

College music programs booming despite economic bust

Economy's not keeping students from their dreams

By Howard Reich | Tribune critic

March 8, 2009

With the economy in free-fall and unemployment taking off, it's no wonder college students these days are clamoring to study ... music?

Yes, music. As in symphony, opera and jazz.

Applications are soaring at music schools across the country, often mirroring the overall rise in college enrollment but in many cases surpassing the interest in other disciplines. Never mind that the chances of landing a paying job in a decent-size symphony orchestra have diminished, with many ensembles going out of business in recent years. Never mind that jazz clubs are becoming an endangered species.

More students want to stake their futures on the seemingly rarefied art of music. And parents are not only letting them—they're paying for it.

"I hear parents all the time saying, 'I don't know if my son or daughter can make a living at this, but I want to support their dream,'" said Joan Warren, associate dean at the Juilliard School in New York. "Whereas 20 years ago, you had to study what was practical."

Some students and parents—encouraged by the Internet-savvy marketing departments of the music schools themselves—do see a practical side to music education. They point to scores of new careers involving music that didn't exist a decade or two ago. At the very least, its proponents say, the study of music prepares a student well for other careers.

But ardor for playing music will not spare students the tough times they are likely to face upon graduating.

"There are just so many orchestras and so many jobs," said Francis Akos, who played in the violin section of the [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) from 1955 to 2003. "And now, there are many more people who are looking for jobs."

"It's an extraordinarily challenging field for young musicians to enter," said Charlie Grode, vice

president for the Institute for Learning, Access and Training at the CSO, which helps young musicians make the transition from student to professional status.

The number of young men and women looking to make that transition has jumped.

At Columbia College Chicago, music applications and enrollments more than doubled in the past five years. For the 2009-10 school year alone, Columbia applications are up 37 percent, compared with an 8 percent increase for the school as a whole. Similarly, at Northwestern, undergraduate music school applications rose 19 percent, compared with a 1.5 percent rise for the entire university.

The Oberlin Conservatory of Music in [Ohio](#) is seeing an all-time high for applications. And although [DePaul University](#) is holding steady this year, its music applications rocketed from 450 in 1997 to 1,150 a decade later. [Indiana University](#) in Bloomington, meanwhile, saw music applications swell 50 percent from 2000 to 2008.

The bad economy has yet to make a dent in those figures, music schools say, nor do officials expect application rates to drop significantly any time soon.

If there were any economic career doubts on the minds of students practicing recently at DePaul's School of Music, you couldn't hear them in the music of Mozart and Gershwin, Brahms and Basie emanating from rehearsal rooms.

"Let's hit it harder," jazz-band director Bob Lark encouraged his ensemble, which sounded so plush and polished you would swear it was professional.

"We've got to go over that passage," said a member of a chamber group trying to finesse a tricky suite by [Samuel Barber](#). Over and over they rehearsed the section—slow, fast, faster.

Other rooms filled with the sounds of fiddles tuning up, singers bellowing vowels and pianists thundering at the keyboard.

Added Olivia Price, a 19-year-old French horn student at DePaul, "My parents knew I wouldn't be happy without music."

As for what to do with that love of music, students today are less limited than previous generations, who basically were preparing for either performing onstage or teaching in a studio.

Fields of study such as ethnomusicology, jazz improvisation and music administration have mushroomed in recent years. The professional music world has exploded in the era of video games, digital technology, YouTube, a massive cable-TV universe and other media.

Thus in one DePaul practice room, a student sits at an upright piano, laptop on his knees, headphones on his ears, working computer programs unimaginable a generation ago.

Even at Juilliard, perhaps the country's most celebrated institution for producing performance virtuosos, young musicians can study how to start a non-profit organization or create a digital

score. At Oberlin, "we teach entrepreneurship, how to start an LLC, tax law," said dean David Stull.

"The students are hip about the professional realities," said Michael Manderen, director of conservatory admission at Oberlin. "They know that someone who comes to a conservatory and just learns the trade of playing the oboe is somewhat limited."

Their parents, too, see the possibilities.

"I talk to very pragmatic fathers who think their child is making a very pragmatic choice by going into video-game design or music management," said Murphy Monroe, executive director of admissions for Columbia.

Moreover, many of today's undergrads view studying music as an effective steppingstone to other careers.

Music deans say their students' success in getting accepted into business, law and medical schools, among others, owes specifically to the skills the students develop in music school.

"They know what it means to chase excellence," said Oberlin dean Stull. "Musicians have the discipline to work in focus for hours, they can collaborate, they can attain high performance levels in the 10 minutes that count.

"If you ask a CEO what are the great life skills you need to succeed, it's a lot of those."

Added Indiana University music admissions director Townsend Plant: "Music students—we've seen for a long time—exhibit a remarkable set of transferable skills which can be applied to many careers. ... They are good at collaborating and building consensus, they're great at public speaking, they have drive and focus that comes from a real desire to master something. And that's a remarkable collection of traits that make you successful in many fields."

At the same time, music schools have not been sitting back waiting for the students to flood through their gates. They've been aggressively using the Internet, social networking pages and other 21st Century means to reach students where they live: on the computer.

And not just there.

"You have to look for new markets," said Manderen, of Oberlin. "For the last 16 years, I've been traveling to Asia every fall, where I hear between 150 and 250 auditions, mostly pianists and string players."

All this growing activity has triggered a building boom among music schools, with both Northwestern and DePaul committing millions of dollars for new facilities, now on the drawing boards.

The students filling those programs say they are fully aware of the economic challenges they face, yet they're undaunted, their belief in the enduring value of music encouraging them at a

critical moment in their lives.

"My parents were saying, 'Do what makes you happy;' they always encouraged me," said saxophonist Corbin Andrick, 19, a sophomore at DePaul, during a break in rehearsals with the school's jazz band.

Andrick fingered the keys on his horn while speaking, as if he couldn't wait to get back to work. As he spoke, riffs penned by [Louis Prima](#) and Phil Woods beckoned from inside the room.

"Yeah, it's a scary economic time, and a lot of my buddies who are graduating are freaked out about it," said Andrick. "But I have this mentality that I just have to do this thing."

Tribune reporter Jodi S. Cohen contributed to this report.