

Dear World-Changing Musicians,

We are living in uniquely challenging times. The recent killing of Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis by ICE agents, coupled with a growing number of ICE-instigated shootings and injuries of American citizens, is an assault on the very foundations of America's democracy and of a free civil society. We must also recognize that for our country's Black, Brown, and Indigenous people, these scenarios are all too familiar and egregiously unacknowledged under the weight of racism and bigotry.

For our colleagues teaching at colleges and universities in Minnesota, the fear, anxiety, and anger fomented by this situation are having an enormous impact on every aspect of their lives. For many of their students, these events have been overwhelming. The worry, fear, and outrage extend across the country.

During times like these, many of us musicians and educators might question why. Why are we studying music, teaching music, and playing music when it feels like the foundations of a free society are under attack? How do we keep teaching, studying, and playing music during times like these? It can seem like a luxury starkly out of line with what is happening in the world around us.

These questions were in the air as 150 CMS colleagues from across the country and around the globe gathered in Houston on January 16th for the Think-Tank Summit. We came together to reimagine the future of music education. When former CMS President Brian Chin dreamed this conference into existence starting two years ago, he had no idea that it would land right in the middle of the Minneapolis maelstrom. But it did. And what seemed like impossibly unfortunate timing turned into something quite different. Gathering together at that moment with our CMS colleagues, charting the future of music education, felt like exactly where we needed to be and what we needed to be doing.

The Summit was built around four pillars: Belonging, Creativity, Advocacy, and Technology. Each pillar featured 6 compelling speakers followed by sessions in which our community responded to questions, engaged in lively, meaningful dialogue, and collaboratively imagined new pathways into our bright future.

As the speakers for the Belonging pillar began to share their visions for the future, questions about the importance of what we do began to quickly disappear. We were challenged to make every music program a community of true belonging, where every person is welcomed for who they are; where every person's histories, identities, and ideas are celebrated; where there is space to feel safe, space to breathe, space to dream, space to collaborate, space to create. There are challenges to creating these aspirational communities, but when juxtaposed with the backdrop of divisiveness, hatred, anxiety, and fear we are seeing in the world around us, the importance of the task at hand becomes strikingly clear.

The Creativity Pillar further dispelled any questions about the importance of music. We were reminded that creativity is a human birthright—that every one of us deserves the opportunity to explore our full creative potential. We need the disruptive power of the creative act. When someone powerfully brings their creativity into the world, it is a demonstration of their essential humanity. It is what oppressive systems fear most. Unbridled creative energy can change the world for the better. The dream of truly centering creativity in everything we do took on a new and powerful meaning as we envisioned music schools nurturing the creative, collaborative world-changing musicians and citizens of the future.

During the Advocacy presentations, we were inspired to spread our light and let the world know about the central importance of music education in creating the engaged citizens, visionary artists, and forward-thinking collaborators of the future. At times when the arts are under attack, we were reminded that this is not a time to isolate and hunker down, but a time to redouble our efforts to build collaborative networks across disciplines, between schools, into community organizations, arts organizations, the business community, and with local, regional, state, and national governments. These connections amplify the extraordinary power of the arts. When music is under attack, it is never because it is irrelevant, it is because it is so powerful. Civil rights leader and congressman John Lewis underlined the central power of music when he said, "Without music, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings." Today, once again, the power of music is pushing back against violence and inequity. Three hundred people gathered on January 11th in Minneapolis to sing their protest. Bruce Springsteen and Dave Matthews have joined the movement, writing songs protesting the ICE insurgency. More and more protest songs are being written every day. Last week, 30 drummers gathered on Minneapolis's Stone Arch Bridge in a rhythmic demonstration against ICE. As they played, they chanted, "Drums in, ICE out!" We can never underestimate the power of music. For me, this session made the critical importance of music even clearer and our mission more urgent.

The Technology Pillar, which primarily focused on AI, also underlined the importance of music, creativity, and personal agency. We were encouraged to approach AI not with fear, but with curiosity and a deeper understanding of what it is, what it can, and cannot, do, and how it might actually help us to elevate our individual and collaborative

creative voices. The important conversations our Summit community had around tech and AI were ethically and morally complex, intellectually and artistically challenging, and emotionally charged. I won't try to summarize the outcomes here, but for me, the one clear takeaway was that AI can never replace you and your uniquely beautiful, uniquely important, uniquely powerful artistic voice.

I arrived at the Summit with grave concerns about the future of my country and the importance of music and music education in a world that feels like it is falling apart.

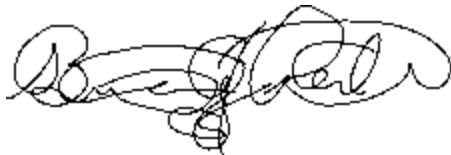
I left the Summit still deeply concerned about the state of my country, but also with feelings of deep gratitude for CMS and its willingness to create spaces for gathering and dreaming the future into existence, especially at a time like this. I left the Summit thankful for a community that helped me clarify the critical importance of what we do and helped me recommit wholeheartedly to the work we do as musicians, educators, creators, and advocates.

Thank you, immediate past President Brian Chin, for creating this remarkable forum. Thank you Jeff Loeffert, Hannah Pearson, and the remarkable CMS staff and interns that made this vision a reality.

In the coming weeks, all the inspiring, thought-provoking talks will be posted on the CMS website, along with the ideas shared by the Summit participants, so you too can experience the transformational power of this event. I hope it will help you clarify the incredible importance of what you do and give you the resources and community that will allow you to move positively forward.

When the scope of the challenges you are facing seem overwhelming, CMS is here for you. Our members are here for you. We strive to be that community of true belonging, that community of wild creativity, that community of fearless advocacy, that community that can help you take even one small step forward when the future seems unclear. Thank you for being part of this community.

Keep Listening, Keep Dreaming, Keep Changing the World.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian Pertl". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B" and a stylized "P".

Brian Pertl
President, College Music Society
Director, Lamont School of Music, University of Denver
Board Chair, Smithsonian Folkways Records