

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor



Bad Behavior: Dealing with Today's Audiences

Does this scenario sound familiar to you? The evening of your school concert has arrived and your kids are excited. The place is packed with lots of parents and family members. Your first group performs and then ... poof! Depending on the group that performs first on the program, anywhere from one-third or one-half of your audience suddenly jumps up and makes a mad dash for the exits.

Let's take a moment to think about the intrinsic message telegraphed here to your students and the poor parents who have to wait until the end of the concert for their kids to perform. Rude behavior you ask? You bet. Is this behavior reversible? Maybe.

The importance of concerts

As music educators we understand the importance of presenting our school ensembles in a public concert. The culmination of months of hard work and preparation that we and our students put in comes down to a single night and we want our kids to get the recognition. (It wouldn't hurt to get some recognition ourselves).

With the annual district budget votes in New York State not too far off we look forward to showcasing the school music program and it's one of the best ways to show parents that "music education matters." Yet, it seems that these days, we're not getting the attention that we should and that's due to a whole host of mitigating factors that we deal with in today's world.

About a year or so ago there was a car commercial on television that featured a children's orchestra performing the opening of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* or, for those who don't know Strauss, the music from the opening of *2001, A Space Odyssey*. The commercial shows a mom decidedly not enjoying the music in her car. So, she conveniently raises her car window

ostensibly to show off the soundproof capability of the automobile. She then smiles and reclines her seat to "relax." There was a lot of expressed outrage on the part of the music education community after this commercial aired. What's the intrinsic message here as well, folks?

The ills of modern life

These days, thanks to smartphones and shortened attention spans, people just can't sit still anymore. It is disheartening that folks are so completely addicted to their phones and it's a sad commentary that boredom sets in much faster than it used to not so long ago. Audiences squirm and it is so unfortunate that they must be constantly otherwise focused on other things except when it's time to watch their child perform.

I remember that an eager and relatively supportive parent once shared a video with me of his child's concert. I was excited to see it because it turned out that it was the only video of a colleague's last concert before she retired and I was looking forward to seeing clips of her conducting with an idea toward editing a few great moments for a tribute video that could be shown at my colleague's retirement. Well, my hopes were dashed when I watched the video, which was indeed of my colleague's group performing except the entire video was nothing but a video of a child singing! The camera never moved except to zoom in on the child.

It's not easy for parents to sit still for the entire concert. Many have just come from work, too. Watching parents sprint to the exits after their child performs and before the next group performs is infuriating. It's especially sad for the parents who sit through all the performances just to see their child in the last performing group of the evening, albeit with a fraction of the audience remaining since the start of the concert.

Possible solutions

Lest you think that holding kids until the end of the concert works, well, not so much. The president of a county music educators' organization told me that the policy of asking students (and parents) to remain for all the performing groups was akin to kidnapping and holding folks hostage! The parent even threatened that she would call the police. Never mind that parents had to sign a commitment form and abide by the county's attendance policy long before the concert took place.

One of the ways my former district used to hold parents until the end of a concert was always to have a "grand finale" performance involving all the kids. The only problem was that we had trouble finding an appropriate selection for all the performing groups year after year.

Then we tried to have an "ice cream social" after the last group performed where all the kids and parents enjoyed ice cream together in the cafeteria right after the concert. The only problem was that we never got the hang of ordering enough ice cream (it became very popular) for all the siblings in attendance and, while it was free to the audience and performers, it was costly for our music department. A short-lived, but kind of a nice way to end a concert by having a reception.

The only way I think that this issue can be solved is if all music educators make a point of including units on proper audience behavior with kids at a young age in classroom music settings and at public events. Students can also help by explaining to their parents all about good audience behavior during concerts. Finally, be firm and stand your ground. Kids will understand. It's the parents who need reminding!

Have a great spring concert season! ||