



## BIRGIT NILSSON PRIZE AWARD CEREMONY 2022 OCTOBER 18 • KONSERTHUSET STOCKHOLM

### YO-YO MA ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Good evening your majesties, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, my fellow musicians — I am truly overwhelmed.

I thank your majesties, I thank you, Susanne, I thank the Birgit Nilsson Foundation for this great honor. I am grateful to all of you for making me feel so much at home in Stockholm and welcoming me into the magnificent world of Birgit Nilsson.

I never met La Nilsson in person. I so wish I could have.

The world acknowledges that that voice, that magnificent voice, was a gift of god. But what kept her feet on the ground during those four decades in the world of opera, that most intense microcosm of human experience? (Besides, of course, comfortable shoes?)

Where did she get the ability to respond to the variety of human characters that she encountered with such aplomb, surety, and humor? What made her Isolde, her Elektra, her Turandot come to life and endure, seared in our memory?

Perhaps she was guided by the values she learned as a young person in Skåne, the land that she so loved, and to which she returned for the last two decades of her life. 44 of her 87 years — more than half of her life — were spent close to the land, and it is there, close to nature, that she must have learned to think about the world beyond her gaze, the future beyond her own life.

It is my privilege to celebrate Birgit and her values, and to remember that her values are Swedish values, too. In Birgit Nilsson's New York Times obituary, the conductor Erich Leinsdorf remarked that her renown was not unrelated to some of the qualities we associate with Scandinavians; singing Wagner, he said, required "thoughtful, patient and methodical people" — people who understand balance, who know when enough is enough — in other words, people who are familiar with lagom.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the nation that gave us Birgit Nilsson also gave us Dag Hammarskjöld and Ingmar Bergman and Greta Thunberg. Sweden is a nation that has stood for profound humanism, yes, in its art, but also on the world stage; it is a nation that has been, at once, deeply attentive to the needs of the local and international communities. It is a nation that has never forgotten that we — for all our struggles and contradictions, our loftiest desires and most intractable challenges — are bound by our humanness, by a responsibility to one another and to the future.

# BIRGIT NILSSON PRIZE

Ladies and gentlemen, I am humbled to be mentioned tonight in the same breath as Birgit Nilsson, and to stand in the company of the laureates who have come before, all artists who, in their way, exemplify culture at its best, in service of society.

The path that brought me here is not one that I could ever have walked alone. My wife, Jill, who is not able to be here tonight, has always been my north star, a guide to what is true since the beginning. And for this I can never thank her enough. Thank you, Kathy, for your kind and generous words. Kathy and I have been playing and laughing and exploring together for nearly forty years. (Yes, since she was three years old!)

She is a true musical partner, role model, and friend.

I believe that what we are celebrating here tonight is the essential role culture plays in connecting us, in bridging our divides.

For me, culture has a unique power: it can turn the other into us.

It joins us; it asks us to seek truth, build trust, and practice service. Culture turns the other into us — at the individual level, in our communities, in society.

Culture joins our analytical and empathetic faculties, and it engages our heads, hearts, and hands.

How did the distinguished diplomat Jan Eliasson, as the UN's special envoy to Darfur, establish a common platform for peace talks? By building trust through cultural understanding, of course — trust that paved the way for the parties to wish to join peace talks.

Let's look at music.

Music is a sort of magic. It has the ability to transport us through time, space, and energy and to create meaning. But it is not an illusion — because music is a human endeavor, invented by us to give voice to our aspirations, to give us hope and memories, to ease our transitions, and to celebrate rites of passage, as with tonight's memorable performances.

As I leave Sweden tomorrow, I will carry with me these forever memories, the memory of this evening, with such moving performances from the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, the Radio Choir, the Royal Opera Choir, the extraordinary young singers, and my wonderful cello colleague Amalie Stalheim. But I will also leave with a promise, a commitment to practice the values Birgit Nilsson held so dear: to live with joy and humor, close to the land and to nature, and in balance with others and with our planet.

Thank you again.