Dr. Jerome Supple remarks
8 PM

Thank you and good evening.

It is my pleasure tonight to introduce this fall’s Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecturer.

It was President Johnson’s dream for his alma mater to invite leaders from many different fields, for these leaders to share their viewpoints and to promote discussion of issues.

In the past, we have hosted leaders from government, medicine, journalism, theater law enforcement, and civil rights.

We turn again to the arts this fall and welcome a speaker who is, no doubt, the strongest advocate for music in the world today.

Lukas Foss has made a career of exploring the new, the unexpected, the mysterious in music.

He continues to leave his mark on contemporary music as a composer, conductor, performer, and lecturer.

The composer in Foss was the first of his talents to come to light. He began writing music at age seven. At twenty-two, he won his first New York Music Critics Circle award for his cantata “The Prairie”—based on a poem by Carl Sandberg.

He has more than 85 compositions to his credit.

He has set to music the words of Sandberg, Twain, and Whitman along with Kafka, Auden, and Nietzsche.

His work has borrowed from every style of the last half century and added to them elements that are uniquely Foss.

He admits, “I don’t make it easy of people to understand what I’m all about. But then, why should I?”

He has shunned the safe to embrace the risky, and the results have been a joy to experience.

Lukas Foss the conductor has lead orchestras throughout the world. Beginning with his first orchestra in Buffalo and proceeding to New York, Los Angeles, Jerusalem, and Milwaukee and he has guest conducted in many others.

Again, his style is uniquely Foss.

He believes that all good music is new; that even an old symphony should be played as if the ink were not yet dry.

Foss the performer is a pianist; the former pianist of the Boston symphony. He was held as a prodigy and in his early years and at the keyboard he can still dazzle an audience.

Lukas Foss is with us this week mainly as a teacher and a lecturer.

Before he was a teacher, of course, he was a student. He studied with legends such as Hindemith, Koussevitzky, and Fritz Reiner.
He himself succeeded to the faculty chair held by Arnold Schoenberg at UCLA and has taught at Carnegie Mellon and Harvard as well. We are fortunate that he continues to find time to share the gospel of new music with audiences around the world. He is here tonight to share that gospel with us. Please welcome to Southwest Texas Mr. Lukas Foss.

Lukas Foss, “Confessions of a Twentieth Century Musician”

It’s a real honor for me to be here and to deliver the LBJ lecture. I might as well begin by telling you that I had once the opportunity of meeting President Johnson, and that was at the White House, my first visit at the White House. I was invited because the White House decided to honor the American winners of a big competition in Russia. They were instrumentalists that were being honored that week, and for some reason I got an invitation to the White House and I thought “well I must see the White House, it’s about time” and so I came.

But, I came late. So when I arrived at the gate downstairs some guard said, “You are late” And I said, “what does that mean, I’m late?” “It means the president is already there.” I said, “Well does that mean I can’t enter anymore?” “No, no we’ll let you in.” And they did, and I began to walk the great stairs of the White House and I heard cello and piano playing and very familiar sounds. By God it was my own concerto. [audience laughs] So I could walk these steps out to the count of my music and then I got up there and I saw the winners playing and I looked around and I saw President Johnson sitting there listening, with his hand like this.

And I was thinking, “Why doesn’t he do something about Vietnam, what is he losing this time for?” [audience laughter]

It is wonderful to be here in general this week and, I mean, to enjoy what is going on here and I wish I could attend all the things that are going on. My colleagues’ work is being played, and I’m missing about half of these things because I’m so busy rehearsing and performing here.

But there is these things going on all the time, and I was thinking how lucky we are here in America that the universities are the stronghold of culture. European universities are not like that at all. Radio stations, strange enough, accomplish a little bit in Europe, or lets say in England, in Germany, what the university does here.

Indeed, our life, our cultural life would be impoverished if it weren’t for the things that are happening on campus. And, you’ll find some of the best people teaching here; find very interesting faculty that is devoted, in this case to the cause of music and it’s really a great thing we’re doing here at the university. No wonder that most of the important people in American culture are teaching. That is unique here, and it’s important.
We might as well examine a little bit, during the course of this lecture, what, what this is all about.

What do we learn?

What is there to learn about creativity, for instance?

What a strange word that is anyway. It’s a word that’s been bandied around a lot to date, creative. Yet, I can’t imagine people that I’ve known like Stravinsky or Hindesmith or Bantock say, “don’t disturb me, I’m creating.” They say, “I’m working,” it’s really just work.

I mean when you think of creation maybe mothers should be called creators.

But artists, why chose artists?

I’ve met many businessmen who are more creative than many performing musicians that I have met. I don’t think we have a, I mean, that we should be allowed to use that word just for the arts. It’s dangerous; it’s misleading.

Bach supposed to have said, “anyone who works as hard as I do can do as well.” Well now that gives us a clue. I mean, why can’t we all work that hard? Well there’s that, but he didn’t say creation he said work. Now I think that’s the way most of us feel about our work, it’s just plain work. But, undoubtedly, the ability to work hard is one of the important things.

Schoenberg said, “talent is the ability to learn, genius is the ability to develop.” That is another interesting statement, because learning could be construed to mean something got the information. Of course it is much more than that. But one might consider that an angle. That wouldn’t explain too much.

Developing, yes that is important. How do you develop?

There’s no recipe for that.

In fact, we use the words constantly and we don’t really explain them.

We think that they cover subject.

We speak about, let’s say, genius.

What does genius really mean? Does it mean anything at all? Does it mean the person is abnormal? Who is a genius?

These are mostly nineteenth-century words like inspiration. That’s another word that’s very nineteenth century-ish, and that I’m afraid of. And yet, it moves something. I mean when we hear a piece of music and we hear a special moment that is inspired, why shouldn’t we use that word?

But we should come to grips with it. We should decide what’s an inspiration, and, in fact, what is an idea?

This question was asked to me once by John Cage, in a symposium that we played, and where the idea was to ask the most difficult questions, embarrassingly difficult questions. And so he said, “well Lukas, what is an idea?”

And I thought about it and I said, “Well maybe it is when you find a parallel somewhere where before that you just saw chaos, non-related things that can suddenly see relationships.”

Well that’s a way out but it doesn’t explain enough about what an idea really is, and a worthwhile idea that we would call an inspiration. At which point do we call something an inspiration, there are a lot of words like, for instance, inevitability, which is a worried that is supposed to explain Beethoven. Yet, to find an inevitable note is rather

Now, to find a surprising note is also rather easy. You can go [singing climbing scale] “da da da da da da da da da da,” [last note is a whole step rather than a natural half step] da” Yea you’re surprised, but it’s arbitrary so who cares? [audience laughs]

So maybe, maybe an inspiration is a surprise, which, in retrospect, makes sense. It’s not arbitrary. Surprise seems inevitable. When we have an inevitable surprise maybe that could be called an inspiration.

And, indeed, the word “surprise” is probably what I’m looking for when I’m composing. I’m looking for surprise, but not arbitrary surprise. Surprise that makes you say “hey, how come I never thought of that before?” See that is really what a musical ideal inspiration will be.

And who say this sort of thing? Who says “how come I never thought of that before?”

You know, we say that sometimes when we hear a joke.

There’s an interesting relationship between humor and, and inspiration. In both instances you deal with that. You deal with the subtle twist that happens in almost every joke, and you say “oh, of course.” And there’s usually some meaning to it if it’s a good joke. If it’s a locker room joke, there’s not much meaning to it. But if it’s a good joke, then you say, you learn something. The joke may reveal something, something sometimes nasty, sometimes not, depending. It does reveal something. So I think it’s a great relationship between humor and, and creativity.

I don’t know if a psychologist would back me up on that, but I always felt, and I said that just the other day, that people who are serious, in the sense of no humor, are not serious enough, they’re just solemn. And that this happens very often when I watch conductors; when I watch my fellow conductors conducting Beethoven, and looking terribly serious, without any sense of humor. I feel they don’t know what Beethoven’s all about. He’s full of humor.

Foss, what do you mean by that?

Now I could absolutely talk about humor but, no I guess the idea of idea got me into this, that I might as well allow myself to be surprised as I talk to you. [audience laughs]

I could demonstrate to you something about Beethoven’s humor, in case that you wonder what I’m talking about when I say Beethoven’s humor because most people don’t connect Beethoven with humor at all. In fact I remember once being in Leonard Bernstein’s room, and there was Arthur Rubinstein, the pianist, and we started getting into an argument about humor and Beethoven.

And then he said, “come on Lukas, show him what you showed me about the humor in Beethoven. Give him an example.”

And I went to the piano, and there’s a piano so I can imitate this I think, and I played a piece that you all know, the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven. The trio and the scherzo with a cellist and a bassist. [piano] Well a little later, a little later, this is what happened: [piano].

Well, we often to play Beethoven’s symphonies because that’s the way they are and we don’t question things. And that’s my main gripe with the kind of analysis that goes on in music courses. We never question things. We tell people about first theme
and second theme, and development section, and all the things that you can find in mediocre music too. But we don’t come to grips with the uniqueness.

Now several years ago, I was composing cello concerto for my friend Rostropovich, the greatest cellist I think, living cellist. Now he does mostly conducting. I wonder why? When you’re number one at something, why do you want to be number three at . . . . I’m beginning to be very naughty here. So I was writing this concerto and you know every concerto has a cadenza when the soloist is playing by himself, showing off his virtuosity, and I started sketching down the little bits of this credenza and then I thought “oh now I need to make a piece out of this credenza, something that is unified and works.” And suddenly I thought “hmm, what if I just hand Rostropovich these sketches and tell him to practice it in public.”

That night I was conducting Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and I get to this part. [piano] Suddenly I understood that Beethoven was making the cellists and bassists practice in public. [audience laughs] Two false starts, two false starts before they finish the phrase. [audience laughs] Why would he do that?

Well, because it’s a kind of wonderful, intellectual, and yet raucous kind of sense of humor, uncouth sense of humor that I connect with Beethoven.

I could give you many other examples but since this section’s not about the humor of Beethoven, I will refrain myself. But I could give you many other examples of such humor to back up the notion that this was indeed a joke of some sort. A diabolical joke of course, not a cheap joke. And he probably said, “watch them, nobody’s going to laugh because they know I’m serious.” And nobody has laughed, ever.

So I stumbled upon this, what I believe to be the truth, and suddenly realized the reason. So I advise you who are music students in the audience, when you find something that’s puzzling, don’t just say, “well it’s, that’s what it says.” Ask yourself why? Ask yourself what makes it unique and why did the composer do it? Try to find a reason because you can see once I understood this how much more I can make of this moment when I’m conducting Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, instead of just going “hmm hmm hmm hmm hmm.” How boring, you know. And that’s my gripe with most performances of classical music that they have that boring quality of taking for granted what’s in the score and just making sure that it’s precise and together and the creamy sound as it’s often called, as if that’s what the composer wants. I mean most of my works when applied a creamy sound, sound very wrong. But there, you see, you’re reading reviews that so and so got a really creamy sound out of the orchestra.

And we are living with clichés and what I’m really trying to do in this talk is to rid us of some of the cliché ideas that are in the way of real understanding and real insight. There are so many such words like originality, you know, and people think that if you’re original then you have talent, but that’s not the way it starts. You start out unoriginal.

Once when I was seven years old, I began to compose right with the first piano lessen. I didn’t want to be original. I just wanted to do something that I loved, which was the little piece of Bach or of Haydn that I just learned to play on the piano. I wanted to do it too.

I think that’s the way we start out and now in progressive education, for instance, people have this idea that we must let our children express themselves. They hand you a pencil and you’re supposed to be creative and express yourself. Well what’s the child
going to do with that pencil? Probably pick his nose. [audience laughs] That’s what the child really wants to do. It’s like a child who learns how to walk. I mean it’s such a great thing for a child to learn how to walk.

I was just, over the dinner table, we were talking about why children love shoes so much, and I offered the theory that maybe, maybe they like shoes because they symbolize the moment when they change from horizontal, helpless baby, to a member of society, standing erect. And that therefore shoes are very, very important. Well what the child wants to learn is how to walk. He doesn’t want to think of new things to do with his legs. [audience laughs]

This whole idea about originality, you see, is really misguided.
I wanted to do it too.
And being talented I was reasonably able to do it too.
And so all my early works were really just exercises in writing the music I loved, which meant the music of other people.
Originality creeps in almost by accident.

Almost by mistake, suddenly the door opens and you say “well, why am I turning it this way? I could, a door! I could try and do it this way.” It’s like door opening and you hadn’t expected that the door, and before you know it, you turning out something original, almost in spite of yourself because chances are that you think that you’re doing, that experimental thing, will not be as lovable as what you did when you were imitating.

In my case what happened was much later after I had written and published a lot of music that was basically neo-classic, in other words rediscovering, trying to do the things that I loved. I remember teaching at UCLA and having the idea that I wanted to free my students from the tyranny of the “printed note,” as I called it, and see what they could do if they would improvise.

Partly, it was out of jealousy of jazz.

You know, the jazz musicians get all the fun improvising, and we classical musicians never get to do that.

So I began to invent all kinds of rules for classical ensemble improvisations. But it was very safe music and it was sort of always sounded like music we know that was badly remembered. [audience laughs]

One day, I asked myself, I asked myself what would be the kind of music that would actually, that would actually thrive on the improvisational process, and be totally new and different and fresh, and not sound like music badly remembered. And with that question, I open up a Pandora’s Box of new music and I began to invent chance music before the word chance—or aleatory as it’s called, alea meaning dice—before that word came into the jargon, the musical language, in the late 1950’s. I began, suddenly, to get interested in chance, and what you could do with chance and improvisation.

That changed me more than my students.

Before I knew it, I had discovered a whole area that I wanted to cultivate. And then I saw the limitations and the dangers namely that we try to play it safe, and that we don’t improvise what we don’t know, but we improvise what we do know, and that we fall into all kinds of routine things that work, licks and so forth. And then I gave up improvisation and I returned to the ivory tower in my own lonely chamber of composition.
By the way, when I say ivory tower, I realize that word is now out of fashion. No composer likes to be in the ivory tower anymore. That’s like an exclusive club that we all belonged to in the 1960s, late 50s and 1960s, and we wrote music for each other and we didn’t really care about the audience, about communicating to the audience, unless we worked for the theatre. But otherwise, it wasn’t important. We cared what the colleagues said. We solved problems. We read professional magazines and we tried to solve these problems and each one of us, even though we were friends, we were also competitors, so we thought we’d solve them better than the other person. But still, it was like a very lovely club.

But something’s wrong, it was not really communicating.
Times have changed completely.
I used to speak about “our new music.” I used to have letters from Stockhausen and from Boulez from [inaudible], from all the modern music masters. We used to write to each other and care about each other’s music and send each other music; no more. These people are still alive but we don’t do that anymore. Now we are in the “me only” generation.

As I said before, we are trading one mistake for another.
The ivory tower may have been a mistake, that exclusive club, but now it’s “me only,” everybody’s alone; one’s self, building a little fortress. It’s really rather impoverished and sad when we consider what’s happening now; that there are still schools of composition, but it’s not the same thing. We are trying to make it in terms of well, it’s a yuppie generation. We’re not pleased anymore by being cooler. We don’t want to be misfits anymore, like Charles Iides, misunderstood, and different from everyone else. We want to be appreciated by the media.

In fact, we don’t feel that we exist unless the television or the newspapers pay attention to us. The newspapers and the television, they are the princes that Haydn and Mozart revered. You know, in those days Haydn wrote about Mozart—a touching letter—saying this great musician, Mozart, the greatest composer of our time, how is it possible that no prince has yet taken him under his wings and given him a job, because you literally didn’t exist. The princes were the tastemakers. They were like the media today.

Today you don’t exist unless you’re in the newspaper.
It’s interesting what happened. For instance, twenty years ago, when somebody said, “oh this young person, he is really interesting.” People listened up, said, “interesting, well lets find out more about him.” Nowadays, if you say interesting, “oh no, doesn’t matter, not important.” But when you say today, “so and so is successful,” then he becomes interesting. [audience laughs]

Suddenly, “oh really,” it’s really; we admire success today. An so, again, we traded the mistake of the ivory tower for another mistake, which is this kind of, awe of success, which of course certain people have a talent for and others don’t. Somebody like Charles Iides had no talent for it. He, to me, is the greatest romantic.

I don’t think we are living now in a neo-romantic era because romantics were all misfits. They were strange people. You realize Charles Iides wrote this music and he was a great businessman during the day and composed at night; and he refused to take a copyright out because he decided that his music was for the people. He had a great American, democratic dream. His music was for everyone, and no one cared and nobody
wanted it. Now that is, to me, a great romantic. We’ve never had a more, greater example of a romantic than Charles Ides.

Well nowadays, a misfit is really someone undesirable. You, you want a person to be successful and efficient. Even a conductor, for instance, what is the sign of a good conductor today? The main thing, I hate to say it myself but it’s true, the most important thing is efficiency. Why? Because time costs so much money. Every minute with an orchestra costs about a thousand dollars, so you can’t waste a minute. You’ve got to be efficient. So what happens to these eccentric conductors of the past like Furtwängler and Klemperer, no good now. You need jet-set conductor who can make things work quickly and everything has become very different, very success oriented.

You know, that’s not necessarily bad.
If you have the talent for success, than it’s good.
But what happens to those who don’t?
They’re simply not being regarded, they never get known.
So there are many sides to all these problems. I’m just bringing the up, not really to criticize our time, because there were other things wrong in previous times, but to pose the problem to you. I don’t really have answers I just raise questions.

We do have all kinds of interesting changes to date, for instance, we’ve gotten rid of other bad things, lets say Stokowski-Haydn-Bach. The kind of blown up arrangements of Bach that we used to have to suffer, that were self-aggrandizing the performer, when the performer put something hyphenated together with the composer and he thinks that he’s doing music a great service by romanticizing it, by streamlining it, by making it more accessible to the public at large.

Well, it’s a good thing that we don’t have that anymore.
Today we have authentic performance practice.
Now people think that that’s a great advance.
It’s just as bad; believe me, because, first of all, what is the scholarship for authenticity?

It’s a very dangerous thing. We have now records coming out that show you the “Messiah” of Handel, instead of a chorus, just four voices soprano, one alto, tenor, and bass. Real authentic because that’s the way the first performance was of Handel’s “Messiah.”

Yes but the first performance was in a hospital, and Handel hated it. And he put his own money into a second performance where he had a large choir.

So, you see, the scholarship is often so sloppy.
First of all, we should not worry about the practice of the time, but we should worry about what the composers wanted. And since they were misfits and rather unique, they didn’t necessarily approve of the practice of their time. Because the practice of the time usually is geared towards making the average, which means the mediocre, sound better.

What is the practice today?
My guess, if it’s weak, it’s miked, it sounds powerful, it gives you a sort of a feeling, and gives you an ambiance, you feel that something is happening and you’re enveloped in it, it makes you feel good, if it’s miked. Well, that’s okay for them, for the average. But I would hate to think that everything that we write that is not made to be
miked, a hundred years later somebody will come and say, “that was the practice of the time, you’ve got to mike it.”

Take ornaments, the meaning of the ornaments because had it in the baroque period. Everybody puts in more and more ornaments, but we all know that mediocre food is better if we put in a lot of spices, a lot of salt, and a lot of pepper, right? And the food is better. That’s what you do with average food. If you have great food, you don’t want to spoil it with all that gravy and all those spices. In the same way Bach knew exactly where he wanted his ornaments. He put them in where he wanted them, and not where he didn’t want them.

So what is so great about the scholarship that tells us that baroque practice means ornaments and therefore we have to put in ornaments all over the place, when it makes actually Bach sound like Telemann, or like Vivaldi or like any other baroque composer because you get that gravy, that hides the uniqueness.

I’d rather violate the practice all the time and get to the uniqueness of the composer.

I think that is more important than the practice of the time.

There is a lot of scholarship that isn’t really understood correctly.

Beethoven’s metronome marks, for instance, is another area that is so full of misunderstandings. Written records are coming out with so-called correct Beethoven metronome markings, then suddenly we find out that the metronome markings are by his nephew.

I’m not joking.

The special markings are nice and clear in the handwriting of the nephew and he got them from the conversation books of Beethoven, the diary conversation books. And he didn’t even read them right. Now that we know the conversation books are the latest record Mr. Norrington is totally wrong, off the mark.

You can see how when, we really, everyone understands, I mean, okay we get rid of an old mistake, but we’ve fallen into a new trap, maybe.

Maybe I’ve talked enough.

Maybe it’s time for questions, or . . . you name it.

*Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant 2007-08*