

Music is the Universal Language, But...

Remarks delivered at the UMaine Modern Languages Awards ceremony on April 28, 2008 by Dr. Stuart Marrs, Chair of the Music Division of the UMaine School of Performing Arts

My name is Stuart Marrs and I am a musician: an orchestral timpanist to be exact. Why, I hear you ask, is a timpanist speaking at a Modern Languages ceremony? Well, when I was a young professional, I had the great fortune to find myself performing with the national symphonies first of Bolivia and then of Costa Rica: a musical odyssey that spanned 12 years. Quite independent of my formal job as a performer and teacher, I discovered a new culture that enriched and broadened my own perspective, even while I was presumably bringing Western European musical culture to them! While I was absorbing and learning a new language, immersed in a new culture, I was opening up to new modes of perception and thinking. Cultural understanding is *experiential*. It cannot accurately be described in the terms of another culture nor translated into another language. The only way to truly understand it is to *live* it. To truly live it requires communication that only language can provide. So here we come to the crux of the matter. Lest we descend into the depths of jingoism or its passive cousin, isolationism, we must engage with the rest of the world and to do so effectively, we must understand another's culture – hence, we must live it, hence, we must speak it.

An anecdote. I was hiking the Inca trail which starts at a 16,000 foot snow-covered pass in the Bolivian Andes and descends over a 3-day hike to a 4,000 foot sub-tropical jungle village. I was accompanied by two Americans who came down to Bolivia for some hiking and mountain climbing. They did not speak Spanish. Along the way, the trail passed through a tiny village in the Andes with stone huts and thatched roofs. Understand that there is no road to this village... just the trail. We were met by the one resident of the village who spoke Spanish, the teacher (the rest spoke Aimara) and he invited us to dine there. My companions wanted to pay them

for the meal, as a capitalist gesture of gratitude. Our hosts instead were offended, and only after some diplomacy in Spanish and the offer of some oranges we had as a gift, was the situation defused. My friends assumed their culture was universal. Enough said.

After returning to the States, I began working summers in France and French-speaking Switzerland. Aware of the power of language from my Latin America experience, I worked hard to develop my French – taking advantage of your department along the way. Again my efforts were rewarded with new understanding, new friendships, and new gigs as a consequence. Although my French was far from as fluent as my Spanish, it was good enough to speak in public and the effort was appreciated. Eleven years ago, before one of my gigs in Neuchatel, Switzerland, my wife and I toured the route des vignobles, through Burgundy, stopping every so often to taste great wines at tiny vineyards, where most of the time a little wine tasting arrangement was set up in a garage, often staffed by “grandpa.” The goodwill engendered by an American couple talking about life to little a old wine-maker in Burgundy, is something that may not reach CNN or our respective country’s diplomatic corps, but one was so excited that he sent for his grand-daughter, who would be going to the U.S. on a student exchange program, so she could meet us. That is how true cultural understanding begins.

Finally, a word about technology. Technological development and ever broader bandwidth continue to open lines of communication around the world at a mind boggling pace. But the communication line is only the conduit through which... “what” will pass? And in what direction? Hopefully, it will be a bi-directional communication. I have been impressed by the personal effort of a young Frenchman called Lille Podcast. He has embraced technology to reach folks around the world who speak some French but who want to improve their understanding of “every-day” French. It is also a little window into another culture. He describes a short event, like going on vacation, for example, speaking very slowly and clearly. Then he goes through the text line by line, describing each phrase or word in other words – *tout en Frances!* Finally, he speaks it at normal speed. Each episode is a free

podcast available over the internet. I believe it is a model of the best of what technology can do.

My experience and life as an international musician and the success that knowledge of culture and language can engender, is but a *miniscule* piece of our big world. But perhaps it can be thought of as a point of departure when contemplating a larger concept of openness, mutual cultural understanding, and our individual roles in our global society.