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Keynote Address : Evolving Populations

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Harmonizing New Voices: Embracing Diversity in Music Education and Community Engagement

"The breadth of music in schools and communities continues to grow as we involve expanding populations of students, teachers, and community members. As we welcome new voices, assumptions, values, and traditions, our increasingly diverse population offers rich opportunities, along with the need to consider new pedagogies, perspectives, and resources."

Good morning, and thank you all for being here today. It is truly an honor to stand before you as we reflect on a topic that holds immense significance not only for me but for the entire field of music education. Today, as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of NASM, we are not just commemorating a century of accomplishments but also setting our sights on the next 100 years—a future that we all have a role in shaping.

Acknowledging NASM's Legacy

For a century, NASM has been a compass guiding music schools across the country, cultivating excellence and preserving the integrity of music education for hundreds of thousands of students. NASM continues to uphold rigorous standards, providing a strong foundation that supports music educators and students nationwide. Each of you here, along with your colleagues back home, plays an indispensable role in this work, and for that, I extend my deepest gratitude.

Your dedication to advancing music education reflects the highest aspirations of our field. The generations of students who have walked through your classrooms and rehearsal halls carry forward the knowledge, artistry, and discipline that define what it means to be a musician. That legacy is remarkable. And as we celebrate this milestone, it is also a moment to ask: **How can we ensure that this legacy remains relevant, inclusive, and transformative in the century to come?**

My Musical Journey

I am extremely fortunate to have grown up in a home where music was the lifeblood of our family. My mother, a high school orchestra teacher, and my father, a middle school band teacher, dedicated their lives to nurturing young musicians. Most afternoons, their classrooms were filled with the sounds of afterschool rehearsals, and our home became an extension of this environment—alive with the comings and goings of their private students.

My father was born in the early 40s and grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. There were key people and events in his life that eventually led him to the band room he taught in for over 25 years. His cousin brought home a saxophone from a house she regularly cleaned that ignited his love for jazz and the blues as a kid. Although he never received any formal music education, he learned what he could from local musicians in clubs and from what he heard on the radio. As a young man, he decided to serve our country by enlisting in the Marines and

fought in the Vietnam War. His pledge to complete his formal musical training was added to his desire to survive his time in the conflict and when he returned physically intact, a VA staffer went above and beyond to get him a seat in the music department at Norfolk State University and set up to use his GI benefits. He worked hard and caught up with his young peers and, after completing his bachelors degree in Virginia, he earned a spot in Eugene Rousseau's studio at Indiana University where he earned his Masters in performance and education. He's shared so many stories with me of times of being excluded and denied musical opportunities because that's just how things were back then, but the instances where people stepped in to include him would always encourage him to keep moving forward. His time at IU would be just that.

On the other hand, my mother was born in the mid 50s and grew up here on the Southside of Chicago. My grandmother brought my mom and aunt to Ravinia in the summer of 1965 to hear Andre Watts perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for the first time. Seeing a young Black soloist left an indelible impression on my mom; it inspired her to work hard as a flutist with hopes that she could accomplish such musical mastery someday. Three years later, she was one of seven students to integrate the Chicago Public Schools where she and her family had to endure tremendous amounts of ridicule and pressure to stay out of the Mount Greenwood community. Despite all of the challenges and lack of support she faced, she still aspired to pursue music as a profession and began the familiar trek of applying to colleges and set out for in-person auditions. She was told at her first college audition that she should consider doing something else besides music because she was so far behind the competition. If you imagine hearing this news, what would you do? For my mom, she decided to return back home to where she would be included and earned her Bachelors of Music from the Sherwood Conservatory at that time when they were granting college degrees. She did see the writing on the wall throughout her undergraduate studies and decided she wanted to add professional skills to her toolbox that would someday compliment her musical studies. It was through the Consortium for Graduate Study in Management program—whose mission is to enhance diversity and inclusion by striving to reduce the underrepresentation of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans in global business education and leadership—that took her to Indiana University's Kelley School of Business where she also played in one of the bands in the School of Music.

On the way to rehearsal one day she met my father. They married and set up shop in Atlanta where they had eight kids. The 7th child my parents made was perfect. This child was the strongest, best looking, and had the most potential. My mother had originally hoped that The Consortium would match her with the business school at Stanford University, so she thought it was appropriate to name this bundle of perfection that you see here today, *Stanford*. I like to believe that they gave up on having more kids after the eighth was born because the seventh was perfect, but maybe my mom was just too damn tired.

And then there were my seven siblings and me, all held to one inviolable rule: *You were only served dinner on the days you practiced*. That rule instilled in us a profound respect for the discipline and joy of making music. But it also taught us something deeper—that music is more than notes and rhythms; it is a way of life, a means of connecting with others, and a bridge to opportunities that might otherwise remain out of reach.

I took these lessons and the entrepreneurial spirit instilled in me by my mother and ran a web design company in middle school, established the *Atlanta Trumpet Festival* in partnership with Emory University in high school, founded a tuition-free summer camp in Reading, Pennsylvania while in college, teamed up with the *Kenya Urithi Education Fund* to develop a music program in Central Kenya immediately after my undergraduate studies, and then spent several months in Venezuela studying their music education and social development program *El Sistema* through the New England Conservatory's *Sistema Fellows Program*—all before I started my professional career as an advocate for those often overlooked and divested in our field.

Shaping Programs for a Changing World

These formative experiences have stayed with me throughout my career and continue to shape how I have looked at the challenges and obstacles that have been barriers for so many people. I desperately want to be engaged through music. Over the past fifteen years, my work—from founding *Play On Philly* to leading *El Sistema USA* and now *Equity Arc*—has been rooted in a deep belief that music has transformative power, not only in individual lives but in communities as a whole. This belief has guided me to advocate for music programs that meet the evolving needs of students and society by integrating social impact, community engagement, and innovative practices.

Today's music classrooms reflect a growing diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and traditions. This shift is not just an opportunity but a responsibility. When I started *Play On Philly*, I saw firsthand how a symphonic orchestra could become a platform for students to engage with their cultural heritage, develop executive functioning skills, and broaden their perspectives alongside peers who were from 59 different countries. By celebrating our students' collective diversity through music, we created a curriculum that resonated deeply with them—a curriculum that didn't just teach music but also fostered connection, curiosity, and confidence.

The results speak for themselves. Many of *Play On Philly's* students have gone on to study music performance, education, therapy, and business at institutions such as Juilliard, Berklee, the Royal Conservatory, Peabody, and regional universities in and around Philadelphia. These outcomes reflect the potential of inclusive, community-driven programs to not only prepare students for advanced studies but also to empower them as engaged citizens. **How are you embracing our students and the lived experiences they are bringing to your institutions as they already know there is much more to learn and strive for than what they need to graduate from your institutions?**

The Power of Mentorship

While NASM's standards have done an excellent job of shaping technically proficient musicians, today's students need and want more. They need to be prepared for a world where adaptability, collaboration, and community engagement are just as critical as technical excellence. And they desire to be acknowledged, respected, and actively listened to by their professors, administrators, and peers, indicating that their opinions and experiences matter and are valued within the academic environment.

Too often, students are left without the time or resources to meaningfully explore these areas. While schools may offer community engagement or entrepreneurship courses, these opportunities are often underresourced rather than central to a musician's education. We have to ask ourselves: **Are we setting aside the proper time to equip students with the tools they need to thrive—not just on the concert stage but also in and with the communities they will serve?** I'd like to share a couple of examples of the people who truly saw me for who I am and leave you with questions to think about:

My first trumpet teacher, Dr. Gordon Vernick, still is the Director of Jazz Studies at Georgia State University. Our lessons were sandwiched between a standing weekly department meeting he had and a big band rehearsal. As an 8 year old, I was much more observant and curious about his work than he thought. Even for a while I thought he was the Dean of the music school because it seemed like he was doing a lot more than just talking about the trumpet or jazz. I watched how he handled himself around the other faculty, staff, and students, being helpful yet firm, but always being inclusive to others' ideas. Once when I asked him about it all, he simply said "jazz musicians must have 'big ears,' which means listening to others more than you're listening to yourself." On one hand, I was witnessing the empathy, respect, and trust he had for his colleagues and students and how that made him such an effective collaborator. And on the other hand, he embraced uncertainty and challenges, showing me that space can be made to take risks. In the eighth grade, after studying with him for five years, I finally worked up the nerve to ask him what it was like doing his job. We put our trumpets down and he took me to the music administrative building where he introduced me to all of the staff, explained how the school of

music ran, and revealed that he had another office that was bigger than my childhood bedroom. Watching him navigate those spaces and often sharing stories of the good, bad, and ugly of his various responsibilities on campus opened my eyes to the multiple dimensions that make up our collective work. **How do you model the balance of empathy, inclusion, and risk-taking in your leadership that inspires and includes the next generation of musicians and administrators?**

Another example of mentorship and advocacy came during my time in the *Atlanta Youth Wind Symphony* under the direction of Dr. Scott Stewart, who continues to lead the ensemble today. While the suburbs and fancy private schools are known to have strong music programs, did you know that Atlanta is number one for having the top black high school marching bands in the country? I navigated the traditional world of wind ensemble on Monday nights at Emory while spending my first two years of high school filming and recording for the 21st Century Fox movie *Drumline* which used our school uniforms, instruments, scores, students and alumni. I had no problem feeling like I belonged in my school's music program—I was constantly validated and supported in many ways. However, it took someone special like Dr. Stewart to see and support me in ways that every other youth music program and summer camp failed to include me. He programmed music from all over the world, especially by living minority composers, where others didn't. He was thoughtful about engaging soloists and guest conductors that my peers and I needed to learn from. Those experiences were the only time I ever saw black men and women of all backgrounds on the podium in front of us in all of my youth and college training. Dr. Stewart came out to my high school to meaningfully engage with my band directors, work with our band, and ensure we had tickets to anything we wanted to hear that came through Emory University. It wasn't just local engagement though, Dr. Stewart was always supporting me and my siblings - whether it was to ensure my family could afford a trip to perform in Carnegie Hall or give my sister the keys to the percussion studio with 24/7 access to the building, he just found a way to make those things happen. When I approached him about hosting the *Atlanta Trumpet Festival*, he did more than offer time and space. He rolled up his sleeves, serving as a mentor and sponsor—taking me and my trumpet buddies through all the operations and logistics we would need to execute a flawless experience, and he opened doors to funding sources by connecting us to the *Coca-Cola Foundation* and he sat with us to explain *in detail* how we were going to navigate and circumvent the bureaucracy of Emory University. **How can you intentionally create opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in the leadership and community engagement of your music programs?** As the *Atlanta Trumpet Festival* just celebrated its 20th anniversary, your students just might create lasting communities that stick around well after they leave campus.

When I moved to Philadelphia to attend the Curtis Institute of Music, I was quickly described as the kid that would someday run the conservatory. I often spent time in those back hallways that Dr. Vernick and Dr. Stewart showed me as a kid. I had an understanding of how the school worked outside of my practice room and recital hall. I found welcoming and warm staff that were happy to show me the ropes through my various work study assignments in just about every department on campus. To me, it was exciting to see how the advancement staff developed relationships with donors that supported my musical learning through gifts of all sizes. I also learned a lot from supporting the student services and marketing teams, lending a hand with the artistic and operations teams, and seeing first hand how the business functions of the school kept the entire institution running on time. What stood out to me the most was the willingness of every staff leader to spend time with me explaining how everything worked in their department and being a resource for me as I started *Play On Philly*. My most impactful mentor was Mary Loiselle, the former Director of Community Engagement and Career Development Services at Curtis. She was the only person who took the time to get to know me on a personal level to match my values, interests, and skills to her advocacy with the faculty and Dean. They found opportunities and gave me the space and time to continue to develop my first nonprofit and launch the *Reading Summer Music Institute*, a tuition-free summer camp in Reading, Pennsylvania. One of Curtis' donors and retired bank presidents in the Berks County region, Mr. John Connelly, took an interest in my story and knew I would connect well with the young people in Reading. Together with the local music educators and universities, we organized a two-week summer experience that dramatically increased participation from Black and Hispanic

students who continued to learn music in high school and college, who then returned to their home communities to take over music teaching jobs in the school district, private teaching studios, and community music schools. **How can you create a culture within your institution where staff, faculty, and stakeholders collaborate to nurture students' unique values and aspirations, empowering them to drive meaningful change in their communities?**

However, I purposely decided against enrolling in a traditional Master's program because I couldn't find a comprehensive program to support me in the type of impact I wanted to make in the world until I met Mark Churchill at the New England Conservatory. In 2009, he launched the *Sistema Fellows Program*, a tuition-free postgraduate certificate initiative. Its primary goal was to train musicians and music educators to develop and lead *El Sistema*-inspired programs in the United States. The program selected ten fellows each year who engaged in an intensive nine-month curriculum. This curriculum encompassed leadership development, presentation skills, nonprofit strategy, finance, resource development, evaluation and assessment, and educational pedagogy. The training combined classroom seminars at NEC with experiential work in the field—for me it was here in Chicago at the People's Music School. A notable component was a two month-long residency in Venezuela, allowing me and my colleagues to immerse ourselves in the original *El Sistema* environment. Unfortunately, the program only lasted five years, but the impact our programs are still having on over 25,000 lives each year is a remarkable legacy to leave on communities often overlooked for high-quality music education programs. To this day, I wish that so many of my peers could have participated in a program like this alongside our musical studies. **How can you reimagine music education programs to include comprehensive leadership and community engagement training, equipping musicians to create meaningful impact in communities they serve?**

Imagining a Holistic Model for Music Education

Imagine a new model for music education that emphasizes holistic development. Picture curricula that elevate skills like collaboration, empathy, and cultural understanding alongside musicianship. Imagine programs that place non-Western music traditions, community-driven performance, and social impact on equal footing with traditional studies. These changes could bridge the gap between music schools and the communities they serve, ensuring that students graduate as both skilled musicians and engaged citizens.

As our society and field evolves, so too must our pedagogical frameworks. Today's musicians must be entrepreneurial thinkers, able to create opportunities, fund their own projects, and navigate the rapidly changing technological landscape. Teaching students how to leverage tools like artificial intelligence, much as earlier generations taught themselves to harness the power of social media, could open doors we've yet to imagine.

Music as a Catalyst for Social Responsibility

But beyond technology and entrepreneurship lies an even greater calling: music as a catalyst for social responsibility. More and more students are asking how they can use their art to address issues like human rights, climate change, and cultural preservation. They see music not just as a career but as a platform for change. Is it our job to support them in this vision?

Programs like *Play On Philly* and *Equity Arc* have shown me what is possible when music education prioritizes equity and inclusion. These programs have used music to build resilience, foster belonging, and create opportunities for students who might otherwise be overlooked. If NASM were to integrate these values into its standards, it could inspire a new generation of musicians to lead with purpose.

A Call to Action

As leaders in music education, you have the power to shape the future of our field. By embracing standards that celebrate diversity, accessibility, and social impact, NASM can prepare students to navigate an ever-changing

world with confidence and compassion. I urge you to consider setting bold new standards that prioritize community engagement, cultural awareness, and holistic education.

Reflect on your own journey, those who've believed in you, and the values that have guided your work. Then imagine how we can collectively support the next generation of students as they chart their paths—paths that may look very different from ours but are no less vital to the future of music.

Envisioning the Next Century

Imagine a music world shaped by NASM's vision—a world where every student has access to the transformative power of music education, where schools celebrate the rich traditions of every culture, and where students graduate as empowered citizens ready to make a difference. In this world, music education becomes a bridge—linking cultures, breaking barriers, and fostering understanding.

NASM has the power to lead us toward this future. By setting bold standards, actively advocating for and championing inclusion, equity, and excellence, it can ensure that music education remains a cornerstone of a more compassionate and connected society.

As we celebrate NASM's 100-year legacy, let us also embrace the opportunity to shape the next century with vision, courage, and purpose. Together, we can ensure that the music we nurture today resonates far beyond our classrooms, inspiring generations to come.

Thank you.