

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF MUSIC
Annual Meeting 2019

Oral Report of the Executive Director

“The Three Rs”

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Good morning. Once again, welcome to the 95th Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music.

It is good to see you. It is always good to see you, to be with you, and to share the pleasure of your company. It is an honor to stand side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, as together we continue the important work necessary to advance the cause of music in higher education in our country, and support the education and training of students enrolled in music study everywhere. And, it is both inspiring and comforting to know that we have returned once again to a place where ideas can take shape, receive support and thoughtful critique, and be shared and considered by individuals deeply committed to the cause of music and its future – all in a positive and mutually supportive atmosphere.

Annually during this time of fellowship, we are reminded of the importance of dedicating and rededicating ourselves to noble pursuits. We search for information and ideas which will assist us to expand our understandings and capabilities. In so doing, worlds of possibility open for us, and therefore for our students and our institutions. We see possibilities for more and for better, and find ideas and inspiration for creating what we see and can envision. We covet this time which enables us to begin new friendships and rekindle old. We realize that these days are a welcomed gift, offering a lifeline of support not only hard to find today, but ever rarer in our country, which at the moment seems to be embroiled in a bitterness of discourse – a discourse which carries the grave risk of destroying a once passionately held shared vision – a shared vision through and from which we as citizens can focus in comity on issues important to our country and in doing so advance cooperatively and productively the future of our Republic as it serves us, our fellow citizens, and the world. So often now, the nation we know and in which we place our hope and trust seems unrecognizable, unfamiliar, unsettled, and on an uncharted, and therefore, possibly perilous course.

We all are familiar with the discursive ebb and flow of each day’s public dialogue, and we understand with deep and poignant concern the many effects, especially to the extent that sights are blurred by desire for personal gain, or worse, by pursuits organized with clear intent to destroy that which we and our ancestors as citizens of this country have devoted lifetimes to create, build, and nurture. We are well aware that if we as a people relinquish our fundamental principles and mission of liberty to a series of temporary distractions, or if we nurture the kinds of partisanship that seek to destroy conditions of philosophical, or artistic, or policy diversity, we will approach ever closer to and ultimately stand at the edge of the abyss, possessing only a fighting chance to step back from a devastating and costly loss of freedom and prosperity for everyone. Aristotle tells us, “It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.” And so therefore, it is clear that our focus and our path forward as individuals and as a group of colleagues are ours to choose, the journey ahead for music in higher education is ours to plan, and the accomplishments are ours to achieve. In making such determinations historically, we have purposefully chosen to rise above the fray, to transcend boundaries real or inferred, and to work, to contribute, and to advance the conversation and our cooperation for the greater good of our art form. We continue to do all this today because we understand the centrality of the art of music to our mission, and

the importance of our ambassadorial work on its behalf. We do this because we understand what is at risk. We do this because we care about the intertwined futures of our art form. We care about our artists, our teachers, our scholars, and all associated practitioners and enterprises. We do this because it is the only wise and safe course for us and our present and future colleagues, those who will carry our art form into the future and sustain it there for their lifetimes before passing their responsibility on to the next generation in their own time.

Within NASM, so it is, and so it has always been. Cognizant of the environment in any age, but either in spite of it, or having risen above it, or having carefully chosen what is worthwhile from it, with heads down focused on our work but eyes wide open and hearts vigilant, we continue undeterred. There is no question that the efforts of music administrators are marked by a seriousness of purpose, a roll-up-the-sleeves work ethic, and a ubiquitously held and shared vision – each of these being integral aspects of our collective pursuit of high excellence in music that includes the best possible education and training of each and every student involved in music study. We did not arrive here, nor have we remained on this foundation, by accident. Much like the path chosen, the journey planned, and the accomplishments anticipated, conscientious choices have been made to settle for nothing less than to seek the fruits of a labor perpetually guided by the long view as informed by the nature and content of our disciplines as exemplified in a collectively held and shared vision – a vision expressed and brought to life by institutions in their individual programs of study and by NASM in frameworks that encourage and support detailed work of many purposes and types, as well as new goals and means to achieve them, all within hundreds of different institutions.

Given the frenetic pace of work, of play, of life, of nearly everything today, we sometimes forget to stop and savor the fruit, the result of all we and our predecessors have accomplished. Unfortunately, when this happens, we can also fail to celebrate our successes, to take stock in our accomplishments, to be suitably pride-filled and proud of our work over time. We can fail to take comfort in the scale and meaning of our successes, to enjoy the ripened fruit even as life presses on and around us.

Recently I had the opportunity to attend a meeting of music administrators. Entering the room, just a foot inside the door and therefore standing on the room's periphery, I was for a moment offered a full and clear view of the activities under way from a distance that seemed to be miles from the activity's epicenter – a bird's-eye view of sorts. From this perch, I witnessed in anonymity the inner workings of a group of individuals who arrived with and were bound together by an unquestionable and abiding collective purpose – in short, a commitment to serve, assist, and support a multitude of institutions varied in size and type and mission, each of which desirously willing to search for and engage in intellectual dialogue, the result of which would assist each institution to consider what was, is, and could be given its own circumstances. I observed a group of individuals who with unrelenting focus were engrossed in serious and purposeful work undertaken at a level of care and concern one normally would expect only if the risk or reward led to personal consequence or benefit. In that moment, I was overcome by a palpable feeling of comfort. The room and the work seemed safe, and honest, and true. The environment seemed familiar. The undertakings in this room were genuine and real, and unlike much of that which was occurring beyond the confines of the meeting space. Quickly though, the distance between the periphery and the epicenter collapsed and I was enveloped in the work of the group. But the moment of distance was not forgotten, the thoughts of the moment did not dissipate, and a curiosity remained. On what foundation did this sensation of comfort rest with such ease and abiding strength?

At the conclusion of the meeting, I traveled home enjoying time for reflection, time to ponder my newfound curiosity. The experience preoccupied me. Its effects resonated with me in a fashion similar to that which led me to music study in the first place, a resonance first experienced so many years ago. This as you can imagine precipitated a walk down memory lane, a walk which quickly reminded me of kinder and gentler days – days when there was less rhetoric, deeper care, and considerable effort on the part of

most, if not all, to not only avoid destructive civil discourse, but to protect the boundaries and courtesies that enable respectful dialogue, thoughtful listening, and measured but insightful replies.

Memories of a small town returned – a town in which the streets were filled with individuals who, holding genuine and unpretentious interest, stopped to greet and speak with each other. A town with a historic past, the residents of which held a collective awareness that its solid foundation and ongoing successes were and could be attributed to the unfailing contributions of individual members of its community. A town that welcomed the thoughts of those new to arrive and valued the sage wisdom dispensed by those who had not only settled in the town but whose ancestors settled the town itself now hundreds of years ago. This was a town that offered support, particularly in terms of values – the value of its history, the value of its people and their contributions, the value of connection and communication, and the value of intellectual dialogue and curiosity – values shared by an enlightened community of individuals over a long period of time.

In my case as a youngster, this support was offered to a small school without conditions or strings – a school in which most all students proceeded in a common curriculum from kindergarten through grade twelve – a school where the teachers knew not only each student, but each student’s siblings, cousins, parents, grandparents, and some cases, the family canine. A school where the day focused on what mattered – the education and training of students in fundamental disciplinary content so that each might become a productive participatory ambassador responsible through his or her life for tending to something far greater than him/herself. Each day in the earliest years focused on the basics – simply the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic). Pursuits were pure and simple and purposeful. Without interruption or intervention from educational fads and mass production improvement schemes, students learned how to read, to distill, to question with respect the positions put forth by others, and to think collectively and independently. They learned how to express themselves verbally and orally, their words chosen carefully and with appropriate amounts of consideration for not only the issues at hand but as well for those involved in the conversation. And they learned how to add and subtract, and to recognize mathematical relationships and proportionalities – calculations that applied not only to numbers but as well to people and events. Invaluable lessons then. Imperative lessons now in their outcome and application in greatly expanded contexts.

Much like the feeling experienced in the meeting room of music administrators, I recall finding great comfort in this local community and its small school room. As the unpacking of my curiosity continued, memories became clearer and connections worked to form new insights. What was it that connected these experiences – specifically the meeting room and the school room? In many ways they shared striking similarities – the conduct of activity was defined by, and its purpose based in, disciplinary substance; in achievements of the past upon which each day’s work rested and built from; in understanding that the promise of tomorrow hinged on success today; and in adherence to strong work ethics which enabled all involved to rise above the noise and distractions of the day and remain focused on the substantive work at hand. Such connection could have been influenced by the intimacy of the spaces and long-standing behavioral expectations, but in retrospect, it seemed clear to me that the major force in both situations was the clear content-grounded, intentional, service-oriented purposes of the undertakings themselves.

In the case of the elementary school room, it was the pureness of the pursuit of mastery of the three Rs – a task well defined and well understood by all, coupled with unrelenting reminders of the responsibility placed before the students to become and serve as good stewards of the land and its peoples – stewards who were to be undeterred in their search for truth, eager to advance intellectual capacity, and uncompromising in the respect offered to others regardless of topic, condition, approach, or individual.

Observing the work in the music administrators’ meeting room, it was clear that the three Rs had been mastered long since, and that principles associated with a focus on disciplinary content, stewardship,

intellectual advancement, and openness to individuals and ideas remained, continued, and were firmly embedded and interwoven into fabrics and practices of the music administrators who were working together in that setting. Absent the need for the unrelenting reminders offered in the school room, these principles had infused the work of individual music administrators, and therefore the work of the collective body. The connection became clear. It was about the concept of basics. Real disciplinary basics, common bodies of knowledge and skills, the necessities for operational competence and fluency, not only in music but in any endeavor. Real service and courtesy were basics as well. Meeting participants had not only held to, but had widened and advanced, the concept of basics. Not only did they include and embrace reading, writing, and arithmetic, they included understandings associated with reason, rigor, and respect, for music first, but ultimately for many fields and subjects touched on in the conversation. I concluded that our arithmetic lessons had taken hold – we had learned how to “square” R, virtually infinitely.

In the meeting room, and as if observing poetry in motion, each and every aspect of our expanded meaning of “Rs” was clearly evident in the work of the music administrators. Each consideration was marked by a concerted and collective effort to think through, understand, and comprehend the current realities and conditions which framed issues, so that informed judgements could be made which would assist those dedicated to producing effective local results. Each consideration was framed by the necessity to ensure that each and every student was provided an opportunity to advance, to become expert in his or her craft at the highest level possible and in doing so to be able to contribute to the advancement of the artform. Each consideration was exemplified by a deep and abiding regard for the specific and often unique positions, points of view, traditions, and aspirations of those involved in the conversation.

It is clear that there are striking differences between former times and today. Today’s dialogues are more sophisticated in certain ways, more simplistic in others; risks and rewards seem more typically accompanied by unintended consequences and hidden or elusive strings; and high stakes are often redefined at lightning speed. There is no question that the challenges of today have moved well beyond the service that can be offered solely by mastery of the original three Rs, or the principles of conduct that can be derived from their productive use. On the other hand, there is no question that the original basics of our discipline remain as essential as they ever were. However, now we must ensure that abiding principles as they pertain to reason, rigor, and respect that were embedded in the unrelenting reminders of the responsibilities that were impressed upon us in the school room, remain infused in our deliberations, conversations, and considerations about music, wherever they occur. Although uncodified and deeply internalized at the time, the imperative then, just as it is now, was clear and decisive – inclusion of ideals and expectations supported by these principles was not negotiable. These principles, a modern behavioral twist on the three Rs of yore, now defined by terms and expectations, are critical mainstays in conversations that continue between and among NASM, its members, and its constituencies.

There is no question that the challenges faced by music administrators today are complex and considerable. The efforts necessary to maintain our desired and charted courses can be demanding. The efforts needed in institutions when it is necessary to return to a content-based approach which has been compromised by distractions or the unexpected setback can be downright daunting. However, and regardless of all that we face, it is imperative that we stay on our discipline-centered course, remaining attentive and committed to the long view – a view that commits to, supports, and reiterates the value of music study on its own terms and the importance of our work to advance the field. FDR offered reassuring words when he suggested that when we reach the end of our rope, we “tie a knot in it and hang on.” If any one of us faces such a time, let none of us forget that this community provides an unending source of assistance and support, a lifeline; that its approach to issues of importance and concern is grounded in a great art and honorable principles, which provide a source of support and comfort; and that its members hold an expansive depth of compassion and knowledge, which is ready to be shared and offered in support. NASM is about music and people and both together.

Let us also remember to revel in the moment, to find the joy along the way, to enjoy the fruits of our labors, and to be open to recognizing and accepting with great humility the humorous and not so humorous ironies we encounter in our daily work. Let us also remember to rise above the fray of the hour and season, and operate and work conceptually where considerations pertaining to reason, rigor, and respect, considerations which know no boundaries, guide the thinking of the day. And once there, from time-to-time, as reminded by a dear friend recently, “let us keep ourselves quieted and rest there on the promises we know.”

It is my hope that the comfort and contributions of this meeting extend well beyond its adjournment. It is also my hope that the conditions which bring about such comfort will permeate and seep through these walls, and through your work, will continue to raise the consciousness and level of the national discourse, the possibility of which remains in our grasp as do the positive results which continue through the good work of students, faculty, and staff, assisted and served by your leadership.

In the coming days, we will move from the company of good friends and colleagues, and the mind-spinning focus on our work in music in higher education, to the gentle and comfortable surroundings of home and family. We extend appreciation to each of you for your inestimable contributions. May you enjoy the peace of the season knowing that your contributions matter to your students, your community, and the ongoing success of our country – the bounties and freedoms of which we hold so dear.

Thank you.