



ADVENTIST MUSIC EDUCATION ... What Drives the Commitment?

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The close of this century marks the end of an era of unprecedented change. Life and the arts have been transformed

by quantum leaps in knowledge and technology. American culture, in particular, has been infused with vitality and enriched by the influx of talent from abroad, a migration facilitated by

two calamitous wars in Europe and the emergence of a more clearly defined national identity in both serious and popular music.

During that time music has benefited significantly from initiatives in higher education. In this century the Eastman and Julliard Schools of Music and New England, Peabody, Oberlin and other conservatories were founded. These schools, coupled with the blossoming of comprehensive music programs at major universities, created opportunities for music study equal to the best in Europe.

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late twenties, flourished with increasing strength through the middle of this century and then began to fade in the late

seventies. During that fifty-year period the arts were encouraged and funded in both public and private schools.

I was one of the fortunate ones. When I graduated from high school in the mid-fifties, attended Atlantic Union College

and then began teaching in the sixties, we were experiencing a growth in music education which, in

retrospect, was mind boggling. Growth and expansion were accepted as a continuing reality, a flawed

assumption arising from a lack of historical perspective. We never suspected things would change.

When I began college teaching in 1968, the "good times" were peaking. Two years

later when the seventies began, there were over seventy full-time music positions in the American Adventist colleges. Three-person academy music departments were the rule.

A quarter century has passed since then. Those seventy-plus positions have dwindled to a little over forty, and those three-person secondary programs are a distant memory. A similar contraction has also occurred in the public schools.

What happened? Obvious reasons could include:

- 1) Declining enrollments
- 2) Increased economic pressures
- 3) An increasingly technological society
- 4) The development of a passive populace, one more inclined to be entertained than to participate.

Other reasons must also be considered:

- 1) A lethargic response by those in music to changes in society.

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- 2) A failure to grasp the significance of the creative explosion in popular music.
- 3) A tendency to protect the sacred canon of Western European art music written between 1600 and 1900 and not to expand musical horizons by including the music of the twentieth Century and that of other cultures.

While all of the above reasons, plus others not listed, are factors, perhaps the greatest reason commitment in the arts waned was that it was a flawed commitment in the first place.

American culture tends to be superficial. In the realm of education this led the commitment to music at times to be rationalized and justified on the basis of tangible outcomes rather on than that of developing a genuine aesthetic experience.

Spectacular, gaudy half-time entertainment shows at athletic events is an example that comes to mind. Perhaps some of this activity has a place in schools. Unfortunately, it also tends to detract from the notion that music should be taken seriously.

In Adventist secondary and higher education during this century the support for music was there, the commitment at first driven by utilitarian

function and evangelistic needs rather than by any sense of aesthetic or academic purpose. Talented students in this environment were often exploited and deprived of an insightful and informed awareness of what they were performing.

Over the years we grew away from that attitude about music, the change driven by the idea that educating students is better

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than just training them. Even so, that original justification persisted in some schools, with music serving primarily as a recruitment tool or as a source of entertainment for the institution.

Since it was driven by this type of rationalization, it is hardly surprising that when resources subsided, the commitment withered. The superficial reasons for support could not justify the expense.

Perhaps not enough thought was exercised when Adventist music programs were expanding

and faculty were being hired in the late sixties and early seventies. Twelve full-time music teachers for fifty majors? At least two of our colleges were in that position.

In retrospect, the number of faculty was excessive and imprudent, an invitation for reduction as resources dwindled. Even so, most Adventist college and university music departments today, reduced as they are in faculty, are able, with the resources they possess, to provide a valid experience. It is challenging, but it is doable.

It seems we musicians may have missed a golden opportunity during those "good times" to educate leaders about the powerful effect music can have on the human spirit. And we did so, ironically, in a school system that speaks often about the importance of nurturing man's spiritual nature.

The situation is not as bleak as one might think, however. The fact is that there is still a significant commitment in Adventist education to music.

Even in the early years, when the commitment was driven mostly by the evangelistic goals of the church, there were musicians who had more in mind. Grace Wood-Reith at Walla Walla, Edna Farnsworth at South Lancaster, and Noah Paulin at Angwin would be

joined by others as this century unfolded - musicians who positively affected the Adventist commitment to music in higher education through their music and vision of what might be.

Ultimately, it is the work of exceptional musicians and outstanding music teachers that drives the Adventist commitment. It is an interactive situation in which

administrators, inspired and educated by the vision and work of these persons, respond with support and funding. That continuing reality should be both our challenge and inspiration.