

Thank you, Dean Cutietta, distinguished faculty, parents and graduates of the USC Thornton School of Music. It's a terrific honor for me to be invited here today to speak to all of you, especially given my own tortuous, meandering eight-year slog to a Bachelor of Music degree.

First, I have a question for the graduates and any other music students here preparing for your future in this difficult business: Are you nuts? Didn't your parents suggest that you go for an MBA or something even slightly practical?

The truth is we are all here for one fundamental reason. Each of us was born with an incredible gift, an aptitude for this miracle of music. Now I know that everyone here, certainly all of the graduates, has labored mightily in countless ways to reach this moment. This is a point of arrival to savor. And yet I believe so strongly that we must be humble in the acknowledgement of this truth: all of us were **given** certain gifts, talents and aptitudes that we did not ask for; they came to us unbidden and they are simply a miraculous part of our most fundamental being. When we were put in an environment in which we could foster these gifts and allow them to blossom, it began the process of connecting each of us to something beyond words, beyond the physical, and beyond ourselves.

I imagine that most of you like me have had some kind of overwhelming, transcendent, mysterious, almost out of body musical experiences whether as a performer, a teacher, a composer or as an audience member. I can only describe it personally as a sensation of euphoria and elation that makes me aware, on the most fundamental level, of being part of something bigger than myself. With these experiences comes the realization that music, our music, contains a **force that can change lives and imbue the world with purpose.**

One of the most inspiring moments in my personal experience occurred about 13 years ago. I was on a recital tour in Africa, accompanying a well-known soprano, and we were invited by Nelson Mandela to present a benefit concert to support the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, his own charitable organization. The recital took place in a large concert hall near Johannesburg, and you have to understand this was less than a year after the election which ended apartheid forever and brought Mr. Mandela to the presidency of South Africa. This was a time of enormous change, of both upheaval and euphoria throughout the country. The concert hall was full that night, and there were even audience members seated on the stage, among them a South African choir dressed in the most

beautiful, vivid traditional robes. At the end of our recital, the choir stood up and sang the South African National Anthem (nkosi sikeleli Afrika), and the entire audience joined in as one. Understand that this song had been banned for 30 years by the apartheid government. This music had become the deepest, most profound symbol of the struggle for justice, and since this struggle was finally over, the music became a **gift** of pride and shared humanity.

Hasrat Inyat Khan, the great Sufi musician, put it this way. He wrote: “It would be no exaggeration if I were to say that music alone can be the means by which the souls of races, nations and families, which today are so far apart, may one day be united. The musician’s lesson in life is therefore a great one. Music is not expressed through language, but through beauty of rhythm and tone which reach far beyond language. The more the musician is conscious of his mission in life, the greater service he can render to humanity.”

If I can give any practical advice based on my own experience and observations of 30 years in this business, here it is: Expect the unexpected, and therefore try to be prepared for anything that fate hurls your direction. I know of virtually no successful musician whose path was exactly what they envisioned when they graduated. I myself never dreamed that I would become a conductor when I was in school as a piano major. Actually I had observed that only total jerks went into conducting. (There aren’t any conductors here, are there?) When Esa-Pekka Salonen told me about 15 years ago that he thought I had the personality to become a conductor I thought, yikes, have I become that obnoxious? It’s all by way of saying roll with whatever comes your way and make the most of every opportunity.

Another word of advice: Always be at the top of your game—every rehearsal, every performance, every class you teach, every note you write. Among the many, many completely unglamorous gigs that I did to pay the rent, I played piano in a hotel bar, an opera restaurant, I sang in the barbershop quartet at Disneyland and did other gigs far too humiliating to mention in these auspices. But in retrospect I realize that all of those experiences seasoned me and in many cases led to other, slightly less humiliating gigs, which led to other gigs etc, and I worked up the food chain as it were. I’ve seen countless variations on this pattern with all of my successful colleagues. The lesson I suppose is to take pride in everything that you do. You never know which gig will open a new door for your future.

Be a good colleague. This business can be tough but we're all in it together. I believe in the idea of a bountiful universe. If we are genuinely supportive and encouraging of our fellow musicians it comes back to us in myriad ways and it helps make everyone's journey easier.

Never stop listening. Listen to every kind of music. Be open to everything. Ours is a world increasingly without musical borders—that's part of the joy of living in this time. I used to say "I like almost anything, **but** I cannot tolerate country music". Then I was turned onto some Willy Nelson, Patsy Kline, Doc Watson and it was like, ok, I get it. There **is** something happening here.

Do not procrastinate. (That thought came to me last night at 2:30 in the morning as I was writing this speech.)

Finally, seek truth with every note that you play, sing, compose or teach. Rejoice in this gift of music while you are on this planet for a short time. This gift, the seeds of which we were all born with, is to be savored, shared, and passed on to our brothers and sisters. It's not an easy path that you have chosen, but I cannot think of a more important use for a life in these difficult times. Thank you and good luck!