

# Celebrating An Amazing Ecosystem

**A**s you read this, something extraordinary is taking place. Approximately five million kids are enrolling in instrumental music programs at public schools across the country. Although the process occurs each year with the predictability of autumn's turning leaves, it shouldn't be taken for granted. The system that provides music education to nearly 10% of the school-age population is an exceptional accomplishment, unique to North America. What many here consider the natural order of things is viewed with envy and awe by retailers and manufacturers in other parts of the world.

A list of the components that underpin our school music system illustrates why what we view as commonplace is both remarkable and not easily reproduced elsewhere. School buildings with adequate rehearsal space for large ensembles are a must. So are institutes of higher education that produce accredited music teachers. Parental participation, in the form of booster groups, is needed for essential financial support. Instrument manufacturers and publishers play a vital role, delivering essential products tailored for students, and retailers have developed rental programs that reduce financial barriers to participation, helping increase enrollment. Industry associations such as NAMM, which makes the case nationally for the benefits of music education, and the National Association of School Music Dealers, which helps retailers refine their operations, also play an important role. A niche business like Ferree's Tools, which supplies repair shops with specialized tools for keeping abused horns in playing condition, is an easily overlooked but critical element of the system. As they like to say, "as long as kids drop horns, business is good for us." Absent any of these contributors, the school music system would unquestionably be diminished.

No single individual or organization can claim authorship of this complex ecosystem of interdependent organizations. Rather, it was the product of spontaneous evolution in response to the demands of the nation's 12,000 independent school districts. C.G. Conn helped initiate things in the 1920s by tirelessly promoting the benefits of school music programs to anyone who would listen. Dr. Joseph Maddy, founder of the Interlochen Arts Academy, played an important role as well, creating a widely adopted school music curriculum. The small group of retailers who founded NASMD in 1962 also deserves credit for refining the retail model that so many music directors have come to depend on. However, the primary driving force was the legion of parents who energetically prodded

school boards in the belief that a music program would benefit their children.

School music programs remain a local affair and as such can be held hostage to the vicissitudes of local economic and budgetary constraints, not to mention to the abilities of the educator in charge. Some view this as a weakness, and argue that the system would benefit from stronger centralized control. We're not so sure. Evidence suggests that the further removed the politician is from the consequences of their actions, the less responsive they become. Having the administrators and board members who hold the purse strings face the wrath of concerned parents has proven highly effective in safeguarding music in the schools. There is some data to support this conclusion.

We qualify this comment by pointing out the surprising lack of any quantitative analysis of school music programs. For all the ink that has been spilled on educational policy, no organization—not the Federal Department of Education, not the leading teachers' unions, not the National Music Educators Association, not the state-level education associations—has ever made the effort to count the number of kids in the K-12 system who are enrolled in an instrumental music program. The absence of enrollment data makes it difficult to gauge trends in participation.

We don't have the solution, but we have come up with a useful metric, based on the number of new instruments shipped annually over the past six decades and the U.S. Census tally of K-12 public school enrollment levels. Charting these data points side-by-side reveals a near ironclad correlation. In 2016, the 991,200 brasswinds, woodwinds, and stringed instruments the industry shipped were equal to about 1.9% of the total K-12 enrollment of 51 million. Over the past 60 years this ratio has held steady as the size of the student population has fluctuated. Between 1950 and 2016, "bad years" have seen new instrument shipments dip to 1.7% of enrollment, while "banner years," have been when shipments rise to 2.0% of enrollment.

We take this stability as evidence that school music programs are resilient in the face of shifting musical tastes and economic conditions. More than anything else, this resilience derives from parental concern for the welfare of their children, a sentiment that is far more reliable than any lawmaker's edict. Some time ago, an instrument maker summed it up with the ad tagline, "The investment is in the child, not the instrument."

So as this school year begins, recognize our school music for the exceptional system it is, nurture it every way possible, lavish praise on all those who sustain it, and take satisfaction in being part of an unalloyed social good.



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