Video Reviews


A Review of “The Music Man”
Lee Bartel

Warner Bros. Pictures
Director: Morton DaCosta
Starring: Robert Preston, Shirley Jones, Buddy Hackett, Hermione Gingold
First Released: 1961

Robert Preston plays a travelling salesman who has honed his craft at raising hopes, collecting the money, and leaving town. He arrives in Rivercity and begins to create the climate for his self-serving deception -- a crisis in the town. Students were "going bad" because of the pool hall, and a music program was the prescribed solution. A similar ploy was used in Ontario -- to "fix" education the government first "created" a crisis in the system. Our students were "going bad" because schools were not meeting the Conservative agenda, but music had to be destroyed to "fix" it.

A more important parallel is evident however. Prof. Harold Hill, the man who could sell a town on a band, does so by appealing to the power of music. Moral corruption is the fear. He argues that an effect of a music program is "to keep the young ones moral after school." His poster encourages people to "get a new lease on life" by joining the band. The cost and effort is justified by the "extra-musical' effects on the children. Today advocates for music programs are quick to appeal to the power of music. Our big fear is that our young are falling behind in the most crucial areas of math and science for financial competition with the rest of the world. So, if music can make kids smarter, make them better at math, then surely music programs are worth the money and effort. Maybe our economy could get a "new lease on life" if we sent a Mozart recording to every mother with a young child as the governor of Georgia did.

At first the music teacher/librarian in Rivercity is suspicious and doubts the claims. But when her young brother, who has a speech and mood disorder, becomes enchanted by the promises and shows signs of improvement, she is quick to hide the evidence and encourage the band. Even the school board members, who have hated each other for 15 years, are suddenly transformed by the power of music and become strong supporters. We may doubt the validity of "music makes them smarter" claims, but when we see increased support and credibility because of this movement, we are quick to echo the claims.

Even when Prof. Hill admits his deceit to lisping Winthrop and to Marion, the piano teacher, he sells self-esteem. Marion points out that everyone in town has been different since they began to catch the dream. Does music education sell a dream? Is that what
Roberta was doing in *Music of the Heart*? Music education also sells something else. When the band finally appears in uniform and plays, the parents explode with pride. Parents are incredibly thrilled to see their child achieve and especially perform. How much does music education thrive simply on the emotions of performed achievement?

How do we sell our music program? There are musical reasons. Let's not settle for the "extra-musical."