
The Arts in Global Society

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH W. POLISI

Joseph W. Polisi is President of The Juilliard School, a position he has held since 1984, following distinguished positions at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, the Manhattan School of Music, and Yale University. During his tenure, The Juilliard School has pursued a new emphasis on the humanities and liberal arts, instituted community outreach to under-represented students, and increased its focus on long-range planning and development. The school's expansion over this time has seen construction of a residence hall for students and development of new school-wide interdisciplinary programs, the Institute for Jazz Studies, and a student mentoring program. Over the same period, the Juilliard Orchestra has toured China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea and performed in France and Bermuda.

*Dr. Polisi holds three graduate degrees in music from Yale University, having completed his Doctor of Musical Arts, Master of Musical Arts, and Master of Music. He also received a Master of Arts from The Fletcher School in 1970. He is author of *The Artist as Citizen*, in which he implores the artistic community to reach out as social leaders. His next book, the first complete biography of the composer and arts administrator William Schuman, titled *American Muse: The Life and Times of William Schuman*, will be released in October 2008.*

On March 28, 2008, The Forum's editor-in-chief Catherine Pfaffenroth and staff editor Erik Iverson spoke with Dr. Polisi about the shifting place of the arts in the American educational system, the need for increased cultural diplomacy via the arts, and the role of the artist in society and international discourse.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What is the role of the arts in modern American society? How has this changed over time and how should it change in the future?*

JOSEPH W. POLISI: Arts are a part of the fabric of American society at every level, from local education on the primary and secondary levels to valuing the art forms in everything we do as a country and in local communities. It has always been my hope that the federal government would

recognize the value of the arts in America and that this would trickle down and be acknowledged in the same way at local levels.

Unfortunately, that has not happened, and the funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is an embarrassment—at about \$124 million in 2007. There is less money spent on the NEA than on military bands. This is true not only of the current administration but also

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of past administrations as well, whether Democrat or Republican. Our government and its leaders have never publicly valued the arts. The perception of the United States as a country of values and beliefs that enhance the human experience has diminished considerably in the recent past.

The Juilliard Orchestra will travel to China in late May and early June this year. It seems to me, in the many meetings I've been to with Chinese colleagues, that most of what the Chinese know about America is pop music, and

that's a real shame. I would hope that at the national and local levels—and internationally—the United States could be viewed as valuing the important role that the arts have in our society and in countries around the world.

FORUM: *On that note, why does the U.S. government continue to undervalue the arts? Why does the private sector not seem capable or willing to support the arts in the way that the government has the potential to do?*

POLISI: The history of America, dating back to colonial days, has always been marked by a rejection of aristocracy and the art forms associated with it. Consider the famous story of a mammoth statue of George Washington that was commissioned by Congress after his death. There was a great deal of fighting about the commissioning, and eventually they never displayed the statue because it looked too aristocratic. And that perception continues to this day. When the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy erupted around 1989, the NEA was put in a very awkward position and Senator Jesse Helms tried to push through the famous Helms Amendment, which essentially challenged the First Amendment and put numerous content restrictions on which art could be funded by the federal government. Although the Helms Amendment never passed, it had a very negative impact on how the

arts were perceived in American society. There were numerous examples of local boards of education actually eliminating arts funding, even for band music and things like that, because of concern that the wrong moral direction would be taken because the arts were involved.

Which presidential candidate has seriously presented a platform on arts policy in the United States? I know Barack Obama has a committee on that, but it's not something that is discussed openly, because it's perceived as going in directions that will not be useful for his candidacy. That's very sad in my view, because the arts can be a healing and intellectually stimulating experience. If one looks at the attacks of September 11, 2001, that's when the arts really did come into play. There were memorial concerts, and the public came out to share a sense of community. The music itself helped make that happen.

The second part of your question asks why the private sector isn't capable of supporting the arts. That's an education question. In the 1970s, the arts were more or less deleted from the curricula of primary and secondary programs in most of the large urban centers of the United States—certainly New York City, Boston, Detroit, Dallas, Los Angeles, etc. And what we have sown, we are now reaping; today's leaders, who are now in their forties and fifties, have never experienced arts education at any level the way it used to happen in the 1950s. Why should these individuals have an epiphany about supporting the arts when they never really understood how the arts function in society in the first place?

FORUM: *One can see that happening with the classical arts in particular: opera and classical symphony orchestras face a challenge pulling in younger audiences. What are some strategies that institutions or the government should use to start communicating to younger people in the United States or in other countries?*

POLISI: Education, education, education—at the primary and secondary levels—and serious funding for arts programs that are consistent and continuous. But interesting things have been happening, in opera especially.

Peter Gelb at the Metropolitan Opera has been marketing opera as a dramatic, not just a musical, experience. He is generating a sense of excitement visually and dramatically as well as musically. And of course, the performances are now going into movie theaters. So there is a certain cachet that's developing in opera that is quite interesting. But this has not been replicated in symphonic music or chamber music, unfortunately.

Drama has always been a draw for young people, and more and more there is a linkage between serious construction of really interesting music

with pretty intensive dramatic experiences that are bringing in younger audiences. Of course, we know of *RENT*, but more recently *In the Heights* also has that amalgamation of pop music. Dance has always attracted large younger audiences and the visual arts actually are quite strong in some ways. Again, it's mostly symphonic music and chamber music that are hurting in the United States.

FORUM: *In your book The Artist as Citizen, you address communication of human values through the arts. Do you think that there are universal human values, and do you think that they can or must be communicated through the arts?*

POLISI: I do think that there are universal human values: family, love, happiness, nostalgia, and a vast array of others. I'll give you a very current example: the trip of the New York Philharmonic to North Korea. They played pretty standard fare—"An American in Paris," "New World Symphony," Wilhelm Richard Wagner—but the thing that really activated the audience was an arrangement for orchestra of the Korean folk song "Arirang." When that happened—and I've spoken with members of the

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orchestra about it—there was a palpable feeling in the hall, even in the orchestra. Why? It hit a nerve. It was something that was not only familiar to everyone in the audience—for various reasons going back to their childhoods—it was also something that linked South Korea to North Korea, and that's when it broke through.

Now, I'm not contending that North Korea is all of a sudden going to shut down its nuclear weapons program because of a folk song, but I'm saying that everything is incremental and that you've got to start somewhere. It was not only a folk song that generated human interaction; an American orchestra, composed of complete strangers

who were viewed with enormous suspicion by the North Koreans, was able to embrace an audience of the cognoscenti, the leadership of North Korea, and relate to them in a common human way that was unthought-of the day before. So by the end of the experience, everyone was waving to each other and there was a real desire to link up. That of course didn't happen

because of the nature of the situation there, but it told me a lot about the power of the arts and human interaction.

FORUM: *Since your career started, how have arts in society changed, and how has your outlook on arts in society evolved?*

POLISI: When I grew up in New York City, as an elementary school student in the late 1950s and then as a high school student, there were very vibrant arts programs in the public schools. Whether you played an instrument or not, there was a lot of exposure to all of the arts. Also, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts was being built. It was a time of enormous vibrancy, of optimism—until the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Then we went into a dark period that in some ways I don't know if we've ever left. There was a great deal of idealism before Kennedy's assassination, and perhaps a good deal of naïveté, but to build Lincoln Center in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a gesture of faith in the arts, and you just wouldn't see that now to the extent you saw it then.

You know, when I went to Fletcher—I graduated in 1970—it was all about power politics. If one did specialize, it was mostly related to Soviet or Sino-Soviet topics. I've come to learn over the years, since my life has been in the arts, that there's another side, a side of persuasion and humanity that is so often overlooked by our government and our diplomatic corps. I'm not suggesting that we go back to the Cold War, but there were a lot of cultural efforts made in that era that are now gone—lending libraries at various embassies around the world so that people could experience American literature; U.S. Department of State-sponsored tours to Africa, to Eastern Europe, to Russia—those are gone. Trying to find someone in the State Department to even talk to you about this sort of exchange, without having them apologize to you for the fact he or she has no money and really no say in anything, is pretty demoralizing. I meet with consular or embassy officials all over the world when I travel, whether it's Helsinki, Berlin, Beijing, or Shanghai. A lot has changed, and I think that because of the lack of education in the arts, America is perceived—I'm not saying it's the case, but that it is perceived—as a heartless bully. People don't know about our values; they only know about our commercial products or our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

FORUM: *On that topic, what do you make of regimes, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, that actually do brag about their disdain for the arts?*

POLISI: What I make of it is that they fear the arts. If the arts didn't have a negative impact on them, they wouldn't even talk about it. They would ignore it. When the Taliban destroyed the ancient statues of Buddha with artillery

fire, why did it expend the ammunition to do that? They feared something. What did they fear? They feared those images, not as representations of a deity, but for what those images stood for. They destroyed the images, just as the Nazis destroyed books and art during World War II. It's all about the incredible power of the arts. Vaclav Havel—before the Berlin Wall fell—produced plays that were white hot in Czechoslovakia. It's interesting: if you see the plays now, they don't really grab you. Many times, former communist party types said to me that it was the danger of seeing the plays that was so compelling; it wasn't necessarily the pieces themselves. So the arts can be very, very problematic for totalitarian regimes, and we've seen that for a long period of time. But for a democratic regime, the arts can be a very powerful and positive cultural messenger as well, and that's where we're failing badly.

FORUM: *One can argue that the center of gravity in American outreach via the arts has shifted away from its traditional roots and into the realm of cinema. What are your thoughts on that?*

POLISI: Well, that is true. I think cinema has had a very vibrant and exceptional impact on how America is perceived. But once again, what actually gets to China or Russia or even France? Our art cinema rarely gets to those places. What they hear about is *Rambo* or various other

..... things that are pop classics. *Superman* or *Spiderman*—these are the things in the movie theaters. It's all about the commercial side. And once again, how is America perceived? The big question I get in China all the time is: "We see these movies and there is so much shooting. Is it really true that you can buy a gun at eighteen, but you can't drink?" Well, that's an interesting question, isn't it? So they see our nation as a violent place. They don't understand the freedoms that we have. We've got to do a significantly better job of explaining who we really are. And you know what the funny thing is? It's not going to cost us any real money. A drop in the bucket is an exaggeration for what we could achieve through a focused program of cultural diplomacy.

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FORUM: *One framework promoted among non-profit organizations and at the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the State Department is citizen diplomacy. This is also emphasized by the title of your book, The Artist as Citizen. How does an artist communicate with an audience? Is there something about the communication of one human to another human, not just the communication through the work of art, that is a successful part of this citizen diplomacy?*

POLISI: In titling my book, I must say I was focused principally on students at Juilliard and at places like Juilliard. The young artist tends to be driven by an acquisition of technique and practice and then the forwarding of a career on the concert stage; the same is true, to some degree, with actors and dancers. Often they see their goal as simply getting the notes right or the steps right or the words right, and they don't see any responsibility once they get off the stage. That's an enormous mistake, especially in America in the twenty-first century, for two reasons. First, we need to have artists who are missionaries for the arts. Second, their careers will in fact blossom, because the public is asking artists to communicate beyond their art more and more, which gets to your question.

What we have been trying to prepare our students to do at Juilliard is to be able to speak engagingly about their art after or before their concerts and to think about entrepreneurial ways that they can go into venues that are not traditional concert halls, whether they be hospitals, hospices, or schools. We've had young artists play in work-out centers and have an impact on how people think of the classical arts. We've had artists play in rock clubs, in cafes, in venues where it's unexpected to hear classical music. We've asked them to play very modern music, very difficult music to listen to, in different contexts, perhaps like a Studio 54 environment. What I'm saying to young artists is that you've got a lot of responsibilities out there and you're not finished once you've been hired by the New York Philharmonic.

One of the things I've done aside from the curriculum changes at Juilliard has been, together with Carnegie Hall, to start something called The Academy. This is a post-graduate program for musicians in which they not only perform at Carnegie Hall, Juilliard, and places like that, but they also teach two days each week in New York City public schools. The teaching part is to get them out of their comfort zones and put them in extremely challenging environments in which they have to use their art to make change for the better. The transformation of these young artists as performers is extraordinary. That's when it all comes around, as far as I'm concerned.

Most people, when they come out on stage as young artists, just want to get it perfect, and they're not really thinking about whether they're saying anything to their audience. The point is: if they're not saying anything to their audience, then they're failing. I don't care how many notes they get right. We have a wonderful drama teacher who said to me once: "What I tell my students is that every time you go out on stage, I want you to try to change the people in the audience for the better, through your art." And of course you can't do that one hundred percent of the time, but there are times when I hope that has happened, and an audience member becomes a different person because of the performance.

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FORUM: *In general, do you think this message is embraced by the students of The Juilliard School, or is there some resistance?*

POLISI: Actually, it is quite embraced. We have 800 students, between graduates and undergraduates, and I would say more than 50 percent are actively involved in outreach programs of some sort during the course of a week. Juilliard has about 35 percent international students—we're very much an international school—and those students are less quick to embrace this, because they have so many other things they're adjusting to in America. But many of our international students are doing outreach as well. This is not just at Juilliard; it's at educational institutions all around the country. In fact, this is something that's of interest now to international schools.

I'd like to conclude with a message that focuses on being proactive with the arts. I reiterate the point that the United States is such an extraordinary country, and you get to understand that when you're outside of America. We have just as many warts and bumps and problems as any place. But we also have this richness of values and beliefs and a real appreciation for the human spirit, and that is a reality that is not getting out to the rest of the world.

Let me give you one final example: I don't know if you've read or heard or seen the phenomenon of Gustavo Dudamel, a 26-year-old conductor from Venezuela. He's a real wunderkind and a great talent. He's just

been appointed the new music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He came to New York City to conduct two concerts, sponsored by Carnegie Hall, that were presented by the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra. The orchestra was created through El Sistema, which was started in the 1970s by an extraordinary man, José Antonio Abreu, to teach musical instruments at a very serious level to thousands of Venezuelan children, most of them poor. This has nothing to do with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez—obviously it started a long, long time ago. They came to Carnegie Hall, they played a great concert in front of a packed audience, and at the end of the concert the whole hall went black. When the lights went back on, all of the students—the entire orchestra—were wearing Venezuelan sports jackets with all their bright colors—yellows and blues and reds. They played this great mambo and brought down the house. And I'm looking around—this is the American spirit, we're going to embrace excellence and quality—and I'm saying to myself, "What a public relations coup for Chavez." People thought Venezuela was a great place that night.

Let's segue to Juilliard, with my going to State Department officials and saying, "The Juilliard Orchestra is going to China in late May. We're playing three concerts, including one as part of the Cultural Olympiad in Beijing. We're playing two concerts in Shanghai in the very best venues, we're being sponsored entirely by the Chinese government, and I'd like a little help in visibility and really pushing that we're an American youth orchestra representing the very best of America." Do you think I got any response? No. I wasn't asking for money; I was asking for people in our State Department to get excited about an American ensemble playing in China. This issue needs to be addressed if America hopes to be perceived and understood in the future as the caring country that it in fact is.

FORUM: *Thank you for speaking with The Forum.* ■

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