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Letter to the Editor

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Letter to the Editor

From the English-language editor

The appeal to which Professor Huron refers was sent to several email lists and asked for interested participants willing to represent CUMS/SMUC on a committee struck by the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences (FedCan). In the interim, two groups have been created: one comprising the many interested parties who responded to the email call, and a second committee comprising a small number of representatives from CUMS/SMUC and the Canadian Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Document Centres/ Association canadienne des bibliothèques, archives et centres de documentation musicaux (CAML/ACBM). Several representatives have been drawn from the latter committee to work with FedCan, which will prepare a position paper as the foundation for advocacy work on Parliament Hill.

Letter to the Editor

In June 2008, Bill C61 was introduced into the Canadian House of Commons. The same day that it received first reading, the Canadian University Music Society issued an urgent appeal for expert assistance in responding to the proposed changes in copyright legislation. The CUMS announcement is a reminder to all music academics of how poorly prepared we are in responding to the changes afoot. Let me explain.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, music conservatories and departments of music have regarded themselves as cultural bulwarks. The music appreciation movement was intended to have a civilizing influence on the general population, and more specifically on the doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals who studied at colleges and universities. As music academics, we were supposed to bear the torch—advocating on behalf of a nurturing, vibrant, and transforming musical culture.

Until the 1960s, this meant largely a defense of classical music against the influx of jazz and popular musics. Times have changed, and we now (quite rightly) embrace a wider notion of what makes a good musical culture. But what ever happened to the idea that music academics cared about the broader health of a musical culture?

The contrast with other disciplines is both instructive and sobering. If you visit other university departments, such as social work, medicine, education, engineering, environment, etc., you'll find many scholars who work explicitly on public policy issues. In engineering you'll find faculty studying safety regulations. In medicine, you'll find faculty with expertise on public health policy. In chemistry, you'll find faculty who are concerned about toxic products and occupational safety. In education, law, psychology, economics, computer science, urban planning, agriculture, business, and dozens of other departments, you'll find a proportion of the faculty who spend their lives preparing for the moment when legislators ask them for advice.

If a government is contemplating revising laws related to welfare, or fisheries, or transportation, you'll find academics and academic organizations ready to travel to the seats of government and ready to submit carefully reasoned policy position papers. These academics understand the legislative history, they are knowledgeable about the policies in other jurisdictions and countries, and they have followed the good, bad, and indifferent outcomes from various initiatives. They can point to unexpected repercussions of different legal approaches, and they can often provide useful advice intended to serve the public good.

Not so in the arts. At the moment, the Web is utterly transforming the way in which culture is created and disseminated, how cultural industries bring in income, how nonprofit organizations do fundraising, who holds power, who controls the cultural gates, which musicians make money, whether music distribution will become subservient to advertising, and myriad other issues. Not since the invention of sound recording in the late 19th century has music been impacted the way it is now.

All over the world, countries are faced with legislative challenges concerning intellectual property, cultural organizations, maintaining cultural identities in the face of globalization, and other related challenges. Have music scholars anything to offer? Where is the policy expertise in music departments and conservatories? At the very moment when decisions are being made that will affect musical culture—possibly for the next several centuries—we appear to be silent. What policies will best serve the public? Few, if any of us, have thought about this. The depressing truth is that we have almost nothing to offer. Scholars in the law schools, engineering, and business have thought more about the future of music than we have.

In my opinion, we in the music scholarly community have dropped the ball. We are focused on tasks such as training far more clarinet players than can possibly find employment. Our Cultural Studies colleagues appear to be preoccupied with fighting old Marxist battles and seem to have no concrete agendas to offer. Critical diatribes against commercial hegemony are one thing, but reasoned policy analysis with legislative recommendations is another. Even as Directors of music schools have sought to better serve the community beyond the university borders, most have failed to show the vision needed to truly nurture the future of music. Against the clamor of hiring another piano accompanist, which Director has bucked faculty pressure and hired a music scholar with expertise in economics or the legislative framework of cultural policy? Most music programs are funded through public taxes, yet we have given little thought as to how we can best serve our constituents.

There are, of course, some hopeful signs. The distinguished ethnomusicologist Marc Perlman recently finished a year studying intellectual property at the Berkeley law school. He is one of a rare breed of scholars who has realized that IP law holds enormous repercussions for what will happen in non-Western musical cultures. How the law evolves will determine whether a Peruvian music collective has the same access to markets as a New York band signed to one of the majors. There are obviously other sources of light, such as the various grass-roots organizations raising funds to lobby governments and counteract the well-heeled industrial lobbies. But these groups are not centred in music departments. They cannot build on an extensive body of existing music policy scholarship. Nor do they draw inspiration from leaders in the music scholarly community. Unfortunately, too much of what we do is too late. Notice that the Canadian Universities Music Society decided to seek expert help only after a bill was introduced in parliament.

I fear that future music scholars will lament our generation's lack of vision and our failure to focus on our primary mission: that of nuturing musical culture.

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