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The Power of Music

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Ellie Burrows

Ellie Burrows was born and raised in a little town in northern Ohio. She was homeschooled from grade school through high school, and came to Cedarville in fall of 2017 to pursue her bachelor's degree in mathematics. Although she doesn't consider herself a writer, she loves to read, and so is thankful for those who do like to write.

The Power of Music

The film *Mr. Holland's Opus* is a drama showcasing life and music in the latter half of the 20th century. Even though it is an entertainment film, it provides an effective message, suggesting that music is a powerful instrument that unites people despite social barriers of age, disabilities, and stereotypes. Further, the film cautions us not to allow music to be dismissed from our education or our lives.

This film tells the life story of Glenn Holland, who dreams of becoming a great composer. As a young man, he takes a job as a high school music teacher so that he can have a steady income for a while. He and his students suffer through the first few months as he focuses on teaching the rules of music. Upon realizing that he should be showing his love for music rather than teaching the rules, he changes his methods, which causes his students to begin to enjoy class and actually learn. His career takes up much of the film, as interactions with several students are highlighted. Family life is one of his biggest challenges, since his only son, Cole, is born deaf. In the end, his long-loved job is terminated as school budgets

are cut. The final scene of the film is a performance of one of his compositions played by his former students, in tribute to him.

Music crosses age barriers, as this movie makes clear. Age doesn't keep one from loving music or prevent one from sharing a love of music with a person of a different age. Since this film covers thirty years, Mr. Holland obviously gets older as the film unfolds. Even at the end, he still loves music, and is still able to pass that love on to his high-school students. One special student that Mr. Holland works with is Rowena. Her beautiful voice becomes the star of the senior show Mr. Holland helps direct. The two spend a lot of time together as he coaches her in her part. He also encourages her to pursue her dream of becoming a singer. Their shared love of music nurtures a bond between them, despite the over twenty-five-year age difference, causing Rowena to ask Mr. Holland to run away with her as she intends to pursue her dream.

Another example demonstrating that music is not defined by age is the final scene. This is a tribute to Mr. Holland given by his former and current students, in which they play one of his unpublished compositions, "An American Symphony". Since Mr. Holland has been teaching for thirty years, many different ages are represented on that stage, from one of his first students to some of his current ones. In a time when our culture increasingly segregates by age, this film reminds us that music and the love of music is common ground for all ages.

A second barrier this film suggests that music has power to reach across is the disability of hearing impairment. Possibly the biggest struggle Mr. Holland has during his life is learning that his only son, Cole, is deaf. Mr. Holland dreams great things for his son

as a musician, but those dreams collapse upon learning of Cole's deafness. Mr. Holland is disappointed, and he struggles to relate to his son, since it seems he can't share his passion for music with him. Cole, being deaf, may not fully understand music, but he understands his father's love for it and wants his father's help in experiencing it more. To do this, Mr. Holland works with the principal of the school for the deaf that Cole attends, to prepare a musical performance that the deaf students can follow. With loud music close to the students, and flashing lights to aid in the experience, the kids enjoy the music, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

Music becomes a bonding opportunity in the relationship between father and son. For Christmas that year, Cole and Mrs. Holland get Mr. Holland a large sound system with big speakers that Cole can sit on to feel the music. This allows Mr. Holland to share more of his love for music with his son. While he may never enjoy music the way his father does, Cole does gain a deeper understanding of music and why his father loves it. Mr. Holland's attempts to break down the barrier that exists because of Cole's deafness show that music is not only for those who can hear. Even the hearing-impaired can access it, and it can mean something to them, like how it allowed Mr. Holland and Cole to strengthen their relationship.

Finally, this film addresses how music crosses barriers of stereotypes. One of the most unlikely successful students Mr. Holland teaches is Lou Russ, an underprivileged, African-American football player and wrestler. He struggles in school, so Mr. Holland attempts to teach him the bass drum for the marching

band to help him get some academic credit. Typically, he would be the last person one would expect to excel in music, as an athlete, and he does struggle at first. With time, effort, and Mr. Holland's help, he does finally succeed. His bandmates are enthusiastic for Lou when he finally gets it, and it's apparent that he enjoys being part of the band. Another student Mr. Holland interacts with is Stadler. He's a druggie and a troublemaker who regularly comes to class "stoned." He's smart and able to do well in Mr. Holland's class, but he doesn't care about anything and doesn't want to try. Mr. Holland works him hard and encourages him to appreciate music. Although Stadler's transformation is not shown, in the end, he is one of the students who returns as an upstanding citizen to say goodbye and thank Mr. Holland for how he impacted his life. Even though these two students are different from each other and Mr. Holland, music unites their stories.

In addition to the story emphasizing how music spans the labels we place on each other, many different types of music are played in this film, representing all kinds of preferences. In addition to the original compositions for the film, classical works by Ludwig van Beethoven, Johann Sebastian Bach and John Philip Sousa are played. Jazz, soul, R&B, rock, pop, indie and hip-hop music accompany and play a part in the story. This serves to expand music horizons for viewers and show how all kinds of music, no matter one's preference, can be fun. Mr. Holland recognizes these different tastes in music and the validity of the different tastes. During his first year of teaching in the 1960s, the principal and vice principal of the school confront Mr. Holland regarding his use of rock and roll music in the classroom. The

leadership was concerned because among many adults, rock and roll was considered evil, or at least wrong, based on the idea that it was “black” music. In response, Mr. Holland says, “I will use anything from Beethoven to Billie Holiday to rock and roll, if I think it’ll help me teach a student to love music.” Mr. Holland understands that classical music doesn’t appeal to everyone, especially young people, but what’s important to him is passing on his love of music, whatever the genre.

After all of this, the movie shows the state of music programs in public education and the problem with that. At the end, there are budget reductions in the school district, causing the art, drama, and music programs to be cut from the school, which means Mr. Holland’s job is removed. Mr. Holland attempts to fight this, not just for his job, but for his students. He agrees that the reading and writing portion of school is more important, but with no art or music, “soon these kids won’t have anything to read or write about.” He argues that if the administration continues to remove music and art from children’s lives, they will “create a generation of children who will not have the ability to think. Or create. Or listen.” This serves as a warning for the audience about what could happen if this pattern continues.

Music is a key part of Mr. Holland’s life, and he wants it to be valued by his students. The writers of this movie want music to be valued by their audience, and so they use this film to demonstrate the power music has in the lives of this one man and the many students he encounters. Without this music teacher, the students may never have come to appreciate the classical music that Mr. Holland taught them. Rowena may not have pursued her

dream of becoming a singer without the encouragement of an older mentor. Cole and the other deaf students may never have gotten a chance to experience music without the aid of a loving music enthusiast. Lou Russ may have dropped out of school because he had no success without the help of a successful musician. It was through the power of music that Mr. Holland was able to reach and help these individuals when he probably would not have otherwise.

As viewers of this film, we should remember that the power of music can reach anyone: young, old, hearing, deaf, athlete, or troublemaker. Music gives all people a common ground, since we all can appreciate it in whatever form we choose. *Mr. Holland's Opus* encourages us not to allow this beautiful and powerful instrument to become lost from our educational system, and thus our culture, because music can unite us across our social barriers unlike any reading, writing, or long division.

Works Cited

Herek, Stephen, director. *Mr. Holland's Opus*. 20th Century Fox, 1996.