

Music Education: A Critical Task

By Sister Kate Hendel, bvm

Human beings are God's special creation composed of multi-faceted physical and spiritual dimensions. While the primary responsibility for developing the potential of the human person has usually fallen in the hands of parents in the world's cultures, the community in which one lives has also played an important role. Certain types of knowledge and skills require more than what parents know; this is the basis for the evolving role of the school in the world's communities.

The first schools in the United States were associated with both religion and music. Early Catholic contributions to such schools included the Franciscan and Jesuit missions in the Southwestern United States, in which the education program included training in music brought from Spain as well as that written by indigenous composers. On the East Coast, beginning with St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's early foundations, music education was a regular part of Catholic schooling. A unique contribution to music education in the United States came from itinerant singing masters who traveled from town to town, teaching basic musicianship and hymns to local youth in short-term "singing schools." The goal of many of these musical "pony express riders" was to enhance the music of worship and to ensure its continuance.

While those same values connecting music to religious education and worship hold true today, additional reasons for promoting and preserving music education in our Catholic schools include the importance of sharing a common as well as a cross-cultural repertoire that recalls the folk heritage of our nation's people and one's ability to engage in various musics as a listener and performer. It is true that music educators past and present, in Catholic or public schools or short-term education programs, never intended that students would become professional musicians solely as a result of their school music programs. However, the ability to access music for worship, personal enjoyment, and appreciation is essential to the endeavor of educating students for life. Stated differently, the goal of being able to participate actively in music making is critical to the life of any nation and any church.

So, when I am asked why music is essential in the context of Catholic schools or other Catholic educational settings, my answer is simple and direct: The very life of the Church is at stake. When asked to defend that conclusion, I can do no better than cite the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council. In calling for the reform and promotion of the sacred liturgy, the council demanded "before all else" a focus on "full and active participation by all the people," because such participation "is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" (no. 14). And music, "a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy" (no. 112), is a key means to promote the active participation of all the faithful (nos. 113, 114).

Now it may appear that this conclusion suggests that music education in a Catholic school is essentially a matter of teaching hymns and music for worship. Not so! For no matter how many hymns or Mass settings are taught, if this instruction does not include music making that incorporates appropriate skills in singing, playing instruments, reading, creating, listening, and integrating music with life experience, then students will be limited in their musical formation by a repertoire of an isolated eight- to twelve-year period in a two-thousand-year-old church. Their right to "participate fully" in experience of the continually evolving musical life of the church in its worship, service, and community will be diminished. Moreover, their ability to "participate fully" in the daily experience of the rich cultures within these "United" States will be severely hampered. Whether they gather at a folk festival, a classical concert, or a Sunday parish liturgy, people need basic musical skills and a legacy that includes active, positive music making experiences.

The church believes that each person brings to worship the totality of that person's and that community's life. This gift of life is offered to God, and, through the power of the Spirit in the Eucharist and in the worshiping assembly, it "is made holy." This totality of life is expressed in various curricular disciplines in the Catholic school, which may call on the music educator to augment each student's experience in that discipline affectively. Music possesses the unique potential to clothe literature, focus and highlight historical events, or to take students to foreign lands and experience other cultures. Music is derived from mathematics; it is a science of sound in time and space; it links and gives depth to art and movement. It expresses faith and hope and love when words fall short of the task. Exploring the musical dimension of various curriculums leads to richness in everyday life and learning. Such musical experiences provide layers of new meaning for the learners and community about life and worship.

This view of music education, particularly in a Catholic setting, may seem lofty and impractical. However, underlying this view is the issue of ongoing preparation of future generations of singers and instrumentalists for whom music will be an integral part of life. This view also focuses on the preparation of music educators so that they will be ready to deal with the concrete day-to-day instruction which includes the knowledge and skills of music and a sensitive, practical understanding of liturgy (including a theology of worship, a familiarity with Scripture, and an involvement with ritual).

There are several organizations and schools that provide appropriate preparation for teachers who wish to serve as music educators. At the forefront of such programs in the United States is MENC: The National Association for Music Education (formerly the Music Educators' National Conference) and for those in a Catholic setting the Music Educators Division of NPM. These organizations promote the National Standards for Music to guide music educators as they build and maintain effective music programs. These

standards cite the content and skills that give shape to music programs, and when successfully taught by competent music educators lead to a long life of music making.

The NPM Music Educators Division (NPM Mus-Ed) endeavors to help music educators achieve the goals associated with their awesome task by providing a wide variety of resources unique to our calling in Catholic education. Available resources include the document *Catholic Perspectives on the National Standards*; extensive workshop offerings through NCEA national conferences, NPM national and regional conventions, and MENC national and regional conferences; expanding opportunities for re-certification credit for these in-service programs; and several ways to network with other Catholic music educators through the *Catholic Music Educator* newsletter, the music educator page at the NPM website, and during conferences. Furthermore, new efforts to address issues of advocacy for music education in dioceses and archdioceses throughout the country have been initiated. This NPM division continues to search for new and meaningful ways to serve the special needs of music specialists and teachers in Catholic schools and educational environments.

Catholic music educators are about a most critical task. In addition to preparing students to engage and participate in music for life, these teachers are ensuring the future of liturgical music, its beauty and power, as the church celebrates its life in the twenty-first century.

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