

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF MUSIC

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Oral Report of the President

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Gathering annually invites us to reflect on all that has happened in the world since we met a year ago in St. Louis – much of it quite wonderful and welcome, but we have also witnessed a nearly unrelenting set of challenging conditions and events in our broader world. And while it is true that our subject is music, so much of our work has ultimately to do with people – those who create music, who study it, those who champion it, and who offer music to others. And people have faced some nearly overwhelming challenges of late. Amidst disease, wars, disasters, violence, economic turmoil, political tensions, and so much more, life does not appear to be getting easier for individuals or for nations. Much in our world threatens our mental and physical health and well-being, even the very lives of many people are at risk. It is hard to imagine the conditions many are facing today.

In this mix of nearly endless opportunities, as well as these formidable challenges, and in just the few minutes I have for this report, what I would like to do is briefly touch on several themes, by highlighting four publications that have emerged since we last met. I will also share some thoughts about NASM, but first, let me mention the work of these four authors and its special relevance in music in higher education.

The first is a 2023 book you likely know. It is titled, “Your Brain on Art,”¹ and was written by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross. Resulting from neuroscience research that began in the mid-20th-century, as led by Marian Diamond and others, and fueled by the use of functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging in the 21st-century, our understanding of neurological development has advanced dramatically. These authors describe our knowledge of neurological malleability, which allows our brains to sort the millions of sensory signals we receive, while highlighting input which is viewed as pertinent or “salient.” Along the way, neurotransmitters are engaged, chemicals are released, neuro plasticity increases, and new synaptic connections are built. According to Ross and Magsamen, the “...arts and aesthetic experience emerge as major conduits for greater saliency. [The] arts and aesthetics quite literally rewire your brain.”² As the field of neuroaesthetics continues to develop, I find this information so compelling, as it reveals the profound wonder of the human brain and the power and relevance of the arts in neurological development, medicine, and in healing.

A 2024 book, titled “Futures of Performance,”³ concludes with a chapter titled “The Performing Arts in the Next America.” In this chapter, written by our own Peter Witte, we read of shifting demographics in the U.S. and the increased diversity of our public schools. Witte’s data review, including extensive analysis of our own HEADS data, points out several substantial shifts, including those attached to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, and others. He encourages continued focus on the critical matters of access, resources, and development of artistry in the life of every student. Witte’s compelling and nuanced research includes reflection on cultural assumptions in teaching and learning and at the heart of the matter, he asserts, “the performing arts and arts pedagogy have for far too long marginalized entire cultures, repertoires, and skills to celebrate those of a very specific few.”⁴ The conditions described offer invitation and challenge, as we do all that is possible to

¹ Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, “Your Brain on Art,” Random House, (2023).

² Ibid, p. 13.

³ Karen Schupp, “Futures of Performance: The Responsibilities of Performing Arts in Higher Education,” and Peter Witte, “The Performing Arts in the Next America,” Routledge, (2024).

⁴ Ibid, p. 357.

invite every person to musical opportunity and flourishing. Witte adds, “Higher education’s job is to prepare these students for their future, a future that will be significantly different from our past.”⁵

The third publication was issued as an advisory this past May, titled, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,”⁶ in which our Surgeon General warned the nation of “...a critical public health concern in light of mounting evidence that millions of Americans lack adequate social connection in one or more ways.” The report stated, “Recent surveys have found that approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness, with some of the highest rates among young adults.” The report maintains that “...loneliness and isolation are more widespread than many of the other major health issues of our day, including smoking, diabetes, and obesity, and with comparable levels of risk to health and premature death.”⁷ In this report, the Surgeon General ultimately points to the healing effects of social connection and the power of community, both conditions, as it turns out, that also serve as vital hallmarks of our music programs.

What has led to this increased isolation? What are the societal variables that surround our students and all of us in 2023? As we are increasingly “connected,” doesn’t it seem ironic that isolation and loneliness are on the rise? In her 2023 book, “Generations,” Jean Twenge analyzed data for more than 39 million people, while contrasting six generational groups. Among her observations, Dr. Twenge notes “...a full-blown mental health crisis among young people ...”⁸ She states that “The very large and sudden changes in mental health and behavior between Millennials and Gen Z are likely not a coincidence: They arose from the fastest adoption of any technology in human history.”⁹ Twenge suggests that “...the rise in these new technologies seemed the most likely culprit for the rise in teen depression, self-harm, and suicide.”¹⁰ These concerns warrant careful consideration, even as we continue to celebrate and advance the rich expanse of technology in music and beyond.

Music has such potential amidst these matters just described – in our human neurological capacity, the increased diversity of our country’s public school student population, as well as the epidemic of loneliness and isolation before us, and the generational impact of technology on mental health. Consider these themes, along with such intense global challenges, and it is difficult to imagine a time when the importance of our work and our music offerings have been more critical. And music lies close to the heart of each of these matters. Not a “nice-to-have,” or an accessory, but essential in finding our way. Music – which is so often experiential, authentic, mind and heart-expanding, and so closely connected to our mental, physical, and emotional spirits, is also often highly relational, connecting people and their impulse to gather with others to create, to sing, to share and explore the depths of their culture and their deepest values. Amidst these many opportunities and formidable challenges, we have been given such a high honor – to be deeply involved in music, as it uniquely and powerfully enlivens and enables each human spirit, ever fostering the expression of deepest joys and sorrows, along with healing, therapy, celebration, and lament.

And what about NASM? As our keynote mused yesterday, “What if there was a body?” What if we had a group that was committed to striving together in tackling the tough questions and challenges, in developing the very best music offerings possible? What about NASM? I suppose we begin this story in 1924, when a group gathered to consider what they might collectively agree upon as essential in music offerings in higher education. According to Carl Neumeyer, writing in 1954, early concerns in those first years “...included minimum entrance requirements, interpretation of music study in terms of units and semester hours, minimum standards of

⁵ Ibid, p. 340.

⁶ Vivek H. Murthy, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” (2023).

⁷ Ibid, p. 9.

⁸ Jean M. Twenge, “Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America’s Future,” Atria Books, (2023), p. 396.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 401.

accomplishment for the granting of certificates and degrees, academic record keeping, classification of schools, scholarships, and other general problems and practices among institutions.”¹¹

Let’s jump ahead 99 years and consider the succinct review of our abiding principles, just offered by our Executive Director. These principles guide our efforts to advance the cause of music, make most of our powerful collective expertise, sustain a support system of threshold standards, and rest on the strength of peer review. We were reminded earlier of our individual and institutional freedoms, while clarifying our independence from government or outside agencies in championing our music standards. And we have been assured that our NASM music standards belong to us and serve to guide us in creating and sustaining the strongest and most effective music offerings possible.

Some of you are new to NASM. You may have heard rumblings that our standards are rigid mandates and that NASM hopes to force member institutions into strict conformity. It is understandable that accreditation is sometimes misunderstood. While it is true that our standards include words like “must” and “shall” where we have collectively agreed that a given condition or context is essential to music-making in higher education, I think our standards are better understood as an invitation. Quite contrary to the notion of conformity, NASM actually celebrates the autonomy of each institution. Your school is invited to begin by considering its mission. Within your unique context and location and with the resources that are yours, you are then invited to consider how your institution addresses what we have agreed are essential threshold provisions for music creation, study, and performance.

Many of you have had the experience of engaging with an evaluator or consultant on your campus, or calling our staff at the National Office, in considering a given degree offering or an operational condition at your school. Your conversation will almost always begin with a question. The conversation might go something like this: “Let’s back up. What is it you’re trying to do? What is the goal or objective you are hoping to reach? How might the collective wisdom of this association, our *Handbook* and all its resources - how might these be helpful to you and those you lead in reaching your objective and serving your mission?” You will almost never hear – “This is how it must be done – how we have always done it,” because the process is about a conversation between your institution and the hundreds of other accredited schools and their leaders in seeking your best answers for your context.

You may have also heard someone ask, “Why doesn’t NASM take a stand – take a position?” This might be related to a broader cause, an event, or situation. Shouldn’t NASM offer broader statements which clarify the views of our organization? I might explain it this way: NASM takes a strong and creative position, but it is through each of its member institutions that it does so. Within the framework of our shared standards, it is in your curricula, your new initiatives, the work of your faculty, students, and alumni, and through your thorough and compelling work, that NASM expresses its collective stance. Our strength is found in each of our schools, as they engage in rigorous self-study, peer review, the sharing of ideas, professional development, and other resources. We don’t agree on everything – we’re not supposed to. There are many aspects of the work of our institutions in music, which vary one school to the next, and we celebrate those differences. Starting with purposes, each school serves a distinct mission, operates in its unique locations, is built upon its institution’s own history and values, and involves a unique population of students, faculty, alumni, and partners.

As I look around this room, I am so deeply thankful for this rich tapestry that is ours in this vital work. We join together in wrestling with what is most important, while freely sharing ideas and challenging one another in sharpening our skills and perspectives and knowledge. We encourage each other, embracing the abiding principles that are ours in advancing the cause of music, making most of our nearly endless collective expertise, sustaining a support system of threshold standards which encourage each institution’s uniqueness, while continuing to harness the rich potential of our engagement with each other.

¹¹ Carl Melvin Neumeyer, “A History of the National Association of Schools of Music,” (1954), pp. 62-63.

Through NASM, each of us also joins with hundreds of institutional members, as we fuel the rigor and integrity of our people, programs, and schools. The numbers of those we serve is staggering, with about 100,000 students currently pursuing music degrees in NASM institutions, and many more participating in our programs. NASM schools have also impacted the more than half a million living graduates, providing a truly remarkable force for the great good of music and musicians throughout the world. I am grateful for the ways that every one of these people having been shaped by our schools and the combined investments of our member institutions.

In closing, my hope is that every assurance of the value of your work might be yours. You are among the most dedicated, industrious, gifted, and creative people anywhere and you represent a powerful vanguard for music and music in higher education around the world. As we look forward to a wonderful centennial celebration next year in Chicago and to the next 100 years, I fully believe our very best is yet to be realized. The need for creativity and innovation and resourcefulness has never been higher. We must be ever more vigilant in our shared resolve to best serve music and musicians. We can do no less, my friends. The conditions and opportunities that surround us compel us to press on like never before. May every one of you have a sense of the essential and noble cause that is ours in bringing music opportunities to people – all of them – nearby and around the world. Thank you for your dedication, your endless resourcefulness, your openness to new ideas, your generous hearts, and your deep love of music and those who create it.

Thank you. Thank you very much.