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VOX HUMANA: A tale of three musicians.

One of the occupational hazards that folks in my line of academic work face is that of introducing people and events. While this often means digging out talking points on topics not all that familiar, or another of the routine institutional stump speeches, every now and again we get to talk about something in which we have experience. A few months ago, the opportunity arose of introducing a panel chaired by Maestro Leonard Slatkin of the National Symphony Orchestra (and soon the Detroit Symphony). He brought with him a group of very prominent friends in entertainment, publishing, government, communications, and philanthropy. The group reflected on the meaning of music in the lives of non-professional musicians. So, I could not resist the urge to share some first-hand, formative experience about the insightful long view of musicians.

Since 1973, I have taught at American University and have served in its administration for the past decade. So I had the advantages of seniority, institutional memory, and a clear knowledge of the core beliefs of the place. Could I then couple the visions of three past visiting musicians to the current practice of the university?

In the spring 1969, I stepped on the AU campus for the first time. I was a student, elsewhere and had come to meet and listen to a talk by Olivier Messiaen. Naturally, Messiaen spoke about the influences upon his music – Impressionism, serialism, birdsong, Hindu rhythms, Gregorian chant, theology, poetry, color, William Shakespeare. His was, of course, a highly personal musical language unlike any other but a highly communicative language precisely because of its linkages to such far flung music experience and thought – it was a multidisciplinary art. So now, four decades later, I reflected, American University, like nearly all of higher education, upholds the notion of broadly construed, interdisciplinary inquiry. Learning and research today takes into account the premise that no idea grows in isolation. Intellectual validity, therefore, demands inspiration from and association with other realms. What Messiaen professed several generations ago has now emerged as truth and common practice of the mind.

So a few years later having perchance become a professor here, I recalled that the music department invited Maestro Lorin Maazel, then music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, to speak. He cheered on a large group of music majors and suggested strategies for building careers in music. He said point blank, “If you have any serious ambitions about having such a career, then you had better get yourself to Europe and live and study there.” Looking back, although seemingly limited in its disciplinary and geographic limitations, this admonition must have impressed more than AU’s music majors. Today, more than three decades later, about 70% of our undergraduates spend at least one semester studying abroad at 106 partner destinations, and most of these are not in Western Europe. More broadly, universities have become internationalized centers where multi-cultural perspectives and scholarship permeate curriculum and scholarship alike. Once more, a musician trumpeted this message decades before it became universal practice.

Finally, in 1982, we hosted a visit by the then music director of the National Symphony Orchestra, Mstislav Rostropovitch. A colleague and I interviewed him on our

recital hall stage. Slava's message was pointed and clear. Music, if it is to be as powerful and universal an art as we believe it to be, must serve higher, nobler purposes, especially that of the freedom of expression for artists and for all and music and musicians must strive to affirm human rights broadly. And again, 25 years later, among its characteristic and defining overarching themes, none defines my university more sharply than its fervent concern with the rights of all human beings. And such is a foundational belief in hundreds of other institutions. Public affairs, international law, communications, and justice permeate the curricula nationally. What's more, programming in the arts has embraced these themes afresh. My point was that, again, a musician led the way.

These three then – interdisciplinarity, internationalism, human rights – endure as essential characteristics of the academy. On my campus, in each case, their harbingers were prominent musicians. There is a lesson here: it behooves us to listen closely when musicians speak!

-Haig Mardirosian