Surely, there can be no issue of greater importance to the consumer’s happiness and to society’s welfare than the issue of how we as a populace manage the activities of our educational system. Every aspect of our social fabric depends on what we teach our kids in school, what our young adults learn in college, and what expertise our professionals and future teachers acquire in graduate school. One can read the very essence of a culture’s values in the knowledge it chooses to transmit to its younger generations. And one can bet that—if something goes wrong, terribly and tragically wrong, with this knowledge- and value-transmission process—society will pay a heavy price in lost opportunities for a better, more refined, more noble quality of life among generations still to come.

What, then, do we make of the trend toward customer orientation that has blossomed throughout American commerce and culture during the latter part of the last century under the tutelage of such management gurus as Drucker (1954) and Levitt (1960)? Various social commentators have criticized this trend toward customer orientation as encouraging attitudes that extend the principle of consumer sovereignty into areas where it does not properly belong (Holbrook 1995b, 1995c; Jacobson and Mazur 1995; Keat, Whitely, and Abercrombie, eds., 1994; Schwartz 1994; Shorris 1994; Washburn and Thornton, eds., 1996). Such extensions would include the emerging role of customer orientation in politics, hospitals, psychotherapy clinics, courtrooms, religions, and arts institutions (Keat,
Whitely, and Abercrombie, eds., 1994). One such area of extension, of course, is education.

In the latter connection, social critics have lamented the objectives of education oriented toward embracing populism based in place of performance (Henry 1994); egalitarianism in place of excellence (Sewall 1996); self-esteem in place of real achievement (Macdonald 1996); pandering in place of discriminating (Slavitt 1996); size of class enrollments in place of merit in course materials (Sacks 1996); pleasure in place of soul-searching (Edmundson 1997); an economic rationale in place of the traditional cultural mission (Readings 1996); political correctness in place of academic freedom (Kors and Silverglate 2000); or careerism in place of intellectual attainment (Rotfeld 1999, 2001). In the words of Rotfeld (1999):

> Once students are told to see themselves as customers for education degrees, they expect customer service with a smile. ... Seeing graduation as a job certification, not a mark of education, students want the degree but not the education. They want to earn, not learn (p. 416).

In this spirit, besides those just mentioned, numerous other authors have explicitly inveighed against the shabbiness of an educational system that appears to be oriented toward catering to the potentially low-brow and careerist tastes of students redefined as customers (Bennett 1992; Bloom 1987; Fulton 1994; Fussell 1991; Holbrook 1995a, 1995b; Hughes 1993; Schwartz 1994; Sykes 1988).

As an example, consider the recent piece in Harper's by Mark Edmundson (1997), a professor at the University of Virgina, entitled “On the Uses of a Liberal Education ... As Lite Entertainment For Bored College Students.” Symptomatic of the pervasive problems that prevail, Edmundson singles out the course-evaluation process in which his normally lethargic students get to play “the informed consumer, letting the provider know where he's coming through and where he's not quite up to snuff” (p. 39). He deplores “the attitude of calm consumer expertise that pervades the responses ... the serene belief that [his] function ... is to divert, entertain, and interest ... in an enjoyable and approachable way” (pp. 39-40). This attitude, in his view, embodies “the university culture”—which, “like American culture writ large, is ... ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment”: “My students ... bring a consumer weltanschaung to school, where it exerts a powerful ... influence” (p. 40). Edmundson sees his students as passionless (p. 41), conformist (p. 42), committed to appearing laid-back (p. 42), cautious (p. 42), fragile (p. 42),
oriented toward financial incentives in general and toward their careers in particular (p. 43), and inveterately unresponsive, as when only timidly answering questions in class—all because “kids come to school immersed in a consumer mentality” (p. 43). And he sees the university as playing a collaborative role in encouraging such consumerist attitudes:

More and more of what’s going on in the university is customer driven. The consumer pressures that beset me on evaluation day are only a part of an overall trend. . . . From the start, the contemporary university’s relationship with students has a solicitous, nearly servile tone. . . . Colleges don’t have admissions offices anymore, they have marketing departments. . . . The university now [pursues] a tendency to serve—and not challenge—the students. Students can also float in and out of classes during the first two weeks of each term without making any commitment. The common name for this time span—shopping period—speaks volumes about the consumer mentality that’s now in play (pp. 43-44).

Ironically, Edmundson (1997) cites a commencement address by Oprah Winfrey at Wellesley as emblematic of this tendency toward customer orientation—never anticipating that, within two years, Ms. Winfrey would be teaching her own course (on leadership) at Northwestern’s prestigious Kellogg School of Management. Commenting on the latter development and tying it to the offering of a finance course taught by Michael Milken at UCLA, Jennings and Happel (1999) “fear that higher education is being reduced to little more than a talk-show format”: “as the distinction between pop culture and higher education has become increasingly muddled, . . . we have witnessed the dumbing-down of the curriculum (p. 14). Indeed—when contemplating Mr. Milken’s recent move into distance learning, a computer- and Web-assisted plan to offer electronically delivered university degrees to anyone who will pay the price—who can ignore the potential danger of the frightening scenario in which today’s superficially attractive Internet-conferred diploma becomes the intellectually bankrupt equivalent to an educational junk bond of the future? In describing Milken’s plan to use materials developed by professors at five major B-schools (Carnegie-Mellon, Chicago, Columbia, the London School of Economics, and Stanford) to offer MBA degrees via Cardean University—owned by UNext (a subsidiary of Milken’s Knowledge Universe) and accredited by virtue of its affiliation with ISIM University (which UNext purchased for that purpose)—Pizzo (2001) allows that “Some professors were outraged that their course materials and their university’s prestige would be sold and then resold by a notorious white-collar criminal” (p. 69). According to Pizzo (2001), “Basically, Milken intends to do for knowledge what he did for capital with junk bonds” (p. 64).
Do we not have reason, then, to envision a day not too far in the future when diplomas from e-learning empires such as UNext will not be worth the parchment they are written on?

Meanwhile, in the view of Edmundson (1997), when it comes to the tug-of-war on campus between intellect and populism, “The consumer culture is winning” (p. 48). Professors have become more timid—“more like careful retailers who have it as a cardinal point of doctrine never to piss customers off” (p. 48), more devoted to an approach that “gives the customers what they most want” (p. 48), and therefore more contributory to an educational system that constructs “people who live for easy pleasure, for comfort and prosperity, who think of money first, then second, and third, who hug the status quo” (p. 49). He sums this up in a paragraph full of righteous indignation:

Is it a surprise, then, that this generation of students—steeped in consumer culture before going off to school, treated as potent customers by the university well before their date of arrival, then pandered to from day one until the morning of the final kiss-off . . . —are inclined to see the books they read as a string of entertainments to be placidly enjoyed or languidly cast down? Given the way universities are now administered (which is more and more to say, given the way they are currently marketed), is it a shock that the kids don’t come to school hot to learn, unable to bear their own ignorance? (pp. 46-47).

As a metaphor for this predicament, previously circulated in the pages of *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, Holbrook (1998) has proposed the example set by the popular and critically acclaimed motion picture entitled *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995). It is important for us once again to ponder this film briefly because, reflecting the temper of our times, it has won widespread mass-audience acceptance, has been adopted by the community of music teachers as a sort of rallying call, and has received praise from otherwise difficult-to-please movie critics. Further and with relevance to our present focus, the film purports to say something important about the educational process in general and about musical instruction in particular. But what it says we have reason to find alarming.

Specifically, *Mr. Holland's Opus* celebrates the popularity gained by a high school instructor (Richard Dreyfuss) who flatters his class into believing that they already know everything he wants to teach them. Why study J. S. Bach, for example, when you already know his “Minuet in G,” as performed by a rock group appropriately named “The Toys”? Why learn to play the notes as written on the page when you can simply look within, shine forth, and “play the sunset.” As described by Holbrook (1998):
Mr. Holland coaxes soothing sounds out of a distressed Gertrude Lang’s clarinet by telling her that she already knows the piece and that it’s already in her head, fingers, and heart. He reassures her that . . . the important thing is to have fun. He insists that she should, therefore, try not to read the notes on the page but rather to close her eyes and to “play the sunset.” After this, Gertrude quickly proceeds, first, to perform an astonishingly successful clarinet solo (full of tricky grace notes and impressively smooth glissandi) with the school dance orchestra at graduation and, then (sooner than we might have reasonably expected), to become the Governor of Oregon (pp. 407-408).

Here and elsewhere, the major thrust of Mr. Holland’s Opus deals with the nature of education itself. The process of education becomes the main theme of the film to the point at which what it says directly or implies indirectly about the educational process demands to be taken seriously. But when it comes to teaching the appreciation of music, not to mention the mastery of more challenging material, this movie carries a deeply subversive significance. From the first, Mr. Holland reveals himself as a confirmed populist who refuses to apply any sort of elite critical standards to the task of teaching music appreciation. Rather, he shows a deeply ingrained egalitarian tendency to like all music. But unfortunately—by implicitly adopting the misbegotten philosophy that if it’s music, it must be both lovable and good—Mr. Holland unintentionally cheapens all forms of aesthetic appreciation.

As a teacher, in submitting to the sway of educational and aesthetic populism, Mr. Holland succumbs to the temptation toward conforming rather than challenging. He mirrors rather than molds the tastes of the students placed in his charge. Nowhere does this problem surface more vividly than when he faces some fairly refractory students who evince the all-too-obvious signs of an inveterate resistance to any education that might teach them something about music theory. So, after wising up to his students’ lack of interest in learning, Mr. Holland cheerfully does what no real educator should ever do. He consciously adopts the path of least resistance. Essentially, he panders to his students’ resolutely low-brow tastes by playing them pop-rock excrescences based on debasements of classical pieces by serious composers. In short, everywhere he gets the chance, Mr. Holland succumbs to the one temptation that teachers are supposed to resist—namely, the popularity-winning strategy of appealing to students by convincing them that they already know everything important; that all they need to do is to reach deep within themselves and to liberate that innate understanding; that hard work is nowhere near as important as facile intuition; that all tastes occupy the same level of refinement;
that all artistic endeavors share equal degrees of merit; and that even the
most harmonically complex Gershwin piece—"Someone To Watch Over
Me," as performed by Mr. Holland with one of his more gifted and, there-
fore, doomed students—can be dumbed down to three or four chord
changes without sacrificing its excellence.

One should not assume that administrators of the schools and univer-
sities themselves have been oblivious to the dangers revealed so strikingly
in Mr. Holland's Opus. Thus, Feder (1999) warns that—though "Admin-
istrators often speak of students as customers whom they must please”—
Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University has expressed concerns that
the "consumerism of the contemporary university" tends to thwart effec-
tive teaching because "the high enrollments on which departments
depend for lobbying power with the administration can sometimes be
proped up by turning education into entertainment" (p. B11). This cus-
tomer- oriented commitment to edutainment as a style of pedagogy—
often involving a consumerist tendency to design curricula to further stu-
dents' career objectives—deeply troubles Thomas Mitchell (1999),
Provost of Trinity College (Dublin), who traces the development of aca-
demic philosophy from Plato and the Sophists onward and who reacts
with alarm to the recent commercialism implicit in the drift toward a
trade-school mentality:

A more worrisome effect has been the pressure on universities to divert energy and
manpower into the most basic, service-oriented forms of vocational training that
can generate significant revenue. Researchers can be similarly forced to devote
more of their efforts to consultancy and to problem-solving dictated by industry in
order to earn revenue to support their main research programs. The result is that
more of the agenda of universities is being set by market forces and funding needs
than by the universities' own ideals and priorities. . . . These trends obviously have
several negative effects, but perhaps the most serious is that universities are fast
losing sight of the first principles that have for so long inspired our educational
ideals and underpinned the intellectual and cultural attainments of Western civi-
lization (p. 21).

More food for thought on such issues appears in a new book by the soci-
ologist Stanley Aronowitz (2000) entitled The Knowledge Factory: Dis-
mantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning.
Aronowitz (2000) pursues the central claim that "there is little that would
qualify as higher learning in the United States" (p. xvii). In this, he distin-
guishes between learning and training or education. In his view, training
"prepares the student in knowledges that constitute an occupation or a par-
ticular set of skills," whereas education "prepares the student to take her
place in society in a manner consistent with its values and beliefs” (p. 2). If the latter sounds a bit like finishing school and hardly seems likely to produce the questioning attitude that should result from an inquiring mind, the former closely echoes the objectives of the typical customer-oriented university curriculum. Meanwhile, learning gets lost in the shuffle.

In the current climate, much of campus life epitomizes Aronowitz’s indictments of typical student motivations for seeking an academic degree: “In most cases, their choices of major and minor fields are informed (no, dictated) by a rudimentary understanding of the nature of the job market rather than by intellectual curiosity, let alone intellectual passion” (p. 10). In this connection, Aronowitz cites with approval the classic tirade by Thorstein Veblen (1918) in *The Higher Learning in America*:

> For Veblen, the true function of postsecondary institutions was “higher learning,” embodied in the work of research and scholarship. In his magisterial commentary on the vastly expanded postsecondary system . . ., he found very little higher education going on. Rather, he observed that most professors were engaged in transmitting knowledge of all sorts and more particularly in training young people for specialized occupations for the corporate job markets (p. 17).

Almost a hundred years later, Veblen’s trenchant, cynical, even venomous attack on the educational system—a veritable masterpiece of precision-targeted acerbity—deserves re-reading by anyone concerned with the problems of a customer-oriented academia. Before dismissing this Veblen-esque viewpoint as outdated, let us consider the double metamorphosis of education in an area with which the present authors happen to be especially familiar—namely, business.

When the present authors began their teaching careers in the late 1960s, distinguished fellow-members of our business-school faculty used the term *trade school* as a contemptuous expression of opprobrium. The famous Ford and Carnegie reports had led to a revolution in business education, and there was a universal desire to shuck off the much-reviled and oft-repudiated vocational-training image. The B-school response to the Ford/Carnegie challenge moved past the industry-centered perspective that had previously dominated toward a greater emphasis on rigorous scholarship and intellectual inquiry. Over the years, this endorsement of a research-and-publication philosophy spawned immense growth in knowledge and insight, with concepts like cost of capital, market segmentation, statistical process control, total quality management, competitive advantage, shareholder value, and customer-relationship management taking a central place in not just the theory but also the practice of
management. So successful was this revolution that it ultimately led to the award of Nobel prizes to professors who spent much if not most of their time working in business schools.

Contrast this with the situation nowadays. In many major business schools, the students flock to courses taught by adjuncts who either are currently employed in industry or have recently retired. No one doubts that such individuals can add to the richness of the business-school environment and can bolster its curriculum. Indeed, having been tempered in the fires of the “real world,” they are often spectacularly good at what they do. But they are rarely engaged in pushing the frontiers of knowledge development at the leading-edge boundaries. Meanwhile, encouraged by the institutional valorization of such ancillary course offerings, the student appetite for networking grows so ravenous that scarcely a day passes without an invited lecture by some visiting CEO or senior executive—an event almost always greeted by students as just slightly short of the Second Coming, as way more important than attending their regular classes, and as subsidiary in the ranks of mandatory participation only to the possibility of attending a job interview (conflicts with classroom commitments be damned). Indeed, today, the trade-school label would be regarded by too many business educators, we suspect, as a badge of honor or a designation of approval. Clearly, times have changed. And one symptom of this change is that most business schools—always at the banausic fringe of the university’s intellectual enterprise and increasingly more marginalized than ever—now make not the slightest pretense of disguising their essentially vocational orientation. Indeed, they take pride in their proven ability to prepare students for—what else?—careers.

Aronowitz voices his more general concerns in this direction by viewing the university as a sort of knowledge factory (p. 35) where “the ‘university-corporate complex’ is at the center” and where “students . . . have no time for anything but a job-savvy credential” (p. 36). Reflecting the temper of the times, during the 1980s and 1990s, “Enrollments in business and pre-law programs boomed . . . as the number of liberal arts majors shrank” (p. 37). Commentators such as Allan Bloom (1987)—along with many others mentioned earlier—lamented the “rampant commercialism” and “vocationalization” that had infected our educational institutions at the undergraduate level (Aronowitz, p. 37).

Keep in mind that Aronowitz speaks from the perspective of the university as a whole rather than from just the narrow viewpoint of the B-school. And from this wide angle, he regards the whole academic enterprise as, increasingly, a monument to consumer sovereignty:
Ultimate sovereignty in the market belongs to the consumer. On this model, universities must maintain high quality in order to attract students to buy their services. . . . Accordingly, if the quality of the credential, measured in number of jobs and the salaries offered to recent graduates declines, the consumer will cease to come. The credential, rather than the various standards of academic evaluation, thus becomes the crucial criterion of the worth and standing of a university. . . . As universities have blatantly marketed themselves to business as knowledge and human capital producers and to students as employment credentials, only the most devoted champions of the idea of the university as an independent community of scholars can doubt that the academic system corresponds more to the above description than to any other (p. 58).

From the vantage point of Aronowitz, there is no doubt that in the emerging academic system, faculty sovereignty has already given way to control by school administrations that view themselves as subservient to corporate interests on the one hand and to student customers on the other (pp. 65-67). The administrations are, of course, concerned with the bottom line. Indeed, “The application of accounting principles to academic employment and planning is perhaps the most blatant indication that higher education is going corporate” (p. 84). In this atmosphere of cost-benefit analysis, governed by the cash nexus, a school or department—say a school of library science or a department of linguistics—must justify its existence on the basis of course enrollments and grant money as ways of contributing to the university’s coffers. Failure to demonstrate sufficient remunerative flair may result in extinction. Never mind whether the intellectual areas involved might justifiably claim to generate knowledge prized for its own sake: “the argument that a discipline or line of inquiry might have other justifications for its existence than the ‘bottom line’ seems to have lost its ability to persuade” (p. 84).

All this prompts Aronowitz to ask whether faculty and students “Have . . . effectively surrendered their vision of the community of scholars and accepted their already institutionalized status as employees and consumers?” (p. 100): “Can faculty and students disengage from the orientation to jobs, jobs, jobs, and to a corporate culture to found our own?” (p. 101). His answer must strike some terror into the hearts of any educators wishing to regard themselves as a part of that proverbial “community of scholars”:

The specifically academic mission of higher education—to produce and transmit knowledge that helps society by enriching the self—already relegated to the back burner, is rapidly being consigned to history by the corporatization of American colleges and universities. As I have argued, knowledge production and transmission must now justify itself in terms of its economic value or risk oblivion (p. 123).
This dismal picture prepares the way for a lamentation that recapitulates and integrates the main themes of *The Knowledge Factory*:

The current academic system has fudged the distinctions between training, education, and learning. Administrations of most colleges and universities have responded to the economic and cultural uncertainties provoked by budget constraints and a volatile job market by constructing their institutions on the model of the modern corporation. Consequently, many have thrust training to the fore and called it education. . . . The academic system as a whole is caught in a market logic that demands students be job-ready upon graduation. . . . Academic leaders chant the mantra of "excellence," the new horizon of university administration, as corporate slogans corresponding to bottom-line corporate practices drive higher education's goals. Excellence means that all parts of the university "perform" and are judged according to how well they deliver knowledge and qualified labor to the corporate economy and how well the administration fulfills the recruitment and funding goals needed to maintain the institution. . . . And the valued student is the one who . . . tests well and gets good job offers. . . . The most important factor in the intellectual decline of higher education is the disappearance of opportunities to explore knowledge domains whose only attraction is that the student's curiosity has been piqued, and of occasions for reflections on self and society (pp. 158-159).

The extent to which the career-oriented ethos has come to dominate academia in general and business schools in particular surfaced recently when the dean of a major B-school paused at a faculty meeting to announce with pride that his institution had ranked high in a new *Forbes* survey of salaries earned by graduates of the leading MBA programs. It was obvious that the assembled faculty shared his delight over this news. Indeed, what dedicated business professor could be so refractory as not to embrace the ethos that motivates such feelings? But what true educator could be so insensitive as not to question that ethos?

This example of regarding the post-MBA salary as the raison d'être for an advanced academic degree is but one illustration of the career-centered preoccupation characteristic of the customer orientation that has won the heart of the university. A more dramatic indication of the pitfalls resulting from over-sensitivity to customer demands in the world of academia appeared in a tormented OP-ED piece for *The New York Times* written by a recent MBA graduate from one of the country's top business schools (Buchanan 2000). At the height of the financial bubble surrounding the much-ballyhooed dot.com companies, his school had "overhauled its curriculum to emphasize . . . e-commerce entrepreneurship" (p. A33). Obediently, almost obsequiously, the school viewed these curriculum changes as "responding to the demands of its customers," where "The customers are the school's students and potential students, of course" (p. A33). The
problem, unfortunately, is that—by "listening to these customers" (p. A33)—this school's eager-to-please professoriate has prepared its students for jobs that—all of a sudden, after the subsequent crash of the absurdly over-priced dot.coms—no longer exist. As the deeply disillusioned author concedes:

The problem is, platitudinous business maxims notwithstanding, the customer isn't always right. The customers—and I include myself here—do not have the perspective to see the big picture, to identify what remains important in the midst of the change occurring in the economy. Many of my classmates wanted only to . . . make millions and retire (p. A33).

It remained for professors from two competing institutions to draw the obvious conclusion. Thus, in separate letters to the *NY Times*, Pyle (2000) and Haveman (2000) commented as follows:

The model of [the] business school as a vendor with students as consumers . . . is a bad model for education. A far better model is one in which instructors, students, textbooks, software and facilities are joint "inputs" to a learning process and the product is well-educated graduates (Pyle, p. A26).

[The] Business School seems to believe that students are customers. . . . I have a radically different perspective. Business schools are institutions of learning, not service providers, placement agencies or, more cynically, hubs for networking and "credentialing." . . . Letting students decide what is taught is putting the cart before the horse (Haveman, p. A26).

We adamantly agree with the opinions just expressed and enthusiastically endorse the view that students should *not* be treated as customers who, whatever they want, are "always right." But, then, what marketing analogy corresponds to the proper role of students in the educational system?

*Student As Producer.* Once upon a time, the student was widely regarded as a producer whose efforts resulted in the production of homework in the form of reading assignments, problem solutions, exam answers, and term papers. Through the channel of the class, these products were directed toward impressing the instructor as the final customer or end user of interest. Students received rewards (penalties) for more (less) successful products in the form of higher (lower) grades.

*Student As Product.* More recently, the old model devolved in the direction of regarding the student as a product—the output of a production process in which the school builds graduates aimed via the channel of the job market at successful careers working for employers viewed as the ultimate end-use customers of greatest concern.
Student As Customer. Unwholesome as the student-equals-product view might seem, an even less appetizing picture characterizes most of the discussion that has appeared in the present essay—namely, a portrait of the student as customer. In this view, one that has come to prevail on today’s academic scene, the teacher as producer cranks out a product in the form of edutainment—that is, palatable but essentially dumbed-down pabulum pandering, à la Mr. Holland, to the low-brow tastes of the laziest and most uncommitted students—directed at the target audience via the channel of the classroom, which unfortunately serves as at best a rather noisy medium of communication because so few of the student customers bother to attend class on a regular basis.

Student As Channel. In contrast to the three views just described—student-as-producer, student-as-product, and student-as-customer—we believe that, to the extent the marketing analogy deserves application at all, students might most properly be regarded as channels of distribution via whose services the knowledge offerings produced by professors are distributed to various end users—including, of course, employers but also including various other members of society such as family, friends, and the general public at large. We believe that nothing short of a sea change in our perspective on students—nothing short of a fundamental revision in our characterization of students from regarding them as producers, products, or customers to prizing their services as channel members engaged in the knowledge-distribution process—can save our educational system from the problems that we have described in this review.

So where, in essence, lies the implementation of a cure for such problems? Aronowitz (2000) offers his own solutions in the form of recommended course offerings appropriate to a suitably liberal education (pp. 177-188). After careful scrutiny, we ourselves wish that we had a command of as many as half the materials he recommends as basic requisites to an educated human being. But, further, we feel that hopes for true solutions lie not so much in the redesign of courses and reading assignments as in the transformation of basic attitudes. To be brief and blunt about the policy implications involved in all this, we must—as a matter of sacred duty—convince our students that they are not so much producers at, products of, or customers for schools or universities and, especially, not so much end users of classroom-mediated edutainment. Rather, they are channels of distribution whereby knowledge generated by the academic community of scholars (often for its own sake, pursued as a self-justifying end in itself) is transmitted to those who might benefit as a result (whether those benefits be in the form of communal enlightenment,
public service, or—yes—increments to the bottom line of some worthy business corporation). Only if we can encourage such a redefinition of the student as a channel member in the information-transmission and knowledge-delivery supply chain can we hope to motivate the redefinition of purpose that might save our education system from the debacle toward which it currently rushes with such precipitous abandon.

Obviously, this redirected path will not be easy to negotiate—not for students, much less for teachers. Instructors and professors will need to redouble their commitment to scholarship. And students? Well, students might have to do some honest academic work for a change. In this, we are reminded of the story line in a new movie that provides an eloquent answer to the shameful precedent set by *Mr. Holland’s Opus* and in which, it appears, Hollywood has finally got it right.

Specifically—in *Music of the Heart* (1999), directed by Wes Craven (formerly noted as the creator of *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Scream*) in what Maslin (1999) describes as a switch from “violence” to “violins”—Roberta Guaspari (played to perfection by Meryl Streep) serves as an earnest music teacher who conducts violin classes in East Harlem Schools and who insists on her premise that it is a privilege, for both teacher and student alike, to work hard and indeed to struggle in the service of music education.

When Roberta first applies for a teaching job at one of the inner city schools (fictionalized beyond recognition, according to Hartocollis 1999), its principal (Angela Bassett) expresses skepticism that her students have the necessary discipline. Roberta replies, “Well, I would teach them to have discipline”: “These kids are gonna be committed. You know? They would practice on their own, and they’d help each other in the classroom.” On meeting her first class of unruly, unmotivated children, Roberta sternly warns her pupils:

> If you listen to me, you’re gonna sound beautiful in the concert, and you’re gonna feel so proud of yourselves. You know? But if you don’t listen to me, you’re gonna sound so bad that your own parents will get sick when they hear you. They might even throw up.

Roberta keeps up this refrain throughout the course of the entire film. When coaching an ensemble that sounds just awful, she interrupts their off-key struggles with another strict warning: “Stop. Everybody, everybody stop, stop, stop. . . . Have you practiced this week? . . . You know, you can’t be in this class if you do not practice.” Soon thereafter, in response to more off-key ensemble playing: “Stop, stop, stop. That
sounds so bad. That sounds terrible. Gee. You’re gonna make your parents sick.”

Before long, Roberta gets called to the principal’s office to confront a complaining parent, upset by her failure to provide a “supportive environment”: “You’re shouting at them all the time.” At first, Roberta stands firm:

Not all the time—just when they don’t listen to me. . . I’m 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.

This logic eludes the besieged principal, who makes Roberta promise to soften her approach. Soon thereafter, we find Roberta obsequiously responding to more atrocious violin playing by almost pandering to the students’ laziness:

Well, that was. . . pretty good. That was. . . not so bad. Some people could maybe practice a little bit more. . . Perhaps you could try a little harder for next week . . . ’cause all you gotta do is your best.

At what becomes the turning point in the film, it transpires that the kids actually miss Roberta’s demanding style of teaching. “Why are you acting. . . nice?” they ask; “We like you better the way you used to be. . . You’re acting weird now.” Roberta correctly interprets this response as a vindication of her approach:

OK, I take it all back. It stunk. . . Don’t tell your parents that I said that, OK? OK, let’s do it again. Right, this time. Stand up straight. . . Let’s go. . . Tempo, tempo, tempo.

The operative word in most of this teaching-related dialogue—so appropriate to music education, but so lacking in the customer-oriented approach of (say) Mr. Holland—is practice. As Roberta reminds her class mid-way through the film: “Practice makes perfect.” Later, when visiting her classroom, we find three words written on the blackboard, underlined and capitalized: “PRACTICE PRACTICE PRACTICE.” In this, the cinematic Roberta mirrors the real-life Roberta, as reported by Hartocollis (1999):

Ms. Guaspari, as in the movie, [is] a strict but passionate teacher, more interested in nurturing discipline and craft than self-esteem for its own sake. “Stop! Stop! I can’t stand it! You’re out of tune!” she yelled at her class . . . as they screeched through an étude in G major (p. B9).
But, beyond being a strict disciplinarian, the cinematic Roberta knows how to nurture her more deserving students. When one hard-working child – Guadalupe – gets discouraged because she has a physical disability that impedes her playing and tells Roberta that the violin is “too hard,” Roberta replies compassionately:

The violin is hard for everybody. . . . You shouldn’t quit something just ’cause it’s hard. . . . Standing strong doesn’t mean just using your legs. You can stand strong on the inside. You know what I mean?

The moral, of course, is that Roberta’s mixture of discipline and empathy works as a successful teaching strategy. By the end of a decade, through dedicated instruction and painstaking application, her East Harlem Violin Program has grown to include 150 kids at three separate schools and has become so popular that she must hold a lottery to determine which students can participate. When the Violin Program is threatened by budget cuts, Roberta’s East Harlem students perform in a benefit concert at Carnegie Hall—a “Fiddle Fest” that features such supportive artists as Isaac Stern, Itzhak Perlman, Arnold Steinhardt, and Joshua Bell, joining Roberta’s students to play an adaptation of Bach’s *Concerto in D-Minor for Two Violins*. Here, *Music of the Heart* adds a highly relevant wrinkle to the old joke about the out-of-town tourist who stops the jaded New Yorker on a street corner in midtown Manhattan.

*Out-of-Town Tourist*: Excuse me, but can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?

*Jaded New Yorker*: Of course, I can. Practice, practice, PRACTICE!

**REFERENCES**


