



2012

Advocating for the Arts: Letting Ourselves "Feel"

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Virtual Commons Citation

Running, Donald J. (2012). Advocating for the Arts: Letting Ourselves "Feel". In *Music Faculty Publications*. Paper 2.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/music_fac/2

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Advocating for the Arts: Letting Ourselves “Feel”

By Don Running, Bridgewater State University

Advocacy for the arts and promoting the inherent values of music education has always been at the core of music teachers’ beliefs. In a world increasingly obsessed and distracted by test scores, budget trimmings, and preparing students in “practical skills” for “real-world jobs,” music teachers have always been asked to justify the significance of music education and their positions, both professionally and philosophically, to parents, principals, education boards, and legislators.

The importance of this advocacy is obvious. Music teachers are trying to build support for their programs or in some cases even save their programs. But what is it that we are really advocating for?

For the most part, I believe that my colleagues have created strong justifications regarding arts and music education for all. It also seems that much of the justification for treating music as a core subject in schools has led to a list of positive results related to the musical experience. For example:

- Music makes for better SAT scores.
- Students involved in music score higher on math and reading tests.
- Music education creates team problem solvers.
- Training in music develops multitasking skills.

When Lowell Mason first made the case for music as a core subject in Massachusetts schools he stated that music education builds both character and morality. A recent survey even confirmed that early music education significantly increases the probability of a child growing up to seek higher education leading ultimately to earning a higher salary.

I am certainly not going to dispute or undermine the value of these findings. Oftentimes numbers and statistics are the only way to reach those who have limited resources for broad distribution—whether they are principals or lawmakers. But the true value of music cannot be evaluated as a means of delivering nonmusical byproducts. And oftentimes, the true value of music can become overwhelmed by these nonmusical benefits, and value of music in and of itself gets glossed over. Concepts that can be easily quantified outweigh the more subjective aspects. On some level it is too easy to lose track of the most primal and important facet of the arts: that arts allow us to remember what it is to feel.

While studying a very different art (theatre) with renowned pedagogue Kari Margolis, my colleagues and I would discuss the role of arts and why they are so intensely vital both to individuals and to society. Kari’s belief was that by understanding the value of sports and competitive athletics in our society, the value of art becomes more apparent. She asked us to consider why do people watch sports? Not play sports, mind you, but why are people entertained by watching others compete? The vast popularity of sporting events in the world indicates some reason for this phenomenon. On a very fundamental level, the popularity of sporting events stems from the fact that sports cause us to remember. Athletics remind us what it felt like to run fast, jump high, score the game-winning goal, miss the game-winning basket. Sports remind us what it felt like to compete—at any level from the professional arena to the sandbox. Sports



remind us what winning felt like and what losing felt like. On some level, what people are really desperate for is the notion of feeling something. People need to feel emotion. The fundamental role of the arts is similar: the arts remind us what it is like to feel a variety of emotions. We see a tragic turn to a character in a play and remember what it felt like when something similar happened to us. We marvel at Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel and remember when we felt that sort of awe in our own life. We listen to Beethoven’s *Für Elise* and remember what that melancholy emotion felt like. When I listen to Mozart’s Requiem Mass, I am reminded not only about emotions that Mozart infused within the Requiem, but also to my first experience with Mozart. I remember what it felt like to enjoy Mozart for the first time again. In this way, we are both a witness and a participant.

We experience this also in popular culture, for example the film *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. At one point, the film’s protagonist trio tours the Chicago Institute of Art. Cameron becomes transfixed by Georg Seurat’s *Afternoon on the Isle of the Grand Jette*. What makes the scene particularly powerful is that we (the audience) see Cameron’s emotional reaction to a piece of art. This work has an obvious effect on Cameron and we understand that he is being moved in some profound way. And this scene, in turn, reminds us about a time where we felt emotional about a piece of art—while watching a piece of art. Lovely.

This is the true calling of the arts: to remind us of any emotional state without actually being in that emotional state. The arts help us give us the safety of feeling these emotions, free from danger. We can feel the fear of a character or piece of music while still understanding that we are fundamentally safe. We listen to music about rage and can safely experience it—without having to actually be in a rage ourselves. Perhaps the allure of much of the music selected by our students for their leisure listening can be examined through this need to feel while not actually having to be in a bad or unsafe situation.

Recently, I asked one of my students about the importance of music education; why music education is an important and vital component to a developed curriculum. She was immediately able to list several factors that seemed to have little to do with the act and art of music-making and musical enjoyment—academic achievement, development of social skills, aesthetic appreciation, etc. It was as if she was justifying music for those who do not understand music. Yet when I asked her why she thought music was important to her, she responded with the more internal, personal, and soul-satisfying answers that an artist can relate to. She talked about soaring melodies, descending bass lines, goose bumps, and Bach.

Why are we less forward about our feelings for music than our empirical studies relating to music? What concerns me is that in our zeal of defending music education, we lose track of the real reasons that we love, study, and teach music. Years ago, a mentor taught me that an ensemble does not care what you think about the music as much as how you feel about the music. Perhaps it is time to remind ourselves and our colleagues about how we feel about music and how the “feelingfulness” of music is at least as important as the other things that music brings along with it.

In advocating for music, let us allow ourselves to feel! •

—Don Running



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an easy way to get involved, is a simple task that allows you to attend a session that you would probably be going to anyway, and is a recognized professional obligation in most districts. Contact Libby Allison at libbyallison@mac.com to volunteer.

What should I bring?

Comfortable shoes, questions, a bit of energy, a smile, a notebook, an open mind.

How can I register or make reservations?

Go to the MMEA website and click on the Conference page. Pre-registration at a reduced fee is now open and you may make reservations for hotels now as well. Keep watching this page and look for email news flashes and more information about receptions, meetings, how to get tickets for the BSO and All-State concerts, as well as an advanced copy of the schedule so that you can plan your attendance well in advance.

If you have questions or suggestions for the conference coordinator, please contact Libby Allison at libbyallison@mac.com.

Committee members for the 2012 Conference are listed on the Conference page of the website. They are happy to answer questions or address concerns.

The next issue of MMN will include articles written by some of our presenters and clinicians as well as an abbreviated conference program. Everyone is looking forward to seeing familiar faces, and this year we hope to see lots of new ones!

Libby Allison is chair of the 2012 MMEA Conference Committee. She is a member of the Executive Board of MMEA, presents at conferences nationally and internationally, is Associate Professor of Music Education at Berklee College of Music, and teaches in the graduate program at Boston Conservatory.