

Address to the National Association of Schools of Music

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In May, 1780, as America took possession of its future and began the process of determining how it would govern itself, John Adams wrote this celebrated passage to Abigail Adams:

The science of government it is my duty to study, more than all other sciences; the arts of legislation and administration and negotiation ought to take the place of, indeed exclude, in a manner, all other arts. I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain.¹

One hesitates to contradict so profound and eloquent a patriot, but I would propose that, in this matter, John Adams was deeply mistaken.

The calamitous 14th century was the time of the Great Famine, the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, and the Great Schism of the church. It was also the time of Dante and Giotto. An age that seemed to have no perspective on its own endless conflict bequeathed to us the art of perspective, and Dante's literary vision of order and beauty, that has transcended the strife and despair of every century since.

Which matters more today – the pietistic theology of the German 18th century, or the music of J.S. Bach? We are more likely to study that theology in order better to understand Bach, than to study Bach to learn more about his Germany.

Closer to our own time, when this country experienced the Great Depression, did we suspend our attention to the arts? No – we *needed* them; they were literally a way out of hardship for thousands who were employed by the WPA – employed to make art, to be a witness to their time, to record what was happening, and to dream about what might happen next.

Perhaps most striking in this regard is the supreme importance of poetry and music to those who lived under the Soviet Russian government. No hardship, and no oppression, could prevent them from expressing themselves and communicating their messages to each other, and to the future.

Thus I would say to John and Abigail Adams: the study of the arts must be undertaken everywhere and at all times – more when it is difficult than less, more when society seems unprepared for it than less, more when it requires a sacrifice than less. The arts are not an adornment to be layered on top of society when it is feasible to do so. They are at the core of the definition and meaning of society.

This is our greatest contribution: the gift of the beautiful, the impractical, the visionary, the improbable, the if-only. The world-changing strengths of engineering and science, politics and philosophy, are complemented by the world-encompassing strengths of the arts, with their irresistible challenge. The sciences need the arts.

The arts at all times are deeply communicative. We speak not only to each other, but, through the medium of memory, with the past. We study history because our creations are a dialogue with our brothers and sisters who were artists since humans became humans. Just as the Han dynasty painters of China, or Olmec sculptors of Mexico, or Egyptian architects, or Athenian playwrights speak to us, though from the distant past, with clear and fresh voices, we acknowledge that **we ourselves are speaking directly to the future** – a thrilling responsibility.

Over the past nine months, I had the privilege of serving on the Obama campaign's National Arts Advisory Group. We met intensively to formulate guidelines and ideas for what we hope will be a new government deeply supportive of the arts in America. One of our members, the novelist Michael Chabon, undertook to express our guiding philosophy in the following statement:

Every grand American accomplishment, every innovation that has benefited and enriched our lives, every lasting social transformation, every moment of profound insight any American visionary ever had into a way out of despair, loneliness, fear and violence— everything that has from the start made America the world capital of hope, has been the fruit of the creative imagination, of the ability to reach beyond received ideas and ready-made answers to some new place, some new way of seeing or hearing or moving through the world. Breathtaking solutions, revolutionary inventions, the road through to freedom, reform and change: never in the history of this country have these emerged as pat answers given to us by our institutions, by our government, by our leaders. We have been obliged—to employ Dr. King's powerful verb—to dream them up for ourselves.

America's artists are the guardians of the spirit of questioning, of innovation, of reaching across the barriers that fence us off from our neighbors, from our allies and adversaries, from the six billion other people with whom we share this dark and dazzling world. Art increases the sense of our common humanity. The imagination of the artist is, therefore, a profoundly moral imagination: the easier it is for you to imagine walking in someone else's shoes, the more difficult it then becomes to do that person harm. If you want to make a torturer, first kill his imagination. If you want to create a nation that will stand by and allow torture to be practiced in its name, then go ahead and kill its imagination, too. You could start by cutting school funding for art, music, creative writing and the performing arts.²

So in this time of obligatory cuts, let us not see ourselves as on the margins of society. What we do, has always been done. What we need, has always been needed. We'll be prudent and responsible, as everyone must be in these times, but we will keep singing and dreaming.

I have three interwoven themes today: first, that music matters everywhere, all the time; second, that, despite this evident importance, we shouldn't be complacent about our role – we should do our utmost for our own communities; finally, that classical music can and should be deeply involved with contemporary society.

Writing about the painter Robert Bechtle, Philip Schjeldahl has called attention to a paramount issue for artists: “The problem of how to live in this land, as it actually is...”³

In November 2008, this land is having some actual problems. And that leads me to muse for a while on a less grand, but equally essential, subject: how to live in *this* land, as it actually *is*; or, to put it another way, what to say about what *we* are doing - each of us - for our own communities, right now.

A generation or so ago, in the work of this organization, we entered into a tremendous discussion about how we were preparing our students for their careers. Some asked what was to become of the thousands of young musicians to whom we gave credentials each year, seeming to assure them that they'd have a bright future in music. Some took a dark view, proposing that we were misleading the great majority of our students. They couldn't succeed, wouldn't find jobs; they had the wrong dreams.

But others took what we now call the "instrumental" view – that an education in music has a usefulness far beyond the narrow professional world of music. Our students might move into other careers, but they needn't regret the time they had spent in the discipline of music, in ensemble learning, in listening and thinking, in the pursuit of something worthwhile and beautiful.

Still a third viewpoint, intersecting with both these negative and positive viewpoints, proposed that we should add the study of career skills to our curricula, helping students to help themselves as they embarked into the increasingly uncharted territory of lives in music.

We developed a wonderful variety of approaches to career skills, foremost among them the programs that aspired to study and foster arts leadership. Among those leading the way was the Ying Quartet, who are playing such a marvelous role in this meeting; who were part of early experiments in arts leadership as students, and who have taken on a nationally important role as performers, teachers, and mentors.

From the Top, the leading national radio show, has begun giving leadership training to every young classical and jazz musician featured on their program. They ask, "What would you say to your city council about the importance of music?" or "What would you say to your U.S. senator?" and then, when possible, those young people are brought into precisely those venues to give remarkable and compelling testimony. In Aspen, we're hoping to partner with *From the Top* for a more sustained version of this with our pre-college students.

I have only good things to say about this whole endeavor. And yet, I want to be among many who are proposing a new perspective on the subject.

This is that arts leadership should not only include ways to organize one's musical life, ways to communicate more effectively, and strategies to advocate for the importance of what we do. As important as it is to bring students to questions like, "Why is what we do important? Why should the community support it? How can we be more persuasive and effective in bringing our message to others?" it is equally interesting to reverse the paradigm.

This is an essential part of the Ying Quartet's message. The artist as citizen⁴ is committed to individual action, seeing community service as a way of being, not a strategy.

This is something being accomplished by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, thanks to the leadership of Bruce Coppock. They've decided to invert the question. What if, instead of putting the musician and musical issues at the center, and asking, "How can the community help us realize our mission?" an organization puts its community at the center, and asks, "What is important to this community? How can we be of service to it? How can we listen better, and respond better?"

Two summers ago, Jessye Norman was our guest in Aspen. We asked her to speak to our opera program's students and staff – singers, pianists, coaches, teachers. We expected an inspiring and imposing story about her career: her struggles and the brilliant successes that followed them, bits of advice from the height of her achievement that would inspire our students. Something like, "Some day, if you work hard enough, you might be like me!"

But this was the day after Beverly Sills had died, and Jessye Norman was instead wrapped in contemplation of her friend's marvelous life. Beverly Sills triumphed over immense personal difficulties, and presented an unfailingly positive and generous face to the world. She radiated incomparable technique and artistry with an appearance of ease and grace that was especially meaningful to those who knew how hard things really were for her. But more than that, when the moment came for her to retire from the stage, when she would never again have whatever happiness her triumphs in performance had brought her, she turned to a life of service. Jessye Norman said, "Be a wonderful musician, but also be a true citizen! Volunteer in your community: serve Meals on Wheels or read to the elderly. It doesn't have to be about yourself. When you are helping someone, say: 'I am a musician,' with pride and conviction."

In a few moments I'll have more to say about strategies for service. First, I have a few observations about curriculum.

One of the great problems this organization addresses is how to expand the realm of curriculum without losing focus on the things that have always mattered, and continue to matter: aural skills, a real sense of history, knowledge of repertoire, and, above all, achievement in performance. I hope it might be true that a new paradigm - seeing our service to others as the center - might help in ordering our students' priorities in general.

I think we can find economies in students' time by embracing technology more imaginatively – some kinds of learning depend on group activity and resist time-saving techniques, some learning only happens when students and teachers are together for that beautiful *A-ha!* moment - but some don't. Solo practice time is a given, but most of our student waste vast amounts of time in poor practice technique, using rote methods that ignore advances in the cognitive psychology of practice, and contribute to injury.

Very often, our style of education seems to depend on relentless competition. I am not opposed to competitions, when and if they are about finding one's best performance. When they are about psyching out the other competitors and even the judges themselves, I'm not so sure.

I had the immense good fortune, and also the great emotional challenge, of studying at Juilliard. I say "emotional challenge" because, for five years of my life, I couldn't walk into – or even past – the Juilliard building without a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach: Am I working hard enough? Am I good enough?

Jane Austen wrote, "One does not love a place less for having suffered in it, unless it has been all suffering, nothing but suffering,"⁵ and those words hit home for me, because Juilliard taught me so much that was positive. I had teachers who cared about music, and cared about me. I derived a conviction that education should depend on supportive, rather than destructive, competition. As we mature in each other's company as artists, we should build trust, friendship, mutual support, encouragement – through learning we forge relationships that will sustain us throughout life, and those relationships are precious and positive.

Like almost every young person, I had moments of extreme doubt – doubt about myself and doubt about how, and whether, I would succeed. But at every moment, without ever one exception, I knew that music was the truest and deepest thing I could do. It gave me the most absolute connection to myself, and to others – and even when I couldn't have said with any certainty who I was, I knew that I would succeed by expressing my best self through music.

And success – excellence - is not a matter of surpassing others – **it is a matter of making a surpassingly important contribution ourselves.**

Now for something concrete about musicians in service to their communities.

The whole idea of music in Aspen had its origin in a convocation arranged by the University of Chicago in 1949, to celebrate the bicentennial of Goethe's birth with a gathering of eminent humanists and musicians. Thomas Mann, José Ortega y Gasset, Thornton Wilder, Gregor Piatigorsky, Arthur Rubinstein, Dmitri Mitropoulos and the Minneapolis Symphony, and many, many others gathered in a hitherto unknown mountain town in Colorado. The keynote speaker was Albert Schweitzer, making his only visit to the United States, to speak about culture, peace, humanity, and service.

This summer of 2009, marking the 60th anniversary of our great beginning, we will partner with the international Albert Schweitzer Fellowship to offer fellowships to our Aspen summer students for projects of direct service to community. We'll ask the students to design projects they can carry out wherever they live and study during the year, and we will fund them in a modest but meaningful way. These projects are not to begin with a premise like "How can I get more people to come to my concerts? How can I find donors to support me? How can I find more students for my studio?" Instead, they should ask "What can I do for people around me? How can my skills and training benefit others? What could I do, besides practice and perform, that would make me proud to say 'I am a musician?'"

Ask your students what makes them happy in being a musician. If the answer is, "I will love it when I finally win an audition," or "I love winning competitions," or perhaps, "It's so great when everyone says my performance was amazing," then they may be in for a rough time. The great and sometimes terrible Adele Marcus used to say, "You're only a concert pianist while you're giving a concert."

The challenge is that, if this is what makes students happiest, then they'll only have a few happy moments, separated by long periods of preparing, wishing, and hoping. And I have to tell you that I have known many real musicians who were happier in winning an audition than in having the job they won.

But if our students' favorite thing is being with other musicians, with other people, and finding that every day they're doing something they believe in, and seeing the joy music-making brings, whether it's performing in concert halls or cafés, teaching, improvising, or just deeply thinking about music - then they have a lifelong source of happiness.

A couple of years ago, a few dozen colleagues and friends gathered in our living room to celebrate the retirement of Tony Bianco. It was Tony's sixtieth year teaching at Carnegie Mellon University. He had been appointed Principal Bass of the Pittsburgh Symphony by Fritz Reiner; his first playing job had been with Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. That afternoon, the head of our voice faculty, Mimi Lerner, and Ralph Zitterbart of our piano faculty, gave us a group of Schubert *lieder* – I remember an emotionally gripping *Gretchen am Spinnrade* and, of course, *An die Musik*. Hearing Schubert's music in the intimate setting for which it was intended, full of power and tenderness, as fresh as if it had been written the day before, made us all quiet for a moment. Then Mildred Miller, who herself was celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of her Met debut, raised her glass and said, "What a beautiful profession this is!"

Though this is a time of tremendous challenge, let's take a moment to reflect on what a wonderful thing we do – what a beautiful profession this is. And, in case your faculty members haven't said this to you enough lately, let me thank you for your role in this beautiful profession. Administration is a wonderful thing, if it is dedicated to building community, to diplomatic problem solving, to encouraging excellence, and especially to telling the story of accomplishment, and making connections with the community, showing everyone how they are linked in this great endeavor.

Each of us works in a unique place, and makes a unique contribution there. Wise colleagues of mine have said that we need to seek the genius of the place – what is especially possible, and especially important, in each different setting for teaching, learning, and performing. It is not the same everywhere.

Each school of music has the sovereign and unique mission of bringing the active study of music into its own community, and representing the educating and civilizing power of music for all.

Some of us are engaged in training the next generation of professional soloists – we are populating the world's greatest orchestras and preparing the scholars who will investigate music in the principal universities of the world. All this is a wonderful thing. But the great majority of our students will not end up in any of these categories. Are we wrong to expend our tremendous efforts on their behalf? Should we, as some have said over the years, concentrate on disabusing our students of their impractical dreams? Should we concentrate on re-channeling their energy, their vitality, their discipline and enthusiasm, into other, more reasonable endeavors?

Without in the slightest rejecting the necessity for realistic career counseling, or training in diverse career skills, I would argue that the purpose of the more than 600 NASM schools is not just to be a system to find the greatest future stars. This is another paradigm that should be reversed: we're not focusing on the few whose talent is so stellar they would make it anywhere. Rather, we are all engaged in bringing the authentic study of music into every community. Every child should sing. Every child should have the opportunity to play in an ensemble, which is a pleasure never forgotten later in life. We see music as a true liberal art, taking a necessary and indispensable place alongside all the other studies fostered in our colleges and universities.

The work of the artist as citizen is not a fall-back for those who are not going to make it in some different way. It is an opportunity for a career of unassailable significance. We *do* need to focus on our personal role, whether we define this as advocacy or as autonomy – who we are, rather than just what we do.

Now I would like to turn briefly to what music *means*, today.

Jon Stewart, talking about political attacks on supposed elitism in the Presidential campaign, asked, “Isn’t the word ‘elite’ supposed to mean something really good?”⁶

Something much on our minds through the recent election was the continuing negativity of what are called the “culture wars.” Today I am not proposing to talk about the larger political and social problems of a society at war with itself over what is elite, what is to be considered authentically American, etc. But within our musical world, the culture wars have their own pernicious effect. What is, and isn’t, in the canon? What is, or isn’t, classical? Years ago, Virgil Thomson sought to end the incessant debate about what is, or isn’t, American, by saying that American music is: music written by an American. Period. But he didn’t succeed in silencing the question.

For decades, we in the academy have been accused of harboring an unwanted elite of composers, out of touch with “real” musical taste. We’re accused of preparing students to perform music most people don’t want to hear. It might take me a week to refute this. But I believe I *could* refute it! The primary fact is that - no matter what was true in the mid-20th century - college and university schools of music today show a tremendous and healthy diversity. Every point of view is represented, from the wildest experimentation, to the “School of the Tchaikovsky concerto,” through the fiercest theory, through every variety of jazz, to minimalism, to a kind of tonality that can cheerfully co-exist with Broadway, to art music inspired by rock.

The great model is Leonard Bernstein, who was important to the world of classical music, and important to the *world*. His music-making crossed every sort of boundary. People tried to put him into various boxes, but now that all seems truly silly, like trying to stick a label on Wynton Marsalis.

At a strategic planning meeting for Aspen, we recently found ourselves debating whether we should describe ourselves as a “classical” music festival. Some proposed that “art music” better describes our mission. Some were in favor of just being a “music festival.” But others worried that by not defining “our” music, we would suggest that we might be planning to host a *Kool and the Gang* reunion tour. And, of course, some thought we might as well do that.

One of the complaints about “our” music, whatever you call it, is that it is out of touch and not popular enough. One reads that what we now call “classical” was really the popular music of its time, meaning this as an indictment of today’s classical music culture.

This I don’t believe. Clara Schumann was not really the Madonna of Düsseldorf, or Schubert the Fall Out Boy of Vienna. But through most of the history of the music we call “classical,” composers *were* deeply influenced by the widest spectrum of the music they heard – folk music, military music, music meant for simple entertainment, music of other cultures, as the trade patterns of history brought the world’s music into contact with what was then a European tradition.

Most composers have always embraced the possibility of including other sounds and other styles. In a review of a recent opera boasting an impressive diversity of styles, Anthony Tommasini wrote “Why *shouldn’t* they borrow from any musical tradition they choose to?”⁷ We all know that Martin Luther borrowed contemporary drinking songs for his sublime hymns, Mozart was fascinated by Turkish bands, Mahler layered the sounds of *klezmer* with military marches into massive symphonic textures, and Debussy was profoundly influenced by the Javanese gamelan he heard in Paris in 1889. In every case, these masters were interested in incorporating all kinds of music into

their own, the crucial factor being that this incorporation was to be carried out with complete integrity – not gratuitously, not as a matter of *pastiche*.

Thus it would be artificial, today, to find a bright line between everything in the pop music culture, everything in the commercial music culture, and everything in the art music culture. Let's have Bach in cafés, Shostakovich in night clubs, film music at the symphony, and *Radiohead* in Alice Tully Hall.

And I would even suggest that to seek such a bright line is, in a way, to fall under the spell of our founding father John Adams's idea that music is a kind of refinement to be postponed, to be segregated, to be elevated beyond the realm of the day-to-day and the necessary, to be waited for. And that is wrong.

I once heard Virgil Thomson say that Beethoven only lives because we give him life – we make him alive through our work, and our belief in that work.⁸ One of the crucial things about our music is that it should change with time and place – interpretation should never become fixed and immobile – so that *we* make Beethoven contemporary and relevant.

So we have looked at some reasons why these tough economic times should not persuade us to postpone, or minimize, or depreciate our work. We've looked at some aspects of leadership in the arts, and some of the perennial questions about how to carry out our work. I had intended, when I started thinking about this occasion late last summer - at a time when the exigencies of the economy weren't so pressing - to talk also about recent work in neuroscience and music, but that will have to wait for another time. Suffice it to say that we musicians are living and working in one of the most exciting times ever for the science of how humans hear and understand music, and what it means to us. Great scientists are engaged in telling us, and the world, that music is absolutely central to human experience, and even to the definition of humanity itself.

Just last week, I was driving to my office on a morning where the remarkable natural beauty of Aspen was not enough to distract me from the worries and uncertainties we are all grappling with these days. Our local radio station was broadcasting *Performance Today*, and I heard Fred Child introduce a segment from London's Wigmore Hall: Angela Hewitt playing Max Reger's transcription for solo piano of Richard Strauss' *Morgen*.

I had one of those moments of deep listening, of emotion so powerful that one almost has to pull the car to the side of the road.

It wasn't so much that the transcription was unexpectedly succinct, tender, and masterful, though it was all that.

It wasn't so much that Angela Hewitt played it sublimely, though she did.

I once heard Pierre Vallet coach this song with two students. It opens and closes with a tremendously extended long line in the accompaniment, built up through audacious pauses and silences; the rather hapless pianist was trying just to get through it, and Pierre Vallet needed to say something like this: "If you don't trust the music, then you can't be trusted *with* it."

The title of the song means "Tomorrow," and it opens "And tomorrow the sun will shine again." Tomorrow we will still be together; we will still hear each other's breath and be reassured....

My emotion was in thinking of the more than one hundred years that this music has stood as a monument to love, to hope, to faithfulness, in a world that has always known plenty of the alternative.

Hewitt let the final chord ring into an absolutely perfect silence, and she created one of those sublime moments that can only happen when people gather together truly to listen. I say *she* created the moment because she must have willed it to happen, but of course, it was really the listeners who created it, all together, as if silently whispering within themselves, “Thank you!”

I would like to close with a thought about what *you* do, in the context of our country’s brilliant history, since you are, after all, the National Association of Schools of Music.

A very, very few leave a legacy that the future will recognize in their own name. Maybe every singer dreams of the impact of Callas, every pianist of the celebrity of Horowitz, every composer of the glamour of Stravinsky. And we wish them success with that, because every generation must have its new stars, and will have them. But *all* of us have the chance to leave a legacy, by making our communities better.

I ask you: is the place where you live better, because you live there? Then I ask you: can you convey to your students that they can accomplish this same great success – that, while they can not know whether they will leave their names on the record of history, they can be certain that their work as musicians, their role in society as musicians, will be part of a human legacy that has carried generation into generation, since there was such a concept as generation.

In this most difficult time, shall we hide our lamps under a bushel and try to keep a low profile? Research is very persuasive that, over the last four recessions in America, organizations that stayed confident in their mission weathered the storms best; those that panicked or faltered were hit much harder.⁹ This is a Haydn year, so let us take the example of his *Mass in a Time of War* to remember that many of the greatest works of art were created by those who saw no dissonance in creating beauty in the midst of trouble and strife.

Everything in our work is about what we hand on – mind to mind, hand to hand, heart to heart. This is the essence of our calling in education. Thomas Jefferson wrote, “If the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe, *education* is to be the chief instrument in effecting it.”¹⁰ We can be proud to say that the sons and daughters of America not only can, but must have the right to study music.

¹ Letter to Abigail Adams, May 1780

² Obama National Arts Policy Committee, October 2008

³ “Parked Cars,” *New Yorker* magazine; May 9, 2005

⁴ See *The Artist as Citizen*, Joseph Polisi, Hal Leonard Publishers, 2005

⁵ *Persuasion*

⁶ *The Daily Show*, October 10, 2008

⁷ “Arjuna’s Dilemma,” *New York Times*; November 7, 2008

⁸ Commencement address, New England Conservatory, 1990

⁹ Giving USA Newsletter 3, 2008; *Marts & Lundy Minute* #3, September 2008

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson to M. A. Jullien, 1818