

Band and the Nature of Man

By Kent M. Keith

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It was a concert in a cafeteria. As I stood there, a sandwich in one hand and a cup of juice in the other, the spotlights shifted from the Leeward Community College Band to the Stage Band, and then shifted again to the Leeward Symphonic Wind Ensemble, and then to a guitar and flute duet. Students, parents, friends, and musicians sat at tables in the center of the cafeteria or drifted in and out as the music and the moods changed. The spotlights were dazzling against the backdrop of dark night on the spacious Leeward campus, and the cafeteria seemed sympathetic to the music, expanding to contain the powerful brass of the Stage Band and contracting to cuddle the delicate flute and guitar. The whole setting began to grow on me. It seemed like an old medieval festival, where people ate and chatted and were entertained, where musicians mixed with the audience, where listeners and performers could see each other's faces and sense the sharing. At any rate, it was different from those dark auditorium halls where audiences sit in total silence, dreading an inadvertent sneeze, and the musicians sit under bright lights, playing mechanically for that anonymous darkness past the first row. Here, we were given food and drink, and the different moods rotated around us on four impromptu stages. When musicians weren't playing, they were talking and walking among us. That may be as close as some of us can get, nowadays, to the sense of sharing in a musical performance.

Every man was a musician. Every man could beat the drums, ring the bells, blow the flutes, and sing. Music belonged to everyone, and men came together with music and dance, chanting and singing into trances, chanting and singing the humanity which was so basically theirs. Man the musician was in tune with himself and his world. Today, few of us are musicians, and few of us are in tune. Music is a specialized task, like typing or operating a lathe. That creative sense of oneness with self and others has faded.

I had forgotten how good a band can be. Too often I have heard bands where the instruments were mere tools, and the result was just organized noise. In a technological age, perhaps we accept too easily the technical musician. After all, we know how to write manuals to train the motor nerves to control rapid and synchronized finger and lip movements to meet the structural requirements for producing notes on different instruments; and we know that the tick-tock of the metronome can hold it all together, 1-2-3-4. I have heard school bands which were so mechanical that I half expected to hear the band director telling his students, "Now, kids, playing an instrument is just like typing— only louder. Maybe it wouldn't have been bad advice. I have been to schools where the typing class sounded more exciting than the band.

The anthropologists were wrong. What is unique about man, they said, is his capacity to use tools. But while they bent over to examine rude stone adzes on cave floors, they had their backs to the lyrical paintings on the cave walls. Man was born to conceptualize, to paint symbols, to explain himself. Man is unique because he can dance and sing and chant, sending his spirit soaring in the free world of his mind and heart. Man is not unique because he has tools. He is unique because he has a soul.

The Leeward Symphonic Wind Ensemble was enough to make me put down the sandwich and juice and stand there with my mouth half open. It's hard to know what that intangible difference is between mechanical music and music played with a sense of being alive, but it's not hard to know the difference when you hear it. My happy discovery was that the Leeward Symphonic Wind Ensemble has a soul.

It isn't an accidental phenomenon. For 15 years, band director Jim Uyeda has been teaching that music is more than the notes. Great musicians have known that for music to speak to the soul, it must come from the soul. Unfeeling souls cannot play music, they can only play notes. What Jim Uyeda has been doing is to follow this insight by emphasizing human development in his band program. "To develop the music, you must develop the musician as a person," he says. "That's where music education really becomes *education*." In his band program, music is above all a human enterprise, a way of communicating, a way of sharing, a way of life.

The Ensemble is a voluntary group with no college credit. Only six of the 38 members are music majors. All of them practice hard, and their technical proficiency is high. Uyeda sets a difficult pace. The band read through 82 numbers last fall in the first two and a half months to stimulate sight-reading skills and familiarize students with as much music literature as possible. Uyeda doesn't believe in spending a whole semester on a few numbers which are rehearsed daily until they are nearly memorized for concert performance. "The true musician has the skill, the flexibility, the interpretive insight to play a number well the first time he sees it," says Uyeda.

The music is inside. We train ourselves to guide it as it comes out, to help it find its home, to delineate its shape, to let it flow through us and speak to others. We must be skillful or the music will be blocked or limited. But the skill won't generate the music—the music is generated by our lives. The music is inside, and the quality of our lives gives rise to the quality of our music.

What gives the Leeward Symphonic Wind Ensemble its special quality of life is its ongoing program of teaching young musicians at other schools. Members of the Ensemble visit intermediate and high-school bands to run clinics. They divide up the school band into instrumental sections to give small-group instruction. Trumpet players teach younger trumpeters, flute players teach younger flutists. They teach techniques such as correct breathing and tone support, embouchure, the best way to hold the

instrument and useful exercises to strengthen skills. They teach interpretation; they talk about making the music sing— and sometimes have the students sing their parts, so they can hear for themselves how much more expressive they could be with their instruments. They demonstrate on their own instruments the tone and technique which younger students can imitate to improve their skills. Most important, they teach by example that music is something human to care about. Ensemble members give up weekdays and vacations to work with younger musicians, and have even traveled to the Neighbor Islands at their own personal expense to expand their clinical program.

The Ensemble was formed to be of service in this way, and its members feel enriched by their service to others. “Music doesn’t become stifling,” says Ensemble President Keith Kuniyasu, “because we aren’t just working with instruments— we’re working with people.” “A lot of students don’t have an example for what they’re doing,” says Secretary Erlinda Ibe. “We get them to listen to us, and then listen to themselves. Some students improve a lot in only 30 minutes.” “Basically, we teach what the band director would teach if he could,” says Treasurer Keith Nakayama. “Band directors just have too many students to do it all alone, and most students can’t afford private lessons.” “After working with them, we go to their concerts,” says Vice President Keith Fukumoto. “We can hear the improvement, and it’s a good feeling.” “Music means more now than it did before,” says Erlinda. “Now there’s a strong human element.” “Music is secondary to most of people,” concludes Uyeda. “It’s a vehicle— the way we show our concern for others and find meaning for ourselves.”

The anthropologists were wrong. Man is not unique because he has tools. Man was born to dance and sing. Man is unique because he has music in his soul.