

**East Texas Baptist University
Marshall, Texas
Meeting of all Music Majors
12:00 noon
24 FEB 06**

The Importance of Music in Our Time

Allow me to explain how we will use our hour together here today. I will first share some thoughts with you about the importance of your musical talent and your stewardship of that gift. We will do so under the title, "The Importance of Music in Our Time." We will devote a few minutes to that subject and then I will use the remaining time to tell you about our Masters Degree programs at Baylor University, in hopes that some of you might become interested in continuing your education with us after you have graduated from East Texas Baptist.

My fellow music majors, have you experienced what I experienced when I was an undergrad music major? You know what I mean; were you as surprised as I to learn that music theory or harmony was more like calculus than music? Were you surprised to learn that your talent is not held in as high esteem here as it was back home with your family, in your church and in your high school? Were you as surprised as I to find out that the practice room would become your second home? Do you ever wonder if it is worth it?

My fellow music majors, do you ever feel like a second-class citizen? Surely some of you, perhaps many of you have experienced your parents' poorly disguised chagrin when you announced you wanted to study music in college. They winced out of love, knowing that the overwhelming majority of the world's musicians don't make much money. Further, much has been said in recent weeks in the news media about our government's newly declared stance on the importance of intensified study of math, science, and engineering in our nation's high schools, colleges, and universities. I fully agree with that concern and I hope that sufficient strategies and funding toward that end will, indeed, come into being. But, in a similar vein, I want to share with you some thoughts about why I feel the study of music, composing music, and making music is essential to our nation's well-being today and continuing into the future. I want to share some thoughts about why devoting yourself to studying music, writing music, and performing music is, indeed, worth it.

Our nation is awash in angry, destructive prose. We are desperately in need of healing. We are desperately in need of inspirational poetry that calls to the depths of each soul rather than to the thin surface of each mind. Our nation needs to hear music that moves us, but is not limited to the works of

John Philip Sousa, music that calls to the human spirit rather than to esprit de corps, music that transforms us rather than programs us, music that expands our imagination far above and beyond consumerism's jingles.

Our nation is divided over a number of profoundly important and foundational issues. We are divided over monumental debates concerning distribution of wealth as seen in health care, education, and jobs. We are divided over the place of Constitutional civil liberties in the time of war, and over the sanctity of life from pre-birth through death. We are divided over the significance of preemptive war, stewardship of the environment, and what is, exactly, the "American culture." These issues are profound, but they are being discussed and explored in the contexts of heated prose and ideological determination. If our nation ever needed poets and musicians, we need them now. Everything is divided in half. Oh, how we need to be lifted above the divide to a third way that speaks to the hearts of all, red and blue, alike. You, young musicians, possess a talent, a giftedness, that is as important to our nation as is oil, and scientists, and, I dare say, democracy itself. Music can be drafted, can be harnessed and made to bring what appears to be life, to what is, actually, a deadly agenda. Those who have studied music will be able to help us know the difference.

There is a certain arrogance that seems to come with musical talent and giftedness; the Primo Dana syndrome. I would like to suggest that the arrogance of the musician may be important. Such confidence, bordering on arrogance, helps us brave the spotlight, it helps us stave off criticism, and it helps us get better gigs (we think). But I think God-given talent often comes with a less than Christ-like spirit because it takes guts, real guts to write and sing and play the poetry that says "No" to partisan prose and self-serving ideology. Fighter pilots have inflated egos that are redeemed as guts in dog fights and poets and musicians have inflated egos that can be redeemed as guts in telling truth to the powers that be and singing and playing poetic truth into the wind of prose, even if few, or even no one, hears. We musicians have the gifts necessary to express the human community's most profound cries for justice, mercy, and generosity. Your oboe, your voice, your pen, your creativity; these can be weapons of peace, no matter the risk and love, even for the enemy; the national enemy, the ideological enemy, the personal enemy. Musicians will you play to such heights, will you sing to such depths, will you write of such truth? Our nation, indeed, our world needs you; your talent given to truth, your ego turned to courage. Your giftedness comes with a call. Your talent comes with a stewardship responsibility.

Still, small voices within our hearts are being drowned out by the sad cacophony of our shouting. Our ears have become deafened to the truth by each side's "facts." How shall we open our hearts and our

ears? How shall we be lifted, as a nation, as a world community, out of the quagmire of hate and suspicion and fear?

Enter: the poets and the musicians. Enter: the artists who work in that world of truth without agenda, agendas that in the end are too small, always too small, and thus frustrating to our souls. The work of the poet and the musician is to remind us...to remind us of the profound strength of the simple truth. And when we are asked by our distracters, or perhaps when we ask ourselves, "Whose truth," we must reply, "*The* truth that will not be conscripted, the truth that changes us, the truth that comes from the music that calls us up and away while simultaneously calling us to the depths within us where we know poetically that there is a better way than what is being presented to us in pushy prose. Musicians, we must remind our fellow citizens of this earth of their basic and shared humanity, remind them by showing them again and again the sun above the clouds, the small flower beside the beaten path, the pink along the eastern horizon, so that our nation, and indeed, our nations, can re-engage in their relationships with each other and with their Maker, with an enlarged vision. Our nation needs more scientists, more mathematicians, more engineers. Maybe so, but God help us, we need more musicians, more talented, dedicated, hard working, in-touch-with-beauty musicians who will be women and men of prophetic courage.

Why do dictatorial regimes imprison their poets and send their famous musicians into exile? They do that, you know. Why? It is because the power within you of which I speak is known all too well by those who would suppress a nation. Label the artists and other tellers of truth as liberals, if that doesn't work, label them as "out of touch" with real life, if that doesn't work declare them to be enemies of freedom, if that doesn't work imprison them as enemies of the state. When you play and sing the great music that overarches centuries and borders, you breath into noisy prose a poetic truth that cannot be discredited. Learn your instrument well. Learn the literature well. Take courage. War does not end war. Poverty is not ended by handouts from the greedy. Injustice is not ended by the victory of the "just." All such attempts and beliefs simply add to the confusing cacophony. But the music that is in your soul and your fingers and your voice, that music can play the poetry that is the prayer of the human soul.

Perhaps you have noticed that I have not mentioned Jesus or Christianity thus far. There is a reason for that. In the Gospel of Mark, chapter one, verses 40-45, we read the account of Jesus healing a leper. The man was overjoyed to be healed, but Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." What a strange thing for Jesus to say. Don't go away from here telling what has happened, show

them what has happened. We can get in prose arguments about creation and evolution and accomplish nothing, but take someone to the Grand Canyon and show them the poetry of God's handiwork and the truth of God overrides the necessity to be right. We can get in prose arguments about pro-choice and pro-life and accomplish nothing, but hand someone a newborn baby to hold in their arms and truth of the poetry of God's handiwork overrides the necessity to be right. Being "right" isn't about helping humanity, its about self-aggrandizement.

In all of our nation's noisy, angry prose, we are accomplishing nothing, nothing. Don't join the shouting. Pick up your violin and play the truth, play the beautiful, quiet, introspective, poetic truth that rises above the prose. Don't join the shouting, too many people are hopelessly caught up in that. Sing poetry, in every language you can, on every recital, so that its not the words, but the truth that the words point to that lifts our hearts and minds from the clutching *prose* of life to the freeing, hope-filled *poetry* of life. This is what you have been gifted toward. Have you thought that your talent was a blessing just for you? Have you thought that your talent was a burden just for you?

Our nation, our world, needs the giftedness you bear, whether you bear is as blessing or burden. To war, you are to sing the message of peace. To greed, you are to play the music of generosity. To consumerism, you are to sing the music of simplicity.

Take another look at that instrument you play. Look at it closely. Listen, again, anew, to your voice as you sing. It is, as Moses found out when he took a closer look at what he held in his hand, the "rod of God." Use it to lead God's people, that is to say, all people, to the promised land of peace and hope, of justice and mercy. Your music, can, indeed, again, like Moses, at least give them a glimpse of that promised land. You know that "zone" you're in when your music is really "cooking," when the music takes over...that place? To the best of your ability, you are to take all of humanity there. Oh, my dear music majors, take your talent seriously, for I cannot overstate The Importance of Music in Our Time. Thank you.

Terry W. York

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