It’s a busy time of the year as many of you now approach your first school concert of the 2019-20 school year. Never mind the fact that you had to get up and running quickly with rehearsals when it seems like just a few weeks ago that the new school year started.

Suddenly, for many it will soon be time to put your kids out there for all to hear and see. It’s crunch time. It’s amazing what we’re called on to do in the blink of an eye and even more astonishing to have to get kids performance-ready literally overnight in some situations!

A number of years back I posed a question in one of my editorials about how others perceive a music educator’s role in a school’s curriculum. My school superintendent at that time (a former English teacher) read every single one of my monthly editorials and he often chimed in after the fact to either challenge a point I made here and there, or to let me know that I may have actually made him reconsider what music education was all about. The topic that piqued my former superintendent’s interest had to do with this question: are we educators or entertainers? Read on …

A complex question
There is no denying the fact that there are many non-music folks out there who never really think about what it is that we really are trained to do. As music educators we accept the fact that where we have the responsibility of one or more school ensembles we will be expected to demonstrate exactly what it is we do best. However, does that mean that we exist to perform? Does it mean that a school concert should be the culminating event of a child’s music education? What about the music we select to be performed? Should we choose music specifically because it’s entertaining for our audience; of educational value for our students, or should it be both of these things?

... are we educators or entertainers?
Can the music our students perform have entertainment value and educational value? In my experience and 40+ years of conversations with parents, music educators, non-music colleagues, school board members, school administrators and community members, I have gotten very mixed answers to the simple question: what is it that music educators do? The answer (to me) is blurred beyond my ability to give a universally accepted and clear response, so I’ll just say, we do it all.

The above discussion lays out a conversation that is important to have with your music educator colleagues and one that I believe needs to be framed in a philosophical context. It goes to the very core of why music education exists. Education is a loaded word. Some might look at it as a way of saying that we teach kids about music from a historical perspective, from an interpretive and analytical perspective, from a technical perspective and from an emotional/aesthetic perspective. All of these things mesh together in a way that (we hope) will create students who are life-long consumers of music with an appreciation of music that passes on to the next generation.

Time for enlightenment
Of course, this all happens in a perfect world and, sadly, you and I probably do not inhabit such a place all the time, but we can certainly take steps to educate and enlighten others about what it is that we do.

Let’s begin with the premise that above all else, we are indeed educators, first and foremost. Our subject area is extremely broad: music. Our expertise in our subject area is like that of any other teacher. We are not casual about our subject area. We are passionate about music and its integral importance as a part of the whole education of all children.

Next, while entertainment value is a wonderful offshoot and by-product of our daily instructional responsibilities, it should not be the sole
reason folks think we exist. I once was very annoyed by a local school district resident who called me but then failed to understand why I couldn’t provide the school marching band on a day’s notice to perform at someone’s 50th birthday party!

Another parent wanted to hear wall-to-wall holiday music on her child’s winter concert because the parent didn’t want to hear “all that other boring music” but simply needed to be cheered up during the holiday season. Wow, that hurts!

The purpose of performing in public is never clearly delineated unless we (as music educators) take the time to explain it first to our students. The satisfaction of mastering the challenges of a difficult musical selection on a concert program performed in public surely has meaning for the kids in any ensemble. Performance is one of the basic precepts of a child’s music education. It is an outgrowth of instruction. We know this but we need to do more to remind others.

I will also say that the perception that one of the things that we do as music educators is to provide “background” music on a moment’s notice for every imaginable type of school-related function needs to be addressed carefully and, above all else, professionally.

Of course, we understand that it is to our advantage to showcase and present our students in public performance at events in our local schools and communities whenever possible. That said, I don’t think that those asking for our time and talent always give enough thought to the upfront preparation on our end. We say “yes” whenever we can to these last-minute requests and sometimes that just furthers the misconception of just why we exist in the first place.

Celebrate what you do

Sadly, it is my belief that music is often more perceived for entertainment value than it should be for educational value. Lost, too, is the undeniable reality that through music education we nurture the creative mind. We know that this doesn’t happen as if by magic.

Not that you would be surprised, but a well-intentioned building principal once asked me, “Do you need to learn to conduct in college as a music education major?” At first I thought that this was a funny question knowing full well that, yes ... we do need to have basic conducting chops as a music educator (we’ll save this for another editorial). Yet, the question was meant in all seriousness and was, in fact, a compliment because the principal was amazed by the music educator’s conducting ability.

This seasoned, veteran principal never gave much thought to all the things that a budding music educator must learn and then what must be taught by the music educator and come together for students to be able to perform! Is it any wonder then that even those who watch over us sometimes misunderstand what we do as music educators? You learn something new every day!

Celebrate the wonderful education that YOU provide your students and enlist their help in spreading the word about what they actually learned along the way. What we do should always be grounded in the context of providing a strong educational foundation in music for our students, first and foremost.

Do what you need to do in your school and community to promote the value of music education, even if it is more entertainment based than educational at times. I am, indeed, thankful for music education and for the job that each of you do every day!

Happy Thanksgiving, Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! All the best to you and yours!

Tom Gellert, NYSSMA® Editor