

A portrait of Michael Jaffee, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored shirt. He is looking directly at the camera. The background is dark and out of focus.

MICHAEL JAFFEE,
circa 1977

A CMA pioneer looks ahead

Lutenist Michael Jaffee, of the Waverly Consort, was one of the 34 chamber musicians who met in New York in 1977 with the idea of founding an organization that would serve and strengthen the often insecure and then under-recognized profession of chamber musician. He became CMA's first president.

CMA's current president, violist Phillip Ying, interviewed Michael Jaffee in May and asked him for his views on the past and future of Chamber Music America.

PHILLIP YING *In your view, has CMA achieved what the founders wanted? Is it what you envisioned?*

MICHAEL JAFFEE Things were so different back in the beginning. It was a mad struggle to exist and survive. As individual ensembles, we saw ourselves as little points of light out there; we thought that maybe if we got together, we could at least form a flashlight beam, if not sunlight.

Now we can look at CMA as an established, colorful and important institution in the music world, with a large budget

and an endowment. When we started, I am not sure we could even envision that. We wanted to accomplish certain specific and, in retrospect, very limited things. We had very few funding sources for chamber music at that time, so we wanted to be able to provide some resources—whatever we could encourage, preferably on a yearly basis.

Fortunately, we had a potential advocate: Adrian Gnam, at that time head of the music program at the National Endowment for the Arts. Adrian came to some of our very earliest meetings and encouraged us to form a unified front through which to request funding for the field from the then relatively new NEA.

Our model was the American Symphony Orchestra League. It was clear that the bigger performing organizations had already taken that step, to form service organizations that could represent the members to the organization, and the organization to the world at large.

PY *You've said that as an Early Music person in 1978, you felt like a minority within a minority.*

MJ The largest chunk of the constituency at that time were the string quartets, and that was a constituency we could build upon. Wind quintets, brass quintets, and Early Music groups—they were not even on the charts. We Early Music people were considered untraditional and weird. One of my concerns was how to get my field accepted even by the chamber music people, let alone by the world at large. I thought Early Music would do well to hitch its wagon to the star of something called chamber music.

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PY *What are you most proud of about CMA—and in what ways are you not yet satisfied?*

MJ The field is no longer viewed as an elite pastime of millionaires, or string quartets as their exclusive preserve. Chamber music is a much wider phenomenon in our culture, and that's a good thing.

I'm proud of all the things along the way that made that possible: the building up of the board and the opening up of the organization to sponsors [presenters]. That was a big deal! When we started, we were all performers and felt we had to represent ourselves almost as a trade union. It took a bit of doing to realize that we are all working together to make this business successful.

Maybe the most important thing for me personally was the social interaction that occurred as a result. I met people I would never have met during the normal course of my career. I almost never went to a string quartet concert, same thing for brass and wind. I got to hear the music and to meet the people like Heidi Castleman, Don Stewart and Paul Katz; coming together with these people was wonderful.

PY *What were the most important CMA landmarks?*

MJ To me, the most exciting thing was opening up CMA to jazz. That hadn't been thought of as traditional chamber music; but when you think about it, it fit the definition that we promulgated. It's one-on-a-part music, and it's a democratically based music-making style.

The repertory is something else, of course—but the aesthetic and driving force of jazz is to me what should animate chamber music, the interplay of musical ideas among individuals. The best practitioners of that art are using material of very high quality. As for improvisation, it was once part and parcel of Early Music.

Another genre that has inspired me as a musician is bluegrass. Waverly Consort did a program of Early American music, touring with fiddle player and a banjo player—Matt Glaser and Tony Trushka, just unbelievable, towering musicians. I'd like to see CMA reach out and include more musicians of those styles. There's enough out there of real quality that qualifies as what chamber music is supposed to represent.

PY *Let me ask you a tough question. One of CMA's original goals was economic stability for the profession. Some argue that by including jazz and other styles, we can't adequately support traditional chamber music.*

MJ I think CMA is free to—and did—make considered judgments about what fits the idea of chamber music. We struggled hard to get past that super-refined, elitist notion of chamber music. The grant for jazz from the Doris Duke Foundation probably wouldn't have happened if CMA hadn't already decided to include jazz in previous years. That didn't take anything away [from existing programs].

PY *CMA's original definition of chamber music seems decidedly broad and open. There was no mention of style.*

MJ In general we wanted to be as inclusive as possible. Having brass and woodwinds and early music was already seen as really progressive. We also felt it was very important, in going to the funders, to be able to say: "We really do represent everybody who's out there. If you want to support chamber

music, this is the organization for you."

At first, a lot of funders were very circumspect about chamber music because it was because it was not institutional like a symphony and an opera company. If they took a risk on one little group and it went belly up, they would be criticized. So here's Chamber Music America, saying, "We're going to take that responsibility off your shoulders." So the funders could say, "Here's the money. You make the decisions." The individual groups had CMA there to legitimize them.

Chamber music has its own institutionality, even though each group has a finite life—finite because the groups are so personal. Take the Ying Quartet, for example: four siblings, what could be more personal than that?

PY *Now that we're more institutionalized, how can we keep that same energetic spirit with which CMA was founded?*

MJ Look at other alternative or nontraditional forms of chamber music at least, and review what's out there from time to time. I think that should be part of CMA's modus operandi and on the agenda at board meetings. We may have overlooked something. Traditional music may be one area—you have to look at the specific musics, some won't end up [being included]. That could add a lot of excitement. Then you can have the same kinds of arguments we had at the beginning, because people are going to say, "You're crazy. *That's* not chamber music," and it will make you think about it and go back to the definition.

It's easy to write things off as being irrelevant and maybe unworthy. But considering new questions brings back the kind of founding spirit that I treasure so much. If something new comes along that's exciting and fulfilling, you can't ask for anything more.