

Teaching Music: Creating a Civilized Society

James Noyes
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Being a musician is not a profession and it's not just a job, and it's not something occasional—it's the totality of your life and your devotion to something in which you believe profoundly. And, you have to believe in order to make other people believe. Music is not important for creating musicians; it's creating a civilized society. The sooner we realize that strength, the better we will be for the future. - - Isaac Stern¹

Recently, a friend living in Central America sent me an email: "Jim, remember this is Honduras - the most undeveloped country in the Western Hemisphere. People are poor and want to see the value in something. Often I am asked, 'What is the value of music? Why do we need to understand, appreciate, and know about Mozart, Ellington, Bach, Puccini?'"² Curiously, here in the United States of America, the wealthiest country on earth, we are confronted with the same questions. The absurdity reaches a grand scale when music teachers have to justify their worth to administrators and patrons of our conservatories and schools of music.

In music, as with arts in general, children are encouraged at an early age. We want them to sing or take up an instrument, and we hope they do both! Every hour practicing is an hour spent engaged in a skilled activity, away from television and idle mischief. Every hour preparing is an hour spent in thoughtful contemplation and in acquisition of self-knowledge, away from the not-so-subtle world of consumerism and shock value. Every hour spent in lessons is a rare one-on-one interaction between pupil and teacher, nurturing intergenerational trust and respect, away from overcrowded classrooms and "teaching to the test." Every hour of performance is sharing time, talents, thoughts, and ideas—a community experience fostering peace and understanding.

But, when the time comes to pick a career, these same young adults are often told a choice for music is foolhardy, since there are few secure opportunities for employment. These music students ask, "How can something be so worthy of studying, yet so unworthy of performing and teaching?" "How can a process possess integrity, but at the same time lack integrity?" "Why were we told music was important?" Denial of such inconsistencies has been routine and thoughtful discussion replaced by platitudes. If conservatories and schools of music refuse to believe in the security of their teachers, how are we to expect others to believe in our values? It is time to put an end to the hypocrisy and wishful thinking.

When music teachers guide their students to a successful concert appearance, we prepare those individuals to succeed in life. We are not teaching to create more musicians. We are teaching a creative and fulfilling process. We are enhancing the bonds of friendship. We are offering hope for the future. The words of Paul Hindemith continue to ring true: "It is not impossible that out of a tremendous movement of amateur community music a peace movement could spread over the world...People who make music together cannot be enemies, at least not while the music lasts."³ What can we do to ensure that music will endure?

¹ Isaac Stern, *Musical Encounters*, Educational Broadcasting Corporation and the Hopewell Foundation, Inc., 2000.

² Bryan Kendall, La Ceiba, Atlantida, to James Noyes, New York, New York, 30 April 2003.

³ Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).