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Joseph Nye, "The War on Soft Power"

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/12/the_war_on_soft_power

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MY COMMENTS:

As a concert pianist and former Fulbright Senior Scholar to México (1999-2000) I have brought music of living US composers to México, Brazil, and Spain under the auspices of the State Department's Cultural Specialist Program. I am disappointed and concerned by the fact that practically no one who's commented on Mr Nye's article --which I found excellent-- has mentioned THE ARTS as a powerful part of US foreign policy. Those who might find that characterization laughable are sad, because of the lack of imagination and education they reveal.

In my view, the commentators on this article who complain of the lack of statistics on the effects of "soft power" do Mr Nye the favor of proving his point when he comments that "The payoffs for exchange and assistance programs are often measured in decades, not weeks or months" -- and goes on to say that "Increasing the size of the Foreign Service, for instance, would cost less than the price of one C-17 transport aircraft, yet there are no good ways to assess such a tradeoff in the current form of budgeting." I would argue that we have no good ways to assess these tradeoffs because we haven't bothered to design them, and also because it may simply not be possible.

Cultural export and exchange are about far more than feel-good frosting on top of the "real" work. Although they are not always susceptible to the standard forms of measurement, they help us communicate with other peoples in ways that can be lasting. When I bring the music of US composers like Anne LeBaron, George Walker, Alex Shapiro, and Jack Fortner (to name a few) to audiences in Sao Paulo, Madrid, and Mexico City and it receives ovations, I am sowing seeds. There is no way to know where they will fall, how many of them will germinate or when -- and what their flowers or fruit may look like. But sow them we must, or reap the bitter harvest of severely limited communication represented by "hard" power.

Ana Cervantes

AN ADDENDUM

I play so much music in so many places that I forgot to mention one more event that I feel supports this precious idea of "soft" power through the arts: When I played in Spain for the first time in 2006, in Madrid, it was at the invitation of the Cultural Section of the US Embassy there. I played a "mixed" program of works from the standard repertoire together with newer pieces of US composers. One of these pairings was of Chopin's gorgeous first Nocturne with Charles B. Griffin's extraordinary little gem "Prelude: Homage to Chopin". By a lucky coincidence

Charles was there to hear the première in Spain of his piece. The audience was delighted to see him take a bow and gave him a huge ovation.

Later, while living in Latvia (goodness, what assonance) Charles gave a whole series of talks about jazz to a number of audiences all over that country ... sponsored by the Public Affairs section of the US Embassy there.

I return to my point, proceeding from Dr Nye's, about the "assessability" of the arts: Do we know how many people were touched, and will continue to be touched by these events, maybe during their entire lives? No, because it is not given to us to know that. Do we stop sending children to school because we have no way of knowing which will turn out to be the next Nobel Peace Prize winner, or the best carpenter in her town?

Ana Cervantes