

## Can the Justification of Music Education be Justified?

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Two justifications for including music in general education emerge from Professor Jorgensen's analysis. The first, reflecting the Platonic model, argues that because music is valuable in and of itself, it should be part of the curriculum. The second, reflecting the Aristotelean model, argues that because music has instrumental value(s) in that it enhances social participation and identity, it should be studied by the young as part of their induction into the social group. As the analysis shows, however, both of these sets of justifications have their flaws: the former raises the specter of unresolvable disagreements about the character of musical value; the latter plays into a narrow and self-serving parochialism. Also added to the picture is Professor Jorgensen's admission that the historic disjuncture between the Platonic and Aristotelean approaches reappears with these two justifications as the fundamental tension between an elitist view, which would identify and study exemplary musical works and the populist view, which would recognize and teach the ordinary music of every day experience.

The genius of this paper, it seems to me, is that Professor Jorgensen does not propose an *either/or* conclusion or a simple *both/and* synthesis. On one hand, she does not weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the two justifications to determine which one has more strengths and fewer weaknesses so that she might plump for the more compelling net result. On the other hand, she does not blend both arguments together in some kind of bland, undifferentiated mix where the weaknesses of one justification are canceled out by the strengths of another and vice versa. In other words, she remains faithful to her analysis throughout by maintaining both justifications with their particular strengths and weaknesses. She gives us what might be called a *this-with-that* solution — a solution that holds both justifications in dialectic tension with each other. Although she does not tell us how this dialectic would apply in the construction and conduct of curricula in music education, we might imagine that our focus would move from time to time between the two justifications, but always the view not center stage in our attention would potentially be exerting its influence and offering course corrections even from the wings.

Even this solution to the problem of justifying music in general education, however, may not be totally satisfying. After all, not only the strengths but also the inherent weaknesses in both kinds of justification hold, and to the extent that elements of the argument are flawed, to that extent, the support of music education is untrustworthy. This is so whether one employs one argument by itself or many arguments in dialectic tension. Multiplying the number of justifications in a *this-with-that* combination multiplies the strengths but it also multiplies the weaknesses.

The centuries' long search for a convincing justification of music in education has apparently not yet been wholly successful, and, in fact, seems now to be as far away as ever — and this at a time when great numbers of music programs and music educator positions in school districts throughout the country are in jeopardy. Against

this light, Professor Jorgensen's paper forces me to ask, Can the justification of music education be justified?

This question is first prompted by wondering whether rational arguments are an appropriate defense for an essentially irrational enterprise such as music. Of course, music has its rational elements. Professor Jorgensen speaks of a musical work's "formal design," which conjures up the scholarship of musicologists, music theorists, historians of music and aestheticians, all of whom approach the study of music cognitively. But composers, conductors, instrument makers, audiences, and performers who play for others or for their own amusement know, at some level, that there is more to music than what its formal design or historical context or any philosophical analyses of its beauty might indicate.

A number of composers and musicians have attempted to articulate what lies at the heart of music. Roger Sessions suggests that music begins with rhythm and sound as "human facts of the most intimate kind,"<sup>1</sup> "the movements of our inner being, which animate our emotions and give them their dynamic content."<sup>2</sup> Igor Stravinsky speaks of musical creation as a "preliminary feeling out," a "moving" will.<sup>3</sup> Aaron Copland describes the "very nature of music" as "the distillation of sentiments, the essence of experience transfused and heightened and expressed in such fashion that we may contemplate it at the same instant we are swayed by it."<sup>4</sup> A contemporary composer, F. Joseph Smith, complains that when music becomes too intellectual, as he considers serialism does, then the effort is found wanting both by aesthetical judgment and just plain listening.<sup>5</sup>

Out of such attempts to explain music itself, there emerges the sense that music, while it is disciplined by rational principles, is not altogether a rational undertaking, but a feelingful and intuitive one. Rational justifications, modeled along scientific lines, may not best represent artistic endeavors. The justifications that may better speak for the arts are those that are artistic.

In the film, "Mr Holland's Opus," the beleaguered music teacher defends the music program that is about to be terminated so that dwindling resources can be devoted to teaching the "basics." The argument he makes, though desperate, simply amounts to saying, "If they don't have music, the students won't have anything to *read* and *write* about." Here was the screenwriter's, the filmmaker's, an art industry's opportunity to make a compelling case for the arts in school curricula before the general public, and this is the sound bite they came up with! There is a wonderful truth in those words, but the argument is clouded by a measure of question-begging: if the arts are not appreciated, then losing the capacity to write and read artistically or about artful insights is not going to matter either. However, the film does offer compelling support for music education when it leaves rational argument behind, and lets the music speak for itself in its own language — as it does especially in the last scene which embodies and transcends all the rational arguments from the enrichment of lives to the sheer enjoyment of music as a good in itself, and does so artistically, emotionally, intuitively.

As long as experiences like "Mr Holland's Opus" remain in the public domain, questions about the nature and place of justifications persist, not only in support of

education in music and the other arts, but also in support of other curricula offerings. In a delightfully satirical piece titled, “A Message from Mars,”<sup>6</sup> Nelson Goodman imagines a situation on “Mars” in which the arts are pervasive and unquestioned, while the study of the sciences takes place mostly in extracurricular clubs, the occasional technical course, and infrequent guest lectures by outstanding scientists, while the great scientific experiments of the past are reenacted in performances for pleasure (the school has even built a large theater for these reenactments) or have been immortalized in museums. The earth visitor was speechless when the “Dean of the School for Sciences and Arts” at the Martian university declared he was not unfavorably disposed towards the sciences, but felt it best if the sciences were not constrained by formal education and submitted to the usual evaluation processes. Besides, the students were so fascinated by, and devoted to, their extracurricular science projects there was no need for courses, grades, credit, or official recognition.<sup>7</sup>

The difficulty that music and the other arts have in justifying their place in school curricula is the same difficulty other subject areas have faced in the past, and science faces on “Mars.” When the prevailing worldview does not afford a supportive context of assumptions and commitments for a particular way of knowing, justifications appear wanting. The present scientific mindset predisposes the community of policy-makers and educators toward the teaching of science without question or doubt as the artistic mindset presumably could predispose an alien culture to the arts. Judgments of worth, it seems, are not entirely rational products. They are rather the outworking of a combination of predispositions, intuitions, moral imperatives, assumptions (examined and unexamined), and reasoning. Choosing what is excluded from and included in the school program may very well end up where the search begins: the initial hunch, pre-rational and unexamined. Subsequent rational arguments do not determine the final outcome; they simply give support to prior commitments.

This is intimated in Professor Jorgensen’s subtitle: “Belief in Search of Reason.” This resonates with the phrase St. Anselm used centuries ago to describe the theological enterprise, “Fides quaerens intellectum,” or “faith seeking understanding.”<sup>8</sup> These phrases are not condemnations of human unreasonableness, but rather, comments about the nature of human rationality, including, it would seem, coming to a conviction about what learning is of most worth. Decision-making, like music making, like the scientific enterprise when it is truly understood, even like the functioning of the human mind itself — is a matter of reasoning, feeling, imagination and possibly physical awareness as well, working together complementarily. Professor Jorgensen’s subtitle and St. Anselm’s confession, “I believe so that I may understand,” are reflected in lines borrowed from the poet Andrew Marvell:

Through that wide field how he his way should find,  
O'er which lame faith leads understanding blind.<sup>9</sup>

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1. Roger Sessions, *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer and Listener* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 11.

2. Ibid., 24.
3. Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 27.
4. Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 10.
5. F. Joseph Smith, personal journal, unpublished.
6. Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 168-72.
7. Ibid., 169.
8. "Fides Quaerens Intellectum" was the original title St. Anselm gave the work he eventually titled, "Proslogion," written about 1077-78. An English language source is Eugene A. Fairweather, ed. *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham, Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 10 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 70.
9. Andrew Marvell, "On Mr. Milton's 'Paradise Lost.'" *Miscellaneous Poems* (London; Robert Boulter, 1681), 61.