

*R.I.P. Lynn Harrell (1944-2020)*

**Commencement Address by Lynn Harrell  
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When I came to Cleveland and joined The Orchestra, I was eighteen years old, and I thought I was a finished product. Now I had arrived. All the hard work was behind me.

You know how it is at ten when you think you'll never get beyond the first position... at thirteen when you can't cope with ten minutes practicing before school and two hours after it... at sixteen when you're working 25 hours a day for the big competition... and then, for me, at eighteen. It was all over. Finished. I had A Job.

And how little I know! It was only the bare beginning. It is so easy in music to forget that we are doing something we love. Sometimes it's easy to forget that we even love it as deeply as we do. It's so difficult when you're young that, with as much passion as you have, it seems impossible to imagine ever playing well enough. It's so difficult as you get older to realize that this feeling will never go away.

I am fifty now. The young students I played with at summer string camp are fathers and grandfathers. And I am still touched and amazed when playing with distinguished colleagues of my own age to realize that -- as well as they may cover it up -- they shake with stage fright before walking out, and sometimes even in performance. The doubts, the insecurities, the anger at the space between the dream and the achievement -- these never go away.

There is never a moment in music when you can say, "This is it. Now I have arrived." It is a journey with many stops. There are frustrating pauses, whirlwind acceleration -- and sometimes, just a sense of having got seriously lost.

I see now how ironic it was for me that only a year after I got to Cleveland with the feeling that I could now sit back and enjoy things... that I had the worst time of my whole musical career. It seemed to my old colleagues -- many of whom were still in music school then -- that I had it made. I had a regular salary -- enough to keep a man and family, after all -- and I with only myself to take care of. I had concerts all over

the world with one of the greatest orchestras of all time... who, from the outside, could possibly have guessed the desolation and emptiness that I felt. Was it all for this? Was this the magic? Here I was on the third stand, never heard and never noticed. I felt invisible -- it began to feel like a boring, terrible, slow death. Forty years of this -- how was I to endure it?

The problem was, of course, the total lack of a good, true education. In those early days, I never listened to my colleagues. I just stared at the page and played along with everyone else. One of the herd. Then one day, George Szell -- clearly frustrated beyond belief at my donkey-like sleepwalking -- told me to stay back during the intermission of a rehearsal. He grabbed my right arm and started to play as I should play out. It was a terrible, terrible noise -- but the passion was there again, the commitment. He was furious with me. He barked at me: "You don't contribute. You don't know anything. You're not prepared. You just float along down the stream. You never know how the music goes." It was a tirade -- and it amazed me. It had simply never entered my self-pitying state that this could all be my fault. That if I was bored, it was because I wasn't trying hard enough. Music isn't boring; people are.

So he told me about studying the score, about practicing music not just technique; about learning to hear the rest of the music -- to study beforehand the architecture of a piece, the lines weaving through it in all the individual instruments. Above all, he dared me to have pride again in my playing. It wasn't to be the old pride -- narcissistically and aimlessly self-delighting in the trivia of instrumental playing. But to get immersed into the whole psyche and personality of a composer. He taught me respect for the creative force behind a great piece of music. He taught me respect for my fellow musicians: bullied and scorned by him, I was forced to open up and listen to the great musicians who surrounded me. I was over-awed by a horn sound that my wretched cello could never match; a clarinet legato that defined the word for me at last; the silvery shimmer of beautiful flute playing. George Szell opened my ears to the musical inventiveness of fine oboe playing. He taught me humility and -- through it -- he brought me joy.

It's so interesting for me to look back. When I was made principal cello of The Cleveland Orchestra, I was probably the same age as most of you. Many of my friends then, I still see and play with. Or, actually, not too many. That's the rub.

When I went into the orchestra, most of my old Juilliard and Curtis classmates wrote me off as solo material. That was me out of the fray -- out of the running -- for a lifetime. There were big talents, big stars-to-be... and I was no longer counted among them. Or, perhaps, never was. And I would have put my money on other cellists than I for a solo career, quite frankly. There are people I can still see in my mind's eye who seemed incandescent: tall, good looks' flashing fingers; the right mentors; competition winners; stunning self-confidence. And most of them -- if not all of them, actually -- you wouldn't have even heard of. I had no idea at twenty-one what a long, long journey it is.

The key is simple: You just have to keep going. It isn't a competition -- it's only about yourself, about one practice day after another, about keeping going, and above all, forcing yourself to understand that you never understand it all. The English have a term which I have just discovered. It's called DINTISM. "How did he get that job?" I asked about a colleague. "Oh, dintism," came the answer. Dintism? It is -- it was explained to me -- by sheer dint of doing it. Of doing it, with all good will and effort day after day, year after year. Of not giving up.

I'm often asked whether or not I get bored of carrying the Dvorak Concerto around the world. Bored? They must be joking. I, who thought I knew everything I needed to know about the Dvorak Concerto when I was twenty, am still discovering new things every single time I play it. I hear someone else play it and that goes for my students too -- and in their interpretation, I'll hear a phrase, a note, an unfamiliar turn of musical gesture, and there will be a new discovery for me.

I'll never forget my encounters with Marcel Moyse, the legendary French flutist, at the Marlboro Festival. In his eighties, he kept tripping over his words in his passion, his eagerness to tell you of a piece of music. As much toil and work as music demands -- it is also our brush with immortality. I heard Pablo Casals play when he was so old that his fingers and technique could hardly be recognized as good cello playing -- and yet, it was the most moving and dynamically powerful music-making you can imagine, so alive was the soul, so strong the belief in the music.

What, you may ask, has all this to do with you who are just about to go into the world? Well, I am here as a scout. I am here to report back on what it looks like down the road. And I can tell you that the journey at the beginning, and the journey to the end are no different -- music is one and the same journey, and it always continues.

I meet young musicians in their early twenties who are already turned off; they're bored; they're cynical. "It's all politics," they'll say. But I met them thirty years ago, too, like that -- and those are the talents who disappeared. Only the music remained -- and those who in delighting in the music; in never failing to find refreshment in it; who rejoice in their gift... those are the musicians who have lasted, whose way has been lit by this special lantern of our art.

It's hard to remember that now, perhaps. Most students I know graduate with the full weight of student loans on their shoulders, cars in need of new transmissions and gearboxes, rent that's due, freelance jobs far and few between...

But I came here today to say, "Keep going." Magical things have happened to me. Magical things have happened to many of us -- and we're all surprised. I have colleagues who are much older than I who teach at The Royal Academy of Music in London, and I feel the bond of being in this amazing and magical circle together. They don't have the international chances that I do -- but the music, and the delight in it, is the same.

Franz Schubert is dead, but his music is alive. It almost breaks my heart that I never knew him. But what truly breaks my heart are the musicians I meet on my path who are alive -- but somehow dead.

Go out and join the living.

Joy and good fortune to you all.