

Robert McDuffie
S2E2:
REFORMATION
AND THE
CLASSICAL CRISIS

30th of August 2021

And we return with Episode 2 of this season's Declassify. This time this episode features none other than pioneering music educator and internationally renowned and Grammy nominated violinist, Robert McDuffie. Robert is the co-founder and artistic director of the Rome Festival for Chamber Music, and the founder for the McDuffie Institute of Strings at Mercer University – a unique course for musicians offering holistic training in music, liberal arts and business. In this episode, Robert talks about the need to reform the structures of the classical music industry, the significance of business acumen in the world of music and making a move towards self-governance during this crisis of classical music.

Victoria Pham

Hello hello and welcome back to another episode of this season's Declassify podcast. And today's episode is one that I'm very excited (and admittedly very nervous for) as I welcome our first non-Aussie guest. I am very pleased to introduce today's guest – internationally renowned and Grammy nominated violinist, Robert McDuffie. Robert has appeared as a soloist with the world's most foremost orchestras and is the founder for both the Rome Chamber Music Festival in Italy and the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings at Mercer University. He gave the world premiere of Philip Glass' Concerto No. 2 "The American Four Seasons" and Mills' Concerto for Violin, Rock Band and String Orchestra, and has toured the US and world with several premieres of key contemporary American works. Additionally, he has recorded a enormous variety of violin concertos including works by Bernstein, Glass, Adams, Barber and Mendelssohn. And with that, it is an absolute pleasure for me to welcome Robert McDuffie! Thank you so much for making the time to speak with me as part of the podcast, I really appreciate that.

Robert McDuffie 07:40

Oh, it's my pleasure. I've read about you. And Chris told me about you. And you're doing good work. And congratulations.

Victoria Pham 07:48

Thank you very much. I hope I somehow live up to that. Well, in that case, I can jump right in. Normally, it's always such a struggle to write and ask the first question and in your case, I think I've actually failed to devise one. So I'm going to jump straight into one that might open the doorway to discussing various issues about the classical music industry. So my first question is, what do you believe that music, classical music in particular means in contemporary society?

Robert McDuffie 08:51

Yeah, you went deep with that, when didn't you? Well, of course, I could, I could, I could use all the cliches that feed your soul that you know, children listening to classical music become more civil. They listened when adults speak I mean, those are all good talking, you know, talking points, but I think classical music and the term classical music is is kind of a misnomer, I think in these in these days as well, but we're kind of stuck with it. So I think we're gonna have to keep using that. You know, that term. I think as society shifts, classical music has got to reach out to the wider and larger culture. I think that is the that is the if we don't use our skills, and our and our love for for our art to connect to a larger culture than where then we will have failed, I think. I think we're really struggling to be relevant. The stays in society. So I think the best thing I can say about music in general is that it's a great music can heal. I think that's, I think when they're difficult times, we turn to, to meaningful music I think of Samuel Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings at JFK 's funeral. I've been doing several concerts with Anna did Anna Deavere Smith, as she recites a letter from Birmingham Jail, and she's an activist, and, and she believes that music can heal words matter actions count. So I think we're healers in some way without sounding too self aggrandizing. And, but if we don't, but if we stay in if we stay in a bubble, I think we're going to, we're going to become even more irrelevant than we are now.

Victoria Pham 10:57

I was actually having a conversation not too long ago with a lot of my friends who are not classical musicians, or people who regularly attend anything that's related to classical music, and they have the presumption, or they believe

that most of classical music is kind of like a heritage art form, that it's replaying of historical collections rather than anything that is contemporary. And coming from me, as someone who's been trained in classical music, I can understand where I'm from. In Australia, we don't have such a huge track record of commissioning new music so the idea of hearing music from someone who has composed it, who is living seems so out of place for a lot of people that I've encountered who don't know too much about the classical music world. Is commissioning and performing contemporary work, perhaps, one method into getting a larger audience to attend?

Robert McDuffie 11:50

So I have a I have a music festival in Italy, and I joke that the subtitle should be, will never punish the audience. Yes, commissioning is hugely important, but I, when I came out of Juilliard, I, I felt that it was my duty, I was waving the flag for American composers, it was my duty to, to, you know, to support them, and it didn't really matter if they spoke to me personally, at that time, I just felt it was just the, you know, the right thing to do. Is that is that become older? You Yes, I want to absolutely want want to connect with living American composers, especially for me, but not just for the sake of doing it. I mean, it's, it really has to be something so personal. And, and has to has, it has to speak obviously, speak to me, but but many times, I just put myself in the audience's situation, I don't. I don't want to be told what's good. You know, I want to I want to experience it without anybody telling me beforehand that it's an important work of an important composer. I think that's our duty is just to come out and leave it up to the, you know, leave it up to the audience. I remember playing a piece by Tobias picker once at at the University of Georgia, and that invited a couple of friends, non musicians with whom I grew up. And they end before the piece is a great piece, by the way. So this is a very important piece by a very important American composer Tobias picker. And then I played it, and it was it was successful, but they came backstage and said, Who are you to tell us that it's important that it's that he's an important isn't isn't enough to us? Shouldn't? We? Should? I mean, if we don't like it? Does that make us stupid? I mean, that's, there's so much. Yeah, I think there's there's fear with classical music. Public. You know, when do you clap? A lot of these composers names or names, you can't even pronounce musicians out there and white tie and tails. I mean, my lord.

14:08

You know,

Robert McDuffie 14:10

it's, it's really we have to, we do have to make our art more contemporary. And, and to the extent that we, that we speak through living composers is great, I certainly don't want to stop playing the music of dead white European males. I mean, those are the great composers for a reason. But that's that should be That should be our North Star as we as we go to the next level.

Victoria Pham 14:41

I mean, you mentioned the the whites and black tails. Sometimes I feel like the kind of procedure involved in classical music in it unintentionally, ostracises people, right? Sometimes I don't even know when to clap. After wait for someone else to start the round.

Robert McDuffie 14:55

Just Clap, clap, whatever. I've been doing these concerts. with Mike Mills, one of the founders of the rock band REM, and he wrote a concerto for violin and muck band, he did a beautiful job. And he speaks beforehand and said, Listen, clap when you feel like clapping. Just do it. If you want to yell, yell, I mean, we love it. So just go ahead

and do it. So it certainly has. You know, it's I think that's all softened me up a little bit. So I would, I would encourage anyone to clap whenever they feel like

Victoria Pham 15:28

excellent advice. I'm gonna take that on board the next time I go to a concert. Well, I was wondering, then, now that you've mentioned, Mills, and him speaking to the audience, I've rarely had the chance, every time I go to see an orchestral performance or an opera or something like that. Very rarely do I actually get to engage with the musicians on the stage? beyond them being in the orchestra pit or the orchestra? Do you think perhaps there could be kind of a fourth will break down if we got more engagement with the musicians themselves? And that we got to hear their voices beyond the instruments?

Robert McDuffie 16:02

Yes, I enjoy talking from the stage as some musicians who just don't talk very well, and they should keep playing. But there are musicians who are who are very, you know, articulate and, and entertaining at the same time. And I think those those are the ones that should be identified to bring to bring our music even, you know, even further, I just yeah, I mean, I think if you're, if you have a talent of speaking in front of an audience's as well as playing in front of an audience, that'll that'll most likely help you get your get your point across. But sometimes music is so you know, so powerful. I mean, I fell in love with the violin. Eight years after I'd started playing the violin, I never loved it. I hated the practice. My mother made me practice. But it was Itzhak Perlman, who came to my little town and Georgia. He never said a word, he just started playing. And it just, it just killed me. And sometimes music is so powerful, you don't need words. But there there are, there are historical references that may be relevant to the piece you're playing. And if and if it's the right thing to do, then absolutely, you should do it. Again, not just get for the sake of speaking, just do it when it's, you know, when it works.

Victoria Pham 17:32

Sometimes it's nice to get a chance to hear some storytelling behind behind the piece.

Robert McDuffie 17:36

I agree. I agree. I mean, if you if, if you see the, if you can experience the person behind the music behind the performer. Obviously, that's a that is a wonderful thing. I mean, many orchestras have after concert talks with with members of the orchestra, and many times pre concert talks as well, I prefer the post concert talks. You know, I'd rather practice and see if I'm, my fingers are moving. Before before I play, but but I think all of that is is is hugely important to not only sustain your audience, but to build audiences as well.

Victoria Pham 18:16

But in order to build a brand new audience, say for something that is often the face of classical music, like an orchestra, I imagine that's what most people the public would imagine. Do you think there is room to change? How music is gate kept? Getting kept? I suppose?

Robert McDuffie 18:34

Absolutely. And I can only speak. I mean, since I've spent a large part of my time in America and know the American orchestral scene a little more than the Australian or European. But um, yes, I think I personally believe that musicians should be the ones who determine how their music is played and heard, I think once musicians are, have have a healthy fear. Not depending on anyone else, but their success. But when they're responsible for their own

success. They'll they'll make the right decisions. They will, their livelihood depends on it. And, and that's why I feel that in America, at least we should look at maybe the Vienna Philharmonic model where the musicians run the show, obviously patronage, philanthropy and patronage is totally different here in the states and that has to be factored in but but but I think musicians and board members, the ones who contribute to their cultural institution should be equal partners in governance. I think that's the I think that will that will go a long way towards fixing what's what's wrong with classical music in America. When you're when you're literally when you're when your livelihood is on the line, you'll start making the right decisions in order to survive. And I think it's the musicians who have to have more of a say, again, in how their music is played and how their music is heard. Do you think that in terms of moving towards this kind of more equal governance model, that the musicians themselves should occupy some of the positions that are, say, on the board, who I think often determine what happens in terms of programming and seasons? Well, I think in America, the board, I think board members are the good guys here, board members are our, I mean, they invest, they're not paid to be on the board as corporate board members are. They, they get a lot of money, I mean, some they have a minimum of sometimes 10 \$20,000 a year, to contribute to contribute, they trust that they should trust that the that the mission is being carried out by management, my wish my king for a day, which is that is that musicians and board members work together to plan programming and the direction of the of the Institute, I think, you know, I, I'm very grateful for a 40 year career in music. I mean, I'm grateful to the ones who have hired me, most of them weren't musicians, they weren't, as you said, gatekeepers, they were the administrators and and I have some, and I've maintained close friendships with, with many of them, I just think, in order for us to go forward, musicians are going to have to be given a much larger role, and in determining how the how the cultural institutions survive. So I think an educated musician, one who knows about philanthropy, and, and and, and patronage and accounting and math, and how nonprofits work and yes, public speaking and entrepreneurship, and, and, and brand management, all of these things. So we're talking about the the end game here, but there's there's a large responsibility for the educational institutions that feed these musicians into the into these orchestras and performing arts organisations. So I think it's it's not only the responsibility of the, of the professional organisations, but also the schools that need to prepare musicians to be independent contracting. musicians who understand nonprofit governance, not to throw my own Conservatorium under the bus, but all those business skills, he just missed it, I was not at all it was never a part of the conversation of my education that we needed to acquire any of those skills in order to survive as a classical musician. Of course, I have learned that pretty quickly once I left my undergraduate degree that I definitely needed it to function as a freelancer, but I feel as if there should be a shift in the conservatory model to teach us how to operate in this contemporary landscape. I was actually having a peek through your centre of strings, outline and you have all those business skills cupboard was that something that was definitely something you needed to have as part of your structure for the centre itself? That was a deal breaker for me. If we didn't have that I would have closed the school down. I don't I personally feel you went to a conservatory. I went to a conservatory. I think in the 21st century. These great schools I mean, Juilliard is one of the greatest schools on the planet. Curtis is fabulous. Coburn is great. I mean, I'm many of my students who graduate from my undergraduate programme ended up going and getting their postgraduate degrees at Julliard and and Colburn and, and we just had our first Curtis graduate as well, but I don't see a healthy future for American conservatories unless they merge with a larger university where they can where they can develop a more hybrid degree that includes music, liberal arts and yes business and to prepare the 21st century musician for for an ever changing world and i just i think it's it's getting pretty late. I mean, we have to, you know, we have we have to find relevance again, it's just too great of an art form. And, and, and the current model in my opinion doesn't meet the needs of musicians or concert goers or teacher concert concert goers

Victoria Pham 24:52

that we need to think well holistically in terms of education and access

Robert McDuffie 24:58

holistically you Guess the business component is crucial. It's just crucial my my students, so I have an undergraduate Institute at Mercer University in my hometown and Macon, Georgia and and we tap into the, to the university orbit we, we have lawyers teach contract law and dispute resolution, we connect with the business school on the accounting and the brand management and marketing and, and those things and yes, liberal arts for philosophy and, and reading religion, whatever I mean, it's certainly need a complete, I think musician. My beef is with the schools and music and universities. That's, I think there's too much music. I mean, there's there's there's time for independent self study for musicians. I mean, if you want to, if you really love your art, I mean, you're going to you're curious enough, if you're curious, curious enough to learn the music, you'll be curious to understand the history behind the music. So I think there's some secondary courses and music schools that can be deleted secondary piano, I mean, if you can't play piano, by the time you get to college, you're not gonna play piano. So take a business course instead. Or, anyway, I just, and they're not the degree that that we're offering at our university is a Bachelor of Music with electives in business. That's the title of the degree. And these electives are actually requirements. And I believe it's the first of its kind in the country. And, and I just feel that as great as Juilliard is, and Curtis and Coburn, and those standalone conservatories, if they don't, if they don't merge, and, and, and provide the same kind of degree, I don't want to, you know, sound so self aggrandizing here, but I think we've I think we've found the right formula. And and I hope that for the sake of us all, I hope that that these conservatories take a real hard look at the I think the disservice 1000s 1000s of graduates from schools of music a year. And it's just not that they just it's just not the work out there for them. So this this empty promise have come to us and will, will make it possible for you to have that great career you've always wanted. That's, that's false advertising.

Victoria Pham 27:56

Well, I can say having come from a conservatory that I wasn't given the tools to equip myself for you know, for working as a freelancer, there was no aid, no one talked about how to get grants written or no one talked to us about funding or basic things you need to survive as an artist, especially when you're by yourself. So congratulations, because it's the first degree of its kind I've seen anywhere in Australia, Europe or the UK or the US. So I think it's going to make a real difference.

Robert McDuffie 28:22

Thank you. Thank you. We're Fingers crossed. And I think if we look at the the smaller collectives the music collectives out there. Brooklyn writer, you have the Knights yo yo Ma's Silk Road. I think there's a group out of Chicago called fifth house. There's the this Orpheus standalone Chamber Orchestra here. They're self governing organisations. Yes, smaller, and not as much, not as many layers. But But I think that's a good start for the larger Institute's institutions to, you know, to observe.

VP: For our first intermission is Mike Mills' concerto for violin, rock band and string orchestra. This recording is from 2016 featuring Robert as the soloist.

Victoria Pham 29:04

In fact, I remember going to see a collective from America who toured in Australia A number of years ago. Why music from from New York, that was so incredible. And, and then they're also self governing. And in fact, with them, I was having a conversation with Nadia Sirota afterwards and she the entire conversation was about how to

acquire grant grants and funding and that was something that was the first conversation anyone had ever had with me about that.

Robert McDuffie 29:29

Yeah, grant funding philanthropy, especially in America, I mean, you know, with the government makes it possible to support the arts with with, you know, these tax laws, tax deductions. But the, the Gilded Age philanthropist of the early 20th century, Carnegie Frick, Vanderbilt, those guys. They've been replaced by Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates and and those guys Besides going up out into space, they, you know, they gates himself cares about world health. And God bless him. I mean, you know, he's more interested in mosquito nets and building a new concert hall and God bless him. But on the other hand, there's a part of me that says we don't deserve his money because we don't have our house in order.

30:25

Um,

Robert McDuffie 30:27

but it's it's really about tools and relationships, when it comes down to it, I think there are. In my experience, I've found that that benefactors patrons respond to a sincere appeal. And if they hear it from the artists themselves, instead of some paid Harvard MBA development person. It's so much more meaningful, and I think you'll have a greater chance of success. Even if it's a little awkward. It's still sincere as your music making should be. So So I think it's a board members are busy, these not they had their own jobs, they have their own companies to run, they just want to be if they're if they feel the institution is in the right direction. And and, and if it's musicians who decide their own, on future. To me, that's the that's that's something that board members respond to that certainly, in my experience with the school that I created, and also the the, that I created with many supporters, I couldn't have done it myself. I don't want to sound like I did it, but and also the festival in Italy. I certainly found found out from that experience.

Victoria Pham 31:51

I'm curious in terms of this idea of reforming how certain institutions work. If you're someone who is in an orchestra, and you've been in your chair for a while and you hoping to change the face of the orchestra by being more inclusive with the musicians? How would you practically broach that topic? With the management level without seeming confrontational?

Robert McDuffie 32:14

Right? Well, every every orchestra has its own DNA, every community is has their own, you know, personality. With I personally think that we could somehow get smaller, not regional orchestras, but professional orchestras in America, in places like Charlotte or Richmond, or to sign those size orchestras if they, if they just give it a shot, and change the model, and, and assign administrative duties to musicians. Because these are not 52 week, orchestras. In fact, they're very few of those left. In America. Maybe we can start a model with a smaller staff, a smaller, a smaller orchestra. I think if the New York Philharmonic musician just goes into this list change, you know, let's change everything. I mean, this is a, this is going to take a generation or two, I think, to change. And as I said before, it starts with this with the music schools, and the conservatories, they have got to do their part because if you don't have educated musicians, then you're not going to have the change that is needed.

Victoria Pham 33:36

Know what was actually lacking when I was at the Conservatorium was this idea of critical thinking beyond musical history and into the making. So we did a lot of music history, and that was what replaced humanities or access to liberal arts subjects. It was just music history. And it was so analytical in terms of its focus on harmony and pitch and technique, but that historical focus was sort of misplaced to an extent that we forgot that we had to relate to an audience and that we had the duty to relate to an audience and a contemporary one. So I'm really hoping that that does change as well.

Robert McDuffie 34:06

Let's take it even. Let's take it even farther back. I think it needs to start with the community art schools, that's where you're going to find your, your brown and black musicians in those in those schools in the inner cities. And there's such a thirst I was on the board of the Harlem School of the Arts for 10 years. That that is a magical, magical place. Those community art schools need to be lifted up and funded and supported. The schools of music, I believe have got to change their degrees. I personally feel that even though I'm part of a School of Music at my university, and I'm proud of every everyone there, I don't think a university should even have a school of music. I think the I think there should be obviously music training, but they're just too many music courses and in the university, you may And music history. I you know, I've gotten a lot of pushback on this, but my Lord, you know, music history is usually taught by, oh my gosh, I'm gonna get a lot of flack for this talk, you know, taught by a new professor who has, you know, a passion for I don't know, Cambodian percussion instruments or something, and you have to, you know, you have to just spend your whole semester and send it. But if you're learning late Beethoven quartets, I mean, that's what you should be. I mean, that's what you should be learning and on your, you know, on your own time, I just, you mentioned harmony and pitch, those are important, those need to be taught, I believe, I mean, you have to be, I think, theory unselfish, or, or essential. But, but when you get into the, I don't know, it's, it's, um, it's, it's, it's a, it's a heavy lift, this, this whole thing is going to be a heavy lift. And because I, when, when I started the school in the university, I mean, I just been playing concerts as a soloist for 30 years, I didn't, I didn't know how a university worked. And the turf battles, I mean, if I had known how University work, that would have been too scared to start the school, I was so naive. And that's, I think, the reason we were successful, because I just couldn't believe that there were these kind of these these obstacles. So anyway, my own as I said, my king for a day, my own my own feeling is that I think the music department should probably be part part of either a liberal arts school or even the business school. And, and go and go from there. And, and teach and educate musicians for their professional part of their of their lives, and let the musicians with that knowledge, change the culture of symphony orchestras, because when only 2% of all albums are classical, you know, there's a problem. So So, so I think that, again, the main decisions about survival and classical music had to come from the musicians themselves.

Victoria Pham 37:14

So do you think in terms of maintaining an audience and the traditional demographic our of our audience being kind of, in their late 60s, to mid 70s, that should change also kind of from the Community Arts route?

Robert McDuffie 37:28

Yeah, um, I'll just give you again, this is I'll give you an example of what we're doing at our school. And in the, I mean, I grew up in making, I live in New York, but I still talk as if I'm from making so I may say, in my hometown of Macon. We're going to give the shot of their four concerts a year it's it's the Centre for strings, and the principal wind and brass players of the Atlanta Symphony, who were the orchestral mentors for, for my students. It's it's kind of a an Uber Chamber Orchestra. 3940 you know, 40 people. So it's a perfect orchestra for you know, Beethoven

symphonies for Mozart for hyden. Even Stravinsky and rebel. We're doing for copiah classical Symphony. But every concert will, will feature either a conductor composer or soloist of colour, and making is a 65%. African American town. If we only play, you know, music of white guys. I mean, really, that's just not, that's just not sustainable. So the great Otis Redding, grew up in my hometown, and his family has continued his legacy with a foundation with young songwriters. So our opening concert is featuring young African American songwriter performers performing their own music arranged for Symphony Orchestra. We've invited a local hip hop artist to come. And he has worked with a great arranger on on a piece that he wrote, I just gave him two conditions. I said, if you don't mind, just make it hopeful and no foul language, if you don't mind. And he said, Oh, absolutely. But it's, it's just so great. We're doing that. There's a gospel choir and part of a large African American mega church in Macon. We're supporting them and there'll be they'll be presenting their music as well. So we think that we're setting a good example and we know that we're going to have a diverse audience. We know that and because, because they're because of their environment and and that's exciting. So there'll be Hearing procopius for the first time and cheering on their own, you know, their own family members and, and, and their own musical role models. So I think it's Yeah, I mean, I think I think that's just, that's just something we can do. That's something we have the power to do. And, and again, is this, I want my students to see that and see the difference that it makes. And, and for them to carry that through in their professional lives.

Victoria Pham 40:35

To have more agency over the programming and what difference music can make.

Robert McDuffie 40:40

Right, and, and I, for some reason we offering the one contemporary piece on a classical music programme is it's akin to eating your broccoli. It's gotten that Well, my gosh, we have to sit through this before we get to the Beethoven symphony. I mean, that has to change as well. And that that goes back to my don't ever punish the audience.

41:07

mantra

Victoria Pham 41:09

thanks to the avant garde movement of the 70s.

Robert McDuffie 41:13

Right, and I was I got caught up in that. I mean, I played Yeah, I used to play a lot of Elliott Carter actually respect Elliott Carter a lot. I think there's the there's a place for Elliott Carter's music. I don't I don't think it's for the wider public. But that's my own opinion. But they're certainly Elliott Carter fans out there and contemporary fans. And we'll make that specific, you know, specific to that, to that group.

Victoria Pham 41:45

What's interesting is thinking about modern American music, as someone who didn't train in America or is American, I seem to have learnt a lot of contemporary American music as a signal of contemporary classical music in general. For example, Steve Reich and Philip Glass, John Galliano, and Gosh, I'm running out of names, and even Bernstein, it was kind of a representation from when I was studying in a conservatory of what could happen with contemporary music. And would you say that's down to an entire culture of commissioning during those periods and continually commissioning now?

Robert McDuffie 42:19

Will you just name for the greatest composers in American history? And again, that goes to their great because they, they, they connected with a larger, listening public through recordings or orchestral performances and yes, commissions, obviously, we're, you know, we're huge. Just on a personal note, I I was a very cocky kid at Juilliard. I was concert master the orchestra. I was. All I wanted to do was play Tchaikovsky and Sibelius, and Beethoven and Brahms. That's all I wanted to do. But there was a competition in school, and the required piece was the same your Barber, a violin concerto. And this was in 1980. So I was I was 21. And barber. The concern was not well known then at all when I think it was one recording out of that, and Isaac started reporting and I, I'd never I'd never heard it. I just asked a friend how it ended. And he said, It is with great excitement. Oh, good. I'm gonna learn it because I want the applause. You know, I was that kind of just really just cocky attitude, but once I started learning the piece, that was something I realised that it was a genuine attempt at beauty and it was something that was speaking to me and I started feeling very American, and very proud. And, and I kind of changed my whole you know, my whole outlook. And so I entered the competition and I won it. And the American composer David Diamond had heard the final round and he asked if I could go to Samuel barbers home and play it for him. Barbara was still alive at the time and was dying of melanoma. Well, I'll tell you, that's that that evening changed my life playing a masterpiece for the Creator, the person that for the master actually, truly changed my life. I realised my role as a musician immediately and, and that was to be a messenger of great art. And and that that piece became the violin concerto has become one of the most recorded pieces now but because of that, that style of American music and then even shifting into Philip Glass. Those pieces spoke to me and that's why I've been promoting those pieces over the last, you know, several decades in order to. I mean, when an audience experiences I think a musician who is in love with the music is playing, there's something special. So again, just this goes back to what we were saying earlier is that I just don't want to commission composers just for the sake of doing it, they have to speak to me and then the audiences will hopefully experience my love for the for the work.

VP: For our second intermission also features Robert as the solo violinist. This excerpt is taken from a work Robert had commissioned for him from eminent composer Philip Glass'. This is taken from the Third Movement of Glass' second violin concerto: "The American Four Seasons" recorded here by the London Philharmonic Orchestra and conducted by Marin Alsop.

Victoria Pham 45:32

Do you think there are any methods in which that kind of ecosystem of collaboration will sort of like collaboration in which you get to engage with a living composer in order to create a new work could be adopted at a wider scale?

Robert McDuffie 45:46

would hope so? Of course, it is a very, it's, you know, it's a personal interaction. And but when you go to somebody who's famous is Philip Glass, I mean, it took me seven years to get him to, to write his Concerto for me, the American four seasons. I mean, it was, but I was just determined. I was I was just absolutely determined to get him to. To write that, of course, he didn't need my support. He was already, you know, Philip Glass when I asked him to, to do that. But I do think that there have been a lot of relationships started in early years that that, you know, that grew. And, yes, I mean, I think musicians have got to be curious. And if they don't, if they just, they just stay tied to the standard canon of classical music, then then everybody suffers.

Victoria Pham 46:40

Do you think the orchestral model kind of encourages the opposite of creativity? What a great question. Yes.

Robert McDuffie 46:52

Yeah. I think I think some so much has to change. I think. I think concerts have to be shorter. They have to be the different time of day. There should be no intermission. I mean, there. Yeah. It's just, we're about coming. We're way behind the larger culture here. So yeah, I think the overture concerto intermission Symphony. I mean, that worked sometimes, and they can work a few times a year, but 5050 weeks a year, I don't think so.

Victoria Pham 47:28

It's exhausting for the orchestral members as well having to churn out that much music. I know,

Robert McDuffie 47:32

in New York. You got the New York Philharmonic, one of the great orchestras in the world. They play a new programme every week. Meanwhile, down the street at Carnegie Hall, you've got Cleveland, Philadelphia, Berlin, Vienna, playing after weeks of preparation. And they are so ready. And at the top of their game, where the Philharmonic is just trying to learn new notes three days before the concert. So there's this this chip on chip on their shoulder, I think their collective sober. Knowing that just 10 blocks down down the road, there's a much better prepared, you know, orchestra. So you've got that they're playing a different programme every week. And yeah, I mean, I just I think extreme radical changes should be made.

Victoria Pham 48:22

Actually, I feel like I was quite naive. I moved to the UK about two years ago, I moved to London, because my partner is an orchestral musician. And he moved to London, and it was the place we were always told, oh, it's the place to be if you're an orchestral musician, if you make it through London, you'll be you'll be fine. I didn't really understand what that meant, because I trained as a composer, so that was out of my depth. Then I realised when we moved here, what that actually meant. There are five main orchestras in one city. Only half of their members are permanent staff. So if you're a new musician, you get hung up on the day, you have one rehearsal, and then you perform at night. And it's just this cycle of kind of being moved between these five orchestras all the time, which is totally unhealthy and anti art making. So I didn't realise that it was such a culture where there was just no preparation for anyone and as a result, very little musicality if you're a young musician, and they're underpaid. Yes, actually, only two of the orchestra's have a salary. And I had no idea that that was the case either. So mildly upsetting uncovering.

Robert McDuffie 49:22

Yeah, I mean, I can't speak personally, I'm an I've played in London, but I haven't. And I have such respect for those musicians over there. Oh, my lord. But, but I can see I mean, I can see a solution for the American problem. I can see it I don't know if it's ever going to be done, but I can see a solution. And what is the solution if I can ask different structure and orchestral governance, where instead of board management, and then at the bottom musicians, that is musicians and boards together as equal partners, running the show, and to the extent that there are administrators that they answer to the musicians and to the board members. That will work. I know that will work. But those musicians have got to be educated musicians. And that brings me back to the schools and their responsibility.

Victoria Pham 50:27

Yes, there just needs to be a different cultural ecosystem change to make this healthier for everybody.

Robert McDuffie 50:34

We're kind of in a rut. But there are pockets of amazing excitement. I mean, you know, you mentioned why music and I mean, there's some amazing, amazing groups out there and the talent coming out of the conservatory talent, it's just mind bending. So, you know, in crutchy, Amala, DITA

Victoria Pham 51:02

will cross our fingers. Indeed, and there's always hope of a few more questions, while you're just kind of relates to the point you were just making, what I suggest to some music management people, or some board members that there could be some slight reformation or introducing new new people, new voices, or new music and kind of altering how things are taught. I'm always met with the argument that it's not economically viable for any change to happen, and that the traditional model is the only one that's sustainable. What would you say to the argument of it not being economically safe?

Robert McDuffie 51:39

Well, it's not economically, economically safe now. I mean, it's if you look at the bankruptcies of American orchestras of the past 15 years. I mean, I think that's an intellectually lazy response. Yes. That's not that's not the case at all.

Victoria Pham 52:02

I think there might be a tendency to because something seems conservative, we presume that it's economically safe, even if that isn't reality.

Robert McDuffie 52:11

Right. I mean, I think we I just, I just think a little smaller, smaller venues, little downsizing, but more of that, that makes sense to spread that out. And, and, and, and I'm hopeful, and I, you know, hope there's some very intrepid people out there in the, in our business, even on the management side. I don't want to diss them, you know, hold I just think that in this, I just think they can they want to leave an institution, they can do it, the musicians are stuck. They can they can hop from one institution to another. These systems are there, they've committed they're invested. So I mean, there are, you know, we need to put a lot of really good minds together, and, and can go forward. I personally, you know, I just feel that the the end game of mine, you know, this this new management model, with with symphony orchestras can't just happen in the symphonic world, it has to, there has to be partnership with, with the universities that in the schools of music and conservatories, who produce the musicians.

Victoria Pham 53:40

Do you think integrating elements of kind of digital interfaces and introducing classical music in more kind of digitally innovative ways is something that will emerge, particularly these last 12 months? That could be a useful

Robert McDuffie 53:53

right there were some beautiful there were some beautiful performances weren't there during during COVID the Rotterdam Philharmonic put out something that was pretty amazing. The Met opera gala was fabulous. Absolutely,

yes. Yes, more digital presence. And you can even look at look into digital rights as well to to support you know, just to support your career. So everything has to be it's just moving so fast. And we're just we're just a little behind

Victoria Pham 54:36

just a little as in digital rights. Do you mean royalties for for the orchestras themselves?

Robert McDuffie 54:42

Or at least individuals? Yes. I mean, just just just so the musicians know what they're talking about.

Victoria Pham 54:49

Okay. I see. That hadn't occurred to me, I'd only put on a number of small online concepts and I that meant learning about what a video licence meant and what A sync licence meant I had never encountered that before, before the pandemic. So, yes, a lot to learn. I actually just have one final question, which is, do you have any advice for up and coming music makers?

Robert McDuffie 55:20

as well, I mean, stay true to your to your artistic self stay true to your own, you know, musical DNA. Don't try to be someone you're not. I learned from experience trying to do things others were doing. Maybe playing music God didn't love or so that that's number one, be self aware. And if you haven't taken any of these courses, I mentioned, go audit some courses. And at least get a you know, get a feel, if you're in me. I mean, if you're in New York, this NYU has a great music business programme, if you can, some some way. I know the head of it. So if anybody wants to get in, just give me a call and go to the Um, but yeah, one I think being self aware is the most important advice, right? All you know, right off the bat, and from there, just just Also be aware of the world around you the business you're in. And, but realise that you're a musician first. And, and if and if you want to keep making music, then there's some, there's some things you're just gonna have to do. That's and that's have the knowledge to build a career. And so yeah, we then if you're still in school, talk to your dean or your teacher about, about about taking courses and professional branding and management and marketing. accounting is huge, as my wife said, she cried every, every day she took accounting is incredibly tedious and painful. But, but I think that's hugely important in this, you know, in this world of ours.

Victoria Pham 57:27

And then just learning how to manage your time and actually being aware of what you have access to and help in terms of, you know, structures and money and things like that. It's it's a big one.

Robert McDuffie 57:39

Right? And don't be afraid to ask for money. Yes, don't be afraid to ask for money. I mean, the worst that can happen is if someone says no. But again, if you have a if you have a project that you believe in, because as I've learned through experience, and I've had, you know, I've had rejections, but but I found, as I said, earlier, people respond to a sincere and honest message. And, and you just never know. So don't be afraid to ask for money.

Victoria Pham 58:17

That's really good advice actually.

Robert McDuffie 58:18

Actually, I do have one quick part of my just want to tell you about my entrepreneurship class that I teach every other year with the final exam, is that every student asks for up to \$500 from a local business person. And, and we go through the whole semester, just preparing that, that pitch, and to make it as personal and natural, as you know, as possible. And I've told the business people look, if you don't like it, don't get on set, don't give them any money. Just this is their exam. This is their final exam. And I mean, it's, it's, it's, it's an awkward part of our of our world, but it's something that we have to know how to do.

Victoria Pham 59:04

It is. And also I know, there were a lot of people who are uncomfortable when it comes to talking about money in general, but just kind of get over it at some point, because you need it to live. I don't know if this is helpful to anyone who's listening to the podcast, because I'm much more inexperienced than you are. But I think in my whole life of working as a composer, which is not very long, but seven years in terms of the length of the career, I think I've written about 450 grants, of which, yeah, which only like 30 were successful, but you only you know, you need one to be successful to start to make your work. Also it's such a huge failure rate and at the beginning, for a few years, that failure rate was at 100%. But I think you just need the conviction to believe in you art or the people that you're working with to make it happen. So in terms of a rate of how much rejection I've had, there's been a lot, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

Robert McDuffie 59:52

Well, best of luck to you. Again, if you sounds like You're doing all the right things. And congratulations.

Victoria Pham 1:00:04

Thank you. Oh, we'll see where it goes. Thank you so much, again for taking the time to speak with me about my range of odd questions or maybe didn't flow that well together.

RD: You were fabulous.

VP: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. It's been a whirlwind of a conversation and I've certainly learned a lot about the where music should, can, needs to go. To everyone listening, information about Robert, his work and the Robert McDuffie center for strings is available to check out in the description and the transcript, I urge everyone to check them out and consider the possibility of self-governance, musical; autonomy and integrating the arts with business. Thank you for listening and catch you all next time!

RESOURCES

Robert McDuffie Website: <https://robertmcduffie.com/>

McDuffie Centre for Strings: Mercer University - https://sacksco.com/pr/mcduffie_center_for_strings.html