15	2.32	2	4
Friends encouraged me to attend	3.75	2.05	4	3

*Note.* 1 = No impact on my decision to participate, 7 = Very strong impact on my decision to participate

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of Remembered Benefits of Participating*

Benefit of Participating	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>IQR</i>
<b>Musical</b>				
Enjoyed the rehearsals	5.81	1.17	6	2
Enjoyed the performances	6.64	.75	7	0
Enjoyed the music	6.54	.73	7	1
Enjoyed working with conductor/clinician	6.01	1.13	6	2
Developed and improved my music skills	6.41	.93	7	1
Enjoyed learning new repertoire	6.48	.80	7	1
<b>Nonmusical</b>				
Met new friends	5.62	1.46	6	2
Enjoyed spending time with talented musicians	6.35	1.08	7	1
Developed self-confidence because of my participation	5.95	1.13	6	2
Developed social skills because of my participation	4.76	1.69	5	2

*Note.* 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

## Contributions to Music Education

Table 3

*Comparison of Current Results to Silveira (2013)*

Current Results	Silveira (2013)
1. Develop more musically*	1. Develop/improve musical skills
2. Perform with highly talented musicians	2. Recreation (to have fun)
3. Have fun*	3. Prestige
4. Music teacher encouraged me to attend	4. Opportunity to perform (play/sing)
5. Perform new repertoire*	5. Desire to work with “talented” musicians
6. Additional performance opportunity*	6. Desire to experience different repertoire
7. Meet new people*	7. Reconnect with old friends and meet new friends
8. Work with a guest conductor/clinician*	8. My music teacher encouraged/required me to do it
9. Parents encouraged me to attend*	9. Opportunity to travel to a different school/performance hall
10. Friends encouraged me to attend	10. Meet/work with a new conductor
11. Travel to new schools *	11. My parents/family encouraged me to do it
12. Opportunity to miss school*	12. Chance to get out of school
13. Another teacher encouraged me to attend*	13. My friends encouraged me to do it
	14. Another teacher (non-music) encouraged me to do it

*Note.* \* Response was within two or fewer rankings of the original results from Silveira (2013).



Participant responses were compared based on type of honor ensemble, gender, and current major. Because of the relative over-sampling of participants in honor bands, females, and music majors, the researchers chose to utilize nonparametric methods of comparison. To compare differences based on honor ensemble type, the researchers used the Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  Test, while the Mann-Whitney  $U$  Test was used to compare differences based on gender and music major status. The only difference based on type of honor ensemble was for the prompt regarding reason for participation, "I wanted an additional performance opportunity"  $H(2) = 10.59, p < .01$ . Subsequent Mann-Whitney  $U$  tests, using the Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, indicated that orchestra students rated the reason as less impactful than choral students ( $U = 169.5, p < .01, r = .40$ ) and band students ( $U = 112.5, p < .01, r = .42$ ). Females indicated that the opportunity to work with a guest conductor/clinician ( $U = 459.5, p < .05, r = .26$ ), desire to perform new repertoire ( $U = 451, p < .05, r = .27$ ), and the desire to meet new people ( $U = 485, p < .05, r = .23$ ) was more impactful on their decision to participate in an honor ensemble than did males. Music majors reported being more impacted than nonmajors by the recommendation of a non-music teacher ( $U = 435.5, p < .01, r = .34$ ). No other comparisons were significant.

Following the procedures of Silveira (2013), responses were combined to create an overall rating for musical and nonmusical reasons for participating in an honor ensemble as well as musical and nonmusical benefits of such participation. Preliminary inspection indicated that data violated assumptions of normality, so again nonparametric methods were used. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that honor ensemble participants were more influenced to participate by musical factors than nonmusical factors ( $z = 7.62, p < .001, r = .82$ ) and agreed significantly more with perceived musical benefits than nonmusical benefits ( $z = 5.85, p < .001, r = .63$ ).

Additionally, the researchers were interested in seeing if there were differences between parallel questions in a participants' reason for participating in an honor ensemble and whether they felt it was a perceived benefit (e.g., 'I wanted to meet new people' vs. 'I met new friends'). The researchers independently paired responses, along with an outside researcher who was unfamiliar with the project, with complete inter-rater agreement using the ratio of agreements/(agreements+disagreements).

While some of the questions did not lend themselves to such a comparison, the researchers identified six parallels. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, again used for violations of normality, indicated that participants enjoyed working with the conductor more than they were seeking to work with a guest conductor ( $z = -6.14,$

$p < .001$ ,  $r = .67$ ), they enjoyed the music more than they wanted to perform new repertoire ( $z = -4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .46$ ), they enjoyed the performance more than they wanted another performance opportunity ( $z = -4.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .53$ ), and they met new friends more than they wanted to meet new people ( $z = -2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .29$ ). The two other parallel questions were not significantly different. Results seemed to imply that participants enjoyed several aspects of honor ensemble participation even if they were not seeking out the experience for those reasons.

Participants were also provided with an open-response opportunity to describe their least favorite part of the honor ensemble experience. Some participants wrote multiple comments while others did not respond to this portion of the survey. The researchers independently created categories for coding each comment, with the stipulation that a code would be created for any aspect that was mentioned three times or more. The categories were then discussed, and the researchers agreed on verbiage for a final number of nine. Each comment was independently coded and if a participant's response included multiple comments on aspects they disliked, then each comment was assigned a code. The researchers ended with an inter-rater reliability of .85 using the ratio of agreements/(agreements+disagreements). The disagreements were discussed and were re-coded in order to arrive at complete agreement. In all, 85 comments were given for participants' least favorite aspect.

Comments about long rehearsals accounted for just over one-third ( $n = 29$ , 34.1%) of all responses (Table 4), although students appeared to understand the structural necessity, with one participant writing, "Because the ensembles were only together for a short amount of time before a performance, rehearsals were often excruciatingly long". Together with comments about needing more rehearsals ( $n = 10$ , 11.8%), mostly in order to reduce the length of individual rehearsal sessions, nearly half of all comments addressed rehearsal time ( $n = 39$ , 45.9%). Social issues, such as arrogant attitudes from other players, was the second-highest category with 13 comments (15.3%). Some participants seemed attuned to social equity issues within the honor ensemble process: "It felt a little hostile or elitist when your [sic] coming from the edge of a district (urban area) and interacting with students who had more encouragement or opportunity to play music (in a suburban setting)", whereas other participants recalled specific individuals who had a negative effect on their experience: "First chair sax was a bit of a jerk." Miscellaneous comments ( $n = 10$ , 11.8%) included "Favoritism for specific members in the ensemble," "As a 6th grader I remember thinking it was really hard to memorize music so quickly," and "... I didn't like the repertoire."

Table 4

*Open-Response Category Frequencies*

Category	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Long rehearsals	29	34.1
Not enough rehearsals	10	11.8
Audition issues	8	9.4
Social issues	13	15.3
Time of day	4	4.7
Poor clinician	3	3.5
Impact on academics	4	4.7
Stress	4	4.7
Miscellaneous	10	11.8

## Discussion

In an attempt to better understand the benefits of and motivations for participation in honor ensembles, the researchers collected information from participants regarding their memories of these events. While previous researchers have explored similar aspects, data do not appear to have been collected after the event, possibly missing an opportunity to determine a more distilled perception. In the comparison of reasons for participating, however, results were similar between current and previous investigations (Silveira, 2013). Four of the top six reasons for participating were musical in nature, while “Have fun,” was the only nonmusical reason to be listed in the top three. The similarities in reasons for participation given years after the fact seem to provide greater reliability for responses solicited during honor ensemble events. It is also encouraging that, once again, musical reasons were rated as the most impactful. For music educators who wish to promote student participation in such events, appealing to the musical benefits and the ‘fun’ nature of the experience would seem to be most successful. This approach is further supported by participants indicating that they received more musical benefits from participation than nonmusical benefits.

Several differences surfaced based on honor ensemble type, gender, and major. Results indicated that orchestra students may be less interested in pursuing honor ensemble involvement than their band and choir peers. Given the additional performance opportunities available to orchestra students outside of school (youth orchestras, pit orchestra, church orchestra), it may be that this particular reason is less of a motivator for them. Based on our results, it also appeared that females were more open to new musical experiences than their male peers. This

may reflect differences in personalities based on gender at this age level, however the researchers feel that such claims are beyond the scope of this study. Collegiate music majors reported being more influenced by non-music teachers than their non-music major peers. Given that prospective music majors are likely heavily involved in their school music programs, they may take the support of their music teacher for granted, possibly explaining the greater influence of other teachers. However, it may be more helpful overall to acknowledge that differences exist on an individual level. While musical reasons seem to be a primary motivator for participation, various musical aspects may motivate students differentially based on large ensemble type, gender, and prospective major status. For example, the desire to develop musically as an individual may motivate some, while an additional performance opportunity or the prospect of playing new repertoire may motivate others.

Comparisons between what were termed ‘parallel questions’, or a motivation for participating and a similar remembered benefit, yielded interesting findings, as well. Respondents indicated greater benefit of working with a guest conductor or clinician than what they were initially seeking. This seems to speak well for how honor ensembles are traditionally approached by guest conductors. Part of the discrepancy may be that students do not know what to expect with a guest conductor, so more information provided by the student’s own ensemble director may be beneficial. Respondents also indicated that the music itself was a greater benefit than they were seeking. This may allude to the literature selected for performance during honor ensembles versus their school ensemble, the quality of performance of the honor ensemble versus their school ensemble, or some combination of both. It is clear, however, that the performance of the music itself was viewed as a benefit of their experience. Finally, respondents indicated that they met friends more than they were seeking to meet new people. It appears that participants were more satisfied with their peer interactions on a social level than on a musical level, and this is also supported by several comments on the open-response portion.

The open-response portion addressing least favorite aspects may carry the greatest influence when exploring implications for future honor ensemble experiences. In response to a prompt about their least favorite aspect, nearly half of respondents addressed rehearsal length. While the vast majority of comments discussed the long rehearsals, several recommended additional rehearsals, although this was nearly always mentioned as a means to reducing the length of individual rehearsal segments. The researchers acknowledge that the schedule is often structured to allow for minimum disruption to the regular schedules of directors and students, as well as logistical challenges for those traveling long distances, among other things.

Regardless, participants were clear in acknowledging long rehearsals as their least favorite aspect. If organizers are interested in making the experience more positive for students, alternative schedules should be explored. The second least-liked aspect regarded social issues, such as arrogant or condescending peers and other participants who were not prepared. Students' school directors, both in the personal and musical preparation of students for participation, can address these issues. Other concerns raised by participants included inconsistencies in audition procedures, stress of the audition and event, and the event's impact on academics. While each of these issues are correctable, it does take an awareness of the problem on the part of the school ensemble director or honor ensemble coordinator in making an effort to do so. Future ensemble coordinators might consider distributing feedback forms to student participants in an effort to illuminate these issues and further improve the students' experience.

There were several limitations to the current study. Participants, even nonmusic majors, were currently participating in a university-level ensemble. It is possible that the current findings are the result of a self-selection bias; that is, honor ensemble participants who may have participated for more social reasons may not have continued performing in ensembles after the completion of middle or high school. This may be supported by the work of Rickels, et al. (2013), who found honor ensembles to be the second-most influential experience in a student's decision to audition as a music education major. Future investigators should attempt to include previous honor ensemble participants who no longer participate in performing ensembles.

Although central to the point of the study, data collection relied on participants' memory of events that were several years in the past. A more robust method of data collection might be a longitudinal approach wherein honor ensemble participants are surveyed at the time of the event and again at some point in the future. Such an approach would permit a reliability check as well as provide additional information about whether memories of the events are consistent or different from impressions formed during the event itself. This particular issue is especially relevant when considering the comparisons between reasons for participating and remembered benefits.

It is possible that ratings provided by students for their reasons for participating were influenced by their having already participated in the event, an artifact of post-hoc data collection. However, the fact that significant differences were found between the two seem to suggest that students discriminated between these two ideas. Future researchers might further consider a type of pre-test/post-test design to compare differences more definitively. Finally, while participants were drawn from two university music programs, the honor ensemble experiences that

they represented were more geographically diverse than two single locations. As a result, it is expected that the results are more generalizable than those drawn from one or two honor ensemble events.

Although honor ensembles provide various benefits to students (Brantley, 2014; Lien & Humphreys, 2001; Neill, 1997), an increased understanding of perceived benefits and motivations for participating may allow music educators to better promote participation. An awareness of the importance of musical aspects of the experience, both in terms of motivation and perceived benefits, might also further encourage music educators who may be hesitant to promote honor ensembles. Regardless, it is the continued examination of aspects of our students' musical educations, including honor ensembles, which enables music educators to create the best experience possible for all students.

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