

The Kids Play Great. But That Music . . .

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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.

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