

Faith of Our Fathers

by Charles Gary

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Music education is built on faith, and music educators are purveyors of truth. More and more of the things that man has considered true have proved invalid, as science digs deeper into the world in which we live. Earth is not flat, nor does the sun revolve around it. Malaria, we now know, is the result of the bites of infected mosquitos and not bad air.

Children are not little adults but developing personalities that are influenced by their surroundings. Many people today are striving to reduce their consumption of cholesterol – a term that would have been meaningless to our grandparents. Things we thought were true are being reinterpreted daily; the list is endless. Even the scientific method, which has revealed much about our world and its inhabitants, is now recognized as fallible by chaos theorists who emphasize the importance of accumulated evidence of minute proportions. Change is ever with us; new truths are being discovered more rapidly every day. One is reminded of the advice of Alice's Red Queen: "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

Music Educators as Missionaries

But music is truth of another kind. What is the nature of this truth, and how are music educators its missionaries? They spread the gospel of the goodness of music and its healing benefits, its socializing power, and its willing service to the lover, the patriot, and the religious person. Indeed music itself is religious, as it gives to all who love it *a glimpse of pure goodness through beauty*. Poets have been telling us this for years. Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that's all ye know and all ye need to know," wrote John Keats in his "Ode to a Grecian Urn". He reminded us again of this with a different turn of phrase in *Endymion*, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever. Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness". Robert Browning echoed the sentiments in "Fra Lippo Lippi" when he penned: "If you get simple beauty and naught else, you get about the best thing God invents". One wonders if the "Chief Musician," or whoever is responsible for Psalm 96, did not have in mind "the holiness of beauty" as well as the reverse, "the beauty of holiness," the form in which this sentiment has come down to us as verse nine (King James Version).

Music educators must recognize that they are entrusted with something special, something spiritual. Music is a part of our existence that maintains its value, if not its form. There is no record of people who have not used music for some of the many roles it can play artistic, emotional, therapeutic, religious, entertaining, or inspiring.

The Housewright Declaration, coming out of *Vision 2020*, expressed it as follows:

Whenever and wherever humans have existed, music has existed also.

*Since music occurs only when people choose to create and share it, and since they have always done so and no doubt always will, music clearly must have important value for people.*¹

Paul Van Bodegraven, MENC president from 1964 to 1966, in writing about another MENC president, Karl W. Gehrkins (1923), recalled the latter's "unshakeable faith that the profession of music education is of infinite importance" and said: "To men like Karl Gehrkins, vision and faith are not enough. Ideas must be put into practice, and this requires courage to fight for change. It is always more comfortable and safe to maintain the status quo. Karl Gehrkins had the vision, the faith. And he had the courage to make changes, despite formidable opposition."²

The Value of Music

Gehrkins, you may recall from your music education history class, established the first four-year course for training music educator. This was at Oberlin; it took courage on his part to tell the college administration that he would not continue to teach there if his four-year curriculum was not adopted. Gehrkins himself wrote:

*The chief value of music in human life is to increase the sum of human satisfaction; in other words, to make life itself worthwhile . . . [Music's] prime function is to arouse in man] a more highly spiritual attitude as a result of a definitely aesthetic reaction.*³

If history teaches us anything, it is that all aspects of human existence are characterized by a series of ups and downs. Despite the run that the stock market has experienced in the 1990s, there are such things as recessions and depressions from time to time, and they are not all behind us. Similarly, the history of music education has been field with periods in which the cause was advancing with little resistance. The years following World War I, when instrumental music was being introduced into many schools, is a case in point. On the other hand, the majority of present day members of the profession have lived through periods in which they have felt the need to be constantly on the defensive to protect their programs from calls for "more time for reading" or "skills, not frills."

During my eighteen years as an MENC staff member, I witnessed Vanett Lawler having to counter the demand for more science education following Russia's Sputnik launch. Thirteen years later, during my period as chief executive, I, too, turned to American Association of School Administrators for help. They passed a resolution that asked their members, when retrenchment was necessary, to make their cuts across all subjects rather than eliminate whole programs.

Despite the high number of MENC members at this time, we are all aware that there have been school systems that have reduced their music programs or even eliminated them entirely. I feel certain that each of you has encountered colleagues who are discouraged. Maybe you number yourself among them. It has been difficult at times to help parents and administrators appreciate the exceptional value of musical experiences. This has been the case even though there have been dissertation demonstrating the importance of music and special projects, such as IMPACT that has confirmed the veracity of these findings.⁴ But, happily, there are signs that should be encouraging to everyone.

Recent research has captured the interest of the media, and their attention has resulted in interest by the very groups we need to reach. If you haven't read "Straight Talk about Music and Brain Research" in the December 1999 *Teaching Music*, do so. (Don't neglect the sidebars.) The information coming from psychologists, researchers in music learning, test makers, and specialists in early childhood is very positive for music education.⁵

So encouraging is it that MENC, at the instigation of Arnold Broido, has organized a task force

whose purpose is to make certain that this get to the people who can help make a difference. With support from ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), VH1 (the television and radio channel) and NAMM (International Music Products Association) to form a group that meets twice each year to explore ways of getting the message to more movers and shakers. At the meeting in February 2000, representatives from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the National Association of Schools of Music were interested special guests. This snowballing attention gives reason to believe that what we have known already about the value of music education will become much better understood outside the field.

We should not, however, defend music because of these peripheral values—increased intelligence, brotherhood or health—though music assists in all these areas. Nor should we be ashamed to use these benefits to convince those who have not yet experienced the more important truth about music.

Music' Special Role

Abraham Maslow told us at Tanglewood that education should be about being a human being. His speech from 1967 is filled with suggestions concerning how we should view music education. He probably had more effect on what came out of the Tanglewood Symposium than any other participant. Some things we have made use of; many we have not. One of his statements relates directly to the way I am suggesting we music view our task as music educators: “This kind of education [he used the word “intrinsic” to describe it] can be a glimpse into the infinite, into ultimate values.”⁶ He concluded by claiming that the type of education represented by the teaching of music, art, and dance could serve to “rescue the rest of the school curriculum from the value-free, value-neutral, goal-less meaningfulness into which it has fallen.”⁷

It appears to me that music educators have yet to take Maslow’s message to heart. We do not yet accept the special role that we have in life. We seek better performances when our ultimate objective should be “peak experiences”. We must find ways to bring joy to our students. C.S. Lewis had a most interesting comment: “I know that (aesthetic experiences) were merely the mental track left by the passage of Joy—not the wave but the wave’s imprint on the soul.”⁸

Be a missionary! Missionaries have to be optimists: so must music educators. In fact, it is hard to understand how they could be anything else. You must believe that your band is going to be able to play something beyond “Military Escort”, or your choir to sing something more difficult than Walter Ehret’s three-part arrangement of Mozart’s “Ave Verum”. We remain optimistic because we know it is imperative that we not become discouraged. It could take some time to reach each child with “joy”. We must see that students have an experience with music that can make a difference in their lives. Music is a truth. Karl Gehrkins believed this when he coined the motto “Music for every child; every child for music”.

Notes

1, Clifford K. Madsen, ed., *Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education* (Reston, Virginia: MENC, 2000), 219.

2. Paul Van Bodegraven, “Gehrkins: Scholar and Teacher,” *Music Educators Journal* 39:5 (1953), 2728.

3. Karl Gehrkins, *The Introduction to School Music Teaching* (Boston, Massachusetts: C. C. Birchard and Co., 1923).

4. J. David Boyle and Robert L. Lathrop, “The IMPACT Experience An Evaluation,” *Music Educators Journal* 59, no. 5 (1973): 42-47.

5. Ella Wilcox, “Straight Talk about Music and Brain Research,” *Teaching Music* 7:3 (1999), 2935.

6. Robert A. Choate, ed., *Documentary Report of the Tanglewood Symposium* (Reston, Virginia: MENC, 1968), 73.

7. Ibid.

8. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1955), 175-76.