

Convocation - Fall 2013  
Westminster Choir College of Rider University  
Robert L. Annis

Today is my 20<sup>th</sup> Westminster Choir College Convocation, and as I considered what I would say to you today, I reflected on the previous two decades of Convocation addresses. Anyone who's been to more than a few might think I have multiple personalities. Over the years I've played the clarinet, one time being my first public improvisation. I've used experiences from my life to try and get a particular point across – Outward Bound, running. We've had 'guest' appearances – most recently Yannick Nezet-Seguin. And I've used props ranging from two cans connected by a string to highlight the challenges of our phone system back in the early 90s – to the memorable day when I brought in a homemade construction set – a contraption really – and used one of my daughter's doll's - Barbi's gymnast friend, Skipper.

More than once over the years I've stepped out of my comfort zone, despite the warmth and nurturing that we all feel on this occasion. Convocation gives us a chance to come together as a community - a community whose life and breath are centered on the making of music. We sing together and we share a common experience, knowing that our inspired vision allows us to nurture outstanding young musicians.

Charles Schisler wrote in his dissertation on the history of Westminster Choir College the following: "Our curriculum combines elements found in both Conservatory and liberal arts institutions. It combines philosophies of rational humanism and cognitive pluralism to emphasize the technical competence and musical sensitivity of student musicians while fostering their understanding of the liberal arts and the role of music in intellectual and cultural life."

So let's assume for the moment that this concept is our comfort zone. But with that in mind – the question is - how do our community values and traditions stay relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, because our comfort zone can easily become its own bubble or silo. As musicians we know first hand that a sensational performance today does not guarantee a sensational performance again tomorrow. For an organization or school this translates into the fact that a successful past does not guarantee a secure future of continued glory. To remain vital we must function as an energized and interactive entity meeting tomorrow's needs. We must learn from our past, but we also must look ahead. As we all go through this journey, I ask you to challenge yourself to grow and venture outside of your comfort zone.

The world is changing very fast –cultural and religious changes, the global economic challenges, and the seemingly precarious state of the arts. The arts have historically had ups and downs – and this period of time is clearly a dip with questions about the role of arts education, graying audiences, and non-profits struggling for relevance. But the most visible change and, possibly the most dramatic impact on our lives, is the ongoing technology revolution. It is a sea-change moment.

A couple of years ago there was a cartoon in the Wall Street Journal. Its title was “Electronic Evolution,” and the caption read: “Nerd is a word that’s changed meanings in the cyberspace world; it once meant a type of person who was not very bright or odd—now it means a technology ace.”

In a conversation with my son the other day I was telling him – proudly – about my use of YouTube, Skype, Google Maps – traffic, and the Find Craft Beer app. Well, he let me know that if I wanted to stay relevant in today’s world I needed to also use Twitter, Tumblr, Foursquare, Instapaper, Snapchat, Feedly, Touch Press – the list went on and on. What I think he’s really telling me is I can’t live one hundred percent of the time in my comfort zone.

One way or another this is the challenge for all of us. How do we build on the past, embracing the old and claiming the new? I wish I had the insight and wisdom to give you a definitive answer.

For our students, our goal at Westminster is to excite you musically and intellectually and to nurture the artist within each of you. Being an artist involves not just the passion each of us has for music, but acquiring the foundation, knowledge, and skills that are crucial to being an artist. We will help you synthesize all of this as you learn, experience and evolve – both as an artist and as an individual. Take intellectual and musical risks. Expand your comfort zone. It’s okay to experiment and fail. Howard Gardner; the noted psychologist, educator and researcher; stated that most creative people learn a great deal from their failures.

A former colleague of mine, John Bingham, who was the associate dean at Oberlin Conservatory, left music administration for a life in the world of running. For years he wrote a monthly essay in Runners World magazine. The heading said: “The miracle is not that I finished. The miracle is that I had the courage to start.”

Pablo Casals, the renowned musician and cellist, had the following perspective. At the age of 95 a young reporter asked him, “Mr. Casals, you are 95 and the greatest cellist who ever lived. Why do you still practice six hours a day?” Mr. Casals answered, “Because I think I’m making progress.”

As young musicians and artists you are a significant part of the future of the world. You can change lives. You can give the world community what it needs. You can make the arts a lifeblood part of your community. Embrace and rejoice in the journey Westminster offers to you.

And to our faculty, I encourage you to think innovatively. Embracing what we hold true to the musical training and life experiences found at Westminster. But think creatively and entrepreneurially to evolve, enhance and mold a curriculum and performance experience that are vital and relevant to the artistic and educational development of our 21<sup>st</sup> century young musicians.

We are blessed with a wonderful faculty. Zubin Mehta may have described our faculty the most eloquently. In his remarks at a Westminster Commencement he said to the students, "Somebody must be doing the right thing with you ... I bow my head in admiration to the entire faculty of this school. Of making this uniqueness of spirit, which I don't know anywhere else in the world."

In thinking about my closing today, my thoughts went to the student remarks at last week's Georgia Tech Freshman Convocation. These remarks went to YouTube immediately, becoming an Internet sensation with more than 2.5 million hits. The student giving the remarks ended with drama, spirit, and music. I won't try to pull off the same sensation. So, I've opted for a two-part closing that may not be as dramatic, but it's nevertheless just as heartfelt.

First, following a rehearsal in The Playhouse a number of years ago, Leonard Bernstein was asked what he thought about working with Westminster's students. The eloquence of his reply is as moving today as it was then. He said, "Westminster Choir College supplies a great measure of beauty to a world that needs it badly."

And lastly, from the deepest part of my heart and soul – thank you.