

**GUSTAVO DUDAMEL's speech  
for honorees of 2015 National Medal of Arts and National  
Humanities Medal  
September 22, 2016  
Dinner in Washington, DC**

Celebrated Honorees  
Trustees of the National Gallery of Art  
Members of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities  
Honored and Distinguished Guests

Music is my language. In this language I can conduct an opera or symphony by heart... or at least that's what they say. But tonight I am not before my orchestra, so I hope this distinguished audience will forgive me for reading.

I believe that the first word one must learn in any language is the word "thanks." So I would like to start by thanking you for this great honor. I feel quite humbled and grateful to be surrounded this evening by such a special group of creators, artists, humanists, and honored guests.

But I feel that I shouldn't give thanks only in my name. I would like to say thank you for the opportunity of addressing you tonight in the name of the millions of Latinos who have made the United States of America their home.

I wish to start by sharing with you an anecdote - simple, though immensely symbolic for me.

Even before I started conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, I promoted the creation of a youth orchestra called YOLA, Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles. One of the first YOLA groups was formed in South Central Los Angeles, one of the most troubled neighborhoods in the city.

It was there that I met a 12-year-old boy called Adam. Adam lived with his mother Tracey, in a highly dangerous area. When Adam learned they were holding auditions for a children's orchestra, he

showed up with his mom, who told us that Adam's life dream was to become the percussionist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Adam and I came from very different places, but we had something in common: we shared the same dream.

Adam's – and YOLA's – first concert took place a few months later, a free concert for the community at a venue some of you might be familiar with - it's called the Hollywood Bowl. John Williams, Quincy Jones and 18,000 spectators were in attendance.

That was, also, my first concert as the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Music Director, so I was as terrified as Adam... Please, understand, it's not easy to stand on the same stage where once stood Leonard Bernstein, Van Cliburn, Jimi Hendrix, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong... even if Adam had no clue who those legends were.

For most in the audience, reaching the Bowl had been one more trek within their daily routine. The 11 miles Adam had traveled from home must have been the most important trip of his life. Simply put: the boy who left South Central that afternoon was not the same person upon his return.

Our Ulysses, our pint-sized hero, had taken his drumsticks and had set out on a one-way trip toward hope.

Tonight, this wonderful hall is full of empathetic, compassionate souls, who know full well what I mean when I say that the shy boy I had met months before was not the same boy that stood before me that evening, playing with intensity, shaping his own life with each beat, touching the hearts of 18,000 human beings – including MINE.

My mentor, Maestro José Antonio Abreu, said once that the worst crime committed in the modern world has been to take away from children the access to beauty and inspiration.

Obviously, we live in difficult times. After any financial crisis that shakes the whole world, schools have smaller budgets. The first programs to get cut are Art and Music, because they are not considered "essential."

I believe that is wrong.

Some people think that art is a luxury and must be cut back in times of crisis. These people must understand that precisely during times of crisis the unforgivable sin is to cut access to art.

In my beloved home of Venezuela such a crisis is happening right now. People are spending their days looking for food, medicine and the necessities of life.

The same arguments exist — how can we fund music — the arts — when basic needs are not being met? A recent article posed the question: “Can El Sistema save Venezuela?” To me, the more appropriate question is, “Can Venezuela save El Sistema?” – which is now more important than ever to the people of Venezuela and to their hope. I work every day to ensure that once Venezuela moves beyond this current crisis, El Sistema will continue to rise and empower those who otherwise would have no dreams.

Art is the nourishment of the soul. Our children will learn architecture to design the bridges that will connect us with our future, they will excel in math to calculate their foundations. Many of our children will better humanity through science, and ALL must strengthen themselves, learning the limits of their bodies through sports. The ARTS are equally vital. Those who cut back art programs must understand that without art, the human spirit dulls.

From the Altamira caves to Jackson Pollock, and from the Sumerian Hymn to the rap-driven, brave and haunting lyrics of Lin-Manuel Miranda in *Hamilton* (which by the way I still haven’t been able to find tickets to), art has been the main travel partner of the human spirit.

I believe spiritual health should have the same weight as physical health. If we all recognized that it’s just as important to keep a healthy psyche and soul as it is to keep a healthy body, then even insurance companies would give out free tickets to concerts, museums and galleries. Maybe this could even be a new provision of Obamacare!

My vocation is music, but my mission is children, especially how we teach them. And to make sure that the greatest expressions of our humanity are passed along to our next generation.

We want to prepare our children for the future, but here’s the problem - in this fast-paced world we live in, we don’t know exactly what the future will bring. We assume it will involve math - there is always

math! And yes, we must educate the mind. But a child is not just a mind – she is a soul. And we must also nourish the soul as well.

We, everybody in this room, must find a way to create and support art in our future, so I invite you to invest in the dreams and spirits of kids like Adam in Los Angeles, and the millions of kids that like him are searching for a glimpse of hope and beauty. I invite you to listen to the words of Schiller, who said that beauty is the only form of communication that can unite society "since it relates to that which is common to all."

Since we became human and started painting on cave walls, we are hard-wired for expression. I don't know what technologies we still will be using in the future, what changes will confront us. I don't know what *Facebook*, *Pokémon Go* or *Twitter* will be like. I don't know if computers will disappear or if they will become something completely different. Anything and everything is possible.

But no matter what the future brings - we will have to express what we feel: and that is art.

Art is future.

Let's make sure we create an environment that cultivates, embraces and empowers the arts.

It's up to us to make sure our children are ready.

Muchas gracias.

*Gustavo Dudamel*