

Why School Music Shines In A Less Than Bright Economy

Looking for a ray of sunlight in a generally overcast economic climate? Consider the school music market. The popular perception is that school music programs are always in a state of crisis, either on the brink of being cancelled by hard-nosed administrators who are only concerned about math and science scores, or set to be zeroed out due to “harsh budget cuts.” Actual data paints a far brighter picture. As reported elsewhere in this issue, a national sample of retailers reported that school music sales in the all-important “back-to-school” third quarter advanced 4.5%, outpacing every other product category we track, including the perennially resilient accessory group. The strong performance at retail has also been mirrored by favorable import data. For the first six months of 2012, imports of brasswinds advanced 37%, clarinets were up by 8%, saxophones increased 38%, and stringed instruments posted a 7% gain.

We’re not dismissing the fact that there are challenges facing school music programs in various parts of the country. There are 99,000 school systems nationwide, each of which faces its own unique combination of financial, demographic, and social issues. In the ten-year period between 2000 and 2010, the U.S. Census reported that New York State saw its population of school aged children drop by 200,000, while Texas experienced a comparably sized increase. Population swings of this magnitude unquestionably have an impact on the size and health of local school music programs. The widely publicized financial duress of cities like Stockton, California, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Providence, Rhode Island are other factors that have had an adverse impact. Nationwide, however, instrumental music programs have exhibited exceptional resilience, which bodes well for the entire industry.

Two factors underpin this ongoing strength. First, local budget constraints haven’t been as severe as generally advertised. Specific reports of music programs being closed down are few and far between, and most retailers report “business as usual.” Music programs are also somewhat insulated, given that parents shoulder most of the costs, paying for instrument rentals and funding other purchases through booster groups. There is also widespread acknowledgement among school administrators that music teachers are highly productive, teaching more students per day than nearly all of their counterparts.

More importantly, though, music programs enjoy deeply rooted support among parents and taxpayers who view them as an essential educational component.

Protecting and nurturing children is among the most primal of natural urges, second perhaps only to eating and drinking. Research by evolutionary biologists demonstrates that these instincts are essential for the survival of a species. On a somewhat less dramatic level, they come into play at the beginning of every school year, when it’s time for kids to sign up for music programs. Thanks to promotional efforts by NAMM and the industry at large, there is general recognition that music participation offers tangible benefits that go beyond the satisfaction that comes from simply making music. NAMM-funded studies have conclusively shown that music making increases discipline and mental acuity. For the numerous parents who have absorbed this message, there is no question about making whatever sacrifice is necessary to get their child into a music program. They might defer other purchases, but not the horn or violin, which explains why school music sales have outperformed guitars, pianos, drum kits, and every other product category we track.

The immediate beneficiaries of these parental urges are horn makers and the network of specialized retailers who manage rental programs. Indirectly, however, the rest of the industry reaps tremendous rewards too. Our consumer research, supported by decades of anecdotal evidence, demonstrates that the well-established school music system is an amazing customer creator. Kids who got started in a school music program very often go on to pick up other instruments, buy sound systems, form bands, and build recording studios.

Economic cycles are transient, but it’s encouraging to note that the drive to make music is more permanent. It suggests that as conditions improve, which they most likely will, our industry will be well poised to capitalize.



Brian T. Majeski
Editor

Email: brian@musictrades.com