

SELF-CARE FOR CONFERENCES

**HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF IT
WITHOUT BURNING OUT**



By Dale Trumbore for Graphite Publishing

In 2017, I wrote an essay with tips and tricks for making the most of a choral conference: what to do if you don't know anyone, how to make effective small talk, and best practices for sharing your work. Quite a few people mentioned that they found the article helpful, though I never would have guessed the most popular tip: bring protein bars.

Of all the strategies I'd mentioned, this was the one that people remembered? Protein bars? The more I thought about it, though, the more it made sense. If you keep a few protein bars in your conference bag, your blood sugar will stay level and you'll stay level-headed. You won't be stressed about when and where to eat at an event that can stretch for hours without a break.

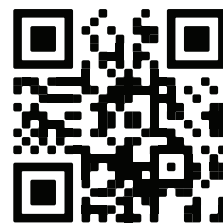
Heading into a new conference season, maybe we would all benefit from fewer networking tips and more suggestions for prioritizing our mental and physical well-being. After all, when I try to go to every convention event and say hello to every colleague in attendance, I'm usually drained by day two, huddling under the covers in my hotel room watching HGTV, and wondering if I'll offend anyone by skipping the rest of the concerts. When I get home, I often need a full day or two to recover. Half the time, I catch a cold.

What would it take to craft a healthier conference strategy? I turned to fellow composers and conductors to see how they stay calm and collected during a convention.

Composer Joshua Shank was quick to emphasize that, while it can be tempting to attend everything on the schedule, "it's important to get out of the professional space for a bit so you don't burn out." Shank always tries to find a local museum to visit. "In Dallas, I headed to the Kimbell Art Museum for an afternoon; in Kansas City it was the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library."

I love this advice. Especially when a conference is in a city you haven't visited before, why not take advantage of that city's cultural offerings instead of shuffling all day between the concert hall and conference center?

When I prioritize a quick walk—to a new museum or restaurant, or just around the block—or do even ten minutes of yoga in my hotel room, I can feel my introvert



Dale Trumbore's blog on making the most of a choral conference





batteries recharge. Composer and conductor Reginal Wright, a fellow introvert, also prioritizes physical activity at conferences. He says, “I always access the gym of the hotel in which I am staying. I also watch plenty of Netflix. My primary goal is to get completely away from anything music or conference related for a few hours each day.”

Dominick DiOrio has not only attended conventions as a composer and educator, but also planned four conferences as a member of the NCCO Executive Board. He emphasizes the importance of taking time for yourself. “Sometimes this might be thirty minutes to escape to my hotel room and close my eyes for a bit, but it makes a big difference toward feeling like I am in control of my time and schedule, and not that it is in control of me.”

The hardest part of putting your well-being first can be carving out time for a quick workout, Netflix break, or power nap. With so many interest sessions and concerts on a conference schedule, it can be hard to decide in the moment what to prioritize. Composer Katerina Gimon has a solution.

“To prevent myself from falling into the FOMO trap,” Gimon says, “I like to make note of my absolute must-see sessions, concerts, events, etc. before the conference even begins. Having this planned out beforehand means I don’t have to spend brainpower on this while I’m in conference mode, and I know what I need to plan around. This also leaves me space for the time I’ll inevitably need to rest and re-charge, for

spontaneous meet-ups with new friends, wandering the exhibit hall, or maybe even attending some things I hadn’t planned.” Gimon points out, too, that if you don’t leave room to re-charge, by day two of the conference you might already be too burned out to take in and retain new information.

It’s easier to add more events to a spacious schedule than it is to cancel or alter existing plans. At home, I handle this by blocking out whole mental-health or catch-up days in my calendar at the start of each month—days when I’m not allowed to schedule any meetings or calls. At this year’s conferences, while I can’t and wouldn’t want to take full days off, I’ll block off at least one hour-long stretch each day to retreat completely from the conference.

“I’ve found ten out of ten times I will get more out of conferences when I’m intentional about what I attend and make sure I’m taking care of myself,” Gimon says. DiOrio echoes her sentiment. “Remember: you don’t have to do everything,” he suggests. “It’s really okay. Find a balance that works for you.”

This year, I’ll prioritize a few exciting restaurants and cultural destinations in addition to the most exciting concerts on a conference schedule. I’m hopeful that this is the year I leave each conference feeling energized—not from protein bars, but from a schedule that puts my mental and physical well-being first. ➤