



DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS PROGRAM SEES AMAZING GROWTH

BY: JOE FONTENOT

In June, Jieun Yun, a doctoral student in NOBTS' Doctor of Music Arts (DMA) program, was interviewed by The Times-Picayune of New Orleans for a Bach concert she performed at her church. Yun is one of record numbers of students currently in the NOBTS Doctor of Musical Arts program.

In the last few years, NOBTS' music department has seen a full enrollment in its doctoral program.

Dr. Darryl Ferrington, the director of the program, believes the high enrollment is due to the changes implemented in the last decade.

"It seems as though what we are offering is resonating with what needs are out in the church music community,"

Ferrington explained. This is in part because NOBTS is first a community seeking to help God's people work out His calling in their lives. And so the starting point is: Is this a God calling?

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Ferrington's passion is to see music be a unifier in the church, be it a younger generation with guitars and drums, an older generation with hymns, or some combination of the two. "If Christianity is to survive, we need an attitude of grace and unity toward one another. If the church is to grow, we need that."

A conviction Ferrington holds deeply is, "Worship is about the heart's expression to God."

Dr Ed Steele, professor of music in

Leavell College at NOBTS, says God's calling is critical.

"We are training the teachers," Steele said. Many songs have lyrics that sound right at first, but upon a closer listen have words that are not at all biblical. "We want our students to be adequately trained to become a theological filter for the theology that's taught in those songs."

But just because the program's first focus is on ministry does not mean it is soft. It is demanding, Ferrington insists. The program includes a full dissertation, as well as other academic rigors associated with a PhD. Through the years, the perennial advice to students has been: "difficult but doable."

This high standard of preparation was recently illustrated in Tyler Brinson, a DMA student, who won the 2015 GMA Dove Award for Choral Collection of the Year.

The program itself trains students in research, performance, teaching, ministry, and denominational leadership, allowing students to focus on the applied disciplines of voice, piano, organ, composition, or conducting.

For what has traditionally been a performance-oriented degree, the DMA at NOBTS today is different. It has an additional research component, allowing students to make their focus primarily on research in worship/hymnology. Ferrington notes that this new approach is one of the largest draws of new students.

In addition to the musical education, there are two significant takeaways a student can expect to gain from a DMA at NOBTS. The first is the camaraderie among student.

"They lean on each other. They become a tight-knit cadre." And with a big smile, Ferrington added, "That's a wonderful thing to see."

But there is another key takeaway -- the sweat equity. Doing the hard work required to progress through the program produces a sharper skill set, and it is this sharper skill set that enables NOBTS' students to become better tools in God's hands.

The 2016 fall enrollment has 15 students. This is over three times previous years' numbers. A significant factor is the program's remotely accessible format.

Dr. Michael Sharp, Professor of Worship Studies, says this format "has removed the distance barrier" and "allow[s] students who live in other regions of the country to take advantage of our advanced degree opportunities in church music." Sharp added that students can visit the main campus "only three times per semester for short seminar-style workshops."

Many DMA students have families and established ministries where they live. Uprooting to move here and then to move back again after graduation is impractical. The new DMA program seeks to help students maintain their local ministry, while pursuing God's call to a deeper education.

To students considering the program, he poses this key question: "Are you willing to give God the chance to do something with your life that you [may have] never considered?" ■