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Teaching Musicians to Be Entrepreneurs

Why entrepreneurship training is beginning to strike a chord with faculty—and students—at top music conservatories

by [Kerry Miller](#)

In most areas of higher education, entrepreneurship has long lost its stigma as a career path for those without one (see [BusinessWeek.com](#), Fall, 2006, "[Hitting the Books](#)"). But at the nation's top music conservatories that stigma is still very much alive, despite the fact that the "traditional" career path for classically trained musicians—one that ends with steady employment in a symphony orchestra—is difficult.

At Manhattan's Juilliard School, one of the country's preeminent performing arts conservatories, Career Development Director Derek Mithaug admits that the business-y connotation of the term "entrepreneur" still rubs a lot of artists the wrong way. "We try to avoid that word," he says. But getting support for entrepreneurship training is about more than semantics: Some in music education still firmly believe that the role of the conservatory is to train musicians, not businesspeople.

That's why at many conservatories, entrepreneurship training—where it exists—has tip-toed into curricula under less-threatening guises. Most schools offer at least one elective or workshop in "career development" or "the music industry." At the Eastman School of Music, entrepreneurship programs are run out of the Rochester (N.Y.) school's Institute for Music Leadership.

CONVERTING THE OLD GUARD

The Institute's director, Ramon Ricker, says it took some effort to convince some old-guard faculty—firm believers in "art for art's sake"—that the school wasn't selling out by offering courses that emphasized practical skills. At one meeting, Ricker went around the room pointing at each faculty member: "You've got a summer chamber music program, you've got a string quartet, you publish books—you're entrepreneurial!" And teaching those skills, he says, is about more than building individual careers—as the nation's symphony orchestras continue their struggle for survival, they're also vital to the future of classical music.

Bringing music schools in line with the future of classical music is exactly what Manhattan School of Music president Robert Sirota is most interested in. "The whole infrastructure of music is experiencing seismic shifts, and music schools have to move with those changes," Sirota says—and just adding a business course or two in isn't enough to keep up with the times. Although getting even one required course on entrepreneurship into a packed conservatory curriculum is more than most schools are willing to commit to, what's really necessary, Sirota says, is a radical rethinking of the whole centuries-old conservatory model.

One of Sirota's sea-change ideas: Instead of requiring all graduating students to perform a senior recital, conservatories could give students the option of producing their own recording. "It sounds like a small thing, but it would be

revolutionary," Sirota says. "Can we do it? Well, that remains to be seen."

As an end goal, Sirota envisions "a new generation of performing musicians who function more like individual small businesses, who work the hypersegmented musical marketplace in an entirely different way." Figuring out how to get there, Sirota admits, is the \$64,000 question. In April, he's holding the first of several think-tank discussions with various music industry leaders to discuss just that subject. And in a year or two—as soon as he nails down the funding—he hopes to open a new Center for Music Entrepreneurship at the Manhattan School.

FUNDING FROM WEALTHY FOUNDATIONS

So far, most of the funding for arts entrepreneurship programs has come from a few wealthy foundations. Among the first was the College of Music at the University of Colorado at Boulder, which opened the Entrepreneurship Center for Music with a grant from the Price Foundation in 1998. Since then, the Coleman, Morgan, and Kauffman foundations have funded numerous other initiatives to further entrepreneurship in music, including grant competitions and mentorship programs.

But critics say music schools still aren't doing enough to prepare students for the real world. "How in good conscience can we continue to graduate thousands of students a year who have no hope of getting a job in the field they were trained for?" asks Michael Drapkin, a business consultant and former symphony clarinetist who got funding from the Kauffman Foundation to support an annual conference in North Carolina on music entrepreneurship called [BCOME](#).

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

He's not the only one asking that question. "If you talk to people outside the academy, this is a no-brainer," says Gary Beckman, a PhD student in musicology at the University of Texas at Austin and a leading academic researcher in the growing field of arts entrepreneurship. But in order for music entrepreneurship to gain more mainstream acceptance, he says the topic has to be academically legitimized. On Mar. 31, he'll present research at Pepperdine University, at the first-ever panel discussion devoted to arts entrepreneurship as an academic discipline (see [BusinessWeek.com](#), 10/2/06, "[Business Plans with Legs](#)").

Still, says Juilliard's Mithaug, "It takes time to change culture." From a very young age, musicians are taught how to take direction, to be the best by being the same. "[Entrepreneurship] is a new way of thinking for people who have spent most of their lives in a practice room," he says.

And Juilliard is already a much different place than it was when Mithaug was a student there; the Career Development Office he now directs didn't open its doors until 2000. Before that, he says, "there was no office, no nothing." Now about 25% of Juilliard students participate in the school's professional mentoring program, which matches students up with a faculty member or with an outside professional to work on a project of the student's own design. Mithaug says interest in the four-year-old program has grown each year, and over the past decade he's seen a profound shift in student attitudes.

STIGMA STARTING TO FADE

Gillian Gallagher, a 22-year-old viola player, says she has no qualms about identifying herself as an entrepreneur. After earning her master's degree from Juilliard she hopes to play professionally with the string quartet she formed as a Juilliard undergraduate with three other students. Besides playing, Gallagher says the group members do all of their own self-promotion—everything from writing bios to contacting programmers.

While Gallagher says most students still seem focused on a traditional career path that begins with auditioning for symphony orchestras, "I can see the stigma starting to fade all around me," she says.

"There are a lot of musicians who come here thinking that the most important thing is their art, and that other concerns—like making money—don't matter." Around the beginning of fourth year, though, "People start to get a little

scared. They start thinking, 'what am I gonna do next?'"

AN ALTERNATIVE TO RAMEN NOODLES

Angela Myles Beeching, career services director at New England Conservatory in Boston, says she sees her students go through a similar rude awakening during the professional artists seminar required of third-year students. But she says the point isn't to scare students away from pursuing their dreams. "Whether you call it entrepreneurship or not, what it comes down to is helping young musicians see themselves as the masters of their future—that they can create opportunities, not just wait to be handed something."

For some students, entrepreneurship is an alternative to what many artists have turned to in the past: the day job (see BusinessWeek.com, 7/10/01, "[Portrait of the Artist in Red Ink](#)"). At UT-Austin, Gary Beckman says that while the students he teaches certainly don't buy into the 19th century myth of the starving artist, they're not interested in entrepreneurship for the same reasons as students in the business school, either. "They're not looking for a six-figure salary," he says. "The reason they want an entrepreneurial lifestyle is so they can continue to practice their art—and maybe not eat ramen noodles every night while they do so."

And Gallagher says that's not the only reason. "Every conversation I've had about the future of classical music comes down to the fact that as musicians, we need to be more proactive." For example, she says, "a major problem today is orchestras failing—maybe if musicians were more entrepreneurial, that wouldn't be happening." But no matter what, Gallagher says she's convinced that entrepreneurship skills are useful for any musician in the long run—even those who aren't planning to strike out on their own. After all, she says, "If you're in some symphony that starts to go under, you're out of a job."

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