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Where and when music fits in the education process

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manuscript of author's speech

Our guest of honor has covered much of the subject magisterially; I find very little to disagree with, save for his high praise of the teamwork of professional symphony orchestras -- but I have become infamous for my harsh assessment of performers in general and orchestras in particular. That quibble aside, however, I agree, in spades, clubs, and hearts (I never have possessed diamonds) about the necessity of the arts for the mind and soul. My disagreement with most educators on this subject, who seem happy to settle for **exposure**, at almost any time in a young person's curriculum, centers around the time it ought to be dealt with, and the methods of student involvement in it. But then, I think the entire school curriculum has deteriorated to the point of senselessness, with Geography, World History, Civics, Foreign Languages, Comparative Religion and Culture, and the domestic sciences all neglected or handled at the wrong time, in the wrong place, by the wrong kind of teacher, with the wrong attitudes towards how much of the student's growing comprehension of subject matter arises from logic as against how much depends upon memorization. Recent political pressure to get the federal government out of the process altogether, even to reduce that of states and cities in favor of districts, and finally, of tight, dominating parental control, may be the most awfully misguided aspect of the whole educational environment. These very parents, brought up in the instructional chaos of the 1970s

and 1980s, know almost nothing about what needs to be done. Leaving them in charge will lead to luddite retrenchment, the elimination of anything controversial, the reduction of expense and anything that causes their little angels to do extended work at home, and the ultimate lack of young adult preparation for the world of the next millenium. National standards for academic achievement, at every level from pre-school to collegiate senior, to which every state, county, city, district, and family would aspire, must be proposed, argued, arrived at through consensus, and promulgated, if we really mean to invest in our children's future; no other strategy can succeed.

The time for music to be inculcated in a child's full *persona* begins around age 2, and extends particularly through age 7; after that, other intellectual functions and interests assert themselves, reducing the child's openness for deep musical experience. The ideal goals for teaching in this period include: getting little guys and dolls to sing, play several kinds of sound generator, read musical notation in detail, and learn basic theory, up through intervals, scales, chords, meters, tone colors, voice-leading, modality, chromaticism, and text-setting. This may seem excessively ambitious, but examples do exist of success in such endeavors, if few and not long-lasting. A long time ago, Maria Montessori herself accomplished near miracles in this

regard; the schools that bear her name do not begin to approach her achievements. Without a massive program of inculcation, teacher instruction, and values re-orientation, on a continental scale, no useful progress could ever be made. At the same time that kids finger paint, model in clay, learn architectural principles from blocks and erector sets, and learn to write letters and words, they can sing rounds and glees, play recorder duets and trios, tap out rhythmic patterns dictated to them, read in the treble and bass clefs, make up words for pre-existent tunes, and write melodies for pre-existent words. They need to get their hands dirty with the materials of music, far more than they need to be "exposed" to the sonic productions of Josquin, Beethoven, Schoenberg, or Ellington. The literature can and will come at a later time, and it will tend to be interesting, challenging material, if the student has been prepared for it in a purely technical way. Nobody can learn Shakespeare from going to the theatre; with the great changes in the English language from his time to ours, one must read the stuff first to comprehend it. Listening to, say, Brahms, without some sense of the tonal materials with which he worked, is **music appreciation**, a species of learning almost totally superficial, and thus, in artistic terms, useless. Give me a child from 3 to 7, and I will make a musical person out of him or her; he probably will not grow up to be a musician, but will likely become an intelligent, aware, sensitive member of the

audience -- and we need those far more than composers and/or performers. Most of all, his soul will resonate with the whole of civilization, not just Western; for with these tools in his bag, he can adjust his sensitivity to any sort of ethnic perspective. And our college education for music concentrators can skip over the basics and begin with probing analysis of compositions from any period or culture. This win-win proposition will cost time, money, and the peace and quiet of millions of parents, but with it, we may actually turn out fully armed people, ready to face the future in all its unpredictable parameters, rather than the few hardened and sharpened tools and the many helpless victims who now pass through the so-called system. People like Mr. Roy and I who advocate such things at a time like this, may end up being steamrolled, Limbaughed, and Gingriched for our pains but we know we are right, we speak from lifetimes of loving music and the other arts, and we remain unafraid. No good deed goes unpunished -- neither does a useful goal get reached without pain and sacrifice. If we win in the long run, nobody will thank us for it, but we will sleep better in our graves, and, depending upon what turns out to be the eternal plan, we might meet Bach, Mozart, and Ravel in Glory, and not be ashamed to make their acquaintance, for our efforts will have perpetuated their ability to reach the ears of untold prepared generations.