

Weston Sprott ICSOM Conference Address – 8/26/2015

A few weeks ago, I was contacted by Bruce Ridge. He had just seen a new documentary film that beautifully depicts the impact music education has on the lives of young people. One of my now former students and I are two of the principal subjects of the film. The film is incredibly powerful and beautifully filmed, and I hope that you enjoy the trailer that has been prepared for you to see. Perhaps noticing that I have a passion for teaching, as I'm sure many of you do, Bruce reached out and asked me if I would share some words with you about the film and the value of music education.

When you're the second trombonist of an orchestra, you don't get a lot of opportunities to stand in front of the group and say your piece.

On the other hand, after ten years worth of counting rests at the Metropolitan Opera, I've had a little time think through some things and form some opinions.

The last time I attended the conference was in 2012 in Chicago. I was a newly elected member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra Committee, still just a little too far removed from the upcoming negotiations to realize exactly what lay in front of me. The Met has just announced record-breaking fundraising and a budget surplus. Needless to say, I felt terrible about the struggles my colleagues in other orchestras were going through, but I was relieved that, for the time being, things were different in New York. Fast-forward a few years, and I think you all know the story. You can ask Tino Gagliardi, President of New York's Local 802, and I'm sure he can confirm that I have since been thoroughly acquainted with the harsh realities of our industry.

I remember many of the conversations with my colleagues during that conference in Chicago. We asked many important questions. How do we bridge the gap between musicians and management, turning positive labor relations into constructive labor negotiations? How can we be advocates for ourselves and help others effectively advocate for us? How can we cultivate the next generation of musicians, audiences, administrators, and donors?

In examining these questions, we learned that we have many ideas in common. We also observed that we share similar fears. Chief amongst these fears is a concern for the current state of music education in our country. Hopefully, we all understand that an education system absent of the arts spells the beginning of the destruction of our civilization.

We all seem to agree that if we don't shore up the issues with education, our long-term hopes for professional respectability, community appreciation for the arts, not to mention fair pay, secure retirements, and quality working conditions, will be a losing battle.

The arts, music in particular, teach us who we were, who we are, how to be, and how to let others be. I have read about the civil rights movement, and my mother has told me the story of being in her high school's first integrated class, but when I listen to Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come", that's when the gateway to understanding the people of those times is truly opened. Music has that power. We've all been preached to that society works best when people from different backgrounds, with differing perspectives, look past trivial disagreements and work towards a common goal, but we understand that playing in an orchestra or a chamber group teaches you how to do that.

With each passing generation, there is dissolution not only of these values, but also in understanding why these values are important. I stand before you today as a product of that

dissolution. Almost exactly ten years ago, I proudly joined the professional ranks of one of the world's great artistic institutions, having just graduated from arguably the finest school for my craft, by most objective measures, a 22-year-old kid who was reaping the benefits of having worked hard and done things "the right way".

At the same time, I was embarrassingly uneducated about the cultural legacy that I am a part of, how that legacy reflects our greater societal history, and how to articulate why the craft I love so much should matter to anyone. And if I had these issues, I can only imagine what's it like for the millions of kids who grow up with far fewer resources, who don't have music programs and concerned teachers. As I teach the next generation, I spend the few free hours I have trying to figure out what I missed. I'm sure that many of you feel the same way.

Despite exposure to music programs, excellent teachers, and a life in orchestral music, we still yearn for greater understanding. Our lack of understanding doesn't stem from a lack of curiosity. It is rooted in the fact that our curiosity wasn't properly nurtured to begin with. That being said, those of us in the classical music community are representative of what it means to have an in-depth knowledge of culture.

We all wish that things were better. We join together at this conference because we desire improvement upon what we have, and we want those who are coming next to learn from our mistakes instead of having to learn from their own. Each day when I watch the news, I wonder to myself if people in our society who take great pride in the confederate flag, suppressing voting rights, who don't support equal pay, or who think that arts programs should be the first thing to go when slashing a budget... I consider if our system has stolen from them the chance to understand how our collective history has brought us to where we are today. In his 2009 Nancy Hanks Lecture, Wynton Marsalis said, "Where you come from ain't where you're going, but if you don't know where you've been, you might just end up where you started, or further back."

As cultural ambassadors, it is incumbent upon us to not only perform well on our instruments, but to support the artistic education of those who come after us. It is through music that we best learn what it means to strive for excellence. It is through the arts that we best learn about our collective history.

In 2007, I started teaching at Juilliard's Music Advancement Program, an outreach program that provides music education to underrepresented minority students. The program was established in 1991 as a response to massive cuts in music programs in New York City public schools. Despite the impact the program had on students, a 2009 New York Times article announced the program would be abandoned due to lack of funding.

Thankfully, some good things came about as a result. New donors came to the rescue of the program, and it is now more expansive and broader in scope and length than it was before. Also, the article grabbed the attention of filmmaker Ben Niles. In Ben's words, "If an outreach program at Juilliard is struggling, we're all in trouble."

Ben decided to pay the program a visit and was inspired by what he saw. Over the next two years, he filmed the documentary "Some Kind of Spark", a portrait of the teacher-student relationship and the profound impact that music education can have. Although filmed at Juilliard, the primary intent of the film is not to promote the school, but to shine a light on the value of an education in the arts. Many other programs around the country are making great strides in this department.

Ben's hope is that other programs and schools will use SPARK as an opportunity to inspire their

students, teachers, and administrators to further agendas on a local level. My hope is that, as we gather to learn more about how we can further the agendas of our organizations, we never lose sight of the bigger picture. Each of us has the obligation, and the opportunity, to make our future brighter. Please continue to fight for music education with your talent, your efforts, and your votes. And while we progress in our own agendas, let's not forget the greater agenda, the one great agenda, of connecting our collective pasts to the future through a meaningful artistic present. Thank you.