



CHESTER F. C. SLOAN RETROCENTER TMCA

# THE 'EASTMAN EVOLUTION'

As music—and the business of music—rapidly changes, the Eastman School continues to look forward.

*By Karen McCally '02 (PhD) | Photographs by Adam Fenster*

**DEBUT:** The opening of a new wing—highlighted by the new Wolk Atrium featuring a sculpture by noted glass artist Dale Chihuly (opposite)—marks the latest chapter in achieving a vision set out by founder George Eastman, says Dean Douglas Lowry (right).

IT WAS ALMOST 20 YEARS AGO THAT CHAMBER musicians David '92E (DMA), Janet '92E, Philip '91E, '92E (MM), and Timothy '91E (DMA) Ying arrived in the rural town of Jesup, Iowa, population 2,000. Fresh out of the Eastman School, the siblings who formed the Ying Quartet were in Jesup as part of a chamber music outreach program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. For two years, the townspeople of Jesup had in the Yings their very own “resident string quartet.”

“It was a huge opportunity for us,” says Philip Ying, now chair of the Eastman School’s chamber music department. “We were placed in an environment where we had to articulate for ourselves and to anyone we wanted to be an audience, what was so great about this music that we play? We had to think about what connects our art to people—people in Iowa who had little exposure to live string quartet music. We had to ask ourselves, what does it have to do with them? What does it have to do with community? What does it have to do with being a human being?”

Today, a slightly reconstituted quartet (violinist Aya-no Ninomiya has replaced Timothy Ying) resides at the





Eastman School, where its members have yet to run out of answers to these questions. They've pushed the creative boundaries of what two violins, a cello, and a viola can accomplish together—by mixing musical genres, for example, and incorporating other art forms, such as poetry and dancing, into their performances.

And they're a symbol of the spirit of innovation and optimism that Douglas Lowry, the dean of the Eastman School since 2007, evokes as he describes what he's come to call "the new Eastman evolution."

"Quite simply," he says, "we're completing George's original vision."

**F**OUNDED BY GEORGE EASTMAN IN 1921, THE EASTMAN School was the first music conservatory in the United States to serve simultaneously as a center for the academic study of music. But it was never to be an ivory tower. Eastman intended for the school to serve the community through musical education and appreciation. The words "For the enrichment of community life" were etched into the Eastman Theatre façade.

Eastman also had planned for the school and theater to occupy the entire stretch along East Main Street from Gibbs to Swan Street, but he was unable to purchase a final lot along Swan at a reasonable price. Thus, part of the new Eastman evolution includes a major expansion of the school's performance and rehearsal spaces—in exactly the location Eastman had intended.

In December, students, faculty, and guest artists will present a series of concerts to celebrate the completion of the nearly 40,000-square-foot addition abutting Eastman Theatre. Within that space will be the 222-seat Hatch Recital Hall, outfitted with live Web streaming capabilities, and a design that permits acoustics to be modified to suit different types of instruments

and performances; a new and acoustically updated rehearsal hall spacious enough for large ensembles; a recording control room; teaching studios; and the multistory Wolk Atrium, housing a box office and a gift shop, lighting up East Main Street through a glass façade. But an even larger aspect of the school's evolution is a series of changes that have been taking place in its approach to professional music education—changes that Lowry says reflect George Eastman's pioneering spirit and his vision that musicians engage and connect with broad audiences.

It's not only an exciting time, but also a challenging one, for Eastman and for music schools generally. The core of the faculty and student body are educated as classical musicians, yet symphony audiences are aging, and many American orchestras exist on the financial brink. Advances in computer technology, digital recording and listening devices, and the rise of the Internet have made it possible for new artists to record and deliver their music more widely, and with less overhead, than ever before—although those very same technologies may often make it more difficult for musicians to earn a living through their craft.

And the mixing of musical genres, although not new, has spurred an extraordinarily creative era in music, while providing musicians



with the potential to attract fresh audiences.

Among the most widely cited points of pride for the school is Break of Reality, a self-described "cello rock" band. Formed at Eastman in 2003, the group today consists of three cellists, including Patrick Laird '07E, as well as percussionist Ivan Trevino '06E. Earning national attention and praise, the group has offered an opportunity in which, in the musicians' own words, "the fans of Led Zeppelin, Radiohead, and Yo-Yo Ma are finally getting acquainted."

Alarm Will Sound, a 20-member ensemble formed at Eastman in 2001, offers musically and visually rich performances of contemporary music that have also been widely applauded. Allan Kozinn, a classical music critic for the *New York Times*, praised the musicians of Alarm Will Sound as "young, virtuosic, and full of lively ideas," making the group "one of the most vital and original ensembles on the American music scene."

Across the school's 13 departments, faculty members point to such adventurous groups as evidence that Eastman graduates are well-equipped to lead in an uncertain musical environment.



The Eastman School began looking forward nearly 20 years ago, when then director Robert Freeman began a formal dialogue on how the curriculum might be revised to better serve students. Ramon Ricker, senior associate dean for professional studies and professor of saxophone, was part of that effort. He now directs the Institute for Music Leadership, founded in 2001 to carry out curricular reforms and inspire students to take an entrepreneurial approach to developing their professional careers.

“We were looking at the music school curriculum, which had been the same for the past 100 years,” says Ricker. “You took a one-on-one lesson on your instrument, you played in the orchestra or band or you sung in the chorus, you learned about music theory and music history, and you took a few humanities courses.”

The first center of its kind in the nation—and a model that schools such as the New England Conservatory, Oberlin, and others have since adopted—the institute established new courses, workshops, and other initiatives to “bridge the ivory tower with the real world”—not only to meet that world on its own terms, but

to help shape it as well, by training musicians to think more broadly about their music and their potential roles in society.

Today, the institute’s Catherine Filene Shouse Arts Leadership Program offers students half-semester and semester courses on digital portfolio creation, intellectual property protection, recording, outreach, and other practical and philosophical aspects of building a musical career. Above all, says Ricker, it encourages musicians to think of themselves as a small business—as the “sole proprietors” that he says is what most musicians, in effect, are.

“I’ve known for 50 years that you’ve got to create your own situation to create a career in music,” says Ricker. “I’ve always played a lot of jobs. I’ve done a lot of commercial work.” And that’s on top of his roles as an Eastman professor and a member of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra for nearly 40 years.

Percussion chair Michael Burritt ’84E, ’86E (MM) advances a similar view. Seated across from his five-octave marimba—a form of the instrument he notes didn’t yet exist when he was a student at Eastman—he says, “I feel like Eastman’s always been a school



that's tried to look forward. I think it's set a lot of trends in higher music education, whether it's the Institute for Music Leadership, or the jazz program, or the wind ensemble, which was the first pre-eminent ensemble of its type."

And Christopher Azzara '92E (PhD), a pianist, arranger, and chair of the music education department, says, "There's a lot about Eastman that's unique that will help us to be a leader." Azzara, who is also an affiliate faculty member of the jazz studies and contemporary media department and an expert on improvisation, says that he has been able to develop courses in improvisation—a longtime requirement for jazz musicians—for classical musicians as well.

**T**HEIR OPTIMISM IS A RESPONSE TO A WIDELY FELT CONCERN at music schools around the United States that classical music, the core interest of many music students, and perhaps the majority at Eastman, is facing a "crisis." But Lowry draws a clear distinction between the music, which he says still flourishes, and the business model which has sustained it in the past. If there's a crisis, it's the business model, and not the music itself, that's the source of it.

That business model is one that confined classical music performance to fixed contexts like the concert hall, and centered it on the permanent symphony orchestra. A century ago, symphony orchestras and large concert halls were financed by wealthy benefactors who believed in the notion that the music of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century Western Europe, commonly understood as "classical music," could both edify and elevate humanity.

But ornate concert halls and commonly accepted performance strictures alienated potential audiences, says Phillip Ying. "Sometimes when you keep music in the concert hall exclusively, people come in and they think they're supposed to behave a certain way, to dress a certain way, they worry about whether should they clap between movements." In the unexpected settings such as hospital waiting rooms, bank lobbies, or prisons where the Ying Quartet performed in Iowa (and occasionally still performs), "people react in more spontaneous ways to the music," says Ying. "It deepens our appreciation for how music touches our humanity and expresses our humanity."

**WINDS OF CHANGE: The musicians of the Breaking Winds Bassoon Quartet, trying out the rehearsal hall in the Eastman School's new wing, balance wit and seriousness, pop arrangements and classical performances. Last spring, their video "Lady Gaga Saga" made them a YouTube sensation, garnering more than 200,000 viewings. From left to right are Yuki Katayama '11E, Kara LaMoure '10E, Eryn Bauer '10E (on leave this year), Lauren Yu '10E, and Brittany Harrington '10E.**

Lowry is confident that classical musicians will continue to find audiences both inside and outside the concert hall, and thrive in doing so. He turns to history for perspective, noting that the concert hall has not been the only arena for music.

"If you were to step back into the 1600s, most of the music that we consider as part of the Western European canon, has its roots in the music of the Church," he says. "Then, as we move through history, we see vocal music and choral music transform itself into opera, a staged medium, and instrumental music move out into the concert hall."

Today, says Lowry, one of the most common stages for musical



performance is the computer screen. And it can be a powerful tool for musicians who want to expand their reach.

Last spring, for example, bassoonists Kara LaMoure '10E, Eryn Bauer '10E, Brittany Harrington '10E, and Lauren Yu '10E, became a YouTube sensation with a video performance not of a classical piece, but a medley LaMoure had arranged of hits by the pop icon Lady Gaga. Featuring the four bassoonists in Gaga-style platinum blond wigs, short skirts, and heels, the video, which the musicians placed on YouTube primarily for the amusement of their friends, received more than 200,000 hits in a matter of days, showing up on Facebook pages, in band classrooms, and even on a *Baltimore Sun* blog.

To be sure, the bassoonists had been known beforehand for their humor. They are, after all, a "bassoon quartet," and the bassoon, says Harrington, with its low-pitched buzz, "definitely has a reputation for being goofy." And they call themselves the Breaking Winds Bassoon Quartet.

But LaMoure says she took some lessons from the experience. It reinforced her view that genre is not as useful a concept as it once was. "People should be more fearless about the way that they're



playing music and the kinds of pieces that they're playing," she says. "I feel like music should be adapted to any instrumentation."


"I know that we have been reaching some people who really don't know anything about classical music," she adds. "So we're doing some serious stuff, to see if we can get people exposed to that now that we've lured them in with our Lady Gaga."

But it's also true that transcribing and arranging popular music for nontraditional instruments can provide musicians a novel kind of challenge. Harrington, who is playing this year with the Rochester Philharmonic and Syracuse Symphony Orchestras, says "we have a lot more arrangements now that we've all done, more than we can get through in one rehearsal." Those include songs from the iconic 1970s rock group Queen, some show tunes, and even some hip-hop.

All of the euphoniumists are pursuing graduate

study in performance. But beyond that, at a time of artistic, cultural, and technological transformation, their career paths aren't clear-cut.

One thing that will not change, says Ricker, is the need for the drive and initiative that have always been necessary for musicians. Musicians have to be, in a word, entrepreneurial. But Ricker stresses that this has, to some extent, always been true. "Someone once asked me who the first entrepreneur in music was. And I thought: Mozart. Because Mozart was one of the first to not have a regular appointment in the court, working for royalty, or in the Church." Contrast Mozart to Bach. Bach, Ricker says, "had a church job and he cranked out work every week for that."

Hardly the vision of Bach cultivated in the concert hall. But a long-standing reality of the business of music, to which the Eastman School—faculty, leadership, and students alike—continues to respond. 

## Concert Celebration

The Eastman School will celebrate the completion of its new wing with a series of concerts from Dec. 6 through Dec. 12. The celebration will feature student, faculty, and guest artists and will take place in all of the school's venues, including Hatch Recital Hall, Kilbourn Hall, and Kodak Hall at Eastman Theatre.

**For more information, visit Eastman's Web site at [www.esm.rochester.edu](http://www.esm.rochester.edu).**