

49th Annual Student Music Awards

OFFICIAL RULES

HOW TO ENTER

STEP 1. Carefully read the Official Rules of the DownBeat Student Music Awards.

STEP 2. On November 1, 2025, we will begin accepting entries online. When you are ready to post your entry, go to downbeat.com/sma and follow the instructions. These instructions will require you to agree to the Authenticity & Honesty Pledge, which states that your submission does not violate any of the rules.

STEP 3. IMPORTANT NOTE: Please ensure that your name, school name and band name **DO NOT** appear on your submitted audio files or scores. This applies to the naming of the file as well as to the audio recording itself. This is a “blind” adjudication, so the judges cannot have any identifying information. **Do not “embed” any identifying information within the file.** Any audio files containing names identifying the student, school or band **WILL BE DISQUALIFIED**, unfortunately.

Step 4. When uploading large audio files to your application, please make sure these files are compressed otherwise it won't let you complete your application. **Please submit mp3s so all entries can be adjudicated on the same platform.**

ALL ENTRIES MUST BE SUBMITTED ONLINE NO LATER THAN JAN, 7, 2026, at 11:59 P.M. (PST).

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ELIGIBILITY

1. Student recordings made after Jan. 1, 2025, but before Dec. 31, 2025.
2. Recordings made by any student/group enrolled worldwide in:
 - A. Junior High/Middle School: Student(s) must be in grades 6–8 or equivalent (9th grade Junior High/Middle Schools are acceptable)
 - B. High School: Student(s) must be in grades 9–12 or equivalent.
 - C. College or University: Student(s) must be registered full time at the Undergraduate or Graduate level.
 - D. Solo entries should reflect the grade level the student was in at the time the recording was made. Group entries should reflect the grade level that each of the students was in at the time the recording was made.
3. Student recordings engineered by professional personnel are eligible in all categories except engineering (10 & 11).
4. Pitch correction **IS NOT PERMITTED** on submissions to the SMAs. Entries found to be using pitch correction (or similar techniques) will be disqualified. Please use minimal production technique, unless the entry is in engineering categories 10 & 11.
5. The Student Music Awards are not open to student musicians engaged in full-time professional work.
6. Tracks with guest artists are not eligible, except in the following categories: original composition (7 & 8), jazz arrangement (9) and engineered recording (10 & 11).
7. In soloist categories, pre-recorded backing tracks are acceptable.

RULES AND CONDITIONS

1. All entries must be submitted online no later than Jan. 7, 2026, at 11:59 p.m. (PST).
2. All students must be enrolled in the same school for group entries (categories 2, 3, 5, 6), except when entering the Middle School and High School Honors Ensemble division. This division includes all regional, state and national honor ensembles that include middle school or high school students from more than one school. If an ensemble includes middle school **and** high school students, then the entry must be submitted in the High School Honors Ensemble division.
3. College ensemble entries that include one or more **graduate** students must be entered into the **graduate** ensemble division.
4. One copy of the recording and an application must be submitted for each category the student or group enters. Likewise, if the same tracks are being entered in different categories, or if more than one soloist on the track is entering the soloist category, then the appropriate number of recordings and applications must be submitted. (In other words, an entry and an application are required for *each* soloist in *each* category.)
5. There is no limit to the number of categories any individual or ensemble may enter. However, each student or group can only submit **one entry in each category**.
6. Composition entries (categories 7 & 8) must include a recording and a copy of the full score. To ensure anonymity, **DO NOT** include the names of the composer(s) or the school name on the score. The composition does not need to be recorded by a student ensemble. Important: You must include notice of copyright or receipt of application for copyright. (Judges do not see this information.)

7. Arrangement entries (category 9) must include a recording and a copy of the full score. To ensure anonymity, DO NOT include the names of arranger(s) or the school name on the score. The arrangement does not need to be recorded by a student ensemble.
8. Engineering entries (categories 10 & 11) must include a list of equipment used (instruments, microphones, software, etc.). DO NOT include the student or school name on the equipment list.
9. The Student Music Awards are not open to student musicians engaged in full-time professional work.
10. When submitting music, note that only audio files are allowed. **Please submit mp3s so all entries can be adjudicated on the same platform. DO NOT** submit video files.

PHOTOS:

During the application process, the DownBeat staff gathers photos for possible publication in the June 2026 issue. Judges do not see these photos. If possible, please upload high-resolution photos with your audio submissions as part of your entry. Label photos of individuals with the student's name. Label group photos with the group name and the group members' names, identified from left to right. Include the school name in the file name. Remember, the inclusion of identifying information is OK for photos because the judges do not see these photos. Files should be 300 DPI and 1 MB or larger. **Also, please include the name of the photographer so we can credit them appropriately in the June issue. Otherwise, we'll say courtesy of the school.** (If you have any questions about submitting photos, contact sma@downbeat.com.)

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JUDGING

- Judgments are made solely on the basis of ability demonstrated on the candidate recordings. Recordings are judged “blind.” The only identification on recordings sent to the judges is a code number. No student, group or school names appear on the recordings.
- The judging criteria are similar to those used by DOWNBEAT in its album Reviews section. These criteria include musicianship, creativity, improvisation, technique, sound quality and balance, excitement and authority.
- If, in the opinion of the judges, there is no entry in a category that meets DOWNBEAT standards, then that category is declared “no contest” with no awards given. The judges may also establish a new category if the nature of the entries warrants the addition.
- The judges are professional musicians and educators.

NOTIFICATIONS

- Applicants will be notified via email when their entry is received.
- Official results will be published in the June 2026 issue of DOWNBEAT. These official results are embargoed until **May 14, 2026, at 1:00 P.M. (PST)**. All participating schools/teachers will receive a digital copy of the June issue in early May; print copies are by request only.
- Honorees will be notified prior to the publication of the June 2026 issue of DOWNBEAT. **Each student or group that is deemed a Winner by our judges will receive one award plaque plus a frame-able certificate for each individual student and director in the group. For Outstanding Performance wins, each individual student and director will also receive a certificate (but no award plaque).**

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CATEGORIES

Below are the categories and requirements for this year's Student Music Awards. If you have any questions, contact Sue Mahal at sma@downbeat.com. A separate application must be submitted for each category. Only 1 entry per category per person or group will be accepted.

1. Jazz Soloist

Requirements

- Instrumental or Vocal
- 2 Selections or 10 minutes (maximum length)

2. Small Jazz Ensemble/Combo (3–9 musicians)

Requirements

- Instrumental or Vocal
- 2 Selections or 15 minutes (maximum length)

3. Large Jazz Ensemble (10 or more musicians)

Requirements

- Instrumental or Vocal
- 3 Selections or 20 minutes (maximum length)

4. Blues/Pop/Rock Soloist

Requirements

- Instrumental or Vocal
- 2 Selections or 10 minutes (maximum length)

5. Blues/Pop/Rock Group (2+ musicians)

Requirements

- Instrumental or Vocal
- 3 Selections or 20 minutes (maximum length)

6. Latin Group (2+ musicians)

Requirements

- Instrumental or Vocal
- 3 Selections or 20 minutes (maximum length)

7. Original Composition (for Small Ensemble)

Requirements

- Submit one composition per entry
- Compositions for groups of up to 9 musicians
- Must include lead sheet and/or full score and can be written for any instrumentation
- Important: You must include notice of copyright or receipt of application for copyright. (Judges do not see this information.)

8. Original Composition (for Large Ensemble)

Requirements

- Submit one composition per entry
- Compositions for groups of 10 or more
- Must include lead sheet and/or full score and can be written for any instrumentation
- Important: You must include notice of copyright or receipt of application for copyright. (Judges do not see this information.)

9. Jazz Arrangement

Requirements

- Submit one arrangement per entry
- Must include full score and can be written for any instrumentation
- DO NOT submit original student compositions in this category

10. Engineered Live Recording

Requirements

- Must be recorded outside of a studio
- Minimum of 20 minutes
- Any musical style or instrumentation is allowed.

11. Engineered Studio Recording

Requirements

- Must be recorded inside a studio
- Minimum of 20 minutes
- Any musical style or instrumentation is allowed.