WestVirginiaUniversity.
COLLEGE OF CREATIVE ARTS

March 5, 2021

Selection Committee
2021 College of Creative Arts Faculty/Student Mentored Research

Dear Colleagues:

Among literally dozens of DMA papers that I have helped to guide during my 33 years here at WVU, one truly stands out above all the others: *The Memorization, Preparation, and Performance of Piano Music: Cognitive Foundations and Current Neuro-Music Researc*h, by Amy M. Simpson.

This 142-page document is remarkable in that it breaks new ground by bridging two vastly different disciplines, piano performance and the scientific discoveries of the emerging field of neuro-music cognition, which explores how the human brain actually learns music, especially when the material is to be performed from memory.

There are countless traditions at play within the capricious world of piano performance. One such tradition is the perceived requirement that we must perform nearly all our repertory without the score. Exceptions to the memorization rule are made for recent works that are too complex to be retained by mere humans, along with most collaborative material. Even within the non-solo category, nearly all concertos and many two-piano works are also customarily played from memory. In most of our pieces, we risk scorn if we do not take on the considerable risk of forgetting our material mid-phrase, exactly when we are sitting all alone at a piano positioned between a hundred orchestra players and a thousand audience members, some of whom publish concert reviews.

This was not always the case. Amy summarizes how the memorization tradition evolved during the nineteenth century. It is also inevitable that pianists and teachers have developed many traditional ways to practice that specifically hope to mitigate the danger of forgetting during potentially mortifying circumstances.

However, most of us are too busy practicing to explore current scientific knowledge about how the brain memorizes and how we can practice in ways that help it do so more reliably. There is something terrifying about words like "neuro-music"! The literature is vast, the jargon is dense, and the price of entry is high. And who has time, when the concerto is next week?

This is the gulf that Amy has bridged, by reading the texts, consulting with experts, attending national conferences, learning the science, and then presenting her findings in a format readable by non-scientists like us. The insights Amy reports could significantly enhance the efficiency and reliability of our practice, with corresponding lessening of terror in public.

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In encouraging Amy to proceed with her passion for such a challenging topic, there was no way for me to pretend that I knew more than just the surface of the scientific side of the project, regardless of what I know about the piano and how to learn its repertoire. Amy and I talked many times about potential approaches, including her attending neuro-music conferences, arranging appointments to meet with presenters, and making sure that the science part of her work would be reviewed by an expert in the field; she found that resource person in Dr. Sarah E. Allen, of Southern Methodist University. In addition to the general scope of the project, Amy and I have worked together in the music side of the material and with details of writing style. Sometimes, though, the best mentorship is saying, "If anyone can do this, it's you!"

Amy's work is beautifully written, based on solid research, directly practical, and rich in opening many new avenues for further study. It also lends itself unusually well to the possibility of publication, in whole or in part, both in scientific journals and also in traditional outlets for musicians. Its appeal and value are not limited to pianists, as all musicians need to learn new material as securely as possible.

Thank you for your time and expertise. I believe that Amy's achievement truly merits your most positive consideration.

Dr. Peter Amstutz
Professor of Piano