

Oberlin Winter Term Chamber Music Festival: “The Chamber Musician’s Approach to the Media” (Jan. 23)

by Jarrett Hoffman



January has been all about chamber music at Oberlin. On Friday, January 23 in Stull Recital Hall, the school gave a taste of the media side of the field with the help of three Cleveland-based music critics, also Oberlin faculty members: Mike Telin and Daniel Hathaway serve as editors of *ClevelandClassical.com*, while Donald Rosenberg is editor of *Early Music America* magazine and former chief music critic at *The Plain Dealer*.

The panel, moderated by Oberlin’s Director of Conservatory Communications Cathy Strauss and Director of Professional Development Dana Jessen, presented a wide-ranging discussion entitled “The Chamber Musician’s Approach to the Media,” the final lecture in Oberlin’s Chamber Music Intensive & Festival.

Michael Strauss, co-chair of the festival, provided opening remarks. “It’s very important to be as literate at working with the media as we are on our own instruments. Without our panelists and the Communications Department here at Oberlin, there is no megaphone, and no one knows what we do.”

From there the panel got underway, introducing an overview of media today and several aspects of approaching and establishing relationships with the media.

On developing the relationship between artist and media

Donald Rosenberg began by outlining the importance of media coverage — for both the media and for artists.

Donald Rosenberg: What we as music critics all try to do is share our enthusiasm about great music with the public. Part of that means working with the artists, and it means artists working with us. And we should say this right at the start: we need each other. We need you, the artists, so we have something to write about. Without you, it's a blank page. But you also need us, to get the word out.

It's important for another reason. If you're seeking grant money from foundations or from funding sources, they want to know that you're credible. One way they know that is if you've been covered. So you want your name to be apparent.

Mike Telin: The relationship between an artist and a writer or public relations person is of the utmost importance. When you're making your first approach to the media, it needs to be professional, no matter how well you know somebody.

Dana Jessen: What if you don't have a relationship with a media person? What's a good way to approach someone?

Telin: Do your research. Get on their website to figure out what they're interested in.

Daniel Hathaway: If you're just starting a group or just moved into an area, make a courtesy call or send an email — “Hi, we're so and so, and we're planning on doing this” — just an early attempt to make a connection. In the relationship-building category, when you send things, don't send them to yourselves and blind-copy 50 other people with a generic message. You probably know how you feel when you get something like that. De-lete.

Telin: And again, always err on the side of being formal with the first letter. If you don't know the person, please say ‘Mr. Rosenberg.’ He will be happy to either continue to allow you to call him ‘Mr.’ or tell you to call him ‘Don.’

Rosenberg: And please don't say, ‘Hi, Don,’ which a lot of people do in their emails. That's more personal, for when you actually know somebody. The details matter. They really do.

On presenting yourself to the media

Hathaway addressed the importance of a concise press release.

Hathaway: I'd like to show you an example of what *not* to do in a press release. This one goes on and on and on, as you can see. Probably tells you everything except the blood type of the performers.

Cathy Strauss: Also, never lie or stretch the truth. Never say someone is world-renowned if they're not.

Hathaway: And never say you're one of the most sought-after artists of your generation. It makes me wonder if anyone has actually found you yet.

Cathy Strauss: Some publications have very specific ideas about what is compelling to their readers. A photo I would send to *ClevelandClassical* is not the same as one I would send to *CoolCleveland*, which wants stuff that's edgier — skewed angles, darkened rooms.



On making a website

Hathaway projected some examples of websites with both good and problematic features. Some were clear and organized — even funny. In others, pictures blocked text, calendars were blank, and content hadn't been updated.

Telin: It's okay to be cute.

Hathaway: If you want to be taken seriously, you might want to titrate the “cute” against the “serious.”

Jessen: I see a lot of websites where people imbed their own Google Calendars, which is super easy. But you have to be careful. I saw one that included personal information on it. Along with concert information, it had ‘move car across the street.’

On reviews

Rosenberg gave his thoughts on reviews from both the critics' and the artists' perspectives.

Rosenberg: A review isn't just a way to find out what the critic thinks about your performance and your artistry. It's another way of getting your name out there — communicating with the public and increasing their knowledge of what you do.

Now, what about this question of favorable reviews vs. unfavorable reviews? From the critic's point of view, we go to a performance to assess what happens there: to write about the music, to describe the event, etc. It's not an evaluation for the artist — though if he or she wants to read it and wants to gain something from it, that's fine. It's really for the general public, so people can share that experience, especially people who haven't been there. A review is the news in the music industry.

On the receiving end, reviews are not meant to change what you do. Critics can't control how you bow something or how you phrase something. It's one person's, you hope, informed opinion. Take what you think is worthwhile and ignore the rest.

Telin: Sending an angry email is not the way to address a review that you think is less than favorable. Remember, a review is just one person's opinion. Everyone in this room could go to a concert, and we'd have as many opinions as there are people. So don't start tweeting about it, don't get angry, don't throw hissy fits — let it drop. Plus, we're all

going to find ourselves back together again, and you don't want to destroy a relationship before it's begun.

Rosenberg: We've all been reviewed. We've all had good reviews. I assume we've all had bad reviews.

Hathaway: Speak for yourselves.

On performers' attire in reviews

The audience was interested to know the critics' thoughts on commenting on performers' attire in a review.

Rosenberg: I think it's the responsibility of the critic to report what happens at the event. The mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato might wear three different gowns during the recital. How can you *not* comment on that? I mean, you don't have to say, 'That was an ugly dress.' You could say, 'She wore this red taffeta something.' It's just another detail.

Cathy Strauss: I think that many classical musicians, in their efforts to draw audiences, add theatrical and choreographed elements to their performances. And it's one of the things that makes it compelling to hear live music rather than just buying someone's CD. If they're using inventive lighting and stage sets, or they're moving around the stage, or if attire is part of their presentation, then it's a reviewable part of the event.

Some artists put a lot of effort into their appearance. It's part of their artistic persona. And you can choose not to cover it, but some artists, male and female alike, actually invite that kind of coverage.

It's a decision to make, what kind of image to craft. Video and photographic imagery bombard us every day to make certain products stand out. And you do have to think about your output and your artistic statements as products.

Photos by Michael Strauss & Jarrett Hoffman.

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