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Michelle Obama and I Agree: Commit to the Arts in Schools

While foreign finance ministers and central bankers met a few weeks ago at the G-20 summit to discuss the state of the world's finances, it was something that Mrs. Obama, not Mr., said that made my ears perk up.

Speaking at the Pittsburgh Creative & Performing Arts School, Michelle Obama gave an 11-minute address about the importance of the arts in our schools. I appreciated her expressing the conviction that the arts aren't somehow an "extra" part of our nation's life, but should be an essential part of it.

Mrs. Obama's sentiments couldn't have come at a more appropriate time. With state budgets under attack, we in the arts are bracing for a familiar song: whether or not to fund arts in the schools. When times get tough, the arts programs are always among the first to be eliminated from the curriculum.

Cutting arts funding is a short-sighted move whose consequences contribute to the deepening cultural disconnect occurring in our society.

Specifically, a generation raised without awareness of the arts, without the opportunity to experience the arts themselves by making music, making drawings, making poems, is a disenfranchised one. Art is the essence of who we are and our society is strengthened whenever young people are given the opportunity to directly share this legacy.

Whether this mission is accomplished through advocacy for arts-education funding, through music or arts programs in school, or through impassioned performances, we must continue our commitment to keep art and music as living traditions.

I am, of course, an advocate for classical music, whose twelve hundred year unbroken continuum allows us to intensely experience what it meant to be alive in 1200 or 1600 or 1900. I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to experience those world views. But, this can only be done by giving young people the keys that open up the whole world of music to them. These were the keys my parents and very importantly my teachers in public schools offered me.

The problem is that we, as a society, have abandoned the responsibility of exposing our young people to the very language of music. Today, the amount of music instruction in both elementary and secondary classrooms is decreasing; many recent reports highlight the disparity between public rhetoric about the value of arts education and the stark decline in curricular offerings across the nation – a phenomenon exacerbated by the growing pool of classroom teachers whose own education and teacher preparation programs included minimal offerings in the arts.

Music is about the human spirit, about our common heritage. When younger people are given a chance to experience classical music, they like it.

We must advocate for this in our schools, but also not sit idly by as artists. The biggest responsibility that we have in the performing arts organizations have today—a responsibility we have no option but to accept—is to help young people understand how music works and what it means. Those who know this music, know the arts, can experience a deeper sense of life itself.

Michael Tilson Thomas hosts Keeping Score Season II, premiering October 15, 22, and 29, 2009 on PBS (check local listings). www.keepingcore.org

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