

Westminster Commencement Address
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Distinguished guests, members of faculty, members of staff, family, parents, and most importantly Class of 2015 – All this incredibly beautiful Westminster family. You have no idea the honor for me it is to be here. In a way it's full circle for me. As most of you know, I am linked to Westminster since I was 16-years old - even younger than you are. And, as I came to two summer sessions to this unique school in the world, I could almost safely say that it almost taught me everything I know about conducting; first with Andrew Megill and then with the master, whom I'm so happy to see here, Dr. Flummerfelt.

I am addressing you now in capacity of The Philadelphia Orchestra Music Director. I'm so humbled to be stepping in this unbelievable tradition and I'm not even sure I want to think about the people who preceded me on this microphone to deliver this speech. I don't feel worthy of these legends - Bernstein, Muti - but today I had prepared a speech, and I as usual, decided to speak from my heart instead. And you know, us conductors do love to talk, even if we are taught at a very young stage in our studies, that it's better not to talk too much and to let the music speak. The music that just spoke so beautifully for the past hour, the music that we did together also over the years, now already forging this incredible journey, artistic culture that Philadelphia and New York audiences, to speak only from my own contribution, have been fortunate to be doing with you - you great musicians in Brahms, Verdi, Bach, Bernstein - and to be inspired by your souls, and your artistry and talent.

Speaking of talent, we always hear this, "oh, a career in music is one percent talent and 99 percent hard work, and luck and all of this." I'm not saying it's not true. But today, I want to talk about something else. I want to talk about choice. We don't choose to be a musician, music chooses us. Music chooses us and chose you to deliver something to the world. What you chose, and what you family have helped facilitate that choice, is to accept this mission as musicians in the world, and accept to do everything possible to make this happen. And with that choice, comes a lot of responsibility, a lot of joy, and also in this moment in your life a lot of doubt, uncertainty, fear, excitement, challenge.

I remember when I was your age; my biggest concern was about, what's the next step? And we are, even more now, more than ever, in a world where everything has to be decided before. You need to know when you're a certain age what you're going to do when you grow up. Then you do your high school, then you do your college, and so forth, University perhaps, and then after you have this job and that's fine. I don't think it's ever been this way for musicians. I don't think in this 21st century it's anymore this way for anyone, actually. But what I want to tell you is, this is a beautiful thing. We would not have chosen to let music choose us, if we were not thriving on that uncertainty; on these waters that are not fixed and delineated.

The most important thing, as a journey in life for any human being, is to learn to know yourself and then accept to be yourself, and work for it. By choosing beauty, art, you have chosen humanity. You have chosen to give dreams to the world. You have chosen to give peace, hope, pleasure, enjoyment, but also relief in difficult times. The world you are in, Class of 2015, is not an easier world that in my time. It's a more difficult world. It's a harder, harsher world, which needs more than ever what you have chosen to do; more than ever. And in ten years' time, I am convinced of this and I hope you will that music and art is what people will need, even more. In a faster paced world, in a world that's so predictable that it becomes unpredictable, we have the baggage of history, of beauty, and you are the messengers.

Learning to be yourself also means to accept our failures. It also means to accept that we will never be perfect, even if we strive for perfection. Believe me; I believe that you are as perfect as you can be for twenty-year-old-something people. I don't know anyone else that can be more beautiful people than you in the world. And yet, you will always change, morph, develop, and this is why what we do is so essential and so beautiful, and will also inspire the others.

You know when we are on stage, or in front of a classroom, or in a hospital, or in an audition, or in front of an orchestra, in front of a chorus, there is this moment that you have to throw yourself there. Let go. Let it be. Not because people expect something from you, but because you know you have something to give them. How many professions really can call for that? It's beyond confidence, it's trusting that you have your place in the world. And I think you have the opportunity to empower with this. You are empowered now to inspire the world; everyone on this earth to be more confident, to accept who they are, and in adversity, just keep the focus on what you are deeply convinced is your place in the world.

I want to finally quote my great, great master Carlo Maria Guilini. Maestro Guilini, who I spoke about years ago in my youth with Dr. Flummerfelt, collaborated here in the States with the greatest institutions and everywhere in the world. So, when I had the fortune to meet him, I was exactly your age. He was well into his 80s, and the little man I was there, probably pretty confident because I even dare to even say, "Hello" to him. But still unsure of what this was all about, would go to him and ask him advice for this, "if I were to go in two instead of four in that bar," things that were a little technical and a little boring, but I couldn't find anything else to ask him. And everything that he would tell me was all related to "how would you do it?" He would ask me to sing that passage. And he said, "There you go, this is your way, you do it this way because it's yours." Of course at the time, I have to say, that I was disappointed. This great, magical master, who could do a Bruckner Symphony like it is the most eternal mass ever, is just talking about "do it yourself, and let it feel natural." Of course, I am summing it up rather too shortly, but this actually, I'm discovering more and more, year after year, is the greatest life lesson. You cannot be a musician, a messenger of beauty in the world, without having deep inside the conviction that it is you; your own self without any makeup, without any façade, without any fear.

Dear Westminster graduates, Class of 2015, I am convinced that you are the most beautiful souls for our art in the world. You inspire night after night, day after day, the entire Philadelphia Orchestra. You inspire all of our audiences. You inspire people around you. You inspire me to become a better person, and this is why what I wish you is to keep being these lights in the dark world, and I am sure we are going to see each other again. May God be with you, and all the best for a most wonderful, personal, individual life lived to the fullest. Bravo.