STATE OF THE ARTS

School of the Arts begins its second act

By Roseann Keegan. Photos by Jeff Dow.

School of the Arts students Nicole Durante, Meghan Kirwin '12 (above), Madalyn Tsugawa and Michelle Calica learn in the new lighting lab, which allows students to train on the most up-to-date stage lighting equipment.
For the past 20 years, University of Nevada, Reno alumnus Jim Rue '94 (theatre) has been building sets for country music stars like Luke Bryan and Garth Brooks, drawing upon the lessons he learned as a student at the School of the Arts.

“I couldn’t have gotten the same training anywhere else,” Rue says. “I was designing and building sets and doing lighting for productions the entire time I was a student. By the time I graduated, I was ready to walk right into a career in the industry.”

On the other hand, alumna Karen Vibe ’04 M.A. (music) is sometimes asked what a master’s degree in classical music has to do with managing stocks and bonds.

“My answer is always, ‘more than you realize!’” says Vibe, a certified financial planner for Morgan Stanley in Reno and member of the Reno Philharmonic and the Reno Chamber Orchestra. “Managing stock portfolios seems to be a stretch from playing a musical instrument. Music and mathematics are often considered close cousins in the financial world, but few people realize all the similarities. Having the opportunity to get my master’s degree at the University helped me to prepare for the life I wanted for myself.”

Whether the goal is a career in the arts or the financial industry, the University’s School of the Arts is helping students chart their own course to success. Through major support from the Nell J. Redfield Foundation and the Edna B. and Bruno Benna Foundation, the School recently completed a $4 million modernization project and will soon launch into a second act of improvements and expansions.

“A lack of adequate facilities has prevented growth in the arts at the University,” says School of the Arts Director Larry Engstrom as he stands on the vast stage of the Nell J. Redfield Proscenium Theatre. “One of our primary goals when we formed the school in 2004 was to create a plan to both upgrade the quality and increase the size of our physical plant. It is very gratifying, indeed, to be standing here in the recently renovated theater.”

The first phase of improvements, fittingly called Act I, is coming to a close. Finishing touches are being made to the new Edna B. and Bruno Benna Foundation Atrium entry to Church Fine Arts on Virginia Street, along with updated sound, lighting, rigging, raked seating and a new curtain for the Redfield Proscenium Theatre.
As part of the Act I fundraising campaign, the Front Door Gallery in Church Fine Arts on Virginia Street was refurbished and tiled to better display artwork. The school’s expansion efforts now move into Act II, which involves the construction of a new building east of Church Fine Arts that will connect to the original space through a skywalk or bridge. The new building is proposed to include a 5,400-square-foot contemporary gallery that will deepen the school’s ability to show museum-quality exhibitions.

Proscenium Theatre. The Front Door Gallery at Church Fine Arts has been refurbished and tiled to better display artwork. An expanded scene shop means students no longer have to use theater space to build sets. A new lighting lab allows students to train on the most up-to-date stage lighting equipment, formerly done in an ill-equipped small classroom.

The Nell J. Redfield Foundation made a $2 million lead gift toward the project, with further substantial support from the Edna B. and Bruno Benna Foundation and additional generous donors.

“We are all very thankful for all of our donors who made this extensive transformation possible,” Engstrom says.

Now the School’s expansion efforts move into Act II, which involves the construction of a new building east of Church Fine Arts that will connect to the original space through a skywalk or bridge. The new building is proposed to include a 5,400-square-foot contemporary gallery; digital media spaces including a maker-space, electroacoustic lab and classroom; a new art critique space and six art faculty offices; a 4,000-square-foot instrumental rehearsal room and storage area; a 2,700-square-foot choral and opera rehearsal room; a recording studio; eight additional teaching studios and offices for music faculty; and music practice and rehearsal rooms.

Director of University Galleries Paul Baker Prindle said the new gallery will create a flagship space for art that will deepen the school’s ability to show museum-quality exhibitions.

“We want our community to be a place where people come to learn from art,” Baker Prindle said. “With this amazing new space, our students won’t have to cross a mountain range to see the art they’re learning about in their art, psychology, history and chemistry classes. This new space will be a cultural destination and a community laboratory for connecting visual art with a bevy of academic disciplines.”

One of the most compelling plans for the proposed new building is a 300-seat recital hall. The 5,372-square-foot hall will include a green room, a control room and storage space. Creation of a new recital hall would not only allow for an increase in the number of quality musical performances in the University and community, it would help ease the now-overbooked Nightingale Concert Hall schedule. With educational and performance events spread between the two venues, Nightingale would be more readily available to organiza-
tions requiring larger capacity.

“The world-class acoustics would provide an unparalleled performing and listening experience for musicians and music lovers in northern Nevada,” Engstrom says. “Such an environment inspires students to perform at a higher quality and more productive level.”

In the earliest days of the arts on campus, visual arts were taught in Quonset huts in a nearby neighborhood. Music belonged to the education department, and courses in speech and drama were occasionally taught within the English department. In 1955, the arts disciplines finally reached departmental status. In 1960, the new Church Fine Arts building provided the first unified physical space for students and faculty.

The Church Fine Arts Building was named after James Edward Church, professor of Latin, German, classical art and history at the University from 1892 to 1948. Church is most known for creating the first snow survey system, which is still in use today. Church also founded what is now the Nevada Museum of Art.

An addition in the mid-1980s created more classroom space, a concert hall, a gallery exhibition area and a small theater, enabling greater attendance and participation in the arts by members of the community. The initial and subsequent investments in arts facilities were prompted by an increased demand for arts education within a growing university and by dedicated supporters in the community.

Today, the School of the Arts is home to three departments: theater and dance, music and art. Housed within the College of Liberal Arts, the school offers 51 degree programs and has more than 500 majors.

In addition to students pursuing arts majors, 4,000 additional students take arts courses each year, whether as minors, participants or to fulfill their curriculum arts credits.

“The school is extremely accessible to non-majors such as myself,” says Michelle Calica, a senior marketing major and music minor. “Music and performance has played a huge role in my life since I was very young, so I was not willing to give that up coming into college. Arts education is a crucial element to a well-rounded education and Nevada provides a strong foundation to that education that students, majors or not, can take with them for the rest of their careers,” Calica adds.

Madalyn Tsugawa, a senior music major and painting minor, chose to attend this university in particular to study with its acclaimed music faculty.

“There were two faculty members in the music department with whom I wanted to work: Jason Altieri, conductor of the University of Nevada Orchestra, and Dmitri Atapine, assistant cello professor,” Tsugawa says. “In high school, I played with Dr. Altieri in the Reno Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. He rekindled my love for music and opened up the music world for me.

“I saw Dr. Atapine play with the University Orchestra my junior year of high school,” Tsugawa adds. “After watching the performance, I felt motivated to work harder at the cello. I was determined to come to the University to take lessons from Dr. Atapine, too. He has become a great friend and mentor.”

There are approximately 110 faculty and staff at the School of Arts in a variety of fields, including ceramics, acting, violin performance and modern dance.

Peter Goin, chair of the Department of
Art and a Foundation Professor, says several exciting additions to the department are in the works. The department has added a new faculty member, Inge Bruggeman, who will develop a major initiative in a new area of specialization in graphic arts. The internationally renowned Black Rock Press will prepare a complementary minor in book arts, offering students a sought-after area of focus and professional study. And the new director of University Galleries, Baker Prindle, has initiated an outreach exhibition program that includes a new downtown gallery, Artspace.

Assistant Professor Rosie Trump says the recent improvements will impact students in the classroom and beyond.

“As a new faculty member, it’s exciting to know we are providing students with educational experiences in top-notch facilities,” Trump says. “Because of our theater upgrades, we can provide students with opportunities to learn, train and create that will directly translate into their pursuits after graduation.

“Bringing the dance students into the newly renovated Redfield Proscenium Theatre and seeing their faces light up when they see how the space has transformed is so thrilling,” Trump adds.

Albert Lee, vocal professor and director of the Nevada Chamber Opera, says the University’s Department of Music is an ideal environment to develop talented musicians, pointing to the department’s small class sizes, accessible staff and faculty who perform nationally and internationally.

“It was in this type of environment that I trained as an undergraduate at the University of Nevada, Reno is the type of training ground capable of launching a wonderful career for the aspiring musician.”

Stephanie Sant’Ambrogio, director of the Orchestral Career Studies Graduate Program and associate professor of violin and viola, says Nevada students can study a musical instrument at any level.

“From a graduate music student who can gain the skills to be prepared to take auditions for living-wage American orchestras, to a non-music major undergraduate student who can fulfill a life-long dream of learning how to play a musical instrument, the department has professors and graduate teaching assistants to teach at all levels,” she says.

Acclaimed pianist Lorie Line ’86 (music) studied piano under Professor Ely Haimowitz.

“Music is such a personal thing, and I think he truly cared about me and my future, and how I would fit in out there in the big world of entertainment,” Line says. “He would pat me on the shoulder when I’d leave my lesson, and he always had a twinkle in his eye that clearly said, ‘OK, I want you to practice more this week Lorie.’ He expanded my world.”

Alumna Nancy Rue ’88 (theatre), an acclaimed children’s author, enrolled in the School of the Arts when it was known as the Department of Speech and Theatre.

“My time there as a student was amazing, and I had no idea that most undergraduate
theater programs didn’t provide the kinds of opportunities I was getting,” Rue says. “Not only did I have roles in four productions and work in costumes, stage management and backstage crew, but my husband (set designer Jim Rue ’92) and I were able to launch the Nevada Children’s Theater, with the cooperation of the department, while we were students. That just doesn’t happen!”

Rue is working on an anti-bullying campaign called SO NOT OKAY, based on a trilogy of fiction books for tweens. “Because of my experience at Nevada, I am able to coach kids to appear on stage and, more recently, develop scripts for videos,” she says.

School of the Arts also functions as a busy hub for arts events and programs that serve the surrounding community as well. Over the course of any given year, University students and faculty appear in more than 300 arts and cultural performances and presentations. The School of the Arts brings in more than 90 guest artists each year. More than 35,000 people attended the school’s concerts, shows and exhibitions last year.

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“We work very hard at breaking down the supposed barrier between the University and the community,” Engstrom says.

Several of the school’s programs bring national and international artists to campus for performances and residencies. The Performing Arts Series presents five shows per year.

The Sheppard Contemporary and University galleries exhibit the work of up-and-coming artists, as well as those of international reputation, including Polly Apfelbaum, Arturo Herrera, Ann Hamilton, Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick, Sky Kim and others.

The annual Reno Jazz Festival draws almost 9,000 participants and more than 300 school groups from up to 10 states. It is one of the largest student-oriented jazz festivals in the world.

The Argenta Concert Series, organized and produced by Professor Dmitri Atapine and his wife, Professor Hyeyeon Park, has been successful in bringing to campus some of the finest classical chamber musicians in the country, including pianist Wu Han and cellist David Finckel. The series includes up to six concerts by out-of-town artists, and three concerts with the Argenta Trio, the University’s professional chamber group-in-residence. The members are Sant’Ambrogio, violin; Atapine, cello; and James Winn, piano.

The Department of Theatre and Dance produces four theatre productions and three dance concerts per year. In recent years, the resident Nevada Repertory Theatre shows have ranged from Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, to the musical Anything Goes, to the contemporary multimedia theatre performance of Faufung.

From Nov. 22 to Dec. 7, the School of the Arts will present A Christmas Carol: The Musical, directed by Tony Award winner Adam Cates, which will showcase the theater’s new rigging system with flying ghosts and larger set pieces.

“It’s a brand-new theater that occupies the same space,” says Rob Gander, chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance. “Act I has elevated the theatre and dance program, as it provides a well-equipped arts laboratory for students to train in the performing arts, both on stage and behind the curtain.”