

## The Artist as Leader: Shayne Doty



**Interview conducted by Rob Kramer and Corey Madden  
Edited by Betsi Robinson**

*Organist and University of North Carolina School of the Arts alumnus Shayne Doty has taken his musical training — along with the organizational and social skills endowed to him by his parents — and successfully transitioned to a position at the pinnacle of international fundraising. As the Managing Director, Philanthropy at Asia Society, Shayne illustrates how creative individuals often inherently possess a high level of authenticity and confidence, which have allowed him to easily move between cultures, both domestically and abroad.*

*As with our other Artists as Leaders, Shayne also possesses an eagerness to listen to and empathize with those around him, and is generous with his time and his talents. He graciously serves on the Board of Advisors of the Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts and the Board of Visitors for UNCSCA.*

**CM:** Many artists make transitions at some point in their lives and have this remarkable capacity to become leaders. You spent many years inside the field of opera, and you saw how opera leadership functions, and then you transitioned into this role, which has broadened your mandate. It would be interesting for you to reflect on those stages of your life. Maybe you could talk first about your background and how it informed your training as an artist.

**SD:** I think my home life, the influence of my parents, is much greater than I realized initially. My mother was a nurse and ran the psychiatric wing of a hospital, if you can imagine what that must have been like in the 1950s. Her discernment, her ability to analyze people, contributed in a big way. And our home was very organized, things happened right on time, I saw how she prepared for events or deadlines. My father was completely different, he was in sales. So he had a very natural way of communicating with people, initially engaging them, finding the narrative, making something appear bigger than it actually was in many cases. The influence of the two of them has been profound.

Concerning arts training, certainly there was a period where an arts school's success was only determined by how closely one adhered in professional life to that path of training. Schools have since wrestled with artist-citizen concepts, the realization that not every person trained as an oboist will be a chair in a major orchestra. We always knew that a number of people who came up through arts training were successful in other areas, but I think it's a lot more accepted, embraced, by the schools, and it's perhaps better documented than it was. What one finds in these schools is the real creative ability, which then manifests itself after one leaves and enters the workplace, whether it's in arts or some other area.

One example is the ability to extract. When you're a musician there is a printed phrase, but it's really your innate insight and ability to extract more in

terms of musicianship, in terms of the way you move that phrase. This insight is what transforms it and creates the difference between a lackluster performance and one which energizes the listener. Obviously, insight is advanced by training, contrary to the picture reality television presents. Artists look at the literal in deeper ways, and bring to it their training, their experience and their personal intuition, as well as research and historical practice. And I think that is very helpful in the world. And the vision, what is the ultimate that we want to achieve? Whether it's a dancer viewing how they would look at or feel about a certain situation, or an artist knowing the endpoint and then working about how to get there, or a musician knowing the ideal phrase, but can he or she physically execute it?

Apart from music, one finds the discipline to bring the utmost to a phrase helpful with writing and conceptualizing projects. The creative impulse transforms a boring or nondescript sentence or paragraph into a vivid text, hopefully inspiring thought and, in some cases, action. It allows the imagination of "what could be" to give a project a much more dynamic and dramatic appeal.

Also, artists have an ability to engage people. Why is it that when people go to a restaurant in New York, and they have a waiter or waitress they particularly love, often they are artists? It's no accident that these people bring more to the job. It's outside the sphere of what they're training for, but that ability to interact with people translates.

**CM:** It sounds like, in your case Shayne, the way you look at being an artist is that it's almost a cultural structure that allows people who have gifts and skills to use those gifts and skills in a way that they can manifest them even more profoundly. The ability to be social was something that your father instilled in you, but then with training you could begin to see how that could be applied to a piece of music. And then you were able to think, 'I could apply that to being a leader. I can see a certain goal ahead of me, and I can use those skills.' I agree with you, a big quality of going through arts training is to be able to marshal the talent you have to execute in other ways. Many people have a hard time executing, and I think you learn to execute in the arts. The ability to execute is a big part of leadership.

**SD:** Some people ask me how I ended up where I am now, raising money and dealing with people who are often leaders of organizations. When I was 15, I was performing for people and attending dinners with patrons afterward at the School of the Arts, so I've always been around that world. That exposure gave me an experience, confidence and, ultimately, an ease with the people I was dealing with, who were the counterparts of the constituency I work with now. So there is a diversity of people that artists come into contact with. When I was in college, I was struck that some people from affluent families were sometimes limited to being around people essentially very much like themselves. I think the arts expose one to a much wider array of people. The arts have come to the forefront of the campus at Duke now and the university population has become an international one, so the experience is more representative of our world.

**RK:** Do you have a sense of how conscious or unconscious it has been for you to use the creative process, and use the skills you gained through your arts background and training, and apply it to what you do? Or is it innate and built-in for you at this point?

**SD:** You're somewhat aware of it, and sometimes you feel you're out too far with it. Frankly, it can be a liability in some workplaces, because you may not fit in the box quite as much. And while ultimately one might be rewarded by that, depending on the results, there can be issues as well. I think workplaces are in this transition where fitting in the box, and having everything completely neat, is not as desirable as it was. If you look at the writings on leadership — you could bathe in them there are so many — they span from covering General MacArthur and the military type or Jack Welch and the corporate type, to accounts of Ghandi's mass social movements. The literature hasn't caught up to involve artists, but now you see the tech leaders who will bust open even more the barriers and value propositions. In recent times and present, we think of Beverly Sills, Wynton Marsalis and Renée Fleming as examples of arts leaders and spokespersons with name recognition.

**RK:** Do you think the millennial generation will impact that as well?

**SD:** I do, because they're looking for individual style and authenticity of voice, and those two things are central to artists. If one looks at CEOs now,

the companies even bring out their individual traits and personalities. This was rare in the 1970s and '80s. I think this will be good for artists. It is, for artists, crossing borders into the workplace that can be tricky. Creativity can be desired by some and less by others. I think understanding the environment, the culture of the organization, is very important.

**CM: With artists, sometimes their entire persona is built around their freedom and authenticity. Versus that sort of 'reading the room' quality, and reading the culture and being willing to use the tools, but not necessarily always being gratified in that situation.**

**SD:** We need a variety of people. We need some people who are never thinking about how this all fits together but are completely focused on a single pursuit. The world is a better place for people whose minds are not filled with these things. At The Metropolitan Opera, we never asked (Music Director) James Levine to spend time attending patron receptions. He was therefore able to focus entirely in the musical sphere. There were other artists and company administrators who did participate at these functions. We see examples of great artists and great scientists for whom total focus is best for them and for us. I'm very serious about that.

**RK:** How do you as a leader corral all these different personality types and work styles?

**SD:** It depends on the mission and the goals at hand, and the group of people one has. For me personally, the strongest leadership is by example, with focus on excellence and inspiration, rather than phrases or slogans or heavy corporate tactics. It's just my personal style. Again, I think personal authenticity is very important because people, especially now, quickly detect a lack of authenticity. So, if I'm working this hard, showing people how it's done and letting them participate in the results, hopefully that will inspire them. Being a source of inspiration for younger employees is key and being able to work with them to articulate a course of action when they feel stuck brings gratitude and loyalty from them.

One of the things about leadership is there can be people you've inspired that you don't really have a clue about. Two examples: When I was working at the Washington National Opera, I hired a firm to recruit someone for a vacant

position. The recruiter interviewed all the staff to get the right idea of the organization and the office. And he said to me, 'You have a very devoted staff, and they would walk over hot coals for you.' While I felt my relationships with my staff members were strong, I had no idea of the intensity of loyalty. That was very fulfilling to me. The other example happened at Asia Society. There was a job announcement that went out, and someone applied and said, 'I would really love the chance to work with Shayne Doty, because I've heard so much about him and his abilities.' Those are people you have inspired who you're not even aware of.

**RK: In leadership language, we usually talk about leader-follower, but to me it's more about the willing follower. You can force followership, which usually has a time limit to it.**

**SD:** Those were the methods of the 1960s and '70s maybe. I think millennials particularly want a different kind of model.

**RK: I don't even think they're looking for the charismatic leader.**

**SD:** More than charisma, they desire a mentor. They don't even want to stay in the position if it's not fulfilling, enriching, meaningful or educational. They certainly are not interested in working for someone if these qualities are not present. They're fearless, really, about changing positions. It's different from my generation, when the parents would say, 'You're lucky to get a job. You'll get it, you'll do well and you'll stay in it.'

**CM: It sounds as though you like millennials.**

**SD:** I do. Sometimes they are a difficult group to manage, because you don't want to say, 'Well, I had to do this early in my career and learned from it.' But with certain things, like a program that has to go to print, one might have three layers of people below you, but ultimately you are responsible and, if the employees haven't put in the time proofing the way the names of donors are listed, it's a problem. You realize you've got to work with them and show them how to go through that list, and take it very seriously, because when someone comes to an event here, or goes to the opera, guess what they do? They open the program and look for their name. One must show a greater value for the task.

**RK:** What I hear embedded in your story, too, is an ability to recognize what folks around you need to respond positively and be brought in. I'm curious to what extent that goes back to training as an artist.

**SD:** The arts vary a lot by discipline. Many areas of the arts are very collaborative, the group dynamics are strong. In solo musical training it can be just the opposite. Sometimes there's very little empathy in the musical arts, performing and training — it's tough, and you're going to work hard, and you suck up the criticism, you go into the practice room and do it. And if this person is not doing well, too bad for them. Empathy is not the first word that would come to mind! I think that one is aware of the surroundings, and the dynamics of the teacher of the class, the whole school, through chamber music and orchestras and things like that.

**CM:** Do you find your conversation with music a rich area for you? When I think about you, I think about the way you must relate to music itself, not to learning music, but to musical expression.

**SD:** I think so. I'm fortunate working in New York, a lot of people I deal with are involved in all the musical organizations. We have quite a rich musical heritage here at Asia Society as well. In some ways, even though I'm not practicing daily, I draw on what I'm exposed to — whether it's hearing James Levine conduct Wagner or it's hearing the Berlin Philharmonic do a cycle of Beethoven Symphonies at Carnegie Hall. And particularly in an area like development, often people are very pleased that there was a career or a passion or a focus that I had in the arts in addition to fundraising. So I draw on my personal experience and depth, which is important because some of the fundraising literature says people make gifts to people, not simply to organizations. Obviously, representing an organization of quality is a significant factor.

I fill in for a director at a very large church in New York that has a professional choir, that's about six times a year, so I'm still in touch with my musical heritage.

**CM:** James Moeser said the reason he could be the Chancellor of the University of North Carolina was because he conducted a church choir for 20 years. That was the thing that gave him the greatest access to

**understanding the art of persuasion, and also casting. He said that it was a lot about persuading someone who maybe shouldn't be a soloist, to accept the job of librarian.**

**SD:** I suddenly found myself running one with not a lot of experience, although I had great musical experience. It was a paid choir, it was where I first learned to hire and fire people, it was where I first learned to have standards that I had to set, it's where I learned about cliques within a group and things like that. It's where I learned to manage a budget and payroll, and do regular reports to the vestry. I think it also involves a lot of psychological counseling!

**RK: You became a therapist as well?**

**SD:** An untrained and unlicensed one!

**RK: We walk a tightrope all the time, don't we?**

**SD:** I also observed that adults in groups share some of the same basic human interests and anxieties, in some cases, as children. I see that with employees, boards and groups of donors.

**RK:** Can you talk a little about that? That's what I would call 'leading up'?

**SD:** They are intrigued to know who will be in the room, with whom they belong or are paired and how they are perceived. These are natural human inclinations. One's constituency in the workplace, one's clients, look to staff for leadership, too. They want to know things run smoothly — if they come here, they want to be greeted, if they have questions, they want to know there's someone they can call. And they value the unexpected, whether it's arranging for a corporate official to meet a high-level government official or bringing a patron to meet someone in their field or one they admire through encounters at arts or policy events. It's the creative that can inspire.

**CM: You're sort of the impresario in certain ways, in the sense that you can make something happen that they might not ordinarily experience.**

**SD:** Yes, it's the unexpected. Which I think goes back to the element of creativity. As I say to my staff, the people I deal with generally have 10 or



more development officers in their lives. So it's not just how closely one adheres to a slogan or a mission statement, it's really the whole relationship and depth of character. My litmus test for a conversation is, would they want to continue the conversation with you? Is there something that you're saying that would make them want to keep talking?

**CM: It's very nuanced, what you do. I'm always so impressed because you are working at the very top of a very complicated world.**

**RK: There's the interaction that's occurring, with the shared understanding of the reason you've come together in the first place.**

**SD:** These are people who want to make a difference. They've already decided they're interested in not just going to work, in going to dinner, in keeping their resources. They're interested in being involved in something. But they want excellence in terms of the organization, they want involvement beyond writing a check, and they want authenticity in terms of the people they're dealing with. In New York, I think it's not just a title — it's not 'you're the Vice President of this or you're the President of that.' People want to know who you are as an individual. Then let's continue the conversation. In some cities it can be more about a title.

You mentioned interaction. Successful interaction is important, but the foundation of the relationship is much more fundamental to long-term success. This is especially true in Asia.

**CM:** Shayne, what's different about your role compared with a CEO role? Because where you sit is a very important leadership position, but it is different from being the CEO of an institution. How would you distinguish that and why do you think you fit where you are ideally?

**SD:** Well, the CEO represents the entire organization, is the voice, the face. Often the individual has expertise in whatever the major discipline of the organization is, then the individuals in development support that. The development leader facilitates the CEO meeting people, briefs them and advises them on all details of the relationship.

But I think the field of development is much broader, in the sense that it's not possible just to replicate what one did at other places, or to have a set methodology. I had someone who interviewed once who brought me the methodology of the person they worked with 20 years ago — it was written down. It was actually kind of scary they had to rely on that in an interview. Because the world is changing so quickly, and each organization is so different, the challenges are doing quick assessment and figuring out what's needed. One method doesn't work everywhere.

So in that sense, the modern development person needs to be a strategist for the organization, acutely aware of programming, public relations and marketing. If the programs are not drawing or engaging donors and new audiences, then one must take the responsibility to have discussions across internal borders with colleagues — all the while respecting the mission of the organization and artistic or intellectual integrity.

**RK:** I'm curious, do you have a yearning to get any creative impulses met? Are they met through this work you are doing? And if not, how else do you get those impulses met?

**SD:** Asia Society has been a fantastic place where I could engage in some of the creative things, like arranging some programs that delved into the performing arts and opera particularly. I have been able to offer ideas to and collaborate with our Director of Performing Arts, Rachel Cooper and now with the new head of our museum, Boon Hui Tan. We have presented young Asian opera singers in programs that allowed them also to perform works from their own countries. We helped bring visibility to the opera *Dr. Sun Yat-Sen* and its composer Huang Ruo, that representatives from Santa Fe Opera saw and took to the stage. We have been a catalyst for a lot of larger performances.

Asia Society is the kind of place where I was able to assist in recruiting Renée Fleming to our board and envisioning projects with which she could be engaged. To some degree I think an artist is able to create opportunities if they fit within the organization. The arts are part of Asia Society's DNA from the initial vision of John D. Rockefeller III. He gave Asia Society his incredible art collection, from the very beginning, and we embarked into the performing arts. So those possibilities were present for me, but it was

necessary to unlock some of them. It really demands a supervisor who can visualize what the benefits would be, and permit one to go over here or over there, while not being too nervous.

**CM:** That's where I see creativity show up in the interactions you and I have. That training as an artist enables you to imagine something and be quietly confident that you can not only imagine it, but you can actually even execute it. And inspiring people to believe that is where you can go, that creates momentum in institutions, and that momentum is very important for institutions to be prominent. A part of excellence is that momentum.

**SD:** And this will be the golden age for that — it's what employers want, it's what organizations want. That time has arrived and it's a great opportunity for artists. Asia Society runs a diversity leadership forum. Apart from that, we have a very evolved global curriculum for children that we've partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop. Out of both of those separate disciplines, one of the major dynamics that they're looking for is flexibility, and I think whether it's moving employees across divisions or being able to assess things on the spot, this skill is very close to creativity.

**RK: I completely agree. And a manager being able to understand the strength of people around them and remove roadblocks so they can play to those strengths.**

**CM:** I talk a lot about casting. Having been a producer and a director for so many years, I think one of the things that I really have a good sense of is the potential that someone has to be cast in a particular role. A lot of what I do is shape an opportunity for a staff member so that it works well with what they are good at, so they intrinsically feel that they are doing what they should be doing. And I take away things from them that I know frustrate them and give them to someone who they seem to fit better. And I notice that that's a lot of what makes a staff cohere, is that they feel seen and cast well. It's a fascinating thing to see that translate from the room into work.

**RK:** And underneath that, a foundational skill that I see a lot in artists is the deep ability to listen. Seeing, hearing, noticing, paying attention to the staff, listening to their needs.

**SD:** There's a large percentage of the population that has poor listening skills. Someone was referred to me through a friend — this person was thinking about making a radical change and going into development. I said to the person who knew them, I didn't think the fit was very good because the listening skills were so poor.

**CM: Listening skills themselves must be more of a musician's ability, to be able to literally listen for the details.**

**SD:** I think with musicians, the listening skills are strong, the comfort with criticism and how to apply it, a degree of self-criticism. I'm always assessing everything before I go to see this person or before I make the call, it's been played out in my mind, and I think that's part of it. The rehearsal process, the feedback from teachers, how one applies it. I remember having a lesson, going in having worked on a whole 20-minute piece, and I only played two bars of the piece in an hour, and the professor completely took everything apart. I was demoralized. But I knew I had to go back into the practice room and take what had come from that session and go through the whole piece and apply it. It made a huge difference, for which I was incredibly grateful. But it was deflating and painstaking on the short-term scale. I think musicians and artists have that kind of stamina when determination is there and a goal is in sight.

**CM:** The more we do these conversations with artist leaders, the more I think about the defunding of arts education in schools and how destructive it is to not give students access to these almost contemplative and, at the same time, self-rewarding systems. Those are two of the things the arts give you — they are highly structured and disciplined and they kind of build it into your structure. But they are very rewarding intrinsically if you pick the right one. Some people are more attracted to musicianship, some people are more attracted to the teamwork of theatre, but in each of those cases you come out with something that I really don't see with people who haven't gone through the training.

**RK: Angela Duckworth (Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania) has been doing a lot of work on 'grit,' which she defines as a combination of determination and passion. Which to me was a light-bulb moment: That defines most artists. An artist's**

**education, in part, is about instilling grit, the resiliency to put yourself through that process in order to achieve a more improved outcome.**

**SD:** You mentioned arts education. The question that I've always been curious about, especially as of late, was not how do we get children to the arts, but how did the arts ever get separated from children? And why is it that in our society, in the U.S., the arts become this thing that's over there, and only people who find the bridge can get there? I think it's a troubling scenario. The arts tend to be ever present to many Europeans and Asians from birth to death. In my hometown of Winston-Salem, musical expression, furniture-making and making pottery were all a normal part of daily life in the 18th century, complete with a musical archives and manuscripts of works not only by the Moravian settlers, but also ones of Haydn and other composers. That very natural and daily contact meant that several centuries later most every Moravian Church has an active band which plays the chorales of their heritage.

**CM:** Recently I've spent time working with actors and storytellers in Cherokee, North Carolina. Even in their culture it's been detached to a certain degree, but you realize it's fundamental to what being Cherokee is. Their aestheticism is in almost everything — the way they tell stories, their sense of shape — so when you take it away, you actually dismantle what it means to be Cherokee.

**SD:** Mothers singing to children, or infants making their first sounds, responding to music. How do we then end up with this gulf?

**CM:** My feeling is that it has something to do with 19th to 20th century industrialization and the utility of man as opposed to the root culture of man. And I feel like, as you start then to look at how much something costs, you start to say, 'Well this has a cost associated to it, so what is its upside?' Part of the purpose of this series is to reveal what making that investment results in, even though resources cost. To me, the result is that you get a fuller, more complete capacity to make things happen. And I think that's an important thing for us to realize — that it isn't a frippery. It has something to do with who a human being becomes.

**RK:** It's kind of the war on the humanities in general, and the lost focus on its gifts.

**SD:** And I think we've moved beyond the trend in the '80s to justify it all in economic terms, or by test scores. David Rubenstein, the chairman of the Kennedy Center board, is now starting to speak more on the arts, and I think has some original things to say, looking at data in a different way. We haven't really had as many well-known business leaders for a number of years who have been speaking about the arts, and he will be an intriguing person to follow. His narratives are analytical, thoughtful and original.

**CM:** In Winston-Salem, it's interesting because the chief of Inmar has decided to be a huge champion of the creative industries. Which I think is good for the city, to begin to think that's where Winston-Salem can revitalize over the next generation.

**SD:** Also people need role models, and we need to have figures who are in business and other places who are interested in the arts. In New York, business and philanthropic leaders set the example of the arts being a regular part of life. This is also true of Chicago.

**RK:** Since we're talking about arts and education and children, I'm curious, in your opinion, what needs to change to encourage more people to get into the arts, to encourage artists to step up and lead, to strengthen that bridge?

**SD:** I think organizations are working hard. People realize it's more than just an annual visit to a concert or to an art exhibition, it's greater involvement in creative ways. I think part of it goes hand-in-hand with larger views. The kind of global curriculum Asia Society has put together about where the world is will be helpful, because it's looking at different points of view, bias, drawing conclusions, and that's a kind of creative thinking the arts can be a part of as well. Improving the presence of the arts in schools and in families is key. Again, it's moving the arts from something that's way over there, to a closer part of our individual experience.

I was also thinking about our leadership models, where can artists go? I remember in Brazil when Gilberto Gil became Minister of Culture. We forget

that Giuseppe Verdi was in the Italian Parliament for four years, and when he died 250,000 people poured into the streets. In India there was a wonderful figure, Rabindranath Tagore, who was a poet and an artist and influenced mass movements. Gandhi took some of Tagore's poetry and used it in his movements.

**RK:** The Czechoslovakian president, Václav Havel. Poet.

**SD:** So we're not without examples in history.

**RK:** What advice would you have liked to receive when you were starting out as an artist leader, that you would want to have gleaned and then pass on to the next generation?

**SD:** One thing I've learned in the workplace is it's not enough to just pursue excellence quietly, and have the plan and do it. It's not just sufficient to have the external, or the clientele, on board, but the internal colleagues as well are important. I think that if one is not good at communicating the path or the vision of excellence, then even though it's on track, one can be severely criticized or unpopular. So the communication, the dissemination of the strategy, the involvement of a group of people as participants in some way, is very important. Also, agreement on the path across the institution is important. Excellence in a quiet vacuum is just not enough.

**RK:** Is there anything else you might want to add?

**SD:** I would just say, given the way much of society is really shifting and breaking up, the influence of the tech industry, media, the interest in diversity, I think it's a promising time for artists. And I hope the institutions that train them will be increasingly attuned to the world. It's still important for someone to be the best cellist they can be, because we want that level of excellence. But it's important also to know where the arts are making a difference, and that artists are prepared to have a place in the world, and a voice. I think it will be a really exciting time, and the world will be better for it.

**Epilogue**

The roots and impact of an arts education and artistic background are translated to the professional world through the eyes and heart of Shayne Doty. Forging relationships and understanding given circumstances launch the translational art and science of leadership we learn from this discussion. Fascinating takeaways include:

- **Start with the end in mind.** Artists and leaders can have a vision, and yet it's the quality of the relationship and the articulation of the vision that garners willing followership.
- **You have nothing without execution.** Creativity, flexibility and adaptation need direction, implementation and accomplishment or else the leader ultimately fails. Artists learn this lesson early and often.
- **Creativity can have its place.** It is important to recognize when to unleash others' creative abilities. People bring a range of innovative skills. Learn when is best to draw them out in others.
- **Art can build rapport.** At its core, discussing the arts is often a touchpoint for many people, whether it be music, film, dance, architecture, food, painting, etc. A place to build relationships is through a shared appreciation of art.
- **Be genuine.** People have a heightened sense of inauthenticity. They are most willing to follow leaders they believe are trustworthy and have high integrity.
- **Make it experiential.** Allow people to have experiences — let them try, stumble and improve. Change their vantage point to change their minds and abilities.

— *Rob Kramer*