And the band played on…
Lee Bartel

Last week three experiences got me thinking….

November 8: I heard Nel Noddings, well-known philosopher of education and feminist ethics, speak at the University of Toronto. Noddings has written extensively about moral education and schooling, about reaching the whole child, about happiness. As she declared her optimism about schooling in America to be at an all time low, she pointed to a pervasive lack of long-term humanistic aims and an obsession with short-term, testable math and language objectives. Leaders and teachers seem to be marching to the drum of the irrational corporate agenda.

November 9: I read Elaine M. Garan’s article in Education Week entitled, “Will Katrina Topple the No Child Left Behind Law?” She says that “Secretary Spellings insists that students who are victims of Katrina—no matter where they are, no matter how disrupted their lives may be, and regardless of how they have suffered—will still be forced to take high-stakes, standardized tests.” Garan argues that “Katrina has reminded us that schools are made up of students who are unique and who have very human problems—every last one of them.”

November 7-11: I listened to Stephen Lewis, the United Nations Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS present the Massey Lectures on CBC entitled, “Race Against Time.” He offered compelling insight into the problems, particularly in Africa, that continue to threaten humankind and children especially - poverty, hunger, gender, and class inequality. The essence of his heartfelt plea was that help and hope is possible but it will take resolve and immediate action.

I was reminded of the controversial book and movie “And the band played on…” which graphically depicts the “band” of government, medical science, church, and even people at risk themselves, “playing on” in the face of the AIDS epidemic. And I thought, despite Katrina, the educational testing band plays on. Regardless of social and moral crises, the band plays on.. I see a headline that reads: “Death is all around, but the band plays on for the tourist horde.”

Where would people get the idea that ignoring crises, avoiding responsibility, and pretending that social issues do not affect us, could in anyway be captured with the phrase “and the band plays on”? Are we as musicians so obsessed with our music...
making that we cannot stop despite all hell breaking loose around us? Are we so socially
ingept that we have no other way to deal with crises than to keep doing what we are doing?
Do we really believe that music making is more important than anything else we might
do?

The meaning of the phrase “and the band plays on,” like the aphorism “face the music” is
now generally accepted in our culture and neither one of these aphorisms casts music in a
positive light. Although probably from a neutral origin, the “band plays on” seems to
have come to the fore with the story, of mythic proportions, that while the Titanic was
sinking, the band played on. Perhaps we might see that as a brave service to soothe the
hearts of the distressed victims, that keeping the band playing despite distractions is a
worthy and admirable thing. Then why does the phrase always cast this as a matter of
burying one’s head in the sand?

I began my course, “Alternative Methods in Secondary Music” this fall playing the video
of the song by Led Zeppelin, “When the levee breaks” and the question, could this be
used in music class. Students immediately made the connection to the New Orleans
disaster and agreed it would have a place in class. How was not so clear. I then played
U2’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday” and some raised doubts about the possibility or value of
playing a song focusing on terrorism in a music class. Then when I played Pat Benetar’s
“Hell is for Children,” most felt this had no place in music class. Students argued
vociferously that “music teachers are not counselors” and should not deal with issues like
this. Then what about Shania Twain’s “Black Eyes, Blue Tears,” or Martina McBride’s
“Independence Day”? or Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” or Black Eyed Peas,’ “Where is
the love”?

How do we deal with the real issues that affect our students? What is our responsibility as
teachers? What happened in North American music classes between 11 am. and 3pm. on
9/11? Do we know what to do besides “playing on”?

“Classroom corners – stale and pale!
Classroom corners – cobweb covered!
Classroom corners – spooky and lonely!
Teacher, let me dance in your classroom corner!
Let the outside world in!”

“But you see my rainbow, teacher?
Don’t you see all the colors?
I know that you’re mad at me.
I know that you said to color the cherries red and the leaves green.
I guess I shouldn’t have done it backwards.
But, teacher, don’t you see my rainbow?
Don’t you see all the colors?
Don’t you see me?”

“Yes, Mr. Principal I will sing your song.
Cheep, cheep, you are always right.  
Cheep, cheep, you are always great.  
Cheep, cheep, you are God!  
Cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep … cheep.”

“The robins sang and sang and sang,  
But teacher you went right on.  
The last bell sounded the end of the day,  
But teacher you went right on.  
The geranium on the window sill just died,  
but teacher you went right on.”

(From the book by Albert Callum, The Geranium on the window sill just died, but teacher you went right on)

How can we as music teachers “let the outside world” in? How can we see the rainbows?  
How can we see the “me” in each child? How can we notice what is important to the person and not just make the “band play on”?  

Is music meant only to be a calm, objective, detached aesthetic experience, complete in itself with reference to nothing else? Is that how to listen to Beethoven’s “Ninth Symphony”? Schafer’s “Threnody”? Axelrod’s “Requiem: The Holocaust” or “Earth Rot”? all the songs listed on [http://creativefolk.com/abusesongs.html](http://creativefolk.com/abusesongs.html) ?

Should students in music class at all levels think? Should musical thinking be connected to critical social thinking? Should students compose expressions of shock? Grief? Frustration? Protest? Anger? Or is the music making we do primarily a diversion, a self-fulfilling phenomenon that separates and insulates us from the real issues of life? Should the band of music education play on? And on, and on?