



DEBORAH RUTTER

Art For Life's Sake

Something magical happens during live performances. You are transported in a way that is like meditation. But it is also fundamentally physical. You feel the music and a connection to the artist on stage. And while you share the experience with a theater of complete strangers, there is a crystalizing sense of oneness. Deborah lives for those moments.

For someone with such an illustrious career in the arts, she has almost never been on stage. She's the one behind-the-scenes making it happen—pointing the spotlight at just the right angle on artists so that they shine their brightest, and so that the audience can feel that transporting experience. She is the bridge between artist and audience.

Music was always a part of her life, but she knew from a very young age that being a professional musician wasn't her calling. She grew up in weather-friendly southern California where she spent most of her time outdoors, hanging out at the beach, playing tennis, or hiking in the mountains. She did play the piano and the violin, and she loved being in orchestras and being part of something larger than herself. But when the time came to announce her career aspirations in middle school, forest ranger came first and musician a distant third.

When not outside, you could find her at music performances, often with her parents. Her father was a founding board member of the Los Angeles Master Chorale. Her mom studied music at UCLA. Deborah went to everything—jazz concerts, classical, contemporary, and it didn't matter who the performer was. Whatever was being performed, she went and took it all in. She used her violin skills to get into Stanford where she spent much of her time attending San Francisco Symphony concerts.

Her first foray into arts management was during college, running a summer program for little kids at the Hollywood Bowl in LA. She had a run-in with the LA Philharmonic's Executive Director Ernest Fleischmann. The sound from the kids' performances was carrying into where the orchestra was rehearsing. Fleischmann told her to fix it, and also that she could apply to work for him at the Philharmonic. Fresh from a year abroad in Vienna, she wrote him a letter in his native German. She got the job.

Deborah spent her twenties hardly sleeping, handling all the logistics for the LA Philharmonic. She did the scheduling, contracts, travel arrangements and stage set-ups. Those eight years were extraordinary, she says. She learned how to get things done efficiently and with a lot of people involved to keep happy.

For the next few decades, she led several of the country's top music organizations, building and expanding programs everywhere she went. She outgrew the LA Chamber Orchestra after six years, where she managed its first recording. Then she was off to the Seattle Symphony where she pulled the organization out of a fiscal hole and launched a smashingly successful fundraising campaign to build a new concert hall that opened in 1998 and transformed downtown Seattle.

Then she went to the Chicago Symphony, where she launched a program with Yo-Yo Ma called “citizen musician,” with musicians performing in homeless shelters, hospitals, schools and senior homes. She also recruited world-renowned conductor Riccardo Muti to become music director, launching a new era of extraordinary music making. They developed festivals with an intersection of music and non-arts themes, partnering with organizations across the city to spread music and culture to new audiences.

It all came together for Deborah at the Kennedy Center, the seat of national power in arts and education, which she led from 2014 to 2025. The REACH—an extension to the main structure—was designed, funded and opened on her watch. It provided more classrooms and rehearsal space, art and cultural installations, and opportunities for artists to curate immersive experiences. It’s been a roaring success, with thousands filing through each week.

Her proudest achievement is that she invited all of America to be in the Kennedy Center’s audience. She broadened programming and more regularly featured artists with diverse backgrounds from across the country. The makeup of audiences soon changed to reflect who we really are as a nation. Every American felt welcomed inside our nation’s cultural center.

An expert audience member she sure was by the end of her tenure. She was clocking in at 4 to 6 shows per week for a total of thousands of shows attended while at the Kennedy Center and easily tens of thousands over the course of her career. She jokes that after spending so much of her life inside sitting in the dark, she’s ready to spend a good chunk of it outside again.

The secret to much of her success is listening to artists. They are holding up a mirror of our society so we can better understand ourselves. Perhaps that’s part of the oneness we feel watching a performance.

Deborah doesn’t believe in the lofty, cloistered notion of “art for art’s sake.” She hopes that by unlocking the performing arts to new audiences over the years, she has spread the gospel of “art for life’s sake.” Art is the book you just read and made you think, it’s the delicious restaurant dinner you shared with friends, it’s the new outfit you are wearing that got a complement. Art is everywhere and for everyone to participate in. In our fractured society, it may be the last thing that can enrich, transport and unify us. ■

