

Welcome Back to School!

As summer holidays wind down and we enter August, most of us in academia in the northern hemisphere are about to start the fall semester in the next few weeks. (Did it feel like this summer went faster than others?) Still, I'm more excited about the school year this fall than I have been for quite some time. We are at an important point in the future of music education, and I'm excited about the conversations brewing. But more on that later...

The thing I love about summer is the space. Space to breathe, to listen, to gain perspective. Most of us in academia get a chance to stop the tyranny of urgency for a moment and get our heads above the trenches just long enough to see the big picture of what we're doing with the mission of our lives.

While the day-to-day work in collegiate music is meaningful as we interact with students, teach our classes, grade our papers, navigate time schedules, organize admissions auditions, and generate assessment reports, we often lose sight of the big picture perspective of what we are trying to accomplish in transforming our students' lives and thereby changing the world through music.

It is in the summer that I can see the big picture of us all working together, pulling in the same direction for the sake of the future of art and music.

Here is what I'm thinking: As professionals in music education, we're all dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in our programs, ensembles, and students. Excellence is a noble and worthy goal.

Yet, excellence is, by definition, exclusive. It separates the experts from the rest of society. If you think about it, much of our time in academia is also spent in relative isolation from each other from the practice room to the one-on-one lessons, grading student papers, teaching rarely observed classes, preparing for the podium, and slogging through emails. We are also in a competitive business by nature. While I agree with Bartók's notion that "competition is for horses," the reality is that we compete with each other every step of the way, from chair auditions in middle school, to peer review for journal articles and conference presentations, to the prestige of our ensembles' performance reputations, and among each other's schools for our annual admission targets.

Still, while music is a competitive business by nature, we must adopt a more collaborative and holistic approach moving forward to elevate ourselves from these trenches and advocate for our fundamental mission.

As the expression goes, *We're all in the same boat together*. I like to think of this as the "orchestra pit rule." I recall a perfect example from a few years ago while in the middle of a month-long run in the pit. As happens all too often among musicians, a principal player in a nearby section started nagging their second about intonation. Of course, tensions grew, and morale worsened over the following few shows (and, of course, the pitch didn't seem to improve anywhere in the pit!). Memorably, in front of many others, one of the respected senior members of the orchestra called out the principal who was harassing the other musician and said something to the effect of "What are you doing? You know how this works! We're all in this pit together. We pull each other up till the end of the run."

In a competitive environment, it is common to criticize and put down others around us—we have been trained to do so. But in the end, we must work together to accomplish our mission as best we can. The Navy has a similar rule for this, especially with the submariners, because when it comes down to it, our collective energy is everything. Naturally, there are times to make personnel changes, but not during the middle of a run. While in the pit, we all pull together 100%.

At this time of post-pandemic, divisive politics, and a general rise of anti-intellectualism, it is more urgent than ever that we focus together and collectively on our primary objective.

The College Music Society and other academic organizations have long been places to amplify the individual musician and scholar's career. From the Music Vacancy List to providing opportunities for academics to collect accolades for tenure and promotion files as we advance our discipline, now is the time for CMS to also become the place where we come together to advocate for the future of our discipline and the role of music in the larger society.

A few years ago, I read a line by one of our colleagues, Rob Cutietta, former Dean of the University of Southern California, that struck me like a lightning bolt at the time and has continued to shape my life since:

"...in a democratic society... the goal of schooling, of which music is a part, is to prepare future adults to contribute meaningfully to society while having a fulfilling life or what our founding fathers called the 'pursuit of happiness.'" *

But, if we do believe that music is for everyone and that part of our mission is to expand music and its role in society, then the music school of the future must rethink its relationship with our traditional notions of excellence and how we interface with the inclusivity of music for all.

I don't have any answers here. Nobody I know does. But collectively, we must figure out how to serve in this capacity in the coming decades if the music schools of tomorrow are going to have a reserved and reverent place in our societies.

As members of the College Music Society, you have two beautiful opportunities to participate and help CMS come together to collectively advocate for the role of music in our country's society, schools, education, process, and the world. The first is the CMS conference held in Washington, DC, this November, with the theme, "Advancing Democracy: Empowering Action Through Music." The second opportunity will be in January 2025 with a CMS summit dedicated to creating a collective document that we are referring to as Manifesto 2.0. One of our primary pillars will be advocacy, where we will focus on this subject. I hope you can join us, and I challenge you to bring a new friend or colleague to CMS with you!

*Cutietta, Robert A. "K-16 Music Education in a Democratic Society" from *Policy and the Political Life of Music Education*. Ed. Schmidt, Patrick and Colwell, Richard. Oxford University Press. 2017.

BC

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "BK Chin". The letters are stylized and connected, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Brian Kai Chin
President, College Music Society