VALUE OF MUSIC SCHOOL SETTLEMENTS IN CITIES: BY N. CURTIS

R. DAVID MANNES, the well-known violinist and Director of the Music School Settlement of New York, once told this little anecdote:

"From a quarter of the East Side where there was no music, came a little girl to study at the Music School Settlement. She had no talent and I do not think that any other musical institution would have taken her in; but we accepted her and when she was not successful with one teacher, we tried another. She loved music and so we felt that if she did not get on, it must be the fault of the teacher. She lived on the top floor of a tenement house filled with many poor hard-working people. You have no idea what that little soul meant in such a house. When she practiced after school hours, the neighbors listened while they washed clothes and did housework. Her mother said: 'I am afraid that my child is disturbing our neighbors.' But the neighbors sent word that they wanted the child to keep right on playing; they forgot they were working when she played."

It was William Morris who said that art should be the expression of man's joy in his work. He meant that creative work into which a man can put his heart and which would seem to be the birthright of every individual. But the immigrant of the East Side who labors all day in the deadening mechanism of the factory, feels little of such joy. To the children of these toilers the Music School Settlement offers art that it may put a light into their lives and make work less crushing.

The Music School Settlement idea is now becoming a definite and far-reaching movement. Patterned on the parent school in New York, eighteen new music school settlements have sprung into life within the last year in different cities. That these schools all work for a common aim was proved last spring at a meeting held at the New York School when the representatives of the several organizations united in a federation of music schools and adopted a constitution. The fine spirit of co-operation which has characterized the work of the teachers in the original New York School binds all the schools in a united effort, though, of course, each organization must independently meet the needs of its own community.

The South End School in Boston works among the Polish and Russian Jews and Irish and Swedish immigrants, the North End School (for Boston has two) is in the Italian quarter. The schools in Brooklyn, Albany, New Rochelle, Pittsfield, Providence and the branch of the New York School opened this autumn in the Bronx have
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each their own differentiated circle of activity. The movement now extends even to the Pacific Coast.

The original New York School which began very modestly has now a building of its own at Fifty-five East Third Street in the Russian Jewish quarter. The aims of the Society of the Music School Settlement incorporated in nineteen hundred and three are best expressed in the words of the President, Mrs. Howard Mansfield: "The purpose of the Society, is to provide instruction at the least possible cost to the children of the East Side. Formerly such instruction as was available had been eagerly sought, often from teachers whose demands were out of all proportion to their ability. These children, being chiefly of foreign parentage, have an inherent love of music, and only those to whom music is a necessity can appreciate the part it plays in the lives of these people. While a small charge is made to all those who can pay, there are scholarships and free tuition where payment is not possible. Pupils with unusual ability are trained to become teachers in the school, and many of them have private pupils among their own people. In all the work of the Society the aim is to keep in close touch with the pupils and their families, and to take a keen interest in the life and development of each one who becomes connected with the School. The effect of this work can scarcely be overestimated."

On the staff of seventy-two teachers are professional musicians, volunteers from uptown and advanced pupils of the School. Lessons are given in the playing of the violin, piano, 'cello and double-bass; in theory, sight-reading and ensemble; in singing, sight-singing and chorus work. There are three orchestras composed of pupils, and a volunteer orchestra of adults which meets in the evenings. Half-hour lessons are given at twenty-five cents a lesson, and chorus-class instruction may be had for ten cents. Lessons in ensemble and sight-singing, as well as all lectures, are free. The work is thoroughly organized and the School is run with that system and precision which are a sure augury of success. Common sense and practicality are manifest in every department of the work. There are athletic clubs, a playground on the roof, and summer outings to woods and seashore as well as a two-weeks' holiday at the Vacation House in the country.

It is not the purpose of the Music School Settlement to train pupils into professional musicianship; the goal is to offer to the children of wage-earners an opportunity for interest in art and that development of the finer instincts of the child's mind and heart which music, when rightly taught, can awaken; also to bring this definite cultural influence into the daily lives and homes of the poor.
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Children who have nothing to do out of school hours but to play in the noisy streets of the East Side, are provided with practice rooms at the Settlement, where the influence of Bach and Beethoven replaces that of the hand-organ and the moving-picture show. That the children love the School and that the people of the East Side are alive to its benefits is proved by a waiting list of a thousand names, which shows that the school of eight hundred pupils is still physically incapable of meeting the ever-growing demand.

At THE meeting for the confederation of the different schools last spring, many interesting anecdotes were told by the teachers—anecdotes so striking and touching that they brought the listener straight to the very heart of the work. One father wanted his little girl to have a violin, but he had no money to buy one. As it was spring, he did not need his overcoat, so he pawned it and bought the violin. The little girl became one of the best pupils of the School.

Then there was the son of a poor widow who also wanted money to buy a violin, so he slept on the floor and rented his bed to a lodger until he had saved enough money to buy an instrument and take lessons. He came to the School, went through the course and is now a professional. Then there was a poor German woman who, as she brought her little boy, announced: “I want Billy to have violin lessons and I am going to scrub floors to get the money and when Billy can play on his violin I shall be the happiest woman in all New York City.”

It is not too much to say that nearly every child in the School is in some degree the center of some such sacrifice. We may well believe that the family of the child is gladdened by the result of the effort from the following story which graphically illustrates the effect of the School upon the home. One little boy who came was so happy after his first lesson that he went home and told his father that he wanted to give him lessons too. So the father got a violin and the little boy thus described to the teacher the evening sessions: “Father and I help mother to wash the dishes and then we get out our violins and have a fine time with our lessons. Father is getting on nicely,” and when the teacher asked, “Does your father practice?” the little Russian replied quickly, as though he could not understand such a foolish question: “For why should not a grown-up man practice when he has wanted lessons for long and now has them!”

The influence of the School which finds its avenue through music, is not confined to music alone. The parents have learned to trust the teachers and the workers who live in the Settlement.
building, and the difficulties in many a home have found adjustment and relief through the kindly help and advice of the School.

A talk with Mr. Mannes brings one to a fuller realization of the work which embodies many of the violinist’s own ideas about the musical education of children, the relation of music to the people and what it can mean in the lives of the working classes from whom the great genius so often springs, as well as what it should mean in the lives of the rich who in this country have as yet little realization of music beyond the bought entertainment in opera or in concert hall. “I would like,” he said, “to fill the city with so many good amateurs that every house could make its own music.” Mr. Mannes’ sympathy with the people and his understanding of their needs have led him to cast aside stereotyped and conventional methods of teaching in the effort to inspire the child to seek from the very beginning not mechanical mastery of an instrument but what Mr. Mannes calls “the true heart of music.”

“Now the way that I should like to teach a child,” he said, “would be to begin with it when it is two and a half years of age. I should put either a fiddle or a piano in the room, but no teacher. I should say: ‘Here is a toy; try to do something with it.’ We put drums and other toys into a child’s nursery; why not a fiddle? Let the child touch and handle the instrument; let him try to play on it by himself. Pretty soon the child will say: ‘Will somebody please teach me?’ I have found this to happen every time, and it would be the same way with sight singing, reading or any other kind of musical instruction. If we begin by saying, ‘You must practice two or three hours a day,’ we begin at the wrong end, for it is the compulsory and monotonous practice of five notes and scales that kills the love of music in a young child.”

At THE Music School Settlement, no children, not even those few of exceptional talent who are encouraged to make music a vocation are allowed to neglect their work in the public schools for their music. For Mr. Mannes believes that much of the egotism of the professional musician, the petty jealousies and the smallness of character are due to “the desire to attain at eighteen or twenty years of age that which is called Success, and which necessitates worship of the golden calf of art—Technique, during the very years that the child’s mind is unfolding and that his interests should be broadly awakened instead of concentrated on technical proficiency in one field.” In Mr. Mannes’ opinion, a student will become a greater artist and a happier man if he spreads his technical training over a longer period of time and thus is able to attain
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through a more general education and a broader outlook a better and more normal manhood, mentally and physically. Mr. Mannes believes that the ideal artist should be imbued with the "Beethoven Spirit"—a reverence for his art as for a sacred trust,—and that music should never be degraded into mere egotistical self-expression, for he says, "Music seems to me the only religion common to us all and through this common religion we find in our own way our own individual and respective religions. It is one that has existed for people in every time and place. It must lead to something. There is a real need for music in our lives, a need for the protection that it gives us from the deadening influence of everyday work in a great commercial city." And there can be no doubt that the Music School Settlement work gives to the young ennobling interests, a dignified means of livelihood, brings joy into their lives and good influences into their homes, and thus benefits the whole community.

Mr. Mannes believes very strongly that the public schools, inspired by the example of the Music School Settlement, must come to realize more fully the value of the great developing influence of music and its stimulus to the imagination, for, as he says, "If it means a great deal to those who are rich and surrounded by beautiful things to have music in their homes, those who have only poverty have even greater need of it. And it is my hope that when this need is broadly recognized, the public schools all over the country will be open after school hours as centers of interest for all those who want to know more about the things that make life beautiful, such as painting, music and the kindred arts. The schools should be to the children a place which they really love, and to the people, a temple of inspiration."

Five years ago the writer of this article visited Hampton Institute in Virginia to attend the annual spring exercises. No one who has ever been to Hampton can forget the marvelous impression made by the singing of the negro students when that chorus of eight hundred voices unaccompanied by any instruments, chants in the untaught harmonies peculiar to the negro people the beautiful old plantation melodies, the slave songs which, like all really great music, were born of suffering and of aspiration and seem to be the expression of the very soul of the American negro.

One evening as we sat in the hall, Dr. Frissell, the principal of the School, announced that after the singing some of the visitors would address the students and a famous musician from New York would play to them. Then Dr. Felix Adler, who
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was present, told this story: There was once a negro named Douglas, who, like most of the negro race, was filled with a love of music. He studied the violin, went abroad and became a thorough musician. After the War when the negroes were freed he returned to this country filled with ambition and with love for his art. But he found that every door was closed to him; no orchestra would admit him because of his race, and so, crushed with disappointment, he was forced to earn his living by common fiddling. One day as he was passing through a crowded street in New York, he heard the tones of a violin floating out from a basement window. He stopped and listened. It was evidently a child’s hand that drew the bow across the strings. At last, impelled by some strange inner attraction, he spoke to the mother of the little boy. Recognizing the talent of the child Douglas offered to give him lessons; then into the soul of that little white boy who was denied all larger opportunity for study, the negro musician poured his own soul, giving the child all that he had himself learned. Douglas died, but the little boy became an artist.”—Dr. Adler paused at this place in the story and turning to the negro students who were sitting at the back of the stage in the hall, he said,—“That little boy will play for you tonight.”

Then Mr. David Mannes rose from the audience with violin in hand and stepped onto the stage. The hall was crowded with guests, many of them distinguished people from New York, Richmond, Boston and other cities. There was a hush as Mr. Mannes lifted his violin; he drew the bow across the strings, and turning with his back to all that company he faced the negro students whose eyes were fixed upon him with expectancy, and played to them. The act was so simple and sincere that tears stood in many eyes and it seemed to all of us as though the violin as it sang under the artist’s fingers, strove to give back to the negro people the inspiration that the broken-hearted Douglas had given to the white child. The violinist’s inspired playing that night seemed a prophecy of that larger act of retribution which has found form in the Music School Settlement for Negroes started by Mr. Mannes last spring.

The aim of the Music School Settlement Work for Negroes is threefold: the educational appeal to the negro through music, a peculiar talent for which is a distinct racial trait; the founding of a social center which shall produce a healthy moral environment and provide instructive recreation for the colored people, young and old; the preservation, encouragement and development along natural lines of the music of the negro, which is one of the most characteristic in this country.
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Mr. Mannes has found in Mr. David Martin a negro musician of good training who is eminently fitted to carry on the negro school under Mr. Mannes’ supervision. In speaking of the need of such a school Mr. Martin said, “There are over a hundred thousand negro residents in New York City, many of whom have come here from the South for the same reason that the white settlers originally came to this country: to find freedom and a larger opportunity. But in New York, as elsewhere, the negro workman, no matter what his education or ability, finds himself shut out of nearly all trades-unions and may obtain only the most menial positions whose small salaries keep the race in pitiful poverty. To support a family both parents must go out to work and the children, left without proper care, pick up in the streets the qualities that make the negro, like any other man in the same circumstances, a burden, instead of a help to civilization. If the white child needs the Music School Settlement, how much more does his little dark brother need it!”

During the past few seasons music lessons were given experimentally at the Walton Free Kindergarten for Colored Children, where evening classes were also held for adults. Mr. Mannes went one evening to overlook the instruction. He found a negro washwoman who had bent all day over her tubs, struggling with stiff fingers to bring tones from the piano. Mr. Mannes was touched at the earnestness of the woman and asked her why she had saved her ten cents each night to come for a lesson and what she hoped to do with her instruction. The woman’s appealing look answered the sympathy in his voice. “If I could only play ‘Nearer, My God, to Thee,’” she said, “I should be perfectly happy!”

The Music School Settlement Movement brings home to us the truth that art is not a luxury for the cultured few. The need of it lies deep in every human heart, often most deeply in the souls of those who live nearest to its message because they suffer much. Art is not merely a product of civilization, but a vital working factor in human evolution. And in America the Music Settlement, leveling barriers of race and creed, summons forth the higher nature of its future citizens by giving them the power of speech in what Mr. Mannes rightly calls “the common language of the soul—Music.”