

It's ^{all} ~~None~~ of Your Business

Professional Conferences and Organizations

Other than my academic degrees, nothing has shaped me more as a teacher, performer and professional musician than the many professional conferences I have attended, along with my longstanding membership in professional organizations. Since *American Music Teacher* magazine is sent to members of Music Teachers National Association, there is a good chance that those reading this article experience similar benefits from MTNA. Regularly attending conferences and being actively involved in professional organizations improves our musical skills, pedagogical expertise and the professionalism within our studios.

I have met some of the most respected pedagogues and performers in the country while attending conferences, and learned a great deal from their presentations and master classes. Conference concerts and recitals, given by both professionals and students, have left me truly inspired. I, like many conference attendees, have had the pleasure of hearing new compositions at publisher showcases, while getting to know the composers at the

publisher booths in the exhibitors' area. Some national conferences have entire days devoted to professional issues such as technology, the independent studio, early childhood music or pedagogy, allowing me to have an intense and in-depth exposure to a field of special interest to me.

In my mind, going to state and national conferences is an absolute "must" for any teacher wishing to continually improve his or her skills. Yet, many times I have heard teachers say, "I can't go to the conference. It is too expensive," or "I'd never be able to make up the missed lessons." This was even said to me by one of my former piano pedagogy students, who upon graduating from college had set up an independent studio not far from the university. When I called to remind her that we were hosting the state conference at our university, she replied, "I don't know if I am going to go. It is so expensive, and I would have to make up lessons." I was appalled! This was coming from a new teacher who now lived only 40 minutes from the university, would not need to stay in a hotel, would pay a low first-time conference fee and had even taken my pedagogy course where I repeatedly stressed the importance of attending professional conferences!

Although conferences can be expensive, as teachers who are dedicated to professional growth, we must not avoid professional conferences because of cost alone. Instead, we can budget money and time for professional development as a legitimate and necessary business expense, which will eventually be "paid back" ten-fold in improved knowledge, musical growth, teaching skills and professional relationships. As with any business, work-related expenses are expected, including conference costs and membership dues.

To help with costs, before each new

teaching year begins, we can schedule a non-lesson week on our studio calendar and tell the parents we will be attending a professional conference that week instead of teaching. We can still charge for that week as part of annual tuition, and let the parents know that this is not a "week off," but a different kind of workweek, one that is still spent for the benefit of their children. This allows a paid week in which to attend the conference, with no lessons needing to be rescheduled. Sharing a hotel room and traveling with other teachers can lower expenses, which are all tax deductible.

One teacher I know writes the parents of her students after attending a conference and outlines all the sessions she attended at the conference. She concludes with, "These are the sessions I attended on behalf of your children during the conference week." A non-lesson teaching week has a totally different ring to it when we educate parents about the value of that week for their children. This is a form of marketing our studios to our clients. Parents will not understand the value of all that we do unless we tell them, and defining the value of our work at a professional conference reinforces that we are caring and committed educators.

MTNA's National Conferences have been the most beneficial to me. There are a number of other more specialized choices as well, which can act as a good supplement to participation in MTNA. Here is a short list of valuable professional organizations and conferences worth attending:

Music Teachers National Association (MTNA)
(888) 512-5278; (513) 421-1420;
www.mtna.org

Beth Gigante Klingenstein,

NCTM, is nationally known for her presentations and writings on professional issues affecting the independent music teacher. Klingenstein taught as an independent teacher for 28 years before accepting a position at Valley City State University, where she also is the founding director of the VCSU Community School of the Arts.



American Choral Directors Association (ACDA)

(405) 232-8161; www.acdaonline.org

American Guild of Organists (AGO)

(212) 870-2310; www.agohq.org

American String Teachers Association (ASTA)

(703) 279-2113;

www.astaweb.com

Association for Technology in Music Instruction (ATMI)

www.atmionline.org

The College Band Directors National Association (CBDNA)

(512) 471-5883; www.cbdna.org

The College Music Society (CMS)

(406) 721-9616; www.music.org

The Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic

(847) 424-4163;

www.midwestclinic.com

The National Association for Music Educators (MENC)

(800) 336-3768, (703) 860-4000;

www.menc.org

National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS)

(904) 992-9101; www.nats.org

The National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy (NCKP)

The Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy, Inc.

(609) 921-0371;

www.francesclarkcenter.org

National Federation of Music Clubs (NFMC)

(317) 638-4003; www.nfmc-music.org

National Symposium on Music Instruction Technology (NSMIT)

www.nsmiit.org

Technology Institute for Music Educators (TI:ME)

(617) 747-2816; www.ti-me.org

World Piano Pedagogy Conference (WPPC)

(866) 742-6682;

www.pianovision.com

There are conferences that specialize in the study, performing and teaching of percussion, woodwinds and brass

instruments; however, there are far too many to list.

A quick look through past and future conference programs shows a sampling of the scope and variety of the helpful sessions offered at professional conferences:

- *Online Tools and Treats for the Traditional Studio*
- *The Written and Spoken Musical Language: Composition and Improvisation in the Private Studio*
- *Funding and the Arts: A Musician's Guide to Funding and Securing Money for Creative Endeavors*
- *Rhythm Tools: New Software for Rhythmic Dictation and Sight Reading*
- *Review of New Repertoire*
- *Who's in Charge Here? The Left Brain, the Right Brain and Making Music*

In addition to attending conferences, being actively involved with a local, state or national music organization provides numerous opportunities for growth and development. And yet, teachers have often said to me, "I just don't get anything out of belonging to an organization when I teach in my home, so I am not going to pay those dues!" MTNA's membership dues are modest when compared to many other professional organizations, but that is not the main reason I am dismayed when I hear this statement. If a teacher never reads the magazines that come with membership, never attends local programs or state or national conferences, has no desire to enter students in any activity outside of the studio, and has no intention of learning about new compositions or improving pedagogical skills, then I guess it is a true statement.

But if we have any desire to improve our teaching, if we wish to offer our students the very best of our capabilities, then active membership—not membership in name only—in professional organizations is invaluable. I have attended professional meetings

faithfully since my graduate school days and continue to learn from programs given on the local, state, regional and national level. My teaching has improved through participation in standardized theory and keyboard skills testing, composition and performance competitions, student festivals, teacher certification and websites full of information. Holding offices in professional organizations has improved my skills as an organizer, speaker and collaborator.

We benefit in other ways as well: national associations support a teacher struggling with zoning issues or other legal concerns. National organizations award grants to deserving teachers and local associations, provide advocacy materials and insurance programs, and publish helpful professional materials. The staff members in various national organizations are there to help us and I found they were willing to help me even when I first started teaching.

Perhaps one of the most important reasons to join a professional organization is to take advantage of a tool that is often overlooked in music studios: networking. Networking with other teachers has given me a vast, nationwide group of colleagues in the music field. By networking with members of professional organizations, I have made important connections and established valuable friendships in the music profession. I have met musicians from whom I can learn and to whom I can turn with professional or pedagogical questions.

A vast resource of professional help awaits us if we choose to take advantage of our options. Attendance at conferences and membership in music organizations add to a lifetime of continual learning. We are prevented from being isolated in our studios and are able to benefit from the shared talents, knowledge, inspiration and mutual concerns of our professional colleagues. What is the true value of attending conferences and maintaining membership in professional organizations? Priceless. ■