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Music Opens Doors and Windows,
Ears, Minds, and Hearts

Why We Teach Music...

By Stephen Melillo, Composer and Music Educator

Dear Reader: Per the author's request, in this article we consider the devices of unorthodox capitalizations and italics as "Musical." Just as a Composer would not wish for his/her Music to be published without the intended accent markings and dynamics, so too does Mr. Mellilo wish his original wording and "effects" to be honored. And so it has!

—Susan Gedutis Lindsay, Editor

Between 1977 and 1979, while enrolled as a Music Education major at the Boston Conservatory of Music, I student taught at several schools including Cohasset High School and Foxborough High School in Massachusetts. Because it was obvious to me, I always told the students, "Music IS Mathematics. Music IS Science," etc. To see the ontological fulfillment of this simple/complex, consistent idea, you can review the early 1980s-written *Teacher Curriculum Guide: Ways of Knowing*. (<https://stormworld.com/teaching-tools>)

After much success using Music to dramatically improve math and science test scores in students, grades 2 through 6, participating principals urged that the curriculum be implemented across several New York City inner schools including the Queens, Spanish Harlem, and the Bronx. Eventually, the Ways of Knowing Curriculum subtitled "MIDI-Music-Math-Science" was presented to 275 New York City Mathematics and Science Teachers for their respective immersions into Music.

During my first year as a Teacher, in Chester, New York, I found myself frustrated, feeling that the students had difficulty understanding why the subject of Music was so important for them and why it needed to be taught in all schools around the world. In the form of a personal letter, first hastily written in pencil and then thumbtacked onto the band room's corkboard, I wrote the following words to my students. Later, I typed these words onto onionskin paper with my old Boston Conservatory *Royal* typewriter and reposted the letter.

Some years went by and a friend of mine copied the basic structure of the letter, slightly altering the wording. In fact, he signed his name to it. The letter was published in one of our important trade magazines.

Before long, the letter appeared in other publications and recently, has been propagated across social media. For this reason, I am quite certain that as Teachers of Music, when you look at the document below, you will recognize having seen a similar form of the letter before. Unfortunately, at least to me, key points have been altered. Keep in mind that I was a 21-year-old year, first-year Teacher at the time. Though I might word things differently today, this is the actual document as written *then*. You'll no doubt observe that many variations of this once personal letter have evolved over the years.

In fact, on 24 January 2020, right before the pandemic, while accepting an invitation to work with the local SHS kids, I saw one such version of "the letter" taped to the band room door. Both of my Sons were playing in the band. After 40 years, I thought, "Hmm. Now *that's* ironic!"

In the band-room door version, the title itself was altered... from "WE" to "I."
Whoops.

After doing a double take, I photographed the door as sort of an interesting, ironic memento. Two days after seeing this, I was rummaging through some old three-ring binders and found *this*, the *original* document that I had typed while teaching in Chester, New York. On the next page is a scan of *that* original letter. I thought that you, my fellow Music Educators from Massachusetts, might find it interesting that it has a Boston connection.

The document speaks for itself. It clearly illustrates, albeit in the words of a first-year Teacher, what I see as the profound essence of *why* WE teach Music. I regard the teaching of Music as a vital, necessary, and most noble profession. Evolved to this moment as a Music Educator and a professional Composer, these life-long consistent, important multidisciplinary concepts are embedded into the motivating passions and Art of the ever-expanding compositions called "Storm" works.

But the most powerful set of lines is within that last paragraph. Then and now, it screams and whispers the same emotional swelling of a Beethoven-like proclamation. "BUT: So you will be HUMAN." That word "HUMAN" in all caps, hammered into the onion paper, not some *subdivision* of Humanity... but ALL of us... HUMAN. If you read that paragraph over and over, it will fill you with every strength you need to walk into your classroom and give the kids the best you have. No need to rewrite it. Look at those words from long ago and make them constantly new with each repetition.

Like you, I have been in the "trenches." I thought that it was important to share with you some thoughts about Music, ideas that I have grappled with all of my Life, and face with each writing of every note as a professional Composer. This written, "*outward introspection*" may help you in your own personal grappling.

In response to a question, here is another personal letter written to Students and Teachers in 2016.

WHY WE TEACH MUSIC

MUSIC IS A SCIENCE: It is exacting, highly organized, embodying many levels of physics from acoustics to architecture. It demands 100% correctness.

MUSIC IS MATHEMATICS: It is the instantaneous expression of fractions or subdivisions of time and space in a highly specific form.

MUSIC IS LANGUAGE: It is composed of phrases, thoughts, ideas, nouns, adjectives, and verbs. It's goal is to communicate, to reach a part of us where words no longer suffice. Notation itself, is a highly developed symbolic system.

MUSIC IS HISTORY: It is the only ART form we can hear as people hundreds of years ago had. Unlike paint, whose image is always there once created, MUSIC is perpetually "RE-PAINTED" each time it is performed. The feelings and thoughts of countless generations are forever cast in SOUND.

MUSIC IS PHYSICAL EDUCATION: It requires a fantastic coordination of fingers, eyes, hands, lips, arms, facial muscle, and unusual control of the breathing apparatus. There are as many calories burned by a symphony trumpet player in one performance as there are by a quarter-back in a professional football game.

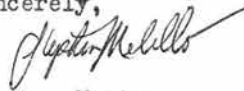
MUSIC IS ALL OF THESE AND MORE, BUT ABOVE ALL MUSIC IS AN ART
It allows a human being to take science and technique and CREATE EMOTION.

THIS IS WHY WE TEACH MUSIC:
Not because we expect you to major in music,
Not because we expect you to play music all your life,
Not so you can relax,
Not so you can trot around a field in a uniform.

BUT: So you will be HUMAN, SO you will recognize beauty, SO you will be sensitive to all the thoughts and feelings PUT INTO SOUND THROUGHOUT THE AGES, SO you will be closer to the infinity of your own heart, So you will feel the beauty of being alive.....and

so you will come to know the value of your OWN SELF.

Sincerely,



Stephen Melillo

"Great Music is Timeless. Stripped of its geographical origins, stripped of its creation date in the Timeline of Human History, and... *(there are many soon to cringe)*... stripped of its *vocabulary* and *style*, Great Music is that rare, fleeting glimpse of the Eternal which resides in all of us. Great Music is self-restrained in its quest for the One in the infinitely possible. It is

therefore much more a *sculpture* than a thing that has been built up and pasted into a preexisting model. Yet, Great Music does something more. And so, my description of Great Music must include something else. *Great Music seems to speak consistently about the otherwise indefinable to the greatest number of individuals anywhere in place or Time.*

Music has little to do with the notes, the markings, or the rhythms, or the vocabulary employed. Those are merely the *devices* of "notation." Rather, Music is a *Time Art*, the use of various sounds serving as only a necessary commodity, much like the statue of *David* is something quite more than marble. Sound itself can carry no more meaning than that of rest or unrest, stability, or a longing for resolve.

Music is *blood*. It is the Life of a Human Soul. When I listen to Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, Thad Jones, and many, many more great Souls across all spectrums and styles, or when my being resonated to Miklós Rózsa's heart, mind, and soul, and know that he left this world just three days after I finally wrote a letter to him, I cringe in both a stinging frustration and an eternal Hope. Music is about *Giving*. Some people give us notes and rhythms and dynamic markings and typeset scores. Other people *die* for us. It is this magnificent difference that always startles me.

Not all the Music we bring to our students needs to be *Great*... it can be fun, for sure! Of course! Football games should be fun! But perhaps we can start with everything we put in front of the kids being real and honest, and from the heart.

We want those students in our care to listen, to create, to compose, and to express themselves musically in the great and wonder-filled Adventure only discoverable in the *art-science-mathematics-history-language* of Music. And what if some of your students might be so drawn to the art of creating Music that they contemplate becoming professional Composers themselves?

There is only ONE reason to be a professional Composer... and that is because you have no choice. You have been called. It is a vocation, not a job or a dream. If you *dream* of being a

Composer, you have already wasted too much Time. Instead of dreaming, write.

For example, if I had the choice, I would have designed ships, or pursued a career in Architecture. I always loved Oceanography and Physics! Oh, Astronomy! NASA! But for me, and yes, entwined in my personal Faith, I was *called*... and there are many times when I wish I wasn't. (*Listen to Ahab on the Chapter 2 CD.*)

As for the "smoother path"... that too is a temporary illusion I hope this document will dismiss. I know SO many talented people, college-aged and yes, into their 70s... all of whom did, and are doing the right things! They moved to LA, some left their current colleges and went to USC and UCLA, they wrote free pieces for people, etc. When they dedicated their lives to this monk-like pursuit some 30–40 years ago, the world around them continued to change.

I think subscribing to ASCAP newsletters and simply following all that is happening with the law and copyright and streaming and YouTube, and so much more will be an eye-opener. Can you still succeed in this massively specific, *rules-of-its-own* world? Yes, but there is much to study. Go in with eyes wide open.

Dear genuine, well-intentioned, dedicated, and authentically-hearted student of Music, let me tell you what I tell my *own* 15-year-old multi-talented kid who teaches himself to play a new instrument in a matter of days, a Son that would have been an ultimate dream student during my 17 years in the public schools, with skills like *August Rush*, and superb, potentially hard-wired skills and sensitivities. Since I'm telling my *own* child this, perhaps you too can accept the sincerity with which I offer these same "tough love" thoughts to you.

When I see great Musical talent within my children... I talk about aeronautics, bridge building, orthopedics. (*As of this date, my now 20-year-old Son is studying Naval Architecture at Virginia Tech.*) But if they MUST dedicate their lives to the Priesthood of Composing Music... then there is nothing I can do. I did my best to warn them.

It is often said, "*Find your passion and then make that your living.*" I would rather say, "*Find a great living, and make that your passion!*" Life is short. Only write Music as your Living/Dying if you cannot Live or be Human without it. There are many, many other valuable and fun adventures to undertake!

I hope this helps!"

In closing, here is one more personal letter.

Dear Teachers of Music,

Your mission is noble and profound. You must deal with all the elements of Music, perhaps like the only true *Renaissance* person in the building, while selling candy for fund-raisers, but take strength. You are not alone. Gone before you are the great Teachers that have inspired you. Some of those Teachers were Composers, like Bach and Beethoven and Gershwin and Quincy Jones and Duke Ellington and on and on. Some were great players and/or Conductors. You get the idea. We are only superficially beholden to the administrators. Our greatest honor, privilege, and responsibility is to boldly carry and bravely, full-heartedly pass the 'Sword Excalibur' of Music to the next generations. We are not alone in this Purpose. There is an "US." WE teach Music.

I wish you the best in your noble efforts as a Teacher of Music!

Godspeed!

Stephen Melillo, Composer •



Composer Stephen Melillo started his music education career at the Boston Conservatory of Music and taught in schools in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York

State. He is now most known as a prolific, award-winning composer. Stephen's more than 1,280 works include four Symphonies, several Concerti, and over forty-two hours of Music for Ensembles of the 3rd Millennium™. Stephen's Symphony III: Lightfall, was nominated for the Pulitzer and Nemmers Prize in Music. Winner of three 2009 Telly & Ava Awards for his 2005 Visualized Concert, Kakehashi: That We Might Live, Stephen's concert-version of that work was also nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Music. A fourth Telly Award was given for "Best Use of Music" in the 2019 feature film, One Little Finger produced by Rupam Sarmah. A fifth Telly Award and a Best Music Award included Stephen's work on the 2019 Reckoning of Darkness, directed by Christopher Kulikowski. Stephen's fifteen feature film scores include the Oscar-nominated 12:01 PM and the Jonathan Heap horror thriller, The Unwilling.

Stephen has been a recipient of the ASCAP Concert Awards each year since 1992. STORMWORKS, Stephen's pioneering, self-publishing entity, has gone from zero to many thousands of worldwide renderings since 1992 simply by word-of-mouth. He has forty-two albums and nine books on varied streaming services. His novels include, Only for Now, Ahab, A Love Story, the prequel to Melville's Moby Dick, and most recently the sequel, Death to Moby Dick, A Love Story.

Now a resident of Virginia, Stephen continues to be a staunch advocate of Music Education.