Think-Tank Summit Preview "Pillar 3: Technology and Artificial Intelligence"

Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.
—Pablo Picasso (Artist)

This newsletter is the third of four, outlining the intentions surrounding the four pillars of belonging, creativity, technology, and AI, as well as the advocacy of the 2026 CMS Think-Tank Summit. The technology and artificial intelligence pillar is perhaps the most difficult to frame for discussion.

Technology and music have always been intertwined; from the invention of the lute, to the hammer-string action mechanism for the pianoforte, to the phonograph, and to the digital audio workstations we use today. In fact, countless examples of artists and musicians have embraced technology to amplify their creativity to even greater heights. In our discipline of music, Bach's master work of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* illustrates what a technologically innovative prompt can do for creativity. I see the same with Berlioz's use of the piston valve, Mozart with the piano and the clarinet, Ravel with the saxophone, and Jimi Hendrix with the electric guitar.

Further, we witness a radical change as music creation enters the recording studio. As Rey Sanchez, Chair of the Program Committee for the Technology and AI pillar and Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives and Innovation at the Frost School of Music, articulates, "...music underwent a transformative evolution in the 1960s when the process of recording changed from capture of live performance, to the creation of the music itself to be replicated later in performance." This brings to mind The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Brian Eno, Björk, and Dr. Dre.

This seismic shift, from capturing live music in recordings to creating music in studios for later performance, has left music schools perplexed about which direction to approach when training the musicians of the next generation. Our traditions would lead us to continue cultivating performers into creators, as is the case with most of the music in the Western Art Canon. Yet, the bulk of the world has already made the massive switch, with many musicians worldwide training as creators first and often later emerging as performers too.

But regardless of our approach, here we stand on the cusp of a new era, powered by artificial intelligence, where the relationship between art and technology is becoming more fascinating and transformative than ever. For many student musicians, technology is no longer just a tool for recording or distributing their work – AI is an active collaborator. As Rey Sanchez has been exploring with the *CMS Artificial Intelligence in Music Cohort* this past year, AI-powered software can help musicians of all backgrounds explore new harmonic possibilities, generate melodic ideas, and assist in creating works once considered out of reach.

On one hand, fully embracing AI tools does not replace the composer's creativity. Instead, it augments it, providing a new lens with which to view their artistic vision, aiding in amplifying intent, and propelling traditional skills and musicianship practice to ever-new heights.

Further, technology is revolutionizing performance and practice. Virtual reality and augmented reality are creating immersive performance spaces, allowing ensembles to "perform" together from different locations with astonishing realism. For individual students, in addition to global technology like Yamaha's *Disklavier,* which can connect us instantly, AI can listen to them play and provide real-time feedback on pitch, rhythm, and tone, acting as a tireless and objective practice partner. This personalized feedback loop can accelerate learning and help students refine their skills with greater precision.

The reality is that the technology is here to stay. If the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it is that we will become increasingly integrated with these tools to bring us together and amplify our beloved art form. As Rey Sanchez puts it, "In my opinion, technology and AI are essential, not optional. They cut across every area of the curriculum that involves making music." By this measure, intentionally and strategically integrating these tools across our schools is crucial to ensure that all students graduate with the necessary technological proficiency.

Still, I opened this newsletter with Picasso's quip about "useless computers" for a reason. Undoubtedly, we will continue integrating technological tools into our daily lives as musicians. However, as I was rigorously trained in the academy, like many of you, I can't help but feel that the rapid pace of AI development poses an existential threat to what it means to dedicate one's life to being a musician. Maybe I'm just annoyed that future students won't have to spend the tens of thousands of hours on dedicated technique and repertoire study to create great work. I believe deeply in the talent development of craft, so I'm not sure how I feel about that.

In contrast to Picasso's idea, however, I am seeing the awe-inspiring AI tools emerging as the "computers" with the "answers" to the human prompts that we provide. Today, the computer still only gives answers, and so far, that's all. It still requires us humans to bring our lifetime of wisdom, musical context, and expertise to turn those answers into

something that reflects the human experience.

Down the road, I wonder if merging the two approaches will show a quantum leap forward for musicians across the globe. If the result is more people making music and engaging in the artistic process, that is a massive win by any measure. Think of what the iPhone camera has done to photography. I would say it has not ruined the art form, but rather expanded our definitions and engaged more people in the artistic process worldwide by removing previous obstacles to participation. I hope that music will evolve in much the same way.

What does this look like in actual practice in 2026? Join us at the Summit in Houston in January to participate in the discussion!

BC

Brian Kai Chin
President, College Music Society