

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor



‘Hello, I Must Be Going’

“Hello, I must be going, I cannot stay, I came to say, I must be going, I’m glad I came, but just the same I must be going, la-la! I’ll stay a week or two, I’ll stay the summer through, But I am telling you:

I must be going ... “

– Excerpted lyrics from the song, *“Hello, I Must Be Going”* written by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby in 1930. This song was sung by Groucho Marx and Margaret Dumont in the Marx Brothers’ 1930 film, *Animal Crackers*.

Well, “it’s a wrap.” For those of you who landed here on the May/June 2025 *School Music NEWS* editorial page on purpose, thanks for giving me a chance to say goodbye and for your support all these years! For those of you who landed here by accident, welcome (and goodbye). Buckle up, I’ve got a lot to say ...

Serving as NYSSMA® editor has been an honor and distinct privilege. I never dreamt that my time as NYSSMA® editor would run so long (maybe, *too* long).

Aside from serving in the job of creating and editing the *School Music NEWS*, I have had the opportunity to serve with more than a thousand individuals who have been members of the NYSSMA® Executive Council during my tenure spanning three decades-plus. Many of these folks have since become good friends, and my life and career in music education has been enriched because of my involvement in NYSSMA®.

I have also served as ex-officio to 16 NYSSMA® presidents over the years, in addition to serving with six NYSSMA® Executive Directors. All these individuals have left an indelible mark on my life.

Years ago, there was a “joke” circulating among the NYSSMA® officers that the association should create an additional officer position known as the “NYSSMA® Fourth Vice President.” Why? Well, it seemed that some felt that we needed an additional officer just to have someone onboard for keeping the consistency and continuity between NYSSMA® presidential terms.

In all honesty, NYSSMA® already had created that position when it established the position of association editor. My NYSSMA® editor predecessors Dr. Frederic Fay Swift and Dr. Robert Campbell, had been those long-standing members of council

before I started in 1994. As NYSSMA® editors we were always there when the “dust settled” and there was a new president, new officers and newly elected or appointed Executive Council members.

A unique resource

It’s been an awesome responsibility to be at the service of the officers, council members and the general membership as someone who has chronicled our association’s history and one

who has been at the table. I am proud that I have contributed to NYSSMA® by being a “fly on the wall” for so long. For 31 years I’ve often been the person who gets the e-mail and phone call every time someone is looking for information no one else can provide. It can be time consuming, occasionally frustrating but also rewarding at the same time.

It is apparent that the minutiae and difficult work involved in being the NYSSMA® editor, in addition to serving as the association historian and archivist, is something that many do not fully understand. Nonetheless, it carries

with it a monumental responsibility.

While many state music educator association journals have “gone digital” during the past 10 years (NYSSMA® has done that to a degree) our organization, along with some of the nation’s largest state music educator associations, still produce their own hard copy state journal. It is something that NYSSMA® gives to its members, and we have a wide circulation beyond just New York State as our magazine is sent to all 50 states and several foreign countries.

While many folks in the world consume the news of the day online, the collection of data that must be archived and recorded for historical purposes — even in 2025 — is not yet something



This is just the tip of the iceberg of ephemera collected over 31 years.

that NYSSMA® can do. This is not to imply that our website isn't a valuable tool for the dissemination of NYSSMA® information. In fact, our website contains a wealth of current information concerning our association that is readily available to anyone seeking information beyond just the NYSSMA® membership.

Our Web editor, Terry Nigrelli, is incredible, and his service to NYSSMA® is invaluable in more ways than any one can imagine. That said, the history of the association can only be accessed through the pages of the *School Music NEWS*. All NYSSMA® members, in addition to other state association leadership in the U.S.; college and university libraries; our institutional membership, and others receive the magazine. For those who collect their old copies of the *School Music NEWS* (including the Sibley Library at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester where the NYSSMA® archives are kept), this is where the history of the association is chronicled and maintained.

The outgrowth of this collection is also contained in a small number of NYSSMA® history books that have been painstakingly pieced together to chronicle NYSSMA® from its beginnings in 1932. In addition, the collection of president pages, editorials, research articles, reviews, feature articles and more have become a snapshot of NYSSMA® at any given point in time. Everything in print has therefore been memorialized for the future.

Perhaps some feel that they can't be bothered to read their printed and "snail- mailed" hard copy of the *School Music NEWS*, and that is understandable when we think about all the various forms of media available to us today. Many only want to consume their news when it is accessible through media online digitally. It's understandable.

The value of recording history

However, only when information is retained, searchable and when it is available in historical context do we succeed in keeping history available digitally. Currently, NYSSMA® does not have this capability. Again, this is why the NYSSMA® hard copy magazine serves an important purpose.

Moving forward, NYSSMA® will no doubt have many options available to streamline the collection of data for the benefit of both its general and extended membership. It will also be extremely valuable as a collection of searchable data for the benefit of research by students, members-at-large and future NYSSMA® leadership.

I have long been a proponent and advocate of maintaining the history of our association, not only to provide information but also for the purpose of clarifying why and how NYSSMA® moved forward to address a myriad of growing pains and circumstances within and outside the association's orbit.

This information is extremely valuable to the association as it deals with events that the association had not anticipated, like the world-wide pandemic beginning in early 2020. Who knows what tomorrow may bring, but the more our future NYSSMA® leaders can draw on the past, the more NYSSMA® can

sustain itself as a vitally important and relevant educational association moving forward.

A Look Ahead: Passing the Editor's "Pen"

When I became NYSSMA® editor in 1994 I did not have the opportunity to transition in collaboration with my predecessor, Dr. Robert Campbell. Bob was very ill when he was forced to step away from his NYSSMA® editorship in early 1994. It was only with the help of then NYSSMA® Past President Jeanne Gray that I was able to gain any insight into the job of being NYSSMA® editor. It was a very short transition.



I am pleased and proud to introduce the fourth editor in the history of NYSSMA® to you. Please join me in welcoming, Daniel Bilawsky. I have known Dan for the past 25 years and, more important, I have had the pleasure of working with Dan over the ensuing years

in many different settings. I will defer to Dan to introduce himself to you but I wanted you to know that it is my strong belief that Dan will be an outstanding editor in addition to serving as a trusted leader as a member of NYSSMA's Executive Council!

Dan Bilawsky's transition in assuming the editorship has already begun. I am excited to help facilitate a smooth and seamless transition, especially in light of my own "deer in headlights" experience in 1994. I know that you will thoroughly enjoy and appreciate Dan's perspective on our chosen profession. To me, Dan Bilawsky embodies the qualities that give his voice as NYSSMA® editor real weight, namely:

- Dan is an outstanding music educator and has a proven reputation as a "mover and shaker" in our profession as a teacher and music department coordinator.
- Dan is a gifted performing musician.
- Dan is an already well-respected writer (noteworthy pieces in professional magazines, reviews, interviews, album liner notes, etc.).
- Dan speaks with a down-to-earth voice that will resonate well with our NYSSMA® membership (both new and experienced music educators).

Welcome onboard, Dan!

Final Thanks and So Long for Now

A wise school superintendent of mine once said to me, "Be careful when thanking folks in public because there is always someone or some individuals you will accidentally omit from your list." He was, and still is, right. I deeply apologize if I forgot any of my long-time NYSSMA® friends here.

I want to personally extend my profound thanks to: Peter Brasch, Dr. Edward S. Marschilok, Dr. Steven Schopp, Dr. Bert Nelson, Bill Mercer, Dick Rabideau, Debby Super, Jeanne Gray, Terry Nigrelli, Dr. Elise Sobol, George Smith, Ron and Cathy Sutherland, Robin DeSantis, Kevin and Kathy Coughlin, Don

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Muro, Dr. Peter Loel Boonshaft, Dr. Ron Caravan, Bruce Bush, and Dr. Raymond McCloat.

I would also like to single out my friend Steven Behler. For 30 years Steve has been my “right-hand man,” pre-press and all-around graphics-guy extraordinaire! Steve knows more about the NYSSMA® history, “nuts and bolts” and the names and operation of the association than just about anyone I know. Thanks also to Leila Zogby. Leila has been our magazine’s proofreader and second set of eyes for my entire tenure as editor. She has been a tremendous asset in helping me to maintain the professional quality of our magazine in print.

Then, there’s Barry Frank who toward the end of my stretch as editor has been an invaluable go-between with our printers. I would also like to thank Steve Guida and Frank Montwill at NHG (our printer) and Becky Muraco at MVS Mailers (our mailing house) for their wonderful work in producing the magazine, along with their much-appreciated customer service. I’m almost done ...

Thank you to my high school music teacher-mentors: Louis DiGennaro (my high school band director), the late Andrew Housholder (my high school choir director) and the late Tom Karolyi (my high school orchestra director) for lighting that “spark” in me more than a half-century ago to become a music educator. There is not a day that goes by when I don’t think of you and the impact you had on my life.

To my family growing up: my dad Dr. Thomas M. Gellert (who did not live long enough to see me become NYSSMA® editor) and my mom Charlotte F. Gellert, who was my biggest and most important *School Music NEWS* reader. Both my parents made sure that our family (including me) and my sisters Jennifer, Karen and Marianne, were all exposed to amazing musical experiences growing up and well into college and beyond. I can’t ever remember a school concert that my family didn’t attend. What memories!

Also, to my best, oldest and dearest friends, Eric and Ridge Kaiser who because of their own musical experiences, opened my eyes to learning to play the horn and joining the band in elementary school. Thanks for always being my big brothers!

I want to thank my daughters, Elyse and Claire, both of whom followed their parents into the music education/performing arts profession and who while in public school became extraordinary musicians including all those NYSSMA® experiences we will forever cherish.

Finally, love and thank you to my wife, Karen who has been my biggest supporter, confidant, source of editorial ideas and motivator. Along the way Karen also got involved in NYSSMA®, serving as all-state orchestra chair, NYSSMA® adjudicator and many more Long Island music educator and leadership opportunities.

Having someone at home for the last 31 years to keep our family going while I was mired in all things related to the creation of the *School Music NEWS*, and especially on all those occasions when I was away at NYSSMA® meetings, events and conferences, allowed me to serve as NYSSMA® editor! Most of all, having a partner to bounce ideas off and to share stories with has been a godsend!

With this, my final editorial I wish you all the very best. Thanks to those of you who have read my editorials and who have on occasion sent me comments after-the-fact. Knowing that folks have found my thoughts relevant has inspired me to write and share my inner thoughts in a way that made me feel useful in my role.

Please stay involved in NYSSMA® and, while you’re at it, please encourage your fellow music educator colleagues who are not NYSSMA® members to join and support their state professional association. Keep that passion as a music educator and continue to make a difference in the lives of your students through music!

Here are two final quotes to share:

“Often when you think you’re at the end of something, you’re at the beginning of something else.”

– Fred Rogers (“Mister Rogers”), children’s television host, author, producer, and minister

“Being the NYSSMA® editor and writing editorials has been a cathartic experience all these years (and a lot less expensive than paying for psychotherapy!)”

–Tom Gellert, (NYSSMA® Editor, June 1994-June 2025)

Signing off after 31 years. ||