

NEW ENGLAND CONSERVATORY

President Daniel Steiner's Remarks Convocation September 7, 2005

We begin the 139th school year of the New England Conservatory of Music with much to be thankful for. NEC—the common thread that runs through all our lives—is a strong, vibrant institution.

We have an extraordinary faculty that work together in a collegial manner to provide the best possible training and education for our students. Faculty set the tone for an educational institution, and we are indeed fortunate to have artist teachers who are not only wonderful musicians but also nurturing instructors and engaged members of the community. Having an excellent faculty does not mean that we will end our efforts to recruit additional outstanding teachers. Just as an artist is unlikely to say “I am performing this piece as well as I can or need to” an educational institution will not say “We are as good as we need be.” There is always room for improvement, and we will always be alert to possibilities for improving NEC.

We are able to select students from a growing number of applicants. Last year we had over 60% more applications for admission than we had five years ago. And the quality of the applicants has improved. As a result, each year we have enrolled increasingly talented students with a passion for and dedication to music. Ours are students who are eager to learn and are able to take full advantage of the faculty who will guide them through their years at NEC. Students are producing beautiful music in Jordan Hall and other venues at NEC and elsewhere and are winning prestigious competitions in the United States and abroad.

The environment at NEC is conducive to learning and creativity. Our standards are demanding, but students are supported, both by the faculty and by their fellow students, and encouraged to take risks. These aspects of NEC, which distinguish us from many other schools of music, are very special, and we must all work to maintain them.

NEC is blessed also with a dedicated staff that works with intelligence to provide the needed administrative and support services.

NEC is a strong institution that ranks among the very best conservatories in the world. It is also a happy institution, a congenial place to teach, study, and work. I feel privileged to be part of this enterprise, and I am sure that many of you feel the same way.

All of this is not to say that we don't have our problems, large and small. We do have both sizes of problems, and it behooves us to be working to solve them. Let me mention some of the things on our agenda for this year.

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Strengthening our financial position is high on the list. As you know, NEC is very under-endowed, and increasing our endowment is a major objective of the \$100 million capital campaign we started a few years ago. To date we have received over \$65 million dollars in gifts and pledges. Last year that included a record \$2.3 million in gifts to the annual fund which is so important in the balancing of our annual operating budget. \$2.3 million is the equivalent of the income from \$46 million of endowment that we do not have.

We will continue to work hard to raise the balance of the \$100 million. Our target for this year is \$11 million.

We will also continue to plan for the construction of a new library and a new dormitory. Last year two task forces, chaired by the Provost, developed programs for these two facilities, and their recommendations will be made available to trustees, faculty, staff, students and other interested constituencies for discussion and comment. We will also be exploring different ways to finance construction of the dormitory and library.

This summer we embarked on a multi-year program to improve the quality of the pianos at NEC. There is no doubt that these need improvement. As a first step we installed temperature controls in a number of places where we have pianos. These controls are needed to prevent temperature fluctuations that can damage pianos. We also purchased twelve new pianos, including five Steinway grands and one Steinway concert grand. These actions alone will effect noticeable improvement, but they are only the first steps in bringing about fundamental change. Important also will be the care and respect which users show for these new instruments and our other pianos.

Last year we contracted with a different vendor, Aramark, to operate our cafeteria. We expected that this change would improve our food services, and it did. Also last year we began to work with a firm to assess the condition of our buildings. As is the case with many not-for-profit institutions, most of which struggle to find the money to balance the budget, maintenance of buildings does not get the attention it deserves. Consequently, there are deferred maintenance costs that must be addressed. We have begun this process and set priorities among the various needs. High on the list was a new roof for the St. Botolph building, and we installed a new roof early in the summer. We will continue in a measured way to improve the condition of our buildings.

The agenda for the College includes a number of items. We will continue to work on implementing the multi-year contracts for the faculty. This change has started in an auspicious way. We will continue to put in place the changes in the undergraduate curriculum and in the voice programs. We will evaluate, as opportunities come to our attention, collaboration with other institutions, as we now have a collaborative program with Harvard and with a French quartet program. We will also begin development of a long-range plan for academic technology.

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This year also marks the opening of the new center for health and counseling in the St. Botolph building where students can go for their health and counseling needs. We have engaged a new provider of health services—the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center—and have every expectation that this leading Boston hospital will meet well the needs of our students.

A closer relationship between the College and Preparatory Division is also on the agenda. These are two centers of excellence, both at NEC, that complement and supplement each other's programs. An example would be the mentoring of Prep chamber groups by one of the many able chamber groups in the College.

The Prep Division is also planning to begin a thorough review of its programs and curriculum. Periodic reassessment—what are our goals and how are we trying to achieve them—is important for any educational enterprise, even one that is as thoughtful and successful as the prep program at NEC.

The Prep Division also will be working with Institutional Advancement in holding a dinner to benefit financial aid. This will be the first of its kind, and reflects a commitment to do a better job of obtaining support from the Prep family.

Institutional Advancement will continue its efforts to foster connections between NEC and its alumni. In the past few years we have established alumni chapters in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and the District of Columbia. This year we plan to expand to Baltimore, Philadelphia, Worcester, and San Francisco. Attendance at events in our existing chapters indicates that there is a strong alumni interest in reconnecting with NEC. We will also seek to establish stronger connections in Korea and in the Pacific Northwest. Closer relations with our alumni can be very important to NEC in the long run.

Institutional Advancement also has responsibility for public relations and marketing. We have made considerable progress in developing capability in these areas—one need only compare our publications now with our publications five years ago—and our efforts will continue in the coming year.

We should note that at the beginning of this academic year Hurricane Katrina has brought enormous hardships across large parts of the country and has posed particular difficulties for our sister academic institutions. Many are not opening now and some may be closed for the entire year. I have great sympathy for their situation and can only imagine what it would mean to close NEC for a year. In response to calls for help a coalition of colleges and universities is offering to take in students whose education would otherwise be halted. NEC has joined that coalition, and I hope that we can match up with the right students and thereby be helpful.

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I now begin my seventh year with the responsibilities of the president of NEC and, I am sorry to say, that it will be my last year as president. I have informed the trustees that I will step down as president either at the end of the academic year or when a successor is chosen and takes office, whichever comes first. This has not been an easy decision for me, but my health is such that it is in NEC's and my best interest that a successor be selected.

My six years as president have been very happy ones for me. I have had the privilege of working with a remarkable faculty and a strong student body and staff. All these people have made NEC the outstanding institution it is today, and it has been wonderful being part of an enterprise that is so important to society and to all of us. These have been productive years for NEC. All of us who have participated in the governance and operation of NEC can feel very good about what we have accomplished.

My devotion to NEC and my belief in the important contribution that NEC can make to the common good remain strong. In the coming years I hope that I can continue to work with you and others to help NEC progress to ever-higher levels of achievement.

I wish you all a good year.