

Response to J. Terry Gates' "Why Study Music?"

Samuel Hope

Samuel Hope is executive director of the National Association of Schools of Music.

It is particularly challenging to respond to a comprehensive and thoughtful paper in a few words. Professor Gates, supported by his commission members, has provided us with what the French call "a tour of the horizon." What a grand intellectual tour it is, taking us from the inner processes of music itself to broad contextual issues to various heights of scholarly perspective. There are contrasts, often poignant, between assertions of the committed and the skepticism of bystanders and critics. Many of the problems of educating for culture in a free market democracy are considered. The paper is written with precision. It argues with poise. It reflects a deep understanding of multiple perceptions about the question of its title.

Given all of these attributes, what is a responder to do? To reinforce certain points does not move us beyond or even into questions raised by the paper itself. To quibble over nuances of interpretation is not worth our time. Instead, I want to respond by emphasizing yet another perspective, one included in Professor Gates' paper but not the center of its broader purpose. By responding in this way, I hope to provide this symposium with two kinds of answers to the question of "Why Study Music?" One is a comprehensive analysis; the other, a simple response. One is a policy investigation; the other, a primal answer. Both are needed if we are to advance the cause of music study.

There are many ways of organizing the structure of knowledge. Let me mention two. The first is to consider the basic functions of major modes of thought and action. The function of science is to tell us how the world works, the function of history is to tell us what happened, the function of philosophy is to tell us what things mean, and the function of art is to make new things or to make old things new. These modes of thought and action are present in every discipline, no matter what category. However, in gaining a basic education, it is more effective to learn these modes by acquiring the basics of the core disciplines of science, history, and art, and at the appropriate developmental stage, philosophy. Elementary and secondary students study science as science, history as history, art as art, in order to gain basic information and to understand how these basic modes of thought and action work. Music is one of the core disciplines in the arts category.

Another set of organizers describes the way that human beings communicate with each other. Beyond touch, taste, and smell, I can think of five: letters and words, numbers

and associated symbols, still images, moving images, and abstract sound. When we put letters and words together, we have language. When we put numbers and symbols together, we have mathematics. When we work to create still images, we produce the work in the fine arts, architecture, and design. When we work with the moving image, we produce dance and film. When we work with abstract sound, we create music.

We can conclude from these two series that music is worth studying because it is a core exemplar of one of the four basic modes of thought and action, and because in itself, it is one of the five basic ways that human beings communicate with each other. What could be more fundamental than that? Music is a basic way of knowing and doing because of its own nature and because of the relationship of that nature to the human mind and intellect.

Beyond the fact that music is hardwired into our basic mental, emotional, and intellectual equipment, the pursuit of music through study begins to produce many other things beyond an understanding of its fundamental uniqueness. As Professor Gates' paper includes and indicates, there are many lists of these benefits. But everyone here who has studied to create or perform music for a long time, knows that such study teaches things that nothing else teaches. Take organization, for example. Many kinds of study teach us about organization or how to organize. However, nothing but music study teaches us about organization in terms of abstract sound. Organization in sound comes out differently than organization with words; it requires a different thought process, a different technique. The Romeo and Juliet of Tchaikovsky is not the Romeo and Juliet of Shakespeare. Neither creating them, presenting them, or receiving them is the same. The different thing about music study is its use of the material of sound rather than other material, and all that this implies for developmental learning. When we are working in the studio, or in rehearsal, or in analysis, struggling to make sound make sense, we are connecting a fundamental mode of thought with a basic means of communication using knowledge, intellect, and physical skill. We are solving sound design problems. We are doing something unique. This is what Professor Gates is talking about when he suggests that the product and the process are one. These connections are made from the simplest levels of capacity to the most complex. At the summits of achievement, these connections produce incredible intellectual and emotional results. As is true in all disciplines, these high achievements confirm music's fundamental position, its revelatory powers, and its place in basic education.

Without question, we live in a context that can be explained from many perspectives. We can consider and argue politically, economically, sociologically, promotionally, and so forth, but none of these perspectives produce a note of music. Virtually none of us are music professionals, because at some time in our past, we made a sociological analysis, much less an economic or political one. At base, we are musicians and teachers of music because our own study has taught us something so valuable that we can do nothing else with our lives except try to pass that value and that opportunity on to others. Our culture regularly invites everyone to feel guilty and walk away from hard

focused work and great achievement, to reject that which we don't enjoy immediately. Our policy future on behalf of music study needs to reject these invitations. We must ask and answer the question "Why Study Music?" not because we don't have the answers, or even an understanding of other people's answers, but because so many other people don't have the answer, or don't want to hear it, people who make decisions that affect us and our mission of substance. Some want to use the power of music but not give others access to this power. Others want to use music or arts education purely for political, economic, or other purposes. There are hundreds of nonsubstantive agendas.

We satisfy these agendas at the peril of our cause and our professional lives and honor. We will never answer all of the skeptics. Despite all evidence, we in the arts will never convince everyone that intellectual work can be pursued through the still image, the moving image, and sound, as well as it can be pursued through words and numbers. But no matter what anyone says, no matter what anyone funds, no matter what anyone does, the facts of nature, the facts of history, and the facts derived from our own experience reveal fundamental truths about music and its position as a human basic in terms of brain, mind, and heart. As such, everyone who is to be educated must have an introduction to the world of communication, thought, and achievement that is music. Study is the only way to gain a fundamental understanding of this world. Music is no different in this regard than any of the other basic modes of thought and action or means of communication. If we are wise, we will render unto politics that which is political; to economics, that which is financial; to sociology, that which is sociological; to demographics, that which is demographic; to advocacy, that which is promotional; and to technology, that which is technical. However, in doing all of these things, we will never forget that the center of our purpose is to render unto music that which belongs to music.

And so, as we move forward with the great responsibility for music that we hold in trust for civilization, let not our knowledge of a problematic context, the admonitions of nay-sayers, or the manipulations of pundits and politicians destroy our faith. Rather, let us use our understanding of difficulties and arguments and opposing forces as the basis for strong tactical decisions that advance our grand strategy so that what we know to be true from thought, study, experience, and evidence can be brought into the lives of many, many others. How can music, among all the others things that it is, also be about learning? How can we help students to more of music? How can we build a bridge between what they know music to be and what music can do? How can we build a bridge from self-absorption to broad engagement? These have always been our great tasks. They are our great tasks now. The answer to our question for this hour is in music itself.