

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF MUSIC
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Report of the President

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The story goes that Anne Bancroft was having a particularly difficult time learning her script for an upcoming movie, and was complaining about it rather loudly to herself, when Mel Brooks, her famous screenwriter husband, overhearing her rant, grabbed a blank sheet of paper from his desk, and yelled, “*You think that’s hard?*” He pointed animatedly at his sheet, “*This, THIS is hard.*” I thought about this anecdote a lot as I struggled with crafting my Report to you last year; I realized that, in developing my thoughts and trying, futilely it seemed at times, to find the right language for my message to you on the intrinsic vs. the extrinsic values of art music, I was confronting the very thing that is central to our mission as music administrators: the need to communicate effectively. When we do, we maximize our effectiveness within our institutions, to faculty, students, and our central administrations, and externally to our many constituents: donors, concert audiences, prospective students, their parents—you know the list. I also realized that styles of communication, and most of all the modes of delivery, have been changing rapidly. So I would like to spend a few minutes exploring the current conditions that cause us to re-evaluate our use of the spoken and written word, and then suggest some strategies that might take our skills to the next level.

We know that today the arts inhabit a very different milieu, socially and economically, a world more complex and competitive than ever before. We are in the midst of a huge shift, from an environment dominated by the printed word to a world of electronically delivered content. Through the Internet, we are experiencing a new and quite robust culture of marketing, sales, and commingled personal, social, and professional messaging. Our task is to make use of all of this, to learn the potential and assets of the media available to us.

If technology is a neutral tool, society’s use of it is truly bi-polar. By that I mean it offers opportunities to broaden our use of language, but also opportunities to butcher it, often beyond recognition.

On the one hand, technology has enabled a culture of blogging. Somewhat more informal, because it is not just a forum for ideas but also a vehicle for social interaction, the blog presents the best opportunity we have had in many years for a rebirth of widespread cogent, informative, at times even elegant written discourse on art music.

Just last month, the music critic Alex Ross wrote an extensive article in *The New Yorker* celebrating the use of the Internet in which he said,

“Classical-music culture on the Internet is expanding at a sometimes alarming pace. When I started my blog, I had links to seven or eight like-minded sites. Now I find myself part of a jabbering community of [several hundred blogs](#), operated by [critics](#), [composers](#), [conductors](#), [pianists](#), [double-bassists](#), [oboists](#) (I count five), (and) [artistic administrators](#).”¹

I think this is great news. The Internet, which has unlimited depth, unlimited capacity for richness of content and unlimited reach, appears to have become the energizing force art music once enjoyed during the LP recording industry hey day. The culture of blogging could very well represent the rebirth of the art of the essay. The somewhat geeky world of classical music (by the way, I borrowed the term from Ross, who refers to grand opera as “the most opulently geeky art form in history”) at any rate, does appear to be ideally suited to Internet communications, and our “niche” or “boutique” community has found a home on the Internet where lay music lovers and professional musicians alike have developed a lively and substantial web presence. That’s on the one hand.

On the other hand, the exponentially growing use of the cell phone has created a culture of text messaging that is promoting an insidious deterioration of our use of language. If email represents an industrial-grade level of communication that has almost completely replaced letter writing, then text messaging goes one step further; the small screen format best suits what I think of as “license plate school of literacy” in which brevity is the primary goal, at the expense of spelling, punctuation, and grammar, the words themselves reduced to abbreviations and numbers that remind me of a re-emergence of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Here’s the alarming thing: in the US alone, 158 billion text messages were sent in 2006, double the number from 2005; it is predicted that half of all 12 and 13 year olds will have their own cell phone by the end of this year, and currently, 58% of teens with cell phones admit to texting during class.² As a footnote to this, some of you may have caught this morning’s article in *The New York Times*, which reported that Korea has opened a boot camp for teens addicted to the Internet!³

Although the influence of technology on communication generally is clearly the most significant new trend, we are also experiencing in the field of music a resurgence in the use of the spoken word. It is now standard procedure for the composer or performer to express in her or his own words the emotional and intellectual content that great music has to offer, a practice that present day audiences have come to expect. As you have all no doubt observed, the musician who gives little or no consideration to preparing such presentations ahead of time often does so at her or his peril. To illustrate the importance of effective communication, and, I admit, how poor preparation can have unintended consequences, I want to share with you just a few randomly collected student responses to test questions collected by teachers in Missouri. I know we have some Missourians in the house; you folks may already know about this:

Answer 1:

- “Refrain means don’t do it. A refrain in music is the part you better not try to sing.”

Answer 2:

- “Aaron Copland is one of your most famous contemporary composers. It is unusual to be contemporary. Most composers do not live until they are dead.”

Answer 3:

- “I know what a sextet is but I had rather not say.”⁴

And, by way of contrast, here are some artfully crafted remarks by those with a cultivated gift for them:

Mark Twain once said, “A critic is like a eunuch: he knows exactly how it ought to be done.”

And this from Giacomo Rossini: “Wagner’s music has beautiful moments but some bad quarters of an hour.”

On the principle that effective communication today requires more than sole reliance on the intrinsic value of music to speak for itself, the spoken word remains as powerful as a tool as the written word, and National Public Radio clearly provides a best practice model through its many features on music, especially on its program, *Weekend Edition*. National Public Radio has raised to an art form the use of music and words in combination to amplify the power of the message. To illustrate, you are about to hear an excerpt from their broadcast from this past January; in this segment, Scott Simon is interviewing the conductor George Matthew, on the occasion of his leadership of a performance of the Verdi *Requiem* at Carnegie Hall to benefit the victims of Darfur. I knew as soon as I heard it that I had to play this for you. I don’t know Mr. Matthew at all, but I think that you will agree that his eloquence informs the music, just as the music amplifies his powerful message about this terrible tragedy.

[“A Carnegie Hall Requiem for Darfur Refugees”](#)

NPR Weekend Edition, January 27, 2007.

(For access to the referenced audio file, please follow the link posted above. The audio sample featured at the NASM 2007 Annual Meeting began at 3:50 and lasted to 5:31.)

I know it’s cruel of me to interrupt this excerpt so abruptly, but we must move on. To summarize, it is clear that we have a need, perhaps as never before for effective communication, some of it in very new forms as driven by new and emerging technologies, some of it in older standard forms, such as the lecture-recital model, in which performers share insights about the music throughout their program. And, as we have just heard, some presentations are more of a multi media experience, either in the form of words with music, as NPR has done, or with visuals, as in DVD’s, web sites with audio, and so on. So many of you have already recognized the need for, and have developed a significant level of expertise with the technologies available, and I know that

many among our membership are eloquent and compelling speakers and writers. In complement to these talents and abilities I offer these few suggestions:

First, let's be sure that we are supporting our faculty in these endeavors, and providing our students with the experiences and opportunities that will help them to understand the importance of well-prepared effective communication, whether that be in the course of a performance, a pre-concert lecture, a prepared speech, or an appearance on local public radio. To the extent to which our faculty and students learn to appreciate the value of effective communication is the extent to which we will develop the most effective ambassadors and advocates for art music.

Second, and implied by my comments on technology, we need to keep up with this rapidly evolving landscape, and be prepared to support those of our faculty, staff and students who are interested in exploring and harnessing the best aspects of it. Through our Web sites and blogs as much as our online music, Internet broadcasts, and podcasts, we benefit from that tremendous richness and reach that technology has to offer.

This third suggestion may at first appear to be a bit of a non sequitur, but bear with me for a moment. To those of you who have not yet done so, I urge you to get involved with NASM. Training to be a visiting evaluator, and then participating in a reaccreditation visit is one of the best ways I know to develop one's verbal and written communication skills, dialogue, advocacy. You will learn by engaging with a program similar to your own, you will have the stimulating challenge of diagnosing how the programs you review can be even better, and you have the wonderful opportunity to learn from your fellow visitors how best to communicate with each constituent group you encounter in the course of a visit. You hone your writing skills with every Visitors Report you author. You learn at least one new thing from every visit, no matter how many. This is not mere proselytizing on my part; just ask any one of your colleagues in this audience what the experience is like. By the way, would all those who have participated as an evaluation visitor raise your hand?

Before I close, I want to share one more excerpt from NPR with you. This one provides an opportunity to contrast *Weekend Edition's* words with music approach to the pre-technology era of the straight lecture. So first, here is one of my favorites, Leonard Bernstein, thinking out loud about the dilemma art music presents: that there is no language to adequately describe its full power. He says, "When a piece of music 'means' something to me, it is a meaning conveyed by the surrounding notes themselves... and I can report those meanings back to you... But when music 'expresses' something to me, it is something I am feeling, and the same is true of you and every listener. We feel passion, we feel glory, we feel mystery, *we feel something*. And here we are in trouble; because we cannot report our precise feelings in scientific terms; we can report them only subjectively."⁵

In contrast, here is the NPR segment. It is taken from an interview with Isaac Stern in 1999 towards the end of his distinguished career, presented on the occasion of the publication of his memoirs. You'll hear him engage in Bernstein's struggle, at first, to find the words to describe music's meaning and value to him, to us. He doesn't actually

identify the struggle so much as experience it. What you'll notice, is that the recording he has chosen to play appears to inspire him to an increasingly meaningful and cogent use of language. As he free-associates with the music that is playing in the background, his words, which might not have Bernstein's power and eloquence on their own, seem transformed. You decide whether this excerpt is any the more or less effective than Bernstein's.

["Isaac Stern – My First 79 Years"](#)

NPR Weekend Edition Saturday, October 30, 1999.

(For access to the referenced audio file, please follow the link posted above. The audio sample featured at the NASM 2007 Annual Meeting began at 12:48 and lasted to 15:15.)

I hope that these excerpts inspire you to continue to exert your leadership in support of effective communication. We face a choice between Mel Brooks's blank sheet of paper, or something akin to Anne Bancroft's prepared script. As for words WITH music, I'm not sure at this point whether or not I am intending to advocate for bringing your iPod to the next meeting of your local School Board. Maybe... In any case, ladies and gentlemen, I can't top Mozart and Isaac Stern, so I close by thanking you for your kind attention and wishing you all a wonderful holiday season and all the best for the remainder of this academic year.

ENDNOTES

1. Ross, Alex. "Feel the Noise," *New Yorker Magazine*, October 8, 2007
2. Heckel, Aimee. *Boulder Daily Camera*, "Talk isn't Cheap as the Texting Culture Takes Hold of Teens." Section D, p. 1, August 18, 2007.
3. Fackler, Martin. "In Korea, a Boot Camp for Web Obsession" page 1, *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007.
4. Online, found by Google search, under "Missouri Music Jokes"
5. Bernstein, Leonard. *The Unanswered Question, Six Talks at Harvard*, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 135.