PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Kathy Perconti – NYSSMA® President



Music for Life: Why We Do What We Do

Every December, when I walk into the NYSSMA® Winter Conference, I take a moment to stop to appreciate it all. There are students carrying instruments through the hallways; teachers rushing from one session to another; conductors working with ensembles; friends stopping to catch up; and strains of music drifting from the rehearsal rooms throughout the conference locations. Somewhere in all of that, I always find myself thinking, **"This is why we do what we do."**

This year feels especially meaningful as we celebrate the **90th NYSSMA® Winter Conference** and gather around our theme, **Music for Life**. Many of us see these words as more than just a conference theme: They describe the experience of being a musician throughout the many stages of life. Music has been there for me as a student, a performer, a teacher, a director, and now as NYSSMA® President. I know I am not alone among my colleagues, and I see that same journey emerging in our all-state students.

Hundreds of students from across New York will come to Rochester this December. They will arrive as individual musicians, each with their own experiences, strengths, challenges, and stories. Then, just a few days later, they will become an ensemble.

The first rehearsal may be a little intimidating. Students will meet people they have never met before, learn the conductor's expectations, and figure out where they fit within their new ensemble. Along the way, something magical will happen: They will begin to listen to one another. They will begin to trust one another. The ensemble will find its collective voice, unlocking a profoundly richer sound. By the time they walk onto the stage, they will no longer be a room full of individuals, but a musical community. This is Music for Life.

We are students for life

The winter conference is also a reminder that we never stop being students ourselves. One of the things I value most about NYSSMA® is the opportunity for music educators to learn from one another. Our conference sessions give us a chance to step outside our classrooms and think about what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what might possibly be next.

As teachers, we spend so much of our time giving to our students. We need opportunities to grow too. Music is constantly changing, and our students are changing with it. If we want to continue to reach them, we have to be willing to listen, learn and sometimes step outside of what is familiar to us. That doesn't mean leaving behind the traditions that have shaped music education. It means making room for what comes next. I think that is one of the most exciting things happening within NYSSMA® right now.

I don't think we have to choose between tradition and innovation.

Our **Modern Band Showcase** returns this year for its second annual presentation, giving students an opportunity to perform in a format that reflects the way many young musicians experience music today. Students are collaborating, arranging, playing contemporary instruments, working with technology and creating music that feels authentic to them.

We are also continuing to explore new possibilities for contemporary vocal music. As a choral teacher, I am particularly interested in the growth of contemporary a cappella and the ways students are using their voices beyond the traditional choral model. The conversations surrounding the future of our vocal jazz offerings and the development of a **Contemporary Vocal Ensemble** are examples of NYSSMA® listening to teachers and students and considering how our programs can evolve.

I don't think we have to choose between tradition and innovation. We can honor the music and practices that have served generations of students while also opening doors to new musical experiences. In fact, I think that is part of our responsibility as music educators. Our students deserve to see themselves in the music. They deserve opportunities to explore genres they love, but also to discover music they haven't encountered yet. They deserve teachers who are willing to keep learning right alongside them. That is how a music program stays alive and that is how NYSSMA® continues to grow with the profession it serves.

Endless learning possibilities

This year, that spirit of exploration will also come alive on our 90th Winter Conference stage through **Voctave**, our featured guest performing ensemble. There is something incredibly special about the human voice — we carry our instruments with us everywhere we go, and when voices come together, the possibilities are almost endless.

Hearing Voctave live will bring that potential to life through impeccable pitch, soaring vocal ranges, and a seamless blend, all produced without a single instrument. Their breathtaking arrangements bridge generations, transforming familiar Disney classics, Broadway showstoppers, and timeless melodies into walls of spectacular sound. I hope you will all join me in welcoming this innovative ensemble and experiencing firsthand what dedication, technique, and passion can achieve. I know their performance will leave our entire music community inspired. I hope our audience not only listens to the incredible sound Voctave creates, but also to what that sound represents: creativity, collaboration, musicianship and the willingness to imagine something that hasn't been done yet.

When I think about this year's conference, I don't think about just a few days in December. I think about everything that happens before those days — and everything that will happen after. I think about the teacher who encouraged a student to audition; the student who practices when it is easier not to; the teacher who comes to Rochester looking for a new idea; the student who discovers a new kind of music; the colleague who finds a mentor; and the young teacher who realizes that there is a place for him or her in this profession. I think about the music that will follow all of them home. That is the beauty of music education.

We may teach a song for a concert, prepare a student for an audition, rehearse an ensemble for a performance or attend a session because we need a few new ideas. But what we are really doing is building something that can last a lifetime. I've lived through this myself, and I'm sure my friends and colleagues have too.

Music has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. It has shaped who I am, connected me to people I might never have known otherwise, and given me a career I still love after all these years. Now, as NYSSMA® President, I have the privilege of seeing that same possibility play out across our state. So, when we gather in Rochester for our 90th Winter Conference, I hope we take a moment to look around. Listen to the students, teachers, session presenters, and ensembles to embrace new ideas and the music. This is the sound of **Music for Life** and I can't wait to hear it this December! ‖