

Mister Chancellor, Madam Principal, Dean Ferguson, colleagues, and most of all, graduating students and your families.

The world, we are often reminded, is full of unsung heroes. I will not claim for myself the stature of a hero, nor, happily, has my life in music been without its many rewards. It is especially hard for me, as a choral conductor, to claim that I have been “unsung”. But today is without precedent. Today, my life’s passion has been recognized by one of the world’s great universities, and by a school of music which is now making its own profound mark on the world’s stage. For this honour I am humbly and most deeply grateful.

The few remarks I have to make this afternoon are addressed to you, the graduating class of 2014. For you, as for me, this is a day of recognition and celebration. And my first piece of advice to you is - “Enjoy it”. Such days don’t come nearly often enough in the life of a professional musician. In fact, let’s get the bad news out of the way. I’m sure I don’t have to describe or to dwell on the challenges that await you. A life in music is intensely demanding, fiercely competitive and constantly embattled. As performers, as teachers, as administrators you will be underestimated, undervalued and, naturally, underpaid - especially bad news for your parents. When resources are scarce - and a society or a community can always claim that resources are scarce - music is invariably among the first casualties. And though music has had its champions from Plato to Sting, the struggle is unending and you are the next generation of champions. However, I did promise not to dwell on the challenges.

So what do you need to take with you on your journey? First, a passport. And today you were given one of the very finest passports you can obtain - a degree from the Schulich School of Music at McGill University. Carry that passport with you wherever you go. And I don't just mean the piece of paper itself, as important as that is. Carry with you the hard work, the training, the mentoring and tutoring; carry with you the discipline, the fatigue and even the occasional despair; carry with you the loyalties, the passions, the excitements and the discoveries that all went into the granting of your passport.

Second, you need a vision. In 1958, the American pianist, Van Cliburn, famously won the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition. In his acceptance speech, he avowed, "The thing that thrills me most is that you are honouring music. Because I'm only one of many. I'm only a witness and a messenger." It's what we all need to remember. We are all engaged in the service of music. And if you believe, as I do, in the power of music to transform the lives of men and women for the good, that belief will uplift you and sustain you even in the hardest of times. That is the over-arching vision. But each of you must also imagine and own a vision that is singularly yours. Mark Twain said that "All of us contain music and truth, but most of us can't get it out." Each one of you, on stage, in the classroom, in the office must find your way to bring out "music and truth" in yourself and in others. How you do that will be your vision, and to that vision you must hold fast.

Over the years, I have spent more time than I care to remember at the console of a church organ, so I know that every good sermon must have three points. What more do you need? Perseverance - that seemingly impossible balance of patience, energy and humour without which your chances of success are almost certainly doomed. You will need to be

patient with yourself as well as with others; you will need to energize and inspire yourself as well as others; and as for your sense of humour, that will allow you to laugh at yourself, and not at others. The practice of perseverance will probably be the closest to sainthood that any of you come in your lives, for as Robert Louis Stevenson pointed out - "Saints are just sinners who kept on going".

To live my life in music has been for me, and I trust will be for you, a privilege and a blessing. Much as we admire and respect the lives and careers of so many around us, you and I, of course, understand, in the words of Browning's Abt Vogler, that

"God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear.

The rest may reason, and welcome: 'tis we musicians know."

That's the kind of confidence I would wish for you at the start of your journey. And wherever that journey takes you, remember, too, the confidence of Aaron Copland - "So long as the human spirit thrives on this planet, music in some living form will accompany and sustain it and give it expressive meaning." You have a vital part to play in keeping music, and thus the human spirit, alive. To you I extend my best hopes and wishes. To the Schulich School of Music and McGill University again I extend my profound gratitude.