A couple of years ago, as I was starting the work that would become Street Symphony, I was invited to perform at the Patton State Hospital in San Bernardino. I was invited by a clinical psychologist who informed me that everyone incarcerated at Patton was there because they had committed a serious, often violent crime due to a severe mental illness. I had never engaged an audience like this before in my life. And believing in the universal power of music, I picked the most universal and most powerful piece of music that a violinist could perform, which is the Chaconne from the Partita in D minor by Johann Sebastian Bach. Yeah. If you can tell by my tone that things didn’t go well, it’s because things did not go well. I started performing for this group of people and it was one of those rare times where as a performer you actually begin to believe that things are going well in the concert. And so I was playing. I was getting towards the end of the Chaconne. I felt like, okay, I’m going to get like a decent round of applause and we’ll do some dialogue, I’ll play an encore and it’ll be great.

Instead, when I finished I got crickets. Like, nothing. There’s not much worse for the fragile self-esteem of an orchestral musician than to have nothing happen from an audience. A gentleman in the middle of the room, an inmate who happened to be African-American, stood up and said, “Son, after all of that do you not know any songs we know?” And the first thing that came to my mind was the Titanic theme song. And then immediately how there could not possibly be something worse to play in a state hospital than the Titanic theme song.

And so I floundered. I turned red. I was sputtering for words. And in what turns out to be the greatest music lesson of my life, he started to sing to me. To me. He started to sing a song called “Jesus on the Main Line.” I had to actually go back and look up the lyrics. And it turns out that this song was actually one of the freedom songs. It was a song that was sung during the civil rights movement. “Jesus is on the main line, call him up and tell him what you want. If you’re down and out and want to get out, tell him what you want. If you’re sick and you want to get well, tell him what you want.”

I’ve had a couple of years to think about that experience and a couple more years to reconsider ever playing the Chaconne ever again. But what I hear now in that man’s request and in that man’s song wasn’t “do you know something that will entertain me?” but rather, “Do you see me? Do you know who I am? Do you know my history? Will you reflect who I am while you stand on that stage?”
I spend most of my mornings and evenings on stage with one of the greatest orchestras in the country. But most afternoons I’m in a community known as Skid Row. In walking distance of Walt Disney Concert Hall, Skid Row is the epicenter of the crisis of homelessness in America today. LA County is home to over 60,000 people experiencing chronic homelessness. And nestled within the bright lights of downtown Los Angeles, Skid Row is a community of nearly 2,000 people living in tents or simply sleeping on the sidewalk, in and out of clinics and shelters.

Folks in Skid Row, usually poor people of color, often find themselves battling some form of mental illness or addiction. As the de facto treatment of mental illness in the United States is incarceration, many people living in Skid Row also face the revolving door of mass incarceration in the largest county jail system on the planet, which also effectively is the largest psychiatric institution on the planet.

In fact, the drop off point for people emerging from incarceration in southern California jails and prisons is a place in Skid Row called the Nickel. It’s the intersection of Fifth and San Pedro where the threat of relapse and retribution is possibly more available than opportunities for recovery and redemption.

The LA County jails and the Skid Row community are the heart center of the work of Street Symphony, which serves to place social justice at the center of world-class musical engagement. As a community often described as a disgrace, a community defined by generational trauma, Skid Row is also one of the most vibrant and resilient, brave and artistic communities of people living in America today.

As my dear friend, colleague and Street Symphony’s composer-in-residence Reena Esmail says, “For people living in Skid Row, music is not a form of entertainment, it’s a lifeline.” The grassroots network of nearly 70 musicians who comprise Street Symphony are my colleges in the LA Philharmonic and LA Master Chorale, studio and recording musicians, young emerging artists, my students from the Longy School of Music and the Colburn School, and conservatories all over the country, as well as musicians from the jazz, klezmer, Afro-Cuban, reggae, and mariachi traditions, which comprise just some of the vibrant fabric of art in Los Angeles today.

For us musicians, this work has become a lifeline as well. This work reminds us why we ever became musicians in the first place, to connect with the world around us, to ask questions and to tell stories. I get to spend a lot of time stuck in traffic in Los Angeles. Usually I’m on my way to rehearsal or a concert in between meetings with donors and partners and musicians. And in a sense that’s a very real metaphor for the conversations we’re about to have. For artists, our job is not in-housed in any one space, but rather between spaces. Our greatest good and greatest impact is not achieved only on stage at the concert hall or only in the county jail, but rather as my mentor and hero Liz Lerman puts it, our work is to literally hike the horizontal between these places. It is the artist’s job to place her body and her artistry in the void, in the divide between inmate and deputy and policy maker, in the voids created and perpetuated by structural violence and institutional racism, in the void between how we think of ourselves as professional artists and how we live as engaged citizens in the world.
As we convene this conversation on achieving the greatest impact, we are surrounded by artists and arts leaders in this room who commit to groundbreaking new ways to show up to the world around them. Musicians like Juan Ramirez Hernandez, Erin Hannigan, Jody Chafee, John Beck, and Jeffrey Barker, the recipients of the Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service, whose stories we will hear tomorrow. Orchestras small and large, new and established, ranging from the activist orchestra A Dream Unfinished to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra itself form diverse ensembles and initiatives which look and sound like their communities, while partnering with advocacy organizations to produce musical programs which reflect the issues and concerns facing our nation today, such as police brutality, gun violence, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the current immigration crisis.

The Eugene Symphony creates opportunities for dialogue between musicians, members of their staff and their board of directors in curating and creating community programs. The Kennedy Center upholds the presence of the arts in democratic participation by activating and championing the voices of citizen artists throughout the country.

At Street Symphony we create a new organizational and artistic structure which is nimble, highly local, and grassroots, with a board, a staff, and artists all in lock-step with a mission to have a lasting impact on historically and presently oppressed communities. Our greatest impact is determined by the nature of our conversations with our partners, our musicians, and our audiences.

As artists and art leaders we must reclaim the conversations about why we became artists in the first place. This conference is a call to action, a time for us to reframe our conversations away from the double bottom line of fiscal growth and so-called artistic excellence, beyond the endless work of centennial celebrations and endowment campaigns, and to what really matters to our country today. It is as much our job to heal and inspire as it is to disrupt and provoke. This is our time to ask the usual inefficient and always uncomfortable questions about how we will adapt to our entire field rapidly shifting in social and cultural ways. How we are going to adapt to unprecedented human migration and ecological devastation.

It’s time for us to truly reflect the concerns of a nation grappling with a legacy of toxic patriarchy and atavistic institutionalized racism. All while being brave enough to grapple with how those same issues fuel the internal workings of our own institutions.

Right now our nation looks to us in order to make meaning for ourselves and the world around us. Our communities look to us to use the music we know and love, to use the artistic process itself to create new, restorative cultures for all people, whoever and wherever they are. When we engage in this joyful work we assume our natural seat at the table as leaders of a vibrant national, cultural discourse.

We here are charged with creating a pathway from arts engagement to true civic engagement where we might hold up an honest mirror to American and global society in desperate search of their common humanity.
Now, the global search for common humanity was sort of the last thing on my mind when I joined the LA Phil in 2007. I was 19. It was my first audition. And I seriously thought that I had more of a chance of jumping off a chair and landing on the moon than I did winning a job in the LA Phil. But, after about ten years in the orchestra, what continues to take my breath away is that I joined not just a world-class orchestra, but a world-class community of people. There were musicians in that orchestra, musicians like Meredith Snow and John Lofton, who are in this room today, musicians who literally adopted me, invited me into their homes, cooked me meals, opened bottles of wine that I wasn’t legally allowed to drink yet, and then after we were just buzzed enough we would read string quartets. And what I realize now is that that’s how they were teaching me. That’s how they were teaching me about how to blend my sound and play with a good articulation and listen to other voices in the texture.

However, as I joined the LA Philharmonic I also became part of another story, the story of a man named Nathaniel Anthony Ayers who was one of the first black men to study at the Juilliard School in Manhattan in the 1970s. Nathaniel in his junior year was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. He dropped out of Juilliard and ended up living in the Second Street Tunnel in downtown Los Angeles.

Now at one point Steve Lopez, the LA Times columnist that Jesse [Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, in his introduction] alluded to earlier, called a man at the LA Phil named Adam Crane who has some small job with a small orchestra on the East Coast somewhere. Adam Crane is now the vice president of external affairs for the New York Philharmonic. But at the time he was working PR in Los Angeles and Steve was asking Adam if Nathaniel could attend a rehearsal at Walt Disney Concert Hall because when they tried to buy tickets to come to the hall, Nathaniel said, “No one should have to pay good money to sit next to someone like me in a concert hall.”

So many of the musicians in the LA Philharmonic, myself and Adam, we became part of Nathaniel’s life. There was one time when Nathaniel invited me to his 57th birthday party, which was actually held on Beethoven’s birthday instead of his own birthday because Nathaniel would rather celebrate Beethoven’s birthday than his own birthday, and it was in a bowling alley. That week at the LA Phil we were performing a program of Beethoven’s First and Fourth symphonies. And Nathaniel and I started talking. I happened to have my violin with me, and he asked, very pointedly, specific questions that only a complete string nerd could ask, about how on earth we played that complicated passage work in the last movement of Beethoven’s Fourth Symphony.

So I just pulled out my violin and showed him how I was practicing. A couple of months later I got a call from Steve saying that Nathaniel wanted a violin lesson with me. And it was after one of these lessons that I began to realize that this man had a savant-like knowledge of music. He knew every single Beethoven opus number. He even knew those weird Schubert numbers and Haydn numbers. He was someone who deserved to be on our stage.

And this question started to emerge for me: that how was it that this man ended up living in the Second Street Tunnel? There was a time when Adam and I went out for sushi in Little Tokyo after one of our
lessons with Nathaniel. We’re driving back across the Second Street Tunnel and we see Nathaniel setting up his milk crates on the side of the tunnel to begin practicing. And we almost crashed the car. I don’t know if that’s as much about Adam Crane really not being someone who should drive vehicles, or about the fact that what we actually felt was the crash of our own privilege, that we were asking a homeless, mentally ill man to push a shopping cart from Skid Row to Walt Disney Concert Hall because that’s where we felt comfortable engaging him.

So from that time we started to visit Nathaniel in the city. I remember playing in front of the Colburn School, playing at the corner of Hill and Fourth, and eventually playing in Skid Row. Playing in this courtyard surrounded by rusting metal bars topped with barbed wire. In this courtyard, our lesson and our music and our conversation mattered as much as it did in the concert hall. It became very clear to us that this man could have only been homeless, not only because he was mentally ill and poor, but absolutely because he was also black. And we started to ask how many more Nathaniels are out here. How many more artists are in this community who aren’t going to have a book and a movie made about them?

So I started to reach out to clinics and shelters in Skid Row. I would take those same LA Philharmonic musicians who would feed me and teach me in their homes, and I wouldn’t quite tell them exactly where we were going. But I would tell them that we would have lunch afterwards on me.

So we would go to the Department of Mental Health clinic in Skid Row and play your typically drive-by Beethoven program where we play like two movements of Beethoven and some string quartets, some Christmas carols, and then we’re like, "We’re done. We’re done with this." Then, at the ends of our programs, or even between movements, people in our audience would raise their hands. And we, classical musicians would go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, I did not sign up for human contact." Right?

Yet what would happen is that our audiences would ask us questions, the kinds of questions that we had never asked ourselves. The kinds of questions that we don’t get to have conversations around with our audiences in our concert halls. The kinds of questions that are almost taboo in conservatory, which is, why do you play music? Who are you? Why should I love the music that you love? Why do you love it?

And slowly the conversation began to change because we started to rehearse our programs differently. We started to program less music and have more space for dialogue to talk about what we actually were discussing in rehearsals. We all know that chamber music is that beautiful conversation, and in a sense Street Symphony became a natural extension of that conversation where we were able to go in to Twin Towers Jail, into a place that is one of the largest psychiatric facilities in the country. Where we would play for men in a mentally ill ward and we’d play the music of Schumann. One of the inmates actually said to us, "You know, Schumann died in a place like this." And suddenly our entire understanding of how we played Schumann completely changed. We would actually feel free going into a shelter, a clinic, or a county jail because we knew that our music-making wasn’t about how perfectly we thought we played, but rather in how beautifully and transparently we connected with our audiences.
We’re going to cue up a video that I’d like to share with you all. One of the first questions that we asked at Street Symphony was how many more Nathaniels are out here. And in the course of now nearly 400 events over the last eight years presented at five LA County jails and three partners in the Skid Row community, we’ve met hundreds and hundred so Nathaniels. And Ben Shirley is just one of them. Let’s play the video, please.

[Video Presentation not transcribed]

I want to share a story before our next video, which is about our composer-in-residence, Reena Esmail. As we started to open up our structure of how we created programs, we started to bring in composers who would actually create pieces of music that were about and composed with the Skid Row community. And there was a time where Reena, who had actually trained as a Western classical composer, but who had won a Fulbright to go to India, composed a string quartet based on Indian ragas. We took it into Twin Towers Jail to perform for a group of women. I kind of like watching my colleagues squirm when I throw them into the deep end a little bit. I asked Reena if she would sing each raga. She had this kind of terror around singing in public. But she thought, what the hell, I’m in a county jail. And she sang.

And she sang beautifully. And at the end of our concert the women in the audience demanded an encore from her, from Reena. A couple of months later Reena went into a different county jail in a totally different part of Los Angeles and a woman in the audience actually said, “Are you going to sing for us today?” And Reena said, “No, I don’t like singing in public.” And this lady said, “Bullshit, girl. You sang for us at Towers. You’re gonna sing for us today.” It’s just one of these amazing examples of how when we go into communities our ideas of excellence change. We have to discover new tools and skills to be able to do this work in a way that is truly authentic and equitable.

“The Messiah” was written in 1741 and the first performance was delivered in Dublin with the goal of releasing 142 men from debtors’ prison. When the concerts were held in London they were not held in a concert hall or a cathedral, but rather in the Foundling Hospital. And in fact if you look at the marketing material through the 1740s, because they do exist, of this concert, men are asked to leave their swords at home and women were asked not to wear hoop skirts because they wanted to pack in as many people into the Foundling Hospital as possible.

A couple of years ago a few members of the Skid Row community approached us with a desire to present a sing-along of Handel’s “Messiah” in Skid Row. I’m going to tell a little bit more of that story at the end of this talk in a couple of minutes. But we have another video that we’re going to run. To preface this video, the video you just saw, as well as the entire live stream of this third Messiah Project, was actually shared on the Kennedy Center’s Facebook page. One of the things that Reena and I, as citizen artist fellows with the Kennedy Center developed with the Kennedy Center team, was a way to keep our work and our actions very local and intentional, but to share them on a global scale. And I think at this point over 11,000 people have watched the live stream of this Messiah Project. So let’s run this video, please.
The round of applause belongs to the Skid Row community. One of the things that you don’t see in this video is all of the workshops, the before and after, that happens with any beautiful transformative communal experience. But the musicians of Street Symphony are also in constant dialogue with another organization in Skid Row called the Urban Voices Project, which is Skid Row’s community choir. They are currently fiscally sponsored by Street Symphony. And musicians like Brian and Christina are members of the Urban Voices Project community.

After the Messiah Project concert happens, musicians from Street Symphony, members of our orchestra and our chorus, go into the Skid Row community and hand out hundreds of hygiene kits. These are little bags that contain soap and toiletries and feminine hygiene products and socks and razors, and these kits are shopped for by the musicians. They do their own crowd funding campaign for them. They even assemble the kits during the rehearsal for Messiah Project. And then the handing out of the kits is actually the most important part of the Messiah Project.

There’s one last thing I want to point out about this video and then I’ll wrap up this talk, which is to say at some point during the video you saw a man standing up and wiping tears from his eyes. Before we began the live stream we had to make sure that all the technical stuff was working well. So I invited a mostly female mariachi ensemble to open the Messiah Project. They were playing songs, from “Feliz Navidad”, to “Guantanamera.” And the moment that the musicians started to play “Guantanamera,” this man in the back stood up. He put his fists in the air and he started to shout every single word of the song. And he was weeping.

Once we began the live stream our lead violinist, Jazmin Morales, led the mariachi ensemble towards the back of the room to watch the Messiah Project. And this man basically accosted Jazmin and he held onto her and he shook her and he said, “I haven’t heard that song in 45 years. I haven’t heard that song since I left Cuba. And the only reason why I’m gonna stay and listen to the rest of this gringo music is because you saw me. It’s because you saw me.”

The indigenous Australian artist and activist Lilla Watson says, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." At Street Symphony we have only one organizational best practice, and that’s to show up. We show up to be in relationship with our neighbors wherever and whoever they are. We have to show up because the Skid Row community matters. Their stories matter. Their neighborhoods matter. Their lives matter. We show up because they teach us about resilience, about perseverance, and the true meaning of artistry. They are our teachers, our friends, our colleagues, and our community. We show up because our liberation is bound up in theirs.

Every person deserves access to a creative and expressive voice. And every person deserves access to the condition in which that voice is heard and received. At Street Symphony, our work now is to move into
a place where the Skid Row community is not only in our audience or on our stage, but is on our staff, is on our executive staff, and is on our board of directors, actively curating and engineering their definition of social change through music. We strive to create an organization which looks like the community we serve. Our power lies not only in sharing our stage, but in sharing our entire organization.

Our art becomes stronger when we are brave enough to open ourselves up into trust, cooperation, and community. This is a movement of radical mutuality where the communities of artists and arts leaders housed in our institutions come into honest and particular relationships with the communities who seek to participate and make meaning in our rapidly shifting social and cultural landscape. This is a mutuality which challenges us to throw away old ideas of expertise and best practices and explore a new, transformative possibility where our artistry does not lie in presenting the best version of music written in a different culture and a time, but rather how radically we welcome the communities on our margins into the center of the artistic process using our music, our process, and our space to convene conversations and experiences toward the goal of our common humanity. This is the literal meaning of culture, to tend and cultivate and redefine our humanity with each other.

At Street Symphony we started out wanting to meet more people like Nathaniel Ayers. We are awestruck at the power and resilience of the Skid Row community as we witness the musicians we have met step into their own power and into their own advocacy, taking charge of their lives. We watch and cheer as Ben Shirley becomes a mentor to aspiring composers living in Skid Row. Our vocalist fellows, Christina Collier and Brian Palmer, found a way to be supported by the community they helped build themselves. They learned to ask for what they needed in their own lives. Brian recently reconnected with his daughter and got a license to pour concrete. Christina recently graduated from months of grueling training to become a bank teller. They both still show up to choir rehearsals and lessons. And Brian, in fact, recently offered to start paying for his own lessons.

"Sometimes all we can do," to quote Kendrick Lamar, "is sit down and be humble" and watch the Skid Row community move into the breathtaking advocacy that teaches us how to be citizens. Brian likes to say that one act of love he knows for sure is listening. Our greatest impact lies in how well we listen and how we show up to the ideas and issues which matter to the Skid Row community.

To use a musical metaphor, our job isn’t to be the soloist or the maestro, it’s to be the accompanist, maybe to be the arranger. Our job is to listen louder than we sing, play, or speak. It's to hold space for the conversations. As we listen to and invest in the ideas of the Skid Row community, the space for that conversation becomes the organization itself. And when we leave Skid Row our organization becomes a pathway to use our power and our privilege to tell the story of this neighborhood and this community as one of the most vibrant and artistic communities in America today.

I’m going to end with one last story, and I tell this story with the permission of the man who it’s about. Don Garza was a combat veteran, a Marine who served in Desert Storm. And he was dishonorably discharged, so he is not eligible for any of the benefits that veterans are usually eligible for. On top of that,
when Don came home to Dallas/Fort Worth he was disowned by his family. His family said, "You shot at people who couldn’t shoot back and you’re a disgrace."

Don went on to serve at the naval base in Okinawa, where he tried to commit suicide. And he wasn’t given any treatment or care. In fact, he was placed in solitary confinement, which is the worst possible thing to do to someone who has suicidal ideation.

The thing that kept Don alive, that he told me through months of conversations as I began to coax out this story of who he was, is that when he was in the brig of this ship all he could do was sing to himself because he loved singing the "Messiah" as a child. And I mentioned earlier that the Messiah Project was actually not our idea but the idea of the Skid Row community, in large part it was Don Garza’s idea to have a "Messiah" sing-along happen in Skid Row.

Don, similar to Nathaniel, ended up wandering across the United States. Came back to LA. Lived in a tend in Skid Row for over ten years and still lives in SRO housing in Skid Row where he spent another ten years. And when we presented our first Messiah Project I watched as Don Garza sat in the very front row and he wept as he heard the solos. And then he would jump back into the stage and into the chorus and he would sing all of the choruses from memory. And I watched this dance.

After that very first Messiah Project, completely unprompted by me, our tenor soloist, a man named Daniel Chaney, started to give voice lessons to Don. And it was a time when Daniel himself was actually diagnosed with terminal cancer. And even as he was dying, Daniel kept giving lessons to Don Garza. And in our second Messiah Project, Don was the tenor soloist.

Now for this man who was so hyper-vigilant that he cannot close his eyes to go to sleep at night, for him to stand in front of 300 members of his own community and sing the words "Comfort ye. Comfort you, your warfare is accomplished," that’s not only great music, that’s the beginning of justice as well.

Thank you very much.