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Keynote Address

Ben Cameron

“Moving Forward in Uncertain Times”

Thank you, and a special thanks to the great Karen Moynahan for the opportunity to be with you today. Music, more than any other art form—even theatre—has been the source of greatest joy in my life: I grew up in a home surrounded by music, playing a Baldwin upright, encouraged by a mother who had attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music in voice, in a home where even our bubble-front Westinghouse drying machine played “How Dry I Am” when it finished its cycle. I sang Wagner with Elmer Fudd in *What’s Opera, Doc?*; while in grammar school, I saw Isaac Stern and Leontyne Price in our small town college auditorium in High Point, NC, courtesy of the Columbia Concerts series; and, at the age of 4, armed with a jar of nickels and pennies and quarters, marched proudly to our local music store to buy my first vinyl record—Herbert Von Karajan conducting Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* on one side and *Sleeping Beauty* on the other, with that bright red Angel label for, I think, \$2.98—although, before you get too carried away, I must admit my second record purchase was Annette Funicello singing “Ma, He’s Making Eyes at Me” and “Jo-Jo The Dog-Faced Boy.”

And while much of my love of music came from my parents and Ed Sullivan and the car radio, my deepest debt is to my teachers, whom I want to salute for a moment even as I invite you to remember yours—teachers like Bess Gayle, who patiently coaxed me from *A Dozen a Day* exercises to Bach preludes and duets at the interfacing Steinways in her home; Henry and Mildred Whipple, my church vocal choir directors, who taught me to take direction; Carl Wright, my high school debate team partner who taught me basic guitar chords and how to tackle classical guitar transcriptions; Mary P. Browne, my high school chorus director who conducted my first *Messiah* during my tenor days when I could still hit that A entrance in “Worthy is the Lamb”; and the great Phyllis Curtin, who in a moment of lunacy wondered what it would be like to teach someone who was NOT a vocal major and gave me private lessons for three years during my graduate school days—teachers who all taught me not only about music, but about heart and feeling and teaching and what it may mean to be an expressive human being.

As Marge Piercy writes in “To Be of Use”:

The people I love the best...

Harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,

[and] pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,

who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,

who do what has to be done, again and again.

You as teachers and artists are the people I love best. With every student every year, with every return to scales and theory or to basic intro appreciation of the three B's—whether Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, or Baker, Bennett and Beyonce—you move things forward, doing what has to be done again and again in pursuit of, as Piercy closes her poem, “the work that is real.” And for that, to each and every one of you, my deepest thanks.

Many of us grew up in and all now work in a country that has increasingly separated “low” art from “high” art—a division examined in 1990 by author Lawrence Levine in his *Highbrow/Lowbrow, the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. While our forefathers and foremothers enjoyed the intermingling of the high and low, we now find it risible that Jenny Lind would have interpolated “Home Sweet Home” into *Rigoletto*, pooh-pooh airlines that co-opt Gershwin and Delibes, and view John Williams pops concerts and cross-over artists like Andreas Bocelli with condescension rather than admiration—even while “average Americans” (whatever that means) committed to the popular have only to see the words “opera” or “symphony” to be certain they are uninterested, even before the first note is played.

With rare exception, this split divides “enjoyable” and “popular” music from “legitimate” and “serious” music both aesthetically and structurally, with music that is “good for you” in a medicinal sense enshrined in the not-for-profit sector, whether through orchestras and opera companies; school-based choruses and concert bands grounded in classics but less often in rock, country, or even jazz; or the tax-exempt media outlets of NPR and PBS. And while this structural polarization had begun in the 1920s, it took flight in the 1950s—an era of national confidence, a rising middle class, ardent media support, rising leisure time, a belief in a single homogenous vision of what it meant to be an American, and a demand for serious music fueled by the appearances of Leonard Bernstein and Van Cliburn and Maria Callas on one of the then three existing television networks. Capitalizing on this context, the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations spent hundreds of millions of dollars to support and create and endow arts organizations and support artists training beyond a few key urban areas with three beliefs: that every American citizen, no matter where they lived, should have the opportunity to encounter serious, live music on a regular basis; that if the field were decentralized, employment opportunities would increase exponentially, and musician artists might find lives, not of economic opulence, but economic dignity; and that removed from the glare of the commercial and critical spotlight of New York, these artists could take more risks—a trifecta of good for audience, good for artists, and good for art form. With the founding of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 (whose founding members, I should add, included not only Bernstein and Stern but Anthony Bliss, Marian Anderson, Rudolph Serkin, and Duke Ellington), state arts councils in every state, local arts councils in many municipalities, corporate arts philanthropy, and most importantly individual donors—donors who subscribed, who attended in ever growing numbers, who joined the call of service by participating on boards, and who contributed regularly and deeply to ensure the permanence of the arts in their and their children's lives—the arts entered an unprecedented era of support in America. The opera field grew from 27 companies to more than 210 today, from 1300 orchestras—many of them

amateur—to more than 1700. Arts in school programs exploded, the arts became a central Cold War strategy as we exchanged the Philharmonic with the Bolshoi, and as much as 13% of the contributed charitable dollar was designated for the arts—all out of a sense that the arts—and music—were an essential part of our education, our lives, and the public good.

But that chapter has passed, and the world that allowed this movement to flourish is no longer the world in which we live. Our world today, in stark contrast, is one not of social confidence but of social anxiety; not a rising but a beleaguered middle class; not burgeoning but winnowed arts journalism; and a landscape of communities far more diverse than the European homogenous vision had ever dreamt—a thrilling, continually diversifying array of racial, generational, sexual, gender, physical ability, religious, political communities, each opening the possibilities of new collaborations, new expressions, new forms, but each with its own unique needs, its own specific sense of what being an American truly means, and a resistance to a presumed ability of major institutions and Eurocentric traditions to set a cultural agenda.

Moreover, we live and compete for attention in a world today of more than 600 million blogs, not three networks but hundreds of cable stations and streaming services, and Twitter traffic of 500 million tweets per day (although with Elon Musk reinstating Donald Trump’s Twitter account, that figure may soon double). And while leisure time may or may not be rising, how we spend our time has shifted: we spend 38 hours each week on the telephone, 16 hours a week playing video games, an additional 16 hours a week on social media—and young people especially are likely to look not to nonprofit arts groups for artistic experiences, but to their iPhones. Long before the onset of COVID, the spinets that had been a staple in every classroom had disappeared, arts programs in public schools had been decimated and eliminated, the arts jettisoned in the move from STEAM to STEM. New metrics had been implemented to determine departmental budgets on head counts—especially vexing equations for the training of musicians, which often must be in small ensembles or one-on-one—and education designed to instill curiosity and train the liberal mind had been replaced with the emphasis on college as job accreditation and preparation, with universities ranked according to potential graduate income.

And the world of nonprofits fostered in the 50s and beyond, into which now many of your graduates hope to find careers, is imperilled: For more than thirty years, audiences at the now more than 150,000 nonprofit arts organizations have been declining, subscriptions falling, the percentage of American households contributing to a charitable cause slipping over the last decade from more than 2/3 to under 1/2 and the share of the charitable dollar shrinking from 13% to 4%. Nonprofit arts groups have seen capacity sales stagnate stubbornly at 61–65% or less—levels my teachers would have called a D or an F—and nonprofit art fields operate with aggregate negative working capital.

COVID during the last two years caused none of this, although it has exacerbated this picture. It has upended our core urban areas, forced us into isolation, and required many arts organizations to suspend programming, cancel contracts, lay off staff—many of whom have now defected to other industries—and shutter venues.

And while emergency COVID funding ironically means that many arts organizations are actually in a better financial position today than they were before COVID began, that funding is over, gone, and—Taylor Swift tours notwithstanding—audiences are not returning even at the previously insufficient 60% level. They are instead hesitant, cautious, potentially disinterested, whether from fear of new variants; or pressures on discretionary budgets in the wake of volatile markets and skyrocketing inflation; or from the COVID-era discovery that perhaps live attendance need not be a priority and that there are numerous other cheaper, more convenient and perhaps more fulfilling ways to devote one’s time and resources.

And aren’t you glad Karen invited me here to brighten your day?

In this moment, arts organizations and all of us—our departments, our universities, we as individuals—have a choice to make. We can persevere. We can keep our heads down and not rock the boat, hoping for a change of deans or presidents or a larger shift in social values that will lay the groundwork for a better time.

Or we can recommit—recommitting and doubling down to long-standing missions centered in creating and delivering art—aggressively pursuing resources to continue in the work we have always done. We can focus on problems of under-capitalization, the lack of public appreciation for what we do and the absence of stable resources even as we are driven by a passionate commitment to heightening artistry and excellence, often making the case that if we sing better or play better or compose better, if we just have better facilities and more money, our problems will be solved. And yes, this is absolutely a legitimate and necessary choice: I think we will always need the maniacally focused drive to training excellence, the conservatory or training program focused on a single tradition and the experience of sitting in a concert hall or outdoor amphitheater and seeing musicians take the stage to offer life-changing experiences, just as our own lives were changed by early encounters with live musicians. My only caveat is that—at least from where I sit—I think that the competition for the charitable dollar will be increasingly fractious with time, that the next generation will be less and less interested in current practice and nonprofit sector purity, and that there are likely to be fewer and fewer of today’s organizations that survive long term.

Or—beyond persevering or recommitting—we can choose to reimagine and reorganize. We can regard money not as the cause of our problems but as manifestations of the value that our public places on us. We can see our challenges not as under-capitalization but as mis-capitalization; not as lack of stability but as lack of nimbleness and flexibility; not a public indifferent to music but one indifferent to our music and the way we deliver it—a very different proposition.

If we choose to reinvent, we must begin, not by looking inwards, but by looking outwards. We must ask ourselves, what is the value of music—not our departments but music itself—for our world today? What is the value music alone offers or offers better than anyone else, remembering that second-rate or duplicative value rarely stands for long? How would our communities be damaged if deprived of music tomorrow? Having a staff and a faculty, students

and alumni is not enough. Having studios and concert halls is not enough. Having shelves of critics' trophies and citations is not enough. What do our communities need—needs to which we can attach ourselves and which demand that we move forward and flourish for the future—a shift from mission and its focus on what do, to one of purpose—the ends to which the work is done—a purpose that requires us, while not forsaking the drive to excellence, to be equally driven by relevance.

In 2014, I heard President Scott Cowen of Tulane University share his experience on returning to a devastated New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina—a city decimated physically, socially, spiritually. His university—long a leader in higher education—longed to reunite, to reconnect to its past, to re-form, and move forward in its long-standing mission of being a center for learning and reflection, to undertake again what they had done before. At the same time, he realized, nothing in that mission required Tulane to go beyond its own walls, to reach out to its surrounding community, to roll up its sleeves, to get its hands dirty to rebuild a city in deep deep distress.

And so, Cowen said, “I chose to ignore the mission”—to require without debate every student, every course, every department and facet of the university to add a public service component to rebuild the city. Business students counseled start-ups, engineers tackled construction, philosophy majors—the first to protest saying, “What the hell should we do?”—worked to rebuild education, recognizing their ability to debate complex ideas and starting debate clubs in every surrounding high school. Some resistant faculty moved on, others frankly were marginalized, but in the wake of this new purpose, applications grew, retention rates grew, graduation rates grew, contributions grew, the sense of community grew, Tulane grew.

In this moment in this country, in this time of division and deep distress, our communities are begging us to roll up our sleeves.

Are we ready and able to embrace, not merely an artistic purpose but a civic purpose as we move forward? In our training, are we preparing our students to assess the ethical and social implications of what they play, where they play, with whom they play, even why they play? Are we training audiences, musicians, or citizens?

Ideally of course, we are training all three—but this shift requires that we arm our students with the skills they need for the future—skills of verbal and virtual communication, intercultural fluency, self-promotion and financial literacy, yes, but skills of purpose and self-understanding and clarity that they will need in this changing landscape moving forward.

For the landscape IS changing—changing in ways that will prove every bit as seismic as the nonprofit movement of the 1950s in reframing where, how, with whom, for whom, and why the arts are made. The values of my generation—a generation of workers attuned to specialization, siloed departments, deference to supervisors, gradual change, and satisfaction with lower wages and benefits in service of nonprofit purpose and calling—are being severely challenged and rejected by a new generation of workers used to transcending siloes, resisting

supervision, demanding immediate change, unwilling to work long hours, expecting to wield authority, and uninterested in calling as an offset to compensation.

And now we must move past any sense of aesthetically induced social agnosticism and reimagine our work in the context of a conscious quest for racial equity. Two and a half years ago, the murder of George Floyd less than a mile from where I live in Minneapolis finally made basic structural racial injustice and inequity impossible to ignore—and in every dimension of our society—from housing to policing to wealth polarization to education to the arts and more—the necessity to think differently, believe differently, behave differently has never been more urgent.

For many of you, commitment to equity is not new—it has been a core tenet of your life, and you have persevered and fought and triumphed even while the larger world has often failed to give you the credit or the visibility or opportunity or especially the resources you have deserved. Many others of you are only now beginning to confront your own culpability in contributing—consciously or unconsciously—to unjust and inequitable systems and are now committing explicitly to racial justice. And yes, this work is far more complex than simply seating new bodies in old chairs. It is the starting point for hard and vulnerable and often painful conversations about how we treat one another—conversations that demand that we are honest and rigorous and generous to each other—that we model internally the dynamics and civic dignity we wish to instill in our communities at large—as we determine together what it is we believe and how we work and what we hope the impact of our work will be.

It demands that we create new curricula, hire new faculty, prepare now for the implications of the impending Supreme Court decision on race as a factor in admissions, even as we must think hard about what from the past we can and must still teach, what we can NOT teach—as much as we may have loved it—as we recognize now the pain it inflicts on others, and what and whom we have yet to discover that will speak to the fullest range of our students and our communities in new and powerful ways.

This moment of change is a litmus test moment for every department and every one of you, demanding that you make an intentional choice and commit to it. While I wish I could say this will be easier, the future is likely to be harder and more exhausting and more frustrating even than the last two years—and if this simply is just too much for you, I for one will be so so grateful for all that you have given and done and I wish you nothing but happiness and fulfillment in whatever new direction your life now takes you. But if you decide to stay, your schools, your students, we in the larger nation need you to be all in—a level of commitment that you can reach only if you understand and anchor yourself consciously in values—two or three at most core values that you and your department exist to serve. You will recognize these values, not in the way they gratify you, but in the way they nurture you. They will permeate your departments and be the mortar that binds the students and the faculty and the administration and the audience together—indeed they will be your best tool of recruitment—and you will fight for these values even if you are punished for doing so. But they can be useful only if you have chosen them consciously, at the expense of a viable opposite you could have

chosen—as we did at our foundation in choosing our three values: of innovation at the cost of tradition, diversity at the cost of homogeneity, humility at the cost of authority. You cannot choose financial responsibility and artistic excellence—they are givens your communities demand and expect of you—and no one could viably choose their opposites, committing to departments hemorrhaging red ink and producing musicians who play badly. Healthy organizations and departments consciously choose values and align action with purpose—an alignment that provides the necessary precursor to deciding, not how you will add these things I’ve mentioned to your already overcrowded curricula, but what you will give up and stop doing in order to free the necessary time, energy and resources to devote to this new work ahead. The organizations I see in greatest disarray—especially during times of crisis and change—are often crystal clear about their mission but find themselves in chaos and rampant disagreement because they take steps in pursuit of mission alone without understanding what their core values and ultimate purpose truly are.

And clarity of values and purpose are fundamental to each of your lives as well—your lives as teachers and citizens, as husbands, wives, partners, as children or parents. What is the purpose of your life? What are the two or three most important values that ground you not only in the work you do but in the life you lead? Independence? Family? Authority? Recognition? Religious faith? Virtuosity? Social justice? Money? The list goes on and on, but understanding your own values, your own purpose, is key to your own ability to make optimal career choices, lead lives of meaning and avoid burnout. Now I’m not talking here about physical exhaustion which we know is real, but burnout—the difference between working 20 hours on something you care about and still being able to say, “Bring it on—I may need a nap but bring it” and work that is enervating, debilitating, deadly. Burnout is not exhaustion—burnout is disconnect from core values—and if you don’t know what your purpose and values are, how can you possibly correct or measure whether an opportunity keeps your life on track and feeds you, nourishes you, sustains you—or throws you disastrously off-course and leads to burnout? Burnout is terrible and we all know the pain of watching someone burn out and leave—but we also know that it is worse when someone burns out and stays.

As I said earlier, we need you to be all in—all in in the age of pandemics, not merely of COVID but of misinformation and disinformation, of polarization and discord, pandemics of deeply seated mutual political contempt—a time in which our most urgent crisis may not be the survival of music and our departments and schools as we have inherited and shaped and grown them, but the survival of democracy itself.

We cannot content ourselves with standing on the sidelines. Music—and all of you—have an enormous role to play—not merely as artists and educators but as social activists—not just in making music but in making citizens and making community.

In a world of blogs and tweet screeds and in which the ability to express oneself is not in short supply, you teach listening—listening not just to notes but to silence, to tempo, to dynamics, to confidence and hesitation; listening not only to the familiar and the palatable but—especially for a generation insulated from discomfort by trigger warnings and wrapped in reinforced

comfort in social media—discovering the pleasures of attention by repeatedly listening to the uncomfortable and upsetting in pursuit of beauty couched in a new and unfamiliar vocabulary—a depth and range and ability of listening beneath the surface that led the University of Michigan to engage musicians to teach doctors how to listen in order to offer better health care, and executives at FedEx to engage chamber musicians to teach listening to executives as part of new consensual leadership models.

You teach and instill teamwork, discipline and delayed gratification—essential social needs in increasingly short supply—prioritizing the ability to listen and blend with others, whatever our individual skills may be—promoting the necessity of those endless agonizing hours of scales that one day bloom in ways that we had never dared to dream—discovering the same patience and diligence that led a marine colonel in North Carolina to once say to me, “I didn’t learn discipline in the marines; I learned discipline playing the French horn.”

In choosing what you teach, you instill greater cross-cultural understanding and respect across borders of race and gender and nation and even time, celebrating the widest range of cultural expressions, instilling respect for those with different heritages or beliefs or lives than our own.

And in teaching not just to listen but to make, you teach community building, for nothing instills community as quickly and profoundly and subtly as making music together. You began today by singing together. Those of us who marched against Vietnam began our rallies singing *Blowin’ in the Wind*; those of us who marched for Civil Rights began our walks singing *We Shall Overcome*; at church we sing hymns; at sporting games we sing national anthems together; at Bruce Springsteen concerts, we leap onto our chairs and sing along at ear-splitting decibel levels. Making music makes community—a power of social orchestration as powerful as our musical one.

Whether you use the power of music to call out injustice, or to call in for conversation and new understanding, or simply to call together—to bring together people just to laugh together, or cry together, cheer together, or sit in stunned silence together—the invitation you ultimately extend to the world is to *conspire*, which in its Latinate sense means “to breathe together”—artist to artist, artist to audience, audience to audience—the prelude to transcending typical dynamics of animosity, competition and self-congratulation to become instead a society of deep listening, cooperation, the ability to confront the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable, to be patient and at last to view our fellow human beings not with hostility and fear and division, but with generosity and curiosity. Lord knows if we have ever needed such capacity, we need it now.

To work in the arts is to have a platform—however many or however few come to bear witness to our work—we have a platform. But it is not a platform to be taken for granted any longer. We must seize it, we must own it, we must earn it.

I salute you all not only as educators and artists but as social activists, pledged through your work to creating a world of inclusion, compassion, empathy, and hope.

I charge you with the final words of *Angels in America*, when Tony Kushner writes, “*You are fabulous creatures, each and every one. And I bless you. More Life. The Great Work Begins.*”

And I thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this morning. Thank you and Godspeed.