

The Artist as Leader: Jane Chu



Since her appointment as the 11th chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts by President Barack Obama in 2014, Jane Chu has worked tirelessly to support arts learning, affirm and celebrate America's rich and diverse cultural heritage, and promote equal access to the arts in every community across America. She is a hands-on artist leader, traveling to all 50 states and visiting hundreds of communities across the nation to see first-hand how the arts are impacting people and places. Chairman Chu's leadership style has resulted in professional success and encouraged a positive work environment. During her tenure, she has overseen increases to the NEA's Congressional budget appropriation, including a \$3 million increase approved in March 2018, and under her leadership, the NEA was twice ranked among the top five small agencies in Best Places to Work in the Federal Government.

In this insightful interview, Chairman Chu draws precise correlations between her artistic training and her leadership acumen, and the Kenan Institute is delighted to share it with you here.

CM: Can you begin by telling us about your upbringing and how your background might have informed your leadership style?

JC: Well, I am an only child, and when I was 8 years old I started taking piano lessons dutifully. When my father died I was 9 and I didn't really have enough words to express my grief over the loss of a parent. Likely, many 9-year-olds don't. I didn't. Some of it was because of my age, but some of it was because I grew up in a family that was Chinese, and I was speaking English at school, so I didn't have the vocabulary to fully express my loss. But music was there for me, and it was so soothing for me. The piano lessons that were just something to do really became much more meaningful as a result.

So I craved, growing up, any other opportunities I could to be in the arts. I looked for choirs to sing in and music camps. It was my social life, and I was in wind ensembles and band. And I took drawing lessons. But I became intellectually interested as well, because it was feeding me. I saw that it was really a vocabulary set in my mind because it was a form of expression that was going way beyond just the use of linear everyday conversations. I majored in music in college as a result of that, and it all stemmed from understanding and going deeper than just the dutiful activities that many times we do as kids, because this one hit home for me that it was a form of expression.

CM: How does that experience as a musician influence how you work as a leader?

JC: I know, because of my own personal involvement in the arts, that there are many approaches to leadership, and to have a tool belt of different skills and different approaches is a match with participating in the arts. If you're playing a repertoire of different composers, for example, you don't play Beethoven the same way you play Debussy, and similarly, you don't try to approach everybody exactly alike. So you may have some favorite compositions and ways of playing, but if I'm talking to someone who makes decisions, for example, through a very logical, step-by-step analysis, I will probably approach that person with a different manner than I will approach a person whose full decisions are made by feeling good. It's not one versus the other, but having an option to approach somebody so that they'll hear you. ... It's similar to making sure you've paid attention to the nuances of Beethoven, which are very different from the nuances of, say, Debussy. Even in my case with the piano, I think of things like whether you use a pedal on the piano, or even the touch of the keys might be different, depending on what composer is writing. So similarly, leadership skills have been that way for me.

... what I am aiming for in a leadership position is to have people who work with you — and for you — follow you because they want to, as opposed to follow because they're supposed to.

CM: So you were able to translate this idea of how you attune yourself as a musician to interpretation, to the idea of being able to translate to different audiences. I love that.

JC: The other piece, though, is that in leadership, there's so many different styles as well, and it's easy to think that because you're the anointed leader, everybody is going to do what you've asked. ... At the National Endowment for the Arts, people are very respectful of the different job descriptions and the job titles, and of me. I've appreciated that. And they would do what I ask just based upon a job title. But what I am aiming for in a leadership position is to have people who work with you — and for you — follow you because they want to, as opposed to follow because they're supposed to. And if you do it, if you want people to follow you because they

want to, it's because you've heard them and paid attention, and used the same nuances as you do in the arts. That's how I see the alignment.

CM: That wonderful ability to listen to other people, and also to inspire. I'm hearing that the arts may have taught you something about inspiration.

JC: When I look at myself and the people that I want to follow, it's because they've been inspiring to me. There's just something about that that makes people want to not only stay, but makes people want to feel like they belong. There are all kinds of people in the world who love their jobs, and then there's all kinds of people in the world who don't like their jobs. And then there's everything in between. But for the most part, across the board, people want to do a good job in whatever they're doing. And they want to feel like they belong. And so if we can find ways in our leadership to pay attention to them and notice the nuance of whatever it is that inspires them, then it might be more possible for them to say, you know, I do belong here.

CM: So many people who work at the National Endowment for the Arts, or who you interact with, are artists or have a relationship to the arts. Can you talk about how you draw on your experience as an artist when you engage with other artists?

JC: All of our staff like the arts a lot. And in some cases, people are practicing artists on the side, in everything from music and dance to literature and creative writing. And we've actually in the past had some staff whose hands have been in movies and a few things like that. So they do like it.

CM: Are you conscious of how you work with artists as a leader? Do you have a sense of how your leadership is different, or how it's informed by that shared vocabulary?

JC: Where I think it's different is actually that I tend to see situations in terms of systems and networks. I could have come to the National Endowment for the Arts and only focused on music, since I majored in music. But because I'm a systems thinker, I'm just looking at the entire system. Do we have a system and a network that empowers the arts, that empowers artists and empowers people being connected to the arts — individuals of all ages, communities of all sizes and shapes, and rural and remote, as well as densely populated places?

So when I'm looking at that system, and I know about the arts personally, it's a combination of that. How are the arts thriving in so many ways in this community versus that community, because when you've seen one community, you've really only seen one. And that's the beauty of the arts. It's less about saying everyone has to like one type of art, and much more about how do you get engaged with the arts, and how are the artists connecting to the communities, and what about themselves? Are they able to have an environment that's inspiring to them? So that's how I'm thinking about the arts, as opposed to talking one on one.

Now when I do get into situations like museums, I love to draw, so I'm always personally curious about techniques, especially when it comes to the arts. Techniques in music, and some specifics like that related to the field or genre. But for the most part, here, I have my systems hat on.

CM: Can you talk about the transition that you made from being primarily an artist to becoming a leader of an organization?

JC: It probably is the systems piece, because I can be a leader of myself and use the same qualities of paying attention to the nuances within me. I find that I'm a more effective leader when I know myself really well and figure out how to manage elements of myself. And in different situations, that calls out different aspects of me, so I pay close attention to the systems within me. I'm not just talking about the physical systems, but the emotional systems and what either trips my trigger or what inspires me, and I take that same mindset, or that same approach, into looking at systems. What's working in what part of the system? Are there glitches in that area, too? But I better know myself first. So that's where the similarities are.

CM: I hear the discipline of a performer in your self-knowledge, which I think of as being so critical to what we mean when we say performance is a discipline. That in order to both technically achieve what a great musician does, but also to emotionally achieve what a great musician does, you really have to have that deep self-leadership — the idea of the artist as a leader of themselves, first and foremost.

And then, what transition they make to the next level, when a producer, a director or someone who moves into arts administration starts to think about what is leadership of others? How or does the system provide any real keys to artists? In the years that I was training as an artist, there wasn't much dialogue with people about anything other than yourself as a performer. And so we had a system that was probably a little bit more self-focused. Now we're moving into a period of time where we're paying a lot more attention to our system and how to care for our system, and how to build up our system. The Kenan Institute is interested in trying to develop a new generation of leaders who really are thinking more consciously in this way.

Teaching others is good, but teaching others to be themselves, and know themselves, has got to be a key component before they can reach out to somebody else. Otherwise, they'll either have no leadership, or it will just not be as effective.

JC: Well, there are some elements of when I was trained as an artist in the conservatory way, which back then was about focusing on myself and separating myself from those surroundings, because we didn't want to be tainted by any type of commercialism or anything that would influence the purity, the authenticity of me. And the piece that I like about it, and what I keep, is that I don't want to be disingenuous. I still want to keep the purity of myself, and yet I feel stronger and able to reach out to others and hear them, and listen to those nuances because of the discipline of practicing.

I think it's great that you're reaching out and having people understand that this is a day and age where we're not sequestered by ourselves, that leadership involves jumping in the middle of a synthesis of different perspectives that may not totally seem like they fit together on paper. But in reality, this is what we are about in our lives: bringing together different perspectives, without force feeding everybody to be exactly alike.

But I have to also say that the ability for me to have figured out who I am — at least for the moment — and figure out almost every aspect of me physically, emotionally, mentally and all that, is an exercise that helps me. The more I know myself, the more I can reach out. So if you reach out so early, because you don't know yourself, you could lose yourself. And I think the strongest relationships we have with each other are usually ones where we can give each other more independence and more freedom, because we're secure enough within ourselves to know that we don't have to dictate every move somebody makes, but we can enter into a more balanced relationship.

So there is an element that says we better know ourselves first if we want to be a good leader. Teaching others is good, but teaching others to be themselves, and know themselves, has got to be a key component before they can reach out to somebody else. Otherwise, they'll either have no leadership, or it will just not be as effective.

CM: It sounds to me like there's a time-based and progression-based philosophy that you bring, that there could be a moment where you're more ready for leadership than other moments.

I think we're in situations now where artists can really come to the floor and show how inspiring they can be as leaders, because they know how to stand in the middle of ambiguity as opposed to following the next step.

JC: I'm not sure we've always ever arrived. But I am saying that I'm most effective in my leadership when I know myself. If you don't know yourself in a situation, I hope you know yourself enough to know that you don't know yourself. You have to know where you are with yourself, even if you don't know the answers, if you want to be an effective leader. Artists, I think, are one of the best ever to do this. We have an opportunity to demonstrate our leadership and effectiveness, not just in the arts but in so many situations, because we know how to stand in the middle of ambiguity. And ambiguity may be ambiguity in us, but can we manage it? Are we even leaders of ourselves, in the middle of ambiguity? That's a big deal. So as you teach others to lead, the old way was "do this, do that." Now it's "you better know yourself."

CM: What attributes do you think are the most important for an artist leader to have?

JC: For an artist leader, I think it is not only the ability to know yourself, but the ability to manage the parts of yourself. Because there will be times where you may feel something intense that is simply not going to be the most effective way to communicate a leadership stance. I'm not saying you would want to deny what you're feeling. But if you can figure out how to effectively manage it, frankly I think it would be some of the most effective leadership when you have figured out how to choreograph yourself in a way that honors what you're feeling and, at the same time, gets across to somebody else who is not feeling the same way you are.

That, to me, is real leadership that aligns with what artists know so much about themselves, and in those cases, it's often attributed to those nuances. Somebody else might say, that's just a nuance, our goal is to go from X to Y. And that is true. But how you go from X to Y is equally as important. You can end up really bringing along a group of people for a wonderful common

cause, because how you did something was just as important as what you do. And artists are wonderful at understanding the how as much as the what.

CM: That's beautiful. What about listening? I remember you once talked about the value of listening, and how that relates to being someone who profoundly listened as part of music training.

JC: Listening, paying attention visually, using your senses to pay attention to your environment, are part of that; how you do something is just as important as what you do. For example, musicians who are trained with the understanding of the nuance, or different styles, know the difference between mezzo forte and mezzo piano. And those are nuances that will also translate when you are either listening to others or paying attention to them. It can, if you have figured out how to manage it, translate to somebody else feeling so cared for, because you didn't gloss over something that meant so much to them. They didn't even articulate it, but you could just sense it, because you are an artist and you can pick up on that kind of stuff. Many people know the difference between galvanized steel and bronze, but artists know the difference between different types of steel, or they know azure blue from cerulean blue, as opposed to just blue. Those are similar nuances in terms of how you have paid attention to somebody in the areas that mean the most to them, and that can pull out a desire for them to feel like they belong or like they really felt heard. Artists are great at that. They have that at their ready, because that's what they do every single day.

CM: Did you ever conduct?

JC: Yes. I had to take all the conducting classes. It's very similar. I think I know where you're going with that. And that is, if you looked at a group of people, you could say, "No, basses, you're not as loud in this part of the music. And sopranos, come on out." Or "here's the part of the music where everybody follows prescriptively exactly the composition. Now we've reached a place in the music where you get to take a ride, and you get to make it up, and everybody else holds it steady." That's a good analogy related to leadership because you're following the prescription of music, and time is an element, too.

CM: It sounds to me that how you lead is almost like a composition through the day. I think of composition as being a combination of instincts and then tactics. They might be musical tactics in some cases, but in your case it's more about what my opportunities are, and what are my longer-term goals, and how do I advance my opportunity from moment to moment?

JC: It can be.

CM: Does that training as an artist make a better leader in some ways, because there is so much attunement in the disciplines of the arts?

I was in the Museum of Fine Arts recently, and there was a group of medical school interns in the gallery, sitting on little stools, and they were being asked to talk about the artwork there. It was part of their diagnosis classes, so it was really about noticing detail. I heard a report the next day at the conference I was attending that more than 150 medical schools

are now going to museums as a standard way to work on young interns' ability to describe detail, and also to be able to relate to each other.

JC: That's very important. Just to counterbalance that, there are times when you need to get out of the weeds as a leader, and not be so stuck. You could stay so stuck in the detail that you never advanced anything that was supposed to be done. I read in a business book ... that leadership is about being on the dance floor and on the balcony at the same time. So it is important to look at the nuances. But at the same time it is not helpful to be so down in the weeds that we didn't help move toward whatever the objective was. But how you do something to get from Y to Z is just as important as getting to Z.

CM: What advice would you have liked to have received when you were starting out as an artist leader? Is there anything that you wish you had heard that you would like to say to this next generation?

JC: I've loved every opportunity, even those where maybe I wish I had more advice. I just feel like everything counts. But what I would say to artist leaders is, you have so many more tools in your tool belt than you even know that you do. So you don't have to be force fed into a specific category or way of being. You can figure out who you are, because you come by this so naturally. So that would be the way to say, 'Go for it.'

Right now, the world around us is soothed when there are opportunities to have people who can stand in the middle of that ambiguity. Because there are many more people who don't know what next step to take, because something hasn't been done before. But we are comfortable in that setting because having a blank canvas means we get to create something out of nothing.

And having tons of resources is nice, but what if you don't have many resources? You still get to create something out of nothing. Some of my best creations have come from when I've had my hands theoretically tied behind my back, or have not been able to express everything, because sometimes that makes you even more creative. Having said that, I think we're in situations now where artists can really come to the floor and show how inspiring they can be as leaders, because they know how to stand in the middle of ambiguity as opposed to following the next step.

CM: That's so important, the blank page. We are really thinking about that as a concept, that you get trained as an artist to understand that not knowing what's next doesn't mean you don't have an inkling. What was the inkling you had when you realized you were going to be a leader? What did you feel that made you think, I need to do this?

JC: That's a really good question. I'm going to have to think about that, because I don't know that I can articulate what was in me so deeply that said I have got to do this. But I do remember when that happened.

CM: Can you tell me about that?

JC: It was more about feeling like I hadn't fully said everything I wanted to say and what was the vehicle for doing it? Sometimes it is through an application of art, but in my particular case, I felt

like I was art and I could express myself through a system of people. I still draw constantly, and I still have my own applications of art. I still develop my own portfolios, and want to do things like that, but there was an element where I felt like I could be art, by the way I led. That was something pulling inside of me, so I sought out opportunities to lead, and didn't think I knew everything. I went back and got an MBA because I felt like it helped me speak a different language. I look at everything like that as learning different languages. So it was more like something was missing that I wasn't allowing myself to do, so I sought it out. I do remember that moment.

CM: How old were you when that happened?

... forget the specific jobs, and express what you want to do and be, and then look for the opportunities that fit what your dream is.

JC: An adult. It's been about 15 years, maybe 20 years. And I was talking about true art leadership, not "what do I want to do next? What's the next job?" It was more like forget the specific jobs, and express what you want to do and be, and then look for the opportunities that fit what your dream is.

CM: It's beautiful to think about the idea that a person's artistic practice can lead them to recognizing that their life's journey is to be a leader.

JC: There's a science element to it, too, because of the discipline and the framework that you want to create yourself in. But the art is what kind of framework do you want to create in? So the empowerment, it's in you already and it's probably closer to the surface than many others realize for themselves. And so the arts have been probably one of the best vehicles to being a leader if that's what you're aiming to do.

Epilogue

Leading at the highest levels of visibility has its unique challenges and opportunities. Such is the case for Jane Chu, who reminds us that no matter the level, leading effectively comes back to the level of the things we can control individually. Lessons from our interview with Jane Chu include:

- **Think beyond what is linear.** The leader has to find new and different ways of approaching situations.
- **Adjust your message to the audience.** Communication flexibility is a considerable strength when enrolling people to willingly follow you.
- **Inspire others by listening.** Pay attention to others' desires to help them find their "true north."
- **Think in systems.** Knowing your internal operations first is critical to effectively face, observe, and positively impact the organizations you serve.
- **Be genuine.** People respond to real connection, allowing them to be their true selves, as well.
- **Find comfort in ambiguity.** Having a plethora of tools to draw from makes you a more adaptive, helpful leader.

-Rob Kramer