

# Saxophone Heaven

*Eastman's saxophonists are earning exceptional accolades under the guidance of Chien-Kwan Lin '07E (DMA).*

*By Kathleen McGarvey*



**LEADING LIGHT:** Chien-Kwan Lin, associate professor of saxophone, is taking Eastman's classical saxophone program to international prominence.

**W**hen members of the saxophone quartet Finja learned they had won first place nationally for wind chamber music performance in the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) competition in 2014, the musicians had already decamped Chicago for the University of Illinois. There, they were performing with the Eastman Saxophone Project at the North American Saxophone Alliance conference. Informed of their MTNA victory, the quartet members—Ainsley Kilgo '15E, Dan Stenziano '15E, Tyler Wiessner '15E, and Jiaqi (Kevin) Zhao '15E—piled into a car and drove 150 miles north to Chicago to perform in the association's Winners Concert.

As they drove, Kilgo remembers, they practiced their music yet again, singing their respective parts of Thierry Escaich's "Tango Virtuoso" and moving their fingers over imaginary saxophone keys.

Such tireless preparation—in Finja's case that year, under the coaching of doctoral student Phil Pierick—is the hallmark of the Eastman School of Music's Saxophone Studio, led by Chien-Kwan

Lin '07E (DMA), associate professor of saxophone. In the last 10 MTNA chamber music national competitions for winds—which include musicians on any wind instrument, not only saxophone—Lin's students have won the title five times. No other studio is represented twice in that list. Under Lin's leadership, Eastman has rapidly become one of the premier schools at which to study the classical saxophone.

"Chien-Kwan has built one of the most high-octane saxophone studios in the country," says Doug O'Connor '08E (MM), '12E (DMA), now a member of the U.S. Naval Academy Band at Annapolis and an adjunct faculty member at Towson University.

The studio's standing is borne out—and fed—by the recognition Lin's students earn in national and international competitions. Since 2006, performing as soloists and in quartets, they have won more competitions than members of any other studio in the country. Those results are "proof of the training [students] are receiving here," says Marie Rolf '77E (PhD), senior associate dean of graduate studies at Eastman and a professor of music theory.

"They're thoroughly committed to technical perfection," says



**PLAYING BY HEART:**  
Lin works with his students at a rehearsal of the Eastman Saxophone Project in Kilbourn Hall.

Griffin Campbell, who holds the title of Distinguished Professor of Saxophone at Louisiana State University and who has judged some of Lin's students in competition. "They have a drive for that and the ability to achieve it. That's really necessary to advance in competitive circles. You have to have the technique. But they also have a level of artistry, and that combination of artistry and technical skill, that's what they have that sends them to the top of the heap."

Rolf sums it up succinctly: "Eastman is known as saxophone heaven, and that's all due to Chien-Kwan."

In the world of instruments, the saxophone is a relative youth, the only widely played, nonelectric instrument invented in more than a century and a half. Developed in Paris in the 1840s by instrument maker Adolphe Sax, the saxophone "has a woodwind sound, but the power of a brass instrument," says Lin.

Strongly associated with jazz in the United States, the saxophone was first taken up by French military bands. By the beginning of the 20th century, composers were beginning to write for the instrument, and since the 1960s, "classical" saxophone—a term Lin eschews,

preferring simply "saxophone"—has taken hold in this country.

An important part of what sets Lin's studio apart, Rolf says—and it's an observation widely made by his colleagues and students—is Lin's training as a violinist. Born in 1972, in Singapore, he began playing at the age of four. He has never truly left the instrument behind, winning top prizes for violin four consecutive times in Singapore's National Music Competition, playing second violin with the Singapore Symphony, appearing as an orchestral violinist, and working for a time as a jazz violinist.

In high school, he joined the school concert band, playing the flute. When the saxophonists graduated, he volunteered to take up the instrument at age 16. "This sounds superficial, but I was drawn to the instrument because it looks beautiful. It really is a gorgeous-looking instrument, and I liked the sound of it. That's all."

His offhand comment belies his stature. "He is one of the leading saxophonists in the world today," says Jamal Rossi '87E (DMA), the Joan and Martin Messinger Dean of the Eastman School of Music.

Lin's teaching and performance bring the worlds of saxophone





and violin together. When Rossi—himself a graduate of Eastman’s saxophone program—first met him, Lin was performing his recitals from memory. “Violinists, pianists, and vocalists have been performing from memory for centuries, but it’s not the standard for wind instruments,” says Rossi. “He was performing Rachmaninoff cello sonatas and Bach chaconnes, and he performed in such a way that you never felt this was somehow compromising the music and the instrument for which it was written.”

Wind instruments don’t have the same tradition of virtuosity that string instruments and the piano do, says Lin—they’re less agile in producing notes. But he has worked to bring a version of that virtuosity to the saxophone, perhaps nowhere more notably than in the Eastman Saxophone Project (ESP), a group he established in 2010, as a “chamber music-like ensemble.” The group performed in April at the Kennedy Center.

When members of ESP take the stage—filing out, one after another after another—the ensemble is alone with the audience. No conductor is positioned before them. No music stands are, either; Lin calls the stands “just small pieces of furniture, but a barrier” that would separate the musicians from each other and their listeners. Project members—all the students in Lin’s studio, from freshmen to doctoral candidates—play their music entirely from memory. A 20-member ensemble is large, and to coordinate so many musicians without a conductor is no easy undertaking—nor is their commitment of music to memory. “The Eastman Saxophone Project memorizes tremendously complicated music—and a lot of it,” Rossi says. “That’s an amazing feat, and they’re doing it without a conductor, so it’s up to them to communicate with each other. The result is beyond impressive.”

He compares Lin and his students to Olympic athletes. “Their Olympic sport isn’t necessarily new, but every once in a while someone will come along—like sprinter Usain Bolt—and keep setting new records and doing it better. They’re inspiring the entire school. They

**SHOW AND GUIDE: Students praise Lin’s teaching style, which is heavily influenced by his violin training and emphasizes development of their own musical voices.**

perform two concerts a year [at Eastman], and if you don’t show up 45 minutes early, you won’t get a seat.”

The ensemble’s performances are posted on YouTube, and that exposure, combined with Lin’s recruitment efforts as he performs nationally and internationally, draws saxophonists to Eastman. “It’s extremely competitive. He’s got a wait list that other people would die for, and what that means is we can bring to Eastman the very best of the best,” Rolf says.

Many people “resisted and argued about the practicalities” when Lin introduced the idea of memorization, says O’Connor, a founding member of ESP. “But the truth is you just live and breathe and own the music better when you memorize it. And now it’s just part of the culture,” he says.

While memorization for saxophone is less unusual than it used to be, “it’s still pretty unusual,” says Campbell. “The level that goes on in that studio is extraordinary.” And, he adds, the students aren’t just memorizing the notes. “They’re memorizing the structure, the flow of the piece. There’s a lot more going on than knowing the notes.”

“Playing in the Eastman Saxophone Project was probably the most intimidating part of my freshman year—coming in and hearing 19 other saxophone players, most of whom are older and better than you,” says Kilgo, who graduated in May with a double major in saxophone performance and music education and is staying on for a semester of student teaching. “It’s very much built around the entire studio pushing each other to be better and play with more finesse, especially at the beginning.”

The project’s repertoire “is unique to them because those arrangements are done in-house,” says Campbell. “There isn’t a repertoire for a saxophone group that large.”

As a result, the ensemble in large part plays music originally written for orchestra or string ensemble but transcribed for saxophone by Lin’s students. When Kilgo would receive a transcription, she would annotate it to show which instrument’s part she was playing on her

# The Family Sax

The only widely played, nonelectric instrument invented in more than a century and a half, the saxophone was developed in Paris in the 1840s by instrument maker Adolphe Sax. Today, the saxophone family includes a broad spectrum of sounds and sizes.

## Soprillo

About 13 inches tall, the smallest member of the family is rare and difficult to play.



## Sopranino

Available in curved and straight versions, the sopranino was notably used by Maurice Ravel in *Boléro*. The Band's Garth Hudson can be seen playing one in the film *The Last Waltz*.



## Soprano

Used as a solo and chamber instrument in classical music, the soprano saxophone has also played a role in the evolution of jazz. Virtuosos include John Coltrane, beginning with his landmark 1960 album *My Favorite Things*.

## Alto

The alto (along with the tenor) is one of the most popular types of saxophones, and is commonly used in classical music, marching bands, and jazz.



## Tenor

The instrument most people think of when they hear the word "saxophone," the tenor sports a distinctive curved neck and is found in orchestras and marching bands. But it owes much of its popularity to jazz music and performers such as Stan Getz, John Coltrane, Dexter Gordon, and Sonny Rollins.



## Baritone

Along with its smaller siblings, the baritone is a standard member of concert bands and saxophone quartets. Its limited solo repertoire includes a featured role in Philip Glass's *Concerto for Saxophone Quartet and Orchestra*.



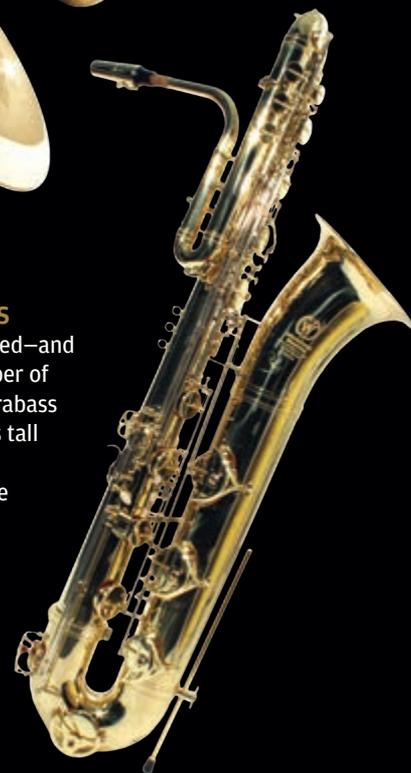
## Contrabass

The lowest-pitched—and the largest—member of the family, the contrabass stands 6 feet 4 inches tall and weighs about 45 pounds. Its tubing is twice as long as the baritone's, and it is pitched one full octave lower.



## Bass

Has experienced several peaks of popularity since it was introduced in 1841, including in dance bands, on Broadway in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, and in rock bands from Frank Zappa to the Violent Femmes.



# At the Top

The reputation of Lin's saxophone studio is driven in part by the honors and awards his students earn in competition.

## Astral Artists National Auditions

### Project Fusion Saxophone Quartet

Winners, 2015

Dannel Espinoza, Matthew Amedio,  
Michael Sawzin, Matthew Evans

### Jonathan Wintringham

Winner, 2013

## Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competition

### East End Saxophone Quartet

1st Prize, 2015

Jonathan Wintringham, Myles Boothroyd,  
Matthew Amedio, Timothy Harris

## Chesapeake Chamber Music Competition

### Red Line Saxophone Quartet

First Prize and Gold Medal, 2010

Doug O'Connor, Brandon Kies,  
Gai Qun, Quinn Lewis

## Coleman Chamber Music Competition

### Project Fusion Saxophone Quartet

Coleman-Saunders Prize

(First Prize for Woodwinds and Brass), 2012

Dannel Espinoza, Matthew Amedio,  
Michael Sawzin, Matthew Evans

### Red Line Saxophone Quartet

Alice Coleman Prize (Grand Prize), 2010

Doug O'Connor, Brandon Kies,  
Gai Qun, Quinn Lewis

## Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition

### Project Fusion Saxophone Quartet

Gold Medal (Senior Wind Division), 2013

Dannel Espinoza, Matthew Amedio,  
Michael Sawzin, Matthew Evans

### Red Line Saxophone Quartet

Gold Medal (Senior Wind Division), 2009

Doug O'Connor, Brandon Kies,  
Gai Qun, Quinn Lewis

### VIM Saxophone Quartet

Gold Medal (Senior Wind Division), 2006

Kristin Rarick, Michael Matlock,  
Dimitrios Kostaras, Rich Miserendino



RED LINE SAXOPHONE QUARTET: Qun Gai '10E, Doug O'Connor '12E (DMA), Brandon Kies '10E, and Quinn Lewis '10E

## International Saxophone Symposium and Competition

### Katherine Weintraub

First Prize, 2014

### Phil Pierick

Third Prize, 2012

## J. C. Arriaga Chamber Music Competition

### Project Fusion Saxophone Quartet

Second Prize, 2012

Dannel Espinoza, Matthew Amedio,  
Michael Sawzin, Matthew Evans

## Jean-Marie Londeix International Saxophone Competition

### Phil Pierick

Third Prize, 2014

### Doug O'Connor

Second Prize, 2008

## Music Teachers National Association (Chamber Music Competition)

### East End Saxophone Quartet

National First Prize, 2015

Jonathan Wintringham, Myles Boothroyd,  
Matthew Amedio, Timothy Harris

### Finja Saxophone Quartet

National First Prize, 2014

Jiaqi (Kevin) Zhao, Ainsley Kilgo,  
Tyler Wiessner, Dan Stenziano

### Project Fusion Saxophone Quartet

National First Prize, 2013

Dannel Espinoza, Matthew Amedio,  
Michael Sawzin, Matthew Evans

### Red Line Saxophone Quartet

National First Prize, 2009

Doug O'Connor, Brandon Kies,  
Gai Qun, Quinn Lewis

### VIM Saxophone Quartet

National First Prize, 2006

Kristin Rarick, Michael Matlock,  
Dimitrios Kostaras, Rich Miserendino

## Music Teachers National Association (Young Artist Competition)

### Myles Boothroyd

National First Prize, 2015

### Jonathan Wintringham

National First Prize, 2013

### Matt Evans

National Second Prize, 2012

### Quinn Lewis

National Third Prize, 2009

### Doug O'Connor

National First Prize, 2007

## North American Saxophone Alliance (Collegiate Solo Competition)

### Myles Boothroyd

First Prize, 2014

### Jonathan Wintringham

Third Prize, 2014

### Doug O'Connor

Second Prize, 2008

## North American Saxophone Alliance (Quartet Competition)

### Project Fusion Saxophone Quartet

Second Prize, 2012

Dannel Espinoza, Matthew Amedio,  
Michael Sawzin, Matthew Evans

### Red Line Saxophone Quartet

First Prize, 2010

Doug O'Connor, Brandon Kies,  
Gai Qun, Quinn Lewis

## Plowman Chamber Music Competition

### Project Fusion Saxophone Quartet

Grand Prize and Audience Award, 2013

Dannel Espinoza, Matthew Amedio,  
Michael Sawzin, Matthew Evans

### Red Line Saxophone Quartet

First Prize (Winds Division), 2010

Doug O'Connor, Brandon Kies,  
Gai Qun, Quinn Lewis

## Vandoren Emerging Artist Competition

### Tyler Wiessner

First Prize, 2015

### Myles Boothroyd

Second Prize, 2014

### Matthew Amedio

First Prize, 2012

### Rachel Perry

Third Prize, 2012

## William C. Byrd International Young Artist Competition

### Katherine Weintraub

First Prize, 2013

saxophone in any given passage: "I might play flute for a few bars, trumpet for a few bars, then violin." Playing music originally written for other instruments can be challenging. "String players have a very easy time articulating lots of notes because it's a movement of the bow, but for the saxophone, it's the movement of the tongue," she says. "You do something called 'double tongue' to imitate the strings. It uses the tongue muscle and the muscles of the throat, and there's only so much you can do."

"There are very few places in the country—if any—that are doing things at the level that the Eastman Saxophone Project is doing them," says Campbell.

Lin, who earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in music at the New England Conservatory, studied under Ramon Ricker '73E (DMA) at Eastman for his doctor of musical arts degree. Initially hired part-time to teach clarinet, Ricker became the school's first full-time saxophone teacher, building a studio for students interested in all saxophone music, jazz and classical.

"Ray is one of the few saxophonists in the world who can bridge classical and jazz saxophone and do both exceptionally well," says Rossi. But in 2002, Ricker, now professor emeritus, cut back on his teaching as he moved full time into the position of director of Eastman's Institute for Music Leadership. It took two people to fill the position he had held: Ricker was the "trunk of the tree" that then split into two limbs, jazz and "non-jazz" studios, says Lin.

Charles Pillow '84E (MM), a jazz saxophonist in New York City, was hired part time to teach the jazz part of the program. He's now an assistant professor of jazz saxophone. Lin was hired while still a graduate student to lead the classical branch. "Chien-Kwan was proving immediately that his was a very special talent, and he was ultimately hired into a tenure-track position," says Rossi.

When Lin first began teaching at Eastman, students who didn't want to play jazz music didn't tend to think of the school as the place for them to study saxophone. "So my first task was to establish ourselves as one of the viable names. And there's no quicker way to



establish a reputation than to have students stand on the stage and say, 'I've just won first prize. We're really good. Look at us.' So that's the approach I've taken to building the reputation of the studio. We have within Eastman a sort of ethic that we've taken upon ourselves that we need to be at the very top of our field, whatever you play here. We didn't separate ourselves from that culture."

Lin's view of competitions is deeply practical. "We think of them as a project for us to work toward, and whatever the results, we are happy because obviously the most important thing is to push ourselves to the max. I don't think there's any sort of teaching behind it that allows our students to do better. It's just hard work."

That hard work pays off. "It seems like I'm writing a congratulatory note to a saxophone player about every week," says Rolf.

LSU's Campbell lays much of the credit at Lin's door. "The Eastman School of Music has always been, since its founding, one of the great institutions of higher learning in the United States, and perhaps the world, for music. As good as Ray Ricker was and the band programs were, the classical saxophone program hadn't come to the point where the other programs were. But Chien-Kwan has, in the time he's been there, brought the program to a level where it stands at the same peak" as the very best classical saxophone programs in the country—the University of Michigan, Northwestern, Indiana University. "The competition for the very top students is very high, and Chien-Kwan is able to attract those students to Eastman," says Campbell. "And it's Eastman, so that makes it doubly fantastic [for the students]. It's a little difficult to be in competition with him, I have to say."

Students praise Lin's supportiveness as much as his drive. "I always felt he'd work his tail off to help me do what I needed to do," says O'Connor, who trained with Ricker and Lin and who has won top prizes in many solo competitions. "He challenged me. He also helped me with the emotional rigors of going after a musical career, which is brutally competitive sometimes."

**ALONE TOGETHER: "There are very few places in the country—if any—doing things at the level that the Eastman Saxophone Project is doing them," says LSU's Griffin Campbell.**

In contrast, students call the atmosphere of Lin's studio familial. In many studios, the only time students see other studio members is in a weekly class, but the Eastman Saxophone Project means Lin's students are constantly working together, says Myles Boothroyd '15E (MM), who has been a member of the studio for the last two years and will begin doctoral study with Lin in the fall. He won national first prize this year in the Music Teachers National Association Young Artist Competition, as did O'Connor in 2007. Boothroyd also took first prize last year in the North American Saxophone Alliance Collegiate Solo Competition.

"Trying to become a great musician is all about control," says O'Connor, who at Eastman was soprano saxophonist with the Red Line Sax Quartet, which won gold medals at the Fischhoff and Plowman chamber competitions. "You're in the practice room. You're in the competition. You're doing everything you can to control the

outcome, but that's a difficult psychological place to be because you don't really know what the judges are looking for. Chien-Kwan helped me not just to see that, but to feel it."

Ultimately, competitions are "incentive to practice hard," he says, adding that while competition can lend dimensions of sport to music making, "it's an art, and Chien-Kwan never loses sight of that."

Lin doesn't play the saxophone when he teaches, so that students will develop their own sound rather than imitate him. "His way is to show and guide, show and guide," says Kilgo. "A lot of times he's using his voice to show you phrasing and the pacing of things." Her first year of study with him was devoted to technique. "I was required to do a lot of scale patterns and études. It was a technical workout. He challenges your fingers and mind and concentration. He listens to every little bit of that; he doesn't assign a graduate student to do it."

"He clearly loves what he does, and he is visionary," says Rolf. "He's at the top of his game, and there's nothing more compelling than that if you're a young student. That's who you want to work with. That's inspirational." **R**