

REMARKS TO THE GLOBAL CONFERENCE OF
THE INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP ASSOCIATION

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Joined by members of the Prague Chamber Orchestra
on the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Velvet Revolution

13 November, 2009

Liechtenstein Palace, Prague

Collaborative Leadership and the Art of Transformation

Good evening. My name is Harvey Seifter, and it's my honor and joy to welcome you to this beautiful concert hall in Liechtenstein Palace, with the strains of Mozart's glorious Magic Flute Overture still resonating in and among us. The Magic Flute seems like a particularly inspired choice to open our exploration of art, leadership, collaboration and transformation – not only because Prague was Mozart's absolute favorite city on earth, the one place that he felt truly understood and appreciated his work; but because those of you who know the plot of the opera know that those somber and majestic chords that open and later interrupt the flow of the overture are meant to summon us to Sarastro's Temple – a lofty summit of wisdom, enlightenment and brotherhood, but one which we can only enter after first descending into a silent and contemplative inner state.

Tonight, we're going to do three things:

First, we're going to experience glorious music by Mozart, Debussy, Bizet, and of course, Dvorak, letting the music speak to our hearts and our minds, our bodies and

our spirits.

Then, I'm going to share a few thoughts about the relationship between art and leadership, and specifically, about what we can learn as leaders from the world of chamber music.

Finally, we're going to journey inside the chamber music process to explore this remarkable world of profound collaboration – a true workplace democracy in action.

I also hope that this evening will be a springboard into some broader reflection about the arts and transformation.

Our format will be a hybrid one: part concert performance, part narrative exploration, part open rehearsal, part interactive discussion.

It is truly an extraordinary and inspiring experience for me to be able to be here tonight:

Not only because my grandfather was born in the Czech lands of Moravia and spent a very important year of his life as a young man here in Prague at the turn of the last century, before journeying on to the United States;

Not only because of the astounding musical culture of Prague;

And not only because this is a place where exactly twenty years ago, moral imagination sparked by art and artists played such a powerful role in transforming an entire nation.

Of course, any of these would have been more than enough to inspire me. But

what's most remarkable about this evening for me is the opportunity to collaborate with the magnificent musicians of the Prague Chamber Orchestra. I'd like to tell you a bit about this unique ensemble before I give the musicians a chance to introduce themselves to you directly. The Prague Chamber Orchestra is one of the world's great orchestras, and ever since its inception more than fifty years ago, it has also been one of only a handful of orchestras to perform wide-ranging repertoire on a regular basis, without a conductor. As many of you know, I spent some years as the Executive Director of Orpheus, which is another conductor-less orchestra, indeed, the only one in the world that does all of its rehearsals, performances and recordings without a conductor. It has been a marvelous experience – truly a labor of love – for me to be able collaborate with the splendid musicians of the Prague Chamber Orchestra this week, sharing experiences, learning about what's different in their way of working, and learning just how much of the vision and passion behind their work is exactly the same. I'm deeply grateful to this orchestra for its generosity of spirit, and, since tonight is going to be an interactive experience, I'd like to invite the musicians to briefly introduce themselves to you.

I'd also like to say a few words about this extraordinary hall we're sitting in. Martinu Hall is one of the world's great chamber music venues. Not only is this a visually beautiful setting, but the acoustics are very close to perfect – clear, transparent, and just a bit silky. This is truly a place in which we can listen, and be heard. However, Liechtenstein Palace – the 470 year old building in which we convene – hasn't always been home to the Prague Academy of Music, and in fact it has a complex and difficult history. Over the centuries, this hall has been filled with some very different kinds of sounds.

As we listen tonight, there will be many resonances.

In the 1620's, "Bloody Karol" of Lichtenstein used this building to plot the execution of 27 Czech patriots. Today, this act of violence is commemorated by 27 cast-iron heads you can see mounted right in front of the palace. For more than 200 years, this building was a military headquarters, and the sounds to be heard were those of battle plans being crafted and executed. Under the Nazis, this gorgeous building was used as office space for second and third tier bureaucratic functionaries – the bigshots were installed up the hill in the Castle – such as the German railroad officials who coordinated the trains that deported Jews from Thereisenstadt to Auschwitz. In the Communist era, one of the world's largest statues of Stalin graced the courtyard, and this stage became the bully pulpit for the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's political education center.

Then, miraculously, in the early 1990's, the new government of the Czech Republic decided to convert the Liechtenstein Palace into a center for artistic expression and education, and began the restoration process leading to the splendid jewel-box we gather in tonight.

What a magnificent gift the Czech government gave its own people, and the entire world, when they recognized that the Liechtenstein Palace represented a profound historical problem, and then proceeded to solve the problem in a boldly creative and transformational way. Simply by turning this building over to artists and artistic expression, the government exorcised the sounds of violence, hatred, propaganda, war and even genocide that reverberated through this building for 450 years, replacing them with songs of the human heart and spirit.

Like most artists, I believe that the world's most intractable problems are direct results of failures of the human imagination, and that art has a unique capacity to engage our imagination in ways that transform us and help us to envision

transformed worlds. I also believe in the power of artistic skills, processes and experiences to help us surface and engage our inner creativity, work collaboratively, and communicate across cultures with clarity and nuance.

All week, as I've walked the streets of this city and talked with the distinguished leaders from around the world gathered here, I've been reflecting on this building's astounding transformation as a metaphor for how artists can help us as leaders – to learn to recognize the true nature of the problems we face, and to stretch our understanding of our own capacity to transcend those problems by creating new worlds.

For the arts teach us that in order to transform, we must first transcend. And they remind us each of us that as humans, each of us is endowed with the capacity to rise above the ordinary, the known, the “possible”.

So now, let's spend the next half hour (or so) together on a journey into the world of chamber music-making, as our ensemble rehearses that quintessentially Czech masterpiece, Dvorak's Slavonic Dance No. 8. The musicians will play the dance through once, then start working on the key interpretive issues – how slow or fast should the music be played? How loud or soft? What is the right balance between the instruments? And on and on the list goes. Rehearsing without a conductor, the group will call on its own leadership resources to reach decisions on all of these questions (and many more) in the course of an open rehearsal. To wrap it up, the ensemble will again play through the dance, giving you the chance to hear for yourselves how the music has been transformed through collaboration; and then, together, the musicians and I will respond to your questions and comments.

Before turning things over to Dvorak, though, I'd like to share a few thoughts about four simple, but powerful, collaborative leadership principles of chamber

music. I believe that reflecting on these principles will be particularly helpful in guiding you through this experience, and in putting the rehearsal in the broader context of collaborative leadership and the art of transformation:

First, chamber music is made by an organizational system that puts both power and responsibility for performance outcomes in the hands of the people playing the music.

Second, successful chamber ensembles value and engage the leadership abilities of each member of the group. These ensembles are built on the recognition that each participant has the capacity to lead, and the belief that the ensemble's success requires each participant to do so.

Third, the music itself is the ultimate road map to working out an effective distribution of leadership roles.

Fourth, great chamber ensembles are characterized by passionate dedication to a clearly understood shared purpose.

You might also watch for several behaviors which are characteristic of organizational cultures that foster this kind of collaborative leadership. Among them:

1. Musicians integrating and balancing characteristics that we typically think of as opposites. Successful ensemble playing requires both leading and following, listening and talking. Chamber musicians must operate simultaneously as specialists by mastering their own instrument and part, and as generalists, able to read the full score and understand their parts in relationship to the whole.

2. A behavior I call “the suspension of disbelief” – in other words, a special willingness to embrace, at least temporarily, ideas that are different from and even contradict one’s own. This is, in fact, the only way that a chamber ensemble can ever meaningfully try out and assess the value of the new ideas that come up in rehearsal.

3. Look for uncompromising choices because, paradoxically, successful chamber groups rarely operate by compromise – they prefer to make strong and clear decisions that reflect real choice. So, for example, the French horn in tonight’s ensemble may prefer to play a particular section of Slavonic Dance No. 8 at a tempo of 100 beats per minute (the rate your heart might have beat after climbing that impressive flight of stairs as you entered this hall) while the clarinet may prefer 160 beats per minute (imagine your heart pounding the last time you ran two blocks to catch the tram). While it’s impossible to predict how those conflicting ideas will be worked out in rehearsal, we can be fairly sure of what won’t happen – the musicians won’t opt to “split the difference” at 130 beats per minute. That’s because all the musicians will agree that their prime objective is to reach a strong, clear and effective choice for performance; therefore, trying to gain the maximum possible political support won’t be on the agenda.

4. Finally, keep an eye out for a unique kind of operational flexibility that defuses potential volatility – the willingness to revisit decisions previously made. Far from using points of decision as choke points to cut off debate and discussion, chamber music uses tonight’s performance as a springboard to preparing a fresh and stronger performance tomorrow.

It is distinctly unusual for a group of musicians to invite a few hundred strangers to watch them go through the normally private process of collaborative leadership in action – and much less for them to do it in a foreign language. Tonight’s open

rehearsal is even more challenging for these musicians because some have just returned from the Prague Chamber Orchestra's tour to Asia three days ago, and also because these particular individuals have never before worked together on this particular arrangement of Slavonic Dance No. 8. Nevertheless, they have thrown themselves into this challenge with generosity and spirit, and we're all deeply grateful.

And now, Dvorak's Slavonic Dance No. 8.