"Playing Well With Others"

Thank you Dean Kates, President Oxtoby, trustees, faculty, staff, my colleagues William Peterson and Eric Lindholm, who have so enriched our morning with music, and of course, the Class of 2012.

It’s an honor to be invited to address you. It’s a surprise, in a way, too. I don’t think of myself as much of a lecturer; I prefer to interact with students in classes, and don’t generally read a prepared speech through the hour. (Don’t panic! This will be 15 minutes, tops!). But this occasion seems to call for at least some dignified, organized, preconceived thoughts, so forgive me while I read:

When a title was due for this talk, I knew that I wanted to touch on issues of community, and the responsibility to others that makes a community function. I wanted to encourage creativity in all aspects of life. I wanted to include the topic closest to my heart, music, which people compose, write about, study, listen to intently or casually, and of course play. So the title “Playing Well With Others” came easily. Since that rash moment some days ago, when I emailed a title to Dani Auroze in the president’s office, many thoughts on this talk have come and gone. I am now in a position to reaffirm the title, along with a subtitle:

“Playing well with others” or, “How to cobble together a convocation speech for incoming freshman in fall 2008.”

This will be in the form of instructions. They may prove useful if any of you are called upon to give a fall 2008 convocation speech. Though I must confess, this is my first such speech, so use your own good judgment.

#1 – [hold up card] – Look for inspiring, informative quotes – let someone else do at least some of the talking.

I came across a couple of wonderful and relevant quotes by the Spanish-born American writer George Santayana. Most of us know him principally as the author of the famous aphorism “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

I’ve always assumed that this is meant to apply to important things like war, or major public policy blunders. More on importance later, but of course, this quote also applies to just about every human activity. Scientists don’t want to spend their lives thinking about basic questions like why did that apple just hit me on the head; Isaac Newton gave that a lot of thought already. Better to move forward with his ruminations fully absorbed, to better refine their logic, or to dismiss them in favor of more satisfactory explanations.

We in the arts like to think that we are composing new pieces, making new paintings or sculpture, or other works of visual art. Novelists don’t really want to write Moby Dick again, or
even Moby Dick II. We all want to feel we are living our own lives, and repeating blunders (or accomplishments) of past generations is not likely to foster that feeling. What is happening today is exciting just because it’s today, but can be more exciting, more meaningful, with the back story in our heads.

It is a more complex case with performers of material from a previous time. As historical awareness of Bach’s performance practice has grown, for instance, performers are less likely today to treat his music purely as a means of self-expression, with impulsive rhythmic distortions that reflect performers’ current psychological states more than the score in front of them. (Not an uncommon approach 50 years ago.) Note that “remembering the past” in this case does not cage the performer in a prison of correctness; surely anyone performing a piece by Bach does so with the intention of sharing some original insight on a very worthy text.

So we study music, visual art, theater, literature, politics, philosophy, and other endeavors of past times out of curiosity and enjoyment in the thing itself, to guide us in living our lives here and now, and to look forward to new experiences that will be fresher and more meaningful because of our absorption of the thoughts of others.

#2 – [hold up card] – Tell the audience something about yourself. If you bond with them, they will throw less fruit.

Just so you know who you are listening to, a bit of my own past, to enable you to better appreciate or to dismiss these words:

I was born dead-center in the middle of the last century, summer 1950. Some of you may have dim recollections of that century. I benefited from public school support of a music program, and university support of a regional youth symphony. I went to a university whose undergraduate course of study was much like the liberal arts curriculum here at Pomona. We were encouraged to take a wide range of courses, and many of those opened doors I was previously unaware of. I bumped my head on some of those doors, but the final result of those encounters was a lifelong curiosity and passion for many things.

I am interested in the daily news and the world of politics, though I can’t say I understand it all. While in college, I did my share of marching in protest of governmental actions, and knocked on doors with petitions. The first thing I do in the morning, as soon as one eye is nearly open, is read the newspaper.

I’ve always been fascinated with science and technology; I was terribly disappointed about Pluto being demoted.

I’m still excited about Mars vehicles and their impressions about their new home. To see photographs take from the surface of Mars only moments before they appear on my laptop still makes my hair stand on end. Many of you were born with cell phone implants, and may just take this in stride, but don’t lose sight of the spectacular accomplishment this is. It’s NOT the same as texting your girlfriend on North Campus!

Just three years ago, the sound of the wind on Saturn’s moon Titan was picked up on a microphone and sent millions of miles to earth – an astonishing accomplishment that may resonate particularly with musicians.
Human accomplishments and stories of all sorts fascinate me – what happens to people in novels, plays, poetry, and even newspapers is engrossing. The photos and sounds from far off planets are inspiring in themselves, but the fact that humans have joined together to bring about these accomplishments is far more so, and should give us hope for the future however dark some moments may be.

With all this, the Arts hold a special place in my heart. The warm, rich, intimate beauty of Rembrandt; the dazzling and weird spectacle of Brueghel; the alternate realities of Dali were all new to me as undergraduate, and intrigue me to this day. But nothing intrigued me more than music – as a listener I was transported to other worlds more wondrous than Titan or Mars. They were as vivid, extensive, and engrossing as Tolkien’s Middle Earth, as a Rembrandt self-portrait, as Hamlet’s Elsinore Castle, as a chart of the solar system – but words or pictures or charts of data could not come close to describing, let alone explaining them. These worlds were evoked by the evolution of sounds through time, and programmatic verbal text was the palest imitation of the real thing.

One of the many fascinating things about music is how the experience of each piece can differ from one person to the next. An obvious example might be Industrial Hip-hop in the ear of student, and in the ear of that student’s grandparent.

There are more stylistically neutral examples:

#3 – [hold up card] – Take an excursion away from grand ideas, if you have any, and involve the audience in a relevant experience:

Excursion 1: Syncopation ambiguation
Cajole the audience into singing two against three, then three against two. Experience each, and feel the difference.

Where were we? Yes, listening to music was an all-absorbing passion. (continue the bonding, #2 above) Learning to play the cello was just as absorbing as listening, even more so, perhaps. To play a piece the way I hear it in my head, either emulating a great performer or attempting a new take on a piece – or a new piece – is a lifelong challenge, one I fully expect to master before my 147th birthday.

I soon discovered that you didn’t have to be dead to be a composer, and proceeded to be fully absorbed by that. Being triply-fully absorbed has disadvantages, I suppose (you might want to chat with my wife or Music Department colleagues on that), but in the balance, I highly recommend it. The lucky ones among you will discover a field or a complex of fields that will triply or quadruply absorb you, and carry you forth into a stimulating life of discovery and accomplishment.

Back to the quotes (#1 above): Anyone still awake and listening closely may still be worrying about the implication that wars or public policy are more important than things like music. Well in some ways they are, at least temporarily, but the music and art of bygone days live on in
more vivid ways than the details of their contemporary wars. Yes, some wars have resulted in lasting and significant social change that some people enjoy and some people suffer with, but the surviving music and art often communicate with us more directly than these larger concepts.

Which brings us to another Santayana quote: “Music is essentially useless – as life is.”

Fascinating though the boulders of Mars might be to us, our lives and our music probably don’t mean much to them. Our lives mean something to us, and to all succeeding generations. Music and the other arts, scientific discoveries, human thought and accomplishments of all sorts are the things that last beyond our lives. They matter to us.

The arts at Pomona College have been an integral part of campus life since the beginning. 121 years along our journey, we have some magnificent facilities (Bridges, the fine Seaver Theater down the block) and some in need of improvement. Faculty, administrators, and trustees have been discussing big plans that will likely change the look of The Arts in coming years; I expect that Music, Theater, Dance, and Visual Art will all have equally magnificent facilities in the near future, facilities that will attract much attention from the outside world.

In the meantime, insufficient space is not enough to fetter the imagination of artists. Art happens in the brain, after all. So join the chorus, audition for a play, take a class in dance or art. And sign up for courses in appreciation, history, or theory, to better your ability to see, hear, and do artistic things.

A last quote from Santayana, my favorite, an affirmation of life and to my biased ears, to music: “There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval.”

I suppose Santayana was referring to an interval of time, but musicians in the room use the word to refer to the distance between two notes.

Let us all enjoy an interval together:

Excursion #2

Cajole the audience into singing a fifth, “one” and “five.” To increase enjoyment and awareness, brighten the vowels, following flashlight batons. (You had to be there.)

#4 – [hold up card] – Four Possibly Pompous but sincere concluding remarks:

1. DO THINGS – speak up, engage with professors and classmates. Be more than passive consumers of the many riches this culture offers you.

2. GET BETTER AT THE THINGS YOU DO – you won’t become an expert without starting as a beginner and working hard. Very hard. The more you put in the more you get out.
The ratio will surprise you. Think of the Volkswagen decanting impossible crowds of people.

3. DO THINGS WITH OTHERS - the probes to Titan and Mars were massively cooperative efforts involving many hundreds of people. A baseball game takes two teams of players and full bleachers to do it right. A performance by a full orchestra, a chorus, or a string quartet requires sensitivity, fluid shifting roles of leading and following, and intense mental focus. And an audience. All these activities yield much more than the sum of their parts.

4. SUPPORT WHAT OTHERS DO – beyond the classroom, attend concerts, art exhibitions, theater productions, dance, athletic events, and lectures. Faculty, students, invited guests, and the incredible Pomona College staff all contribute time, effort, expertise, (yes, often love!) to these events. They are passionate about the events they sponsor and produce. Yes, you have homework, yes you need time to bond with hallmates, yes you need to party, but bonding, letting off steam, and enrichment of your homework can often be accomplished while supporting the activities of your friends and colleagues.

Play well together. Thank you.