

All-Steinway School Initiative strikes the right chord

The high-quality sound and craftsmanship of Steinway pianos is widely recognized all over the world. To provide students and faculty with access to these exceptional instruments, Eastern Michigan University's music and dance department launched the All-Steinway School Initiative in 2007. The initiative hopes to raise \$2 million to replace and maintain 84 campus pianos.

"As an All-Steinway university we will build prestige, enhance student and faculty recruitment and create a lasting legacy of excellence in music education for future generations," said Dr. David Woike, head of the music department.

Since the initiative began, the department has been able to acquire four new Steinway pianos. One is in the Student Center, where it can be played by students or taken into the banquet rooms for special events. The other three pianos are in the faculty studio and student practice rooms in Alexander Hall.

James Jelasic (BM80), who was recognized as a Steinway Artist last year, has offered to lend a hand in the fundraising effort. As a Steinway Artist, he joins musicians as varied as Van Cliburn, Harry Connick, Jr. and Billy Joel. Steinway & Sons awards this coveted designation based on a rigorous review of a pianist's career, including degrees, performances, recordings and teaching. Steinway Artists have special access to Steinway pianos for performances anywhere in the world.

Jelasic's education at EMU also began with an honor: he won the Dillman scholarship vocal and instrumental competition against many other incoming freshmen. A second win the following year cemented his relationship with the University. "It was the first time in EMU history that anyone won that scholarship two years in a row," said Jelasic, who completed a bachelor's degree in piano performance.

At Eastern, Jelasic's talents were nurtured by faculty members such as Emily Lowe, who invited Jelasic to sing a capella with the madrigal singers on their tour of England and Ireland, a first for a freshman. "The EMU faculty really take you under their wing and mother and father you," said Jelasic. By the time he graduated, the once-shy young man had also performed twice with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

"It was obvious to everyone that he had real talent and was going to go places," said Paul Lehman, piano technician with Eastern Michigan's music and dance department. Lehman and Jelasic were fellow music students at EMU in the late 1970s.

Jelasic went on to complete a Master of Music degree in accompanying and chamber music from the University of Michigan in 1982. He then studied music in Germany and France before founding a society dance orchestra in Washington, D.C. in 1986. Led by the grand piano, the orchestra specializes in music of the 30s, 40s and 50s. Rockefellers, Kennedys and other well-known figures were frequent guests at the Park Hyatt Melrose Room, where Jelasic's group was the resident dance band for 20 years.

The reputation of Jelastic and his orchestra led to some flattering invitations. In 1996, Jac Nasser, Ford Motor Company's chief executive officer, flew the orchestra to Michigan to perform at the grand reopening of the Detroit Opera House. Closer to home, his group was invited to perform at one of the official balls for President George Bush's second inauguration in 2005.

Now, Jelastic's career includes co-owning Black Tie Arts Management, performing internationally, teaching private lessons as well as classes at Northern Virginia Community College and serving as minister of music at The Falls Church in Northern Virginia. Jelastic is also a recording artist, and his albums are available on iTunes.

--Lisa Donovan