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Building a "Soundtrack" for Life

by Giselle Wyers, R&S Chair for Student and Youth Activities



In the summer I often find myself thinking about the value and meaning of music for music's sake. Summer becomes the time I get back to basics within myself, learning and growing as a musician and scholar in a quiet, sometimes lonely place.

And yet when the school year ramps up again, I find myself anxious about whether the endless hours of "on time" with students will leave me invigorated or exhausted. This catch-22 is perhaps as much about human nature (always wanting what you don't have) as anything. But inside this is also what I consider to be a useful exercise- looking at how we can use music as a "soundtrack for life" in both the active, harvest phases (working with students, going to festivals and tours, etc.) and the quieter "germination" phases (alone in the office, filing old papers, and playing through repertoire ideas on the piano).

What makes a piece become part of a "soundtrack for life?" How can we help our students build connections to the music they sing so that it sustains them both throughout the year, and eventually, outside in the "real" world as they pursue future paths? Can we help students connect with classical music at the same emotional intensity that they feel when they hear popular music?

A couple of years ago I had the honor of working with a large number of choirs in Alaska during a three day festival held in Ketchikan for high school choirs, bands and orchestras.

Part of my task was to offer workshops in areas that might enrich their education. After doing a number of sessions on vocal technique, Laban movement and small ensemble skills, I chose to deviate from the norm and offer a session called "How music has saved or changed your life."

"If you ever wonder, as you amp yourself up for another year of hard work and long hours, what the value of your work is, ask your students to write a "soundtrack for life" story for you."

The room was packed. I began the session by sharing a true story from my past about how music sustained me through the darkest period of my life.

Back when I was 26 years old and pursuing a masters degree at Westminster Choir College, my mother was diagnosed with one of the most malignant brain tumors out there- and I was told that she probably had less than a year to live.

This shocking news was delivered to me one week before I was expected to conduct my graduate choral recital. Arrangements were made for me to fly home after her surgery, and the day after my recital.

I spent that week preparing music, packing boxes, researching unconventional cancer remedies, and missing my mother terribly.

But what sustained me through that week was the music itself. It is strange and serendipitous that I had chosen Corigliano's *Fern Hill* (a setting of a bittersweet poem written by Dylan Thomas about the fading of childhood, with the final lines of the poem "Time held me green and dying, though I sang in my chains like the sea") and Lauridsen's *MidWinter Songs* (the first lines of the Robert Graves poem read "Dying Sun, shine warm a little longer! My eye, dazzled with tears, shall dazzle yours, conjuring you to shine and not to move," and the final lines of the poem are, "How hard the year dies: no frost yet... Spare him a little longer, Crone, For his clean hands and love-submissive heart.")

How I was able to conduct these texts is beyond me. Something about the process of creating music in the midst of grief, within a community of sympathetic fellow singers, was a tremendous gift and has always stayed with me. My mother died after 5 1/2 months. Each day after she died, I spent four hours playing piano as well as studying scores for my orals exam, and somehow, music pulled me through it all.

When I shared my story with the high school students before me, the concept of music as a "soundtrack for life" began to resonate.

I then asked them to write down anonymously their own stories of how music has saved, or changed, their lives. The stories were incredible. I had not anticipated the depth of sharing that might come from this simple exercise.

There were stories of brothers in Iraq, stories of perseverance through poverty, stories of parental neglect, and how in each case, music saved them from despair.

I also read stories of music's ability to transform students' moods and perceptions and bring joy and creativity to their lives, especially through the friendships and bonds they formed in choir. Many spoke of particular texts that shaped their year, or "signature pieces" that they will never forget performing.

If you ever wonder, as you amp yourself up for another year of hard work and long hours, what the value of your work is, ask your students to write a "soundtrack for life" story for you. You may be surprised to learn that your teaching has "saved or changed" their lives, through your offerings of music, poetry with depth, community, and love in your classroom.

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