

May 7, 08

Sports Widow

I have been in the Copper River area for almost four years, now, three as the School District Itinerant Music teacher, and one as the free-lance director of the Freemantle Music Conservatory. I have found this place to be a hot-bed of musical talent. I have discovered rich musical gifts residing in the most unexpected places, expressed in the most unexpected idioms. The level of spontaneous, intuitive musical consciousness here is higher, possibly, than in any place I have ever lived. I have encountered children of a very young age who seem destined for professional musical involvement, if not centrally, at least peripherally in their lives.

This is a difficult admission for me, because, in the past, I have always been extremely cautious in making any such predictions, and I NEVER make them lightly or capriciously. I have always said, "If you can do something other than music, do it--you don't choose music, music chooses you." Music is a hard life, and it has left many a personal casualty strewn along its thorny way; people who choose music, and then find that they are unprepared to give themselves over totally to its rigors become the worst kind of loser--bitter, unfulfilled, and generally, poor. Still, I have encountered a higher percentage of students, in my current conservatory class, who seem to me to be "chosen" than ever before in my career (such as it is). If this is indeed the case, and not the mere sentimental doting of a getting-older-all-the-time uncle RFT, then something must be said about the most serious impediment to musical progress present in the district--sports.

I have nothing against sports, per se; having paid my dues in the stands leading the Pep Band for three years, I now know more about sports than I ever have in my life; I have learned to sympathize with the thrill of accomplishment that members of a basketball team feel when the final buzzer goes off with them in the lead. It cannot be denied that, as an institution, sports play a leading part in providing a focal point of cultural identity for the entire state of Alaska. It is not the institution with which I have a quarrel--it is the proportion.

Sports dominate the after-school time of students in Alaska, much more than anywhere else I have lived, to such an all-consuming level that the children have no choice--they either do sports, or they don't do sports; and if they don't do sports they are consequently left out of the primary cultural and social mechanism of their local culture. They are left out of all the sports-engineered social interaction with their friends, and they are left out of those long bus rides (specific to Alaska) which, according to my inexact calculations, take up about a MONTH of Fridays every year. Children in Alaska have sports to fill their extra-curricular

time and nothing else-- no chess club, no photography club, no youth orchestra.

The explanation that has been offered to me several times, since I arrived here, is that the small number of students tends to involve ALL the kids in ALL the activities, with none extra to spread around. At the same time, the small number of kids yields a small number of offered activities. This makes it sound like if there were more kids it would be possible to have more music-making; but the truth is that, however many kids there were in this town, there would still be tremendous social pressures impressing children into intramural sports whether they have any aptitude for it or not. This is also fine with me.

But the fact that there have never been any competing programs to occupy the minds and enthusiasms of children after school has led to a very possessive, territorial attitude on the part of the coaches; quite understandably, they require 100% participation from their athletes--without such discipline they can't WIN; they can't build a team unless all the kids are there all the time.

The unfairness comes in from the fact that I could say the same thing; I can't properly build a music program when the ranks of my organizations are decimated week after week by sports activities which ALWAYS seem to take precedence over mine. Never mind that I'm languishing down at the Basin Bible Church trying to rehearse an operatic aria, while my lead singer is standing a post on the volleyball court. The implication is that sports are more important than music. I have never militated for the attitude that music is more important than sports--but I resent the implication that music is LESS important.

When I first came here, I attempted to form an after-school jazz band; the best deal I could get out of the coaches was an extra fifteen minutes after school--the kids had to be suited up by 3:30 instead of 3:15. Any veteran of a musical ensemble can easily see how paltry and inadequate a compromise that was. I have also been told that, over time, more kids would gravitate toward music as an alternative; and yet, after four years, my most gifted music students are still so pressured by the need to be a part of the happening school activity, that they endanger any possibility of musical success, by, time and again, sacrificing lesson, rehearsal, and practice time to the inflexible goddess of sports.

I say inflexible, because the coaches do not allow unexcused absences, that is to say the STUDENTS think that the coaches do not allow unexcused absences. There is the distinct possibility, however, that, if more parents stood up to the sports establishment and stated in no uncertain terms that they want their kids to participate in sports AND music, the coaches would have no choice but to relent. I have been accommodating sports activities for years, and the rare student who has had the courage to tell his/her coach about a recital conflict, etc., has been excused in an uncomplicated and civilized way. It would do my heart good if it would even OCCUR to somebody in my organization to do that.

The problem has reached epidemic proportions in terms of participation in my program, and I have recently been forced to adopt the following policy:

any student of mine, high school junior or older, who is contemplating a career in music, will not be allowed to study with me and do sports at the same time.

This policy is necessary for three reasons:

- 1.) I can't build a program plagued by inordinate absences,
- 2.) music demands a supreme commitment, and allowing students to think they can give any less and still succeed, would be promulgating a lie that would ultimately consign me to music teacher hell, and
- 3.) at this point my personal ego demands some tangible payback for the enormous sacrifice I have made to continue to live and work here; from the beginning I have felt a spiritual calling to practice my music ministry in this place, and my calling will brook no compromise. I know that my place is here, and that my vision, now shared by a few, will eventually be shared by many.

Younger students are exempt from this restriction, but I wish parents would see the writing on the wall and address this problem in their child's chosen sport at younger ages. Just like the coaches, I can't run a music program when attendance is constantly compromised by absences due to sports. I would rather NOT take a stance equally inflexible with the coaches--I know a compromise is possible, I realize I am David battling Goliath, but remember that David won his battle because he was in the right. We'll see how right I am.