

From; Mark's Trumpet blog.

A missive on the decline of classical Music and appreciation for the Art form in Society.

The alarm bells are growing louder seemingly by the day about America's classical music crisis. Just this fall alone at least five large US orchestras have had or have come close to having work stoppages. The reason for these problems specifically are multi-layered and generally deal with poorly run managements who have as little fiscal skills as they do vision for the art that they are supposed to be advocating for. This post is not about those specific situations. It has more to do with a more deep seeded problem that lies at the heart of public apathy and lack of outrage when these situations occur.

Recently the referees of the National Football League went on strike. This led to replacement referees, whose bad calls caused outrage across the country. Everywhere you looked there was outrage, even the President of the United States, and his opponent for the highest office, in the land made public decries for the situation to resolve. Yet, when the Indianapolis Symphony, one of the country's oldest musical institutions, is out of work, where are the cries of outrage? When the Minnesota Orchestra, an orchestra, who has been hailed by European critics as one of the world's greatest orchestras, has been offered a fifty per-cent cut, in pay who seems upset? And when the Atlanta Symphony, an orchestra who has made many Grammy-winning recordings and made the United States so proud by their outstanding performances during the Atlanta Olympics, are forced to take draconian pay cuts of over thirty per-cent over the next two years, lose ten weeks of their season, as well as several musicians, who seems upset on a national level?

The answer sadly, is no one.

*Why is this might you ask?*

Basically it comes down to one thing. No one has taught our society to care. For decades now our society has become less and less artistic. It has become more and more driven by competition, bottom lines, assessment, and taking the easy way out. The failure of our society to embrace classical music has everything to do with misguided priorities and the way in which our music education operates, with its head in the sand from the earliest grades all the way up through our most prestigious universities.

Before I start to explain what I mean by this grand statement, I must make a disclaimer. The apathy is not the fault of marching bands, American Idol, or any one source. But it is from a combination of factors, many of which are in the control of those of us who are musicians. Without swift changes we will see an even steeper decline in the way our country views music.

*Everyone gets a trophy*

I have given many clinics to high school trumpet sections whose band rooms are filled with so many trophies you would think everyone who ever went to that particular high school was destined to sign a Decca recording contract right after graduation. Yet upon further review, there were hardly any students who could play a major scale, other than Bb concert. They could not read the simplest tune without it being taught by rote, much less play with a sound that is characteristic of their instrument. However, they could tell you exactly how many counts were in the opener to last year's marching band show and what score they received for visuals at their last competition. How do I know this? This was my high school experience. Not every situation is like the one I am describing above. I have been to many fine programs. Nevertheless many are like this, and it's a huge problem.

What would musical education in the United States be like if the ratio of time spent in group competitions wearing uniforms was equal or less than the time spent learning to play an instrument well? I would be willing to bet that band and orchestra would be one of the most important subjects in school. It would be more challenging and more students would play beyond their high school graduations. More would attend concerts and more would encourage their children to participate. Why do I assume all of these ideals to be true? Because learning an instrument in a way that aims for some level of mastery requires time, patience, imagination and hard work on an individual level. Any activity we do in our lives that requires those four qualities becomes an experience that we remember and that has meaning.

Is marching band the reason for the decline of music being appreciated in the United States? Of course not! But is it a symptom of the problem? You bet. Our society places such a strong emphasis on winning and bringing home some sort of symbol that lets you and everyone else know how good you are. We have forgotten about the fact that music is first and foremost an art form. Art forms require the union of technical skill and human expression. And for that expression to have some lasting meaning (thus translating into a lifelong fulfillment of that expressive vehicle) it must be honest and earned. What do I mean by this?

To understand something with some depth is what I mean by honesty. To have played in a school music ensemble and not be able to read basic rhythms or understand how to read a key signature is like playing for a baseball team and not understanding that three strikes is an out and where first base is located. Is the player on this fictional baseball team ever going to understand the beautiful game of baseball? Then how can we let this happen in our schools to our music programs? Marching bands are not the problem, the problem is the emphasis on them, and what this emphasis represents, that is the problem. Most brass players in American orchestras, at some time or another in their development participated in these activities. The difference is that they were balanced and taught that playing your instrument and understanding what you are doing musically is more important than the fancy salute that comes at the end of a loud moment on a football field in late October, and beating an opponent into oblivion.

When I speak of earning something in music I am relating to the self-satisfaction of pursuing excellence on an instrument (or voice) that takes dedication and a sacrifice of time and ego. One of the greatest lessons that music teaches us all is that the road to excellence and true self-esteem is a long path with peaks and valleys. Instant gratification has no place on this journey. How many other things in today's society can we say this about?

*Assessment, Assessment, Assessment!*

It is impossible to discuss education without using the buzzword "assessment". Most things today in the American education system are guided by assessment. End of grade testing, SATs, ACTs, you name it, everyone is teaching for the test. There is little emphasis placed on mastery. This brings us to the problem in today's archaic system of training music educators. I have seen many music education majors who have graduated and cannot tell you the first thing about Leonard Bernstein or Aaron Copland but know plenty about the history of public school education and how to set up a lesson plan. I have observed this both as their colleague in school and as an applied music professor. How can the two most important figures in American classical music of the twentieth century be an obscure fact to people graduating with a degree in music? It's simple. The amount of class time devoted to fulfil requirements in educational assessment dominates today's music educators. The subjects that are required for mastery of a skill or an area become secondary.

The results of this educational model lead to substandard music teaching. Students come into college hoping to become better players on their instruments and to become great teachers who will influence generations of students the same way that someone else has influenced them. Instead they are bombarded with educational theories that have nothing to do with teaching a seventh grader how to finger F<sup>#</sup> on the flute or how to play a smooth roll on a snare drum. Yet the amount of time students have to learn how to finger the F<sup>#</sup> on the flute or teach the smooth roll on a snare drum is miniscule compared to the amount of time they have to spend in classes unrelated to the skills needed to become excellent music educators and more importantly great musicians.

Most music students graduate college without playing in a chamber ensemble. This fact alone should be enough to make us look at how antiquated and overburdened our system of music education has become. Could you imagine having a math teacher who never had to take calculus? Of course not! There would be academic outrage. Then where is the outrage in music education when the only experience in music performance is marching band and a large ensemble? Some schools now do not require music education majors to perform a half hour recital on their major instrument. Fortunately this is not the case at anywhere I have ever taught, but sadly it is not uncommon. If we are ever going to make music an important part of school curriculums again, we must allow those who are going to teach the chance to become masters of their subjects. Under the current system we have no chance.

#### *What we need more of in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century music education system*

What do we need now? Obviously we need more emphasis on the craft of music but there is more than that. We need to all be musical ambassadors for our communities. We need to be the music expert wherever we live. In short we all need to channel our inner Leonard Bernstein. Leonard Bernstein is remembered by my generation as the former music director of the New York Philharmonic and a great composer best known for his score to the musical *West Side Story*. But to those of previous generations, Bernstein was much more than that. He was a driving force on the American cultural scene and the music educator for the masses. From 1958 through 1972 Bernstein presented fifty-three young people's concerts on CBS with the New York Philharmonic. In these concerts Bernstein presented a multitude of composers and styles that taught generations about the world of music. He taught what music is and why it is important. How do we as musicians and educators become our own Bernstein? By gaining an understanding of the two areas most musicians lack the most, public speaking and promotion. Everywhere music is taught the person teaching is looked at as an expert in the field. The idea of not being able to speak about what we do will make it very hard to convince anyone, especially in a society that places little value on depth and talent, that what we do is important and has meaning. Bernstein's *Young Peoples Concerts* should be required viewing for all music students. All musicians at some level are educators and these concerts should serve as a model. Sadly, even though it has been forty years since they were last broadcast they are still light years ahead of where we are today in terms of educating young and old about music.

One place where music can take a lesson from sports is in the area of marketing. There are plenty of ways to occupy kids with sports programs that are well organized and attractive to students and their parents. Rarely classical music in any form from orchestral music all the way to middle school band is advertised with as much zeal as a local high school football team. There are of course exceptions... San Francisco Symphony, New York Philharmonic etc. But by and large the advertising is stuck somewhere in 1985 with no hope of a time machine to get us back to the future. Selling what we believe in has become as important as actually being what we believe in. This is the new reality. How else can we explain the

phenomenon of American Idol? Without courses in marketing and basic business the classical music industry will just have to hope against hope that a few from our ranks will figure this part of the game out on their own. But there is no reason to be so backwards in this regard. Marketing classical music in a way that shows its intelligence is the only way it will have a future.

The future of classical music can be reshaped. Musicians can do their best in dealing with managements who lack a conscience. The apathy and lack of understanding is appalling. But until the education system changes and we start building audiences for the future, we cannot look any further than our own mirrors for the mess that we are in.