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Why and How: “Music Will Save the World” Challenging the Crises in Educational Thought

By Andrew Pudewa

“Maybe music will save the world,” said Pablo Casals, the great cellist and humanitarian musician of the twentieth century. Shinichi Suzuki, founder of the Suzuki Method, also believed so, but amended the point by writing, “If we work hard, music can save the world.” Ludwig van Beethoven, composer of some of the most magnificent music known to man, also believed and lived for the purpose that music should save the world. But how?

Certainly the power of music has done little to prevent wars, crime, hatred, and destruction in the last two thousand years. Perhaps many great men and women have been inspired by uplifting, transcendent music. Swaying and influencing the emotions of the masses can be more easily done when reinforced by patriotic or religious sounds. Without question, music has power—but in what way can music save the world?

Most likely, Beethoven, Casals, Suzuki, and countless other dedicated musicians and teachers throughout history felt that the power of music would help sustain and ennoble people to be the best that we can be. We want to believe that music, as the language of the soul, might enable mankind to transcend the mundane and rise above its petty desires, conflicts, and quarrels. It seems that such effects have yet to be seen on a grand scale. And yet, perhaps music will help us now, at a time when we face a new wave of ideas about what children should learn and how they should learn it. Many people feel that we are facing a crisis, or many crises in education, and that the future of our country and perhaps of our world may depend on our ability to solve these crises in this decade.

What crises? Are we not at the height of intellectual and scientific achievement? Do we not have the highest quality of life in all of recorded history? How would all this be possible if there were real crises in education? Let us not forget that today we are reaping the benefits of our grandparents’ and great grandparents’ efforts to build this country on a strong moral and ethical foundation. History buffs now

discuss parallels between America today and the fall of the Roman Empire. Our collective moral and ethical standard is quickly taking back seat to our need to support “politically correct” positions and heel “theoretically accurate” pedagogical and philosophical ideas.

Indeed, there are crises at hand. The three Rs are continually deemphasized. Textbook publishers are careful to eliminate any hint of moral message in reading materials. History is edited so as to prevent the proliferation of “misconceptions about our founding fathers’ real motives.” Parents read that to teach their preschool age child to read, swim, do ballet, or gymnastics may put them at risk for “long term personality damage.” Basic phonics information is gradually being displaced from the code of language curriculum in early grades, and this is producing illiterate children across the continent. “Inventive spelling” up through the third grade is commonplace. Upper elementary children receive instruction in “values clarification” and are asked to analyze their mothers’ and fathers’ parenting skills. High school students are given the opportunity to place themselves on a “spectrum of sexuality” somewhere between entirely heterosexual and entirely homosexual. National test scores continue on a downward trend, and standards are revised. The NEA pushes for more regulation of teacher certification, textbooks and curriculum, private and religious schools, and homeschooling. In the 1990s, the United States ranked at the very bottom of nineteen industrial nations in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Yes, there are crises in education.

The reasons for these crises are diverse, complex, and numerous. Equally complex are the solutions to these problems. Where does music fit in? What power is there in music to effect change in educational philosophy and practice? Why do musicians, music educators, musically literate parents, and music lovers all have a responsibility to challenge these complex crises in the field of education?

Standards have been lost. What was expected and required of students of yesteryear is no longer the rule. Vast numbers of teenagers graduate from high school with far less knowledge and problem solving ability than the graduates of eighth grade 100 years ago. In our grand search for solutions to the psychological and emotional problems of the day, ethical standards, moral standards, and academic standards have been sacrificed. From Rousseau to Dewey to Spock, the psychologists have gradually taken over the education of educators, and what teachers-to-be learn in university classes today often has much less to do with what to teach than with the psychological implications of how it is taught. Content is second place. Standards have been lost.

In almost every subject, classical methods for teaching content have been compromised with a “new” and presumably better system. “New Math” has still failed to produce a nation of children who are competent at the level of *Ray’s Arithmetic* (first published in 1877). Various new reading strategies over the last

twenty years have an ever-increasingly poor record of producing a literate high school and college population. An ever-growing selection of phonics-first reading materials are readily available to aware and concerned parents who often find that books like the *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers* (published 1836) provide a better basis for developing basic reading skills than any of the "new" material currently available in their local public schools.

Real art instruction has all but disappeared and been replaced by "exploring media" and appreciation of modern, cubist, surreal, post-impressionistic, and who-knows-what; everything but the classics. The methods whereby the masters learned their trade have all but vanished from our school curricula, and consequently the quality of artwork in our environment today has little aesthetic value when compared to the great art of a more classical time.

Most serious of all, however, is the compromise of the moral fiber of education. Once upon a time teachers were respected and revered for the moral standard that was theirs to uphold. Our forefathers learned handwriting by copying again and again the moral lessons of the day:

Employment prevents vice.
Time cuts down all, the great and the small.
Build your hopes of fame on virtue.
Zinc is a white semi-metal useful in galvanism.
Wrought by hand great works to stand.
Zeal for justice is worthy of praise.
Persevere in accomplishing a complete education.

These copybook headings were written before condescension toward children became elevated to a dogma. Presently, no early elementary reading curriculum would presume that children would have any interest in such ideas or that it should be the role of the school to try to influence the child's value judgment in such a way. Almost without exception, standards in education have been lost.

But music may be the sole survivor. Hard rock and heavy metal-type noise aside (which misappropriates the word *music*), the study of music is simply not possible without standards. One cannot hand a violin to a child and say: "Here, learn music." Rhythm, harmony, melody, intonation, tone quality—all the intrinsic factors that make music what it is—these cannot be learned without structure and standards. Without standards, music is not. And these must be skillfully taught. Music will never disappear. It is the oldest and most basic form of human expression. It is the highest and most elevating form of human expression. It is the most eternal form of human expression. And without standards, music does not exist. Discipline is inherent to rhythm. The gentle and joyous discipline of music gives life to all who step into it. Children thrive on it. Music will survive.

"All people who love art," Dr. Suzuki says, "should burn with the obligation to

save the world.” Music teachers will maintain the standards that make music music. And after all the psycho-educationalists have come full circle to realize that in order to give children self-esteem, you have to “give it by teaching them something,” the musicians, quietly upholding a standard in music education, surrounded by happy, emotionally healthy, and competent children and parents, will be ready to help rebuild the educational foundation upon which this great country was built. And that is how music will help save the world.

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