

NICHOLAS PERNA, DMA

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NATS Membership

Dear Colleagues:

I am honored to have the opportunity to outline my vision and priorities for a potential term as part of the NATS presidential line. I understand the commitment this service role requires, and I am excited about the possibilities ahead of us as an organization.

NATS is at a complex and consequential inflection point. We are completing a 5-year strategic plan (and about to embark on a new one) while simultaneously beginning an organizational shift as we transition to a new Executive Director (ED) of NATS and Editor in Chief of *Journal of Singing*. With these matters, and more in mind, I believe the next few years will be influential in setting a course for the following decades. I hope to be able to continue to serve NATS through this critical period. Below I will outline several aspirational goals for my years of service.

Goal 1: Execute Goals of the New Strategic Plan

As NATS develops and begins to execute its next strategic plan, I believe that we need to accomplish several outcomes central to NATS' mission. I know that my two years as president-elect will focus on supervision of the new strategic plan. My goals for this time include nurturing existing programs, coordinating with our new Executive Director to ensure NATS' staff can provide efficient infrastructure and communication, and serving the needs of a continually diversifying membership.

(1) Thanks to the work of outgoing Executive Director Henderson, our current and previous board, our members, and donors, NATS has developed and expanded many programs over the past decade. While these programs all bring value to our organization, I believe the rapid expansion has not always been paired with the needed infrastructure, sponsorship, and support staff. I hope to see the next strategic plan support our existing programs before we expand any further. Similarly, we have many fundraising initiatives that are partially funded but lack full financial support for the initiative to be endowed. Focusing on fulfilling the initiatives we have begun before diving into new ones should be a priority. I hope to see the next strategic plan initiatives better support our existing programs.

(2) I often hear from members that they are unaware of what NATS offers. While I recognize that communication is a two-way street, I have heard this often enough that I believe it needs to be addressed. To do so, the board, along with the new Executive Director and existing staff, need to consider what existing resources could be utilized more effectively, while identifying what areas require additional help. Our social media, email communication, and website all need to be used more effectively, but that will require additional staff and resource allocation. These are challenges I faced during my time as Executive Director of Opera Mississippi, and I hope to bring that experience to the table as president-elect.

(3) As our membership has continued to evolve, NATS has done an admirable job meeting the differing needs of academic and independent studio teachers. We need to continue to explore the changing culture of voice teaching in its many settings. Despite our best efforts, I believe that we still have not fully overcome our academic bias. I believe many of our initiatives—ranging from the National Conference to our officer service structures to our program offerings like the intern program—still do not best serve our independent teacher members. A specific example would be the prioritization of the NATS Science Informed Vocal Pedagogy Institute, a venture catering to academic classroom teachers, in lieu of a similar

summer training institute or online course geared at business training for independent studio teachers. Another example is our continued lack of a fully virtual option for the National Conference.

(4) I am glad to know that the NATS National Office has undertaken a program review process this year in line with the current strategic plan, but I believe this self-reflection process should be a regularly occurring activity. Strategic assessment and mission should always drive our annual budgeting process.

Goal 2: Facilitate Executive Director Transition and Collaboration

I believe that my time as a vice president on this board, and my tenure as Executive Director for Opera Mississippi have provided me with important experience of both sides of non-profit leadership. I have observed how non-profits are often power vacuums that will be filled by whoever shows up. As a result, a power imbalance frequently exists between the staff and board of directors. I believe that NATS needs some realignment of responsibilities. By design or not, much of NATS' institutional knowledge currently resides with its Executive Director. We need a board, committee chairs, and committee members who will balance the hard work of an Executive Director and staff, while establishing a healthy collaborative leadership structure. While Presidents Davis-Hazell and Umstead will bear the brunt of the new Executive Director's onboarding, the subsequent president will need to provide strong leadership as roles and best practices are established and continuously redefined. I believe my experiences have prepared me well to serve the organization during this process.

Goal 3: Conclude and Implement the Audition Software Process

Without giving away confidential board information, I was an outspoken opponent of the path we attempted regarding commissioning and eventually selling licenses for our own audition software. I am committed to seeing this project completed, and I do see the organizational and fiduciary benefits of NATS owning its own proprietary software. I do not believe this issue will be concluded during my current vice-presidential term, and I hope to be able to provide institutional knowledge, counsel, and continuity as we finalize that process. We must ensure that NATS audition staff and volunteers are fully prepared to begin using the software, with adequate training and time for implementation. As an organization it should be a priority that exemplary technical support is provided to our chapters and regions during audition weekends once we are using the software.

Goal 4: Ensure the Financial Future of NATS

One of the reasons I believe the strategic evaluation of programs and the continued self-reflection of our academic and independent teacher populations is important is that we should always budget based on mission. In recent years, NATS has had budget challenges. I have grown concerned that our organization is willing to run at the proposed deficits, particularly considering consistent areas of loss (the National Conference) that are not being counteracted aggressively enough. Over the next five years we cannot act as if everything is as it was prior to the pandemic and the latest federal U. S. government transition. We must take steps to increase membership, meet the diversifying needs of those members, increase participation in NATS auditions, increase the staff where and how we can, and carry the NATS mission into the mid 21st century. At the same time, we must seriously consider eliminating programs or initiatives that no longer serve the mission of NATS to ensure a long-term balanced budget.

As I conclude I want to add some personal thoughts. First, my career has been heavily focused on voice teaching, and I would not be where I am today without the resource that is the NATS greater community. To put it directly, NATS has enabled me to reach the point in my life where I can now focus on giving back. While I look forward to the final year of my vice presidency, I feel that there will still be much work left undone. I want to continue to serve NATS during this transitional time to equip future generations with the types of support I have received from our organization.

Additionally, if NATS membership wishes me to serve in this capacity, I am prepared to transition out of my weekly role with the *VocalFri Podcast*. While the podcast has been my most beloved professional accomplishment, and my experience and skills developed in new media will be a resource for NATS moving forward, I believe the timing will be right for me to hand off that mic to younger generations as I would transition into the president-elect role.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Perna, DMA

NATS Vice President for Outreach (2022-2026)