

## ORMTA

July 26, 2014

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It's a great pleasure to be here with you tonight. Now, as has already been mentioned, I am a conductor, a conductor being the only person on a musical stage who is not actually making music! Which inevitably raises the question, "What actually does a conductor do that is even remotely useful?" When Sue referred to me as "maestro" just now, I was reminded of the husband who was shopping for a birthday present for his wife. She had from time to time mentioned that she'd like a parrot, so the husband headed to a pet shop to look for a parrot. The proprietor brought out 3, the first one a nice-looking bird with handsome plumage. Now parrots are supposed to be able to do something audible...sing or speak...and this particular one could indeed sing the national anthem. It sold for \$1000. The 2nd one could sing, all by himself, any one of the 2 part inventions of Bach! Not surprisingly, it was going for \$2000. Parrot #3 launched into the Hallelujah Chorus, singing all the parts in a weird arpeggiated way. Of course, as you can imagine, the price tag for that one was \$4000. Well, the husband had something rather more modest in mind, this being an ordinary birthday his wife was celebrating, nothing ending in 5 or 0, you understand. He had, in the meantime, spied a dreadful looking, mangy, moth-eaten, foul-mouthed parrot sitting forlornly at the back of the shop. Thinking this one might be considerably less expensive, he asked to see it. The shopkeeper immediately told him, "Well, I must tell you, that's my most expensive parrot. I'm selling it for \$7000." "And what exactly can it do?" the

husband asked. “Not a darn thing as far as I can tell”, came the reply, “but all the other birds here call it maestro!”

You may draw whatever conclusions you wish from that story! I fear none of them will be complimentary to conductors.

It's not often that I have the privilege of speaking to a roomful of music teachers. I'm here tonight to tell you that what you do is of inestimable value to our society. You are mostly undervalued, misunderstood, and far too often ignored. And yet you soldier on heroically, quietly, steadfastly, changing lives for the better. Why do I say this? Because I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for a number of important teachers who taught me about music, but more importantly, about life.

When I finished high school in the farming community of Winkler, Manitoba, I was already deeply interested in music, having studied the piano since the age of 7. We sang in church, always in 4 part harmony, and I was involved in various musical endeavours throughout high school - choir, orchestra, operetta productions, a barbershop quartet - you name it, I did it. I was hoping to go to university and either pursue an academic career in English literature or take a law degree and quite possibly go into politics. But first I wanted to finish my ARCT in piano, having already done my Grade X while in high school. So I enrolled in a small private college in Winnipeg, a school with an excellent music department. That's where I intended to finish my theoretical requirements, take piano lessons with someone, anyone,

on the faculty and get ready for my associateship exam. After that I would get serious about my post-secondary education. Little did I know what was about to befall this naive little high school graduate who thought he knew exactly what he was going to do. Thanks to a gifted, spirited, dedicated young piano teacher on faculty, I was launched into a magical world of beauty and order and creativity and tradition and discipline, although I suspect I disappointed her as far as the latter category is concerned. But I completed my ARCT, and in the meantime it became very clear to me that music really was my calling. That realization was due largely to my piano prof who instilled in me a deep and life-long love for music. I owe her a great debt of gratitude. Her name is Marjorie Beckett. Unfortunately she couldn't be here tonight, but I would ask you nevertheless to give her a warm round of applause *in absentia*.

Well, after I really caught the music bug, thanks to Marjorie, there was no holding me back. I finished my undergraduate studies, married Maggie, my beautiful bride, taught secondary and post-secondary school for 3 years, during which my intense interest in musicology was eclipsed by an even more passionate interest in conducting. Consequently we headed off to Germany for graduate studies in choral, orchestral, and opera conducting. I even did some more work in piano, conductors and pianos being more or less inseparable. We returned to Winnipeg where I taught at my alma mater for a couple of years before moving to Waterloo. It was there I took up a teaching position in music at Wilfrid Laurier University, and became very active as a conductor in Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Stratford, and later,

Hamilton as well. In 2010, after 38 gloriously fulfilling years as artistic director of the Grand Philharmonic Choir, I resigned and embarked on a new and exciting phase of my life, more about which a little later.

During my undergraduate studies in Winnipeg, I worked part-time at a private radio station in the town of Altona, about an hour south of Winnipeg. The station was, shall we say, unique: it specialized in farm news, religion (southern Manitoba is Bible belt country) and classical music, lots and lots of classical music. It was a fabulous way to put myself through school, although it never occurred to me then that broadcasting might eventually be part of my professional career. But years later, after I was nicely settled into my teaching and conducting in Waterloo, I got a call from a CBC radio producer friend of mine in Toronto who was about to start a daily classical music programme. Knowing of my former broadcasting experience, he asked whether I might audition to be the host of the programme. Well, sort of as a joke, I accepted his invitation, thinking I'd never be hired, and I'd just go back to teaching, which I loved. Well, wouldn't you know it, they offered me the job, and so I made the difficult decision to give up my academic career, a decision I have never regretted for even an instant. That led to a 32 year career with the CBC, which I absolutely loved right up until my retirement 6 years ago.

During the last couple of years, Maggie and I have had the rare opportunity of spending a considerable amount of time teaching and conducting in Kunming, China. In 2012 we spent a full semester at the Yunnan Arts University, where Maggie taught conversational English

to graduate students who were contemplating doctoral studies abroad, and I taught conducting and also conducted the university choir and orchestra. Among other things, we did a complete concert production of Verdi's *La Traviata*. The following year I was invited to be conductor-in-residence with the Kunming Symphony Orchestra. Those 2 years, although they were hard work and stressful in many respects, were also immeasurably rewarding and turned out to be an experience we wouldn't have missed for the world. We ended up receiving so very much more than we were able to give.

Everything about China is huge. The population of China is 1.3 billion; Yunnan Province, in southwest China, has 40 million people; Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, is a modest-sized city by Chinese standards, having a population of just 8 million. The interest in music, both western and Chinese, is overwhelming! Everyone is always singing, in the shops, on the streets, on their bicycles and motorcycles. How many Chinese piano students are there, you ask. Well, the number is about 80 million! The music building at the university where I taught boasted 270 practice rooms, each equipped with a piano. To be thrust into such a world, a dynamic mass of humanity with its own incredible 5 millennia of written history, yet intent on imitating everything - the good and the bad - emanating from the West, is to be perpetually exhausted and exhilarated. During my residency with the orchestra in 2013, I rehearsed and performed 38 works, 23 of which were by Chinese composers. That's enough pentatonic music to last me a good while! Among other things I developed a great love for the pipa, also known as the Chinese lute, which has been around for at

least 2000 years. I had the opportunity to conduct 2 concertos for pipa and orchestra, and we premiered 2 symphonies by Yunnan composers. But we also did a considerable number of western works: the Schubert Unfinished, Wagner's Siegfried Idyll (on Wagner's 200th birthday, no less) as well as the Brahms Haydn Variations, a Rachmaninov piano concerto and the Dvorak New World Symphony. Although these musicians have played Beethoven and Tchaikovsky before, all of this repertoire was brand new to them. What a thrill to introduce this important music to young musicians who are like so many sponges, eager to soak it all up!

Now the very first time I ever conducted in China was 15 years ago at an International Festival of the Arts. I took a small choir with me and, among other things, we did what turned out to be the 2nd ever performance of Handel's Messiah in the history of the People's Republic of China. I worked long and hard (and with surprisingly positive results) with a professional Chinese symphony orchestra. Learning this iconic western work was sheer bliss for them. After the performance, some of the players came to me, and in their halting English, said, "Maestro, we enjoyed this so very much. But we have to confess to you that when we came to the Hallelujah Chorus, some of us didn't play very well; we had so much water in our eyes we couldn't see the music!"

People ask me occasionally why I do this kind of thing, especially when I've reached an age where I might be forgiven for leaving these adventures to my younger colleagues. Well, it's really very simple.

**The kind of response I just told you about says it all. Aside from the fact that I'm never happier than when I'm actually making music, I believe passionately that the arts, and especially music, are terribly important for a civil society. I believe that the arts make us better people. I believe they ennoble us, they enable us to transcend our own limitations, they encourage us in our weaknesses and failures, and they empower us in our pilgrimage through this vast and wondrous and kaleidoscopic adventure we call life.**

**I believe that as teachers and performing artists we bear the responsibility of transmitting and communicating to our troubled world rarified and distilled and insightful artistic statements by our civilization's most visionary and inspired prophetic voices, those prophets being composers and writers and painters and choreographers and filmmakers. To be able to communicate these works of art, as all of us here tonight are able to do, is a privilege as well as a responsibility.**

**I believe that in a world of war, brutality, poverty and self-interest, the arts speak to us of truth and beauty, integrity and wholeness, serenity and love.**

**This has always been, and continues to be my personal credo. To have been given the opportunity to live such a life in the arts is a gift for which I am profoundly grateful.**

**I grew up in a Mennonite community where biblical references were mother's milk for absolutely everyone, so you will forgive me when I invoke my religious roots for a moment. For me, one of the most powerful metaphors in all Scripture is the first chapter of the Gospel of John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". And then, leaping ahead a bit, we encounter these barrier-breaking, earth-shattering words, "And the Word was made flesh". It's a most potent account of incarnation and Christmas, a succinct distillation of the very quintessence of the Christian faith. The word become flesh, Idea transformed into physical reality, the rubber hitting the road in a most profound way. The late American conductor Robert Shaw came from a family of preachers, and he would often resort to theological metaphors when rehearsing the great choral works. In one of his most insightful moments, Shaw described music and music-making as the reverse of what we read in John's Gospel, in other words, the "flesh become Word". He deftly turned the New Testament image on its head, suggesting that by our work, our diligence, our feeble attempts at musical expression, there is a miraculous alchemy or transformation that results. From our imperfection comes pure inspiration... "And the flesh was made Word" – it's one of the most deeply meaningful commentaries on John chapter 1 I've ever encountered!**

**Let me conclude with one more of Shaw's biblical references, this time to the Holy Dove of inspiration and benediction which descends, regularly but not always, to affirm and bless and enhance our meagre**

little efforts. That holy spirit, that muse, that unique inspiration - call it what you will - is a gift, and when it comes, we humbly and gratefully accept it. Alluding to how relatively little we musicians really have to do with the ultimate success of a musical performance, Robert Shaw compared the whole music-making experience to a bird and a bird-cage. The dove, a metaphor for inspiration, wants to descend – all we teachers and musicians have to do is keep cleaning the cage, putting out fresh newspaper every day, cleaning the cage. For us as teachers, that means getting our students to attend to technique and intonation, and phrasing, and dynamics and articulation - all the usual stuff - that's cleaning the cage!

In 1986 I interviewed the great Austrian conductor Herbert von Karajan. In the course of our conversation, I asked him what constitutes a great performance. He smiled in his uniquely impish way, and said, "Oh, you know, you just look after the too high and the too low, the forte and the piano, the slow and the fast, the legato and the staccato, and already you have a great performance". Clean the cage, he was saying, and the dove will descend. I wish for all of you pristine cages filled with happy birds!

Thank you very much.