

The Kids Play Great. But That Music . . .
by Stephen Budiansky

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If there is a medal awarded for conspicuous bravery in the form of sitting through countless elementary-, middle- and high-school concerts above and beyond the call of duty, I'd like the authorities to know that I am eligible for it.

Unflinchingly, I have kept my face rigid through the most trying of musical ordeals. My kids are both in high school now, but every now and then my jaw muscles still hurt from the effects of one fourth-grade chorus concert.

I think only once in all those years did I give way to temptation and relate to the person next to me that bit from one of the Marx brothers' movies, where Chico is playing the piano and a man sitting next to Groucho says, "I love good music," and Groucho replies, "So do I. Let's get out of here."

I should hasten to add that I'm not really a curmudgeon, at least not when it comes to taking the normal, abundant parental pride in the efforts of my offspring. I've never actually dreaded all these school band and chorus concerts as far as the quality of the performers' efforts goes. Learning to play or sing is impossible without some squeaks or screeches or rhythms that occasionally wander away for a stroll on the erratic side, and I've always been genuinely impressed by how well the kids do.

No, the problem is not how they play. It's what they play.

What they play is always That Piece, as I've come to think of it. That Piece is not written by any composer you have ever heard of -- not classical, not jazz, not pop, not rock, not blues, not folk, not alternative Czech heavy metal fusion, not nothing. You've never heard it on the radio, not even late at night at the bottom of the dial. It in fact exists nowhere in the known music universe -- except for the twilight zone of school musical performance.

That Piece is nearly always written by someone who (a) is alive and collecting royalties, and (b) has a master's degree in music education. It is always preceded by a very wordy description, read out to the audience by way of preparation, explaining that the piece (a) was inspired by a medley of Lithuanian folk songs and Gregorian chants that the composer heard while researching his master's degree; or (b) depicts the journeys of Lewis and Clark and, if you listen carefully, you will hear the American Indian motif that represents the faithfulness and courage of their young Native American guide Sacagawea and then in the saxophones the sound of the rapids as the raft approaches and then the warning cry from one of the men on the bank and then the raft plunging down the rapids and then the return to calmer waters and then another set of rapids approaching and then. . . , or (c) evokes the soaring ideals we can all aspire to. (Pieces in this last category usually have "eagle" in their titles.) If I've heard That Piece once, I've heard it a hundred times. Different composers, different titles, same bombastic banality.

There had been hints of what was coming, back when my kids were in elementary school. Instead of "Home on the Range" and "Jingle Bells," their school concerts were filled with rather slick but soulless numbers cranked out by the music ed publishing industry. I vaguely recall one sort of Disneyesque self-esteem-boosting number called "Possibilities," in which the fifth-graders informed us that they were "the future." There was also a song about recycling.

But I wasn't prepared for the extent to which such new and original works of great mediocrity have completely supplanted the real music -- classical, folk, Sousa marches, American popular music, Scott Joplin rags, Broadway show tunes -- that was once a staple of the American school music curriculum. And it's not a question of new vs. old: There's plenty of truly great contemporary music of all genres being written. This stuff just isn't it.

I've pored over publishers' catalogues and lists of recommended pieces from various state music educators' associations, and it's happening all across the country. In place of genuine folk music, there are compositions "inspired" by the folk music of the American South or West, or Korea, or Africa. In place of real rock numbers are "rock originals" by one of those school band directors with a master's degree. The closest thing I've heard to a real Sousa was a creation called "Sousa! Sousa! Sousa!" that (according to the publisher's description) "includes famous themes from 'Manhattan Beach' and 'El Capitan' along with just a hint of 'Semper Fidelis' and other Sousa favorites."

I do understand the pedagogic purpose behind this stuff. Beethoven didn't have to come up with music scored for middle school bands made up of 57 alto saxophones, 40 trumpets, 15 percussionists and one oboe. Fair enough.

But music education is supposed to be about more than just learning to make your fingers move the right way. It's also supposed to be about having the chance to experience firsthand the truly great music of all genres -- the great music that, after all, is the whole point of learning to play or sing.

And, to put it kindly, it's hard to imagine anyone falling in love with music on a diet of band directors' compositions portraying the initial helicopter landing of the 1st Marine Division during the Korean War (yes, that really is one frequently played high-school band piece), or the one by the same composer that I heard at my son's all-district concert a couple of years ago: Pretentiously titled "Symphony No. 2," this turned out to be a blow-by-blow re-creation of Homer's "Odyssey," complete with musical depictions of the Trojan horse's squeaking wheels and the crackling fires of Troy burning. I know this because the guest conductor was the composer himself, and he spent 10 minutes describing to us what we would be hearing.

A bit of what is driving the dominance of all this pseudo-music are education-theory mandates that music education "connect" with other parts of the curriculum (this probably explains those elementary-school songs about recycling and self-esteem); a bit comes, too, from pressures for parent-pleasing or competition-judge-pleasing pieces that are showy and give the illusion of being more advanced than they are.

But the result is a terrible confusion of ends and means. One of the songs my daughter's all-county chorus sang at its recent concert had won a 1991 competition among choral directors in Iowa. Described in the program as a "blend of contemporary and madrigal styles," it was a nice enough, if completely unmemorable, piece. But why, I kept thinking, couldn't they sing a real Elizabethan madrigal? Or how about a Beatles song? Or anything at all that has inspired and touched and sent shivers down the spine the way great art does?

If high-school English teachers stopped assigning Shakespeare and Faulkner and instead gave their students the winner of the 1991 Iowa English teachers' novel-writing contest to read, I think we'd know where to tell them to get off.

I did glimpse one ray of hope at my son's most recent high-school band concert, though. Sandwiched between all the variations on Korean folk songs and musical depictions of erupting South American volcanoes came a performance by a small woodwind ensemble, made up of students who met on their own time after school. They had no director, no adult supervision, and had chosen entirely on their own the one piece they performed.

They did Mozart.

A follow-up: Why there's so much bad music in the school curriculum -- and what we can do about it

by Stephen Budiansky

WHEN I SET OUT to write a short and slightly amusing article for the Washington Post about what I -- as a parent and an amateur musician -- felt was wrong with the school music repertoire, little did I realize that I would end up feeling like someone who had just done the 800 yard dash through a live mine field. The Post, though barely interested at first (they felt the subject was too narrow), finally agreed to run my article. I thought perhaps I'd hear from one or two readers.

In fact, literally nothing I have written in 25 years of journalism has generated such an outpouring of passionate responses. I almost instantly received an email from Col. Tim Foley, the recently retired director of the United States Marine Band, offering his heartfelt opinions on the subject and saying that I had expressed "everything that is currently wrong with music education." Frank Battisti, former conductor of the New England Conservatory wind ensemble, also contacted me, thanking me for having "the courage to speak out on this very important issue."

I wasn't sure what he meant by "courage," but I soon found out. Within a few days I had received more than 100 messages and phone calls. I heard from band directors, students, ex-students, elementary school teachers, church musicians, parents, chorus teachers, college music professors, professional musicians, composers. By the time the dust finally settled my mail was about 7 to 1 in favor of what I had said.

But what struck me the most was the intensity of feeling. With very few exceptions, whether they agreed or not, those who wrote poured out their hearts. They wrote long, intelligent, impassioned, well-thought-out arguments. I clearly had touched a nerve in a way I had scarcely imagined possible.

THERE WERE THOSE WHO TOOK OFFENSE, claiming that I had insulted the professionalism of music educators. But I was pleased that the strongest letters of support came from many, many school band directors and music teachers themselves, from all across the country. Many said I had put my finger on an issue that troubled them deeply, and were grateful for having it raised by an outsider.

In fact I discovered I had raised a far more profound question than I knew. I was bothered by the poor quality of the repertoire in my children's band and chorus programs. I had never been able to understand why so much mediocre music written specifically for school performance was pushing aside famous works by great composers, and folk music, and genuine contemporary music -- and especially why this should still be happening at the high school level and in district ensembles, where bands and choruses were surely technically capable of doing real music.

I soon found out many others were bothered by this, too -- and even more so by the forces that lay behind this unhappy trend in school music. Hearing from so many thoughtful and insightful people was an immensely interesting and gratifying experience. Many who wrote had clearly been thinking about these issues far longer and far more deeply than my own simple complaints, and they helped me crystallize what exactly the problem is -- and exposed what I believe are some of the false arguments that are still too often used to justify this sorry state of affairs.

Band directors at many universities and high schools described to me the relentless promotion of mediocre music by the educational publishers at conferences and clinics that the publishers themselves often help sponsor. I was especially interested to hear from people in the profession who were trying in their own way to fight against these forces that are driving authentic music out of the school music repertoire. Professor Phillip Hash of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., sent an interesting sample list of real music which includes many pieces that bands even at the lower levels can play: non-simplified transcriptions of music by great classical composers, from the Renaissance to the 20th century; original compositions written specifically for band by significant composers (but not the mediocre stuff produced by music educators for their captive victims); and pieces that authentically represent the music of other cultures.

Other teachers told me how their frustrations with the meager offerings of real music from the educational music publishers had led them to make their own arrangements of classics, marches, Civil War songs, folk music.

In other words, it is simply a red herring to argue (as some of my critics did) that they have no choice but to use second-rate made-for-school pieces. In fact we can have our cake and eat it too -- we can give our kids great music that also meets classroom needs.

MANY WHO DISAGREED with me challenged me to define "real" or "good" music. I think that's actually easier than they suggest. The worst aspect of the current state of school music is, I

believe, that it is such a closed world. We have composers producing pieces solely for the school market. We have kids performing pieces that are not tied to anything in any part of the real music world. They will never again encounter these works when they leave school.

We can all debate endlessly the philosophical question of what constitutes great art. But even by the most generous definitions, these scholastic pieces are scarcely art at all. Some of these works, I'd venture to say, are scarcely even music. None of these pieces could find an audience anywhere outside the captive market of the school curriculum. None of these composers could make a living in the real world.

As a number of respected professional musicians and music educators pointed out in their messages to me, virtually all of this made-for-school music is formulaic, cliched, undistinguished, and undistinguishable. Ed Quick, director of bands at the Detroit High School of Arts, observed that the new band pieces he regularly hears as a judge at festivals "all have the same formula: a grand, dramatic opening; then a fast section with lots of percussion activity; next comes the slow, emotionally draining section; then the fast section returns with a slammin' ending."

John Casagrande, a music education professor at George Mason University, told me that every month he listens to the promotional CDs that the educational publishers send out, and often -- quite literally -- he cannot tell one piece from another if he is distracted for a moment and doesn't notice that the CD is on the next track.

Lamest of all is the artistic pretense of so many of these made-for-school works: the way they attempt to make up for their musical thinness with grandiosely "artistic" titles, lengthy programmatic descriptions read out to the audience, or attempts to tie them to worthy causes.

As one of my correspondents (an attorney and former band student, Christopher Wist) wrote amusingly but with devastating accuracy, "I am all for honoring Helen Keller, the heroes of 9/11, and the victims of child abuse. One good way to do so would be NOT to use them in crassly calculated pitches to promote mediocre works of art that couldn't possibly stand up on their intrinsic musical merits." He also sent along his own humorous guide to identifying bad band pieces by their overblown titles.

I WOULD HASTEN TO ADD that I believe it is a totally false argument to cast this debate as one of old music versus new, classical versus popular, Western versus multicultural, or elitist versus inclusive. There is great modern music; there is great popular music; there is great non-Western music; there is great music with broad appeal. All have their place in the American school music curriculum.

But waving the flag of multiculturalism to defend a second-rate school piece by a music educator that lamely incorporates an ethnic folk theme, or donning the mantle of "the new" to defend something that is utterly lacking in the qualities that define great art, is to play a dishonest game. We are short-changing our children when we do not give them the opportunity to experience the best real music -- classical, folk songs, jazz, Broadway tunes, rock, spirituals, music that has

stirred and moved and inspired people, music that has roots and a history and a substance and a living tradition -- and instead give them distinctly second-rate substitutes, once or twice removed from the real thing.

I wonder how many of the music teachers who have told me that Beethoven or Mozart also wrote pieces that were panned in their time really believe in their heart of hearts that these made-for-school-performance pieces they are defending will take their place alongside the greatest and enduring classics of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Sousa, Basie, Fats Waller -- or for that matter enduring popular works by composers like Stephen Sondheim, George M. Cohan, Leroy Anderson, or the Beatles? Do they really believe that this school music will be played 50 or 100 years from now?

As I said, I am all for new music. But let's champion the best new music, music that we believe truly has the artistic merit and emotional engagement and integrity that we believe in our hearts and minds makes it great art. I think too many directors who invoke this sort of artistic relativism argument are actually using it as an excuse for ducking the responsibility to exercise critical judgment. All music is not created equal.

MANY OF THE TEACHERS who wrote to support what I said emphasized that when they had given their students real music -- often defying the conventional wisdom that today's students think classical or folk music is "dull" (or, even worse, being told that it would be "elitist" to challenge their kids with authentic or difficult music) -- the students in fact thrived on it. The students knew the real McCoy when they saw it, and loved having the chance to play or sing any real music instead of some condescending exercises written by a music educator.

I was touched beyond words by one message I received from an idealistic, 26-year-old elementary school teacher who wrote me of her struggles against the school bureaucracy to be allowed to have her students do real music -- American folk songs, Vaughn Williams, Schubert, Copland.

"Here was what I loved most of all," she wrote me. "The children knew the difference. Kids are way smarter than most music publishers believe. They can tell the difference between high quality music that has stood the test of time, and a song written only for Earth Day or to help the clarinets over the register break." She quoted the words of Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodaly: "only the BEST music is good enough for children." Amen to that!

Others who wrote and called me lamented the way school music has become (as Frank Byrne, executive director of the Kansas City Symphony pithily put it to me) an "athletic event," in which the object is to win medals rather than educate. I do think we need to look long and hard at the way competitions are distorting the repertoire and the educational mission.

Finally, there's one thought I'm left with from these discussions that stands out above all others. For most students, the music they play in band or sing in chorus IS their music education and enrichment. In reading and discussing and thinking about the comments I received to my article, it struck me very forcibly that what really dismays me the most about the present situation is the

way my children are being robbed of the chance to have the kind of soul-stirring and (it's not too much to say) life-changing experience that I had in high school, when I was introduced to some of the world's greatest artistic creations in my music classes.

The pieces we sang in chorus that year -- Haydn's "Lord Nelson" Mass and the Creation and traditional Christmas carols and "Shenandoah" and songs from Broadway shows and choruses from the Messiah -- have been a part of me ever since. They awoke in me a love for a world of great music I simply hadn't known existed before. They gave me the chance to feel I was literally touching greatness, to raise my voice and be a part of these great works. They made me yearn to make music a part of my life, to learn more, to sing and play more.

I never remotely had the talent to be a professional musician, but that love of music has never faded. It's a love that has led me to explore and discover wonderful music throughout my life: Bach, and Bartok, and Fats Waller, and opera, and medieval Arabic music, and blues. I just do not believe any of this made-for-school music comes even close to evoking such feelings.

ONE PERSONAL FOOTNOTE I would like to add: As a humorist, it's sometimes easy to forget that jokes can miss their intended target and cause collateral damage. The wisecrack I made in my original Washington Post article about sitting in torment through my kids' band concerts was meant as nothing but a joke, but I'm afraid it embarrassed and offended one truly wonderful music teacher who taught both of my children, Beth Paquette of Simpson Middle School in Leesburg, Virginia. So for the record, I want to state that she is one of the truly great and inspired teachers, and someone I think the world of. My jibe was not aimed at her.

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The Chris Wist Guide to Titling Conventions for Bad Band Music by Christopher Wist

Drawing upon my own decades of agonizing personal experiences, I've put together this handy guide to help the uninitiated identify worthless band music before they actually have to listen to it. If I can save but one soul from suffering needlessly, it will have been worth it.

Run, don't walk, to the nearest exit if you see something on the program with a title falling into any of the following categories:

1. "Dumbed-Down"

Sounds of Sousa

(As if JPS didn't know how to write for band!)

Bach to Basics

Tchillin' with Tchaikovsky

Here's the dead giveaway -- alliteration. Annoying, awkward, and asinine alliteration almost always accompanies an artistic atrocity.

2. "Does It Sound Like a Subdivision?"

Stonegate

Lakewood

Ferndale

Look for two or more features found in nature combined in a single word. DO NOT BE FOOLED by the gratuitous addition of an additional geographical noun; e.g., "Stonegate Canyon", "Lakewood Point", "Ferndale Forest" etc.

3. "Places You've Never Heard Of"

Carter's Mountain

The Valley of Hwing-Po

(Excessive employment of gongs, woodblocks; parallel fourths virtually guaranteed.)

Farnsworth Castle

If these musical depictions are in any way accurate, there's a good reason you've never heard of these places.

4. "Meaningless Abstractions"

Quadrilaterals for Winds and Percussion

Grammatical Suite

Prelude: "Subjects"

Intermezzo: "Verbs"

Finale: "Direct Objects"

Quantum Variations

When in doubt, pick something that people will be too embarrassed to admit they don't understand. This is hardly a new ploy. (See Reginald Bunthorne, the Oscar Wilde knockoff in Gilbert & Sullivan's *Patience* (1881): "And everyone will say as you walk your mystic way, 'If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me, why, what a most particularly deep young man this deep young man must be!' ")

5. "Gee, I Hope They Confuse This With Something Good"

William Tall Overture

Eine Kleine Notmusik

75 Trombones

The operative principle here is "Greatness Through Association." The implication is that the new work and its composer somehow share the sterling qualities of the old -- without, of course, the inconvenience of having to ask Rossini, Mozart, or Meredith Willson how they feel about it. (Obviously, the key here is to pick a composer who -- having *Joined The Choir Invisible* -- is unavailable for comment.)

6. "Excitement through Punctuation!"

Festival!

Champions!

Fiesta!

(Note that Fiesta! is actually the same piece as Festival! except with castanets.)