

# Finding Your Voice in the Cosmos

*Augusta Read Thomas, professor of composition at the University of Chicago, prolific composer, educator, and Pulitzer Prize in Music finalist, delivered the Spring 2014 Commencement address.*

Graduates: I offer hearty congratulations! It takes courage to have attended a world-class University such as the University of Illinois with its stellar School of Music, where the standards are extraordinary and the culture is absolutely committed to excellence. What a privilege to have been members of this distinctive, empowering, and transformative culture. Amazing environments of this kind thrive thanks to exceptional leaders, mentors, teachers, colleagues, and friends.

We that have been so fortunate. We must give back.

What are the obligations of our good fortune? And what are the obligations of our training in music? Mary Oliver, beloved poet, said: “the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.” Our music wells up from that same “attentive soul,” which is the source of our intellectual, ethical, and spiritual values. On the largest level, if our attentive souls embrace a cosmic and holistic perspective, then...

With great humility today, we ponder our place in the biosphere, from our immediate ecosystem to the cosmic one, knowing we are only a tiny speck in the dynamic and holistic connection of all the planet’s ecosystems. We’re all seated together today, fastened in, on a gigantic ball whirling around the sun, nestled in a galaxy, hurtling through the depths of space and time. If this fact does not put our lives in perspective, nothing will!

I will return later to this celestial vantage point and to the topic of giving back, but this cosmic timescale makes one thing very clear to me: life is short! Thus, I feel strongly that for every second of it we should trust our instincts, trust our passions, trust our empathy, and trust our love.

I always try to make big decisions with my heart and to embrace what I love, and what I love is music. Music is my entire life. For over a third of a century composing has been the focus of my life.

Robert Frost said: “To be a poet is a condition, not a profession.” Pearl S. Buck said: “By some strange, unknown, inward urgency [the artist] is not really alive unless he [or she] is creating.” I identify with this “strange, unknown, inward urgency.” Composing music makes me feel alive. Being a composer is my *condition*, not solely my profession. Likewise, each of us has been chosen by music. I am sure that many of you would say that being a musician is your *condition* not your profession.

A sense of wonder and modesty binds us to our art and to one another. As custodians of the musical arts, it is exactly this sense of amazement and wonder that unlocked our creative impulses and set us on a path of imaginative discovery. Our talent compels us to create and re-create our music as a gift to be cultivated, nurtured, cherished, and shared generously.

Growing up the 10th of 10 children (and a twin, at that), I remember lying underneath our piano and listening to someone playing with the resonance sounding all around me. Sometimes that piano was played by my mother, who supported our family by teaching kindergarten for over 30 years. I loved to play the piano as a child (and still love playing it now)! I spent my childhood making up short songs. I then played trumpet for 14 years, and was embraced and enchanted by the sound of an orchestra.

I learned to write music by writing music and by working with superb, collaborative musicians. Several creative, passionate, and generous teachers taught me that in life, there is no core curriculum. The paths are infinite and the results uncertain. Thus, I create works whose destination and discovery is unpredictable, like messages in bottles.

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One great composition teacher, Alan Stout, taught Professor Stephen Taylor and me to “always trust your intuition because

what you’ll discover will be yourself.” We can Google many things, but we can’t Google to find what’s in our heart—the passion that lifts us skyward. Creating a life that reflects your values and satisfies your soul is a rare achievement and it is not easy, but you can do it. A life oriented toward discovery is infinitely rewarding.

In 1998, a Chicago Symphony Orchestra patron wrote to me to say: “Do you really like the music you write?” I spent days drafting a nuanced and polite reply. In the end, my husband and fellow composer, Bernard Rands, told me rather to send a postcard with one word on it: “YES!”

Pierre Boulez told me (and by extension, many other composers) never to apologize for my music. I try hard not let the opinions of others drown out my own inner voice and intuition, not to be trapped by other people’s dogma. I tell my composition students to go out on a limb and be willing to fail, and that it is okay to make glorious and amazing mistakes. I would rather that they reach for something ambitious that later needs revision, or is even thrown away, then play it safe, writing derivative, dull, impersonal, generic music. I believe every musician should strive to keep their curiosity ferocious, seeking truth with ravenous desire and to stay true to what is in their hearts.

Plutarch who wrote of Roman lives once articulated: “What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.” Each day that you’re inwardly moving toward your dreams without compromising who you are, you’re winning. Be creative as often as you like because you can never exhaust your creative capacities.

The rules for composers and musicians getting their works seen and heard are constantly evolving. In the age of YouTube, which simultaneously makes everything



Courtesy of Augusta Read Thomas

**Commencement speaker Augusta Read Thomas joins Stephen Taylor, professor of composition-theory, and recent composition-theory graduates. L-R: Jason Mitchell (DMA '14), Augusta Read Thomas, Bernard Rands, Stephen Taylor, Juri Seo (DMA '13, MM '07), Andrew Burnson (DMA '14, MM '09), Halim Beere (DMA '14, MM '10)**

available and shortens our collective attention-spans, you may need to become more creative to make a deep, lasting connection with your audience. Use the skills that you have learned to create your own rules and to reach out to others in a meaningful way.

All of us want to reveal the wonder of music. We delight in organizing sonorities and striving for clarity—even within complex musical structures—seeking to find a graceful relationship between concept and craft. Such a life search is at once extremely humbling and invigorating, especially because music’s eternal quality is its capacity for change, transformation, and renewal.

The musics of J.S. Bach, Mahler, Debussy, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, David Rakowski, George Benjamin, and so on, are all completely different yet they are all magnificent. Remarkable works from one period of time do not negate remarkable works from different times. Old music needs new music, new music needs old music, and all music needs vital musicians to interpret it and bring it to life. The past and the present coexist in a state of mutual dependency, thus, whether we are performers, composers, ethnomusicologists, historians, or educators, we have an abundance to celebrate today. Music changes and it always will.

The accomplishments of our predecessors keep us focused and humble and they inspire us with confidence to think creatively. We should never take for granted living in a nation where freedom of expression is protected.

One principal aim of art is to explore the tension between the enduring and the ephemeral. Thus, musicians of every era uniquely define their music and imbue their time with wonder.

You musicians take that leap of faith to illuminate your particular moment in humanity’s ongoing creative and musical searching, and celebrate the variety of artists who make irreplaceable contributions to the evolving culture of our society. But how can each of you share the wonder of music in this day and age when there is a tendency toward crass commercialism, mediocrity, and at times a

mind-numbing barrage of loud, inarticulate sound? We must seek excellent music and we must emphasize and be ambassadors for the fact that music's healthy survival depends on a willingness of nations, universities, scholars, composers, performers, patrons, and audience members to take a leap of faith and believe that the search for truth in the arts is consequential and valuable.

Albert Einstein said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Over these years, I have learned that there are three things musicians and composers need: First, exquisite and fertile imaginations; second, technique and a strong toolbox of specialized skills; and third, a super, tireless work ethic. If we were to add a fourth, I suppose it would be a sense of being tuned-into this world, this life, this cosmos.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote: "What we would do if the stars came out only one night every thousand years? No one would sleep that night. Everyone would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God." Instead, the stars come out every night, and we stare at our computers! We should consider practicing not only our instruments, our daily performing routines, composing music, studying music, but perhaps also a computer detox?

Thinking of Emerson's night sky filled with billions of stars reminds me of what I mentioned earlier regarding the cosmic perspective and our place in the world, which bring me back to the questions: What are the obligations of our good fortune? How can we give back?

We understand clearly that today's celebration must be about looking forward to ways we can help with global problems, including poverty, lack of clean water, medicine, shelter, or warmth, hunger, and surges of violence, human trafficking, kidnapping, wrongful incarceration, human rights abuses. We realize that today we need all of our hands to help others. I wish dearly that we could fix these and other problems through our music making. Our imagination enables us to empathize with other humans whose experiences we have never shared. Through music, we try to build bridges of understanding between creeds, cultures, and ethnicities, rich and poor, educated and neglected—all of whom have their own rich musical traditions. Though we never know exactly

when our efforts deeply touch another's soul, we each possess an insatiable urge to communicate hope.

David McCullough, Jr. wrote: "The great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself." Reaching out and helping people will bring you more satisfaction than anything else you have ever done. Kindness is a choice. Instead of standing back and doing nothing, find happiness in this interdependent world by using your talents to help bring basic human essentials and dignity to those in need. I do not have the answer, but I know we should be asking the questions about how we can be of service, and tangibly so. Our preparation for the "real world" rests not in the answers we've learned, but rather in the questions we've learned how to ask ourselves.

In closing, you are alive during one of the finest points in mankind's history. We know more about our origins, planet, and universe, than ever before. Life took over 4 billion years to evolve into you and you now stand to have about 80-or-more years to enjoy it. Catch happiness. Life is short. Don't waste time.

I once heard and now pass on this thought: Throughout all of history, there is not one single person, not Shakespeare, Mozart, Rodin, Hubble, Einstein, veterans, our great-grandmothers, who would not give up everything that they ever achieved in their lifetimes to stand here today in your place and be alive now. You have the imagination to see yourself doing something truly exceptional—So go do it!

Believe in noble possibilities and then make them a reality. Be passionate. You will build a body of recordings, concerts, work, but you will also build a body of affection with the people you have helped who have helped you. These people are the core of everything that you have accomplished and will accomplish. Embrace intelligence, hard work, honesty, character, loyalty to family and friends, and above all, love and faith to pursue and attain your artistic dreams.

Thank you all for the privilege of sharing my visions and encouragements about music and art with the new generation of musicians and those who inspire them.

Hug your family and friends, high five your mentors, and never go far from music. Good luck and congratulations!

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