

Music and the Fine Arts

Necessary Elements in a Well-Rounded Education

By Kenneth Bell

Much of my life has been spent as a musician, performing for audiences throughout the United States, South America, Italy, Mexico, Canada, islands here and there. It is often said that ‘people are the same the world over’. I would disagree with this on its surface, in that the diversity of humanity in its attitudes, mores, expressions of emotions and spirituality is of constant amazement and joy to me. Music is, of course, a common denominator throughout humanity. When words fail to convey emotion, music and art become the windows to the soul and bring into relief the commonality of humanity. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche said “Without music, life would be a mistake.”

I have performed in ensembles in close to a thousand programs for children from New York to California over the last 40 years. I have seen the surprise and delight in their eyes when they hear sounds in person and up close, not through loud speakers, but from a true acoustic source. Voices and instruments being activated and resonated not far from where they sat on the floor, often able to feel the resonance of the music through their bottoms. I have performed for blind children and wondered at how they move their heads to explore the sound perspective around them. I’ve performed for the deaf where they could be involved with sight and sound waves in concert, having them touch the vibrating media. Recently, in the past week, I will have performed for probably a hundred fifth and sixth graders in Del Mar and Encinitas with a vocal quintet. Performing music from over five centuries from Europe, South America and the United States, written for festival, church, geographical locations, sports; music designed to express emotion, celebration, the joy of nature. I have designed these concerts to bring the

spectrum of vocal and often instrumental sounds in harmonies, melodies, rhythms and sonic colors to young audiences whose primary source for music has been recordings and “live” music has meant only that the performers were in the same room, albeit amplified and pushed through loudspeakers.

America is an amazing country in its ethnic diversity and its energy, borne of our strong attitudes toward individualism. Our native music, our indigenous forms in rock, gospel, soul, and jazz are indications of our youth, as a nation that is young in its evolution. There is a richness in American music and art that is undeniable, and is only beginning to come to fruition. It is necessary to help our youth to understand and appreciate not only our American heritage, as depicted in our art and music, but to comprehend the lineage of artists throughout the centuries, bringing us to this cultural point. For this, we must entrust our music educators with the responsibility to provide examples of art and music in historical, political and cultural perspective. This is an enormous task, but necessary to prevent the dilution of seminal imperatives that have provided our contemporary society with the rich tapestry of culture uniquely ours.

In a larger sense, the study of music and the arts are necessary for full development of the mind. Pamela Stephens, an ehow.com contributor states it succinctly: “Research indicates that students become more responsible for their own learning, and critical thinking skills are promoted when quality arts education programs are included in the curriculum.” The Performing Arts Alliance segment of the National Endowment for the Arts states, “Arts education has been proven to help students increase cognitive development, inspire motivation and discipline, develop confidence and inventiveness, and hone communication and problem- solving skills.” In addition it offers “Students who study the arts continue to outperform non-arts students on the

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). According to the College Board's 2001 College-Bound Seniors: A Profile of SAT Program Test Takers, students with more than 4 years of arts study scored 68 points higher on the verbal section and 51 points higher on the math section of the SAT than students with no arts course work. It is shown that performing arts in the curriculum prompt students to "express ideas and emotions that they cannot express in language alone". When applied throughout a student's academic life, it helps to develop "students' skills and understanding of creating, performing, and responding". It "promotes knowledge and understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of the arts".[2]

This is Your Brain on Music is written by neuroscientist Daniel J Levitin. Levitin makes recent findings in the neuroscience of music understandable to his educated readers. He describes the components of music: timbre, rhythm, pitch, and harmony, and associates them with neuroanatomy, neurochemistry, cognitive psychology, and evolution. Levitin argues, from a scientific point of view, that music has served as an indicator of cognitive, emotional and physical health, and has been evolutionarily advantageous as a force that led to social bonding and increased fitness, according the observations of Charles Darwin and others. [7].

It is the belief of many educators that study of the arts helps connect the pathways of the brain to other subjects. The different activities that students take part in while in school play a significant role in their education. The activities that involve team involvement and hand/eye coordination can be compared to the musical activities that involve ensemble performance, both instrumental and vocal. All musical endeavors involve a translation process from a musical "language" of notation and often language to execution in accordance with set parameters of tempo and pitch. Educators link studies in the arts to higher academic achievement in all other

areas, especially math, science, and engineering, but is proven in research that the arts enhance everything else.

Other areas in which arts and performance in music enhance the lives of students are in self-discipline, problem-solving, responsibility, dedication to completion of projects, and working with others. It is thought that all this might enhance right and left brain connections, but certainly it gives what many students yearn for; a sense of belonging and purpose. More profoundly, study of the arts and music, in particular, may help the student's welfare in physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual aspects. Educators agree that there are many various pathways to learning. Students involved in the arts establish pathways of learning in different ways, with different avenues of approach. In the arts, these pathways are often paved more comfortably in terms of enjoyment and self-fulfillment.

I've recently completed twenty years of conducting a community band which has been part of the performing arts curriculum at Palomar College for three years. The band is comprised of seventy or so, instrumentalists ranging in age from sixteen to eighty-five. Many of our members had not played their instruments for up to forty years, but began playing again because they felt something was missing in their lives. For the senior members I am fully convinced that this endeavor has added significant time and richness to their lives.

Unfortunately, the financial predicament for the San Diego Unified School District is not conducive to fostering an appreciation for music, specifically, and the arts in general. Only a handful of elementary schools in the system offer just one hour a week for teaching basics of musical instruments. The future does not look bright for maintaining even this meager schedule. Millions are being cut from the performing arts curriculum in order to attempt to fill what was a \$120 million hole in the \$1.2 billion operating budget. After firing 10 art teaching jobs and more

than 45 music teachers, it is feared that these jobs may never be filled again. An ancillary effect this will have was shown as the “trickle-up” of the ‘80s, when high school music programs dried up because there were no students feeding into them. The budget cuts for the state of California in June of last year cut \$1.8 billion will likely be followed by another \$1.9 billion if the budget holes are not filled. Spending for the community college system could be cut by \$102 million, on top of the \$400 million already cut this year and \$129 million in delayed funding.[2] According to David Brown in an article in wsws.org,, “Since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008, 30,000 public school teachers have lost their jobs, and ‘superfluous’ programs like art and music have been cut.” [8]]

The comprehension and use of concepts of music theory demand the brain work in specific ways, to be extrapolated into other useful realms. The construction of the musical scale and the ways the brain innately comprehends it is well demonstrated by Bobbie McFerrin in one of “Ted’s Talks”, available on YouTube. What is referred to as “tonal magnetism” is shown as the audience automatically can predict the next musical tone in a series of pitches that it has never heard. The placement of whole and half steps in our major scale is part of our very fiber. If that placement is altered, we immediately recognize the alteration, even if we can’t verbalize what the change has been. The difference in tonality between major and minor is evident in the mood a piece of music conveys, simply changed by altering the scale a composition is based on. Feelings of joy, sadness, repose, anticipation, anger, and so on can be expressed by the very simple juxtaposition of two or more notes in the context of a work. Perhaps even more basic to human instinct is that of rhythm. We are bound within several simultaneous rhythms every moment of our lives. Some rhythms are so slow as to repeat themselves without notice: the turning of seasons, the rising and setting of the sun. Other rhythms are more obvious, although

not felt to be synchronous: the beating of the heart, breath. Intricate harmonies fill our ears, if we can only find the silence to actually recognize them. i.e. circadian rhythms. The counterpoint of rhythm and pitches which fills our lives is not easily recognized as such by those who have never been taught how to listen and delight in what they hear. In today's world, we begin to feel restless when silence settles around us. The 'avant garde' composer of the 60's John Cage gave this retort to one of his audience who asked, "doesn't it bother you when insensitive folks around intrude on your silence with their portable stereos and boom boxes?" Cage replied, "Have you ever thought how you are intruding on their sounds with Your silence?" As electronic reproducing of music and the spoken word, for that matter becomes more and more sophisticated, the arguments for encouraging live music and performance become more of aesthetics and of a spiritual nature. One wonders what the author Callahan in his short story *Chimera* might have written about the metaphysical dynamic of the interaction between audience and performer; how they affect each other in both directions. Performers accustomed to being 'on stage' know well the emotions and energy involved playing to a full, responsive house and those of playing to empty seats. Most performers thrive on the energy coming across the footlights, creating a two way avenue leading to an enhanced musical experience.

It is difficult to know how and sometimes what to support in the performing arts. The National Endowment for the Arts and other governmental and private funding agencies have contributed meaningfully in funding over the past decades, in spite of some occasional serious gaffs of bad decisions, supporting projects that had little merit. The public has a responsibility to engage its critical faculties in supporting the arts, by self-education, public education, exposure, sharing experiences, and to the greatest extent, attendance. We also need to hold accountable our

elected and appointed representatives to insure that our youth are offered the highest quality education possible, and that it needs to be well-rounded, intellectually and artistically.

When we learn to actually listen carefully, we begin to realize that silence is as the blank canvas to a painter. Those trained in how to hear music, as well as create it, can allow themselves to hear all the complex colors of sound and feel the intricate rhythms of life.

Works Cited

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