

Norman Spivey

NATS and Ethics—The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same



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CALL ME OLD FASHIONED, but I think it's important for people to try to get along and to do their best work. Of course, some enduring principles never go out of style, and in many ways ethical behavior functions much like the "golden rule" in our profession. We strive to do well unto others, not only because it's the right thing to do, but also because it creates a community in which our teachers and students can thrive.

While discussion of ethics is always timely, NATS has had a Code of Ethics in place for many years. It was established for members to understand more clearly their ethical duties and obligations to students, other teachers, and the general public, as well as to promote cooperation and good fellowship among the members. As you can see, it also illuminates and upholds our mission statement:

To encourage the highest standards of the vocal art and of ethical principles in the teaching of singing; and to promote vocal education and research at all levels, both for the enrichment of the general public and for the professional advancement of the talented.

Other organizations have produced similar documents, notably the American Academy of Teachers of Singing. AATS has issued a number of papers on the subject, and regularly revisits the topic, particularly as our profession grows and evolves. Today there is more information available than ever before, there is groundbreaking interdisciplinary work, there are lessons taught over the Internet—things our predecessors couldn't have imagined. Nonetheless, honesty, integrity, and respect are abiding principles of our profession.

Many of you may know that NATS has an Ethics Committee. It is one of the central standing committees outlined in our Association Bylaws. Charles Peterson has expertly chaired this committee for many years. He has served with Barbara Peters (who recently cycled off the committee when she assumed the office of Mid-Atlantic Regional Governor), and has worked alongside a number of our presidents and past-presidents. When necessary, the committee has also worked closely with our executive director and corporate attorney. The committee functions particularly well, and it is a testament to their work that I knew very little about the details of their dialogues prior to assuming the office of president. Now that I have had the opportunity to follow their conversations fully, I appreciate the work of the committee all the more. They research each allegation fully, and look for the best outcome

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for all parties involved, with exemplary discretion and efficiency.

I am grateful that Charles agreed to continue as chair during my tenure as president, though he will be stepping down from this role following the Chicago conference. To plan for future leadership and a seamless transition, I worked with Charles, our President-Elect, Linda Snyder, and other officers to identify a chair-in-training. Jennifer Trost is now serving in this capacity, and will bring consummate skill to her service on the committee. Jennifer is a colleague whose clarity of ethical mindset and behavior I have observed firsthand for many years. She has a deep commitment to ethics, and, coincidentally, was a 2008 NATS Intern under the tutelage of Charles Peterson. She will work side by side with Charles over the course of the year, and will then continue as chair. Also joining the committee is Sarah Holman, who has a long history of strong service to NATS. We can be assured that this committee is well poised to continue the important tradition of support it provides.

Each of us in NATS agrees to accept and abide by our Code of Ethics; nonetheless, there are instances when alleged breaches occur and complaints are filed.

(For information on this process, please refer to the Bylaws, Article V, Section 5.) I have seen this range from simple misunderstandings between teachers, to abuse of power in the studio, to unabashed assaults on fellow members. When a misunderstanding occurs, sometimes it is simply a teachable moment. Often all that is needed in these cases is mentoring, and that is something that NATS can do very well. Others misuse the student/teacher relationship and stray from a professional model, which is not to be allowed. This may require careful remediation. There are those, too, who bring their own outside troubles into working relationships with other teachers, which can easily undermine the functioning of an entire group or chapter, and might call for more formal steps or possibly rescinding of membership. In any event, what it makes us realize is that no teacher is an island. What one studio teacher does likely has an impact on many others in an area. While our focus is, of course, student-based, we need to remember to nurture relationships with colleagues. We often have very long associations with our fellow teachers, and cultivating these relationships is also a priority.

Recent modification to our Code of Ethics, based on a request from the Federal Trade Commission, has stirred questions and interest about our policies. Complete antitrust compliance information is available on the NATS website, and I encourage you to visit it. Some of you may remember the cover letter I wrote last year that accompanied information about the compliance. I think it bears repeating here.

Many of you may have heard about the interaction the Federal Trade Commission has recently had with NATS. Official notification about this is attached, and new links on our website give full information, but I wanted to take this opportunity to explain some of the process and thinking behind our decisions.

While investigating similar music teacher and trade organizations, the FTC learned that our Code of Ethics contained the statement, "Members will not, either by inducements, innuendos, or inappropriate acts, proselytize students of other teachers." It seems the questions raised by the FTC were ones of syntax and interpretation. Fair competition among members has never been an issue; indeed there are many examples of professional competition that we nurture and embrace.



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Nevertheless, we were asked to remove the clause. The board of directors was made fully aware of the dialogue with the FTC, and after much discussion, we approved the settlement. We knew that this implies no culpability, but we also acknowledged that the prohibitive cost of litigation was not in the best interest of our association. We respect the work that the FTC does in promoting free and fair competition, though we suspect their efforts in this case were unnecessary.

NATS is confident that the ethics policy change allows us to address any ethics complaint related to the clause in question through other provisions of our policy. The overall message I hope you will take away is that in our opinion this is a housekeeping matter, and one that will not result in any substantive change in the way NATS operates relative to the standards and expectations of pro-

fessional behavior. Members are still expected to interact with colleagues and students with utmost integrity.

Please know that the NATS board continually works to be responsible stewards of the association. If there are questions please be in touch with any of our board members, or with Executive Director Allen Henderson, who serves as NATS compliance officer in this matter. Thank you for your understanding and for continually upholding the mission of NATS.

I am confident that our ethics policies still oversee the model behaviors we uphold, and that we all want to create a community of teachers that thrives together. As we know, rising waters lift all boats. Back to our “golden rule”: If treating others the way you would like to be treated is the food of moving forward together—sing on!

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