

In Conversation with President Mark Rabideau



Dear Recent Music Graduate

This month, we will celebrate the culmination of our graduates' accomplishments as they cross the stage, loved ones close by, and colleagues degrees conferred by academic dignitaries. Like so many, I love the pageantry and promise. In June 2017, I wrote an open letter to music graduates everywhere and wanted to share that again with our society with the hopes that it might provide meaning for your students.

Congratulations to all those graduating.

Dear Recent Music Graduate,

When you applied to school, you were probably told that you should only go into music if you couldn't imagine doing anything else. That was good advice.

You have spent the past few years, as my friend David Taylor puts it, "[embracing the joy of the struggle.](#)" You did not wait for inspiration, but pursued it on your own: striving for mastery where perfection does not exist; learning to play something difficult so well as to make it sound easy; teaching so tirelessly that your students no longer need you – all signs of your grit and tenacity.

And with degree in hand, you are now equipped to enter the world – an increasingly connected world, in which the vast expanse of technology provides unprecedented access to global audiences. A world where music is embraced throughout every culture, where communities gather around music to mourn collective hardships and celebrate shared moments. It's a world where many parents already understand that music enhances their child's chances to succeed. Yet it has never been more of a struggle to make a living as a musician – at least when following traditional paths. So what, then, comes next?

You needed these past few years to focus and to hone your skills. But now that you're graduating, I want to tell you the second part of that good advice about going into music, the part we thought best to save until this moment.

You need to be more than someone who plays the cello really well, or who has mastered the trumpet excerpts most likely to appear on orchestral auditions. You need to be bigger than the number of jazz standards you can play in any key or the treatises you can cite. You need to be not just an artist-to-a-pair but an artist-to-the-world.

I want to offer a different view of these past few years in school, one in which your music education has been about learning how to do things, but rather about developing yourself into someone who can make the world a better place.

What if you were to think of your life as your art?

Think of it the way a composer might think of a new composition. Maybe she imagines the scope of the work first. Maybe she has an idea of the instrumentation, the moments of arrival and the transitions that lead us through a story. But they're all just ideas at first, and as she writes, they will change along the way. Your life will unfold similarly, but try to imagine it now:

What do the big moments look like? How do the transitions unfold? Who will be in your ensemble, your audience?

As you think about the composition of your unknown future, consider some of the strengths you have as an artist and musician:

You are curious.

You are creative.

Nobody has ever become an artist without a deep sense of curiosity. Curiosity about what they could do their instrument. About making sense of the world around them. About helping others to see with a unique perspective. Art, after all, is about challenging perceptions we may take for granted.

Licensed in creativity, we are inventors of the future. As artist-entrepreneurs, we are poised to see needs and gaps as opportunities that may bring about meaningful change, both around the world and down the street.

And who are better at collaborating than the members of a string quartet, a jazz trio or an opera company?

Armed with your curiosity, creativity and ability to collaborate, how, then, can your artistry make a difference?

In her book, *The Third Chapter*, Harvard professor and author Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot speaks to the role that the arts play even in life's most challenging moments. She writes:

It is fascinating that the first responses to violence, fear and despair are often not words, arguments or analysis. When we feel desperate, words will not do. They do not seem cathartic or productive; they will carry our complex emotions. The New York City public school teachers from District One who could see the fiery destruction of 9/11 from their classroom windows knew this intuitively. While looking for a way to help their young students rage and grieve, they turned away from the formal curriculum not to words, but to art. They asked their students to draw their fears, paint their pain, dance their anguish, and rap their rage. Their raw emotions were channeled into art when words would not do.

When life gets confusing and painful, we turn to art to learn not *what to do*, but *how to be*. Don't ever underestimate the good that art can do in the world.

I didn't know it at the time, but as a welfare kid struggling to get through school at the hands of an undiagnosed reading disorder, it was music that would scoop me up and give me focus. And it was my music teachers who not only found ways for me to thrive artistically, but to succeed as just the person I am. They showed me that it was my talents that would define me, not the poverty that I came from or the learning disadvantages that shamed me.

When I close my eyes, I remember exactly how I felt when I graduated from music school. Full of hope. Full of promise. Ready to take on the world. And when I open my eyes and think of you, Dear Recent Music Graduate, I want to tell you that your future is promising.

That does not mean that it won't unfold unexpectedly along the way; it will. You will suffer maybe more than a few bumps in the road. I did. When you do, please remember this: Worlds end. Worlds begin. And your ability to imagine the future you want for yourself is what will get you through.

Remember that there is little else more intimate than making music with other people. Every glance, note and breath synchronizes our shared commitment. Draw on those who have gone through this experience with you. You are inextricably linked by the music you have made together.

Remember that tenacity and grit are your greatest assets as you grapple with the complexity of the world you will soon inherit.

Remember to be authentic, and to be grateful.

Be true to your own unique voice. Music school has not likely prepared you in this way. We prepare you to be thorough, but a byproduct is that we become alike – learning from the same excerpts, etudes and ensembles. Now it is time to discover what you can offer the world. And this makes sense. This is a personal journey best done away from the busyness of 120-credits, master theses and doctoral dissertations.

Be grateful to your art. It has prepared you to play in the messy, fertile spaces of complexity and ambiguity. Be grateful to the artists you learn from and collaborate with. They, too, have walked this path. And be grateful to your audiences, because your art is incomplete without them.

Now that you have graduated, it's time to tell, and to live, your story. And I can't wait to hear about all your

Welcome to the conversation,

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