University of Nebraska–Lincoln Fosters Mentorship

LOOKING BACK OVER THE EVOLUTION OF the jazz studies program he directs at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), Paul Haar recalls a turning point that came courtesy of vibraphonist Stefon Harris.

“Within the Glenn Korff School of Music, we had been discussing what we should do with our jazz program to compete,” said Haar, a Nebraska native. “What were the other programs doing that we should do? Stefon was here leading a master class and he really set us back on our heels by saying, ‘Why not concentrate on what you’re doing that’s different?’ The jazz program at UNL had a very mixed past; it had faltered a couple of times. Stefon’s comments really opened our eyes to how we might be able to move forward.”

Over the past decade, the school has differentiated itself by focusing on graduate courses, offering master’s and doctoral degrees in jazz studies (master of music and doctor of musical arts). At the undergraduate level, bachelor of music and bachelor of arts in music degrees are offered. But, although the university does not offer a specific jazz undergraduate degree, it encourages extensive interaction between its dozen or so graduate jazz students and undergrads in the broader music program.

“It’s a bit like a laboratory,” said Associate Professor Hans Sturm, a bassist who leads the Korff School’s strings area. “We like the cross-fertilization and really believe that mentorship is essential.”

The primary place where that interaction occurs is within the program’s two ensembles and eight combos. While undergrads are encouraged to compose a solo in the style of one musical genre, the graduate students might then illustrate how a specific musician who epitomizes the genre would typically voice the solo.

“The graduates serve as coaches,” said Sturm, noting that this approach is effective in demonstrating the breadth of jazz studies. “Undergrads at UNL have typically been the best players in any situation they’ve encountered at the high school level. What comes with one-to-one mentorship is an expansion of horizons. To younger students who might be familiar with the better-known composers and bandleaders in jazz, we want to say, ‘Yes, but have you checked out Henry Threadgill?’

Grads and undergrads also work closely in preparing and presenting four concerts each year—a kickoff performance, one with a historical focus, one featuring student compositions and one highlighting a guest artist. The guests, who also teach master classes, have included Ingrid Jensen, Poncho Sanchez and Ray Anderson.

The ability to work closely with undergrads is one of the things Haar looks for when evaluating applicants to the jazz studies program. Most of the doctoral students are looking to make the transition to teaching at the post-secondary level, while a number of those who apply to the master’s program seek to advance their careers as performers.

Haar said his goal is to equip the next generation of jazz teachers with an understanding of current technologies and prepare them to teach a wide variety of courses. Students are required to create a portfolio of resource materials with the aim of designing a comprehensive jazz program at either the high school or collegiate level.

Haar said future plans include the creation of a third jazz ensemble and the development of a final document that graduating students would leave with, combining a UNL-produced recording of the student’s original compositions and a collection of the student’s scholarly writing.

“I was a tenured professor at Ball State, where I’d been for 17 years, when I heard about this job,” Sturm said. “What made me want to move to Lincoln and start my career over again? It was the mentorship and personal attention that this program embodies. There is so much one-on-one interaction here—between the faculty and jazz studies students, and between them and the music undergrads. Learning about jazz is a long path, and this program really encourages exploration.”

—James Hale