

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
Winter Quarter Commencement
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David Citino, Speaker

POMP, CIRCUMSTANCE, AND OTHER SONGS OF A LIFETIME

If you're like me, you've got a big head,
not to mention a funny robe, full of music--
poems and melodies, the tunes
we move to, shower and shave by,
study, write to. Not just the incidental,

but the momentous music keeps time.
Our histories are measures of song,
chant and drum of Africa, sea-spume
of blind, far-sighted Homer, Sappho's
honeyed lyrics of love. Often, one piece

of music says a thousand words. Who
am I? I can't get out of my skull the words
of Rodolpho in Puccini's *La Boheme*.
Scrivo. I write. Vivo. I live. This ceremony
Is loud music—pomp and circumstance

of the life you began freshman year
or that first day of graduate school.
In my head I press *Play*, and the CD
of Big Days and Nights kicks on.
I leap and linger over moments too sweet,

nearly, for words. I'll never escape rhymes
from the nursery. *Up above the world
so high, like a diamond in the sky.*

We knew from the start the universe
was a wonder. Italian, Latin, English,

sung in nasal Cleveland accents.

Gaudeamus igitur, Juvenes dum sumus.

So, let us rejoice, while we are young.

Youth is that gift we can't comprehend
when we're young. By this ceremony,

you are less young than you were.

Don't let the heavy knowledge gained
from your studies deprive you of the gifts
of youth, to be able to rejoice at the drop
of a hat, to care for, be moved by others.

Now I hear golden hits of five decades.

Big Mama Thornton, and that so-called *King*

(King of what, fried butter sandwiches?)

who stole away her hound dog. *You aint*

never killed a rabbit, you aint no friend

of mine. As with those profs and TA's,

course after course, you had to produce—

kill some rabbits—to earn respect.

And at times OSU may have seemed

like Heartbreak Hotel, down at the end

of Lonely Street, so difficult was it
to do your best. Tennessee Ernie Ford,
"Sixteen Tons": *St. Peter don't you
call me 'Cause I can't go. I owe
my soul to the company store.*

You have been digging deep in mines
of knowledge. We all owe our souls
to Ohio State, company store of learning,
shared experience—precious ore
we have in common forever.

Now I hear Domenico Modugno's
fervent urging to wish, sing, fly,
Volare, Wo-oo. Cantare, Wo-o-o-o.
My grandfather was a peasant farmer,
a contadino in Calabria in the toe

of Italy. He knew it's the human lot
to dream, to wish, to fly. *Lucky,
lucky, lucky me, I'm a lucky son-
of-a-gun. I work eight hours, I sleep
eight hours, that leaves eight hours*

for fun. Hey! He sailed in steerage across
the Atlantic, came to Cleveland, where
he stayed long enough to work 52 years
for the B & O Railroad, before lying down
to rest in good Ohio soil. So many of us

here today came from elsewhere,
or ancestors did. From Tennessee, Italy,
Africa, Asia, Appalachia—even,
President Kirwan, the wilds of Kentucky
and Maryland. Women and men with backs

supple as birch trunks. The courage
it took to pick up stakes and begin again
in a new world! Think of the work
those older ones did. For you. You all
are facing a change right now.

This sheepskin is your passport.
You're bound for emigration to
the next song of your life. Ohio State
is the ark on which you've been sailing.
You've been the precious cargo.

But, as Noah once said, *I can see
clearly now, the rain is gone.* The ark,
our university, was filled to overflowing
with the *diversity* of us. Diversity.
Networks and talk shows devalue the word.

I say, rather, the richness of us,
precious difference, the grand multiplicity
of selves that balance this globe
and enable it to spin true. Grandson
of peasant immigrants, I was given

the opportunity to earn a doctorate
in English literature from Ohio State—
because my family labored long nights
around the kitchen table trying to learn
this arduous English. I sat where

you're sitting twenty-six years ago.
Bob Dylan and Smokey Robinson got me
through. Yes, it took a prophet and Miracles!
My son earned an OSU Ph.D. in history.
Now you, graduates, are being honored—

by degrees. We've all come together
around the kitchen table of OSU,
Ohio, *Round on the ends and high
in the middle*. For years to come
we'll sing together, *Beautiful Ohio*,

*in dreams again I see, Visions of what
used to be*. These psalms, sacred thoughts
of our tribes, 78's and 33's, tapes,
CD's--these take up space in shelves
of our skulls, our hearts. They remind us

we want a song beyond the run-
of-the-mill thrill, the moment throbbing
with pleasure or bathed in the blues.
We ache for measures grander than
pure selfishness. Songs sung for one

alone are not true music. Arias shared
are music of the spheres, ways of saying
to another something from the soul.
Of course the Buckeye Battle Cry
is there. *Drive, drive on down the field,*

*Men (and Women!) of the Scarlet
and Gray.* Well, you drove on down
the field, and you drove up and down
the streets, around and around
crowded lots, looking for a place to park,

and you searched our dark, ancient library
for a decent place to study. My wife,
Mary's, father, Bob, marched in the first
"Script Ohio," in 1936. He's here today
with us, blowing his horn, I can't help

but feel, as is the sweet mother
I lost last year, the one who gave me
the stars. Today's music makes us think
of the debts we owe, and never can repay.
So many of us would not be here

were it not for the lullabies and songs
of dear parents, their parents, theirs.
Some are here today in the flesh.
Many are not. We mourn them with cadences
of our hearts. Think how many people

sang before us, gave us name, a voice,
taught us the right words. We must
cherish them by remembering, every song.
When we sing to others, we honor
our fathers and mothers, thank them

for this day of profound scarlet and gray
pomp and circumstance. *O, come
let's sing Ohio's praise, And songs
to Alma Mater raise.* Alma mater.
Ohio State is our sweet, nurturing mother.

We came of age here, with her help.
*Well, Mother, we love you, but, like,
it's time we moved out, got a place
of our own. You're standing there,
Mom, gray hair, eyes scarlet*

from crying. We won't forget you.
Now, even though this ceremony
means we're being weaned, taken off
the nipple, let's take care to cherish her
all our days. Let's remember

the words to the songs she taught us,
and pass them on. *We'll remember
always, Graduation Day. Summer's heat,
and winter's cold, The seasons pass,
the years will roll, Time and change*

*will surely show How firm thy friendship,
O-Hi- O. We call that little number
Carmen Ohio. Carmen means song*
in Latin. You've worked hard; she
is your reward; today is your reward.

You're filled to overflowing with
the notes, the poems we've written
together. You know the score.
Continue to work hard for yourselves,
and one another. Find what needs

to be sung in this world. Sing it loud.
Graduates, it's a joyful litany, this hymn
composed by our ancestors and ourselves.
The calling of your name is music to
our ears. Sing that name proudly

all your days, as if your life depended
on it. It does, you know. It has been
an honor for me to speak—and sing—
to you today. Thank you, graduates,
and, again, Congratulations.