

Rx For School Music

Every September, just under 10% of America's school age population—about 5 million kids— signs up for an instrumental music program at school. This enormous participation is the envy of the world. Not only does it generate sales of woodwinds, brasswinds, and stringed instruments, it has helped create an amateur musician culture that positively impacts every other facet of the industry. Anecdotal evidence indicates that legions of current guitar, keyboard, and drum buyers got their introduction to making music in a public school. Given the widely publicized financial difficulties of states and municipalities nationwide, it's worth asking, will music programs continue on such a large scale in the future?

This type of question is not new. For as long as we can remember, people have been sounding the alarm about potentially mortal threats to school music. When the baby boomers started to flood the nation's schools in the early '50s, the industry fretted that the enormous cost of new school buildings would strip music programs of funding. A few years later, the advent of the Space Race gave rise to a new set of worries: would the stepped up emphasis on math and science marginalize music programs? The guitar boom and the ascent of rock 'n' roll in the '60s kept retailers and manufacturers awake at night worrying "will any kid still want to be in a band or orchestra?" Title IX, which expanded athletic programs for girls in the '70s, led to concerns that girls would abandon music programs, decimating participation levels. Other perceived threats over the past three decades have included, tax containment drives, like California's Proposition 13; any modification of school funding formulas; the No Child Left Behind Act, and more real or imagined budget issues than we have space to list. Yet, if instrument sales are any indicator, the school music movement has proved remarkably resilient. Local programs may grow or shrink, but that typically reflects enrollment levels or the skill of the music director, not a larger national trend. For the past 60 years, instrument sales have marched in lockstep with national enrollment levels. (Unit shipments of woodwinds, brasswinds, and strings have consistently hovered around 1.8% of national K-12 enrollment levels.)

The history of American's system of school music helps explain its remarkable durability, and also offers some insights into how to preserve it going forward. Dr. Joseph Maddy deserves more credit for advancing the cause of music education in America than any other single individual. In 1926, he launched the National High School Orchestra Camp to both showcase the talents of aspiring young musicians and to serve as a pilot music program for other schools to emulate. Maddy approached music education with a missionary's zeal, and his efforts evolved into the now famous Interlochen Arts Academy in Traverse City, Michigan. For decades he consistently generated a flood of publicity attesting to the benefits of music education. He instinctively grasped that music programs are not difficult to sell. Expose parents to a good music program, appeal to their deep-seated desire to enrich their child's life, and support will be forthcoming.

Although Maddy's message immediately struck a respondent chord, two decades of national hardship precluded widespread

implementation. In the '30s, the 25% unemployment and economic collapse of the Depression stunted everything, music programs included. Then in the '40s, consumer production restrictions necessitated by World War II made instruments all but unavailable. When these impediments faded away in the '50s, music programs spontaneously sprouted up across the country. The fact that they remain vibrant 60 years later confirms Maddy's original insight that their value is broadly appreciated. What's more, parental support for music is akin to a mother lion's instinct to protect her cubs; it doesn't vary much with the state of the economy or the political climate.



While we have every confidence that school music programs will outlast the current downturn, we have a few contrarian thoughts on how best to insulate them from harsh budgetary realities. As noted above, school music programs were established nationwide, when education policy was almost exclusively a local affair, long before there were education bureaucracies in state capitals, and long before the creation of the U.S. Department of Education in 1979. In the 32 years since the state and Feds have upped their involvement, our columns have yet to record the slightest evidence that they have ever done anything to aid music programs. Three decades, hundreds of interviews conducted, thousands of words written, and we've yet to quote a manufacturer, retailer, or salesperson who described how some state or federal initiative made a music program better.

This is not to say that the industry has been silent on the state and federal role in music ed. Our columns have been full of music educators and industry members blasting the negative impact of standardized tests (courtesy of the Fed), block scheduling (generally a state prerogative), mandatory English as a second language requirements (state), exploding special education budgets (combination of state and federal), and countless other mandates emanating from well intentioned bureaucrats far away from the classroom.

Despite this less than glowing assessment, most music education advocacy efforts are still aimed at State Capitals and Washington D.C. The hope seems to be that if a senator or governor writes a law or appropriates funds, music will flourish. Evidence suggests otherwise. Democrats and Republicans have traded the reins of power over the past 30 years nationwide, and both parties have proved equally ineffective in making a positive impact on music participation. The best that can be said of any of them is that they got out of the way and refrained from doing something truly destructive. Perhaps the industry would be better served advocating for a reduced state and federal role, and giving locals more say over the management of the educational process. Seventy years ago, Dr. Maddy conclusively proved that parents and students are primed to rally behind music education. The same can't be said for our elected officials.

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