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Published April 12 2009

Karl Paulnack essay: Music essential for life

One of my parents' deepest fears, I suspect, is that society would not properly value me as a musician, that I wouldn't be appreciated.

By: Karl Paulnack, Special to The Forum, INFORUM

Editor's Note: As the world around us has been saturated with the struggle, frustration and anxiety of fighting flooding rivers, one musical message has spread through the e-mail inboxes of our community to become a viral note of inspiration for musicians and artists.

The irony is that this isn't a song, but a speech underscoring the importance of music to our human condition.

Its eloquence would have been enough for this Internet sensation to spread to Fargo. But, there's also a local connection.

With that in mind, we've decided to publish the essay that was given by Karl Paulnack, the music department head at the Boston Conservatory, to incoming students in 2004.

And the local connection Paulnack mentions near the end of this piece? According to those in the know, Paulnack came to Fargo-Moorhead in 1995 with violinist Jorja Fleezanis to perform with the F-M Symphony.

Enjoy.

One of my parents' deepest fears, I suspect, is that society would not properly value me as a musician, that I wouldn't be appreciated.

I had very good grades in high school, I was good in science and math, and they imagined that as a doctor or a research chemist or an engineer, I might be more appreciated than I would be as a musician. I still remember my mother's remark when I announced my decision to apply to music school – she said, "You're wasting your SAT scores." On some level, I think, my parents were not sure themselves what the value of music was, what its purpose was.

And they loved music, they listened to classical music all the time. They just weren't really clear about its function. So let me talk about that a little bit, because we live in a society that puts music in the "arts and entertainment" section of the newspaper, and serious music, the kind your kids are about to engage in, has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with entertainment; in fact it's the opposite of entertainment. Let me talk a little bit about music, and how it works.

The first people to understand how music really works were the ancient Greeks. And this is going to fascinate you: The Greeks said that music and astronomy were two sides of the same coin. Astronomy was seen as the study of relationships between observable, permanent, external objects, and music was seen as the study of relationships between invisible, internal, hidden objects. Music has a way of finding the big, invisible moving pieces inside our hearts and souls and helping us figure out the position of things inside us. Let me give you some examples of how this works.

One of the most profound musical compositions of all time is the "Quartet for the End of Time" written by French composer Olivier Messiaen in 1940. Messiaen was 31 years old when France entered the war against Nazi Germany. He was captured by the Germans in June of 1940, sent across Germany in a cattle car and imprisoned in a concentration camp.

He was fortunate to find a sympathetic prison guard who gave him paper and a place to compose. There were three other musicians in the camp, a cellist, a violinist and a clarinetist, and Messiaen wrote his quartet with these specific players in mind. It was performed in January 1941 for 4,000 prisoners and guards in the prison camp. Today it is one of the most famous masterworks in the repertoire.

Given what we have since learned about life in the concentration camps, why would anyone in his right mind waste time and energy writing or playing music? There was barely enough energy on a good day to find food and water, to avoid a beating, to stay warm, to escape torture – why would anyone bother with music? And yet – from the camps, we have poetry, we have music, we have visual art; it wasn't just this one fanatic Messiaen guy; many, many people created art. Why?

Well, in a place where people are only focused on survival, on the bare necessities, the obvious conclusion is that art must be, somehow, essential for life. The camps were without money, without hope, without commerce, without recreation, without basic respect, but they were not without art. Art is part of survival; art is part of the human spirit, an unquenchable expression of who we are. Art is one of the ways in which we say, "I am alive, and my life has meaning."

On Sept. 12, 2001, I was a resident of Manhattan. That morning I reached a new understanding of my art and its relationship to the world. I sat down at the piano that morning at 10 a.m. to practice, as was my daily routine; I did it by force of habit, without thinking about it. I lifted the cover on the keyboard, and opened my music, and put my hands on the keys and took my hands off the keys.

And I sat there and thought, does this even matter? Isn't this completely irrelevant? Playing the piano right now, given what happened in this city yesterday, seems silly, absurd, irreverent, pointless. Why am I here? What place has a musician in this moment in time? Who needs a piano player right now? I was completely lost.

And then I, along with the rest of New York, went through the journey of getting through that week. I did not play the piano that day, and in fact I contemplated briefly whether I would ever want to play the piano again. And then I observed how we got through the day. At least in my neighborhood, we didn't shoot hoops or play Scrabble. We didn't play cards to pass the time, we didn't watch TV, we didn't shop, we most certainly did not go to the mall.

The first organized activity that I saw in New York, that same day, was singing. People sang. People sang around fire houses, people sang "We Shall Overcome." Lots of people sang "America the Beautiful." The first organized public event that I remember was the Brahms "Requiem," later that week, at Lincoln Center, with the New York Philharmonic. The first organized public expression of grief, our first communal response to that historic event, was a concert. That was the beginning of a sense that life might go on. The U.S. military secured the airspace, but recovery was led by the arts, and by music in particular, that very night.

From these two experiences, I have come to understand that music is not part of "arts and entertainment" as the newspaper section would have us believe. It's not a luxury, a lavish thing that we fund from leftovers of our budgets, not a plaything or an amusement or a pastime. Music is a basic need of human survival. Music is one of the ways we make sense of our lives, one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words, a way for us to understand things with our hearts when we can't with our minds.

Some of you may know Samuel Barber's heart-wrenchingly beautiful piece "Adagio for Strings." If you don't know it by that name, then some of you may know it as the background music which accompanied the Oliver Stone movie "Platoon," a film about the Vietnam War.

If you know that piece of music either way, you know it has the ability to crack your heart open like a walnut; it can make you cry over sadness you didn't know you had. Music can slip beneath our conscious reality to get at what's really going on inside us the way a good therapist does.

I bet that you have never been to a wedding where there was absolutely no music. There might have been only a little music, there might have been some really bad music, but I bet you there was some music. And something very predictable happens at weddings – people get all pent up with all kinds of emotions, and then there's some musical moment where the action of the wedding stops and someone sings or plays the flute or something. And even if the music is lame, even if the quality isn't good, predictably 30 or 40 percent of the people who are going to cry at a wedding cry a couple of moments after the music starts. Why? The Greeks.

Music allows us to move around those big, invisible pieces of ourselves and rearrange our insides so that we can express what we feel even when we can't talk about it. Can you imagine watching Indiana Jones or Superman or "Star Wars" with the dialogue but no music? What is it about the music swelling up at just the right moment in "E.T." so that all the softies in the audience start crying at exactly the same moment? I guarantee you if you showed the movie with the music stripped out, it wouldn't happen that way. The Greeks: Music is the understanding of the relationship between invisible internal objects.

I'll give you one more example, the story of the most important concert of my life. I must tell you I have played a little less than a thousand concerts in my life so far. I have played in places that I thought were important. I like playing in Carnegie Hall; I enjoyed playing in Paris; it made me very happy to please the critics in St. Petersburg. I have played for people I thought were important; music critics of major newspapers, foreign heads of state. The most important concert of my entire life took place in a nursing home in Fargo, N.D., about four years ago.

I was playing with a very dear friend of mine who is a violinist. We began, as we often do, with Aaron Copland's "Sonata," which was written during World War II and dedicated to a young friend of Copland's, a young pilot who was shot down during the war. Now we often talk to our audiences about the pieces we are going to play rather than providing them with written program notes. But in this case, because we began the concert with this piece, we decided to talk about the piece later in the program and to just come out and play the music without explanation.

Midway through the piece, an elderly man seated in a wheelchair near the front of the concert hall began to weep. This man, whom I later met, was clearly a soldier – even in his 70s, it was clear from his buzz-cut hair, square jaw and general demeanor that he had spent a good deal of his life in the military. I thought it a little bit odd that someone would be moved to tears by that particular movement of that particular piece, but it wasn't the first time I've heard crying in a concert, and we went on with the concert and finished the piece.

When we came out to play the next piece on the program, we decided to talk about both the first and second pieces, and we described the circumstances in which the Copland piece was written and mentioned its dedication to a downed pilot. The man in the front of the audience became so disturbed that he had to leave the auditorium. I honestly figured that we would not see him again, but he did come backstage afterwards, tears and all, to explain himself.

What he told us was this: "During World War II, I was a pilot, and I was in an aerial combat situation where one of my team's planes was hit. I watched my friend bail out, and watched his parachute open, but the Japanese planes which had engaged us returned and machine-gunned across the parachute chords so as to separate the parachute from the pilot, and I watched my friend drop away into the ocean, realizing that he was lost. I have not thought about this for many years, but during that first piece of music you played, this memory returned to me so vividly that it was as though I was reliving it.

"I didn't understand why this was happening, why now, but then when you came out to explain that this piece of music was written to commemorate a lost pilot, it was a little more than I could handle. How does the music do that? How did it find those feelings and those memories in me?"

Remember the Greeks: Music is the study of invisible relationships between internal objects.

This concert in Fargo was the most important work I have ever done. For me to play for this old soldier and help him connect, somehow, with Aaron Copland, and to connect their memories of their lost friends, to help him remember and mourn his friend, this is my work. This is why music matters.

What follows is part of the talk I will give to this year's freshman class when I welcome them a few days from now. The responsibility I will charge your sons and daughters with is this:

"If we were a medical school, and you were here as a med student practicing appendectomies, you'd take your work very seriously because you would

imagine that some night at 2 a.m. someone is going to waltz into your emergency room and you're going to have to save their life. Well, my friends, someday at 8 p.m. someone is going to walk into your concert hall and bring you a mind that is confused, a heart that is overwhelmed, a soul that is weary. Whether they go out whole again will depend partly on how well you do your craft.

"You're not here to become an entertainer, and you don't have to sell yourself. The truth is you don't have anything to sell; being a musician isn't about dispensing a product, like selling used Chevys. I'm not an entertainer; I'm a lot closer to a paramedic, a firefighter, a rescue worker. You're here to become a sort of therapist for the human soul, a spiritual version of a chiropractor, physical therapist, someone who works with our insides to see if they get things to line up, to see if we can come into harmony with ourselves and be healthy and happy and well.

"Frankly, ladies and gentlemen, I expect you not only to master music; I expect you to save the planet. If there is a future wave of wellness on this planet, of harmony, of peace, of an end to war, of mutual understanding, of equality, of fairness, I don't expect it will come from a government, a military force or a corporation. I no longer even expect it to come from the religions of the world, which together seem to have brought us as much war as they have peace. If there is a future of peace for humankind, if there is to be an understanding of how these invisible, internal things should fit together, I expect it will come from the artists, because that's what we do. As in the concentration camp and the evening of 9/11, the artists are the ones who might be able to help us with our internal, invisible lives."

Tags: [karl paulnack](#), [life](#), [music](#)

Quotes About Music and Music Education

How is it that music can, without words, evoke our laughter, our tears, our highest aspiration?

Jane Swan (b. 1943)

We know an age more vividly through its music than through its historians.

Rosanne Ambrose-Brown

Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

We listen to great music and know that all our joys and sorrows are part of something beyond our comprehension - and so indefinitely valuable.

Jesse O'Neill

I always loved music; whoso has skill in this art is of good temperament, fitted for all things. We must teach music in schools; a schoolmaster ought to have skill in music, or I would not regard him.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Music may achieve the highest of all mission: she may be a bond between nations, races, and states, who are strangers in many ways; she may unite what is disunited and bring peace to what is hostile.

Dr. Max Bendiner

Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast, to soften rocks, or to bend a knotted oak.

William Congreve (1670-1729)

Music speaks of Platonic truth - the idea river rather than the polluted reality, love as we dream it rather than we experience it, grief noble and uplifting rather than our distracted weeping. It is necessary to our survival and our sanity.

Pam Brown

78% of Americans feel learning a musical instrument helps students perform better in other subjects.

Gallup Poll, "American Attitudes Toward Music," 2003

The schools that produced the highest academic achievement in the United States today are spending 20% to 30% of the day on the arts, with special emphasis on music.

International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IAEEA) Test, 1988

88% of Americans believe participation in music helps teach children discipline.

Gallup Poll, "American Attitudes Toward Music," 2003

Music majors are the most likely group of college grads to be admitted to medical school.

Lewis Thomas, Case for Music in the Schools, Phi Delta Kappa, 1994

Students who were exposed to music-based lessons scored a full 100% higher on fractions tests than those who learned in the conventional manner.

Neurological Research, March 15, 1999

High school music students have been shown to hold higher grade point averages (GPA) than non-musicians in the same school.

National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988

71% of Americans surveyed by the Gallup Poll believe that teenagers who play an instrument are less likely to have disciplinary problems.

Gallup Poll, "American Attitudes Toward Music," 2003

A study of 7,500 university students revealed that music majors scored the highest reading scores among all majors

including English, biology, chemistry and math.
The Case for Music in the Schools, Phi Delta Kappa, 1994

During moments of musical euphoria, blood travels through the brain to areas where other stimuli can produce feelings of contentment and joy-and travels away from brain cell areas associated with depression and fear.
Dr. Frederick Tims, reported in AMC Music News, June 2, 1999

95% of Americans in a 2003 Gallup Poll believe that music is a key component in a child's well-rounded education; three quarters of those surveyed feel that schools should mandate music education.
Gallup Poll, 'American Attitudes Toward Music,' 2003

Martin Gardiner of Brown University tracked the criminal records of Rhode Island residents from birth through age 30, and he concluded the more a resident was involved in music, the lower the person's arrest record.
Music Linked to Reduced Criminality, MUSICA Research Notes, Winter 2000

Students of lower socioeconomic status who took music lessons in grades 8-12 increased their math scores significantly as compared to non-music students. But just as important, reading, history, geography and even social skills soared by 40%.
Gardiner, Fox, Jeffrey and Knowles, Nature, May 23, 1996

Middle school and high school students who participated in instrumental music performances scored significantly higher than their non-band peers in standardized tests.
University of Sarasota Study, Jeffrey Lynn Kluball; East Texas State University Study, Daryl Erick Trent

In 2003, 54% of American households reported having a least one musical instrument player, the highest figure since the study began in 1978.
Gallup Poll, "American Attitudes Toward Music," 2003

The College Entrance Examination Board found that students in music appreciation scored 63 points higher on verbal and 44 points higher on math than students with no arts participation.
College-Bound Seniors National Report. "Profile of SAT Program Test Takers. Princeton, NJ." The College Entrance Examination Board, 2001

The world's top academic countries place a high value on music education. Hungary, Netherlands and Japan have required music training at the elementary and middle school levels, both instrumental and vocal, for several decades.
1988 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IAEEA) Test

Music training helps under-achievers. Students lagging behind in scholastic performance caught up to their fellow students in reading and surpassed their classmates in math by 22% when given music instruction over seven months.
Nature, May 23, 1996

College-age musicians are emotionally healthier than their non-musician counterparts for performance anxiety, emotional concerns and alcohol-related problems.
Houston Chronicle, January 11, 1998

U.S. Department of Education data show that students who report consistently high levels of involvement in instrumental music during the middle- and high-school years show "significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by grade 12."
James Catterall, Richard Chappleau, and John Iwanaga, "Involvement in the Arts and Human Development, " 1999

A Columbia University study revealed that students in the arts are found to be more cooperative with teachers and peers, more self-confident and better able to express their ideas. These benefits exist across socioeconomic levels.
The Arts Education Partnership, 1999

The nation's top business executives agree that arts education programs can help repair weaknesses in American education and better prepare workers for the 21st century.
The Changing Workplace is Changing Our View of Education, BusinessWeek, October 1996

Music integrated into seventh- and eighth-grade social studies results in better subject performance and better social behaviors and attitudes.

National Educational Longitudinal Study, 1988

When a child learns by experience that music forges direct links between self and world, self-expression becomes more fluent; the music helps interpret "who I am."

Growing up Complete, the report of the National Commission on Music Education, 1990

96% of respondents to a U.S. Gallup Poll believe participation in a school band is a good way for children to develop teamwork skills.

Gallup Poll, "American Attitudes Toward Music", 2003

A study of 237 second-grade children involved with both piano keyboard training and innovative math software scored 27% higher on proportional math and fractions tests than students only using the math software.

Amy Graziano, Matthew Peterson, and Gordon Shaw, Neurological Research 21, March 1999

Researchers noted that the college-aged music students seemed to have surer footing when facing tests.

Houston Chronicle, January 11, 1998

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