

The Kennedy Center 2025

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I have an emotional attachment to the Kennedy Center (that's the John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts situated in Washington, D.C.). I live in an island nation in the South Pacific, and have never visited, nor am I likely to, yet its presence has impacted me.

How?

In the mid-1990s I was teaching music in a Roman Catholic boy's school populated by students who identified as Māori and Pasifika. For the latter, although New Zealand was their citizenship, their affinities were with places beyond: Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Cook Islands, and Fiji. I mention these countries to highlight that students were familiar with music performance. Village life had been transferred into their urban worlds, including group singing through church attendance and community celebrations.

At the time the Ministry of Education was loosening its controls, and for music instruction that involved allowing schools to choose setworks relevant to their cultural context. In the past, pieces from the European classical tradition were standard fare. Now the choice was ours.

"Sir, can we study Led Zeppelin?" came the request. My first reaction was bemusement. I knew of the band, and they were on the fringe of my consciousness, but I was never a groupie. Composers like Mozart, Beethoven and Berlioz held my interest.

"What do you want to study?" I asked.

"*Stairway to Heaven*," came the response.

"OK, we can on the condition that for our second work, we study Tchaikovsky's *Souvenir de Florence*." I can't remember why I chose the Tchaikovsky, perhaps because string orchestra music is an interest. They agreed.

We embarked on a study *Stairway* and soon the enthusiastic students had the guitar licks and lead solos well under their fingers. To say I was impressed by their abilities is an understatement. And, I grew to understand and appreciate Led Zeppelin's compositions.

Some thirty years later while surfing through YouTube before sleeping I happened upon a live version of *Stairway to Heaven*. On closer inspection I discovered the performance was to honour Led Zeppelin's contribution to music at the Kennedy Center in 2012.

The performance blew me away.

It begins with a female soloist accompanied by her sister on rhythm guitar (the Heart duo) and moves from those small beginnings to a grand anthem replete with backing vocals and choir. The audience, including the three surviving band members, were enraptured. Cameras swung from the performers to the audience: President Obama and his wife were obviously enjoying the experience and cellist Yoyo Ma was in ecstasy.

However, you need to wait until the final moment to when the performance switches from an enjoyable replay to a profound statement. The work concludes with the choir singing "Ahhhhh"; a wall of sound that celebrates the breath of life.

My story of emotional attachment is backdrop to my sense of dismay at the move by President Donald Trump in February 2025 to fire the Kennedy Center's board to appoint himself as chairman. Dismay turned to a complex mix of anger and grief that then got me thinking about the role that the performing arts and artists play in society. Should politicians interfere and what are the implications of privileging some works over others; of censoring pieces that may offend ruling elites?

Protests come in many guises. In the case of the Kennedy Center's changing governance and aesthetic preferences, some artists have removed support, choosing not to perform there (Horton & Lee, 2025): some in dignified coded language – Renee Fleming – and others expressing direct outrage – Actors' Equity.

Of course, contrary to prevailing ideologies about activism, and following Žižek (2008), silence is also a valid and provocative action.

Performing artists of old have been in the forefront of political protest including some who may have passed into obscurity unless you're a classical music aficionado. Joseph Haydn protested Prince Esterhazy's reluctance to return home from their summer palace in his 45th symphony "Farewell"; Beethoven railed against Napoleon's abuse of leadership (Symphony No 3 "Eroica"); and Chopin penned his "Revolutionary Étude" in 1831 opposing the invasion of Warsaw by the Russians.

Paul Hindemith, in a polymathic surge of creativity, wrote his *Mathis der Maler* symphony and opera based on a painting by the 16th-century German artist Matthias Grünewald. He had grown alarmed at the rise in the 1930s of the National Socialists and wrote the work in protest of their purges of people and cultures. Joseph Goebbels denounced Hindemith. Such a "degenerate artist" had no place in the new Reich!

Back to the Kennedy Center and its capture by the executive branch. As scholars of aesthetics and the arts; how might we respond? I wonder if artists are the prophets of our age: men and women who provoke, persuade, and call us to action, who speak in whispers across the darkness and declaim in daylight in the public square.

References

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