

OBERLIN



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Why Are Music Schools Seeing Influx of Funds?

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The numbers alone are staggering:

\$90 million for Northwestern University's new music school building in Evanston;

\$120 million for the recently completed Colburn School conservatory in Los Angeles;

\$193 million for the physical expansion of the Juilliard School in New York.

And that's not all. Tens of millions of dollars more are pouring into other music schools across the country — in an era when professional symphony orchestras are struggling to survive and jazz clubs are an increasingly endangered species (outside urban centers such as Chicago, New York and New Orleans).

Which raises the question: Why is so much money from foundations, individuals and universities funneling into institutions that train ultra-sophisticated musicians?

Performance opportunities for classical and jazz artists — primary beneficiaries of higher education in music — would seem limited in a pop culture world.

The reasons for the building boom are both concrete and ephemeral, easy to explain in terms of supply and demand but a bit more elusive in the grander scheme of things.

"There is an element of mystery as to why this

is happening," says Samuel Hope, executive director of the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), the accrediting organization for music programs in higher education, based in Reston, Va.

"The stars are aligned," says Toni-Marie Montgomery, dean of Northwestern University's School of Music.

That's for sure, though the influx of so much cash to so many music schools may not be as counterintuitive as one might think.

Enrollment is soaring

For starters, despite conventional wisdom on the future of classical music, jazz, ethnomusicology and other high-toned musical pursuits, enrollment in music schools has been soaring. In 1992-93, 75,844 music majors entered institutions reporting to the NASM; in 2007-08, the number was 110,778 (during the same period, the U.S. population grew to about 301 million from 255 million).

At the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, applications have risen more than 40 percent in the last three years, says the school's dean, David Stull. Fully 20 percent of Oberlin's admissions are from international students, "and it could be much larger if we wanted it to be — in other music schools, it reaches as high as 50 percent."

“Essentially,” says Stull, “the major conservatories of the United States are thriving.”

At Northwestern, more than 1,700 students applied this year for 200 slots, and that demand has been rising steadily, says Montgomery, the dean. In part, that reflects a demographic bubble: The Baby Boomers’ kids are swarming into college. Total enrollment in post-secondary degree-granting institutions grew to 17.9 million in 2007 from 14.7 million in 1999 and 17.2 million in 2004, according to estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Even so, the surging demand for advanced music education — which covers everything from Bach to bebop and beyond — at first glance may be hard to understand. Why study the classics in the era of fast-changing technology, ever-increasing globalization and other implacable social forces?

“What I think is going on is this: There was a period of time where ... going to college was about being trained for a profession,” says Gwyn Richards, dean of Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music, which is spending \$44 million on a new building (and instruments).

“And maybe now we’re back to the idea that [you’re] going to college really to be educated as a person, and that what you do as an undergraduate doesn’t have to be directly tied to what you do professionally.”

Vying for elite status

For those students more urgently concerned with paying the bills, music schools have been hurrying to bring the latest technologies on campus: digital music libraries, fiber-optic networks to disseminate audio and video, state-of-the-art recording studios and the like. The new technology not only trains musicians for emerging industries (not everyone wants to be a performer) but enables schools to battle for the best students.

“It’s a competition for elite status in a hyper-competitive marketplace,” says Douglas Dempster, dean of the College of Fine Arts at

the University of Texas at Austin. Earlier this year the school introduced the newly re-christened Sarah and Ernest Butler School of Music, backed by a gift of \$55 million (which will support scholarships and faculty chairs).

Because so many of the top music schools have flourished for a century or more, their facilities are crumbling. Northwestern’s main School of Music building, that glorious but crumbling white hulk on Elgin Street in downtown Evanston, was completed in 1874 and it shows. Paper-thin walls separating practice rooms make it nearly impossible for students to hear themselves play.

Oberlin has been running its acclaimed jazz program “in an old gymnasium that had a series of rooms attached,” says Oberlin dean Stull. He’s overseeing the construction of the \$22 million Phyllis Litoff Building, an edifice designed for the study and nurturance of America’s indigenous musical art form.

And the San Francisco Conservatory of Music — which operated for nearly 50 years in a former infant shelter built in the 1920s — spent \$80 million to build sleek new quarters within blocks of the symphony and opera.

Kind of stampede effect

What’s remarkable about all these developments is the financial largesse supporting them. Though no one pretends to know exactly why music schools together are attracting hundreds of millions of dollars these days, some observers believe a kind of stampede effect has been taking place.

In 2003, the University of Miami announced a \$33 million gift to rename its music school after benefactors Phillip and Patricia Frost. Two years later, Yale University reported a \$100 million anonymous pledge that would be used to eliminate music-school tuition; and Indiana University trumpeted a \$40.6 million gift that would rename its conservatory the Jacobs School of Music.

Since then, Indiana University acquired an additional \$69 million gift from the Lilly Endowment, the school dedicating \$44 million of it for a new music building; and UCLA

announced the formation and naming of the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, backed by \$30 million from the celebrated trumpeter.

“I think one grant helps to encourage the others,” says Hope, of the National Association of Schools of Music.

Often, the funds come from donors with deep attachments both to music and to their alma mater.

Joseph Clonick, who graduated as a composition major from Oberlin in 1957, realizes that his gift of \$1 million and pledge of an additional \$4 million could raise eyebrows.

“My [late] mother might not have been terribly happy” says Clonick, who’s passing along part of the family estate.

“She wanted to save the world or cure cancer or something, and I understand that completely.”

But jazz, says Clonick, “is a worthy cause too.”

Moreover, the flowering of music education defies the commonly held notion that non-pop musical forms are doomed.

“It just seems to me that the whole notion of sickness unto death is oversold,” says Hope, of the NASM, referring to the supposed moribund quality of certain niche music.

‘Higher achievement’

“Even a small percentage of the population of the United States — 2 percent — is something like 6 million people, and that’s a few more people than they have in Finland.

“So it’s not necessary to have everyone engaged in something to have a very large economy for it. ... Higher education hasn’t been poll based. It’s based on higher achievement.”

Yet something bigger seems to be stirring here as well. Beyond the supply-demand reasons for the development of music schools, there may be a deeper yearning for what these institutions uniquely provide.

“I believe there was something about what happened on 9/11 that turned people back to this question: What is universally human?” says Mary Ellen Poole, dean of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

“I don’t want to hang all of it on that, but I see that as part of it.”

Northwestern’s music dean also sees a tie between world issues and the blossoming of music education at the highest levels.

“When we read the papers, we see the headlines of all this turmoil, in the United States and abroad,” says Montgomery.

“If we imagine a life without the arts,” she says, “it would be a horrible, ugly world.”

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Building boom at music schools

Soaring enrollment and heightened competition have spurred a building—and funding—boom at the country’s most prestigious music schools. Some of the major projects:

Juilliard School
New York City
Expansion: Concluding: 2009
\$193 million

The Colburn School
Los Angeles
Completed: 2007
\$120 million

Northwestern University School of Music
Evanston
Groundbreaking: 2009
\$90 million

San Francisco Conservatory of Music
San Francisco
Completed: 2006
\$80 million

Indiana University Jacobs School of Music
Bloomington
Groundbreaking: 2009
\$44 million

Oberlin Conservatory
Oberlin, Ohio
Groundbreaking: June 2008
\$22 million