

SUMMER 2025

DEPAUL

MAGAZINE



Keys to Success

DePaul's School of Music harmonizes with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

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Art Director

Francis Paola Lea

Associate Editor

Craig Keller

Design

Claire Keating

Production Manager

Kimberly Cleary

Editorial Contributors

Mike Bogart
Colleen Connolly
Courtney Day
Alyssa Muir
Chris Quirk
Kate Silver

Associate Vice President

Tracy Krah

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Features

14 **Class Act**

As The Theatre School hits its century mark on the American stage, its legacy of hands-on learning, collaboration and critical dialogue remains as vital as ever.



Photo by FJ Gaylor Photography



Photo by Todd Rosenberg Photography

ON THE COVER

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's pre-professional Civic Orchestra, pictured here in performance at Symphony Center's landmark Orchestra Hall, typically includes a dozen or more students and recent graduates from DePaul University's School of Music. Civic Orchestra members are coached by Chicago Symphony Orchestra musicians, who are often DePaul faculty as well. Turn to page 18 to learn more about this remarkable relationship. Credit: Todd Rosenberg Photography

22



18 Harmonic Convergence

DePaul's School of Music and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra form a dynamic duo.

22 Focus Group

A new crew of student shutterbugs documents the DePaul community.

Departments

4 From the President

DePaul Digest

- 1 Moments
- 5 Marquee: Matthew Ragas and Ron Culp
- 6 Around Campus: DePaul news briefs
- 10 Memoranda: Alumni volunteers, SEAF

Athletics

- 12 Doug Bruno steps down

24 Class Notes

Profiles

- 28 Alumni Spotlight: Steve Schmidt
- 32 Alumni Spotlight: Sarah Brachle Wagner
- 33 Making a Difference: Tom Mendel

Photo by DePaul Athletics



12

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School of Music



Photo by Doug McGoldrick

Thomas Miller performed his “Metropolis” film score on theremin with the DePaul Wind Ensemble in 2023.

A Fond Farewell

The School of Music is bidding farewell to two longtime professors who have left a big mark on the school – and the city of Chicago.

After 25 years in the faculty, master chamber musician, coach and cellist Stephen Balderston is retiring. Throughout his career, he performed solo and alongside other musicians, including Yo-Yo Ma and Daniel Barenboim, and was also a featured artist at the beloved Ravinia Festival and many other national and international festivals.

Among his most important credits is the impact he left on students. School of Music Dean John Milbauer says Balderston “created a studio culture that demonstrated to all of us how excellence and caring for one another are mutually reinforcing.”

The school’s inaugural director of sound recording technology (SRT), **Thomas Miller (MM ’96)**, is also retiring after 32 years with the university. His studio engineering has been featured in the iconic Chicago classic “The Blues Brothers,” and he has worked with famous musicians like the Spanish opera singer Plácido Domingo.

“Miller established a program that has become an industry leader thanks to his extraordinary vision, creativity and drive,” Milbauer says. “SRT will feature even more prominently as a growth edge for the school and DePaul moving forward.” – CC

College of Law



Photo by Owen Baker

College of Law students volunteered for Working Bikes, a nonprofit that restores bicycles for local and global communities.

Going Pro Bono

In addition to their time spent studying, working, attending classes and participating in internships, DePaul law students dedicated thousands of hours to volunteering throughout the 2024–25 school year. Much of this work is coordinated through the nearly 20-year-old Pro Bono and Community Service Initiative at the Center for Public Interest Law.

Students have educated at-risk youth about their legal rights, assisted the unhoused with expunging and sealing their criminal records, and helped clients with citizenship and immigration applications.

No matter their academic focus or career aspirations, the College of Law encourages all students to take part in community service.

“Aside from the plethora of practical skills I learned through my service, I was also reminded of the importance of pro bono work,” says **Lily Jarzabkowski (JD ’24)**, a recipient of the Benjamin Hooks Distinguished Public Service Award. “Being able to devote a significant amount of time during law school to make legal services more available to others reinvigorated my passion for public interest work.” – CC

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

HUMANITIES IN ACTION

A \$750,000 Mellon Foundation grant will allow the Experiential Humanities Collaborative, also called HumanitiesX, to expand and continue for three more years. Students, faculty and community members work together in the program to design community-engaged, project-based humanities courses related to immigration and migration, environmental crisis and action, and democracy and rights.

Assistant Professor Yoalli Rodríguez Aguilera is working with Lumpen Radio to teach students about activism and storytelling through community radio. Associate Professor Sanjukta Mukherjee and Professor Anuradha Rana are collaborating with the nonprofit Women for Economic Justice to design a course on creating change through feminist filmmaking.

“By centering empathy, equity and ethical inquiry, students not only hone their craft but also come to understand the transformative power of media in shaping a more just and compassionate society,” Rana says. – CC



HARMONIC Convergence

DePaul's School of Music and the Chicago
Symphony Orchestra form a dynamic duo

By Craig Keller

Daniil Trifonov, one of the world's greatest classical pianists, packs concert halls wherever he performs. That includes Orchestra Hall, home to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO), where the Russian-born virtuoso served as artist-in-residence for the CSO's 2024–25 season. And yet, on a Monday morning last November, Trifonov, comfortably clad in sweater and slacks, opted for the intimate Murray and Michele Allen Recital Hall at the Holtschneider Performance Center on DePaul University's Lincoln Park Campus.

The hall's 140 seats were filled with piano students from DePaul's School of Music (SOM), Northwestern University and Roosevelt University as Trifonov shared tips on technique, musical elements and performance with students who took turns playing on an adjacent Steinway piano. **Boris Krivoshein (MM '23)**, a DePaul student earning a post-master's certificate in performance, played Liszt's Transcendental Étude No. 4.

"It was incredibly inspiring and helpful to have a lesson with the great pianist," Krivoshein says. "I played a piece that is extremely challenging technically, and his advice was invaluable in helping me relax my body and arms. We also discovered that we studied at the same music academy in Moscow, which made for a nice conversation afterward as we shared memories of that experience."

Such connections stem from a special relationship between DePaul and the CSO.

"Daniil wants to be a mentor to younger generations. When we looked for a partner for his master class, DePaul was the first place that came to mind," says Jonathan McCormick, managing director of the Negaunee Music Institute, which oversees the CSO's educational and community engagement programming as well as the CSO's Civic Orchestra, a training ground for students and young professionals. "They have a great faculty, a responsive administrative team, great instruments and a community of people who want to attend and be inspired."

The DePaul faculty play a key part. The Music Performance teachers include an extraordinary concentration of CSO musicians, with 15 CSO members – including several principals in their instrumental sections – among the school's adjunct faculty this spring. Given that the CSO is one of the top symphonic orchestras in the world, its close partnership with DePaul's School of Music is rare and exceptional.

"When I came to DePaul in 2023 it was clear that our relationship with the CSO was a tremendous distinguishing characteristic that should be cultivated," says the school's dean, John Milbauer, also a pianist and Steinway Artist. "There are very few other conservatories – if any – in the U.S. with such a close relationship to a major symphony orchestra, and as the CSO's sound, culture and history are distinctive on a global scale, so too are our ambitions for orchestral training at DePaul. This is not only beneficial to our students, it benefits the field, and we are honored to have such engagement from the CSO."

The venerable Civic Orchestra, making music since 1920, typically includes a dozen or more DePaul students and recent graduates, even though less than 6% of applicants, drawn from an international pool, are accepted annually. Many CSO musicians, who are often DePaul faculty as well, coach Civic Orchestra members. Cliff Colnot, a SOM faculty member who conducted the DePaul Symphony Orchestra from 1997 to 2022 and the Civic Orchestra for over 20 years prior to his passing in 2024, provided a vital link.

"Chicago educational institutions' relationship with the Civic is very unique," says Michael Lewanski, SOM associate professor, ensemble conductor, and Music Performance chair who has conducted programs for the CSO's MusicNOW contemporary music series. "No other U.S. orchestra has a paraprofessional orchestra associated with it in the same way. It's ideal for musicians who are finishing their studies or have just graduated and are taking auditions."



Photo by Anne Ryan

Opposite page: The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's bassoon section, including Miles Maner and Keith Buncke (shown right to left) as well as William Buchman, also comprises the School of Music's bassoon studio faculty. Left: DePaul graduate student **Boris Krivoshein (MM '23)** makes the most of a master class at the school with pianist Daniil Trifonov, the CSO's 2024–25 artist-in-residence.



As the CSO's sound, culture and history are distinctive on a global scale, so too are our ambitions for orchestral training at DePaul."

—John Milbauer, dean, DePaul University School of Music

"Both institutions are stronger as a result," adds McCormick, who says one of the "miracles" of the CSO — its bold, signature sound that has remained intact across generations — only happens through such mentorship and knowledge transfer. "So teaching at a place like DePaul or being a coach for the Civic is sowing those seeds."

McCormick mentions Alexander Hanna — CSO principal bass, Civic coach and SOM faculty member — as emblematic of that mentorship. "The basses every year are amazing, and we know that because Alex is at the helm. He is a thoughtful and intentional teacher and really builds a community within his section and at DePaul in his studio."



CSO principal bass Alexander Hanna mentors School of Music students and Civic Orchestra members.

Civic Orchestra players even substitute in the CSO on occasion. Xander Day, a flutist earning his master's at DePaul, was having breakfast one morning in February when the CSO's personnel manager emailed him. Emma Gerstein, SOM faculty and CSO second flute, had a fever. Stefán Ragnar Höskuldsson, the CSO's principal flute who also taught at the SOM (and has since moved on to the first flute position with the Berlin Philharmonic), had recommended Day.

"I called them, and the manager was like, 'How soon can you get here?,'" Day recalls. He arrived in the midst of the CSO rehearsal 45 minutes later, his flute and piccolo poised for duty.

"So I have to find my way to the chair, which is in the middle of everything. That was a little scary," Day recounts. "Jennifer [Gunn],

the piccolo player, points to where we are and I just pick it up and give it a go. I was totally shaking. I mean, an hour before this moment I didn't even know that this was possible."

Day ended up sitting in for Gerstein for three concerts at Symphony Center.

"So I guess I'm on the guest list now," concludes Day, whose primary teacher at DePaul, Alyce Johnson, plays piccolo with the Lyric Opera Orchestra. "The faculty members at DePaul are so good at what they do. But they're also great teachers who create a supportive culture and connect students with gigs. And they bring so much positivity, which is so important when you're learning how to play music, because music is supposed to lift us."

Angela Hernandez, a senior who came to DePaul from Honduras to further her bassoon studies, agrees that the DePaul faculty dispel stereotypes of elite artists.

"People always see them as super famous and unreachable, but they're super kind people and very intentional about staying in touch with every single one of us," says Hernandez. "They see you as someone who's preparing to win a job, and they want to prepare you to be as successful as you can be."

The bassoon studio faculty — Miles Maner, Bill Buchman and Keith Buncke — also comprise the CSO's entire bassoon section. Maner ascribes to a pragmatic and holistic approach. One day he's instructing students on reed-making techniques; another day he's attending a student recital to offer encouragement and constructive feedback.

"Music is a very difficult profession, and failure is public," Maner says. "You might go onstage and fall on your face. But if you feel loved and supported, that directly and positively affects your music making and helps you get back on that horse and try again."

Building confidence while instilling a humble work ethic necessary for success is a constant balancing act, he adds. Maner insists on practicing études ("they're your vegetables," he notes), but also mentors students on the daily responsibilities and mental challenges that occupy a professional musician's life.

"We might be talking about a sleep schedule, how to advocate for yourself, performing in general, or the journey of failure and introspection," Maner shares. "So many things have to go well for you to do your absolute best."

Cynthia Yeh, the CSO's principal percussionist and a Civic coach, also employs "a very honest approach" with her students at DePaul.

"We all take the opportunity to get real with students. I tell them, 'If you think you're nervous now you better address it, because you're asking to do this for a living,'" Yeh says. "Now is the time to have big mess-ups, but learn from your mistakes because it's only going to get tougher from here on. Performing takes talent, but it's also a mental game."

Yeh empathizes with her students' struggles, and often shares instructive experiences from her own formative years.



Cynthia Yeh, CSO principal percussionist and SOM faculty member, takes a holistic and honest approach with her students.

"But with the caveat that I'm feisty and don't shy away from competitiveness," says Yeh, who thinks she may be the only female principal percussionist of a major orchestra in the world. "During my undergrad studies, two guys in my studio literally pulled me aside and told me I didn't belong because I didn't go to Juilliard. And instead of shutting down, I thought to myself, 'I'm going to beat you one day.' And sure enough, I did."

"It's sometimes important to take information thrown at you and turn it around into fuel that drives you," she continues.

Yeh also helped Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra percussionist **Joe Bricker (MM '21)** turn his career around at a tumultuous time. Bricker was en route to a final-round audition with the Philadelphia Orchestra on March 15, 2020, when COVID-19 swept across the U.S. and he was told not to come. It was just as well. Bricker had gone far in other auditions, but "wasn't getting over the hump," he says. Something needed to change.



DePaul alumnus Joe Bricker credits Cynthia Yeh with teaching him the musicianship that helped him win a percussion position with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

Bricker had met Yeh at summer music engagements and appreciated how she framed percussion playing within a wider musical landscape. That fall, separated by a Plexiglas screen and wearing masks, the two got to work.

"I credit Cynthia with figuring out how to make me into a musician and not a technician," shares Bricker, who won his position in Cincinnati during one of the first major auditions in the pandemic's wake.

While at DePaul, Bricker also earned a spot in the Civic Orchestra's elite fellowship program that foregrounds community engagement. With violinist Hannah Christiansen, he developed an initiative, named *From Scratch*, that mentors teens on composing contemporary classical works, which are then recorded by professional ensembles.

From Scratch lives on in Cincinnati, where three teenage participants had their works performed with dances choreographed by the Cincinnati Ballet. *From Scratch* has also worked with another nonprofit, *The Well*, on a project in which 200 children collectively scored a composition that will be shared nationally through general music curricula this fall.

Bricker says his commitment to lifting communities through music and innovative pedagogy was sparked by DePaul and the Civic – "kindred spirits in civic service," as McCormick puts it.

"I learned that it's more about people than music," Bricker says. "The idea that you can go into a neighborhood and say, 'Here's your Bach and Brahms, sit down and listen, you're going to be changed by this,' is not effective. If you get to know people first, the art form becomes more powerful. Because you're not just cutting a tree from somewhere else and replanting it, you're tending to a garden that grows over time and nourishes entire groups of people."

Tom Mendel performing in the pit for the musical "Hamilton"

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Musical Mentor

Tom Mendel throws DePaul music students a bass line to stay afloat in their shared profession

Photo courtesy of Tom Mendel

Sustaining a career as a professional musician requires perseverance and preparedness. But the most vital skill of all may be versatility, counsels **Tom Mendel (SOM '78)**, a veteran Chicago bassist who has plied his trade in musical theatre venues, jazz clubs, advertising jingle recording studios and school classrooms.

Now Mendel is leaving a legacy for young musicians preparing to enter the demanding field.

One of them is Adam Blendermann. In the 2024-25 academic year, the precocious bass player – now entering his second year in the Jazz Studies program at DePaul University's School of Music – was the first recipient of the Tom Mendel Bass Endowed Scholarship, which Mendel created in 2023.

"The scholarship is for bass players who are doublers," specifies Mendel, using a term for switch-hitting electric and acoustic players. "DePaul prepares students to be excellent acoustic bass players in both jazz and orchestral music, but in my experience in theatre, freelance and recording, electric bass proficiency in many styles is also a must. My goal is to help students get ready for the real world by having the greatest amount of tools to do what I do."

Mendel had the chance to share such guidance with Blendermann when DePaul arranged for the two to meet at a local café. They discovered another musical connection besides the latter's facility with acoustic and electric. Blendermann's father, Andrew, is a freelance pianist, vocalist and arranger whose career spans piano bars, private events and musical theatre gigs in the Chicago area.

Mendel's own career has involved multitasking from the start. After earning a music education degree at DePaul, he briefly taught orchestra at a junior high school while playing various gigs at Chicago venues, including the storied Playboy Club, Pump Room and Jazz Bulls. During one stint in the late 1970s a bandmate asked him to join a national tour of the Broadway musical "Godspell."

"He said, 'It pays \$750 a week,' and I was making \$375 every two weeks teaching school," Mendel recounts. "I said, 'I'm there.'"

Mendel has been a mainstay in musical theatre orchestras ever since. His resume includes "Hadestown," "Hamilton," "Wicked," "Billy Elliott" and "The Lion King," and he has tallied more than 100 shows in his career. He's also been a leader for musicians'



Photo by Kemper Florin

Adam Blendermann and Tom Mendel

labor rights, serving the Theatre Musicians Association as its national and Chicago chapter president.

"I like being under the microscope, where you've got to be perfect," Mendel says. "That's even harder onstage than in the studio, because there's no chance for an overdub."

Through his scholarship Mendel aims to instill the same work ethic in a new generation of musicians. But he wants students like Blendermann to enjoy music as a joyful communal experience as well.

"DePaul has so many more ensembles now than when I was there," Mendel says. "I told Adam, 'Soak it up, man. But don't be myopic. Be ready to play anything when you go out there.' This is all about passing it on." — Craig Keller