

April 29, 2021

Peggy Chang's remarks for the IC Class of 2021+, also posted in the program [here](#).

[Yo-Yo Ma, performing "Amazing Grace" -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWZwuK8D4Js>]

Welcome! Members of the Independent Concentration Class of 2021, faculty advisors, other members of the Brown community, family members, and friends: Thank you for joining us for this virtual celebration of the independent concentrators completing their undergraduate degree requirements this May.

My name is Peggy Chang. I am the advisor for the Independent Concentration program, housed at the Curricular Resource Center for Peer Advising and in the College at Brown University.

The piece you listened to is renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma playing an instrumental version of "[Amazing Grace](#)" during the Biden/Harris Inauguration Concert this past January.

Soon-to-be graduates: Words fail me as I stand before you, wearing headphones instead of a cap and gown. So I turn to the universal language of music to offer some reflections for you today.

Yo-Yo Ma has used music to convey a sense of community and hope during this challenging period in our human history. I considered playing a recording of [Ma's pop-up concert at Berkshire Community College in western Massachusetts](#) after receiving his COVID vaccine shot or the time he [played in Laredo, Texas, near the US-Mexico border wall](#).

"Amazing Grace," an African American spiritual and folk song, was also performed by Garth Brooks at the Biden/Harris Inauguration Ceremony and sung by Aretha Franklin and many other icons over the years. It was written as a hymnal in 1772 by an Anglican clergyman named

John Newton. Newton was involved in the slave trade and later became an abolitionist. The song often serves as an anthem of sorts in the face of troubled times.

Your concentration, your composition, is an achievement particular to the group of you. You chose to cultivate an individual academic path, as did about 1,100 IC alums who came before you.

You composed an interdisciplinary field honoring your passions and urgent questions—you crafted distinct movements for your learning at different stages. You performed a translation of your IC's significance to a broader audience in the writing of your IC proposal and when presenting your senior capstone project. The range of interdisciplinary concentrations in this Class -- incorporating fields and topics such as storytelling, literacy, migration, food, computation, design, genetics, neuroscience, health, equity, and economics -- together form a chorus of work that you have performed with skill and brilliance.

And today, we are at the cadenza of your masterpiece. [Cadenzas](#) are “an improvised or written-out ornamental passage played or sung by a soloist or soloists, usually in a ‘free’ rhythmic style, and often allowing virtuosic display.” The cadenza comes just before the end of a movement or entire musical piece. You are nearly at the end of your performance, with the coda occurring this Sunday.

Cadenzas occur in pieces for soloists accompanied by a group of musicians, such as an orchestra. Similarly, while you completed a concentration independently, you hardly did it “on your own.” In your proposal, you needed to align yourself with other scholars and practitioners in the fields you integrated into your studies. You needed to marshal the support of a team of faculty advisors, some of whom are here with us now. You joined a lab, the IC virtual community meetings, or another concentration's DUG. You worked with practitioners at start-ups or nonprofit organizations.

Finally, a few words about your transition from student to scholar, and from scholar to practitioner entering -- as expressed in the lyrics written by *Prince* -- this thing we call "Life": During the past 13+ months, we have encountered uncertainty, isolation, and despair. Nevertheless, you persisted, insisting on building bridges, not walls. You graduate having become skilled at knitting together concepts perhaps not commonly seen together. You have excelled at building relationships between disparate areas, knowing that new insights, discoveries, and possibilities emerge when different perspectives come together. The song is more nuanced, more beautiful. Life is a symphony, after all.

Congratulations on the achievements in your concentration, your studies overall, and the other knowledge you gained while being a part of the Brown community. You have been an inspiration for me and many others. Please stay in touch.

***** A mini video/audio playlist in honor of you, in no particular order:**

Aretha Franklin with James Cleveland & the Southern California Community Choir, singing "Amazing Grace" (1972) -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LGN64GwVIRM>.

An example of a cadenza, in [Beethoven's Violin Concerto](#), performed by Hilary Hahn (timestamp 40:53 - 42:15).

[Prince's "Let's Go Crazy"](#)

[Celia Cruz's "Rie Y Lloro"](#)

[Slumdog Millionaire's "Jai Ho" by A.R. Rahman](#)

"This is Me," from *The Greatest Showman*, performed by Keala Settle et al. -- https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=XLFEvHWD_NE and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj4YugUtdwo>.

[Luther Vandross's "Power of Love"](#)

[Brown's Alma Mater](#) (2020)