

WESTMINSTER CHOIR COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
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President dell’Omo, Provost Fredeen, Dean Shaftel, members of the Rider Board of Trustees, the Westminster faculty, members of the graduating class of 2017, ladies and gentlemen. First, I want to thank Dean Shaftel, the faculty, and members of his staff for inviting me to speak to you today. It is an honor and very humbling.

I’d like to begin this morning by sharing some ideas from a column that I recently read. The column is centered on the question, what does it mean to be human in an age of intelligent machines. If, perhaps, in the near future, artificial intelligence can compete with our own thinking, what makes human beings unique. The answer, of course, is that though many of life’s practical needs may one day be met by artificial intelligence, machines will never have a heart. Machines will never be able to empathize, never be able to move us deeply. Intelligent machines may dazzle us with their ever-increasing capacity to solve the most complex problems, but they will never be able to astonish us with the glow of an evening sunset, or touch us with the beauty of a poem or a simple Bach chorale. Closer to home, they will never fill us with the joyful exultation the Westminster community experiences as it sings a hymn every year at the Opening Convocation.

Each of you graduating today knows exactly what I mean. Over and over your heart has been opened and your souls nourished by the countless life-changing moments you have experienced during your years at Westminster.

As I was thinking about what I might say to you today, I thought how interesting it might be to ask each of you to recall that moment in your life when you were so deeply affected by a particular musical encounter that you begin to think about considering music as your life’s work. Perhaps it was an experience with your choir director, in your community, at church or in school. Maybe you heard a great artist in concert, on line, or on a CD. Maybe you heard one of the Westminster choirs on tour or, perhaps one or both of your parents were Westminster grads. Whatever it was, something compelled you to learn more about this wonderful art. Perhaps then you began studying piano, or an instrument, or taking voice lessons, or maybe you joined a choir or an orchestra. Gradually it became apparent to you that you had no choice but to pursue music as a life calling. As you shared your passion with your friends and your family, there may have been those who suggested that while music was certainly a wonderful sideline, or a lovely avocation, wouldn’t it be better, especially in today’s technological world, to pursue a more practical field. Better to choose a vocation and a college which would guarantee you a job and probably earn you a lot more money. But you persisted. And your friends and your family came to understand the depth of your commitment. Today I want to take a moment to honor your parents and your extended family for the love and support, and the great sacrifices they made to make it possible for you to be here today.

As the end of your high school years approached, you began to think about where to go to college. And among others, you were considering Westminster. Perhaps you had been inspired by your experience in a choral festival or an all-state choir led by a member of the faculty. You may have come to the Vocal Institute or another summer program at Westminster. Your church

or high school choir may have been directed by a Westminster grad, or there may have been a teacher you wanted to study with. No doubt you also visited other colleges or universities, which probably had better facilities, and may have offered you more money. Then you visited the Choir College campus, and there you encountered something special. You couldn't put your finger on it, but something said to you that Westminster Choir College is where I have to be.

So, on an August day a few years ago, you arrived in Princeton and began your years as a student at Westminster. There you found devoted teachers who sewed seeds of insight and understanding that will continue to emerge and evolve as you go through life. There you made lifelong friends who supported you when you were down and rejoiced in your successes. And there you experienced that special quality of community which was created because, on most days of the week you came together with your peers to make music at the highest level of the choral art. There, regardless of different levels of musical and technical skill and vocal gifts, you regularly brought that most intimate of all musical instruments, your voice, to serve the works of the world's greatest composers. And while at Westminster, you also got the rare opportunity to regularly make music with the world's greatest symphony orchestras and vocal artists. And through that, and so many other experiences – in other performances, in your own recitals, in choir rehearsals, in the studio, and in the classroom, your life was changed.

None of this, of course, would be possible without a faculty whose love, devotion, musicianship, and mastery of their fields have so richly impacted each of your lives. They have inspired you, challenged you, and sometimes, administered a dose of tough love, but this firm hand was always couched in the desire that you develop your own musical gifts to the fullest, and that you continue to grow as a human being. Undergirding this, of course was the wonderfully supportive and caring staff.

Today, one of the beloved members of the Westminster family is no longer with us. With her depth of humanity, her great gifts as a teacher, her profound intelligence, and her relentless pursuit of the truth, Lindsey Christiansen inspired all of us to become our better selves. We will all sorely miss her, but her influence will continue to radiate in the lives of her students and in the lives of those of us who were privileged to know her and to love her.

As we consider the choral focus of Westminster, I think it is important to reflect on the relevance of the choral experience in today's woefully fractured world. Isn't it great that when singing in a chorus, people of all races, all ethnic backgrounds, all approaches to faith, and with wildly opposing political views can become one through the binding power of a Brahms Requiem, a Bach B Minor Mass, or a Mozart Requiem - works that all transcend the particular meaning of their texts because they speak with one universal voice. You certainly understand this, because during your Westminster years, you had the opportunity to sing masterworks by Britten, Mahler, Mozart, Rachmaninoff, and last weekend the Symphonic Choir's highly-praised performance of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony with the New York Philharmonic. In those performances, as well in as other concerts on and off the campus, you experienced that special quality of community that results when a group of singers, having mastered all the technical considerations, become united within and through the human/spiritual power and meaning that gives life to all great works of art. And it is the search for meaning that has been the hallmark of Westminster choirs from the beginning.

Westminster has always understood that while, of course, all aspects of the notation must be mastered, and the sound is vocally healthy, it is only when we open ourselves, when we breathe together, when we engage our imaginations to ask why the composer chose to symbolize that text with that music, and then allow ourselves to go there, will the music we make come alive.

Before going on, I'd like to take a moment to say how moving it has been that so many have written about the irreplaceable role that Westminster Choir College has played in the pantheon of this country's centers of musical study. Parents, alumni, faculty, and so many friends have, with heartfelt words, spoken about the powerful impact that Westminster has had on the lives of so many for so many years. Leaders in the world of music, such as the music director of the New York Philharmonic, the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, the president of the Juilliard School, and the executive director of the American Choral Directors Association, representing over 20,000 choral directors from around the world, have also written about the icon that Westminster Choir College is in the world of choral music. I know I speak for all of you here, as we join those many other voices, in expressing the fervent hope that a way will be found for Westminster Choir College to remain in its long-time home in Princeton.

No doubt, for many people, the name "Westminster Choir College" brings to mind its world-class choirs or the name of an alum who changed their life. But for all of us in the Westminster family, it is a place. It is a place where the world's greatest conductors and other artists have often come to work with the choirs and speak at its Commencement. It is a place full of meaning and special memories for all those who studied there and for those of us who taught there. And for sure, the location of that place and the central focus of that campus has been a major factor in creating the quality of community that exists at Westminster.

An integral part of every Westminster's year has long been this magnificent Commencement ceremony, where today we celebrate those of you who have concluded your years on the campus. Soon you will join with most of your fellow students in singing the Anthem of Dedication. I well understand from long experience that for a number of you, it is uncomfortable to sing some of these words. But I have always believed that the overarching message of this anthem is that those who remain say farewell to those who leave with their blessing, and what a lovely thing that is. And during the anthem, your classmates, with words from the Old Testament, Book of Isaiah, will ask three times, "Whom shall we send?" and three times you will respond "Here am I, Lord. Send me." And in that humble response, you will have dedicated your coming years to serve those whose lives you touch through the humanizing power of music.

In today's world we are surrounded with so much that distracts us and can keep us from being in the moment. Because this distraction can also keep us from listening and looking with our hearts, what you have been prepared to bring to the world has, I believe, become ever more important. Whether it be in schools, in churches, in your communities or in the world's concert halls, its opera houses, or through your own compositions.

This won't always be easy. So much that surrounds us keeps us separated from one another, and indeed, often from ourselves. We see a world being torn apart by the fear and suspicion of those who are different. Instead of seeking common ground, we often talk at each

other, rather than listening to each other. And constantly we hear the clamor of groups, be they social, political, or sometimes religious, who believe they have a corner on the truth.

For those of us who are musicians, it is very disheartening that so many people want music to just be entertaining, and are so easily drawn to music that only manipulates the surface emotions. All of us are alarmed by how music and the arts in general are being devalued in the schools, and we are troubled that churches often opt for music that is readily accessible rather than being deeply devotional.

This can be discouraging. But I have long believed that in spite of appearances and behaviors to the contrary, and often without knowing it, every human being longs to be in touch with something that is real, something that is true.

This morning I want to congratulate you on completing this phase of your education, but you all know that this is just the beginning. Never stop learning; never stop growing. As you continue to deepen your musical skill and understanding, it is so important that you remain aware of all that is going on in the world around you. Keep learning about fields other than your own. Delve into all the arts. It is a lifelong process. And in the often chaotic noise of this complex world, and given the seductive power of social media, please find time for silence and solitude. Because, finally, it is in silence and solitude, when you are alone with yourself, that you will be able to reflect most deeply on your life. And it is in those precious moments that the spirit from within and without may be allowed to be heard.

You have been blessed with musical talent. You have been led to develop your gifts in this extraordinary place we all love. Now before you lies the possibility of a deeply fulfilling life devoted to helping others open their hearts and deepen their humanity.

Today, as you graduate, you join the worldwide family of Westminster's alumni who have, for so many years, touched the lives of countless people throughout the world. It's an astounding legacy. And all of this emanated from a small college in Princeton, New Jersey, which has played such a powerful role in every one of our lives.

Thank you and God bless you.