Should the MIT reputation be upheld at all costs?

By Robert D. Nathaniel

With the redeployment of grades and proposals for new forms of performance evaluation, the MIT community has recently witnessed much in the way of evaluating its educational standards and goals. Many things have been said about the order of priorities in educational and social development. Criticisms have been raised to indicate that the Institute's administrators and educators are perhaps disproportionately concerned with maintenance of rank and prestige. It has been implied and argued directly that in the process of maintaining its impressive reputation for outstanding achievement, the Institute has tended to overlook individual development. I would like to relate an incident which illustrates, all too clearly, the Institute's overwhelming and perhaps damaging concern for its renown.

The incident involves a fellow student who had considered entering a musical composition contest. The student was designated as a science major, but had, for some time, been torn between his two main interests in life: that of his science major and that of classical music. He was well versed in the rudiments of musical theory to the extent that a major in music at MIT was well within his realm of alternatives. In fact, it was not a clear-cut decision that lead him to major in science, but rather, practical considerations of the disadvantages of majoring in music. However, his undying interest in classical music and his active creation of several pieces left him still curious to test his own potential as a composer. Consequently, he was attracted to the idea of entering one of his pieces in a competition.

At this point, the involvement of an Institute faculty member became necessary, as the contest application required the authorization of any instructor to verify the work's originality. Enrolled in a music theory course, the student approached his instructor with a written copy of his composition in the hope of obtaining the required consent.

The instructor flatly refused. He explained that by signing the application as a faculty member of the Institute, he would be, in effect, adding the endorsement of the entire department to the piece. His explanations seemed to imply that if the student entered and did not win (as the instructor predicted), then he did not want his credit to the Institute to remain intact. The music instructors had been previously reimbursed for encouraging students to participate in the contest. The instructor declined to sign the application and stated that she could not put the reputation of the MIT Department of Music on the line by endorsing a piece which she thought deficient.

I would like to consider the ramifications of the aforementioned incident by introducing one very basic principle: that the evaluation of music and, for that matter, any art form, is entirely subjective. Within the spectrum of tastes of the MIT community about which we can see that what is abhorred by some is often esteemed by others. In many situations the artistic preferences of an individual group or entity may offset another's criticism. Very often there is a discrepancy between that Institute officials anticipate and the artistically perceptive reactions of the MIT community.

As a case in point, consider the Institute's procurement of "Transparents Horizons" and the resultant student response that the sculpture has received. One should also consider the factor of timing involved in the presentation of innovations that may differ from the original source. Many of the great masters in every field of the arts and humanities were initially subjected to varying degrees of criticism, from dubious tolerance to outright rejection.

The question regarding the improperity of the response of the music instructors can be viewed in fairly simple terms. As an educational institution, MIT's primary obligation is to the betterment of its students. The school's resources should be made available to any endeavor that can only develop productive potential. One would imagine that a given department would be glad to assist any student who aimed to compete in any legitimate forum. After reviewing the piece, the instructor replied that while the work "showed talent," and was original, it lacked sophistication and skill in competition among more formidable contestants. When the student pursued the matter, insisting that he only wanted a chance to compete, the instructor simply refused. He explained that by signing the application as a faculty member of the Institute, he would be, in effect, adding the endorsement of the entire department to the piece. His explanations seemed to imply that if the student entered and did not win (as the instructor predicted), then he did not want his credit to the Institute to remain intact. If the instructor replied that while the work "showed talent," and was original, it lacked sophistication and skill in competition among more formidable contestants. When the student pursued the matter, insisting that he only wanted a chance to compete, the instructor simply refused.

The situation is reminiscent of the athletic coach who is reluctant to take on a novice if there is any risk of losing the team's star. The welfare of the prestige of a given department should not be the guiding factor for education. If we accept that musical preferences are, indeed, subjective, then what authority does anyone have to say that a given work will not find appreciation? Is it possible that an art form, is entirely subjective. Within the spectrum of tastes of the MIT community about which we can see that what is abhorred by some is often esteemed by others. In many situations the artistic preferences of an individual group or entity may offset another's criticism. Very often there is a discrepancy between that Institute officials anticipate and the artistically perceptive reactions of the MIT community.

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