

September, 2021

Mark Rabideau

Why (and if) We Gather

For many of our members, I imagine, waiting to **register for the Rochester conference** (October 7-9, 2021) is about hedging our bets, as we watch with uncertainty as the Delta variant wends its way through unvaccinated America. For the organizers, this is a time to examine the wisdom of holding an in-person gathering vs. pivoting to the digital space - both in 2021 and in the future - and grapple with what is lost if we're unable to be together.

So, what will drive our decision?

Caring for our community requires us to know and share the facts about hosting an embodied event and put into place protocols that align with risk factors. Nationally, health and safety data provided by the **Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation** project the Delta variant will peak in late September, waning prior to our conference. **University of Rochester** data report vaccination rates of 90% for students and 82% for faculty and staff, a threshold that has reinstated local public gatherings and group music-making. Nonetheless, CMS will mandate CDC recommendations, as shared within our August 19 email message to all conference registrants. These include:

HEALTH & SAFETY STATEMENT COVID-19 PROTOCOL FOR EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC

The impact on CMS' financial future – if we were to cancel the conference – is considerable. Hotel (\$90,405) and Convention Center (\$21,760) cancellation penalties could prove crippling for the organization. Current constraints imposed as a result of the virus do not meet the threshold that defines Force Majeure, as articulated within these contractual agreements. Only if the State of New York were to limit gatherings to a number less than our registration (roughly 300) would there be a clear path to recovering existing financial obligations. Of course, none of this accounts for the countless operational hours already exhausted by our CMS national staff, even while working at reduced salaries over the past 12-months.

Seeking to understand what influenced our sister societies' decisions to host live events or move to digital conferences, on August 26th I consulted with Presidents Patricia Hall, Society for Music Theory, Tomie Hahn, Society for Ethnomusicology, Daniel Goldmark, Society for American Music, and Steve Swayne, American Musicological Society. I am grateful for the generosity with which these colleagues have shared their wisdom. What we quickly agreed upon is that this is a difficult decision, driven by complex local conditions, and that there is no clear answer. I support their organizations' decisions. And acknowledge that we have learned that much of what a conference offers its members – the intellectual exchange of ideas – can thrive in the digital space. But what makes CMS distinct—a tireless commitment to shape the future of music in higher education and an organizational embrace of diversity and the embodiment of inclusivity—requires opportunities to gather in-person as a community. Newly formed affinity groups are scheduled to meet informally for the first time in Rochester, as we build an infrastructure of support for one another. 50 registered students (including 21 of whom will receive travel support) are scheduled to present research, attend networking opportunities, and connect with a profession that might otherwise feel out of reach. Newly minted graduates and early career professionals have signed-up for **face-to-face mentoring opportunities** that will provide insights into the nuances of navigating an increasingly complex profession. Pre-conference workshop registrants are poised to expand their knowledge about the future of the profession (**registration remains open**). And life-long friends with years of shared experiences will check-in with one another, meet for dinner, and explore ways to collaborate on shared projects.

To be clear, if the science (something CMS believes in) suggests that it is not safe to move forward at any time prior to the start of the conference, we will make the decision to push back the date and host an online event.

This moment challenges us to reflect on the convergence of forces that face our profession and the world, consider the future of music conferences, and ask the question:

How might we re-image music conferences in ways that contribute to global health, decrease our carbon footprint, leverage local and hybrid experiences, and counter funding inequities based on dis/abilities, race, gender, systemic oppression, and contingent faculty status?

The profession and the world is at an inflection point. And as a society uniquely qualified to grapple with these questions, imagine promising futures, and take on the challenges and opportunities presented in this moment, we must lead with a seriousness of purpose during these turbulent times.

Later this month, membership will vote on a slate of seven Board positions, shaping the future of CMS leadership. My hope is that you will include your voice.

Thanks for joining the conversation,

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