

Message for the Teachers' Breakfast
43rd Annual National Flute Association Convention
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By Paula Robison

Good Morning. It is a joy to be with you today, my dear fellow teachers!

Our subject is "How to keep the arts alive for future generations."

What a huge subject!

I hope that what I have to say will be useful to you, or at least interesting, even though it covers only a small part of the question.

Since most of us are living and working in the USA I'll keep my thoughts to the North American arena. And since I'm a classical musician, I'll be speaking mostly from that tradition.

So how are the arts doing in our country right now?

I'd say that the creators, the composers, dancers, singers, players, are doing great.

Everywhere, people are inventing and performing and using their imaginations in the most extraordinary ways.

We are not suffering from a lack of creative artists.

But I believe that we are at the same time faced with a huge challenge. This challenge is to address and to cure the malaise which surrounds creative people in our country: the distrust in the discipline of the true creative process, the celebration of ignorance rather than wisdom by a large part of our population, the disbelief in the idea that one should be able to earn a living from one's art.

Only when that cure succeeds can we hand down our art to our descendants and know that it will prosper with them. They are going to need it in the times to come.

Art does have a way of surviving almost anything. Art is eternal. Art goes beyond what we experience every day and takes us to a place where we can be more than ourselves. Out of the worst, most devastating scenes, Art can emerge and seek expression. Art brings us a comfort like no other. Art has the power to change us forever. Art ties us to our origins and to our future at the same time.

Art connects the entire human experience.

We cannot live without Art, so we must preserve it.

I can't give you any large-scale political or social formulas. I wish I could. I can only investigate with you our individual gestures of commitment.

To understand where we are now, let's go back a bit in history. It's useful to remember that in the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe was a melting pot of countless cultures and musical forms, just like the USA is now. North Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, Asia, and their art influenced the music which was being composed and danced to in court and at home. There was active interchange with folk dance and folk song. A crazy quilt of styles flourished. Music was for use. Daily use. Everyone played at home: rich and poor alike. Everyone danced. It was not a spectator sport. Everyone participated.

This was the source of the music and dance which was brought to our shores during hundreds of years of exploration and then immigration: a living, breathing art. If we add our Native American customs and the overwhelming African contribution, and add the voices of the many other peoples who set their dancing feet on our soil, we get a pretty good idea of the nourishing springs of American musical culture.

During the 19th century, we started to develop a true American voice in music, a voice which combined the traditions we saw and heard all around us. Defining American music has always been a challenge; we are such a diverse nation that it's almost impossible, but the important thing to remember is that music itself was valued in earlier days, considered something to be taught and experienced as part of daily life.

Almost every family had a piano, and gathered around it to sing. Sheet music was treasured. Italian families spent their last pennies to go to the opera. German Jewish families organized chamber music series. Czech families played their violins, even out on the Nebraska prairie. Everyone sang hymns. Scottish steel barons built concert halls. Their wives formed women's

committees to keep the orchestras solvent and to attract and educate new audiences.

The tradition of concert-going was established here during that era, with the classic image of great performing artists on stage and audiences who knew and understood the music listening attentively and then going home to practice it themselves. Far-seeing teachers went out into the schools and fought to make a home for music there.

It seemed that these traditions were valued and that they would last forever. At least it seemed so to me, as a young artist in the 1960s. We were riding a great wave. I remember being told by a distinguished European: "The future is yours in America. Our Europe is tired and old. You in America are young, with concert halls, audiences, great young composers and performers...the future is yours."

I thought this sounded wonderful, and I believed my European friend. It did go as he predicted for a while, during most of my early career, and then suddenly, as we worked our way towards the 21st century here in the U.S., something became askew, something was falling away at the center.

What had happened? Some kind of power cord was cut. America had started to turn its back on classical music. Serialism had exhausted even the most loyal concert-goer. The new multi-purpose concert halls were too big and, with less government support, they needed to be filled by ticket sales, so a sense of adventure disappeared and the same box office stars appeared again and again.

We heard the expression "music written by dead European white males." Suddenly the Internet appeared and kept the public in their own houses; and without the excitement of live performance, a central part of the power of classical music disappeared. Women had joined the work force and so the women's committees vanished and along with them the audiences they had educated and trained. Even when the minimalists brought back tonality it was not enough to seduce a new audience.

Things *have* changed. We need to find something to fill up that center again. We must go back to the source and remember. We must find our listeners again. Our intelligent listeners.

We are now in one of the most creative eras in American history. But our artists cannot exist in a vacuum. A particular substance in the atmosphere is

crucial to their survival. I call it “recognition,” not in the sense of fame and fortune, but in the sense of the life-filled bond between artist and listener. Recognition implies a responsibility on the part of the listener to be inside the process of the creative act. The listener is not passive, but active.

Think about our forebears here who brought their dances with them: the Poles and their mazurkas, for instance, who filled Carnegie Hall for a performance by Arthur Rubenstein; the Viennese who wept to hear Schumann and thought of their cafes at home, or remembered the brook by their town as they listened to Schubert or Beethoven; the Italians who knew every bar of Verdi and laughed at the operatic paraphrases for flute and piano...they “recognized” those sounds, those ideas.

And here we are now, in 21st- century America. We are speeding up and dumbing down at the same time. We don't have time to absorb, to contemplate. True education—reading the classics, studying history, learning more than one language, learning more than testing rituals, learning how to think independently, learning respect for teachers and elders—is becoming rare. The Internet makes everything accessible, encouraging a kind of rude, passive-aggressive behavior born of loneliness.

We are phasing out penmanship and cursive writing in our schools: cursive, which brings an artfulness to ordinary handwriting (and takes more time). We can't spell anymore. And what about use of the curvaceous apostrophe? Abuse and misuse everywhere! We forget that grammar is a craft which enables art. We are also losing the delight of memorization: of rhetoric and of Shakespeare, a common process in the humblest of schools in the 19th century.

We are not taking time to sit quietly with a book.

We don't go outside and sit by a brook.

We are losing our “recognition.”

The Merchant of Venice, by William Shakespeare

Act 5 Scene I; Jessica and Lorenzo

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears. Soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven

Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still choiring to the young-eyed cherubins.
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

It takes tremendous courage to be an artist. The land of "What if?" is the land where artists live. A tree can be blue, a face green. A fountain can sob. A moonbeam can become wine. Soft stillness can become sweet harmony. And no work of art is ever really completed, but always in progress. "There is no satisfaction whatsoever, at any time," said Martha Graham. There is always the "What if?"

An artist has a chronic ache, a wistfulness which propels him to try and describe the cosmos and his own suspension in it. With great art, a lilting phrase can suddenly cut to the bone: a listener is in tears and doesn't know why; a voice way down inside brings back a "What if?" and makes the lilt into a fragment of eternity. This happened whenever the great bass-baritone Paul Robeson sang "Deep River."

Or a painting of Mary and her baby suddenly speaks for all mothers, and the observer notices the foreboding on Mary's face: how does she know? (I speak of a small pre-Renaissance painting by Pietro Lorenzetti in the lower floor of the Cathedral of St Francis of Assisi.) What if? What if Lorenzetti had painted a Madonna solely to inspire reverence and the life of the spirit? That was his job. That's a great job. He was a great craftsman and could do that. But he went beyond. "What if I were to indicate that she knew she would see her son crucified?" he may have thought. Luckily, his patron did not ask him to change the image. It is a shocking one. Check it out.

Similarly, J.S. Bach, the craftsman for God, wrote the "Aus Liebe" from the *St. Matthew Passion* as an intimate spiritual revelation. But it is huge—great art—and applies to each one of us. "What if?" "What if My Saviour is willing to die for Love?" sings the soprano in wonderment. And the composer may have said earlier to himself, "What if I use only two English horns, one flute, and high voice? Would that tessitura take us to the place of amazement and realization?" and he had the courage to do that. It was his faith that enabled him, yes, but also his voice as an artist, that voice which pushed him across the boundaries and broke forth, unstoppable.

That push is the passion, the mark, the brand of an artist.

Art is not entertainment. Entertainment diverts us, amuses us, makes us laugh or cry, but it does not change us. We remain the same person. It is of the moment. But Art changes us. That is not always a comfortable feeling. And it may be deeply disturbing. But it makes us more fully human, and therefore is essential for our survival. Art is not a luxury, but a necessity. We *must* pass it on to future generations.

Now is the time to train a new, young audience to be able to sit and let the sounds of music creep in their ears, to have the courage to be a participant as well as to accept the gifts of the art they are hearing. They are there, those listeners; they are waiting for us, and they need us.

Our world is changing, yes, but I put forth that it is terribly important to go back, without embarrassment or scorn, to the source, to the spring, to find the illimitable joy of the eternal in great art, to cultivate “recognition” and “what if” in our young people, and to become better listeners ourselves.

Each one of us must make the decision to preserve the art we love, to defend it and to remember its gifts with thanksgiving.

It’s up to us, teachers!

I’d like to conclude with one of my favorite poems.

By [Stephen Spender](#)

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul’s history
Through corridors of light, where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the Spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious, is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.
Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light
Nor its grave evening demand for love.

Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit.

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,
See how these names are fêted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.