

William Schuman on
“The Responsibility of Music Education to Music”
address given on April 17, 1956 at the
MENC National Conference in St. Louis

“In other words, school music is often regarded as a social force and, if you wish, as a therapeutic agent. These uses are often considered more important than musical excellence itself.”

“Would you not agree that no musical performance should be given in public which does not meet acceptable standards; that, however socially valuable the musical training has been for a particular group of students, there should not be a public performance which is not valid musically?”

“Clearly, the only musical standards for schools can be those acceptable to a given teacher or supervisor in a given situation. Standards cannot be legislated. They are personal, reflecting as the music the musicianly attributes of the instructor. For this reason the musical ‘equipment’ of every music teacher is of paramount importance, for it is this equipment which is directly and irrevocably responsible for standards.”

“A true musician working the schools must, of course, recognize the social uses which music can serve, be he/she will not permit these uses to compromise musical standards.”

Any performance of a piece of music which is unmusical in its projection, and which falls below acceptable technical and aesthetic standards, does harm to the art of music. And musical standards are just as important for the elementary grades as for the senior classes in high school. These standards can be met if the music that is used is chosen judiciously. Using music without a fundamental concern for its merits as an artistic enterprise is nothing short of exploitation. Make no mistake about it, a teacher of music is incompetent unless he/she is a musician as well as a teacher. If he/she does not consider him or herself a musician and if, in fact, he is not a musician, he should not be teaching music!”

“School music needs musicians whose primary concern is with musical standards and who are not preoccupied with methods. Methods are means of transferring knowledge, but there must be knowledge to transfer. Only the musician of quality who knows how to teach is equipped for the job of music educator. The musician who cannot teach will fail and the teacher who is no musician cannot serve music.”

“A music teacher who is genuinely interested in music will be able to answer ‘yes’ to each of the following questions:

1. Do you have an interest in the art of music beyond the immediate concern of your school position and, if so, what evidence can you supply to prove this interest?

2. Are you making a continuing effort to perfect your ‘equipment’ in music either as a performer or composer?

“Unlike the general public which ‘knows what it likes’—another way of saying ‘likes what it knows’—music teachers have a professional responsibility to keep abreast of developments in their field. If a teacher of literature were not interested in reading contemporary literature as well as the literature of the past, you would, I am sure, unhesitatingly state that such a teacher was not keep up with the field, and that he/she would be incapable of introducing his/her students to writings of the present as well as the past. The same principle should hold true for the music teacher. This interest should go far beyond the mere selection of materials suitable for the classroom.”

“I would like to mention the choice of materials that you use for performance in the schools. Your choice of these materials reflects your own taste and equipment as musicians as well as the level of student ability. There is no excuse for the use of cheap and tawdry materials in the schools when ample art music exists—both of the past and the present—which is not too demanding technically.”

“The most effective way to advance music in the schools and to give true meaning to your dedication as teachers is to become better musicians. This is the true responsibility of the music educator to music.”