

RALPH ELLISON
730 RIVERSIDE DRIVE
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10031

Lincoln Hill Road
Plainfield, Mass. 01070
August 24, 1975

Dean Peter J. Schoenbach
The Curtis Institute of Music
Rittenhouse Square
Philadelphia, Pa. 19103

Dear Dean Schoenbach:

Enclosed please find, at long last, a copy of my commencement address - now edited - which I was privileged to deliver to your graduating class last May. I apologize for the lateness in getting it to you but my summer has been filled with writing on a novel and other chores and I just could not get it to you sooner.

Please feel free to reproduce and distribute it to the school and its friends. Whereas I plan to publish the speech at some future time, your distribution of it to associates and friends of the Institute will not interfere with its later publication.

Kindly express my appreciation to Mr. Cook, the Board and to Rudolph Serkin once again for the opportunity to participate with them on that most memorable occasion.

My wife joins me in warm regards to all.

Sincerely yours,

Ralph Ellison (2)
Ralph Ellison

(dictate but not read)

Commencement Address

To The Curtis Institute of Music

Graduating Class of 1975-

(Essayistically Extended)

I have been cautioned that when addressing an audience of musicians such as yourselves, it is imperative that the speaker pay close attention to such matters as your sharps and flats and stops and frets, your resonance, your range, your pegs, temperament and timbre. I was also cautioned that he should have a good eye, ear, nose and throat and that his reflexes be ultra-fast. And then, if he is so rash as to risk your displeasure by proceeding to bow you (the word is "bow", not "bore"), he should stroke you lightly lest he upset your tuning and screech you.

Such, believe me, was my advice. And if after all that you can refrain from rising up and throwing me off the podium, I'll do no further violence to your good humour and praise your unshakable graciousness.

Seriously though, there is a hallowed convention which holds that the main speaker at commencement ceremonies is expected to provide the class of graduates with bits of advice. The assumption being, I suppose, that having successfully negotiated the perennial rite-of-passage around which such ceremonies revolve the speaker has plumbed certain mysteries of the world into which you, the graduates, are about to enter and thus has achieved some insight worthy of your consideration. If this be correct, then a confession

is very much in order: For while it is true that I once aspired to the goal at which you, on this glorious day, have arrived, I long ago lost my way. The cap, the gown, the colors that lend such glamour and sweet mystery to this bright pageant-rite of spring which commemorates your most enviable achievement, were never mine to wear. Because unlike yourselves I failed to reach the final stage of my initiation. To put it bluntly, after completing my junior year I became a drop-out. Thus the honor of being your commencement speaker carries with it a personal overtone of irony. It is not, however, a cruel irony, but one which moves me with gentle poignancy of an old love affair suddenly remembered, to recall Keat's melodious line: For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair...

For in truth music was my first love among the arts and few of the joys that accompanied the sorrows of its vain pursuit have faded from memory. If anything, time and nostalgia have made them quite precious. So much so that despite the inescapable irony they explain my rather rash presence here upon your podium. But then, honor relates to irony as a fundamental note to its audible and inaudible overtones; strike the ear-pleasing, soul-stirring chord of honor ever so lightly and mocking arpeggios of irony are sure to follow. It can't be helped. Nevertheless I'll add in my defense that my dropping out was due to no lack of application, enthusiasm or talent, but to a drying up of scholarship funds and a scarcity of jobs. And then, shortly thereafter, I discovered a talent of a

different order, a talent for words. After that, my studies of music put aside, my fate as a musician was sealed.

And so it was, disappointed but no less a lover of the art to which you've dedicated your lives, I left music to those more fortunate, or more persistent, than myself and learned to view their triumphs from a distance. Today you honor me by decreasing that distance with a most dream-like telescoping of time and experience, and I'm delighted. But having gone astray so long ago I'm forced to speak with you now across that friendly mystery of hierarchy which while uniting those of us who find our beings in different domains of the world of art yet keeps our experience, as artists, quite separate. I've always regretted that separation, but as your speaker it turns out that my years spent in your domain may now help me bridge somewhat our distance. And while I'm still forced to address you as a mere appreciator rather than a creator of music they allow me questionable satisfaction of assuring you that no time spent in acquiring the arduous discipline of the conscious musician is ever totally lost -- at least not for a drop-out who became a writer. Further, since convention demands that your speaker draw upon his experience it is possible that my aborted years as a student of music did, after all produce at least one item worthy of your consideration. I hope so, because like yourselves even a failed musician must observe the conventions. Thus even if my confession has rendered anything I might say of my own experiences as a musician suspect I can only

pucker up my old trumpeter's lips, tense my diaphragm and proceed. I can reassure you however that any bits of advice that spin off from my account will not really be my own, but the contribution of an artist whose experience in the realm of music was long, and, despite its lack of wide recognition, rich and profound. Thus since I am only its ironic instrument you may accept it as a gift of formulated experience which a very fine artist granted me during a time of depression -- both world-wide and personal -- and which I now pass on to you as you stand on the verge of a somewhat less economically depressed but an even more chaotic world than that in which I received it.

The experience occurred one day at Tuskegee Institute during the mid nineteen thirties. At the time I was a student of trumpet and music theory and aspired to become a classical composer. Dressed in my hired tuxedo, I had just completed a student recital in which I had attempted to slide by on mere technique; and as you might surmise, my faculty judges were far from being impressed with my attempt to allow the lips and fingers perform work which called for the passionate involvement of the heart and intellect. They gave me a hard time, and afterwards I sought solace in the person of Miss Hazel Harrison, a marvelous pianist and teacher. Miss Harrison had been one of Busoni's prize pupils, had lived (until the rise of Hitler drove her back to the U.S.A.) in Busoni's home in Berlin, and was a friend of such masters as Egon Patri, Percy Granger and Sergei Prokofiev. Her advice was brief:

"Baby," she said, "in this country you must always prepare yourself and play your very best wherever you are."

"But of course," I said.

"No," she said, "you don't understand; at least not yet..."

"Then what," I said.

"There's more to it than the usual reason," she said.

"Of course you've always been told to do your best, look your best, be your best. You've been taught such things all your life -- but when it comes to performing the classics in this country there's something else involved..."

She paused and I waited, somewhat impatiently, expecting her to make the obvious even more obvious.

"Are you ready to listen," she said.

"Yes, m'am," I said.

"Alright," she said: "You must always play your best, even if it's only in the little waiting room at Chehaw, because in this country there'll always be a little man hidden behind the stove who'll know the music, and the tradition, and the standards of performance of whatever it is you set out to perform!"

"Yes, m'am," I said, "I understand."

"I hope so," she said.

Frankly, I did and I didn't. I knew that Chehaw was the lonely nearby whistle-stop where southbound trains paused briefly to cut loose the coaches which bore passengers destined for Tuskegee, and from where the coaches were then coupled to a switch engine and hauled to the Institute's railroad siding. Yes, but given my familiarity with Chehaw's miserable, claustrophobic little waiting room, I found it difficult to even imagine anyone plucking the blues

on a guitar within its narrow walls. And I suspected that sounding a full-bore trumpet there would reduce the place to rubble. Still, Tuskegee possessed a rich musical heritage, both folk and classical, and many musicians and music lovers lived within its environs. But even so, Chehaw Station was the last place in the area in which I would have expected to find anyone, much less a connoisseur, huddled behind its pot-bellied stove waiting to pass judgement on some unsuspecting musician. True, he might well hear the haunting, blues-toned, train-whistle rhapsodies that were blared by fast locomotives as they thundered past -- but of the classics? Nothing at all. So what else was hidden in her folksy metaphor?

Thus, as Miss Harrison smiled knowingly into my dead-pan face, I thought, So, you ask for comfort and understanding and you're given some kind of riddle. I would have felt better if she'd said: Sorry, baby, I know that you think that the faculty has treated you unfairly, but after all, I was there, I heard you. So how can you expect me to uphold your bad musicianship?

Actually, I did not, but in my disappointment I was quite unprepared to grasp the underlying implications of Miss Harrison's advice. Nevertheless, I respected her artistry and experience so highly that as I leaned against the curve of her Steinway listening to her interpret a rhapsody by Liszt (during which she carried on an enthusiastic verbal analysis of passages which Busoni had marked for expressional subtlety), her words fixed themselves in my memory. So much so, that after all these years not only does her "little man behind the stove" continue to engage my mind, he often materializes

When I least expect him. As when I'm brooding over some problem of literary criticism -- like, say, the rhetoric of American fiction. Indeed, he has come to symbolize for me no less than the enigma of aesthetic communication in American society. And especially the difficulty of communicating with that mysterious organ with which (like a conductor struggling with a strange orchestra) we must exhort, persuade, woo -- in order to achieve our purpose. I refer to that second and, in a sense, our most difficult instrument, our audience; that instrument which plays upon us as we upon it.

Simultaneously a focus for insight and a warning against stale perceptions, the little man has also become my metaphor for those individuals we sometimes meet whose refinement is not adequately explained by family background, formal education or social status. We've all encountered the types: Individuals who seem to have been sensitized by some force which issues undetected from the chromatic scale of American social hierarchy and which throws off strange, ultrasonic, ultra-semi-semitones which create within those who are attuned to its vibrations a mysterious enrichment of personality. Here I am sure that heredity plays an important role, but whatever that role may be, it would appear that culturally, environmentally, such individuals are products of errant but sympathetic vibrations set up by the tension between America's social mobility, its universal education, and its relative freedom of information. The latter includes, and most importantly, the finest products of the arts and intellect; products that are so abundantly available

in the form of books, graphics, recordings, and pictorial reproductions. Just how these factors operate in concert involves the mysterious interaction between environment and personality, instinct and culture, but the frequency and wide dispersal of such individuals endows each American audience with a special mystery of its own. Certainly this is true of any audience in which Miss Harrison's little man appears.

But having gone this far, my rhythm slackens and my phrasing flags. For with no reliable sociology either of the dispersal of ideas or taste in American society at my command I can only suggest that personal origins aside, the cultural circumstances which I've tried to describe offer the intellectually adventurous individual what might be termed a broad "social mobility of the intellect"-- plus an incalculable scale of possibilities for self-creation and the force which seems to have sensitized them -- call it a climate of free-floating sensibility -- appears to be a random effect generated by a society in which certain assertions of personality that were formerly the prerogative of high social rank have become the privilege of the anonymous and the lowly.

If this be true, the matter of the artist being able to identify the background and character of his audience can be more puzzling than we might assume. In the field of writing it presents a problem of rhetoric, a question of how to fashion strategies of communication that will bridge the many divisions of background and taste which any representative American audience embodies. And to the extent that American literature is both an art of discovery and

an agency for creating a consciousness of cultural identity, it is of such crucial importance as to require not only great skill but an act of democratic faith. From my hierarchal distance I assume that this is true, in his own terms, of the performing artist. He does his best not only out of dedication to his art and instrument, but because he realizes that the chances are that despite its inevitable unevenness any American audience will contain at least one listener whose knowledge and taste will compliment, or surpass, his own. For to paraphrase Miss Harrison, in this country even the most homogeneous audiences are culturally mixed and embody in their anonymity the mystery of American cultural identity.

That identity -- tentative, controversial, uneasy -- is confusing to performer and audience alike. To the audience because it is mixed and seldom conscious of the implications of its own wide, democratic range; to the performer because he directs his finest effects to a refinement of sensibility which is quite shifty because it is not rooted exclusively in a highly visible elite. Instead, it is a sensibility which tends to transcend class lines and float free in the crowd.

Which leads us to ask: Just who, precisely, is this little man of Miss Harrison's riddle? From what section of the house and from behind what unlikely mask does he render his judgements? And by what magic of art can his most receptive attention, his grudging admiration be excited? Such questions are important, for like Shakespeare's Hamlet -- may I be forgiven for having savaged his lines in my introduction -- the little man of Chehaw Station also has his pride and complexity. He values his personal uniqueness,

cherishes his privacy, and clings to the anonymity which makes identifying him such a problem. Hamlet masked himself with madness, the little man plays mute; perhaps because in the shadow of his anonymity he can be both the vernacular cat who looks at (and listens to) the tradition-bound king, and the little boy who sees clearly the Emperor's pretentious nakedness.

Connoisseur, critic and trickster, he is also a day-coach, cabin-class traveler; but the timing of his arrivals and departures is unclear; sometimes he's there, sometimes he's here. Thus for the musician who would pluck out the heart of the peculiar American mystery which gives the little man his being, his sensibility, his mobility --it isn't enough to know the lowest stops and highest compass of his own instrument. For besides upholding the highest techniques and standards of his chosen art he must also consider the special character of that other instrument which is his audience. Let the performer play fast and loose with tradition if he will, but he should never treat an American audience as some base, incomprehensible instrument. Nor should he consider the little man who symbolizes its ideal sensibility unworthy of his finest efforts. For as Hamlet admonished Guildenstern, call the little man hidden behind the stove whatever instrument you will, you may fret him but if you can't sound him you cannot play upon him. Though self-effacing he is given to a democratic touchiness and is easily fretted. But what frets him most is an attitude which would render him non-existent. So for the musician the little man is a cautionary figure who challenges one

to reach for new heights of artistic expressiveness. Ignore him and violence is done to that ideal democracy of cultivated sensibilities for which he stands. Respect him and one's art becomes an agency for raising the general level of musical taste.

But why would Hazel Harrison associate such an humble symbol of high democratic sensibility with a mere whistle-stop? Perhaps because while Chehaw Station was a deplorable piece of architecture it was nevertheless a point of arrival and departure for people who represented a wide diversity of life-styles and tastes. Philanthropists, businessmen, sharecroppers, students -- even musicians -- passed through its doors. But in ^{their} its own exalted way the same is true of Carnegie Hall or the Metropolitan Opera; both are meeting places for a motley mixture of people. So while it would take the imagination of a Melville to reduce American society to the dimensions of either concert hall or railroad station their common feature as gathering places serves to remind us that in this particular country even the most homogeneous gathering of people is culturally mixed and pluralistic. And perhaps the mystery of American cultural identity which is projected by this motley mixture arises out of our presented attempts to reduce its diversity to an easily recognizable unity.

On the other hand, Americans tend to focus upon the diverse parts of their culture (with which they can more easily identify) rather than upon its complex and pluralistic wholeness. And they identify with the parts because as an entity the whole is greater, if not of a different quality, than its parts. This difference,

this new quality, creates a state of uneasiness within us because it is a constant reminder that ideally American society is a collectivity of individuals; culturally a collectivity of styles, tastes and traditions.

Here lies the source of many of our problems, especially that of American identity. Because in relation to the cultural whole we are, all of us, members of minority groups. Feeling isolated in the fluid, pluralistic turbulence of the democratic process, we cling desperately to our own familiar fragment of the democratic rock. From such fragments we confront our fellow Americans in that war of civility, piety and tradition which is the drama of American society. And from these we engage in the ceaseless contest whose goal is the creation of an ever more encompassing and acceptable definition of our corporate identity as Americans. Often this contest becomes violent but usually it progresses as a war of words, a clash of styles. But what else in so abstract a nation as this? For the ground upon which we struggle is in fact abstract, a terrain of ideas -- man-made but sublime -- which find their form in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. We stand, as we say, united in the name of these sacred principles. But indeed it is in the name of these same principles that we ceaselessly contend.

For while we are but human and given to the fears and temptations of the flesh, our principles are both abstract and ideal. Therefore in our frail physicality we seek security from within our own

part of the corporate American culture and look out upon our fellows with a mixture of fear, suspicion and yearning. We identify with our own part of the corporate culture because each of us is representative of one or more of its parts and because these parts, these familiar fragments, were thrown up by a past -- cultural, religious, racial -- which we assume by such magical emblems as our mothers' milk and fathers' beards to "know". And by relying upon such intimate symbols we seek to deal with the mysteries and pathologies of the social process. But too often we shy from confronting our cultural wholeness because it offers us no easily recognizable points of rest, no easy certainties as to who and where we are. Instead, the whole is always in cacophonous motion. Constantly changing its key, it appears as a vortex of discordant life-styles, tastes, traditions and values; a whirlpool in which the past courses in uneasy juxtaposition with those futuristic principles and promises to which we as a nation are politically committed. Even the sounds and symbols, spun off by its clashing of group against group, we find in our vaguely perceived here-and-now not only alarmingly off-key, but threatening to our inherited eyes, ears and appetites.

In the past an attempt was made to impose conceptual order upon the chaos of American society by viewing it as a melting-pot. Today that metaphor is noisily rejected, vehemently disavowed. And before the rich diversities, glaring inequities and unfulfilled promises of our society we chant of blood, of our European, African and Asian backgrounds; of ethnicity. Ill-concealing our anxiety,

these disavowals are uttered with an old-fashioned, camp-meeting fervor and with a self-righteous air of divine revelation. And most amazing, these dis^sonances are often orchestrated and led in chorus by the descendants of peasants, or slaves, or inhabitants of European ghettos; people whose status as spokesmen is a product of that very melting of barriers which they would deny. On the positive side, of course, such disavowals are affirmations of the diverse and unique individual pasts of which this nation is comprised and as such they might well contribute to a clarification of cultural identity. Yet I see the current denial of that affirmation of the goal of cultural wholeness for which the melting-pot was a metaphor as a current form of an on-going American self-distrust. It is an effort to reduce the mystery of the American past to gesture, an effort to dispel magically the turbulence of the present, and a vote against that hope which is so necessary for our cultural fulfillment. If such disavowals be viable, how then the little man behind the stove?

Ironically, the concept of the melting-pot was never so simplistic or abstract as current arguments would have it. For despite their booster extravagancies, Americans of an earlier day recognized the difference between the ideal and the practical even as they clung desperately to, and sought to default on, the responsibilities of the democratic ideal. Their outlook was pragmatic and vernacular. Having rejected tradition they improvised their culture as they did their politics: touch-and-go, by ear and by eye, fitting new form to new function, new function to old form. In the process they brazenly violated their ideals. They kept slaves, they substituted rhetoric for deeds, they betrayed, brutalized and scape-goated one another and paid lip-service to their professed forms of

justice. But by their fidelity to custom and by their respect for their traditional pieties none of the groups which made up the total culture ever really desired to lose its sense of its own unique past -- even if that past was clouded in slavery. Instead, they wished to use the techniques, life-styles and values of each of their backgrounds in the process of antagonistic-cooperation that was necessary in building a more human society. At their most hopeful they saw themselves as living embodiments of the past, and as such the best guarantee that that which was most desirable from the past would exist and flower in a future free of hierarchal hindrances.

So our current disavowals are not only misdirected, they are also productive of more social disorder and crises of identity than they resolve. For it is here, on the level of culture that the diverse elements of our various background, our heterogeneous pasts, have indeed come together, melted, and become transformed. It is here, if we would only recognize it, that elements of the many available tastes, traditions, life-styles and values that make up the total culture have been ceaselessly appropriated by groups and individuals to whose own backgrounds and traditions they are historically alien, but which, finding them desirable, they have consciously or unself-consciously, or imperialistically made their own. Because melting-pot disclaimers aside, Americans at their best have sensed intuitively that the possibility of enrichening the individual self by such pragmatic appropriation has constituted one of the most precious of their many freedoms. In this they act on the assumption

that all members of a nation-of-nations are by self-definition and by the uncontrolled processes of cultural integration the creations and inheritors of a culture-of-cultures.

So perhaps the complex actuality of our cultural pluralism so perplexes our consciousness because in their interaction the diverse elements -- traditional and vernacular -- which surround us not only break down accepted codifications but take on a character which is something other than that of their various parts. The parts, while apparently remaining their old familiar selves, become in juxtaposition with elements from other backgrounds incongruously transformed; they exert an energy (or synergy) of a different order than that generated by their separate parts, and this with uncalculated results. Nor should we forget the integrative role of objects in the integration of cultural styles. (Put the blues and English folksong together with gospel shouts and electronic guitars and you have Rock -- God help us!) Such unities of diverse cultural elements are capable of creating exciting transformations of culture. Even more mysterious (and here, perhaps, we have a further source of the little man behind the stove's rich sensibility), they provide exciting and most unexpected metamorphoses within the self-creating personality.

Had I been more mature or perceptive an object which lay on her piano top would have hinted certain of these possibilities to me. It was a signed manuscript by Prokofiev, given to Miss Harrison by the composer, and to a more perceptive eye its presence would have been most eloquent. For there we were, both Afro-Americans, both devoted to classical music, in what was considered to be merely an agricultural college in Macon County, Alabama, and both far away

from Moscow, Paris or Berlin. And yet, thanks to the capability of music (and musicians) to transcend the divisions of class, distance, nationality, or race, there, undeniably, was that Prokofiev manuscript, and a Gutenberg Bible in the pulpit of a black country church would have been less unexpected. But there it was, an artifact of contemporary music, a folio with signs and symbols which resonated in its silence with that intricate harmony of friendship, admiration and shared ideals through which it had found its way from Berlin to Tuskegee. Surely this was a most unexpected resting place for such an artifact, yet in being there it had become far more than a piece of music. It had become an agency of cultural transformation. And by charging Miss Harrison's basement studio with the spirit of living personages, ideals and purposes from afar, it had transformed that modest room from a mere spot on a segregated Negro campus into an advance point on the frontiers of music. Just by being there it had added an important dimension to a musical atmosphere with which I could respond emotionally, and with which as a musician I could identify while making of the scene -- place, studio, campus -- a cultural ambiguity too complex for my conscious mind to grasp.

On the Steinway there were also works by Schumann, Bach and Beethoven, among others; works to which Miss Harrison devoted her tremendous energies -- teaching and rehearsing -- from pre-dawn until the early hours of the morning; her piano thunderously roaring or lyrically singing to the delight even of those student passersby for whom the classics were of a world apart. And as I say, there I was, a privileged listener, eagerly drinking in with my ears and

absorbing through the Steinway's vibrations against my ribs, structures of musical meaning that were invisible to my mind's uncomprehending eye, ^{meanings} ~~that~~ which spoke so clearly and hopefully to my heart. There I was, aware of certain details of the scene but not of the complex cultural context in which they sounded, nor of the cultural unity-in-diversity which they made manifest. Perhaps we are able to see only that which we are prepared to see, and we see only at the cost of uncertainty.

Miss Harrison might well have said to me: Look, baby, the society beyond this campus is constantly trying to confuse you over the relationship between culture and race, but even though talent might appear to come from that direction, you do not inherit culture through your genes. No, indeed; musical culture is a matter of conquest, of the individual applying himself to that music, jazz or classical, which helps him to realize and complete himself. And that's true no matter where that particular music originates...

Or again, in the words of André Malraux (whom I was to discover only two years later), she might have told me that as with the other arts, music lives "because its function is to let men escape from their human condition, not by means of an evasion, but through a possession... [for] all art is a way of possessing destiny." Therefore, even at segregated Tuskegee (and especially at the Tuskegees of the nation) one's "cultural heritage is the totality, not of works that men must respect, but of those that can help them live." And to this Miss Harrison might have added, "Yes, and most importantly

you must remember that in this country things are always all-shook-up, that people are constantly moving around and rubbing off on one another. And don't forget that here all things — institutions, individuals and roles offer more than their assigned purposes: They provide education as well as criticism, they challenge, they ask questions, they give answers to those who would probe their mystery. Most of all, remember that it is not only the sound of music which passes through walls and gives pleasure and inspiration, it is ^{of} the very spirit of music to be defiant of categories and obstacles." But then, perhaps, all this was hidden in her brief, "Baby, in this country you must always prepare yourself and play your best, even if it is only in Chehaw Station."

Three years later, after having abandoned my hope of becoming a musician, I had just about forgotten Miss Harrison's mythical "little man behind the stove." Then, in far away New York, concrete evidence of his existence arose and blasted me like the heat released by an internally-combusted ton of coal.

A member of the New York Writer's Project at the time, I was spending a clammy, late fall afternoon of freedom circulating a petition in support of some now long-forgotten social issue which at the time I regarded as indispensable to the public good -- when I found myself inside a tenement building in San Juan Hill, a Negro district which disappeared with the coming of Lincoln Center. Starting on the top floor of the building, I had collected an acceptable number of signatures and, having descended from the ground floor to the basement level, was moving along the dimly lit hallway toward a door through which I could hear the sound of several voices. They

were all male, Afro-American voices, and all raised in a violent argument. The language was profane, the style of speech a southern, idiomatic vernacular such as was spoken by formally uneducated Afro-American workmen, and as I reached the door I paused, sounding out the lay of the land before knocking to present my petition.

But as I listened I became indecisive. Not because of the loud, unmistakable anger of the voices; for being myself a slum-dweller I knew that while voices in slums are often raised in anger, the rhetoric of anger, being in itself cathartic, was not necessarily a prelude to physical violence. No, my hesitation was evoked by the growing realization that there was a mystery unfolding behind the door; a mystery so incongruous, outrageous and surreal that it struck me as a threat to my sense of rational order. It was as though a bazaar practical joke was being staged in which I had been designated the unknowing victim; or that an assault was being made upon my knowledge of American culture and its dispersal, or, at the very least, upon my pride in my knowledge of my own people.

Because profanity, vernacular speech of the incongruity of the scene notwithstanding, the angry voices behind the door proclaimed a knowledge and intimate familiarity with the subject of their contention which confounded all my accepted assumptions regarding the correlation between educational levels, life-styles, class, race and the possession of conscious culture. I was bewildered because

these foul-mouthed black working men's voices were locked in verbal combat over which of two celebrated divas of the Metropolitan Opera was the superior soprano.

Now I attended the opera myself whenever I could raise the funds, and I knew full well that opera-going was far from a usual cultural activity of men who went with the linguistic style of such voices. Yet they were voicing a familiarity with the Met far greater than my own, for in their graphic and vehement criticism they were describing not only the sopranos' stage presence, but the gestures with which each gave animation to her roles. Indeed, they held strong opinions as to the ~~divas'~~ best ranges of the divas' vocal equipment. Thus, given the confounding ^{distortion of} perspective which they were imposing upon me, I was challenged either to solve the mystery of their knowledge by entering into their midst or leave the building with my sense of logic reduced forever to a level of college-trained absurdity.

And so challenged, I knocked. I knocked out of curiosity, I knocked out of anger. I knocked in fear and trembling, I knocked in anticipation of whatever insights -- malicious or transcendent, I no longer cared which -- that I'd discover beyond the door. I knocked like the so-called fate motive in Beethoven's Fifth -- four times.

For a moment there was an abrupt and potent silence, then came the sound of chair legs thumping dully upon a floor -- followed by further silence. Then I knocked again, this time with the authoritative heat of impatient urgency.

Again silence -- until beyond the door a voice boomed out, "Come in!"

Opening the door with unsteady hand, I looked inside -- and was even less prepared for the scene which met my eyes than for the subject of their loud-mouthed contention. In a small, rank-smelling lamp-lit room four huge black men sat sprawled around a circular dining-room table, regarding me with hostility. A lamp with a sooty chimney glowed in the center of the bare oak table-top, casting its yellow light upon four water tumblers and a half-empty pint ~~of~~ of whiskey. And as the men straightened in their chairs I became aware of a fireplace with a coal fire glowing, and against the ornate marble facing its mantelpiece I saw four enormous coal scoops leaning.

"Alright," one of the men said, getting to his feet, "What the hell can we do for you?"

"We ain't buying nothing, buddy," one of the seated men said.

And now, closing the door, I moved forward, holding my petition like a flag of truce before me, and saw that the men wore faded blue overalls and jumper jackets, and that while all were of dark complexion their blackness was accentuated in the dim lamplight by the dust and grime of their profession.

"Come on, man, speak up," the one who was standing said. "We ain't got all day."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," I said, "but I thought you might be interested in supporting my petition," and hurriedly began

explaining.

"You look like one of these relief investigators," one of the men said, "You're not out to jive us, are you?"

"Oh, no, sir," I said. "I happen to work on the Writer's Project."

The standing one leaned forward. "You on the writer's project?"

"That's right, I'm a writer."

"Now is that right? How long you been writing.?"

I hesitated. "About a year," I said.

He grinned, looking at the others. "Y'all hear that? Old Home here has done up and jumped on the gravey-train! Now that's pretty good. Pretty dam good. So what did you do before that?" he said.

"I studied music," I said, "at Tuskegee."

"Hey, now!" the standing one said. "They got a dam good choir down there -- Y'all remember when they opened Radio City? Son, let's see that paper."

Relieved, I handed it over, watching him stretch it between his hardened hands. And after a moment of soundlessly mouthing the words as he read he gave me a skeptical look and turned to the others.

"What the hell," he said, "signing this piece of paper won't do no good, but since Home here's a musician it won't do us no harm to help him out. Let's go along with him."

And fishing a blunt-pointed pencil from the bib of his

overalls, he wrote his name and passed the petition, nodding to his friends, who followed suit.

This took some time, and I watched the petition move from hand to hand, barely able to contain myself or control my need to unravel the mystery which had now become far more important to me than getting their signatures on paper.

"There you go," the last one said, extending the petition toward me. "Having our names on there don't mean a thing, but you got 'em."

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you very much...."

Now they watched me with amused eyes, expecting me to leave, but I stood there, clearing my throat, too intrigued to leave and too embarrassed to ask my question.

"So what're you waiting for," one of them said. "You got what you came for. What else do you want?"

And then I blurted it out, "To ask you just one question," I said.

~~I said.~~ "Like what?" the standing one said.

"Like where on earth did you gentlemen learn so much about Grand Opera?"

For a moment he stared, then with a blow of his palm upon the mantelpiece he collapsed with a roar of laughter, holding on. And as the others joined in I watched with feelings of embarrassment and insult, trying to grasp the handle to what appeared to be an unfriendly joke. Finally, wiping coal-dust-stained tears from his cheeks, he interrupted his laughter long enough to initiate me into

the mystery.

"Hell, son," he laughed, "we learned it at the Met, that's where."

"You learned it where?" I said.

"At the Metropolitan Opera, just like I said. Strip us down and give us some costumes and we make the finest bunch of Egyptians you ever seen. Why we been down there wearing leopard skins and carrying spears or waving palms or ostrich tail fans for years!"

And now, purged by the revelation, and with Hazel Harrison's voice echoing in my ears, it was my turn to collapse with laughter. And as I joined them in appreciation of the outrageous American joke which played upon the incongruities of race, economic status and culture, my sense of order was restored, my appreciation of American cultural possibility was vastly extended. The men were products of both past and present, both coal-heavers and Met extras; working men and opera buffs. And seen in the clear, pluralistic light of American cultural possibility there was no contradiction. The joke, the apparent contradiction, arose from my attempting to see them by the light of concepts which cast less illumination than an inert lump of coal. As you can see, at that moment when I least expected to encounter the little man behind the stove (Miss Harrison's vernacular music critic, as it were), I had stumbled upon four. It hadn't found them behind a stove, it is true, but even more wonderously, they had materialized at an even more unexpected location: at the depth of American social hierarchy and behind, of all possible things, a coal pile.

Years later I was to learn that while I had failed initially to grasp Hazel Harrison's vision of American cultural possibility I was by no means in a class by myself. Shortly after the Revolution that famous Philadelphian and founding father, Benjamin Franklin, wrote to the young painter, Charles Willson Peale, that since the arts had always traveled westward there was no doubt of their "flourishing hereafter on our side of the Atlantic."

Now this was most perceptive, only Franklin was looking to the future and ignoring the possibilities of his own time. For on another occasion he held that the young republic was not ready for the fine arts. "All things have their season," he stated, "[but] with young countries as with young men, you must curb their fancy to strengthen their judgement." Therefore he believed that for the American of two hundred years ago, "one schoolmaster [was] worth "a dozen poets," and that the "inventor of a machine or the improvement of an implement [was] more important than a masterpiece of Raphael." "Nothing," he added, "is good or beautiful but in the measure that it is useful; yet all things have a utility under particular circumstances. Thus poetry, painting, music . . . are all necessary and proper gratifications of a refined state of society but objectionable at an earlier period, since their cultivation would make a taste for their enjoyment precede its means."

I find this most ironic, for in fact the means to which he referred were already at hand. Ironic, too, because after managing to anticipate the aesthetic criteria of functionalism by over one hundred years Franklin failed to note that the very first action Yankee-doodle ^{the mythical} ^{performed} took after taking his ride, decorating his hat and setting up a confusion in the King's English by misnaming his

famous feather -- "macaroni" indeed! -- was to transform a little jigging tune of mysterious origin into a musical agency ^{of} ~~for a~~ word-shaking revolution.

Nor was our second President, John Adams, ^{any} ~~any~~ more perceptive. Adams wrote that while he wished that he had the "pleasure and tranquility" to amuse himself with "those elegant and ingenious arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and music, "the taste for all of them [being] an "agreeable accomplishment", he did not consider them proper to the young republic. For he believed that Americans of his day had more important concerns; like making a living and building up the institutions that would embody the principles of governance which the ~~Founding~~ founding fathers had committed to paper (and to the amorphous future) here in Philadelphia.

In Adams' view a democracy was not likely to provide the necessary patrons or support for those rather strange folk, the artists. These he regarded as people who renounced their pleasure, neglected their exercise, and destroyed their health for "reputation" "notoriety" and "celebration" -- matters which seemed to charm them beyond all consideration for their "loss of appetite... riches and honors." In this country he saw few possibilities of the artist being celebrated; and should this come about it would not be in the best interest of the republic. Because being without taste the people would shower their "applauses" and "adorations" too often on "artifices and tricks." And then, sadly, he revealed himself as a founding father of an attitude that is still far too common among politicians: He rejected the arts because he felt that the people

would expect to receive the arts "gratis." No advocate of government support for the arts was he.

In brief, both illustrious founding fathers (and they were not alone) considered the arts a luxury and a hindrance to the young democracy. They failed to see that the arts were as necessary to the fulfillment of the democratic dream as to the refinement and glamour of court or salon. They did not conceive the possibility that such a work as Beethoven's Ninth might assert as great a force in transforming human expectation and sensibility as the ideas of the Enlightenment. Nor did they recognize the fact that the relatively unstructured character of the new Nation, with its social fluidity, swiftness of change and its openness to the random effects of all kinds of symbolic expression - including music no less than words -- was already creating a new type of individual. Not one sprung full-blown from the ink which gave visibility to the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and The Bill of Rights, but from the shattering of ^{social} barriers. Yes, and from the eclectic availability of styles and tastes that was to transform the arts no less than science and technology.

But already American slaves wearing knee britches and lace neckcloths were performing on flute and violin the European music by which Carolinians and Virginians were dancing their versions of courtly European dances; while out in the slave quarters other Afro-Americans, by way of burlesquing and imitating the fancy goings-on in the big house were having a ball dancing out what would become their own unique contribution to a developing vocabulary of American vernacular choreography.

Compared with the snailspace of political nation-building, things move^d with a marvelous swiftness in the world of music. Thus before many years had passed the all-encompassing universality of music was asserting itself in the new republic, and European styles and techniques that had found receptive ears scattered from the top to the bottom of the American social hierarchy were leaping back across the Atlantic transformed -- indeed "Americanized." Soon musicians who originated below the threshold of social mobility, like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, were bringing their Negro spirituals to England and to the continent. And by the time of World War I James Reese Europe's 369th Regiment Band was to excite the sophisticated musical imagination of such composers as Debussy, Stravinsky and Satie no less than the public-at-large with the American vernacular style (so recently resuscitated) called Ragtime. And shortly thereafter that vernacular synthesis of Afro-American and European musical styles known as Jazz was holding sway in even more distant lands. Not only did music flourish on our side of the Atlantic, it underwent a most marvelous metamorphosis.

This process of stylistic cross-fertilization continues today, and what John Adams and Benjamin Franklin failed to perceive in their time the mysterious, speed-of-light processes of cultural change has by now made inescapable. Along the way American efforts toward creating a native aesthetic have come and gone, some intelligent, some malconceived, but there is no question but that our presence here today is testimony to our success in the field of music.

And I would guess that our success rests less upon the application of a conscious theory than upon the pragmatic observation arrived at over the years that music tends to transcend both politics and ^{the} class divisions common to traditional cultures. Perhaps it also has to do with an intuitive recognition that in music the contradictions which exist between the past and the present can be reconciled and sustained in a state of timeless equilibrium. The music of God Save The King becomes America (or, in the vernacular, My Country 'Tis of Thee), thus allowing for a continuity of melody despite the vast dischord which existed between the allengancies of kingship and those of democracy.

Ironically, it was during the very moment of the twentieth century when such truths became self-evident to those who were most intimately concerned with extending the nation's musical heritage and determined not only to create a supply of native-born musicians of the highest skill but informed audiences as well, ^{that} there were educators and politicians -- and even a few musicians -- who considered the idea somewhat quixotic. Such opponents considered the plan through which American children would be trained to the highest standards of European music to be not only absurd but a waste of public funds. They regarded such an effort as a backward step, a surrender to the aristocratic standards of the past, and held that the average American child was incapable of adapting to the high standards of European musicianship. But not only did they underestimate the ability of our potential musicians, by no means did it occur to them that there was a possibility that great numbers of European artist-teachers there was the possibility that great

would make themselves available to help Americans attain their standards. And yet the presence of Efrim Zimbalist and Rudolph Serkin here today, (not to mention others among the members of your distinguished faculty), proves how gloriously shortsighted they were.

I refer, of course, to the school music program that was established in this nation during the 1920's, a program which touched ^{own} my life profoundly. On one level musical education was introduced into the public schools, and on a much more advanced level such schools as your own Curtis Institute were brought into being. Just why it was that music, of all the fine arts, became the target of this American exertion of the conscious will in the direction of extending its cultural traditions I do not know. Perhaps it was because music by its nature exists in an ideal form of time and thus allows Americans to relinquish some of their fear of the past. Perhaps it was because music allowed for the politically non-controversial continuity between the auditory order of the old world and the dissonant needs of the new. Perhaps music was recognized as one way of imposing artistic order upon a society which had consciously cut loose from its anchoring in tradition and was moving -- geographically, politically, technologically -- toward that future which had been evoked by the words of our sacred documents of statehood.

But whatever the reason, by the twenties -- thanks to the phonograph and later the radio -- the best of European recorded music was being taught and heard by school children throughout the land.

Classes in music appreciation flourished, band, orchestra and choral instruction was offered to those with talent, and thanks to Walter Damrosch, even their parents were adding to their musical culture via the growing popularity of the radio. Indeed, in my own public school we were not only instructed in music appreciation but were taught harmony through the ninth to the twelfth grades. Curtis himself had begun training ^{and composing} singers, instrumentalists ~~and composers~~ of high caliber, many of ^{the} whom are today acclaimed throughout the world. Music, in brief, (and music of the most refined standards), was becoming as available for the interested individual as the sport of baseball.

Thus it was out of this conscious effort, this process of education, that the anonymous critic of whom Hazel Harrison reminded me came into existence, and the American audience for traditional, or classical music was prepared for those who would, as composers and performers, display their art. I suppose that musicians are still, as John Adams feared, neglecting their exercise and sleep, and most likely the possibility of earning higher economic rewards in other pursuits. For in this country musicians, whether traditional or jazz, have always subsidized that most important area of the nation's life in which they find their being, and have been penalized economically for the pleasure and inspiration they provide.

Nevertheless, even in this regard change has occurred, and musicians have begun to receive their share of acclaim and honors. Indeed, under President Lyndon Johnson programs were initiated through which the musician's indispensable service to the nation is rewarded. Better still, today, musicians need have no fear of having

audiences whose ability to appreciate their art is incommensurate with their talent. For as Hazel Harrison realized so many years ago, your audience is everywhere; eclectic, eager, and growing in knowledge and taste, it waits, in John Adams' words, with its "adorations and its applauses". Sometimes it will be delighted with mere tricks, but the difference between today's audience and that which Adams envisioned is that they, like the little man behind the stove, will know the tricks from the real thing. So now, as you go forth to confront them, that little knowledgeable man and woman and their kind, I admire you, I envy you, I wish you God speed.

###