

In Conversation with President Mark Rabideau



Grappling with the principles and practicalities of going to Florida

Since locking-in Miami as the home to our October conference, Florida legislators have politicized the educational system, launched assaults on LGBTQ+ and BIPOC communities, and censored art that does what word alone often fail to do: tell the truth.

On May 20th, the [NAACP issued a travel advisory](#) for the state of Florida (with Equality Florida, the Human Rights Campaign, and the League of United Latin American Citizens). It reads, "Before traveling to Florida, please understand that the state of Florida devalues and marginalizes the contributions of, and the challenges faced by African Americans and other communities of color."

This issuance makes clear that for many members of our Society, Florida is a dangerous place. As president, I read the statement as a set of questions to be answered.

Will cancelling our conference in Florida and boycotting the harmful legislation emerging from Tallahassee make a significant impact?

Or might the collective voices of our Society be more impactful if we were to gather in Miami and take action?

There are convincing arguments for either decision, [as unpacked within this article by CNN](#). And we can learn from how organizations, such as the [Association for the Study of African American Life and History \(ASALH\)](#), arrived at their decision. Of course, CMS members will need to weigh the calculus about travel to Florida for themselves. These are difficult questions without simple answers.

As president, I am charged with the dual responsibilities of caring for the good of our members and caring for the good of the organization.

Here are the practical reasons why I have decided to go forward with our Miami conference.

A conversation with CMS professional staff confirmed that our current capacity is insufficient to take the heavy lift of pivoting to an alternate location given the time horizon required to do so.

Although CMS has formed a [Task Force for Reimagining Conferences in 2025 and Beyond](#), our current conference budget model is anchored by hotel contracts that cannot be voided or transferred and would prove crippling for CMS finances if we were to incur the \$80,000 in penalties.

Good faith partnerships have been made with local and national collaborators who have invested considerable resources to host a successful conference. CMS cancelling is de facto cancelling for our partners.

And here are the principled reasons I have decided to go forward.

I hold a belief that we can strategically care for our people.

Ample evidence exists that [Miami is vastly more inclusive, diverse, and accepting](#) than the legislation emerging from Tallahassee.

As a profession of music educators devoted to leading change, there has never been a more urgent moment than now to gather and resist the erosion of academic freedom and the proliferation of censorship spreading from Florida.

Here are some of the worries inherent in making this decision and how the CMS staff is rallying to minimize those risks.

Worry: How will we care for members of our Society who may experience harm if voices of incivility

Plan: CMS plans to place a professional counselor specializing in addressing harms disproportionately experienced by marginalized communities on retainer. Counseling during the conference will be free and available to all conference attendees.

Worry: How will CMS leverage our financial influence in a way that signals our support for inclusion and civility?

Plan: Recognizing that restaurants continue to struggle even as the pandemic lifts and that [hospitality workers](#) disproportionately identify as members of marginalized communities, CMS plans to partner with LGBTQ+- and [BIPOC-owned restaurants](#) throughout Miami as we secure locations for our “dine-arounds.”

Additionally, CMS members employed within states that do not allow government funds to be spent on travel to Florida will receive a discounted registration. If you are facing such a restriction, please email operations@music.org for more information and to facilitate the next steps in your registration process.

Worry: How can we provide opportunities for members to raise their voices and speak on behalf of inclusivity, love, and acceptance?

Plan: CMS will host expert-led Round Table discussions designed to:

- equip participants to interpret legalese used to attack academic freedom,
- pushback against legislation that targets diversification efforts to the curriculum, and
- oppose political attacks on institutions of higher learning.

CMS is not, and should not become, a politically affiliated organization. We are, however, a Society that stands for decency, civility, and the freedom of speech required to teach and learn about music's ability to unpack complex histories and unveil difficult truths. To be specific, we must reject the erasure of the Black experience, combat the denigration of the LGBTQ+ community, and champion music's ability to tell each person's story as a way of telling all our stories. And although Florida warrants our particular focus, legislation challenging the fundamental values of the educational system, including the protections of terms that allow for academic freedom, is unfolding across the country.

Why does a Society of musicians and music faculty shoulder some of the burden of maintaining decency and civility?

Music-making reflects the values of democracy itself, and is premised upon prizing, in equal parts, individual and collective contributions to the whole, so that each one of us might contribute to something greater than ourselves. After all, the very definition of an artist is someone who sees the world from a one-of-a-kind perspective and shares that vantage point with the rest of the world so that we, too, might better understand that which connects all of humanity.

The CMS staff plans to organize volunteer opportunities for conference attendees to engage with local organizations to celebrate Miami's diverse communities. Seeking member feedback, you can [take this survey](#) to offer your ideas and register to become involved.

Thanks for joining the conversation,

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