



**Written Testimony in Support of FY10 Appropriations for the
National Endowment for the Arts**

Submitted by Linda Ronstadt

Singer

House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment & Related Agencies

“Arts = Jobs”

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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to be here. My name is Linda Ronstadt, I am a singer, and I am pleased to be a part of the Americans for the Arts delegation and to come to our nation’s capitol for Arts Advocacy Day. I am also here to testify in favor of a Fiscal Year 2010 appropriation of \$200 million for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

Before I discuss the topic of my remarks, I would like to share a bit about my personal background, which informs my conversation with you today.

I grew up in the desert in Tucson, Arizona on what was then a rural route. My grandfather’s cattle ranch had been whittled down considerably in size as a result of the financial storms of the last depression, but we were pretty happily established there amid the cactus and the cottonwoods. My family had built a little compound with my grandparents in one house, my father and mother and the four of us kids in the other.

I don’t remember when there wasn’t music going on in some form - my father whistling while he was figuring out how to fix something, my older brother practicing the “Ave Maria” for his performance with the Tucson Boys Choir, my sister sobbing a Hank Williams song with her hands in the dishwasher, my little brother struggling to play the huge double bass.

Sundays, my father would sit at the piano and play most anything in the key of C and sing in his beautiful baritone: love songs in Spanish for my mother, maybe a few Sinatra songs while he remembered single life before children and responsibilities, and before the awful war that we won, that time. My mother would play Ragtime or something from Gilbert and Sullivan.

When we got tired of listening to our own house we would tramp across to my grandmother’s where we got a pretty regular diet of classical music. They had what they called a Victrola and would listen to their favorite opera excerpts played on 78-RPM recordings. On Saturdays, they would tune in to the Metropolitan Opera radio broadcast or sit at the piano trying to unravel a simple Beethoven, Brahms or Liszt composition from a page of sheet music.

Evenings, if the weather wasn't too hot or freezing and the mosquitoes not threatening to carry us away to the land of Oz, we would haul our guitars outside and sing songs until it was time to go in, which was when we had run out of songs.

There was no TV, the radio couldn't wander around with you because it was tethered to the wall, and we didn't get enough allowance to buy concert tickets. In any case, there weren't many big acts playing in Tucson, so if we wanted music, we had to make our own. The music I heard there, in those two houses, before I was ten years old, provided me with enough material to explore for my entire career, which has stretched from the late sixties until now.

It gave me something else too, something even bigger than that. It gave me an enormous yardstick to measure my experiences against generations of other people. It placed me in a much larger cultural context, and helped me to locate my humanity.

Sometimes, it shocked me when music revealed the intensity of an emotion I was feeling, something I hadn't even realized I felt so keenly or disturbingly until I had a musical lens to bring it into focus. As renowned music educator Karl Paulnack, Music Director and conductor of the orchestra at the Boston Conservatory said about great music: "It has the ability to crack your heart open like a walnut; it can make you cry over sadness you didn't know you had. Music can slip beneath our conscious reality to get at what's really going on inside us the way a good therapist does." Years later, I would have the same emotional experience paging through works of classic literature. It occurred to me: no school curriculum would be complete without the works of Shakespeare, Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, Henry James, Edith Wharton or F. Scott Fitzgerald. Why then would it be complete without a working knowledge of Mozart, Beethoven or George Gershwin?

In the United States we spend millions of dollars on sports because it promotes teamwork, discipline, and the experience of learning to make great progress in small increments. Learning to play music together does all this and more.

José Abreu, the founder of El Sistema, the children's music curriculum currently considered to be the best in the world, says this: "An orchestra is a community that comes together with the fundamental objective of agreeing with itself. Therefore, the person who plays in an orchestra begins to live the experience of agreement. And what does the agreement of experience mean? Team practice, the practice of a group that recognizes itself as interdependent where one is responsible for others and the others are responsible for oneself. Agree on what? To create beauty."

Karl Paulnack has also described how the arts, including music, were able to survive even the nightmarish conditions of the Nazi concentration camps: "The camps were without money, without hope, without commerce, without recreation, without basic respect, but they were not without art. Art is part of survival; art is part of the human spirit, an unquenchable expression of who we are. Art is one of the ways in which we say, 'I am alive, and my life has meaning.'"

Music exists to help us identify our feelings. Through music one can safely express strong emotions like anger, sorrow, or frustration that might otherwise find a release in violence, or, just as bad, cause one to seek the numbing relief of drugs.

I'm continually stunned and deeply concerned when I hear groups of school children trying to sing something as simple as "Happy Birthday" and they are unable to match pitch. Many recent school

children's performances that I have observed sounded like a gray wash of tone-deaf warbling. Not the children's fault.

Increasingly, people's experience with music is passive. We delegate our musical expression to professionals. Music cannot be learned without both listening and playing. We need to teach our children to sing their own songs and play their own instruments, not just listen to their iPods. Do we really want our children's musical experience to be limited to the mainstream commercial music that is blared at them continually? They deserve and are fully capable of learning to express themselves in the more subtle and profound ways of traditional and classical music.

As I am now 62, I have become concerned about keeping my mental faculties intact and recently acquired, from National Public Radio, a program I can do at home called Brain Fitness. It was developed by Michael Merzenich, a leading researcher on neuroplasticity, which is how our brains can change and adapt to meet new challenges like stroke, head trauma, or old age. When I opened up the program on my laptop, I was very surprised to discover that hours and hours and hours of the exercises were based on one's ability to distinguish pitch. It turns out that this ability has a great deal to do with how our brains process and store information. Do you know a way of putting in sequence 26 things and remembering them? Well, the alphabet has 26 letters and we all learned it the same way: A-B-C-D-E-F-G... I can still remember a bit of a grammar lesson the nuns at Saints Peter and Paul School drilled into my head by using the tune of "Sweet Betsy From Pike." "First person refers to the speaker you see. For personal pronouns use I, mine, and me".

For thousands of years human history was passed down the generations using music as a way to remember long sagas before they could be written down. In these modern times, we tend to think of music as an entertainment or something that helps a troop of soldiers to step out smartly in a parade. Music is not just entertainment. Music has a profound biological resonance and it is an essential component of nearly every human endeavor. Oliver Sacks, the noted neurologist, wrote a book called "Awakenings" in which he describes his patients whose brains were severely damaged by Parkinson's disease. These patients were unable to walk, but when music was played they were able to get up and dance across the floor. Music has an alternate set of neurological pathways through our bodies and our brains.

Music programs have a very discernable positive effect on our children's education. A recent survey by Harris Interactive of 450 randomly selected high schools revealed that students who are enrolled in a music program have a 90.2% graduation rate, while those who take no music classes have a 72.9% graduation rate. Christopher Johnson, professor of music education and associate dean of the School of Fine Arts at Kansas University, conducted a landmark study comparing test scores of students in a music program with students who had no music. Professor Johnson later testified before Congress, presenting some eye-opening data: students of all regions and socio-economic backgrounds who studied music scored significantly higher on math and English tests than students who did not study music.

Recently I have been invited to sing at several schools. I agreed on the condition that I not sing from the stage to a large school assembly but rather in the classrooms of first and second graders so that they could hear un-amplified music in a more natural setting the way I experience it in my living room. I know that many of these children don't have families that play music at home. In fact, most of them have had no experience with anything but recorded music. They think music comes out of their television or computer screens, not out of people's hands and mouths. After they got over the shock of discovering that we didn't have volume knobs on our heads or on our acoustic guitars, they

settled down and listened to our selection of folk songs from the early part of the twentieth century. These were not children's songs. They were songs about building the railroad, exploring unknown territory and the loneliness of being a stranger in a new land. Afterward, we talked about the stories in the songs and how they might apply to their lives.

There are some excellent programs that promote live performances in the schools and they deserve to be supported. Yo-Yo Ma, the renowned cellist who performed recently at President Obama's inauguration, has volunteered his time to perform in schools with the help of an organization called Young Audiences.

In my hometown of Tucson, an organization called OMA (Opening Minds to the Arts) has made a tremendous impact in helping children of many different cultures and languages to assimilate into the Tucson Unified School District. Children of African refugees, Native Americans, and Mexican immigrants, all have benefited from learning music, the universal language, as they struggle to become proficient in English and excel in their other subjects. In only the first year the program was implemented, the dramatic rise in test scores in schools being served by OMA surprised teachers and researchers alike.

Currently, I am acting as the artistic director of the Mexican Heritage Foundation in San Jose, California. We have a mariachi program that has functioned successfully in the schools since 1992 and an exciting math and music program in development.

And finally, as you may know, there is a conductor of staggering talent who has been hailed as the next Leonard Bernstein. His name is Gustavo Dudamel and he has toured the United States and Europe with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra to ecstatic reviews. He joins the Los Angeles Philharmonic as their Music Director in the fall. Perhaps you have seen him featured on 60 Minutes or in other national or international press. Here's what matters to us today: this young conductor has a passion for music education because he knows its true power to alter the course of young lives. He was brought up in Venezuela in the extraordinary music education system that I mentioned earlier called El Sistema. It has existed for 35 years, and now reaches over 250,000 students and their families. A driving force in Dudamel's life is to transform communities through participation in music. He is leading the Los Angeles Philharmonic's YOLA or Youth Orchestra L.A. project, which is designed to serve children who have the most need and the fewest resources.

ACCESS TO QUALITY MUSIC EDUCATION SHOULD NOT BE ONLY FOR THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD IT. THE BENEFITS ARE TOO GREAT. Today, children ages 7-16 in the urban core of Los Angeles receive free instruments, after-school music instruction and orchestra experience. The Los Angeles Philharmonic has already touched the lives of hundreds of children and their families and has plans to reach more. Imagine what can be accomplished if we support the arts, engage 'at risk' youth and help them succeed in school and in their lives. For 'underserved' families, indeed for all families, participation in music and the arts can help people reclaim and achieve the American Dream.