Video Reviews


A Review of “Music of the Heart”
Lee Bartel

Starring: Meryl Streep, Angela Bassett, Gloria Estefan, Aidan Quinn
First Released: October 29, 1999
Director: Wes Craven
Miramax Films

Another film about music teaching and learning! There are not many actually - The Music Man, Mr. Holland's Opus, Madame Souzatska. You could include ones that have significant scenes of music teaching like Shine, Hilary and Jackie, and maybe even The Sound of Music. However, there are few that deal with groups in school context. There probably are some that feature music teaching but do not appear to be about music - like the one I recently discovered that is ostensibly about teen suicide but has considerable implication for music education - Permanent Record. a film about music education, based on a real-life person and program, and one where the threat to cut the program is successfully thwarted, is relished by beleaguered music teachers and especially program advocates. Of course, we would want to see the making of music delight and inspire children. We would want to hear wonderful music played expressively and passionately. We would want to see a teacher care deeply about music but just as deeply about the children and their varied lives. We would want to see the child's ability matched with the musical challenge so that fulfillment and motivation thrive in every class. We would want to see music touch the heart and come from the heart.

Music of the Heart accomplishes some of what we want in a music education movie. This story of Roberta Guaspari-Tzavaras is based on her actual experience teaching in East Harlem. Her program was begun through her determination and commitment to violin teaching and, when threatened by budget cuts, was sustained by private fund-raising. This story of the typical American hero fighting almost alone against great odds and emerging victorious from the fray resonates positively with audiences. But, when you add to that the sight of a multicultural group of under-privileged children playing beautiful music in Carnegie Hall with violin celebrities you have the recipe for an outpouring of sentiment and shallow verbal support for music education.

Movie critics have been almost unanimous in their praise of the real Roberta Guaspari-Tzavaras' work. They have been less unanimous in their opinion of the writing, acting and directing of the movie. Music of the Heart, with Meryl Streep playing the role of Roberta, was inspired by a documentary featuring the actual East Harlem program. The movie seems to be a pale copy of the real and, I hope, an inaccurate portrayal.

Movie critics have not however, taken a music educator's look at Music of the Heart. If this is what the public is being shown as a fine example of music education, we need to take a close look at what shape music education will have in the mind of the public.
As the movie switches to "10 years later" we encounter Justin and Ramone. Both boys were selected in the lottery for membership in the violin classes. Justin is full of mischief and typical boyish pranks. He finds it difficult to practice outside of class. Ramone wants violin class more than anyone else - he crosses all his fingers during the lottery draw. He practices at home despite the complaints of the adults around. Roberta is constantly on Justin's case - demanding he practice more, getting mad at him for lateness, judging his playing as terrible, threatening to kick him out of class, etc. Later Justin is killed in a drive by shooting and when Roberta asks the class whether they want to talk about it, Ramone says, "I think we should just play violin." Roberta stops by Ramone's house on the way home and helps him process the death of Justin and his guilt at having told Justin to "drop dead." The relationship of Roberta with these two boys illustrates the two sides to this less than perfect teacher. She does clearly care about the students but the class manner, pedagogical style, and threatening rhetoric seem the dominant dimension. Is this typical of music education?

Roberta is confronted by a parent in the principal's office who accuses her of being verbally abusive to the children. Roberta argues that she is "just trying to teach them discipline, that's all. If you want to take a very difficult instrument, you have to take it seriously, you have to focus, you have to pay attention." The question we must encounter is whether we can teach "discipline" and develop "focus" by insulting, threatening, and embarrassing students. We usually encounter the need for "discipline" and external motivation when we are trying to teach music that is basically irrelevant to student's lives. There may be no classical music in their experience but we insist, through teacher-controlled choice, that classical music must be learned. At one point in the movie a parent accuses Roberta of being the "white woman" on a mission to "save" the ghetto children and of forcing them to play music by "dead white guys." That very legitimate accusation is never answered directly in the movie. The apparent response is that developing discipline by learning to play a very difficult instrument and by experiencing the success of the final concert, students develop self esteem and do better at life. Could the same be accomplished with any difficult task? Could it have been juggling rather than music? Is a year of scolding and verbal abuse justified by the applause and admiration of a year-end concert. What we see in class is never the enjoyment of playing. Never the music of the heart. Only mistake elimination and attempts at external motivation.

A look at Roberta's pedagogy reveals incredible shortcomings. And remember, this is what the public is seeing as fine music education? She offers few, if any, demonstrations although she does stand at the front of the class playing her violin. We never hear her demonstrating an expressive sound to the children. There is no immersion in the music to be learned. We never hear a recording. Children are given no responsibility for musical interpretation or problem solving. They have no responsibility in what music they learn. There is no freedom to "approximate" the model - i.e., making mistakes is not seen as an inevitable occurrence in the progress toward the goal but as the justification for anger and verbal assaults. Feedback is excessively negative. Students are not asked for self-assessment for purposes of self-initiated improvements. Rather, Roberta offers her "adjudications" complete with vivid facial expressions of disgust.

Most important in pedagogy is the emotional tone in the class. When the principal sides with the parent complaining of verbal abuse, Roberta attempts to "soften" her approach. She lets the children play a piece clearly out of tune and inarticulate. She feebly attempts to "praise" the attempt. The children immediately recognize the mismatch of feedback to performance and question her. The result is that Roberta resorts to her old ways but asks the children to be "complicit" with the abuse and not tell the parents. Do the children really like to hear scathing judgements of their playing? Probably not. Do they want honest appraisal of achievement? Yes. Could they offer some of that in self-assessment? Definitely.
The problem pedagogically, and unfortunately for the minds of the public many of whom associate music class with an angry and insulting teacher, is that Roberta has no alternative approaches in her pedagogic repertoire. She is probably teaching the way she was taught (the real Roberta only studied violin in public school never took private lessons). As Brian Cambourne states, "we are all prisoners of our own model of learning." Maybe the director, Wes Craven, best known for directing horror movies, is a prisoner in his model.

With the title, Music of the Heart, we would expect expressive performances of music and scenes where the students' enjoyment of the music is evident. Unfortunately we see very little of this. The classes focus on mistake elimination. Playing appears to be a technical exercise. Maybe Roberta believes in the "aesthetic" notion that music does the job - we only need to be in the presence of the music and contemplate or experience and the music will "do it to us." However, musical experience and the "peak" moments are constructed - they come in a context which includes the emotional tone. They seem not to happen in this movie except for once a year at the concert. It is surprising that children stayed with the violin classes - but when you see the other music teacher you know they chose the least of the evils?

The title song from Music of the Heart is sung by NSync and Gloria Estefan and is included as a video following the movie. The words of that song are, "Your love is the music of my heart." That love for students was not adequately revealed in this movie. We need to realize that we may be rehearsing the greatest music in the world but it is the feelings and attitudes we communicate, the pedagogy of the heart, that will really shape the music in our students' hearts.

Web Find: www.classicd.co.uk/wot/movies/list.html This site lists the classical music used in 460 movies