ETSU Department of Music Launches New Master's Program

By Jordan Austin

This fall, East Tennessee State University's Department of Music officially launched their first ever Master of Music program offering graduate concentrations in Performance, Conducting, Composition, and Music Education.

Behind the scenes, the creation of this new program has been years in the making, driven by faculty determination and a shared vision to expand artistic opportunities for musicians in the region. This shared vision is representative of a department that has steadily grown in size, artistic production and regional influence: something that is evident in both the ambition of its programming and the enthusiasm of current and prospective students alike.

The Master of Music program's inaugural semester rolled out with the expectation of drawing four incoming students. Instead, it over-delivered and has welcomed twelve graduate level students out of a large pool of applicants.

"We've just had so much interest with people asking if you have a graduate program and the answer has been no until now," said Dr. Matthew Potterton, professor and director of Greyscale. "We just felt like there was enough interest that we could get enough students to make it work, and we actually had more people apply and get accepted than we anticipated."

This initial wave of interest, along with the rapid growth that followed, signaled a clear demand for advanced arts education in the Tri Cities region.

"The closest area to get some sort of a Master's level artistic education in Knoxville, so it was clearly a need in this area," said Dr. Potterton. "This is my 13th year and each year I have had many of our graduates asking if we'd ever develop a master's program, so there's clearly a need."

Developing this new degree program required years of preparation, planning, and approval. Alongside the creation of new courses in the curriculum, the department also had to seek accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Music. The department also secured countless amounts of upper-administrative support in the form of graduate assistantships, something that has been a primary draw for many applicants.

For many that find themselves in this initial batch of graduate students, the appeal of this brand-new program lies in the many opportunities abound in the curriculum.

Ross Earl, a graduate assistant in choral conducting, stated that this unique structure provides students with growth opportunities that they aren't likely to get elsewhere.

"I get to work directly in the rehearsal room, at the podium and directing rehearsals," said Earl. "There's even been rehearsals where I've taken the entire rehearsal myself on several occasions. As a first-year master's student, that's just incredibly uncommon."

He also emphasized the faculty's support: "Uniformly across the board, everybody really cares about the success of the student. That's not always the case as you get into advanced degree programs."

For violin graduate assistant Abraham Ruiz, the opportunity to grow through leadership roles has been equally vital.

"One of the biggest challenges is to be the concertmaster of the orchestra, which is a very important leading position," said Ruiz. "I think I wouldn't have that opportunity almost anywhere else."

Though their paths in the program differ, both students share one unexpected outcome: discovering the Tri-Cities through a graduate experience rich with opportunity.

"I've been looking for a master's program for about two years," said Ruiz. "I initially had never heard of ETSU, but after looking into the program here it became the perfect combination of scholarship and affordability, great city, and the newness of the program."

Like with any first-year initiative, the program is still refining its structure, using vital feedback from students and faculty alike. With its first semester coming to a close, there's much work to be done before the program hits peak stride.

"There's still lots of things we might need to work through," said Earl. "However, those challenges are far outweighed by the opportunities being a part of something as special as this initial group."

For the department, having graduate students has been a clear benefit, allowing undergraduates to observe advanced study firsthand.

Both students and faculty agree: the program's launch marks a new chapter for the arts in ETSU. Ross described the department as "an ascendant program,constantly seeking to improve itself," adding that its growth has been "remarkable" over the past 15 years. If current trends continue,

the new master's program may soon become one of ETSU's most defining strengths, both for the university and for the region it serves.