

May, 2021

Whose Music Matters?

Duke Ellington famously said, “There are simply two kinds of music, good music and the other kind.” Heeding Ellington’s genius, what if we were to redefine musical study as the pursuit of learning, embracing, and creating good music in all of its forms? In this scenario, the criteria for the music we study would no longer be limited by a composer’s gender identity, skin color, or geographical birthplace. Nor by the music most familiar within our own experience. Rather, the criteria would be how deeply the music challenges our intellect, stirs our emotions, and ignites our spirit. Of course, arriving at a consensus on a canon of “good music” would present its challenges, and if done so with bias, prejudice, or malice, would prove harmful. We know this from experience.

Perhaps in 2021, we are ready to agree that the principal goal of musical study is to prepare one-of-a-kind artists-to-the-world, equipped with the requisite skills to create a lifetime of artistic moments, one after the next. And that agile graduates are inspired to see a horizon of opportunities to engage their audiences from center stage and within a 3rd grade classroom; to advocate for arts education within our communities and to unpack the complexities of 21st century society through artistic expression.

To achieve this goal, music schools would need to become diverse and inclusive ecosystems, that embrace the teaching, learning, and exploration of musical traditions that stretch across cultural boundaries. Creativity would be prized. Difference would be celebrated. And feeling welcomed when showing-up as our whole selves would become the joyful norm.

What might this look like in action? And how might this paradigm shift position music as the soundtrack for a societal revolution that champions equity and justice?

While serving as Director of the 21st Century Musician Initiative, 21CM and the Silkroad Ensemble partnered to launch the Global Musician Workshop (GMW). Bringing together musicians from around the world to explore new art forms at the intersection of classical music traditions as diverse as Hindustani (Northern India), Arabic (Middle Eastern), Kugak (Korean), and Jazz (U.S.), GMW was conceived of as a cultural exchange of ideas through music. Bridging the gap across difference, seeking to better understand diverse people within an ever-increasingly globalized world, and expanding the definition of music as one that celebrates creativity and inclusivity were our radical goals.

What did we discover? When you make music with someone whose life experience is different from your own it changes you. It changes them. And then when we pick up the newspaper and read about lives lost in war-torn countries far away, or hospital systems at the brink of collapse, or communities embattled over the question WHOSE LIVES MATTER?, our differences no longer feel so different, so distant, so foreign. It is closer to home, closer to our own understanding, part of our shared humanity.

CMS is moving our society and the profession closer to this vision. Already among the most diverse collection of scholars and makers within the profession, CMS, too, should become the most inclusive. Here are a few ways in which we hope to spark this change.

The [Committee on Cultural Inclusion](#) embraces openness, listening, possibility, and play. The committee’s mission is to “empower all CMS members to become institutional change makers by providing them with professional development opportunities and resources for their ongoing cultural inclusion and antiracism work. Knowing that this work belongs to all of us, we strive to build a welcoming community that invites CMS colleagues to safely share their stories and deepen their commitments to antiracism through listening, learning, reflecting, and acting. We are a hub for shared wisdom, brave conversations, and collective creativity for the benefit of all.”

Acting upon this mission, the Committee on Cultural Inclusion, under the leadership of Chair Leila Ramagopal Pertl will be hosting two Listening Sessions.

[Sunday, May 23 3:30-4:30 PM EDT](#)

[Sunday, July 25 3:30-4:30 PM EDT](#)

These conversations will gather insights into how we will shape our Affinity Groups. We invite our Black, LGBTQAI+, Latinx, Women, AAPI, Allies, and all our members to register now. Next, we will host our first break-out meetings virtually on [Sunday, September 26 from 3:30-4:30 PM EDT](#) and then gather in-person in Rochester this Fall.

The [Committee on International Initiatives](#) serves as a liaison between music faculty and institutions across the globe, generating dialogue about best practices for music instruction in higher education and creating opportunities for cultural exchange among our membership. Embracing the vision that CMS's future is global, Chair Don Bowyer has expanded committee membership to express the diversity of CMS's potential reach, with new committee members joining from Australia, Kuwait, Egypt, and beyond. 2021 goals include establishing an International Chapter for members outside of North America with an equitable membership fee structure that reflects financial disparities of nations around the world, presenting a webinar focused on international employment practices and opportunities, and re-enlivening the [International Ambassadors Program](#), begun in 2013.

Driven by a shared belief that providing music units tools to conduct qualitative and quantitative self-evaluations on internal processes, policies, practices, and priorities will lead to greater equity and inclusivity, CMS is proud to announce the formation of the CMS Equity and Inclusivity Coalition. A dynamic trans-organizational collaboration among the College Music Society's [Committee on Academic Citizenship](#) (CMS-CAC), the Alliance for the Transformation of Musical Academe (ATMA), and the College of Arts & Media at the University of Colorado Denver (UCD), the coalition's work is focused on providing more equitable, inclusive, and just frameworks in our musical disciplines by reflecting upon our curricular and co-curricular offerings, our workplace and learning space cultures, the music we study and perform, and the moments and measures we use to define and reward success.

CAC Chair Jocelyn Nelson says, "CMS is the perfect organization to provide leadership toward these goals in contemporary times because we represent the panoply of music disciplines and interests. And we have assembled a dynamic team."

This past month, ATMA student leadership partnered with CMS to host Music School for Tomorrow, a symposium exploring ways in which schools of music can be more equitable, inclusive, and just. Nearly 400 attendees benefited from the rich dialogue. I am grateful and inspired by the vision of the next generation of music leaders who hosted these conversations. Among them are Paula Wilson, Georgia Heers, Samuel Dunlap, and Jenn LaRue. The webinars now live on our site and [can be accessed here](#).

Committed to continuing this dialogue, CMS is in search of an inaugural host for its new series Whose Music Matters? – an overdue dialogue about the ways in which we can reimagine the canon and create more inclusive pedagogies centered on good music from around the globe. Interested? CMS is now accepting nominations (including self-nominations) through June 1. To do so, please [complete and submit this brief form](#).

Across our society we feel pain, anger, and frustration as we seek closure for George Floyd's public murder by Derek Chauvin, denounce the tragic killing of Daunte Wright, grapple with the death of 13-year-old Adam Toledo, and stand in solidarity with the Sikh community suffering in Indianapolis. And although we might find some measure of comfort in knowing that music will surely play a healing role during the services that memorialize these lost lives, let us too find ways to leverage our art towards inventing a more promising future. Surely anthems of unity have the power to bring communities together? Surely the stories we tell through our music can shine light on injustice and illuminate a path forward? Billie Holiday did that. Olivier Messiaen and Leonard Bernstein did that. As did Aretha Franklin, Mahalia Jackson, Kendrick Lamar, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Sam Cooke, John Lennon, Robyn, Gente de Zona, and innumerable musicians from every country, across every genre, throughout the history of time. We should do that.

Thanks for joining the conversation,

Mark Rabideau

President, The College Music Society

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