Afterword: On Reinstating an Arts Agenda in Our Schools

Leonard Slatkin

In February 2020, about three weeks into the shutdown of personal contact in our society, a certain amount of anger started to wend its way through my entire system. It was not about my own inability to move freely in the world, nor was it about being forced to shut down the recreative side of my life. In fact, something of the opposite was occurring. All of a sudden, I had the time to think and consider what I should be doing.

First in my mind was using all the tools that my seventy-five years had taught me. Reconnecting with people whom I had not been in contact with for many years showed me that I had been missing a lot. Almost any animosity I had felt toward any human being who had been a part of my life disappeared. Instead, I was enjoying tremendously the joy of living in the moment by reliving the past.

Most of my early years were filled with music, whether at home or with my friends. How did those of us who attempted to grow up in the 1950s come to have such a well-rounded education, including the arts? I began to wonder about many things, and jotted down the following.

On September 12, 2001, I returned to the United States from London, on one of the few airplanes allowed to fly to Washington, D.C. Near the end of the flight, the pilot asked us to look out the window. It was a clear day, and we passed about forty miles from the site of the tragedy that had taken place a little more than twenty-four hours earlier. I felt a pang of sorrow in my heart and soul, knowing that I was not returning to the same place that I had left two weeks before. And holding out hope that nothing again would affect any of us in this way, especially in the music world.

Recently, I tuned into the Berlin Philharmonic's Digital Concert Hall. What I saw was like nothing else in my almost seventy years of concert viewing. With a maximum of fifteen musicians on the huge stage, the conductor, Kirill Petrenko, led a program of mostly intimate works, but presented in the most unintimate way possible.

All the musicians practiced social distancing from one another, no one seated less than six feet from his or her neighbor. The hall was empty, devoid of ushers and audience. The

cameras were operated robotically with no production personnel visible. The performances, including a reduced instrumentation of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, were uniformly excellent. But with the absence of a public, even with their occasional coughs and dropping of program books, it felt more like a visual glimpse of a recording session rather than a true concert.

During this presentation, several thoughts kept recurring to me. Is this going to be how it is from now into the unforeseeable future? This led to other musings: Shouldn't the group on my computer screen be called "Members of the Berlin Philharmonic"? Is this a good time for clever orchestrators to tackle the majority of the standard repertory? Will composers be asked to write for reduced forces over the next few years? Can this type of effort be sustainable? What happens if someone coughs or sneezes on stage?

We may not know the answers to those and so many more questions, but it is not hard to understand that concerts will be among the last to even remotely return to what they once were. Possibly they never will. The longer the restrictions continue, the more dominos will fall. There have been many articles written about our orchestras' future, but few have mentioned how the virus has impacted the schools and conservatories that turn out the next generation of musicians. As both a member of the faculty and serving on the Board of Directors of the Manhattan School of Music, I have been privy to information that shows the extent of damage being done.

Although the School is in decent shape, it cannot afford the massive hit this storm will cause. As with other institutions of its kind, MSM spent the remainder of the 2020 spring semester in lockdown. Classes and lessons were taught as webinars. That is the best that could be done, but it only goes so far. Music relies on personal contact, and attempting to teach via satellite is limited at best.

Most of us who are in the profession contribute both financially and artistically to various artistic and educational institutions. Whether giving fundraising concerts, helping with endowment drives, or teaching, each of us is invested in the future. These expenditures of time, energy, and money help a great deal. Things are different today. More than ever, our contributions matter. Leadership must come from the inside, with ideas and wisdom to help guide the emerging stars.

There is no magic bullet, no bailout, this time around. Live performances, even with modifications, are what sustain the creative artistic world. There is a reason we are part of "The Seven Lively Arts." We can, and must, get ourselves to functioning when the time is

right. Audience participation is a vital part of the listening and viewing experience. In order to move forward, we must look back, but with a new set of lenses.

Things will return, but as with the aftermath of 9/11, they will not be the same.

> Darest thou now O soul,
> Walk out with me toward the Unknown Region,
> Where neither ground is for the feet, nor any path to follow?
>
> —Walt Whitman

As I wrote those words, a feeling of being powerless came over me. My days of being an influence in the world of music have changed. No longer was I in a position of being a music director, the person who leads a community on a cultural journey. At the same time, I started to feel that this time of isolation could take me on a different path. And that was all because I was reconnecting with my past.

When I was but a wee lad in the fourth grade, twice a week, one Mrs. Otto would come to our classroom at Wilshire Crest Elementary School in Los Angeles. She brought instruments appropriate for our ten-year-old hands and minds. We sang while she played the autoharp. For most of the kids, they were learning about how to read simple musical notation for the first time.

Only one word could be used to describe this woman: inspiring.

When I return to conduct concerts with the LA Philharmonic, every so often a former classmate will come backstage, introduce himself, and ask, “Do you remember Mrs. Otto?” Such was the impact that she made on our collective educational experience. More than likely, I was the only member of the class who had come from a highly musical household. But the others most certainly had listening skills, whether derived from the radio, recordings, or concerts. Families interacted within the rest of the household, and music was a shared experience.

From grades seven through nine, I attended another public school, John Burroughs Junior High. The music teacher was Eileen Wingard, and at this point in the educational system, band and orchestra, as well as chorus, were taught. My instrument at first was violin, but when it was noticed that there were no violas in the group, I was asked to switch over. Mrs. Wingard helped me to understand the viola clef, and I found myself truly enjoying sitting where one could hear most of what was going on within the rest of the orchestra.

We will skip over the part where some of us tried to lock Mrs. Wingard in the double bass cabinet!

What made this time special, but not to us back then, was that all arts classes were taught during school hours. No rehearsals took place either before or after the hours of the normal curriculum. Once again, I had a teacher who inspired us to work every moment at improving, and who understood the value of music for everyone. This was the norm in California during the 1950s. Much of the nation felt the same way. That was, of course, before Proposition 13.

As my proficiency on the viola increased, I was admitted to the California Junior Symphony. The conductor was a Russian immigrant named Peter Meremblum. With my own family coming from that part of the world, I already knew of the tough love that educators imposed on students. The attitude was simple. If you did well, there was nothing to say. And if not, you got holy hell!

Every Saturday I took my instrument to Plummer Park and sat, surprisingly, on the first stand. My technical skills did not warrant this position, but perhaps the maestro thought he saw the spark of intellectual curiosity and wanted me up there to keep a close eye on what I was—or was not—doing. At one rehearsal he was called away to the phone. Looking down at me he asked, in his heavy Slavic drawl, "You vant to conduct?" I timidly said yes, and all of a sudden, at age 16, I was on the podium for the first time.

The fire was lit. It was now the start of my time at Los Angeles High School. Still a public school, it boasted three choirs, two bands, and an orchestra, as well as a composer-in-residence—in our case, Peter Schickele—as well as classes in virtually all the arts. These all took place during regular school hours, with the exception of band practice during football season, when we had to be there an hour before the team took the field. I played the glockenspiel and when we marched down the fifty-yard line, I would make a sharp left and form the tip of the letter L. When January arrived, we became a concert band.

One big advantage for me was that if you played in this ensemble, you were exempt from physical-education classes. I had intensely disliked these at John Burroughs High and was more than happy to have them disappear from my school agenda. Both the band and the orchestra were led by Raymond Wurfl, a man who truly knew how to deal with the raging hormones of the students. He was disciplined and brought out the best in us. By now, there were some members in both groups who were thinking about pursuing a career in music.

The reason I have provided my own background here is simply to show how it used to be. Today, although all three schools still exist, the music and arts programs in America's public schools are few and far between. If they exist, the classes are not part of the regular curriculum. Not only does this make the days longer, if you choose to participate, you do not have as much opportunity to just be a kid. And with these pesky ACT and SATs looming, there is even more pressure placed on each student. Certainly, I happily

acknowledge the few spots of important activity in the arts at private institutions: Gustavo Dudamel's work with El Sistema and the LA Philharmonic, the robust Advanced Placement music-theory program in some high schools, Michael Tilson Thomas's New World Symphony program at Miami Beach, many summer music camps like Greenwood or the Interlochen School of the Arts, or Limor Tomer's amazing work with music at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. But we still need a national K–12 program in which our young people of the future learn to sing and to play instruments. The idea is not to prepare yet more professional musicians—our collegiate schools of music are already producing 35,000 degrees in music a year—but to prepare young people who love to work hard improving the product while learning to listen with acuity, developing future audiences.

According to Peterson's, a guide for college admissions, it is easy to see the history. SAT testing has never been static and unchangeable. The test has evolved to meet the educational standards of the best colleges and universities, and to reflect the material emphasized by the majority of American high schools. The most recent revision, prior to 2005, occurred in 1994 when antonym questions were removed, longer reading passages were added, as were open-ended math questions, and calculators became permitted. Although initiated in 1926, with ACT starting in 1959, they did not seem to have much impact during my own school years. Perhaps I took one of them, but I don't remember and neither did many of my friends from those days. Today these various academic trials stand as the principal reason to go to school. And naturally, the arts have no place in them. We will get back to this a bit later.

In 1990, the National Center for Education Statistics issued a report that contained the following information:

> Most public, elementary and secondary schools that offer separate instruction in arts subjects have curriculum guidelines provided by their school districts. However, only one-third of schools at both instructional levels reported that their districts had arts coordinators or curriculum specialists on staff.

Just five years later, the Brookings Institution found that

> Engaging with art is essential to the human experience. Almost as soon as motor skills are developed, children communicate through artistic expression. The arts challenge us with different points of view, compel us to empathize with others, and give us the opportunity to reflect on the human condition. Empirical evidence supports these claims: Among adults, arts participation is related to behaviors that

> contribute to the health of civil society, such as increased civic engagement, greater social tolerance, and . . . [more frequent] other-regarding behavior. Yet, while we recognize art's transformative impacts, its place in K-12 education has become increasingly tenuous.

In 2006, when I arrived in Detroit as Music Director, I had the occasion to speak with the then-acting director of the public school district for the city. He proudly informed me that "30% of our students have arts education in their schools." My first thought was that 70% did not.

With all that we have learned regarding the benefits of early learning in the arts, we have moved so far away from this ethic since I was a student that we can all continue to worry about the historical culture disappearing entirely from the United States. Other countries understand the value and require some form of training in the arts from an early age.

The pianist Lang Lang once told me that there are more than fifty million young people studying piano in China. Not only does this give them a discipline to add to their academic arsenal, it also provides a glimpse into the Western marketplace as regards culture. Again, the fear is that traditions may disappear, not only in the artistic workplace but in what used to be handed down from generation to generation.

At this point, with so many studies out there and statistics galore, it is time to focus on solutions. In order to do that, we have to make a few assumptions. First is the realization that the federal government, as well as most state and local communities, has little or no interest in the arts. They have other priorities when it comes to dispensing funds because, in our democracy, not very many people have evinced a strong interest in the future of the arts in America.

Along with that comes the second assumption, that it will take private money to get anything moving forward. That seems unlikely on the face of it, but if there is one thing I have learned, especially during my Detroit tenure, it is that even in the most desperate fiscal instability, the education of our young people is an area that still interests individuals and corporations.

While my orchestra, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, was dealing with severe fiscal instability following a six-month strike in 2009, money for its programs assisting children increased. Today, more and more dollars have flowed into the Wu Family Academy, an initiative started by two patrons who understood why we should be responsible for teaching music. With community outreach becoming an important part of the orchestra's mission, when combined with the new pricing system for tickets distributed to students, this part of the budget was more than secure.

If you were to come to Orchestra Hall on most Saturdays, you would see about 500 young musicians, instrument in hand, who break up into five or six ensembles. They rehearse, are given sectionals by members of the DSO, and perform concerts, not only at the Auditorium but around the community. In addition, for those who cannot afford instruments or lessons, these are provided throughout the year. There are also programs for those interested in jazz.

What this says is that there is strong interest among the young people. They have not gotten to the point of restricting their musical knowledge to the latest pop or hip-hop sensation. The dictum of Duke Ellington is apt here. "There are only two kinds of music, the good and the rest." It is up to each of us to determine not only what we like but why. My background, as you have read [Chapter 3], has always encouraged me to adhere to that adage.

Still, what are these kids getting from their schools? Not all that much. It has taken, at least in Detroit, a private group of donors to get things going. Can this be transferred into our public educational system? I believe it is possible, and am now going to propose something radical and possibly doable, even if it seems like a pipe dream.

If we can accept the premise that getting arts education back into the public schools is critical, and that money will not come from the government, how can this be accomplished? Ask yourself this question: What is art? To me, it is an expression of history since nothing can be created outside of the time when it is written, depicted, or built. Even if a work deals with the past, future, or the abstract, it does not exist in a vacuum. And we all know what that means.

Originally, Beethoven wanted to honor Napoleon, a leader he thought embodied the highest ideals of democracy and anti-monarchy that motivated the French Revolution. In fact, the title page bore an inscription, "Bonaparte." But the composer was worried that he might be offending the person who commissioned the symphony and, in the autumn of 1804, changed the dedication. He was also worried that the fee he was to receive might be reduced. As a compromise, he decided to recognize Prince Lobkowitz as the dedicatee, but the title of the piece itself would remain.

Just after that, on May 4, 1804, Napoleon declared himself Emperor of France, throwing Beethoven into a rage. His personal secretary, Ferdinand Ries, described what happened next: "I was the first to tell him the news that Bonaparte had declared himself Emperor, whereupon he broke into a rage and exclaimed, 'So he is no more than a common mortal! Now, too, he will tread underfoot all the rights of man, indulge only his ambition; now he will think himself superior to all men and become a tyrant!' Beethoven went to the table,

seized the top of the title page, tore it in half and threw it on the floor. The page had to be recopied, and it was only then that the symphony received the title, 'Sinfonia Eroica.'"

Three months later, the title of the work now included, "Composed to celebrate the memory of a great man." Even though Napoleon would not die until seventeen more years had passed, in Beethoven's view, he and his ideals had perished that past May.

How can we turn this story into something fundamental, that speaks of the arts and their relationship to history?

It is not clear that the composer actually tore or threw the title page on the floor, despite the writings of Ries. That is because what still survives is that piece of manuscript paper. It shows that Beethoven took what was probably his version of a pencil or even a small knife and scratched out the name, Bonaparte.

The work itself begins with two blunt E flat chords. You would be amazed to hear how different conductors interpret those opening bars. Some try to project nobility, perhaps honoring the initial feelings of the composer. Others, myself included, play them very short and angrily, indicating his wrath. Take a listen to this:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnhlQUBsd6g

This story is indicative of how art and history can come together. Not only can we hear and read the thoughts of the composer; it also puts part of the Napoleonic Era into a wholly different perspective.

Imagine that a history teacher today is discussing the French Revolution. Adding this story, seeing the page and listening to the first movement, gives the educator a chance to engage the students in a novel way. What do they think the opening should sound like? Did Napoleon take an interest in painting, architecture, or music? Do you think that, in a time of war, the arts serve a purpose?

What I am getting at is what should have been obvious a long time ago: the arts are a part of history, so why not treat them that way in our educational system? The simplest of folk songs plays its part in understanding society. The architectural monuments reflect the technologies of their time. Painting represents real events in the way that photographs do. All the arts are connected to their time of creation.

In order to accomplish the merger of the arts with the history curriculum, a bold set of actions is needed. Our entire system of education will need to think in a different way. With the world in a constant state of turmoil, perhaps the stability of creation might help soothe the anxiety felt by so many of our young people.

The concept starts with an introduction to the arts, taught by leaders in five different fields: music, drama, painting, architecture, and sculpture. It is best described by the Waldorf-Inspired Learning web site, https://waldorfinspiredlearning.com/resources/the-seven-lively-arts/:

> The Seven Lively Arts evolved from the concept of the seven liberal arts of ancient times. These were the key subjects one would master to become a scholar. But Rudolf Steiner felt that these liberal arts, once considered high arts, had become abstract sciences and that teaching needs to be alive rather than abstract. Instead, Steiner encouraged teachers to foster what is artistic in the child because the artistic element strengthens the will.

Hopefully, most of those reading this book will agree with these sentiments. In this case, they represent a guideline for home schooling, but I believe there is a way to put it into practice across the country. It all starts with the creation of a foundation. As mentioned earlier, the purse strings for education are a bit looser when it comes to our children, representing as they do the core of our future as human beings. Let me outline what the foundation would actually do.

A site would have to be selected, one where the members in each discipline would gather as well as a group of twenty-five school teachers. It could be a location where a university could offer a teaching facility. Certainly, the base needs to be one that encourages the community to invest in the foundation. The suggestion has been made that Houston or Nashville might be fine places to consider first.

Each day, except Sunday, a class would be taught by each one of the professors. The course would take place over a four-week period of time. There would be three sets of these, with the first commencing in late May and running through mid-August, avoiding conflicts with the start of the school calendar in the fall.

Each mentor would develop a line of teaching that takes the students through a brief history of the arts in their individual fields. A curriculum is developed that encompasses grades four through twelve. These schoolteachers would integrate the information into the history lessons they are already delivering.

The mentors are selected by the board of directors, a small group of leaders in the fields of education and the arts. They are paid, housed, and given travel and per diem expenses. In an ideal world, they would all be available for the entire twelve-week period. In order for that to occur, we need to offer salaries that are competitive with fees normally paid to these people, in order to attract the best.

In whatever year the program is launched, January is the time to start accepting applications from the teachers. We would use every resource to get out the mission statement and post the details. The twenty-five would be selected, with consultation from the mentors, and informed of their acceptance by the middle of February, allowing each to make plans, depending on which of the three time periods each might be assigned to. In the event of conflicts, we would need to be as flexible and accommodating as possible.

Travel, housing, and per diem would be extended to those participating. Every recipient attends all the classes, so the learning experience is intense. Some may already have a background in specific arts. Others may be learning about the other fields as newcomers. At the conclusion of the training period, each educator will be handed a curriculum outline in order to guide him or her in the ways they choose to teach their own students.

This may seem limited, but here follows the way I hope those interested will look at our proposal. If you have twenty-five teachers every four weeks, and there are three different groups, that actually means seventy-five are given instruction. Each teacher probably has twenty to twenty-five students in each class he or she teaches. Let's say that there are four periods of classes per day each week. Multiply the seventy-five teachers by twenty students, and in the first year alone we have reached 1,500 young people! If teachers and students often eat together in groups of three or four, all sorts of additional unanticipated educational outcomes will ensue.

After a three-year trial period, the foundation expands, with more campuses and facilities. Eventually, we can work to get this combination of history and art to the majority of our public schools, ensuring that almost every child has a much more well-rounded education. There may be some who object that this is not part of the SAT or ACT requirements, a situation that would in itself encourage renewed concern about the development in America of a K–12 educational system that allows our young people to compete more effectively with those from other countries, unleashing new potential for our nation as a whole.

I leave you with the inspiring words of Leonard Bernstein. My only addition is that it is not just music that is fundamental, but that all the arts have a role to play in the education of every human being.

> I propose that the reading and understanding of music be taught to our children from the very beginning of their school lives; that they learn to participate with enthusiasm in the study of music from kindergarten through high school.
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> No child is tone deaf; every child has the natural ability and desire to assimilate musical ideas and comprehend their combinations into musical forms. Every child

can be taught to read music as he or she is taught to read words; and there is no reason why both kinds of reading cannot be taught simultaneously.

Children should receive musical instruction as naturally as food, and with as much pleasure as they derive from a baseball game. This must happen from the very beginning of their school lives.

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