

Teaching Classical Music in the Elementary School

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That music should be taught in our schools is not a debatable question. Because God has given us not only the gift of song, and the ability to bring forth music on instruments, but also the injunction to praise Him, we have our calling to instruct His children in this phase of glorifying their Maker.

The gift of song is an awesome thing. The wonder of a person's vocal organs, his ability to distinguish between various musical tones, to make instruments "talk" – all show the might of our Creator. From tiny tots, copying their mothers and dads, to the well-trained high school and college choirs, our children are singing children. Theirs is an expression of joy and of sorrow; of happiness and sadness; of humility, praise and glory. They are a part of that singing church of all ages – to be perfected in life eternal.

The ability to play musical instruments is also a great talent. As not everyone is a naturally good singer, so is not everyone gifted in this respect. Some children do not "take to" music until much later in life and sometimes not at all; others can barely crawl up on the piano bench to take their first lessons. But again, no matter what the age, playing an instrument is another means of glorifying our Maker. It is important that we provide an opportunity to develop this means, either in band or orchestra, in grade or high school. To be able to put heart and soul into a rendition of a number is not only personally satisfying – it is another expression of praising our covenant God. We become, then, an active dedicated Church – playing our praises.

The Church also listens. Who has not thrilled to an especially well-rendered "Pastoral Symphony" of Handel's MESSIAH? Or ever forgotten the stirring strains of Christian's High's Band in rendering their Spring Concert? To which member of the congregation does not Heaven seem a bit closer when the majestic peal of the organ precedes the Sabbath's message? Truly, listening too is a skill and needs much practice to be perfected. We would do well, therefore, to cultivate a good musical listening and discrimination.

How then can we develop this third musical skill? The Civic Auditorium of our own city presents many programs; Christian High has its vocal and instrumental concerts; our day schools present Christmas and Easter programs; there are a variety of good records which may be borrowed from the library or bought for one's own record library. There is much good music to which we can listen.

Let us take for granted that the students have some kind of musical background such as the fundamentals of notes, sounds and singing. In this way they will also enjoy music, especially that which is rhythmic and melodic. At this time we wish to make the student aware of classical music.

We may divide classical music into several categories, all of which cannot be thoroughly discussed here. Let us take a look at a few of them.

Nationalistic music has been written by the composer with the glory of his fatherland uppermost in his mind. The music may be partly programmatic in that tells a story, such as Smetana's THE MOLDAU, but this is not necessarily true. In introducing a piece of nationalistic music, one would most likely begin with the composer, his life and type of music, a brief exposition of what to expect from his music would be followed by the record itself. A diagram of the phases or stages may placed on the blackboard and followed throughout the

playing of the record. Thus, one could see and hear THE MOLDAU as it progresses from its beginning in the Bohemian forest to its final, quiet flowing toward Prague. This may also successfully be carried out with 1812 OVERTURE by Tchaikovsky.

Programmatic music, or that which tells a story, is probably most easily recognized and learned. One needs to hear the story of THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE or THE CARNIVAL OF ANIMALS but once or twice to apply the words to music. What interesting story music can tell! What a wonderful gift man has been given! One stands in awe at the brilliance God has given in order to write as he does.

Take, for instance, another form of classical music, that of the symphonies. In the studies of the lives of Johann Sebastian Bach, George Handel, Wolfgang Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven and Johannes Brahms, one marvels at their abilities at such an early age. Familiarity with their music increases our wonder. To children and teenagers, however, their music may be a mass of noise and unrelated tones; here again, the simpler ones should be taught first; these would gradually give way to the deeper, more complex ones. One may begin with the history and presentation of the suites, a group of fairly short movements in various rhythms and tempos but which are all in the same key. From this, music history tells us, developed the form of the sonata. With the advent of this new form, audiences were made aware of keys and their relationships; they listened to composers daring experiments of modulation and transposition. This in turn, developed into the classical symphony. Orchestras played the sonatas, enhancing and enriching the structure of the original sonata.

Symphonies are hauntingly beautiful and, once recognizable, a joy to the listener. Children will Tchaikovsky's PATHETIQUE SYMPHONY, Beethoven's MOONLIGHT SONATA and FIFTH SYMPHONY as well as Grieg's PEER GYNT SUITE. Once more, the teacher will undoubtedly begin with the composer's life and the background of the selection. This time, themes and sub-themes would be pointed out. Repetitious humming of favorite main themes will distinguish them and make them the pupil's own.

The objection to teaching an appreciation of classical music seems to lie in the fact that the lives of some composers are anything but exemplary. Aside from the music itself, I would advocate little stress on the composer's life as such, but would emphasize the fact that, in no matter what circumstances a composer found himself – rich or poor, in health or in sickness – God used him in some small way to bring forth the gift of music. To know that both, Smetana and Handel were deaf when they wrote their greatest works; that poverty drove many composers to sell now well-known works for a few pence in order to get enough bread to eat in order to live – this shows that man himself if nothing. By using man as His tools in His Almighty sovereign good pleasure, God has given to us the gift of music – to sing and to play, but especially to hear. May His Church be a singing, playing, listening Church, now in the midst of sin and disharmony, but later in Heavenly perfection.

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