

Opening Session Keynote by Deborah Rutter

League of American Orchestras Conference

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Thank you for your warm and generous welcome...

It does my heart good to be among so many friends and fellow lovers and advocates for the essential role of art, music, and culture in our families, neighborhoods, communities, and broader society!

I think we can all agree that never have artists and the art they create been more needed. Never has what we do to share in the broadest possible ways their creative talents been more vital; and never have the transformative experiences that access to great art and music enable been more essential to the soul of our nation.

I've given some thought to the theme of FLOW, defining this gathering here in a city that abounds with creativity in all its forms—the excellent Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, led by Jonathan Heyward; so many world-class museums (The Baltimore Museum of Art, Walters Art Museum, American Visionary Art Museum, Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture); the storied Peabody Institute (preparing future musicians for our ensembles and schools); the Baltimore School for the Arts; the Shriver Concert series at Johns Hopkins University; the Lyric Opera House where the Washington National Opera recently performed *West Side Story*; several chamber concert series; the Hippodrome Theater, Everyman Theater, the Chesapeake Shakespeare Theater...the list is impressive. It's an astounding array of places where artistic expression flourishes and is rightly celebrated. And, as each of us here in this room knows, it takes a tremendous amount of dedication, persistence, sacrifice—along with relentless advocacy—to sustain it.

But back to the theme of this conference: “FLOW.” I took a stab at defining what I think it means and how it represents what each of us does in our own individual ways and collectively: “FLOW: Doing something with intensity, fascination and joy.”

We know when we're experiencing it and in the process of achieving it, we deploy creativity, imagination, and when we do, we feel as though we're fully engaged and operating at full capacity.

That sounds about right, don't you think? And it defines the feeling we have when we know our work is on track and having impact.

Now, I've been at this long enough to know that maintaining FLOW consistently is itself an art—perhaps more the ideal than the everyday reality. As I've said, this is hard work, but so satisfying and fulfilling when we get it right. When bold ideas are realized in celebrated performances, when our organizations achieve a level of success and collective recognition of the communal effort, when the artists we serve thrive and feel appreciated.

These are the aspirations we all have—and finding FLOW is the rhythm that keeps us and our organizations thriving.

As you might imagine, in the roughly year and a half since my rather hasty departure from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, I've been asked often what I miss most in having led the nation's cultural center.

It's not the glittering gowns and high heels on any number of evenings, it's not the international relations that my role necessitated, nor the glamour of the Kennedy Center Honors, however wonderful all that was. No, it's the connection to my colleagues and the way we did our work, what together we accomplished, the creative process we shared and our efforts to constantly push ourselves to think in different ways, knowing what an awesome privilege as well as responsibility we were given to lead this “cultural mecca” as President Eisenhower intended it to be when he and Congress established it in 1958. We definitely experienced FLOW in our work together.

I do my best to keep in contact with my other Kennedy Center refugees who made my decade as president so utterly rewarding and who were committed to upholding the values that informed and guided our work: Courage, Justice, Freedom, Service and Gratitude. This was, in reflection, our collective FLOW.

In my journey from one part of the country to another, where I'm now privileged to serve in an academic setting teeming with ideas, innovation, and passion to experiment, I've carried those same values with me.

Certainly, Courage is required in these days as we advocate for the free expression of artists, enabling their authentic storytelling and all that they create and make possible; Justice must guide our work, ensuring that the art we enable and promote reflects and relates to all members of our communities, while also giving voice to the urgent issues of our day; Freedom—the absolute prerequisite for true art to flourish, to challenge us, inspire, console and delight us; Service, the constant recognition that we first serve the artist and their art, and the communities that stand most to benefit from what they create; and finally Gratitude—what an immense gift it is to do the work we do, to be in such close proximity to the creative powers of great artists, to work alongside them and to play some role in the transformative experiences they make possible.

In my nearly five decades in this peculiar profession of arts administration, it occurs to me that the challenges we deal with week-after-week, month-after-month, and year-after-year—the persistent state of UNCERTAINTY—have uniquely equipped us to deal with our new present reality.

Uncertain whether that grant or long-cultivated donor will come through; uncertain whether this artist or that will agree to perform on our season; uncertain whether a newly-commissioned work will be well-received and please the commissioner; uncertain it's all going to work together and work out as planned (marketing, fund raising, budgeting, selling enough tickets)—and that our patrons and concert-goers will return again and again to sustain this marvelous work and this enterprise that so many depend upon for their livelihood and for their life's purpose.

And then, of course, we deal with an uncertain future, given the ever-increasing integration of AI technologies into our everyday lives—both personal and professional. Many are understandably torn and struggling to understand both the threat and potential. This new frontier challenges us, and also requires us to double down on our core values and commitment to authentic artistic expression. Admittedly, big questions remain: how can technology advance our mission and goals? How can it help us entice those new audiences who are digital natives with points of reference that are entirely new to us, but which are defining a new language, a new way of thinking, and a new reality? How can it be employed to serve the artist and their art in ways that do not degrade or compromise authenticity, but enhance it?

Like it or not, the genie is out of the bottle, and so we must rely on and learn from one another as perhaps never before, be honest about what works and what doesn't, and importantly, be curious, informed, diligent, and discerning—and always courageous.

It is this tension and indeed, this chronic condition of uncertainty, that must fuel our own creativity: to try new things, to entice new audiences, to pursue new artists and art forms, and then to trust and follow those same artists. To overcome and aspire beyond the potential barrier of uncertainty requires a disciplined adherence to your core values. That is what gave the Kennedy Center team its FLOW: the undergirding of our namesake's values: Courage, Justice, Freedom, Service, and Gratitude.

All of you, I know, understand this very deeply—those of you who work to ensure that artists are embraced and empowered to share their gifts authentically and with that essential implicit trust that makes it all work. It's also what audiences crave and what they expect and deserve.

The artist must feel welcome, truly free to share their unique perspectives—to enlighten and challenge us—to reveal perspectives and truths. To push us to think critically about our time and our role in it. And yes, to enable us to experience new insight—and, above all, JOY!

It's been over 20 years since Yo-Yo Ma came to the Chicago Symphony as our Creative Consultant and we collaborated in developing a call-to-action that I like to think was prescient—especially in light of our current predicament.

The concept of Citizen Artist has now become virtually commonplace in our country and beyond. The inherent responsibilities that are involved when we accept that artists—and arts organizations—have obligations larger than themselves, beyond the performance and enjoyment of their art.

Rather than merely a programmatic extension, the Citizen Artist considers how the art performed in our concert halls and performance venues truly relates and serves the needs and issues of our communities. This requires deep research to truly understand the needs of a community:

In North Carolina, it is the Symphony traveling across the state to small communities performing in unlikely venues and sharing the magic of music through education programs. This is SERVICE.

In Chicago, the Civic Orchestra of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra integrated social justice into its curriculum via a four-part program including modules in artistic planning, music education, social justice, and project management. Emerging professionals design and present community-engaged projects that explicitly address social issues, training them as “artist-citizens” rather than only orchestral players. This is JUSTICE.

The Seattle Symphony's “climate music” agenda with John Luther Adam's *Become Ocean* evoking melting ice and rising seas. Our planet is under siege. The arts have a role in amplifying these messages. This is COURAGE.

There's the Hartford Symphony Orchestra which established a dedicated “Learning & Social Impact” department focused on education and engagement, with the clear goal of creating community impact through programs in schools, neighborhoods, and social-service settings. I am particularly moved by its “Strings of Hope” performing in churches and synagogues—in a time where we need to bring communities together. This, again, is COURAGE.

To be credible in our assertion that the arts matter and deserve an ever-increasing level of financial support, artists and the people and organizations that present them must be

invested in their communities. As we who are close to the art form know, there is NOTHING like a great performance of a work, whether a masterpiece or a new commission. And, it is vital that we stay connected to our communities and the realities all around us.

This is the very definition of Citizen Artistry and the fulfillment of the Citizen Artist. I promise that gratitude will always find its way back to the artists and organizations, from audiences, patrons, communities and ultimately those who support our work when we are focused on these values and the concept of Citizen Artistry.

One remarkable Citizen Artist, I think you will agree, is Renee Fleming. With Renée as our Creative Consultant at the Kennedy Center, we launched the Sound Health Network in partnership with The National Institutes of Health and the National Endowment for the Arts. This eventually led to establishing the Arts & Wellbeing initiative—an expanded focus on the intersection of art, science, and personal and communal health—exploring how art inspires and benefits our everyday lives. Renee has been an advocate nationally and internationally on the benefits of Music and Brain Health, collaborating with renowned physicians and scientists on the positive and profound impact on our overall wellbeing through cultural engagement. This now national movement is finding roots in communities and college campuses with the Arts Pharma and Social RX programming. Imagine if we could achieve national policy for insurance companies to reimburse prescriptions for concert attendance, piano lessons, and visits to museums! How our national culture would change. THAT is an aspiration to support the values we all dream of!

Another extraordinary Citizen Artist was Michael Tilson Thomas. It's altogether fitting that we take a moment to remember and celebrate the much beloved and extraordinarily impactful MTT, one of the great American musicians, not just in our time, but in history. His lasting mark on music and the symphony orchestra experience in our era is truly monumental.

MTT and I enjoyed a long personal history. His mother was actually my 8th grade world history teacher and when she learned of my interest in music, I quickly learned all about Michael and what a life in music means. Since those early days, MTT's presence, musical instincts, and career illuminated my own.

I had the enormous pleasure of working closely with him, and of course, Josh Robison, his husband, for all the 50 years they were together, from Los Angeles to Chicago to the Kennedy Center. We were plotting projects as recently as a year ago. Their passing has left a void that cannot be filled.

In reflecting on Michael's life and remarkable artistic "output" we would do well to hold close his example and learn from his own endless curiosity and insatiable appetite to learn and discover.

His exploration of new music, whether recently composed, or of historical significance but new to him, was inspiring, and I believe the best example we could follow. His friends ranged from Harry Partch to James Brown. He was inspired by collaborators as diverse as Metallica and Yuja Wang. In other words, for Michael, there were no "right or wrong" categories. Music was music and he celebrated and championed it all, in every form and genre.

Michael will also be long remembered for his commitment to mentoring young musicians. I recall when he was launching the New World Symphony and there was true terror that this new venture would somehow eliminate the mid-size orchestras because of the financial structure established for the young musicians. Now nearly 40 years old, it has had an incalculable impact on the quality and shape of orchestras around the world.

So, what do we take from Michael and his life's work? Curiosity, belief in the power of music and an obligation to mentor our future musicians...and audiences. We mustn't fall back on just the tried and true, but continue to believe in the miracle of this art form and nurture constantly its evolution.

Mentor not just our orchestral musicians but all of the artists in our orbit — composers, actors, dancers, all of them. And take that same engaged approach in our communities, with our colleague arts organizations and with our audiences and patrons, demonstrating: Curiosity, Humility (ok, MTT may not have been a specialist in that), Generosity, Forward Looking, and above all COURAGE!

It's what will sustain us, empower us, give freedom to our work and the artists we celebrate, heal and transform our communities and society as a whole. Our audiences crave, need, and deserve nothing less!

In the days following my departure from the Kennedy Center, I was asked repeatedly what advice I would offer audiences and also to artists given this new focus on defining so-called "acceptable" art.

It's really quite simple. To the artist I say: continue to assert and express your art in those places where you can do so unfettered by partisan interests or fabricated culture battles—always in truth and with the authenticity that is essential to the free expression of your talents.

And to audiences, I say: trust the artist; follow the artist. Continue to support the artist wherever they feel welcome, supported, empowered, and importantly, unencumbered to share their art and their storytelling without fear of scorn or retribution.

I continue to believe that this latest trend of labeling certain artistic expressions as counter to our national values or are in some way unwholesome and unworthy of audiences, will ultimately fail—just as all of those similar attempts of the past.

Time, as we've seen, has a way of righting egregious wrongs. And fortunately for us, artistic talent is typically granted in similar proportion to personal courage.

I continue to believe that the assertion by any public authority that it alone maintains the prerogative to determine what is acceptable artistic expression and in the best interests of the citizenry, culturally and otherwise, is an exercise in futility.

The artist will always prevail. The artist will always create, always enlighten, always reshape our perspectives— how we see the world and our role in it—challenging our assumptions, attitudes, cultural bias, and even at times, whole societal movements. Quite simply, the artist holds a mirror to who we are as a people and nation and compels us to be and do better.

For our purposes today, it's worth recalling the always clever wisdom of Leonard Bernstein who said: "To achieve great things, two things are needed: a plan, and not quite enough time."

Time, I think we can agree, is not on our side—and there will never be a better one than now.

It's certainly not a time to be timid—nor to shrink from our shared mission of bold inclusiveness. It's not a time to modulate, equivocate, or compromise in our unqualified assertion that art and its broad accessibility make our communities better—and our society at large more honest and reflective of who we are.

It is a time when we are called to be our best Citizen Artists and to reflect the values of John F. Kennedy as they were at his memorial (our nation's cultural center: COURAGE, JUSTICE, FREEDOM, SERVICE, and GRATITUDE.

Thank you for all that you do, and for allowing me this time together with you.