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promotion, composition,
performance, understanding
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Beyond Membership: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Professionalism By Andrew Martin Smith



What follows might be considered the naive musings of a young professional, one who still has much to learn and explore about music, life, and everything. It may be considered provocative or perhaps even genuinely interesting. This collection of thoughts may look all-too-familiar to some. It might be information as old as our society itself, ideas simply repackaged and/or regurgitated for a new generation's consumption. Maybe these are the ravings of a madman? Perhaps it is all of these, to a certain degree. After all, perspective is everything. I cannot claim to possess equal footing with all members of the contemporary music community. We are all at different stages of our musical development and personal journey. As I consider aspects of professionalism and community in the 21st century, I can only share with you the perspective I have in this moment, and hope that it resonates with some...just like the music I create.

A society, by definition, exists to order (hierarchically) a collection of individuals into some aggregate. This "unified" whole possesses general characteristics that reflect elements of each individual member within the group. Based upon these characteristics a society forms a set of common values, beliefs, and practices (i.e., culture). We use terms

like social contract, etiquette, rules, and protocol to guide our interactions with superiors, colleagues, peers, and subordinates. This is true of any society, even a society of composers; although, the requisite social guidelines are rarely taught to fledgling composers in any formal setting.



About the Newsletter

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Upcoming SCI Events

2016 SCI Student National Conference
November 17-19, 2016
 Ball State University
 Muncie, Indiana
 Carter Rice, Co-host
 Chad Powers, Co-host

2017 SCI Region VIII Conference
March 1-14, 2017
 Washington State University
 Pullman, Washington
 Ryan M. Hare, Host

2017 SCI National Conference
March 30-April 1, 2017
 Western Michigan University
 Kalamazoo, Michigan
 Christopher Biggs, Co-host
 Lisa Coons, Co-host
 Richard Johnson, Co-host



Internet & Email

www.societyofcomposers.org

- Conference dates and submission guidelines
- Contact information and links to member web-pages
- Student chapters and opportunities
- CDs and journals produced by SCI
- Details on SCI such as membership, contacts for officers, regional structure, by-laws, newsletter archives and more...

SCION

SCION is a listing of opportunities on our website exclusively for members. It is updated on a continual basis so that it may be checked at any time for the most current notices. In addition, members are emailed on the first Monday of each month to remind them to visit the site for new or recent postings. The large number of listings is easily managed by a table of contents with links to the individual notices. In-depth coverage; contest listings in full; all items listed until expiration; this is a valuable resource that you may print in its entirety or in part at any time.

John Bilotta, SCION Editor
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scimembers

scimembers is a member-driven e-mail mailing list that is intended to facilitate communication between members of the Society on topics of concern to composers of contemporary concert music. It conveys whatever notices or messages are sent by its members, including announcements of performances and professional opportunities, as well as discussions on a wide variety of topics. For more information, including how to join and participate in the listserv:

<http://www.societyofcomposers.org/publications/listserv.html>

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Membership Information

For complete details, please visit
<http://www.societyofcomposers.org/join/membership.html>

Full Membership (\$75/year): Eligible to submit scores to the National Conferences, regional conferences, SCI Recording Series, SCI Journal of Music Scores. Access to the SCI Newsletter in electronic form. Optional subscription to [scimembers], the SCI listserv and all other SCI publications. Eligible to vote on Society Matters and in elections for the National Council.

Joint Membership (\$100/year): Same benefits as full members

Senior Membership (\$35/year): Open to those 65 years of age or older, or retired. Same benefits as full members.

Associate Membership (\$40/year): Open to performers and other interested professionals. Receives the SCI Newsletter in electronic form and can participate in national and regional conferences.

Student Membership (\$35/year): Eligible to submit to national and regional conferences and to vote in society matters. Access to all SCI publications.

Student Chapter Membership (\$25/year): Same benefits as student members, but only available on campuses having Student Chapters.

Institutional Membership (\$40/year): Organizations receive hard copy of the SCI Newsletter and other mailings.

Lifetime Membership (\$1400 or \$150/year for 10 years): Benefits the same as full members, for life.

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As young composers—a social subcategory of which I consider myself a member, even though I have aged out of several competitions geared towards youths of the world—we tend to adopt the manner, style, and/or aesthetics of our musical idols, who are themselves contributing to a community into which we may desire admittance. We learn by example. We cargo-cult. The downside of cargo-culting is, of course, its superficiality. We utilize sounds and/or techniques that we might not (yet) fully comprehend, because we do not see what lies beyond them, veiled by the glitter of an external packaging. Similarly, we might not understand the motivation and experience behind the surface of various networking strategies or critical opinions. To become professionals we emulate professional behaviors, for better or worse. But what does it truly mean to be a professional member of a professional society?

Many societies require their membership to take an oath—either formal or informal—when professional standing is attained. These often articulate the tenants or culture of a given profession, and serve as a reminder (or example) of good citizenship within that community. One might immediately call to mind the physicians’ Hippocratic Oath, but there are numerous oaths taken by professionals around the world. A specific example, which might prove useful for a musical comparison, is an oath taken by martial artists (of various disciplines) when they obtain the rank of black belt. The Black Belt Oath exists in three sections. The first is a pledge to uphold a set of standards valued by the community. The second involves acknowledgement of lineage and tradition, while the third section articulates the desire for continued development of both the individual and society through education and enculturation.

As a member of both communities, I find the comparison between martial arts and music to be quite relevant. These disciplines require their practitioners to engage in extensive mental and physical training, and they can be practiced individually or collectively. Abilities and skills of individual artists can vary greatly, and the preferred aesthetic style of each is often distinct. These communities, along with all other human societies, grapple with the conflicting practices of individualism and selfishness.

Within our own society, selfishness can be seen in a composer’s pursuit of uniqueness. In my opinion, the pursuit of uniqueness is a superfluous activity. It does not

The Black Belt Oath

I accept, with honor and privilege, the Black Belt in Martial Arts, and do hereby swear to uphold the standards of honesty, integrity, courtesy, high moral code, and indomitable spirit.

I sincerely pledge to honor my instructors and school with loyalty and support, and to value and carry on the Martial Arts Tradition with respect and dignity.

I further pledge, with humility and gratitude, to continue my mental, physical and spiritual growth to the highest level, to lead by example, and to share what I have learned with others.

seem that many other disciplines are burdened by this pursuit to such a significant extent. Martial artists, for example, are not concerned with “finding their voice” or making their personal technique distinct from others within their style. They are unconcerned, because that result is a natural outgrowth of their individual, physical, and mental being. The most selfish activity—an activity in which all composers have engaged at one time or another—is thinking that one’s (natural) uniqueness is somehow superior to that of another.

For too long the “ideal” composer has been the outlier, the romanticized rough on the fringe of society. As previously mentioned, ideals (or idols) are usually revered and emulated; however, all composers cannot honestly push the boundaries of a social construct. If this is happening, then the construct is either absurd or obsolete (i.e., does not reflect the general characteristics of the society). All the individual can do is continue to push their personal boundaries within an ever-changing world.

When examining a community of composers, some voices naturally will be found on the fringe. Many voices will reside within the comfort zone of the global community, with some fitting neatly into a particular style; this is inevitable. Our uniqueness is trivial. It is a natural outgrowth of the human condition. In our society, that

which matters most is the purpose that we share, along with the aspects that make us similar to each other. We (should) put aside our selfish desires in order to create something more significant, something we could not accomplish alone.

Musicians may not have a formal oath, but many of our professional societies (including SCI) have clear mission statements. As a community, the Society of Composers, Inc. is “dedicated to the promotion, performance, understanding and dissemination of new and contemporary music.” This statement is relatively ambiguous, and with good reason. It is no more specific than the aforementioned Black Belt Oath, which seems designed specifically to mitigate any stylistic preference or prejudice. At the core of our society’s statement are verbal nouns of engagement. We are charged to communicate contemporary musical ideas within (and beyond) our network, utilizing all of our individual tools, talents, and training.

A fundamental aspect of any social endeavor is active participation. In order to be considered a true member of a professional society, one must actively contribute to the community on multiple levels. It is not enough for a composer to simply create music abstractly; one must also get that music realized through performance, requiring active interpreters (i.e., performers) and attentive listeners. Even this, however, is not sufficient for genuine participation within a professional society. As a professional, one must actively engage with superiors, colleagues, peers, and subordinates (i.e., the community) on a regular basis. Our society does not revolve solely around the music we create. It is an environment for critical feedback and stimulation.

So we must continually ask ourselves a series of tough, personal questions. To what extent does our individual action and participation affect our society? Are we creating music that is honest, thoughtful, and reflective? Are we respectful of each other’s time? Are we continuing to explore and push our own limitations? Are we providing critical feedback to our colleagues? Are we encouraging the development of our subordinates? Are we supporting and promoting the work of our peers and mentors? Are we sharing our values and traditions with the next generation? Are we leading by example?

This constant inquiry can be difficult, at best. It takes a tremendous amount of integrity to be intellectually honest with ourselves, and to put forth our strongest work at any given moment. We will not always be successful in this endeavor. It is within this struggle, however, that we find meaning and value. Becoming a professional is the beginning of a journey, not the end. Contributing to a society is not just about the work we create for it. It is about how, and with whom, that work is created and shared.