Being “hottest” sure beats being tepid, the new dean of the Eastman School of Music says.

Kidding aside, Douglas Lowry says the Eastman School deserves its spot on the 2008 Kaplan/Newsweek list of the 25 hottest schools across a range of disciplines. Eastman School, considered a jewel in the crown at University of Rochester because of its international prestige, is steeped in history but takes risks.

That is an enticing mix—and a good place to talk about entirely new ways classical music can be performed or enjoyed, Lowry says.

His investiture as dean is slated for Saturday. Lowry, 55, joined the Eastman School in August after serving seven years as dean of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, a leader in the performing arts and electronic media.

Those who have worked with Lowry say the Eastman School and Rochester have gained a gem. He made substantial contributions to prominent music schools in Cincinnati and Los Angeles, was active in local communities and brings the perspective of a prolific composer to his leadership roles, they say.

He takes the helm as the Eastman School—a leader in producing scholars and performers since its inception in the 1920s—defines its strategy for programs and growth in the next decade. The school has roughly 900 students in undergraduate and graduate programs and operates on a budget of $29 million.

The school plots its future against a backdrop of profound changes in the interests and behavior of students and audiences. Also part of the backdrop: growing competition, with multimillion-dollar gifts going to other music schools in recent years.

Lowry emerged early as a strong candidate to replace former dean James Undercofler, who joined the Philadelphia Orchestra Association last year.

“He made clear to us in the search that Eastman will take a hard look at, in his words, breathtaking changes in the way that music is experienced and consumed,” says UR vice president Paul Burgett, who led the search. “So our enthusiasm for Doug went not only to his background, experience, intelligence—he ‘gets it’ in terms of who we are at Eastman, but he also has a window on the future.”
The issues facing music schools are serious and changing fast, Lowry says. He draws parallels between the struggles of newspapers trying to gain footing in a society increasingly looking online or businesses grappling for success against global competition.

For one thing, music students now look for broader experiences from college rather than narrowly focused music study. Lowry says. That was a feature that helped Eastman, with ties to UR, earn its “hottest” label from Kaplan/Newsweek.

Also, audiences have shifted away from live performances. In particular, younger people are oriented to enjoying music via ever-evolving electronic media.

Beyond that, the number of well-financed music-school competitors is growing. Within the past year or two, at least four across the country have received gifts of $40 million to $100 million from single donors.

The Eastman School has a roughly $278 million endowment, Eastman School officials say.

“I am not shy about letting people know these parameters,” Lowry says. “I’m dealing with what the business world deals with every day, and that’s this changing climate of competitors. You really have to remain vigilant.”

**Strategic push**

Strategic planning was under way at the Eastman School before Lowry arrived, under the leadership of Interim Dean Jamal Rossi. Issues explored have included long-standing infrastructure needs, such as renovation of the Eastman Theatre, and instrument inventory.

The Eastman Theatre will be renovated to include a 200-seat recital hall, an expanded lobby, more rehearsal and faculty studios, and a recording studio. The estimated $35 million project has received $13 million in commitments in state funding.

Other key points being explored are ways to raise more money for the school and ways to build on unique programs such as its Institute for Music Leadership, which has developed a host of programs focused on keeping the classical music industry thriving.

Finally, Lowry is encouraging conversations about the directions classical music can take.

“One of the issues that the serious music profession is facing is that it has taken itself a little too seriously and divorced itself from its roots,” Lowry says. “When that happens, I think you have people struggling to figure out what’s going on with the symphony. It has to be relevant for the population—that big mass of intelligent, informed, sophisticated, thirsty people out there eager to participate in the artistic experience but (that) may not be interested in the way we insist on delivering it.”

With that in mind, Lowry has a few dreams. He would like to find a way to have performers, composers and scholars interact with professionals in other art forms more directly. For instance, it would be interesting to bring a young filmmaker to the Eastman School to work with composers, or have a choreographer work with performers.

Musical theater, or opera, Lowry notes, grew from a melding of two art forms. A new potential exists today, with students arriving for study with technological savvy, he says.

“We’re going to have some young, brilliant student who will create some new art form that we just never thought of,” Lowry says. “I think that day is coming. But we will not get there unless we create opportunities for students to see the possibilities.”

He would like to convene an international conference on the future of music. In the room would be people representing a range of disciplines—music, film, visual arts.

“Open up the dialogue,” Lowry says. “Some of the most exciting musical experiences were spawned by our proximity to metaphors. If you watch films of Leonard Bernstein rehearsing with the philharmonic, he always used a metaphor; it was a bird or visual image.

“Musicians respond to metaphors from other forms of experience. It stands to reason that rather than constant referential inspiration points just in music lingo, they, like you and me, are very much inspired by all this sensory stuff.”

Burgett says Lowry reminds him of one of the most famous leaders the Eastman School has had. Howard Hanson, director of the school from 1924 to 1964, also was a composer and conductor and had served at a school in California. Lowry spent 20 years at the University of Southern California before joining CCM in Cincinnati.

Hanson was well-known as an eloquent champion of American music, Burgett says. That focus was a deliberate attempt to free American composers to find their unique voices, separate from work being done in Europe.

In today’s international, electronically connected environment, Lowry could help lead an emergence of a new relationship between music and other art forms, especially new media, Burgett says.

“He is an active composer in new and interesting ways. So he has one foot in the future as a composer himself but also has one foot in the hallowed traditions of the past. It’s not something everybody can do,” Burgett says.

**A different path**

Lowry says he did not follow the typical path of a classical musician. He first studied piano in fourth grade for a while with his mother, a musician. He learned trombone in adolescence and then played guitar in a band. Lowry’s creative efforts have most recently focused on composition, and one of his works will be performed in his ceremony Saturday.

Lowry started college in Idaho intending to become a doctor, but he was dissuaded from that after a course in organic chemistry. He switched to psychology, then shifted from that when in a Psych 101 course I began to see myself on every page.”

His direction shifted to music when a professor teaching him piano lessons in Idaho sat him down.

“He said, ‘You need to take this seriously,’” Lowry recalls. The professor—who Lowry later learned was a violist on leave from the Boston symphony—urged him to find a school where he would be challenged but where he would not be “ground into powder.”

Lowry earned his bachelor of music degree in theory and composition in 1974 from the University of Arizona and followed with master’s degrees from USC in trombone performance and orchestral conducting.

He spent 20 years at the USC music school, now the Flora L. Thornton School of Music. Lowry taught, performed and held leadership roles there.

Susan Lopez, associate dean for administration at the Thornton School, says Lowry’s move to the Eastman School is exciting for the school and for Rochester.

“He is one of the most intelligent, humorous, thoughtful, widely-ranging mind people that I’ve met,” Lopez says. “He’s like a presence that pervades everything and makes it all better.”

When USC received a major gift from benefactor Thornton, Lowry composed a fanfare to honor her. The piece is energetic, regal and somewhat unpredictable and has become a signature for the school.

“I think that Doug will bring a sense of energy both to the Eastman School as well as the city of Rochester in terms of the dynamics of its cultural life,” says Lopez, who has family in the Rochester area. “Doug is someone who will be engaged not only in the school but also in the city. For a city like Rochester, where the Eastman School can play such a pivotal role in the culture, it bodes well for the city at large.”

At Cincinnati, Lowry spearheaded recruitment of key faculty members and helped found several successful fundraising events, says Warren George, interim dean and formerly chief academic and financial officer under Lowry.

“He was also very skillful when it came to community outreach,” George says. “Doug helped elevate the community’s awareness of CCM both by publicly advocating for the school and by developing partnership programs with other arts organizations.”

Lowry and his wife, Marcia, have moved into a home in the Park Avenue neighborhood. The couple have three adult children.

Lowry says he was happy at Cincinnati and had been approached with opportunities at other schools. But when the Eastman School search team came to him, he felt drawn by the Rochester school’s stature and what he saw as abundant possibilities.

“I am really excited about the challenge of galvanizing diverse interests and opinions,” Lowry says. “Particularly with groups of really gifted, driven, ambitious, accomplished people, there’s an inherent friction in that particular cocktail. Whether it’s business, education, the orchestra, gifted people with strong ambitions have strong opinions. By the same token, if you can galvanize, create common ground, when the collective ambitions are fused together a little bit better, the results can be stunning.

“There is a creative dynamism here that is quite extraordinary.”  

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