

Marian Blaikley explores the secrets of the Eastman School's success

“It’s known as ‘the Eastman tug’”. That’s how the Director and Dean of the Eastman School of Music, Professor James Undercopfler, characterised for me the extraordinary pull that the illustrious College has for its former students. It is a pull that the Professor has felt himself. He studied at the College back in the Sixties alongside such emerging Brass Greats as Chuck Daellenbach, the tuba player in Canadian Brass, and Vincent DiMartino, now one of the most sought after trumpet players and educators. Originally a horn player, Professor Undercopfler combined the role of first horn in the New Haven Symphony Orchestra with teaching, before embarking on the distinguished career in arts administration and innovative education which brought him full circle back to his present post at Eastman in 1995.

This article explores what lies behind this Eastman tug: just what it is that has for so many years made the Eastman School, so affectionately regarded by its alumni and so well respected in the wider world as a trainer of brass players and other musicians. Founded by George Eastman of the Kodak family in 1921 in Rochester New York, the Eastman School attracts students from nearly every state in the union. 25 per cent of the students come from overseas. These days the School enrolls approximately 900 students (500 undergraduates and 400 graduates) every year. It currently has 94 brass students on its books: 76 undergraduates and 18 postgraduates. It is, therefore, a relatively large conservatoire by British standards, but with an influence surely far wider than its size should warrant.

A roll-call of famous alumni is enough to illustrate its reach. On the brass side alone tuba-playing alumni include Roger Bobo (Daellenbach credits his presence at the School in the Sixties for attracting a lot of fine players) and Ralph Saur, Principal Tuba in the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra. Trombonist graduates include Steve Witzer, Principal of the Cleveland Orchestra, the late Lewis Van Haney (the legendary trombonist of the New York Philharmonic), Bill Reichenbach, John Fedchock, Scott Hartmann, Jim Pugh and Raymond Premru (who was not only a distinguished classical

performer and composer but also played on the legendary Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album among others). As well as DiMartino, twice President of the International Trumpet Guild, the School's outstanding trumpet alumni include Christopher Martin, currently Principal of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Eastman hornplayers are to be found in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (Principal Eugene Wade), Pittsburgh Symphony, LA Philharmonic, and Quebec Symphony Orchestra. Beyond the Big Names, musicians trained at the Eastman school are to be found teaching in conservatoires, universities, colleges and high schools across the United States, spreading the Eastman gospel far and wide.

What a lot of performers named above have in common is their versatility, their ability to switch effortlessly from one genre to the other. Time and again people I talked to cited this as one of the important aspects of an Eastman training. Mark Kellogg, Associate Professor of Euphonium, Trombone and Brass Chamber Music and himself a trombonist, explained:

“We have got a formidable list of alumni, but lots of Schools in the US and Europe have lists like that. What is impressive about it is the breadth. You've got orchestral performers like Saur and Witzer, then there's Bill Reichenbach in jazz, and Premru who went on to become a fine composer. They are all great all-rounders. Some people might see this as producing Jacks of all trades, but I see it as a strength and as part of the long-term philosophy of this place: to have as many strengths as possible is seen as a good thing. Eastman has always encouraged people to expand their horizons in as many different ways as possible.”

Trumpeter Vincent DiMartino describes this constantly evolving and stimulating environment at Eastman as ‘a catalytic atmosphere.’ His description obviously still has meaning for current and former students. Second year trumpeter Matt Osika, from Buffalo New York has already discovered in his brief time at Eastman that “there are many great learning and performance opportunities out there, but they don't just come knocking on your door. You have to work for them and seek them out.” Colin Webb, a

former student of Mark Kellogg's, looking back on his time at the School, says: "I chose to attend Eastman because it was one of the few music schools in the country with a premier programme in both Classical and Jazz. The faculty encouraged me to pursue my interests in both types of music, and though I have chosen to focus more on the classical genre for my career, I feel like I have developed more completely as a musician because of my education at Eastman which showed me all types of music."

Chuck Daellenbach, who himself earned a PhD from Eastman at the age of 25 and was only last year awarded the School's Distinguished Alumnus award, also emphasises the value of Eastman's all-round approach. He cites Daniel Patryluk, the trumpet player of the original pace-setting Eastman Brass Quintet who was Acting Director and Associate Director of the School back in the Seventies, as a supreme example: "The original Eastman Brass Quintet set a new pace. Dan Patryluk was a new breed of trumpet player. It has now become the norm to play equally well in classical and jazz, to have the sheer endurance to do that. But back then it was unique." The fact that DiMartino, too, mentioned Patryluk's brilliance to me – he was impressed by his ability to undertake Quintet gigs while running the School – suggests that the trumpeter was an influential figure in stamping this ethos upon Eastman.

These days – as throughout its history - the breadth of education offered by Eastman is achieved by a combination of three main elements, neatly summed up again by Mark Kellogg:

"To me the best thing about the place is not only having a good teacher and playing in good ensembles, but the strength of the people around you: here it is possible to learn as much from your peers as your teachers."

The key 'good teachers' who make up the brass faculty all have lengthy biographies, revealing their active engagement with the music profession both inside and outside academia. Two of them are Rochester Philharmonic Principals as well as being Eastman graduates themselves: Peter Kurau, Associate Professor of Horn, and Mark Kellogg, who is the Orchestra's Principal Trombonist. The other senior brass staff are John Marcellus.

Professor of Trombone, James Thompson, Professor of Trumpet, Don Harry, Associate Professor of Tuba and Douglas Prosser, the part-time Associate Professor of Trumpet and Brass Chamber Music Their work is, of course, supplemented by regular master classes and performances by guest artists. Recent visits from eminent horn players, for example, have included D L Williams, Verne Reynolds and Gregory Hustis (Principal Horn of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra).

The resident tutors' remit includes teaching and running the Eastman School's three courses concerned primarily with performance: the Bachelor of Music professional music degree, focused on the performance side of music, but also on practical and academic skills; the master of music degree programme, designed to foster high achievement in the performance of music as well as broad intellectual development; and the Doctor of Musical Arts degree. awarded for high attainment in the practice of music, with emphasis on the arts of performing and teaching. (There are strong Music Education courses, too, but in this article I shall be concentrating mainly on the performance element).

To give me an idea of how much hands-on performing tuition the students get Peter Kurau talked me through his horn undergraduates' week, describing a pattern which is no doubt replicated to some degree across the other disciplines. He currently has 20 undergraduate and four postgraduate students.

"Each undergraduate has a one hour private lesson with me a week plus two additional sessions each of 1.5 hours in group classes on Monday and Wednesday evenings. In these we might look at orchestral repertoire, solo work, practise for auditions, or do some horn choir work." (More of the horn choir later). "It's the sort of forum where if there is a degree recital coming up then a student can have the chance of a dry run in front of his colleagues, and get feedback from them. The freshers and sophomores (first and second year students) also get an hour's session with a graduate student teaching assistant."

Alongside their instrumental tuition (they have to achieve competency on the piano as well and may take up another second instrument) the students pursue academic studies. They also have the opportunity to dip into the electives offered by the Institute for Music Leadership (IML), a centre integral to the Eastman School. First established in 2001 the IML administers a collection of curricular and extra-curricular programmes designed to bridge the gap between the academic and professional world. For its own students these include such topics as setting up a website, healthy music making, orchestras in the US today, understanding tax returns, as well as orchestral and other practical placements.

The IML was the first of centre its kind in the States and is very likely the model for a number of similar schemes now being developed across the States and at UK conservatoires. Professor Undercopfler, the Director of Eastman and principal architect of the Eastman Initiatives which led to the development of the Institute, explained a bit more of the thinking behind it: “The idea is to put more tools in the kids’ tool boxes. Tools of practical experience to prepare them better for what they will be facing 1 – 5 years out of university. We also want to give them a very broad prospective of the field as a whole, the music scene in the whole world. And to get them thinking about the opportunities. We are challenging them to see opportunities rather than limitations at what is a difficult time in the profession. It’s a two-pronged approach really, because at the same time we are trying to raise playing to the highest possible levels “

I got a sense that introducing this strand of the curriculum at Eastman has not been entirely plain sailing and indeed Professor Undercopfler himself said: “It’s created a bit of a crunch inside the curriculum, about what is most important.” As a slight outsider Chuck Daellenbach has observed “how difficult it is to put an innovative programme in place” but sees it as typical of Eastman to be at the cutting edge of musical education: “The Eastman is trying to come up with a novel way of preparing students for the real world. They’re getting students to think of themselves as musicians and/or about the mechanics of a musical career.”

Chuck's own current involvement with Eastman is part of another strand of the Institute of Music Leadership's work, providing musical opportunities for young high school students and continuing professional education for graduates and teachers already out in the profession. The Canadian Brass Institution, which is now in its fifth year and which runs from July 21 to 23 in 2006, resulted from conversations between Chuck and former Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra percussionist Ruth Cahn (another Eastman alumna!), who is now the Eastman School's Summer Session Director. The project has several significant aims: to bring brass players together to celebrate brass quintet playing; to encourage young high school players and to renew the enthusiasm of brass teachers and players of all ages. It enables Canadian Brass to share their 'outreach' and presentation techniques. It also gives the five quintets who attend this exclusive course the chance to hear a great concert by Canadian Brass, and to experience the intensity of the Eastman musical experience. Again, Chuck regards it as typical that such an event should be pioneered by Eastman:

"I thought it significant that the Eastman should be the hosts for this. It was compatible with their innovative summer schools in the Sixties, which dealt with things such as Recording at a time before anyone else had thought of it. I am proud that a school like Eastman would support our innovative programme. It is very new I think and I feel it will be a pace-setter."

The Canadian Brass Institute is just one of a number of such events held every summer. Others of interest to brass players in 2006 include a Trumpet Institute run by Jim Thompson from June 29-30 and Mark Kellogg's Trombone Institute from July 30 to August 3.

The provision of such courses is just one example of how Eastman reaches out to the wider world. Another is the way in which all student chamber music groups take part in the innovative Music For All Program, giving two performances every year at varied locations in the community such as schools, hospitals, and businesses. Chamber music is an important strand

throughout the students' four year undergraduate course, it being a requirement for performance majors that they play in some kind of chamber group for four out of their eight semesters. Freshmen are automatically put into a chamber music group – a wind or brass quartet or quintet – as soon as they arrive, and very often these ensembles survive into the years beyond if the group gels. Mark Kellogg explained why chamber music is so important: “In my view probably the two most important classes are chamber music and aural skills. They combine to give you the ability to listen accurately and intelligently. Through chamber music, with no conductor. you get a sense of independence, of being your own musical unit.”

The experience of playing in large ensembles is crucial, too, and there is no shortage of those at Eastman. Best known, of course, is the Eastman Wind Ensemble, still flying high more than fifty years after its foundation by Frederick Fennell, with tours to Japan and appearances at Carnegie Hall under new Director Mark Scatterday. 21 year old third year student John Elliott, who is a tuba player from New Hampshire, conveys the excitement that being a member of the ensemble still generates:

“One of the special things about Eastman that makes it great for brass players is the Eastman Wind Ensemble. The music that we get to play in that ensemble tends to be much more technically demanding than the vast majority of the orchestral literature and tends to put brass players in the spotlight more often. Coupled with this is the fact most of the music we do in the ensemble is either very new or mostly unheard of. It's always exciting to play with players who are excited about being part of something new and special.”

There are six major ensembles in all, in which brass players can participate. Undergraduate instrumentalists progress from the Eastman School Symphony Orchestra and Wind Orchestra to the Philharmonia, Wind Ensemble, Chamber Orchestra, and Musica Nova (the School's contemporary music ensemble). There is also Collegium Musicum, a virtuoso ensemble for the performance of music composed before 1700. Other ensembles include the

renowned Eastman Trombone Choir, first founded in 1941. It is now directed by John Marcellus and has an impressive catalogue of performances at prestigious venues and recordings to its name. There is also a Horn Choir, set up by Peter Kurau's predecessor and currently thriving under Kurau's direction, with 24 members, at least one concert a semester, and regular participation in international horn workshops. Their next concert in April is to include a performance of a new arrangement of Jupiter from Holst's *The Planets*, which certainly sounds worth hearing.

In addition to the official ensembles there is also plenty of what Peter Kurau calls 'the underground ensemble system' – the ensembles which the students set up themselves.

The main venues in which all these ensembles get to perform sound impressive. The Eastman Theatre, 'a magnificently beautiful hall with a rich cultural history', is the primary venue for the School's large ensembles. The smaller Kilbourn Hall, 'with its pure acoustics and elegant décor', is very highly regarded as a recital space. Vincent DiMartino describe these venues as "two of the greatest halls I have ever played in all my days. You never forget the sounds you heard, and made, back then."

For Vincent the experience of playing in ensembles at Eastman was obviously a high point, despite the illustrious career that has followed since. "At Eastman the ensembles are of a very high quality, like a professional orchestra. Such a high excellence of players in every area. It is an unreal situation! You never get it again when you leave. Some of the players I played with while I was a student there were the best players I have ever worked with. You get to play with wonderful ensembles. You make life-long friendships with some wonderful musicians." Vincent DiMartino's sentiments echo Mark Kellogg's earlier remark about being able to 'learn as much from your peer as your teachers' at Eastman, and is something that is also recognised by current students. Matt Osika (a trumpeter) speaks of "the outstanding work done by the trumpet studio, combined with the outstanding work done by the other brass departments, which has created a group of brass students that are not

only wonderful performers but also work well together when placed in sections.” John Elliott revels in the way he is “constantly being rewarded by great playing experiences. I am still able to surround myself constantly with great players in chamber groups or large ensembles or any type of music I want to pursue.”

The affection with which current and past tutors and students talk about the Eastman – the Eastman tug - seems to me to derive not only from first class musical experiences like that but also from the way in which the School is such a self-contained community. Some people – Chuck Daellenbach for one – think that this is no longer the advantage it once was. But I get the feeling it is so. Peter Kurau articulated point very well:

“I think what makes Eastman distinctive, aside from its long history of distinction, is that it is largely a resident faculty. All the other major conservatoires such as Juilliard and the Curtis Institute are largely an adjunct to musical things going on in the city. Of course in some ways that works in their favour. They can capitalise on the fact that they are part of a large city by drawing on the opera house and symphony orchestra. But this also means that the tutors not necessarily there all the time. At Rochester, which is a much smaller city – only a million people - we are here all the time and the tutors are all full time residents. There is therefore a very strong commitment to the students and to the school. If a student is in difficulty it is easy for them student to come by and search you out, and get the problem sorted. I do feel that the faculty here have a sense of devotion to the School and to the students. There is a feeling almost of family. I was nourished by this attitude when I was a student and I still feel it is the same now. “

Student John Elliott certainly seems to agree, and I shall leave him the last word: “Perhaps the greatest thing about going to Eastman is the fact that it is a very tight community of people during and after your attending the School. No matter where you go with your travels in music, you will always have a connection to someone, wherever you are.”

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