

Thomas Wilkins' Closing Session Remarks

June 3, 2022

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THOMAS WILKINS: Okay. So, I'm speechless. But I do want to begin by saying thank you so much to the League for this recognition. I'm really glad, by the way, that Jesse also received the Golden Baton award because, quite frankly, I probably even-- wouldn't even be at the Hollywood Bowl had it not been for Jesse saying to those guys when they were looking for a new leader, "You know, you should take a look at that Tom Wilkins guy." So, thank you Jesse for that. And thank you that I don't have to give you my Golden Baton award.

I also want to thank Gail for not just being a friend, but taking about four of the points that I was going to make in my speech. So, I can skip this part about the Virginia Symphony 'cause what I was going to say, Gail, about the Virginia Symphony is that everyone knows that as the Norfolk Symphony of 1964 they changed my life forever. Growing up to a single mother on welfare in the housing projects, there was no piano in my house. Probably wouldn't fit anyway. There were no classical music albums laying around for me to hear. There certainly was no such thing as a private lesson. I didn't get a private lesson till I was in college. But there was the Norfolk Symphony Orchestra.

And what I was going to say about the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, which was the Norfolk Symphony Orchestra, is that if it's true that in order to pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you have to have boots, it's also true that the Norfolk Symphony Orchestra and the music that they gave me gave me boots.

This is probably not the audience to confess this to, but I'm going to anyway. I remember the first time my manager sitting right there emailed me and said that there was an orchestra I was about to conduct, and I was putting together a program and they wanted to make sure that I included a piece by a BIPOC composer. And I thought, BIPOC? What's BIPOC? I've got to look that up. And so, I did. And I thought, holy cow, I'm BIPOC.

I shared this with the colleague of mine in Washington DC and we just got a chuckle over the fact that I didn't know what BIPOC was. But it started a series of conversations from that point on. And for me it became not so much an epiphany, but a set of reminders. It reminded me of that experience with the Norfolk Symphony Orchestra. It also reminded me of why I wanted to be in this business in the first place. I didn't come at this to build a career. I thought that this was a moral obligation to come alongside people in the community and say, how can we let our music help you help those?

I'm so glad Sarah talked so profoundly about community. That's what I wanted to do. I said to my students at IU, in fact one of them is even here, and he's heard me say this before, when we're on stage, the most important people in the room are not on stage. These men and women come into the building with their own sense of hope and aspiration and longing. And in some cases, they come in the building with their own fears and their own despair, which is the worst kind of helplessness. And it's our responsibility to invite them to be better and to, with our music, invite them to think something better about themselves.

We're stewards of some of the greatest achievements of humankind. This music is life altering and life affirming. And shame on us if we don't see this more as a calling and less as a job.

I was in a Walmart in Omaha and I'm about the fourth person back in line and the cashier, I can see him very clearly, and he's got long, stringy hair and he's got tattoos all over the place. He's got an earring in both ears. And not dressed all that well. And you know, I'm standing in line already making some-- coming to some conclusions about who he is. What he is. What he listens to. By the way, some people call that prejudice.

I get up to the register and he looks at me and he says, "Man, that concert you guys did when you did Appalachian Spring on the first half and Rite of Spring on the second half was killer." I thought, shame on me. I did not expect to hear those words.

Every once in a while, in Boston-- by the way, with the point of that young man in the Walmart, if we're going to talk about diversity in our industry, apparently, we have to be willing to let people be diverse. Just saying.

So, in Boston, after our youth programs, often the ushers or even the teachers and chaperones will ask the kids how they felt about being in Symphony Hall or how they felt about the music that they heard. And sometimes those answers get back, make their way back to me. And sometimes they're really funny. But on one such occasion the teacher asked this young lady, how did it feel to be in Symphony Hall? And she said, "It was the first time I ever felt safe." Those were not words I was expecting to hear.

A few weeks back I went out into the audience-- because sometimes I don't tell them what the piece is about because I want them to use their imagination and use their own words because-- because it then becomes their music. And so, we had just done the storm movement from Britten's Four Sea Interludes. And I go out into the audience, and I grab this young man and I said, "What was that

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about?" He goes, "I don't know, but all I can tell you is that I'm really happy and I hope you guys are too because you sounded great." Of course, they sounded great because of their leadership. But that's another point. But those were not words that I expected to hear by a long shot.

Words that I loved hearing occurred quite a few years ago. I was in Connecticut. A post concert reception. A grown woman walks up to me at the reception, and she said, "This is the first time I've ever heard an orchestra concert. And oh my gosh, I had no idea." These are living, everyday, ordinary, going to work, going to school, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches people. And they deserve our very best.

You know, as has been mentioned already, these have been the last crazy, few years. I kind of think humanity is hanging on by a thread. And I'm starting to tell myself at this stage in my life, listen, let's just savor everything and squander nothing. Savor everything good. Squander nothing.

But I'm also starting to ask myself "Who else?" Who else needs for it to be okay to be different from other people in the room? Who else needs to be safe? Who else needs to just be happy? And who else, for the very first time, deserves the opportunity to discover something wonderful?

I think I'm in a state of urgency. I think we all are. And we need to hurry. Not rush, but hurry to make sure that regardless of what happens, even if we can't save the world, even if we can't save humanity, we can sure make it better. We can ensure that at the end of the day beauty gets to have the last word.

Thank you so very much.