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An Ear for Leadership

By RONALDA A. CRUTCHER | DECEMBER 17, 2004

People from all types of academic disciplines become college presidents, but relatively few have extensive musical backgrounds. Besides having served at the helm of one of the largest schools of music at a university and as dean of a leading conservatory, I am a cellist in a chamber-music ensemble and have performed internationally for almost 25 years. Although my musical training and long-term engagement in that ensemble are somewhat unusual for a college CEO, I believe that they have contributed immensely to any success that I have enjoyed as a leader in higher education.

I only began to play the cello at the rather late age of 14; until then I had hoped to become an architect. Within a year, however, Elizabeth Potteiger, the cellist and one of the founders of the Oxford String Quartet at Miami University, heard me perform in a competition and offered to teach me for free if my parents would transport me to Oxford, Ohio, about 35 miles northwest of Cincinnati, my hometown. Liz was a renaissance woman, widely read, and a world traveler. She was also my most influential mentor when I was a young man.

Each Saturday morning at 7:20, I would board a bus in Cincinnati for the journey to Oxford and then return home at 6 p.m. Liz taught me how to play the cello as a "thinking performer." In addition to an excellent technique, she taught me the style, historical background, and musical architecture of compositions. I learned how to be certain that what was in my mind's ear was ultimately produced from the cello. That guidance was particularly useful for me, as I had a natural affinity for the instrument and had been primarily self-taught. She also taught me that the type of practice routine necessary to perform consistently well in public was analogous to that of an athlete preparing to compete in an athletic event: The practice time had to be intentional and goal-directed.

Because I was raised in a household in which the discipline to perform a specific task was instilled in me as a child and reinforced every day by my father, I made rapid progress with the cello. I soon won an audition for my first professional position as a member of the Dayton Symphony Orchestra. By the time I was 17, I had performed a concerto with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra as a winner of its young artists' competition.

In addition to teaching me cello, Liz introduced me to George Klemperer, a German émigré, amateur violinist, and first cousin of the renowned conductor, Otto Klemperer. George lived on Chanticleer Farm just south of Richmond, Ind., where he would convene a group of three other musicians for string-quartet "readings" once every week. I would perform sonatas for George and read chamber music with him and his daughters.

Many years later George's youngest daughter, Erika, and I returned to Chanticleer Farm to join her sister and a friend as founding members of an ensemble that performed in a chamber-music festival for several weeks during the summer. It was in this group that I began to realize the profound difference between performing in a symphony orchestra and a chamber ensemble -- notably the lack of a conductor. The decision-making process in a chamber ensemble is thus necessarily collaborative. Each player has the opportunity to make a contribution.

That approach should not be confused with decision making by consensus, because ultimately a decision has to be made: If the group cannot agree, one player is designated to make the call. That person is usually the player of one of the high-register instruments -- he or she normally has more of the melodic and, thus, leading musical material -- although some chamber ensembles rotate the responsibility from player to player. Whatever the case, a final

decision has to be made about the interpretation, and each player has to agree on the approach. That also is true when making decisions about repertoire, performance venues, and personnel. Learning through the musical ensemble the value of that collaborative approach certainly helped me prepare for a life in academe.

In fact, I now see numerous parallels between performing in a chamber-music group and leading a college or university, particularly a liberal-arts college. But it did not occur to me that such skills might be especially useful for an academic leader until I interviewed for my current position at Wheaton College, in Massachusetts -- an unusually collegial community with a history of close working relationships among the faculty, students, and staff. Near the end of the interview process, one of the search-committee members asked me: What did my skills and broad experience as a chamber-music performer lend to my effectiveness as a leader, and how might they be useful to me as the president of a small liberal-arts college? As I responded to her question, I suddenly realized that my experience was transferable in many ways.

First, the ability to collaborate, as well as the willingness to lead and the wisdom to know when to assert oneself, are paramount for both a chamber-music performer and a college president. That means often remaining silent in meetings and allowing a provost or faculty member to make a persuasive argument, particularly when change is at the heart of the discussion. However, an institutional leader must insert himself either in a summary statement or in punctuating a significant point or argument.

The practice of established artists' serving as mentors for young musicians is also a model for the mission of higher education and the approach that wise leaders take in working with promising young people. That is particularly the case in a liberal-arts college, where a student-centered environment is a given. Yet good mentoring practices are not only necessary for students; faculty and staff members can also benefit. Although an institution can establish formal programs, the most successful situations result when the president is a good mentor to others. Colleagues on the campus will follow his or her model, creating an informal culture of support.

In addition, just as listening closely is critical to artful musical performances, it is imperative for college presidents. Leaders must not only grasp the broad strategic implications of policies, programs, and procedures, but they must also understand and interpret the subtle nuances that can make the difference between success or failure. Another attribute that results from good listening skills is the ability to listen and hear polyphonically -- to participate in more than one conversation at a time. The knack for gathering multiple levels of information simultaneously is invaluable at cocktail parties or dinners.

Finally, the discipline required to remain calm and perform consistently under stress is something that all professional musicians must master. That discipline is also indispensable for success as a president, a highly public role. During my five-year tenure as provost, I invented an imaginary implement that I called the "S Shield." I stored it under my desk and almost always carried it with me, figuratively speaking, to university-senate meetings. When acrimonious words were hurled at me, I simply lifted the shield in front of my face to deflect them. Thus, I had sufficient time to listen closely, contemplate exactly what was being said, and respond appropriately.

To be sure, not every musician with a breadth of performing experience in chamber music has learned how to transfer those capabilities into leadership skills. Indeed, most of my musician colleagues have no interest in what it takes to be a college president. While those colleagues say they admire me, they also wonder how I could give up being a full-time performer and teacher to become an administrator. Yet, I do not view myself as an administrator: I am a teacher, scholar, and performer who happens to be a leader in higher education. And I am motivated to lead by my passion and belief in the power of education to transform the lives of young adults.

While I will probably remain a rarity among college presidents, my peers at other institutions could benefit from honing most of the skills that I have learned as a musician. And perhaps my experience presents yet another case for the introduction of chamber music in the early phases of musical instruction at schools and colleges -- and for musical education in general.

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