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Hello everyone. It's great to be here with you today, after all that we've been through since 2019.

Imagine that wine ... is music.

What sort of music? Doesn't matter. Whatever you love most.

Do we even have to imagine?

Wine is ... a sort of music.

It weaves patterns of scent and flavour rather than sound.

It brings solace to our lives, by taking us beyond ourselves, as music does, to a restorative elsewhere.

And it does this by touching us both intellectually and sensually, unlocking emotion in the process. Just like music.

There is a language of wine, as there is a language of music. We need to learn, by long study, how to unlock the subtleties of each, rather than producing a horrible din, discordant scents, flat flavours.

We need to learn how to taste it, too, at least if we want to explore wine culture to the fullest extent ...
though of course we can all enjoy wine instinctively, just as anyone can enjoy a tune, a sequence of chords, a beautiful voice.

But ... who composes the music of wine?

Ah -- that's different.

The music of wine is composed by the rocks, the soil, the micorrhizae, the hillside, the altitude, the day lengths, the wind, the sun, the rain. The potential grandeur of a wine is a function of its natural milieu. There is no Schubert or Springsteen of wine -- other than place itself.

Place composes wine's music.

The strange thing about this music, though, is that it's silent ... without the human. For most of the last 20,000 years, Montrachet was just a small patch of thick forest. The potential was there, but the trees couldn't communicate it to our hunting and berry-gathering ancestors ... and the wolves weren't listening.

Agriculture -- viticulture -- realised that potential, and brought the music into being.

The human role goes further than that, though.

Great music needs instruments, and needs performers. There is no music without instruments and performers.

The performers are those who make wine. Their struggle, once fully trained, is to listen for the silent music of place and bring it most memorably into being.

Well ... you see the problem, the challenge.

Listening to a music that is silent, that hasn't yet sounded, is difficult.

You have to ask the place what sort of wine it most wants to make, and then carry out its instructions.

It's a kind of intuition. You need to be a hill whisperer, a soil diviner.

Wine traditions, where they exist, help hugely: they mean that others have listened first. This is certainly an advantage for European winegrowers.

But the shock of global warming, and the evident rapidity of its advance, is effacing even that advantage. All the instructions are changing. Nothing is fixed. The music of many places is beginning to slide out of tune.

The winegrower's key choice is the instrument or instruments with which to play that music of place. These instruments are grape varieties. Music can always be played on different instruments. Some, though, will sound more sweetly in the ears than others.

The very greatest places of all will only reveal their greatness with a particular variety or variety combination. The sublime is picky.

Montrachet might be planted with Aligoté or Pinot Gris; Romanée-Conti with Gamay. The wine would be good. I doubt it would be sublime.

This is why varieties matter. They're a litmus for landscape. They're a stethoscope to press onto the chest or breast of a vineyard, in order to make out the silent music of place. The better the place, the more the instrument matters.

And this leads us to ... our cherished Chardonnay. You could fill a warehouse with instruments. They're all important; they're all perfect -- somewhere or other.

For all that, in the very centre of the warehouse, sits the most useful and the most adaptable instrument of all. Somewhere in the middle of the warehouse sits ... a piano.

I suspect Syrah might covet the role, but in truth there's only one grape variety which can really claim to be as useful and as well suited to a variety of different sites as the piano is to different sorts of music. That variety is Chardonnay.

The problem with being adaptable is that folks take you for granted. You get used everywhere, for everything. There isn't a tune in the world that someone hasn't played on the piano, and there isn't a region in the world where someone hasn't tried planting a vineyard or two of Chardonnay. We know the sound, the scent, the flavour ...

... and we love it. We love it so much we go looking for it. "Can I bring you some wine?" asks the sommelier or the waiter. "A glass of Chardonnay" I reply, and ...

that's all fine. So far as it goes. But ... it doesn't go very far. Ask for Chardonnay, and you're just asking for any old tune, played on the piano. Most of it will, of course and necessarily, be pleasant -- and anodyne.

In this sense, Chardonnay's its own worst enemy. Drinkers like the instrument. They ask the instrument to play. All the time. And that's what they hear. What they don't hear, or hear only rarely, is the music.

In this respect, Niagara has taught me a useful lesson.

When I first came here, I tasted everything. How could I not? When you arrive in new places, you gauge the range, listening out for landmark or signature sounds.

The high-pitched ice-wine chorus; the soulful Rieslings; the classical Pinots; the jazz lab Cab Francs, the rapper Gamays.

Honestly, I didn't pay that much attention to the Chardonnays at first, because making Chardonnay was like speaking English or applying for a passport: it was just what everyone did in order to strut onto the world stage as a wine region.

Of course there was Chardonnay; of course there's a piano in the room. There always is.

Then I went away, and then I came back and tasted some more, and then I went away again.

And then I realised that it was the Chardonnays I was thinking about, and it was the Chardonnays that I most wished that I had a few bottles of, tucked away at home.

These were the quiet, compelling Niagara wines in which the variety had retreated most comprehensively.

It was in these wines that I could sense this North most clearly; the great brooding icy masses of water; the sticky chaos of moraine and till; the implacable grey of winter; the green frenzy of summer.

These were the wines in which the variety had ceased to come first. The Chardonnay was so good I could forget about Chardonnay. And think about Niagara instead.

The greatest musical performances are not the showiest or the most gestural; they're those during which you forget about the performer in order to become one with the music, to live the music. Or, in wine, to become one with the place.

This is why great winemakers strive for nothing so much as invisibility. This is how you taste Chablis Montée de Tonnerre, Corton-Charlemagne or Meursault Villages, and never Chardonnay in the end.

This is the music of place.

How much, though, is Chardonnay's repertoire predicated on temperature? Must this be a music of high latitudes, of elevated altitudes and of continental locations? Is it ... cool or nothing?

Few varieties can convince in as many locations as Chardonnay. Burgundy alone shows us that it can embrace musical multitudes, through its graduated changes from near-austere Petit Chablis to amply fleshed Pouilly-Fuissé.

The warmer the location, though, the greater the risk that the variety will throw place into shadow.

I suspect this is as much to do with speed of ripening as it is with heat summations; Chardonnay seems to become most place-sensitive when it can take its time in finding the path towards maturity.

The variety name is rarely the first thing you think of when you sip a glass of classic Chablis. It's too inarticulate for that.

So ... is it this kind of teasing inarticulacy that we need to look for? That would be the simple conclusion. Simple conclusions are usually wrong.

Don't confuse the shy with the mute. For the shy, the music is quiet. Time is needed to make it out.

For the mute, there is no music.

In warm regions, for example, you can achieve inarticulacy and preserve acidity by early harvesting: it seems a tempting technique. Yet the wines which result may be mute and undeveloped – so 'tightly wound', to use a fashionable tasting term, that they will never unwind.

The fruit hasn't achieved resonance, and it never will; it was taken too soon. You prod and poke and you find nothing there except bare acidity itself. There isn't anything much to give.

Inarticulacy based on the wait for ripeness over a luminous high-latitude summer, by contrast, will always express itself in the end. Teasingly.

So less cool regions face a challenge. How do you give Chardonnay the articulacy and resonance which comes with a full season while dissuading it from over-exuberant varietal expression?

It's difficult, but many do this successfully, notably in southern Europe and North America, via perfectly judged harvesting and cellar restraint. The fruit can then be itself, as variously as it might wish.

Chardonnay is an instrument on which you can play many types of music.

Is there, though, a difference between cool-by-latitude and cool-by-altitude? And what of soils?

Two qualifications first, before making necessarily dangerous generalisations.

No matter what the variety, the vine is a forgiving and adaptive plant that usually rewards devotion, close attention and hard work.

Secondly, the cultural context in which a wine comes into being can always be read in the finished result, just as culture seems to be embedded in the chords and rhythms of particular musical traditions.

My impression, though, drawn from the Chardonnay wines of the Alps as well as those of Eastern France more generally, is that higher altitudes and stonier soils tend to result in something percussive, with less tenderness and purchase than for those wines produced at lower altitudes or with less stone. A marble beauty, if you like, striking and smooth but sometimes a little chilly and austere.

This is as true of those Chardonnays found at the topmost, thin-soiled vineyards of the Côte d'Or or the Hautes Côtes, as it is of the often impressive wines of Alto Adige or Switzerland's Valais. It can be true of wines from high-altitude Tumbarumba in Australia and of Limoux in the Upper Aude Valley, too.

Because of the chemistry of the Côte d'Or's soils, many wine actors fetishize limestone – but for me it is the textural qualities and cation-exchange potential of marl which is most interesting for Chardonnay, both in Burgundy and elsewhere. It's often a concealed, almost viscerally appealing tenderness, lurking behind a taut exterior, inarticulate in youth, which exemplifies the appeal of Burgundy. Could you have that without any clay at all? I doubt it.

Marl means limey clay ... but how much clay, and what sort? Too much can be as bad as not enough. A little propitious clay, particularly in mid-evolution in limestone bedrock fissures, is better than over-nutritious spadefuls and slabs in would-be potato fields.

There's plenty of evidence, too, that the chemical signature of limestone is not essential to the distinguished places where we can hear great music from Chardonnay. Quality of clays and aptitude of soil structure is surely just as important, alongside climate and culture. That's the lesson of Oregon's volcanic soils, and of the shales, quartzites and ancient laterites typical of Australia's Yarra Valley, Adelaide Hills and Margaret River.

Chardonnay, to repeat, is an instrument on which you can play many sorts of music. It's the wine world's Proteus: super-adaptive, mutable, pliant and fearless. It came into being in what we call cool climates, but it's moved deftly beyond these – as a servant of place.

That's all it asks: to serve, and not to dominate.

Well, we've got a great day of discussion and tasting ahead of us. We can put Proteus to the test, not only by looking in detail at Niagara's exciting Chardonnays but also by discovering great wines from further afield.

In Session 3 this afternoon, on redefining cool, we'll discuss with our global Chardonnay guests whether cool climate needs to change from

- being a passive concept, defined by external data points which are rendered increasingly unreliable by climate change, to
- an active concept, something that you seek, you guard, you fight for and you sustain.

Remember, as we explore all these wines of cold, cool and tepid climates, that less varietal character often means more place.

Wine's finest music is created not by winemaker virtuosity or by the instruments of variety. It's created by winemakers listening for singularities of landscape, for topographical aptitude, for conjunctions of soil, wind, water and light. By seeking out those distinguished places, in other words, where such wines come into being.

And if, when we taste and drink, we think first of the place and not of the variety, then the winemaker and the vineyard owner are on the right track.

Thank you.

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First held in 2011, the i4C – short for the International Cool Climate Chardonnay Celebration – is a wine event unlike any other, blending premium wines, Niagara’s world-class culinary scene and immersive wine education into a long weekend that absolutely overflows with fun. Visit coolchardonnay.org for more details.