

Entrepreneurship and the Performing Artist: Preparing Musicians for 21st-Century Careers

By Sasha Margolis

“Anyone who’s been paying attention to the classical music world knows that the industry has been undergoing some serious changes over the last 10 years,” says the **University of Colorado’s** (CU) Jeffrey Nytech. “Government funding has gotten harder to come by. Corporate funding has gotten harder to come by. Foundations are changing their priorities.” Some organizations have responded to recent economic stresses by cutting the number of productions or performances, reducing the number of employment opportunities for artists.

As the next generation of performers prepares to enter this challenging environment, programs in entrepreneurship and leadership have begun to appear at music schools nationwide. Nytech, director of CU’s Entrepreneurship Center for Music, explains the rationale: “The old model was, we’ll teach you how to be the best musician possible, you’ll network with your teacher’s help, take some auditions and make your way. That model doesn’t work anymore. As a system for training students, it’s irresponsible.”

Ramon Ricker, director of the **Eastman School of Music’s** Institute for Music Leadership, agrees: “I would feel really, really bad if we were just turning out great musicians without also making them aware of the real world. We can’t just teach someone how to play the clarinet, and say, ‘Good luck to you, maybe send us a hundred bucks in 10 years.’ We want them to be proactive, to be influencers in music.”

Entrepreneurial Musicians

One such influencer is **Rachel Roberts**, the newly-appointed director of Entrepreneurial Musicianship at the **New England Conservatory** and **an alumna of Eastman’s program**. She shares Ricker’s goals: “We’re trying to put students in the position of leading, not responding and trying to catch up.”

“A lot of people want to follow their hearts,” notes **David Cutler**, author of *The Savvy Musician: Building a Career, Earning a Living, & Making a Difference* and coordinator of **Duquesne University’s** Music Entrepreneurship Studies program. “And if their passion is music, they want to be involved with it — but they also want to make sure they won’t have to live in a dumpster.” **Cutler is also an alumnus of the Eastman program.**



Anne Ricci sings at an Opera on Tap performance at Freddy's Bar and Backroom in Brooklyn. Photo courtesy of Opera on Tap.

“I was in my late 20s,” confesses soprano Anne Ricci, “I still loved to sing, but I was auditioning badly and beginning to feel pretty dark about my prospects. Then I was offered this opportunity to sing in a really casual environment. I jumped on it, and from the first time, I thought, this is what I’m supposed to be doing with my life — singing in dive bars!”

Today Ricci is one of the directors, or “divas,” of **Opera On Tap**, an organization which, presenting performances in bars and other informal venues, has hit upon an unusual business model: franchising. Currently in five cities, Opera on Tap is providing opportunities in entrepreneurship to a growing number of singers (each franchise has its own personnel) at the same time that it brings opera to a new audience. Says Ricci, “Fifty percent of our crowd are people who already love opera, but who also love the whole concept we’re bringing to it, and the other half are definitely people who have not been. I’ve had people come up to me and say they went to an opera because of first seeing Opera on Tap. I also have people who say they’ll never go to an opera house, but they love this show.”

“People often ask me, why entrepreneurship?” says Edward Klorman, director of the **Manhattan School of Music’s** Center for Musical Entrepreneurship. “Is that something to fall back on if you’re not a successful performer? I would say *in order* to be a truly successful performer, you want to be the kind of performer who can dream up a project, a concert, a recording, an organization. Having the tools to put that in place is very empowering.”

“The idea that musicians have to be entrepreneurs is not new,” Klorman contends, pointing out that even Beethoven complained that the need to “be half a businessman” ate into the time he had to practice his art. “Two hundred years later our conservatories are finally starting to embrace entrepreneurship as a key part of what a musician needs to be successful.”

What Schools Are Doing

While every school’s program is slightly different, there tend to be several common features: encouragement and funding from one or more enterprise-oriented foundations — the Kauffman, the Coleman, the Morgan, the Price; dynamic executives leading the way — Manhattan’s Robert Sirota, the Oberlin Conservatory’s David Stull, Colorado’s Daniel Sher, New England’s Tony Woodcock. As for content, most schools begin by offering a general course before proceeding to some combination of internships, grant opportunities, workshops

with successful entrepreneurs (Oberlin brought in Jerry Greenfield, co-founder of Ben & Jerry's) and one-on-one mentoring.

At most schools, participation is voluntary. But at New England Conservatory, the introductory Entrepreneurial Musician course is required for all juniors. Eastman, while allowing students to “vote with their feet,” offers a staggering array of courses in topics as diverse as digital portfolio creation, arts media and promotion and intellectual property rights. Meanwhile, at Oberlin, music students can take advantage of courses offered at the adjoining liberal arts college — accounting in the economics department, grant-writing in the English composition department.

Student response has been enthusiastic. **At Eastman, one-third of all juniors, seniors and graduate students have taken at least one entrepreneurship course.** At Manhattan School of Music this year, 23 students signed up on an elective basis for the inaugural Practical Foundations for Music Careers course — most of them seniors and second-year graduate students nearing completion of their studies. This semester, more than 80 students chose to enroll in the class, which is being phased in as a degree requirement for most students.

Some programs, like **Oberlin Conservatory's** Center for Leadership and Creativity, stress an experiential approach. “Instead of starting with a series of courses and building minors and majors and concentrations, we wanted students to be compelled by the opportunity to actually *do* something, to imagine what they were going to do and then practice it,” says **Andrea Kalyn**, co-director of the program and **yet another Eastman alumna**. Thus, Oberlin has put in place an escalating series of grant and fellowship opportunities to facilitate projects between semesters and even after graduation. Meanwhile, at Colorado, where the university as a whole boasts six separate entrepreneurship centers, music students are able to enter business plans in a campus-wide Venture Challenge. Similarly, at Eastman, musicians vie among themselves in a New Venture Challenge.

With all this new activity, do students have any time left to practice? “This is not meant to take you out of the practice room,” says Kalyn. “You absolutely *have* to do that. But then what do you do? How does your music live in the world? How as a musician do *you* live in the world?” In fact, she adds, “once you’ve had one of these experiences, your next year in the practice room is very different. Suddenly things that you took for granted, or things that you didn’t think were very important, or things that you thought you were interested in but really aren’t, get highlighted, and you can channel your education.”

The idea of entrepreneurship can inform not only the practice room, but also the classroom. “What I’m a big advocate of,” explains Duquesne University’s Cutler, “is looking for ways to restructure the curriculum that’s already in place to emphasize an entrepreneurial mindset. The idea so often in school is that you show up on time, you learn your part, you go to the performance, you get a standing ovation and then you’re successful. You get an A.”

“What that teaches students is that if they just learn to play really well and show up on time, then they’ll have successful careers. And of course that’s *not* the way it usually works. It’s harder than that. So in the ensemble class that I teach, we have a treasurer, we have a project manager. They’re in charge of all of the elements of setting up a tour for themselves.”

Despite the expanding skill set of today’s conservatory graduate, the statistics remain daunting. In addition to the challenges faced by arts organizations, there is this figure, reported by **Eastman’s Ricker in his new book, *Lessons from a Streetwise Professor***: In 2009 alone, there were over 115,000 music majors at the 625 U.S. music schools that are accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). And the College Music Society, a more

inclusive organization, indicates that there were 326,975 students enrolled in music programs in 2007-2008.

But the directors of the new programs are optimistic. Klorman proposes that “we can either say, anyone in their right mind would quit music and do something else because this field has no future. Or we can say, some traditional models are less sustainable now than they used to be. How can I be on the forefront of the next curve?”

A look at the work of some young musical entrepreneurs already out of school, along with the ideas of the new educators, suggests a few “next curves” that are already emerging.

How Are You Good?

“As young artists approach the opening years of their careers, they tend to think this one thing they’re seeking is some preconceived notion of ‘success,’” says Edward Klorman. “And therefore anything else is not success. For many singers, ‘success’ may be singing on the opera stage, and the reality is there are many more qualified performers than there are existing opportunities.”

“There are a zillion people who are taking the auditions, doing the competitions,” says soprano Deborah Lifton, an alumna of Manhattan School of Music. “Rather than just waiting around, I said, okay, what am I interested in doing? *Voix Humaine*. I really like that piece.”



J.J. Penna, Erika Switzer, Tami Petty, Hai-Ting Chinn, Scott Murphree and David McFerrin performs Brahms's *Liebeslieder Waltzes* at the Bryant Park Fall Festival. Photo courtesy of Five Boroughs Music Festival.

When he's not busy singing lieder, opera and symphonic solos across the country, baritone Jesse Blumberg stays hard at work cultivating a uniquely local musical culture. Blumberg is artistic director of the **Five Boroughs Music Festival** (5BMF), an organization which, at a time when many young New Yorkers have been priced out of Manhattan, makes concert attendance more accessible by performing in traditional and nontraditional venues, not only in Manhattan but also in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Staten Island and Queens.

5BMF's “buy local” mindset directly reflects one of the main new trends endorsed by the leaders of entrepreneurship programs. Meanwhile, Blumberg's specific role as artistic director reflects another: the use of do-it-yourself skills to expand the artist's range of possibilities. While 5BMF does provide Blumberg with the occasional performance opportunity, more significantly, putting together a diverse series that includes early music, tango, jazz and original string band music offers one more kind of creative outlet for him — not to mention a rich experience for his audience.

With partial financial backing from the Opera Singers Initiative — a group privately devoted to many of the same goals as the academic entrepreneurship programs — Lifton is now putting on a series of concerts built around Poulenc's one-woman show.

Looking inward, as Lifton has done, is one solution. "Maybe," says Klorman, "there's something about your personality that might make you an outstanding singer to sing in community centers, rural settings, to start a series that brings performances to prisons. If we can envision a broader range of possibilities that feel like success to us — whether it might be starting an educational program that tours to libraries and schools using art-song and folk-song to teach about the Civil War, a program that presents opera in a community where it's never been presented before, a program where opera singers work with composers in a community residency where the community helps to create an opera — I think there's a lot of exciting work out there."

Or, as he more briefly puts it: "The question isn't so much *how good are you*, but *how are you good?*"

Give the People What They Want (But What Do They Want?)

While some advise young performers to create an audience for the music they believe in, others reverse the equation. "Sing what the audience wants to hear," says baritone Andrew Ryker, a mentor for New England's Entrepreneurial Musicianship program, who encourages students to improve their employability by increasing their versatility. Similarly, Rachel Roberts, who heads the program, emphasizes "discovering a community's needs and responding to them."

But those needs are becoming harder to pinpoint. David Cutler believes that "audiences are more open-minded than ever before. We now live in the iPod Shuffle generation." Therefore, rather than focusing specifically on repertoire, he believes that "there will be new opportunities for arts organizations that can tap into local cultures. Something that's special is something I can get in my neighborhood that no one else can get." These ideas are borne out by the success of artist-run organizations such as Opera On Tap and the Five Boroughs Music Festival (see insets, pages 29 and 31.)

Musical Entrepreneurs

Opera on Tap's Anne Ricci and Five Boroughs Music Festival's Jesse Blumberg illustrate another rising trend, too: performers who direct part of their energy into organizational entrepreneurship. Ricci points out that "musicians tend to be more extroverted, more passionate about their ideas, and that's great for board members to see." And according to countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo, "being entrepreneurial on a business side of things is very much like a performance. You have to gauge the energy that people are giving you and figure out where to fit yourself into that."

For these reasons, despite the number of music majors in school today, and the diminution of traditional opportunities, Colorado's Jeffrey Nytych has come to a perhaps surprising conclusion: "The way I look at it," he says, "is that we need *more* musicians. I think our culture needs as much art and beauty and expressiveness as it can get, now more than ever. We just have to reinvent the way we interact with society. We have to create ways to be active in society as artists and as citizens. A music student who ends up not pursuing a professional performing career, but takes the sensibilities of the artist, the ability to collaborate, to communicate, to translate abstract thoughts into something concrete and physical — these are all things that musicians take for granted, but if you see these as universal skills, then you can bring them into other disciplines, and still have a positive impact on the world you may not otherwise have had." ©

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Countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo appears to lead a double life. This year, following the career path of the traditional opera singer, he will sing on major stages in New York, Boston and Philadelphia. At the same time, he is a devoted musical entrepreneur, creating projects that advance both his own ends and those of the medium itself. “It’s really important,” Costanzo believes, “that we find ways to demystify opera while staying faithful to the score, and without offending any of the diehard opera fans. We can’t underestimate the benefits of showing people who know nothing about opera the things that it may have to offer them.”

“Today,” he continues, “it’s also important to find avenues to explore your artistry outside of conventional contexts, and then bring that ‘extracurricular’ experience back inside the traditional institutional settings. I’ve been entrepreneurial about creating opportunities for opera to traverse traditional boundaries, and similarly for things such as film, dance and visual arts to enter the classical music mainstream.” While still a student at Princeton, Costanzo undertook a project that began with research into castrati, evolved into a pasticcio of castrato arias with spoken dialogue and dance, and ended as a documentary film shown at Cannes, which subsequently qualified for an Academy Award. Along the way, the countertenor was joined by eminent collaborators such as director James Ivory, choreographer Karole Armitage and designer Andrea Branzi. Costanzo accomplished all this partly by means of previous personal connections — “the first and most important thing about being entrepreneurial as a singer,” he stresses, “is relationships: nurturing relationships with people in a way that’s genuine” — and partly through creative fundraising.

“Part of being entrepreneurial,” Costanzo further explains, “is understanding how a system works, whatever that institution or system is, and figuring out how you can adapt your project to fit into that system.” Thus, at Princeton, he was able to convince the chairs of nine separate academic departments that his pasticcio project was relevant to their concerns, and therefore deserving of funds; once a film trailer was produced, he was able to secure further funding from the university’s administration. With each step — and in other, more recent mixed-media projects — Costanzo employed one of the skills (networking, grant defense, business planning) being taught at music schools today.



A “making of” shot from the documentary, *Zefirino: The Voice of a Castrato*, that Anthony Roth Costanzo made about his senior thesis at Princeton. The short-length documentary subsequently was shown at Cannes and qualified for an Academy Award. Photo courtesy of Anthony Roth Costanzo.