

“MUSIC AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE”
SCOTT SPECK

Good evening everyone. I can't tell you how honored I feel to be here with you tonight, and in such distinguished company. It means so much to me to be able to make a difference in my adopted state of Michigan, on the West Shore that the rest of the world calls the Eastern Shore, and in this lovely city of Muskegon, where I make my home at the Amazon building just a few blocks away. Working here with the extraordinarily talented musicians and staff of the West Michigan Symphony has been a joy and an honor, and I'm looking forward to many more wonderful years in this part of the world.

My talk tonight is about two loves of my life, which I cannot live without: music and change. In fact, the talk is called "Music as an Agent of Change."

Music has often been crafted by composers – often forcefully, sometimes very subversively – to try to change their world. Music transforms not only those who hear it, but especially those who perform it. And the flow of music shows us that growth and progress in our lives are possible only through real change. My artistic life has been organized around all three of these principles.

When I first made clear my intention to move to Muskegon to work with the Symphony, a lot of people I knew greeted my move with skepticism. "Why would you want to go to Muskegon?" they said. "Someone like you, who has been all over the world, why would you ever move to such a place?" I heard this over and over, and I still do. And it's worth noting that all the people who have ever said this to me live in Muskegon.

The answer to their question is as follows: I love Muskegon. It's a great city with wonderful values. It's a city that values the uplifting qualities of art. It's a city that, despite its small size, proudly supports a Symphony orchestra. That says a lot about a place. Charleston, South Carolina does not currently support a symphony orchestra. Savannah, Georgia does not currently support a Symphony orchestra. Honolulu, where I had my first professional conducting job, does not currently have a symphony orchestra. Even Cleveland is *this close* to not being able to support a symphony orchestra. But Muskegon, for the last 70 years, has supported a symphony orchestra. And a good one too!

The other attributes of this fine city are well known to you. The gorgeous coastline. Some of the cleanest beaches in the world. The abundance of nature everywhere you look. The perfect summers. An arts and cultural scene worthy of a city many times its size. The potential to be a tourist mecca, a green energy hub, a model for the rest of the country. Why is it, then, that so many people in Muskegon are so down on this place? Why don't they see the potential that I as an outsider saw so clearly?

I'm sure you have your theories. Here is mine. The fulfillment of this potential requires a little bit of change. And most people -- not just in Muskegon, but everywhere I've ever been in the whole world -- have trouble envisioning change. People have trouble

imagining things even a little differently than they currently are. Hence the irrational pessimism during economic slumps, and irrational optimism during booms. People seem to think that the way things are will never be any different than they are *now*.

A notable exception to this rule was Charles Hackley. After he made his fortune, he said, "You know what? I could really envision a library here. And how about a nice park?" Our most venerated city father, who truly represents the "good old days" of this city, was an enormous agent of change.

Charles Hackley knew that nothing ever stays the same. You're not the same person you were five years, five months, five minutes ago. What's unclear is *how* change will manifest itself. Change is hard to predict, so it's mysterious. And because it's mysterious, it causes fear. And fear leads to dislike. So people by and large dislike change.

It seems to me that in the history of the world, it's always been this way. Fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of what is different. And again, in a sadly predictable pattern, fear leading to dislike, and dislike leading to conflict.

It's not a radical leap of logic, then, to see that a lot of war, conflict and stress could be avoided by understanding the inevitability of change. Music allows us to do this. And in doing so, music can change the world.

The best performances of music are dangerous. They are unpredictable, almost improvised; they are constantly going into the unknown. It's as if the music were being composed on the spot. Those are the kinds of performances I live for. As a conductor, if I end a piece completely transported by the spirit of the composer, the sound of the orchestra, and the communal musical journey with the audience -- so transported that I'm momentarily not even sure what city I'm in -- then I know I've done a good job. It sometimes happens. It's happened here in Muskegon. At least, I *think* it was Muskegon.

Music, like life, *is* constant change. The compositions themselves are always shifting, always evolving. That's how music stays healthy. Even the music of Philip Glass, the great minimalist composer, has changes. It might seem to comprise a repetitive pattern, but very, very slowly, the pattern shifts. Imagine, if you can, an empty and desolate shopping mall. Now imagine a very slow shift from that empty shopping mall, to a pile of rocks, to an intriguing street grid, to an intriguing street grid with street lamps, to a beautiful and vibrant downtown neighborhood... all in about eight years. That's Philip Glass.

Even in the most "old fashioned" piece of music, such as a classical sonata movement by Mozart, there is change. First the composer states the main themes of the piece -- that's called the exposition. Then the composer plays around with these themes, works them over a bit, in the development section. Finally, the themes come back, almost identically, in the recapitulation. But as a listener, when you get to that recapitulation, even though the themes are the same, things have changed. You've been through a transformation. In

the course of the development section, you've become intimately familiar with these themes, and you now see and hear them from a completely different angle. Plus, you're 20 minutes older.

There was never a time so early that some people weren't nostalgic for an even *earlier* time. Even in the year Zero, people longed for the good old days. It's human nature to want what you grew up with. But music says: You can't go home again. It says: This is the *recapitulation* of Mozart's C major piano sonata. It only *seems* like the exposition. But it's not. We've been through some *stuff* since then. As the Buddhists say, "You can't bathe in the same river twice."

Musicians are aware of this, at least subconsciously, because they live this way from day to day. Change is not only a part of their everyday lives: it's the *greatest* part. Incidentally, an overwhelming number of classical musicians identify themselves as progressive, even politically. It's the ultimate irony of classical music that in most parts of the country, an orchestra is a group of liberals playing for a bunch of conservatives.

Of course, the music world itself has been plenty slow to embrace change. Let me read you just three short quotes to show you what I mean:

From a Boston newspaper, June 1, 1899:

"...The Ninth Symphony of Beethoven... Oh, the pages of stupid and hopelessly vulgar music! The unspeakable cheapness of the chief tune, "Freude, Freude!"... Do you believe way down in the bottom of your heart that if this music had been written by a Mr. John L. Tarbox of Sandown, New Hampshire, any conductor here or in Europe would [perform it]?"

From the Vienna New Free Press, December 5, 1881:

"Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto gives us for the first time the hideous notion that there can be music that stinks to the ear."

And finally, here's a quote for you:

"I played over the music of that scoundrel Brahms. What a giftless bastard! It annoys me that this self-inflated mediocrity is hailed as a genius. In comparison with him, Rubinstein is a giant, who is after all a live and important human being, while Brahms is chaotic and absolutely empty dried-up stuff!"

The author of that last quote was Peter Tchaikovsky.

Do Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky seem modern, radical, hopelessly vulgar, hideous, chaotic and empty to you? Of course not. But they once had that

effect on most people - and then something funny happened. People came to love them. The same might be said of the *next* new idea.

Many forward-looking composers are subversive peacemongers. Composers have often used their music, quite subversively, to combat war, oppression and censorship. Here's a great example. In a moment I'm going to play for you the very end of Shostakovich's Symphony no. 5.

You probably know that Dmitri Shostakovich, a fantastically gifted composer, lived under the oppressive regime of Joseph Stalin. Stalin's brutal regime had a very specific requirement of new works of art: that they glorify life in the Soviet Union. In 1936, after the premiere of his opera *Lady Macbeth*, Shostakovich woke to a scathing review from *Pravda*, entitled "*Chaos instead of music.*" It said. "The purpose of good music is to inspire the masses... and this is very dangerous music."

Overnight Shostakovich became an enemy of the people. In fact, newspapers announcing his concerts read, "Tonight at 8, a concert by Enemy of the People Shostakovich." A once popular composer, he now found himself shunned. He recognized how crucial the reaction to his next composition would be. Failure would most likely result in his "disappearance." He kept a suitcase by the door of his apartment just in case the KGB showed up. And so he set out to rehabilitate his image.

The next thing he composed was his Fifth Symphony. In the same vein as all the celebrities who go on Jay Leno and Oprah to confess their sins and beg forgiveness, Shostakovich subtitled his symphony "A Soviet Artist's Reply to Justified Criticism." He allowed the following quote to go out: "The theme of my symphony is the making of a man. I saw man with all his experiences at the center of the composition...In the finale the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements are resolved in optimism and the joy of living." Here's the end of that finale, by Dmitri Shostakovich.

(Play Track 1 - Shostakovich 5th, finale, Bernstein/New York Philharmonic.)

Rousing, isn't it? And this is a rousing rendition by the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Dmitri Shostakovich himself heard this performance in 1959, when the New York Philharmonic toured the Soviet Union.

When Shostakovich premiered this piece, the critics were stunned and thrilled; this was just the kind of Soviet music that they had been asking for. Shostakovich was completely "rehabilitated" and became a superstar once again.

But interestingly, that wasn't the real theme of the music at all. After his death, a book of memoirs came out, called *Testimony*. In it, Shostakovich is quoted as saying that he didn't mean to glorify the Soviet system at all. In fact, he says that he meant the symphony as a bitter condemnation of the Stalinist regime. "I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth Symphony," he says. "The rejoicing is forced, created

under a threat. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you get up, stunned, and go marching off, muttering, 'My business is rejoicing, my business is rejoicing.' What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that."

We're not complete oafs, are we? Wasn't it incredibly triumphant sounding to you? Didn't we all hear the same piece of music? Well, not exactly. All it takes is one subtle difference, and the character of the piece changes completely. It turns out that there was some disagreement on Shostakovich's tempo marking -- the measure of how fast the music should go. Shostakovich wrote a metronome marking of 184 to the eighth note -- meaning that you could fit 184 eighth notes in the space of one minute. Bernstein, like many conductors, took a tempo closer to 184 to the QUARTER note -- twice as fast. At that faster tempo, the repeated A's in the violins and the xylophone just fly by in a brilliant whirlwind.

But what if Shostakovich meant what he wrote? Here's a performance by Mariss Jansons with the Oslo Philharmonic, heeding Shostakovich's metronome marking. This time, at half the tempo, each repeated note of the xylophone and violins, rather than transcending into a brilliant, glorious shimmer, now sounds like a hammer blow to the head.

(Play Track 2 - Shostakovich 5th, finale, Mariss Jansons/Oslo Philharmonic)

There you have it -- a scathing musical critique of the Soviet government, right under the nose of Stalin — from a man who had nothing but the greatest contempt for Stalin, and yet was hailed a hero by the same government he bitterly condemned.

The great opera composer Giuseppe Verdi was similarly subversive. For a good part of the 1800's, Austria occupied Northern Italy, effectively separating the Northern Italians from the rest of their country. It has long been thought that Verdi wrote his opera *Nabucco* in part to protest this Austrian occupation. But he did so in a cleverly allegorical way. The story of the opera takes place in biblical times; Babylon has occupied Israel and enslaved the Hebrews. The most famous melody in the opera is the chorus of Hebrew slaves, called *Va, pensiero*. The slaves sing of their homeland, alternately nostalgic for it and fiercely determined to return. They sing:

*Fly, thought, on wings of gold;
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,
where, soft and mild,
the sweet air of our native land smells fragrant!
Greet the banks of the Jordan
and Zion's toppled towers.
Oh, my country so lovely and lost!
Oh, memory so dear and despairing!*

(Play Track 3 - Verdi, *Va pensiero*)

A beautiful and rousing melody. And due to this rousing melody, *Nabucco* was a huge hit. The Northern Italians understood the code. They saw that *Va, pensiero* was a reflection of their own political oppression, their separation from the rest of Italy, which they longed to rejoin. They made *Va, pensiero* into their rallying cry. They scrawled the name VERDI on the walls and on the streets. The Austrian occupiers were amused by the Italians' quaint love for the composer. In fact, the Italians were quite clever. The letters V-E-R-D-I also stood for something else. They stood for *Vittorio Emmanuele, Re D'Italia* -- Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy. By reminding the Northern Italians of their cultural heritage, *Va, pensiero* did more than any political speech could to rekindle their desire for reunification with the rest of Italy. And long after Italy had been unified, at Verdi's funeral, *Va pensiero* is the song that people sang. And to this day, many Italians consider this melody to be their second national anthem.

In a similar vein, the great Finnish composer Jan Sibelius, wrote his symphonic poem *Finlandia* out of protest. Throughout much of the 19th century, Finland was an autonomous grand duchy of the Russian empire. But Russian censorship increasingly stifled the freedoms of the Finns. For all intents and purposes, they were oppressed. Although Sibelius never said this explicitly at the time, he began *Finlandia* with a clear musical description of an unhappy and oppressed Finland under Russian oppression. For that, you need trombones.

(Play Track 4 - Sibelius, *Finlandia*, opening)

The rest of the piece is an epic struggle against an unspecified foe, resting for a moment at a lovely oasis containing a patriotic melody now known as the Finlandia Hymn. Here's the end of the hymn, part of the epic struggle, and the ultimate victory of *Finlandia*. Again, though Sibelius never stated this explicitly, most people heard the ending as a triumphant vision of an independent Finland.

(Play Track 5 - Sibelius, *Finlandia*, ending)

Finlandia became so popular, and caused such Finnish nationalistic fervor, that the Russian Empire banned its performance. To sneak past the censors and program it in concerts, orchestras had to change the name of the piece, giving it a creative title like "Fatherland," or -- I'm not kidding -- "Happy Feelings Upon Arriving in the Finnish Countryside." After Finland finally broke free from Russia, Jan Sibelius became a national hero. To this day, the Finnish people consider Jan Sibelius as important to them as the Americans consider Abraham Lincoln.

Speaking of Lincoln, the great American composer of *Lincoln Portrait*, Aaron Copland, underwent a more recent, and far more personal, struggle for independence. As you know, his music is extremely populist -- Appalachian Spring, Rodeo, and Billy the Kid are pieces that appeal to the masses. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, he also happened to have some sympathy for the Communist movement in America. During the Great

Depression, when fully a third of the work force of the richest nation on earth was unemployed, he questioned an establishment that could tolerate such suffering. Although he never joined any party, he did vote for at least one Communist party candidate, and he made several statements in support of one. Because of this, he was called before Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. A lot of his music came into question. He had used elements of jazz in his piano concerto. Didn't he know that jazz musicians were considered to be leftists — or worse?

And then, of course, there's this next piece of music.

During World War II, the Cincinnati Symphony commissioned eighteen different fanfares from American composers to promote patriotism and national unity. The conductor, Sir Eugene Goossens, directed that each fanfare be a tribute, quote, "... for Soldiers, or for Airmen or Sailors." Ironically, all but one of the commissioned fanfares have been forgotten. The only one of the fanfares that gets played anymore is the one from the composer who brashly defied the directive. Aaron Copland decided to glorify, not the soldiers, airmen or sailors, not those struggling abroad, not even the country as a whole -- but the Common Man right here at home.

The idea of glorifying the common man -- so central to the democratic ideals of our Founding Fathers - had become twisted during the McCarthy era into something vaguely *un-American*. And yet, here is Copland saying, no, this is America. The common man is what we're about. It's Copland at his most subversive.

(Play Track 6 - Copland, Fanfare for the Common Man.)

Decades later, the Fanfare for the Common Man endures as a great American masterpiece. Copland was able to say in music what he might not have been allowed to say in words.

These are all instances where a specific piece of music brought about real change. But in my life as a musician, I've often asked the question, Can music really change the world? I'm not so naïve as to believe this blindly under all circumstances. I understand that some great composers could embody a belief so fully and convincingly in the form of musical notes that they caused a groundswell, inciting others to make political or social change happen.

But aside from pivotal political moments, how can music change the world? I believe this happens through the music-makers themselves. If enough people play music, they will be transformed. I've seen the look on the faces of thousands of young students who get to play the recorder in unison, accompanied by the West Michigan Symphony, in our Carnegie Link-Up concerts. Kids have told us that this was the highlight of their lives so far. They were changed. We do what

we can – we reached the students of 46 schools last month, and we hope to reach more children each year.

I've seen something even more miraculous happen in Washington DC over the past few years. That is the creation of THEARC, which stands for Town Hall Education, Arts and Recreation Campus. It's a 110,000 square-foot campus, built in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Southeast Washington DC, and funded entirely from charitable contributions and government grants. THEARC allows underserved children and adults to participate in music and the other fine arts — and it provides continuing education, tutoring, recreation, and medical and dental care, often for free. It has state-of-the-art music and dance studios, among many other things.

When THEARC opened, the Washington Ballet became involved, and in an extraordinary open house, offered free dance and music lessons to anyone in the neighborhood who was interested. On the first day, something like 800 kids showed up. We're talking about at-risk kids in a very dangerous part of the city. In a blighted neighborhood that might otherwise have been allowed to rot, who knew that the hunger for the arts was so great? Now, thousands of children, who otherwise might have been on the streets, are occupying themselves creatively and productively, making art and music. In a few short years, a direct participation in the arts has transformed a community, when decades of politics could not.

I know that classical music can have this effect on all kids. In years of conducting young people's concerts, I've never met a kid who didn't love classical music. But unfortunately, the music world itself has been responsible for a horrendously elitist, exclusive reputation that we still fight today. The fact is, this music is meant for Copland's common man – and it always was.

Could you ever imagine saying, "I want to go to the stadium to hear the Jonas Brothers in concert tonight, but I don't know if I'll enjoy it, because I don't have a degree in music. I haven't studied the songs that they'll be playing. I'm kind of intimidated by the stadium. Also, I'm not sure if I'll know when to clap."

The fact that classical music is *exquisite* doesn't make it exclusive. In fact, the product that we create is absolutely without exclusivity. It promotes the unity of all mankind.

I want you to listen to this final track. It's an excerpt from the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth. We'll hear a section where the whole world seems to be in conflict -- an almost chaotic fugue of differing worldviews, all vying for prominence, like the Tower of Babel. It reaches a climax, fades out, and after a suspenseful moment, where we don't know what is going to happen, the chorus powerfully asserts Beethoven's main point -- that we are all one.

(Play Track 7 - Beethoven, Symphony no. 9, finale)

Listen to this Beethoven. He says, *All* people become brothers. *Alle Menschen werden Brüder.*" How much clearer can we be? And yet, people don't hear it that way. Perhaps even more harmful than the Boston critic who called Beethoven's Ninth "stupid and vulgar music" is the present-day listener who says, "What a nice piece. How lovely" -- and totally misses Beethoven's subversive point. It's the same subversive point of great non-violent religions like Christianity which in their purest form admonish us to forswear all violence against others, forever, no matter what, period.

Beethoven is saying: Here's what the ideal world looks like. Unity. No prejudices. Tolerance. Can we accept one another with our differences? It's going to be a challenge. We say that children are our hope, our future -- yet we persecute them if they turn out the slightest bit different from ourselves.

Beethoven is saying: "This has to change. Why not be different? Why not embrace all of humanity? What part of *ALLE Menschen* do you not understand?"

This is what the most important kind of change looks like. This is what it looks like when we can all live in peace with each other. It looks like MUSIC!

Thank you very much.