

In Conversation with President Mark Rabideau



What music faculty can learn from the Kobayashi Maru

Some of our members will identify as “Trekkies”: those super fans of the science fiction, cult-classic television show turned movie dynasty, comic book series, and (least appealing to me) worldwide network of conventions. I do not. But like any other kid growing up in the late 1960s and 70s, there was escaping the grip of Captain Kirk and the crew of the Starship Enterprise.

Perhaps the allure was embedded within the intentionality of its diverse characters? So many of us could see ourselves as part of that crew. Or because of its optimistic view of cohabitating within the universe amidst the divisiveness over America’s involvement in the Vietnam War? Or maybe the appeal was quite simply found in the astonishing imagination of the creators and of those who continually reinvented the franchise?

What I remember most about the *Star Trek* enterprise (lower-case “e” and not so clever pun intended) are those adorable tribbles that caused so much trouble. (But that doesn’t have anything to do with what I want to talk about today.) What I want to reflect upon is Captain James T. Kirk’s defiance against systems that were structured so that they could not be overcome.

Introduced in the 1982 film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, we learn that Kirk was the only cadet in Starfleet history to ever beat the Kobayashi Maru. After taking the test and failing on two occasions, Kirk controversially reprogrammed the computer to make it possible to win the simulation. Kirk then went on to become the first (and only known) cadet to beat the “no-win” scenario.

Of course, knowing what systems need to be broken and what systems might bend is the challenge. What are systems meant to protect and from what? And who is quietly being harmed behind the protectionist systems built to perpetuate the status quo and serve those in power?

The College Music Society’s brand is about leading meaningful change. We do this by pushing back on status quo through the good work conducted by our councils and committees, disseminating member-generated knowledge through our publications and conference gatherings, and by supporting one another as colleagues and friends. We do this by articulating best practices, providing resources, and living our values in plain sight. In short: we show, not tell. Yet there have been moments during my presidency where (and others) have witnessed egregious violations of the rules of our profession, and wondered what role any, should our Society play.

Recently, a CMS member reached out to me with concern that a “prominent” music school was handing down a “plum” position, seemingly without a search and offered the suggestion that CMS might call-out the institution. They described the perceived cronyism as “incredibly depressing for [gender marginalized members of the profession], as we gain more and more clarity about why we feel so frustrated, undermined, thwarted, sabotaged, exploited...”

They raised (and I share with permission from the member) the question:

Does the College Music Society have any rightful concern or responsibility to shine a light on Worst Practices when we see them, with discussion about why practices like this run so damagingly counter to the work we are trying to achieve?

To which I posed the question:

Will calling-in institutions to Best Practices bring about change?

Their response:

Calling In works when the callers and the ones picking up the phone share mutual goals and a trust that communication can be of mutual benefit. If I heard you say something, Mark, that I found

Mark, your sense of yourself vis-à-vis the leaders of our nation's college music institutions may support your feeling that you could be in a position to call them in on anything (something it seems you were acknowledging), but so many of us – and so many of the humans we are here to represent and support – would fail to recognize any such sense, having spent our careers feeling like the perpetually threatened outsiders. We have no “inside” of anything into which to call the powerful.

Charged as president to speak and act upon the collective will of our Society, I have sought to balance responsibilities to the whole with the concerns expressed by individuals. When it is reasonable to believe that my privilege has shielded me from realities endured by those who feel they are the “perpetually threatened outsiders,” I have sought counsel from those whose life experiences will offer a greater diversity of perspectives. This is but one reason why we build [diverse Boards](#).

To address this challenge, I sought the counsel of two past-presidents and the [Executive Committee](#), to whom I've asked:

How would CMS ever know enough about the inner-workings of an institution to warrant calling them out?

Would an institution reverse a decision (or refrain in the future from similar acts) based on a coordinated outcry by CMS?

And is this the best use of our collective time, energy, and mind-space?

As president, I have made the decision that it is not in CMS' best interest to enter into the business of calling-out institutions for nefarious practices, no matter how egregious. My decision is rooted in the belief that it is neither feasible nor the collective will of our members. I, too, want to acknowledge that for members who have experienced greater harm from these practices than I (as a person who benefits from systems built for people who look and live their lives like me) have, colleagues for whom systems were designed to oppress, that my decision will likely be a disappointing one.

So, the question then becomes: How might an organization dedicated to leading positive change confront harmful practices occurring within music in higher education?

The College Music Society will expand its toolkit beginning in 2024 as we roll-out courses (leading to badges and certifications) in best practices within music in higher education. These will include:

Music Schools Hiring Practices that Foster Equity and Diversity

Inclusive Pedagogy in Music Education Classrooms

Inclusive Music Histories: Leading Change through Research and Pedagogy

Radically Responsive Music Schools: Leading Change through Culture-Building

Becoming an Artist-to-the-World: Music and Social Entrepreneurship

Change Leadership for Music Executives in Higher Education

The absence of Captain Kirk's most recognizable quote, even to those who tune-in to Star Trek only on occasion, would at this point be an avoidance. But as is so often the case, what it means "to boldly go where no one has gone before" is neither found in changing course nor hiding from our responsibilities. Rather, I am holding out hope that our continuing work modeling best practices, hosting open dialogue, illuminating a path forward for a more inclusive, equitable, creative, and joyful profession will prevail. His will be the judge.

If you've read anything here that you would like to speak to, I would welcome hearing from you in a public statement via social media or privately via [email](#).

Thanks for joining the conversation.

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