

Speech by Colonel John R. Bourgeois

Saturday, January 19, 2007

NBA-Wisconsin Chapter Convention

“I am honored to be here this afternoon as it is always a great pleasure to be with the people who are the true toilers in the field. You are the source of learning by which our future citizens and musicians are molded and taught. You are the standard bearers; you are the keepers of the flame! My brief remarks are offered not as a polemic but more as an observation of some of the things that I think affect the future of music.

We have ended a century of unprecedented advances that have transformed our country from a rural, agrarian-based society to the leading industrial nation in the world. We have moved from a country of small towns, honest values and simple pleasures to a nation of huge cities and sprawling suburbs where words like “small” and “simple”-and, at times, even “honest” seem at once helplessly and hopelessly unattainable. And now the computer moves into every facet of our lives and offers possibilities that were beyond our wildest imaginations just a few years ago. WE must face the fact that 100 years from now, our lifestyles will seem just as old-fashioned and out-of-sync with reality to our children's children as our forefathers' seems to us.

With so much change and so much changing, it is comforting to be able to cling to tradition and exalt in continuity, but are these traditions in jeopardy? What about music? What about standards?

If we were to trace the breakdown of aesthetic values and the commercialization of art in our time where would we start? For argument's sake, lets go back to the fifties. Perhaps this is something else we can blame on the advent of progressive education. It was surely the time that we were introduced to the narcotic of television; it was the time of dramatic technological advances in the recording industry. I remember well the furor that was set off when Mario Lanza, believing his own press releases, produced a series of RCA Victor Red Seal 45 rpm records with the great Enrico Caruso singing an earlier recorded aria on one side of the record, and on the other side, the greater Mario Lanza was heard in “living tonsils' singing the same aria, obviously far surpassing Caruso. Then in the late 60s into the 70s we have the legendary Barbra Streisand not content reigning as the divine one of popular song, but she must control us completely as she teaches us the art of the French chanson, not sung but crooned. And of course we can't forget the height of eclectic art as demonstrated by Charlotte Momran in her nude electric cello recitals. Just think of the possibilities had Lady Godiva lived in the same era as Thomas Edison!

My observation of the current state of music is that somehow or other we continue to swap standards for hype. Hype over substance. The gimmick has become the standard. The “more is better” or “three tenor syndrome.” This is not only evident in the entertainment industry but it has bled over into our own disciplines. Take the current trend in wind band writing with its “louder-faster-higher” approach to composition, and of course what new work would be complete without the mandatory, drum-corps style percussion ostinato in the middle section or perhaps an alleatoric sound byte during which the instruments are brutalized beyond the limits of recognition.

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We are living in a world where commercial hype and exploitation have become the way of life. Gandhi has been replaced by Yanni. WE live in a world where fast food and even faster morals is the menu of the day. I wonder how you, as teachers, explained to your students some of the more recent world musical events? How did you explain the 2000 Olympic games performance of a Beethoven Ninth with its play-by-play voice-over commentary and a commercial break for a Colonel Sanders promo?

I felt that we witnessed an even more bizarre performance on television, when at the Grammy awards, that incomparable rhythm and blues artist, Aretha Franklin, was brought out to substitute for an ailing Luciano Pavarotti and encouraged to perform Puccini's "Nessun Dorma." As a follow-up in this age of the "crossover artist" we now have, in one of this recent releases, Michael Bolton caterwauling tenor arias. Look out Caruso, here we go again! Perhaps now that Michael has been shorn of his ponytail we can expect to hear him at the Met in a new production of Samson and Delilah! And how can we forget that new replacement of Musak, the ubiquitous Kenny G...In Kenny G's case, I feel there is finally a validation for saxophone jokes.

Which reminds me of a saxophone joke I dreamed once...what is the difference between a saxophone and a guillotine? Actually there are more similarities than differences...first, they both tend to be sharp...Secondly, they're both lethal instruments, and thirdly, they're both most effective when dropped from high places!

While it is a given that an artist must generally appeal to the public to achieve success, we cannot compromise art for the sake of the public. I do not accept that commercial success is proof of artistic worth.

The study of music is the most demanding and rewarding task that we can use to challenge our young people today. It not only gives them concrete academic rewards and a means to distinguish and express themselves, it gives them spiritual and emotional benefits as well. When we teach we must often do so by example; and if not our own, we must find and use the most artistic examples possible. This is what I mean by standards. You are the standard bearers.

Several years back, Paul Griffiths wrote a wonderful piece in the Sunday New York Times that should be of special interest to you. He wrote" "We should resolve, most vitally, to encourage and enhance music in the schools. Music teaches the ability to listen, which is fundamental to education. And all the evidence suggests that listening to music and performing music help a child in acquiring other skills. Music seems to hook into parts of the brain that have to do with mathematics and language abilities. On a more practical level, a child involved in a musical performance is confronted with challenges that will be of lifelong benefit; how you present yourself in public, how you argue a case, how you interpret a document, what evidence you accept and what you question, where you draw the limit between what you are told and what you want, how you work with others toward a common goal. Then there are the values that music has in and of itself; the values of giving expression to a thought or a feeling without going through words, the values of phrasing that expression so that it can be understood by others, the values of asserting the importance of music works that have no physical existence or monetary worth, the values of stimulating and training the experience of sound and what sound can mean. Beyond all that, we need an adult culture in which music's importance is taken for granted, at least by those responsible for music. What really matters is that organizations through which music is conveyed-record companies, orchestras, concert halls, artists' management-(and I would add teachers of music)-remember why they are there."

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Too often in our “back to basics” attitude toward education , we overlook what is really important-how to be thinking, feeling individuals. If we do not give our young people that, we are neglecting a critical element of their education. Some 2, 400 years ago, Plato prescribed the ideal curriculum for the most promising children; music and sports until age 16, then mathematics and moral philosophy to complete the education for future philosopher kings. The implication then, as now, is that the study of music makes an individual more capable in all disciplines. The student that we see on our stages today are not only learning to be better readers and writers by studying music, they are learning that what is truly important in life is not what you are, its how you live. And they are learning that there are things in the human heart and spirit than cannot be expressed by words alone.

Music teaches our children not only to “do the thing right” but also to “do the right thing.” We must continue to fight for music programs in our communities-programs that reach all segments of our communities-because losing them is a mistake we cannot afford.

Somehow, today's role for teachers seems greatly more complicated than it was years back and in the face of modern dilemmas, we might very well throw our hands up in the air and ask “What can I do that matters?” “How can I make a difference?” In spite of what may seem to be overwhelming odds, I do believe that each of us can do something that matters both in our music programs and in our communities.

Remember: You are the teachers-You are the standard bearers-You are the keepers of the flame. Just as the high priests and priestesses of ancient Greece, you must keep the flame alive, fueling the lamp of knowledge with the oil of wisdom and good example. You must guard the flame with vigilance and commitment, sheltering it from the infernal winds that seek to extinguish its fire. It is not a part-time job and there is no vacation. But also remember; without you there is no music. Without music, there is no life.”

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