

New Note for Classical

City to Open a High School That Will Shake Up How Musicians Are Taught



Jamay de Givé for The Wall Street Journal

Irina Morozova teaches Special Music School student Marie Brogdon.

BY SOPHIA HOLLANDER

For decades, students who dreamed of careers as classical musicians trained to compete for spots in symphony orchestras.

Today, they are more likely to be discovered on YouTube than distributed by a label; record on a home computer than rent out a studio; and drift among different genres, playing violin at a chamber concert one night and as back-up to an indie rock band the next.

New York City plans to open a public high school next fall for this new breed of performers, a milestone in a growing national movement to re-evaluate how classical music is taught, and to what end. The Special Music School, now a small kindergar-

ten-to-eighth-grade school on the Upper West Side that works in partnership with the Kaufman Center, will expand with 50 ninth-grade students in September 2013.

"It's not enough to be a great string player, you need to know how to market yourself online and what to do in terms of recording and all of those types of things," said Paul King, executive director for the office of Arts and Special Projects at the city Department of Education.

Despite industry shifts, few programs in high schools or even colleges require courses in technology, management or cross-genre performing. Still, some question the wisdom of siphoning precious hours away

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A New Approach to Classical

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from practice time, especially at such an early stage in a musician's career.

"You can't run until you can walk, and so that's really the big question," said Charles Wuorinen, a Pulitzer-winning composer, pianist and conductor. "Are the students here going to be given a thorough grounding in things that aren't so sexy and up-to-the-minute, or are they going to try to somersault that and go right into the fun stuff?"

Supporters of change point to daunting numbers: Although classical music sales have held a steady 2% to 3% share of the U.S. market over the past decade, a 2009 study by the League of American Orchestras found that the unique audience for classical concerts has been shrinking, dropping 13% between 2002 and 2008. The audience has also aged, to a median of 49 years old in 2008 from 40 in 1982.

"The training does need to change," said Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, a non-profit that is currently working on helping orchestras adapt to the new environment. "The boundaries are less distinct than they used to be."

There are new opportunities for artists prepared to seize them, experts said.

"It's common now for...musicians to graduate with degrees in music and find themselves in situations where they're called upon to perform or improvise in ways that they're not prepared for," said Jenny Undercofler, the music director at the Special Music School. "We're not only inspiring them and educating, but we're also sneaking in some job skills that will be useful to them later on."

The school now has about 15 students in each grade. Children

must audition to be accepted, but they also take a full academic course load.

As in the K-8 school, contemporary composers will be taught alongside the traditional masters. On a recent afternoon, students in a seventh-grade music history class moved easily from studying Mozart to debating whether contemporary musician Steve Reich had scored part of "The Hunger Games" film (he had).

While high school students will be expected to take individual lessons on an instrument, they will also be required to participate in an intensive two-year course on music technology.

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It's a marked contrast from the city's most famous performing-arts school, Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, situated directly across the street.

LaGuardia has maintained its music curriculum—and its focus on performance and fundamental skills—for decades, said Principal Kim Bruno, though she noted that optional classes in composing, conducting and recording technology had been added in recent years.

"I have some very, very fine educators at LaGuardia and I think they would be afraid to tamper with something that's been working for us," she said. But, she added, "that doesn't mean that other ideologies can't be successful."

While she said she recognizes the value in teaching students

management as well as musical performance, Ms. Bruno cautioned: "You don't want to sacrifice the integrity of the art form. It is a delicate dance."

Although Special Music School's approach is rare among high schools, it reflects a recent national shift among college programs.

This year, Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia created a three-year residency with a contemporary-music ensemble that will collaborate and perform with students. The goal is to help Curtis students "be inventive and entrepreneurial about their own careers" said public relations director Jennifer Kallend.

Last year, Curtis opened a new building that includes music technology facilities, including video and recording studios, and began offering a course in those subjects.

But those classes are optional. At Mannes College at the New School for Music, a dean hired last year is proposing an even more radical overhaul in the course of the next decade. It will be the first substantial changes to the curriculum in more than 50 years, officials said.

The plan suggests making "new music a priority," though it will still teach the classical canon. A plan currently being considered by faculty members will require classes in technology, entrepreneurship and how to teach music in schools and local communities. A new five-year program will offer students a bachelor's degree in music and a master's in arts administration.

The changes have not come without their dissenters, said Dean Richard Kessler. Critics have said, "They'll end up learning how to market something without having anything to market," he recalled. But he dismissed the concerns.

Officials at the Special Music School also insist that their music instruction will not suffer.

Lydia Kontos, executive director of the Kaufman Center, conceded that some might question the "audacity" of training students for an industry where "opportunities are not going to increase. If anything, they might decrease" for classical musicians, she said.

But, she said, "music is everywhere in our lives. Music isn't going away."

"To me classical music comprises the basics," she continued, "It's a matter of the foundation. It's the starting point."



Ramsay de Goo for The Wall Street Journal

Students attend a music-history class at the Special Music School.