

Da Vinci acceptance speech

(Salutation)

It is with sincere humility and appreciation that I accept the Leonardo da Vinci World Award of Arts from the World Cultural Council.

I have many people to thank for supporting me throughout my life who all share in this honor. My percussion teacher from the time I was eleven-years old, Alan Abel, gave me fundamental training in everything to do with percussion and told me “if you play each note with integrity and follow the line of the music, you will learn to play musically.” Fred Hinger, my teacher at the Curtis Institute of Music showed me the importance of sound and phrasing in music. He said, “the most important thing is to play one note correctly. When you are able to do that, then play the next note correctly, and then the next.” My teachers of non-Western music made me aware of the beauty and complexity of rhythm. And my colleagues in Nexus for the past forty-six years inspired me by showing me how to love every sound I make. I have tried to follow these simple instructions all my musical life, and any success I have had in music is a result of the wisdom of these great musicians. I also have the great fortune to have the composer Steve Reich as a close personal friend. I have played in his ensemble since 1971 and this experience has altered my life in ways I never could have imagined.

Most importantly, I want to thank my wife, Bonnie Sheckter, who is an award-winning visual artist in her own right, for her love and unwavering support throughout our life together. Our greatest contributions to the world are our two beautiful daughters, Laura and Carla, both of whom are more creative than I could ever hope to be and who are here today to share in the celebration.

I am personally humbled and honored to receive the Leonardo da Vinci Award World Award of Arts, however I am delighted that the World Cultural Council has chosen to recognize, through this award, the significance of percussion in the musical world today and the re-emergence over the past fifty years of rhythm as a major structural component in Western music. Percussionists,

especially in symphony orchestras, sometimes feel like minor contributors to the symphonic musical experience. As conductor Michael Tilson Thomas told me recently, “Percussion is the frosting of the orchestra.” I still enjoy playing in symphony orchestras and trying to create the perfect sound that enhances the overall musical palette. However, as music critic Allan Kozinn said in a 2009 New York Times article,

“I’ve been pondering the way percussion has gradually grabbed the spotlight over the last century, and how percussionists have been asserting themselves in the broader musical scene as composers and conductors....If you think about it, drums are the new violins.”

I look upon the Leonardo da Vinci award as a tribute to percussionists throughout the world and to musicians and artists who explore the boundaries of their art, create music on the edge, and pass on their knowledge to the next generation of creative artists. It might be said that contemporary percussionists best represent the Leonardo model of artists who explore multiple avenues of creativity. Just as Leonardo da Vinci was the quintessential Renaissance polymath, a percussionist today is expected to be a virtuoso creator of music in an assortment of genres.

Fortunately for percussionists, this burgeoning role in which we find ourselves coincides with the revival of rhythm and pulse-based music, and has given us a golden opportunity to move to the forefront of musical innovation. Steve Reich and other contemporary composers have stimulated this interest with their minimalist compositions that give percussionists a prominent role and rhythm a primary and compelling element. A quote sometimes attributed to Leonardo da Vinci may have foreshadowed this minimalist trend, “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”

The simplicity of percussion has evolved into a sophisticated art form and I feel fortunate to have been a part of this rhythmic renaissance. I am delighted that the World Cultural Council has chosen to recognize it with the Leonardo da Vinci World Award of Arts.

Thank you.