

Let's make Salem a music mecca

Written by Michael Davis Commentary
Mar. 16

statesmanjournal.com



The North Salem High Nordic Choir performs during the 2013 OSA 6A Choir State Championship. / TIMOTHY J. GONZALEZ / Statesman Journal file

Dick Hughes's column, *Connecting the Dots*, will return to this space next week. Mr. Hughes tripped over a dangling participle and is recovering at home.

It was not uncommon in an earlier age for a hometown newspaper to wage a crusade, a vigorous assault of paper and ink to influence public opinion.

Such an offensive – in the form of multiple news stories, editorials and columns on a single subject over many weeks – might be mounted to redress an injustice.

Publisher Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* did just that in the 1880s, pillorying milk dealers and the railroads for artificially raising milk prices and endangering the public with watered-down milk that had been mixed with solids like borax. The *World* editorialized, "Every family man who pays eight or ten cents a quart for milk has the satisfaction of knowing that a good portion of that sum is unjustly extorted by the railroad companies, and that ... his children are stunted in their natural and most helpful food."

Other times crusades were enacted to push forward a political agenda, and Pulitzer was no stranger to that. The *World*, whose circulation reached a peak of 340,000, used its power and influence to help elect Democrat Grover Cleveland in the presidential election of 1884.

And then there is the type of crusade that gets behind a grand – or grandiose – idea. It was Pulitzer's *World* that waged a populist fund-raising campaign to build the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, after the wealthy one-percenters of the Gilded Age declined to contribute. Some 120,000 individuals raised \$101,091 for the statue's base, upon which is inscribed a poem by Emma Lazarus. The verse, which begins, "Give me your hungry, your tired, your poor ..." was the winning entry in a contest sponsored by the newspaper.

On the occasion of my first anniversary as executive editor of the *Statesman Journal*, I want to ask the community to consider an idea that has been percolating since reading arts writer Barbara Curtin's reports from the state high school music competition last spring. It is up to you to decide whether the idea is grand or something less.

An opportunity awaits us that could enrich the local economy, raise the state capital's national profile and solidify our reputation as a community that understands that education means more than preparing children to pass bloodless standardized assessments, as if life upon graduation is just one big multiple-choice test.

Arts education still matters here.

Specifically, Salem and surrounding communities understand the need and importance of music education. Our bands, orchestras, choruses and musical theater productions are a source of justifiable pride and community identity. If you press that little dot on the map locating Salem, you should hear a trumpet fanfare.

I believe we are ready for the next step in our musical evolution, and it's a big one. Salem should become home to a national center for scholastic music, a destination for major exhibits, one-of-a-kind programs and symposia, summer camps, concerts, a festival of musical theater and an annual gala honoring America's outstanding high school instrumentalists, singers, conductors and composers. This event would be to amateur musicians what the Grammys are to the pros.

What I'm proposing might eventually cost millions of dollars, but at this stage it would involve only the expenditure of thought and discussion. We have the brainpower here in spades.

Here's one more analogy: What if Salem, a medium-sized community, could be linked to scholastic music the way tiny Cooperstown, N.Y., is synonymous with baseball?

Finally, I'm quite aware that there is a Sherwood Forest of archers out there who love nothing better than to shoot down progressive ideas. I ask that you set your bows down, fellas, and give this one a fighting chance.

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