

TO: Federal Communications Commission

FR: Imani Winds

RE: Comment on Net Neutrality/Preserving the Open Internet NPRM (09-191)

DT: January 8, 2010

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before the commission on the crucial issue of net neutrality. We are Imani Winds, a 12-year-old, Grammy-nominated wind quintet that has carved a unique path in the world of classical music by mixing European traditions with American, African and Latin sounds. We are based in New York City.

Our ensemble includes players on the flute, French horn, oboe, bassoon and clarinet, hence the name wind quintet. We have released five CDs, and collaborated with such legendary acts as Wayne Shorter, Steve Coleman, Jason Moran and Stefon Harris. But perhaps the best summary of who we are is our name. “Imani” means faith in Swahili. We have great faith in our music and advancing daring new works. We also believe strongly in educating the community and providing an inspiration for children through our playing.

Net neutrality is so important to us because of the unique place we occupy in the music world and how the Internet has helped us get there. Many people we encounter wonder what the heck a wind quintet is before we sit down to play. That’s OK. We realize that our formation is not as commonplace as a jazz trio or classical orchestra. Yet it presents us with a dual challenge as a group: getting people interested in wind quintets in general and in Imani Winds’ music specifically. Our online presence has been all-important in this regard. The Imani Winds website has become a go-to destination for people to discover and get educated about wind quintets. This gives us a tremendous sense of satisfaction.

Web video on YouTube and other sites has also played an invaluable role in familiarizing people with our unorthodox take on the wind quintet — we play works by everyone from Mendelssohn to Paquito D’Rivera. Videos of our shows have generated tens of thousands of views on YouTube alone. Since we are not a straight-ahead classical group, these videos have allowed people to hear our repertoire and grasp the energy we create with our audiences. I think it’s fair to say the number of gigs we’ve gotten has increased because people have been able to preview us first online, something that would not have been possible in any other era.

In addition to educating the general audience, our site has become a powerful tool for teachers. We frequently play for groups of students, so we’ve created an “education” portion of the site that serves as a supplement to our performances. This section includes puzzles, games and frequently asked questions about Imani Winds, as well as music that covers areas students are often interested in. This year, we intend to broaden our forays into the educational aspects of the

web. For example, we are offering a series of master classes aimed at college-level music students. For the sessions, we will accept audition tapes via YouTube and have students fill out online applications. This approach is non-traditional, but we think it'll be very interesting and rewarding for both the students and ourselves.

The Internet has also been crucial to distributing our music far and wide. With the decline of brick-and-mortar record stores, there's a whole generation of fans who only get their music through downloading and online radio. We wouldn't be able to reach them without our presence on iTunes, Pandora and similar sites. Promotion and distribution only scratches the surface of how we use the web. In addition, we log on to research what other wind quintets are doing and conduct business with each other and our agents online.

As much as we would love to be as popular as Biggie or Britney Spears, we understand wind quintet will likely remain niche. We also realize our adventurous sound is not for every listener, although we think it should be. Despite these limitations, we've thrived as a group in no small measure because of the open internet. The web has given us cheap and easy tools to promote and distribute our music – from our web site to YouTube and iTunes – that rival those of the biggest pop acts. These tools have allowed us to reach a fan base and generate a following we couldn't have otherwise. The loss of net neutrality threatens this grassroots model, which is so important to Imani Winds and hundreds of other artists. What happens when the cable companies charge content providers — big and small alike — for access to a fast lane on the Internet? The biggest artists would be able to afford the premium service, while many niche artists like Imani Winds could get stuck in the slow lane. The Internet would be an uneven playing field, where money — not enterprising musicians or ardent fans — determines what gets heard. The richness of our cultural landscape would ultimately suffer if this were the case.

It's equally important that net neutrality is extended to the wireless space. As cell phones become a more dominant portal for accessing the web and listening to streaming music, it is critical that the same rules apply to any broadband-capable device.

Net neutrality is important for our livelihood, but it is also crucial for an even more fundamental right: free speech. The Internet has ushered in an unprecedented era in our democracy. Think of the millions of new voices that have taken a place alongside the handful of traditional media outlets through blogs, social networking sites, and other internet soapboxes. Yet if net neutrality is undermined, the diversity of perspectives and expression could be compromised. There have already been troubling signs in recent years. For instance, AOL reportedly blocked email on its servers that contained a petition against the company, and Comcast interfered with legal file sharing on its network. It doesn't make sense to set cable companies up as arbiters of free speech — especially when they have a financial or political incentive to block certain content. A vital democracy depends on a free, open and neutral internet.

As powerful as the internet has been in facilitating free speech and bolstering the careers of artists like Imani Winds, there is one area in particular where it has been detrimental: unauthorized file sharing. We are getting to the point where it is threatening to spin out of control. Musicians who have spent their blood, sweat and tears creating pure and beautiful music should be protected from this pernicious force. I believe in a more proactive approach to filesharing, but with some important preconditions: Artists (including independent creators) must play a key role in formulating the new rules and determining how well they work. Internet users should also be protected from the government or big telecommunications companies — like AT&T — prying too deeply into their sensitive personal information.

While filesharing is a downside of the Internet, we would be fooling ourselves if we thought it was going to go away. Yet there are an increasing number of legal, licensed services that are offering an alternative to piracy. Unfortunately many people don't have access to these services, or any internet at all. The federal government should continue its efforts to expand broadband to all low-income and rural communities across the country. Imagine a young person today growing up without regular, speedy access to the Internet. What would his or her prospects for success be like in our wired and globalized economy? Virtually every job in every field requires Internet literacy to one degree or another. Broadband is not just a luxury at this point — it's absolutely essential, like health care or public education. The longer we delay its full deployment the more we put some of our citizens — and our nation as a whole — at a disadvantage when it comes to competing economically.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer our perspectives on the open internet as you undertake this important proceeding. We feel strongly that net neutrality has created the ideal conditions for smaller artists like Imani Winds to thrive alongside megastars like Jay-Z. It doesn't make sense for artists or fans to set up telecommunications companies as gatekeepers who determine what gets heard. We should keep the Internet neutral because without it the next Imani Winds may not get a foothold in the industry.