

Notes from the Field: An Arts Envoy's Account of US Cultural Diplomacy in the 21st Century

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Received: 01 September 2021 | Accepted: 05 September 2022

Abstract

Cultural diplomacy has been a critical tool of U.S. foreign policy since America's emergence as a global power. This chapter explores the personal experiences of Carla Dirlikov Canales, an Arts Envoy for the United States State Department since 2005. Examples of missions to Mexico, Honduras and Indonesia are featured.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Arts Envoy, Opera, Exchange, Digital Diplomacy, Diplomat

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Introduction

What motivates me and has drawn me to the field of cultural diplomacy is a lifelong desire to better understand and harness the relationship between culture and power. My life and career have brought me a greater understanding of how interrelated these forces are. As an opera singer, social entrepreneur, professor, and Arts Envoy for the U.S. State Department, I have witnessed firsthand the connections between culture and power. This is why I believe that culture can be utilized to solve emerging global challenges, and it's why I place great importance on cultural diplomacy as a tool in this effort.

I would like to tell you about how I arrived at this moment and how experience has shaped my personal view of culture and of power. I was born into a state of cultural confusion, as the first American in my family, daughter of a Mexican immigrant mother and Bulgarian refugee father who met in Prague. That I existed at all; that these two people from such differing backgrounds would meet in a pre-internet era and produce an American didn't make me feel like a child of destiny, but rather of coincidence. This feeling grew exponentially as I navigated various social hierarchies in the underserved town of Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Music has always been my home; a place where nationality doesn't exist. When I discovered singing, I was immediately captivated by what a powerful tool this could be. Singing is a beautiful marriage of my two passions: music and language. Originally, I was drawn to opera for two reasons: the power of the human voice to project without amplification, and the beauty that a human being is capable of creating with their own body. People may mock implausible plots, but that's not the point. The reason that opera is so grand is simple: this art form draws on the most complex human situations in order to evoke catharsis.

On my journey as a singer, I have found one thing to be true: all people, regardless of nationality, race, age, or gender share one thing in common: the capacity to feel emotion. This is our deepest universal—we all cry, laugh, love, feel pain, and embarrassment. We all speak a common language: that of the soul.

At fourteen I got my first glimpse of the intersection of power and culture when I performed for President Clinton at the White House. I've since enjoyed a prosperous career that has brought me before audiences on five continents, given me the chance to sing for Kings and Queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers, and on many of the world's most acclaimed stages. This wasn't always an easy journey. There have been instances when I was limited due to my identity—for example when making my operatic debut in Canada, some critics protested the fact that my role went to an American rather than a Canadian. Later, when performing on a major stage in Mexico, I was not quite Mexican enough for some of the critics, despite my dual citizenship. Furthermore, in China I performed with cast members who objected to an American as "Carmen" rather than a Chinese national in the title role. Each instance taught me more and more about the powerful nature of culture.

For nearly twenty years, I have had the honor of working as an Arts Envoy for the U.S. State Department and as such learned about the power of cultural diplomacy first-hand. “Arts Envoy” is a program for invited artists who serve cultural diplomacy missions on behalf of the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Education and Culture.

The Arts Envoy Program engages American artists and arts professionals in cultural exchange programs and shares the best of the U.S. arts community with the world to foster cross-cultural understanding and collaboration, to demonstrate shared values and aspirations, and to address foreign policy themes and objectives. (United States Department of State, 2022, para. 1)

I completed my first Arts Envoy mission in Mexico in 2005, in the city of Campeche, an area with relatively low tourism at the time. Given the immigration challenges at that time, the U.S. Embassy had a desire to connect with constituents of underserved areas. As a result, this was one of the first programs conducted in this region. As a community with a large indigenous population, U.S. government officials were working closely with Mexican government regional delegates to foster understanding and forge new connections. While that was taking place, it was my job to create a cultural program that would build a bridge between our countries.

In most cases, artists are charged with the responsibility of conceptualizing the programming through which the cultural diplomacy is to take place. There is little training and few resources to help artists with this process. In some cases, Arts Envoys are briefed on foreign policy objectives and on the history of the relationship at hand. However, it’s been my experience that in order to become aware of the history between the two or more countries involved, it is up to me to learn as much as possible. Language barriers and cultural complexities add to the learning curve. In terms of this mission in Campeche, while I speak fluent Spanish, many of the constituents in Campeche spoke Mayan dialects, and many of these indigenous peoples were already skeptical of Mexican government officials, and more so of American diplomats.

Just as artists may not be familiar with foreign policy, diplomats and foreign service officers may not have direct experience with artistic programming. Historically, much of U.S. cultural diplomacy has been based on older formats, such as traditional tours through which an artist can travel and thus perform for different audiences. Particularly in light of the pandemic and since the internet era, today much more is possible through creative programming that takes into account the long-term objectives and seeks opportunities for true exchange. Performing can be much like a lecture, with the performer “showing” the audience something that they deem culturally relevant, often with a Western bias. A different approach, one which requires more preparation, participation and exchange of cultural equity and values, is almost always sure to be more effective. In this way, an artist may share their native culture with an audience while also learning about their native culture. To me, this is the most important element of cultural diplomacy.

While the thoughtful team of Embassy officials was planning the performance schedule for my concert in Campeche, I wandered the streets and came upon a soccer match of some youngsters. They seemed amused that a 5'10 American would want to join their game, but within an hour we were all laughing together. As a token of my appreciation, I sang a song for them. In return, to my surprise, they wanted to sing for me! That evening when I met with the embassy team, I asked if I could invite these kids on stage to perform in the concert. In the ensuing days, we rehearsed and performed together. Meanwhile, the embassy worked with a local organization that was trying to use the arts to help their education's Centro Cultural "La Chacara." Those performances led them to form a children's chorus. Within a year they were performing with Andrea Bocelli for the state's largest annual concert. The next year, they won the Coming Up Taller Award, which they received at the White House in Washington D.C.. Offering a Presidential award to an underserved community in Mexico sent a strong political message, one which in part helped to ease existing and escalating tensions related to immigration issues. Today, La Chacara, is a cultural hub that offers many workshops and classes to the community.

Since then, I have worked on similar projects in Chile, China, Honduras, Japan, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, Peru, and Indonesia. For much of the last decade, I have been a frequent visiting artist in the People's Republic of China. Those experiences were among the most humbling and caused me to rethink the importance of cultural diplomacy. After performing in a dozen different cities in China, it became clear to me that whatever political differences exist between our countries, the potential for cultural bonds is expanding rapidly. This has resulted in growing young audiences for American cultural exports such as Disney films and hip-hop music. At the same time, we in the U.S. became more aware of traditions such as Chinese New Year.

In 2020, the world as we knew it changed. Just as the world was grappling with the beginning of the pandemic, I conducted a virtual program for the U.S. Embassy in Honduras. I was contacted by the Public Affairs Officer and my team in Tegucigalpa with a request to create a two-month long summer program for elementary school children which was to focus on anti-corruption and anti-immigration policies that were a focus of the Trump Administration. The solution I offered was to create the "Campo de Valores" (Values Camp) by flipping the narrative of the briefing. Instead of focusing on being against something, I created a program aimed at teaching kids about integrity, citizenship, and kindness: values that both societies value. The goal was for the participants to take pride in their own culture, and to share our mutual appreciation for being good citizens of any country. By creating songs that echo these values, the workshop was well received. In addition, the fact that the program was virtual allowed for a longer program as there were no longer any travel expenses. With this longer, more participatory model, I worked with these young participants for two months and experienced strong bonds which could only take place with time.

My engagements through the US State Department have continued in this new framework, which I consider full of possibilities for "digital cultural diplomacy". In 2022, I embarked on my longest mission to date, leading a self-created program titled "Triple Threat Academy",

supported by the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, and implemented in partnership with the Jakarta Performing Arts Center (JPAC).

The program aimed to mentor and empower local artists to use artistry to improve their livelihood, address social issues, and shape a more inclusive society. The Triple Threat Academy started on March 23rd and ended on July 31st, 2022. The program offered training in three aspects of artist development: traditional artistic development, advocacy, and entrepreneurship. This is the first program of its kind to approach the all-encompassing elements needed to become well-rounded performing artists, through a sustained long-form educational model. All classes are provided free of charge and are conducted online via the Zoom platform. In addition, interpreters were provided during the program.

At the conclusion of the program, JPAC reported that the total registrants for all programs was 1,082 participants. The total attendance for all TTA programs was 3,154 (please note that this number may include multiple attendances). Rather than tell you in my words how much this program has meant to me, here are a few testimonials:

I love how interactive, fun and insightful the teachings were even though classes were held via Zoom. They were very inspiring and encouraging every single student to discover their talents, and as an inexperienced student I do feel they've helped me so much.

- Ayumi, 22 years old

I've never felt more welcomed and appreciated...Finally! I'm in a group of people with the same love for music, writing, or maybe a similar dream! We really bonded as a group and it made the whole songwriting process and experience way more exciting!

- Charin, 21 years old

I definitely would HIGHLY recommend this workshop! The supportive community of the people joining as well has become a very warm environment that I enjoy a lot, alongside the amazing teachers that had given their all into giving out very insightful knowledge for all of us.

- Najla, 17 years old

My work for the State Department has been the most rewarding work of my career. While I gained critical acclaim for my work as an opera singer, I recently pivoted my life to focus more on cultural diplomacy. I want to use my voice, literally and figuratively, to make a positive impact in this world. I feel the best way that I can do so is through cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as the ones I've been a part of as an Arts Envoy for the U.S. State Department.

As an artist, I've often heard people speak of music as the universal language, but I see this differently. I believe we share an emotional universe that transcends language and reveals fundamental traits of humanity. We each have the capacity to feel deep emotions, and this capacity makes us human. The arts offer exploration of the deep emotional complexities that come with our shared human condition.

Yet the real superpower of the arts is to serve as a gateway to something even more powerful: the human capacity to imagine. When we unleash our imagination and dreams magic happens. Culture and the arts, viewed by many as a luxury, are in my view essential—the glue that holds societies together, the stuff of which bridges are built, the platform on which we can jointly imagine and realize our visions of a better future. This is why I hold a precious and core belief that music can advance positive change. It is why a single song can make the world a better place by imagining a better future, and the underlying sense of humanity reminds us that we are all in it together.

References

United States Department. (2022). *Arts Envoy*. <https://exchanges.state.gov/us/program/arts-envoy>

■ Carla Dirlikov Canales

Carla Canales has won acclaim on leading stages around the world as a performer while also being recognized as an educator, advocate, and entrepreneur. This summer, she joins the faculty at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy of Tufts University, where she will serve as Professor of Practice and lead a program on cultural diplomacy. In addition, Carla is a Social Innovation and Change Initiative Fellow at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School.

Carla has served as a U.S. State Department Arts Envoy since 2005. Missions in 2021 include creating new arts programs for U.S. Embassies in Honduras, Peru, Montenegro, and Kazakhstan. In 2022, she continues her work as an Arts Envoy in Indonesia for the Triple Threat Academy, a five month-long program. Carla was a 2021 Advanced Leadership Initiative Fellow at Harvard University, the youngest fellow in the history of the program to date. During her fellowship, she collaborated with Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs on the new self-created initiative titled "The Future of Cultural Diplomacy".

Carla has been a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities Turnaround Arts Program, was selected by Foreign Policy Magazine as one of its 100

Leading Global Thinkers and won the Medal of Excellence from the Sphinx Organization, which was presented to her at the Supreme Court by Justice Sotomayor. Carla was also named one of Musical America's 30 Movers and Shapers of 2018.

Carla is the founder of The Canales Project, a non-profit arts and advocacy organization through which she created Hear Her Song, a musical celebration of distinguished female leaders worldwide that commissions new songs written by female composers to honor them. The project engages a variety of participants and partners worldwide, including Vital Voices, El Sistema USA, and participants including honorees Hillary Clinton, Sonia Sotomayor, and Malala Yousafzai.

As a classical singer, Carla has been in demand for her portrayal of Bizet's Carmen, a role she has performed over eighty times in twelve countries. Her performance was praised by Opera News as "a well-practiced, sexy Carmen, [Carla] dominated the show." Other roles in her repertoire include Dalilah in Samson et Dalilah (Sinfonica de Yucatan), Eboli in Don Carlo (Opera Royal de Wallonie), Maddalena in Rigoletto (Opera Royal de Wallonie, Michigan Opera Theater), Giulietta in Les Contes d'Hoffmann (National Centre for the Performing Arts Beijing), Adalgisa in Norma (Portland SummerFest), Fenena in Nabucco (Michigan Opera Theater) and Preziosilla in La Forza del Destino (Opera Royal de Wallonie). As a concert soloist, she has sung at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall, Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center.

Carla has been a guest speaker/lecturer at the United Nations, Oxford University, SciencesPo (Paris), Aspen Institute, and TEDxMidAtlantic. Carla holds dual U.S. and Mexican citizenship. She is fluent in Spanish, French, Italian, German, and English and is currently studying Mandarin.