
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.

[Tim Foley and I have more recently assembled a small and random sampling of pieces by significant composers, from the 16th through 20th centuries, that are suitable for less

experienced bands. This table, which will be included in a forthcoming article in the WASBE Journal that we have co-authored, can be downloaded by [clicking here](#).]

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.