***May You Live in Interesting Times***

-Ancient Chinese Curse.

These ***are*** interesting times for Music advocacy. Those of us with a passionate interest in the power of music education find ourselves confronted by a daunting range of challenges. Economically, we see money for Arts education removed from school board funding models; the Program Enhancement Grant for the Arts, in place since 2008, was dropped from this year’s provincial budget, taking as much as $45,000,000.00 out of our Music and Arts programs. Furthermore, this move follows decades of eroded funding for Music in our classrooms, and the brief period of support hasn’t come close to making up for the years of fiscal leakage.

Politically, current struggles between our own teaching federations and the Ministry of education create a new and unfamiliar challenge for us. This recent tension is all the more troublesome, as it follows several years of unprecedented cooperation between the provincial government and Arts organizations. This era of cooperation lead to a dynamic new curriculum, and the development of resources in support of Arts literacy, instruction, and assessment. The current situation feels a bit like the proverbial rug has been pulled from beneath our collective feet.

**Conventional Wisdom**

At times like these conventional wisdom tells us to circle the wagons. We need to look after our own piece of the pie. It’s a dog eat dog world out there and we have to make sure that our very particular bread is biggest, meanest mut on the block; we need to protect our own interests, even when that means attacking the interests of others. In lean times like this only the fittest will survive.

The problem is, however, that none of this “conventional wisdom” holds true. In fact, even that “Ancient Chinese Curse” is a fiction. There is some debate as to whether the apocryphal oath should attributed to Frederic R. Couder, as quoted in, “Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science” in 1939, or to a short science fiction story, “*U-Turn*” by Eric Frank Russell in 1950. There is no evidence at all, however, that connects “may you live in interesting times” to the literature, folklore, or history of China. In this light, think it’s time we examined some of the other “conventional wisdoms” we live our lives by, especially as they applies to advocacy for Music Education.

**Un-circle the Wagons:**

Insulating ourselves and just staying out of trouble during these genuinely challenging times is not, I would suggest, a useful strategy. In fact, quietly pursuing our own interests, as this adage implies, could lead to an even further erosion of our current position. We need to continue to promote music education in private, public, and governmental circles whenever and where ever we can. The OMEA and its members must continue involvement in both local initiatives and larger projects like ***Wise Voices***, sponsored by the Coalition for Music Education. In fact, we need to take a leading role in such ventures to ensure that the hard questions are asked, and the even harder answers are found.

**Protecting interests--- Why Can’t We Just Get Along?**

Before we begin a policy of protecting our own by attacking the “other”, I think we need to consider whose interest it is we’re protecting. I hope it’s the students. I hope our desire is at all times to help our students become the very best, most well rounded, courageous and empathetic citizens they can be. And yes, we believe that Music has an important role in an education that encourages the growth of such a resilient soul. However, there are other important facets of a well-rounded education, such as broad-based literacy and numeracy, physical health, mental well-being, and a sense of history, culture, and place. We must not, in promoting our cause, disparage the legitimate interests of others. Too often we have jealously regarded the funding offered to programs like literacy and numeracy, rather than seeing the potential of such programs. Hey, I want the kids in my music classes to read and write well! The same goes for funding for initiates in character education, First Nations awareness, math, science… the list goes on. All of these programs, along with Music, have the potential to help a child reach full potential. We need to move forward with own important, while still celebrating the successes and possibilities of these other interests.

The notion working in harmony (sorry, couldn’t resist that one) is particularly important in our own musical community. As the pressures of the current climate comes to bear, I have too often found that we turn on each other. And here I’m not just talking about staff room discussions of the number of string sections verses the number of vocal sections. Let me use my own experience in music advocacy as an example: In my local role I’ve been able to support a range of Music programs, including both traditional( choral and instrumental) programs, and more contemporary offerings (guitar, African drumming, electronic music, First-Nations music). These newer offerings were sometimes met with vocal and public criticism some members of the broader Arts community: African Drumming is not *real* music; Guitar players won’t learn to read “standard” notation; electronic composition has neither rigour nor form; First-Nations studies has no place in the Music classroom. This kind of family in-fighting is dysfunctional and destructive, and takes away from our real arguments that support the benefits of music…. ***all*** music… in the nurturing our students’ true potential.

**We all need to survive.**

One of the things that defines an enlightened humanity is the ability to see beyond a “survival of the fittest” perspective. The kind of social Darwinism that only allows a single, strong powerful perspective to flourish while others dwindle and perish has no place in the egalitarian, open, accepting nation we are trying to build. Sure, I’d like to see a strong, growing and broadly defined musical presence in our schools, but I also want to see viable programs in other areas as well: Visual Arts, Dance, Drama, as well as reading and literature, numeracy and science, history and culture, technology, and the myriad other influences that I want my own children to know. None of these valuable voices should have to fight tooth and nail with the others for survival, and few of us will survive at all if we choose to participate in this kind of uncreative competition.

**Un-conventional Wisdom.**

There is no denying that we are living in a time of great challenge for the Arts and for education. There are some out there that challenge the central notion of Music and the Arts in our world. However, even in the midst of our current trials don’t believe that anyone purposely follows a social, economic, or political that that will lead to the disadvantage of our future generations. We do need to press forward with our faith in the centrality of music to a fully integrated and rounded education, but we need to do so within a paradigm that also respects and supports the values of all the voices in this complicated discussion.

In developing this new, un-conventional wisdom, let’s also rescue the old curse from its mistaken ascription, and place it in its more factual, and friendly, context:

*“For centuries the Chinese used an ancient curse: "May you live in interesting times!" It isn't a curse any more. It's a blessing.*”

From “*U-Turn*” by Eric Frank Russell