

Music and Art: Frivolous Folly or Critical Keynotes in the Development of Young Minds?

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Which is it? Are music and art critical to the successful formation of young minds? Or are they frivolous extravagances and luxuries we don't need and can't afford?

Stingy Ebenezer Scrooge may have voted to add music and art to the school curriculum if he knew what we know now—that these 'soft' subjects not only improve performance in technical and academic studies, but increase overall intelligence. In 1995 Daniel Goleman published *Emotional Intelligence*, a groundbreaking treatise on why human beings need to be trained and skilled in aspects of emotion and why emotional intelligence can matter more than IQ. Goleman's book, supported by recent pioneering research into the brain and human behavior, explains why we need to develop our emotional minds.

The implication is that, for the most part, we haven't been doing so. For the past three centuries, our view of the world has been mechanistic: things rational reign supreme. We kow-tow to all things logical and scientific. The warm and fuzzies—the soft fluffy stuff of feelings, creativity and spirituality—are too often whisked under carpets or into closets, leading to repression, depression and all manners of psychosomatic illnesses, the result of ignoring the needs of the emotional mind.

Art and music are two creative activities whose elements—visual imagery and aural sensation—speak directly to our emotional mind thereby supporting its growth and expansion. And it's in childhood when we are more willing students, when both emotional and intellectual development may be carefully wrought and crafted, like a fine sculpture from hammered bronze or a melodic tune from a viola. Children need opportunities to make art and music. So do grown-ups.

Listen all you Ebenzers who think music and art are frivolous pursuits. In the spirit of understanding and knowledge, listen.

It's no longer a question of one or the other: creative quest or intellectual pursuit. An emotionally developed and balanced individual is a smarter individual, one who can more easily and successfully orchestrate the challenges of life. Put many such persons together and society itself blazons forth in dynamic vitality.

The SouthCoast is home to a diverse range of organizations who strongly believe art and music encourage learning and enhance life—and they're not all talk. They put their money into programs to support these beliefs.

The New Bedford Symphony Orchestra (NBSO) is one such organization.

"When we started this program, our goal was to put "Music in the Mornings" into fifteen schools within three years. We put them into fifteen schools within three *months*—the demand was that great!" says Executive Director Lena Rouxinol. "We are hoping to raise sufficient funds to put the program into another fifteen schools during the 2006-'07 school-year," she said.

The program, which was introduced by Music Director and Conductor David MacKenzie, is only one part of a four-part educational outreach initiative sponsored and

subsidized by NBSO. It features five minutes of classical music each morning for five days a week, for a period of five years. After a brief introduction—different each morning depending on which segment is going to be played—five minutes of classical music are broadcast over the school intercom. Children and teachers alike have a few minutes each day to listen to classical music.

Humbug, you may grumble under your breath! I'm sure Dickens's Scrooge wouldn't have begrudged his employees even five minutes a day to listen to classical music—what was classical music then but part of the era's frivolous pop culture? In 1843 when Dickens was writing his story of little lame Tiny Tim and the spirits of Christmas's past, present and future, Ludwig von Beethoven, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and John Gay were probably still quite the rage, though the era of romantic music was well underway. I can't imagine Scrooge opting for any of the romantic composers, except perhaps the dark Richard Wagner. I bet, had he the luxury of radio or piped music into his office, he wouldn't have allowed even a tuneless tinkle to penetrate the dour dank of his office, unless perhaps it was the sound of money clinking into his tin piggy-bank.

So while ol' Ebenezer might not have blown his bugle for classical music, we know now that if he had allowed his employees the opportunity to listen to it during their work day, he would very likely have been the proud manager of a group of productive, inspired and happier staff. Recent research conclusively confirms that classical music is good for us! Numerous studies show classical music can improve memory and the retention of information in the brain; it can strengthen academic performance in reading and math; it can reduce chronic pain and depression; it can unlock the creative spirit inherent in all persons, young and old alike.

Art is another key activity in unlocking creativity and fostering intellectual growth. Since 1995, The New Bedford Art Museum (NBAM) has brought art to children via their artMobile. The artMobile is a summer-time effort, an art-room in a big purple bus that goes where the children go, providing opportunities to kids to learn about and make art. During the school-year, NBAM, together with other youth service providers, offers artMUSed!, a Junior Docent program, and a Portfolio Program. These after-school art programs fall under the sponsorship of New Bedford's Invest-in-Kids initiative. For only a nominal registration fee, more than one-hundred area 5-12th grade students per year are brought to the NBAM to learn how to make art. Art educator Pat Regan, also known as the Purple-Bus Lady, is the NBAM's instructor. "Our aim is to teach art to children who don't have art instruction in their schools," she says. "We offer our programs to schools not listed as '21st-century schools.'"

This year the NBAM is taking kids on Saturday field trips to see art as it's made and exhibited in the SouthCoast, with trips planned farther a field to New York City as well.

Pat Regan sees art as a vital element in a child's development and notes there is extensive research supporting this view. She has been appalled when young children have come to her classes who have not yet mastered the use of a pair of scissors because there hasn't been enough time or money for regular art instruction in the classroom. Training in the use of art tools, from simple crayons and scissors to the more advanced implements and techniques used in making sculpture or sumi watercolor painting, for example, develop essential physical hand-eye coordination and intellectual skills that stimulate critical development in the brain.

The Rogers Free Library in Bristol, Rhode Island, is another example of an institution filling a need for art education to young children. Although the emphasis is on reading, these classes, taught by Bristol Art Museum's Harriet Pomerleau, also provide children with the opportunity to use art to explore and express their understanding of story, a fine example of how art complements and enhances academic study.

While the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra, the New Bedford Art Museum, and the Rogers Free Library offer their programs as a free service and educational outreach to the community, there are many more praiseworthy organizations offering private music and art instruction to those who can afford it.

So why are private institutions stepping in to provide music and art education to children? It must be a phenomenon of demand.

Although art and music in the Dartmouth Public Schools, for example, enjoy the support of School Superintendent Steve Russell and the School Committee, across the board cuts in all school departments adversely affect these programs. William Kingsland, Jr., Director of the Dartmouth Public Schools' Music Program, said they've had one-third sliced off their supply budget—that means, even if demand and costs rise, purchases that support the program must be reduced by thirty percent. To raise funds that may not be covered in the high-school's budget, the Dartmouth School Committee is considering imposing fees for all after-school activities, including music. If parents can't pay, a potential repercussion exists that will see these programs bow-out the back door.

At the top of the education totem pole are the universities. Last year the UMass Dartmouth music program was under heavy scrutiny with proposals that some elements within the program be axed. Dean Michael Taylor says no changes will be made until they find a new chairperson of music.

When asked about collaboration between the visual arts and music departments, Dean Taylor notes the most obvious collaboration is in the realms of electronic music and imaging.

Indeed, art and music are like good ol' friends from way back. Together, with their buddy emotion *kerplunk* in the middle, they walk like three musketeers, hand-in-hand, supporting and inspiring one another, offering one another different viewpoints on the same subject. Sometimes they argue; sometimes they are illogical; but together they expand the depth and breadth of understanding and knowledge of life and what it means to be human.

Art and music teach us to look at the world from a creative perspective. With evidence conclusively demonstrating they also promote intellectual and emotional development and well-being, our response should be to support such activities whenever—and however—we can. Frivolous pursuits they are not.