LAST YEAR IN JANUARY, Graeme Jenkins, the music director of Dallas Opera, mounted the podium to conduct a performance of *Jephtha*, Handel's last oratorio, in a large-scale performance featuring period instruments in Dallas’s Meyerson Symphony Center. In his orchestra were not only professionals from the Dallas Bach Society but also a slew of student instrumentalists and singers from the University of North Texas (UNT) in nearby Denton.

The *Jephtha* performance was not the first time UNT students had rubbed elbows with early music professionals in a Handel cause, and it will not be the last. In 2001, Jenkins led a performance of *Israel in Egypt*, an effort that featured UNT’s Baroque Orchestra and its chamber choir, Canticum novum, Fort Worth Early Music, and the Helios Ensemble. A similar joint performance of *Samson* is planned for 2006.

“We immediately realized that collaboration between professionals and students was to everyone's advantage,” Lenora McCroskey would later write in *Counterpoint*, the magazine for alumni of the UNT College of Music. McCroskey, a professor of harpsichord and organ at UNT who participated in both performances, remembered, “The students gained invaluable experience sitting next to professional players, and the ‘pros’ were clearly impressed with the students’ enthusiasm and abilities.”

Rebecca Beasley, a soprano who is now pursuing a doctorate in early voice performance at UNT, sang choral and solo parts in the *Jephtha* performances. She says such collaborations create a very rare opportunity for students.
because of the wholly professional way in which they’re rehearsed and presented. “You come out with a very clear idea of what you’re preparing for,” she says.

The early music program at UNT attracts 80 of the 1,600 students enrolled in the school’s College of Music. “It compares with any other program in the country,” says Cecil Adkins, a musicologist who was its founder in 1963 and ran it until his retirement.

Student-professional performances, which now come along every two or three years, depending on the availability of funds, have become an important component of the program. But so are regular performances by the school’s select instrumental and vocal ensembles at the early music festivals in Boston and Berkeley.

Lutenist Lyle Nordstrom, who succeeded Adkins as director of the program in 2000, says he has assembled as many as 14 students for one of these coastal journeys, supported in part by money from the College of Music’s travel funds.

“We’re in Texas. We don’t have the advantages of living in New York or Boston or San Francisco, where there’s always an abundance of high-level early music events,” Nordstrom says, explaining why travel money is money well spent. In addition, of course, the larger early music world gets a chance to hear what’s going on at UNT—even if, as Adkins says, “I don’t know how many people I’ve run into, over the years, who don’t know where North Texas is.”

Nordstrom supplements the instruction of permanent faculty with guest artists, such as singer Julianne Baird, oboist Steve Hammer, and members of London Baroque.

The overriding philosophy Nordstrom brought to UNT was to give every early music participant as much solo work as possible. That might mean having each member of the UNT Baroque Orchestra perform part of a concerto during a concert. It might entail, in the course of a longer choral work, dividing up bass solos among several vocalists, instead of assigning them all to one person. And it probably means giving all early music students a solo recital, in settings that complement their levels of accomplishment.

“In order for students to grow, they have to have experiences where they’re responsible,” Nordstrom says. “That’s
what early music’s built on – the one-on-a-part solo element.”

So if everybody gets a chance, how does that prepare students for the big, bad world of cutthroat competition they’ll encounter after they leave UNT? “If you don’t have experience, then the big, bad world isn’t going to take you in,” says Douglas Beasley, an opera singer who’s been turned on by early voice and is pursuing a master’s degree in musicology.

Nordstrom has been equally adept as an administrator. “I have to give the credit to Lyle Nordstrom,” says James C. Scott, who was named dean of the UNT College of Music a year after Nordstrom was hired. “He built on the strong history of Cecil Adkins, who got the program going.”

Adkins says the hiring of Nordstrom amounted to the greatest compliment anyone could pay him when he retired. “He came in and picked up where I left off and made the program even better,” he says. “There’s no way around that.”

What Adkins left were many interested students, several permanent ensembles, a history of fine performances and, perhaps most importantly, a collection of more than 200 period instruments that could be loaned out to musicians who wanted to learn how to play them.

The collection is one of the reasons Nordstrom took the UNT job. It came into existence because Adkins spent countless hours in the shop – and thousands of dollars of his own money – buying or restoring instruments. As any knowledgeable observer of today’s music education scene knows, most students take up period instruments only after they spend what little money they have on buying and mastering modern ones. If the collection’s instruments were not available, many students would probably not be able to participate in the school’s early music ensembles.

While not all of the instruments in the Adkins collection are still playable, many are, particularly those used in the UNT Baroque Orchestra. What’s more, the College of Music’s budget now allocates as much as $20,000 a year for upgrades to the collection.

Try something different

At UNT, opportunities arise not only because so many resources are available to students but also because each part of the music program strives to be fully integrated into the whole. Early music is no exception. “You don’t always find that in a comprehensive school of music,” Scott says. “There can be a lot of silos within the musical enterprise. The UNT students of early music are not sequestered in one enterprise that doesn’t have anything to do with anything else.”

Instead, it’s not uncommon for, say, a student of modern violin to study modern styles with one teacher and play in a modern orchestra while also studying a period instrument with another teacher and performing in the UNT Baroque Orchestra. Nor is it out of the ordinary for a tenor, after singing leading roles in opera houses around the world, to suddenly become interested in early voice while pursuing a doctorate.

Adkins believes that the sharing of students among various stylistic camps ultimately helps attract the best players into each. He points to his string-instrumentalist daughters, whose presence in the early music program guided other students also to choose that course of study. “I do have to admit it,” he says. “They were my best allies.”

The result? Nearly any type of ensemble dating from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries can be assembled. Students can participate in the UNT Baroque Orchestra, a complete Baroque orchestra with as many as 35 members, or The Collegium Singers, a vocal group of 24 that specializes in early vocal literature for soloists and small groups. UNT is also home to a cornetto-sackbut ensemble, a broken consort of plucked and bowed instruments, and recorder and other early wind ensembles, as well as various Baroque trumpet and horn ensembles.

In addition, private instruction is offered in voice and for just about every instrument. Students are able to earn master’s and doctoral degrees in musicology with what Nordstrom calls “a strong performance aspect.”

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– Lyle Nordstrom
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Baroque violin as if it were a different instrument all together,” she says. “To make the adjustment from modern temperament and pitch to Baroque, I actually had to change the way I placed my fingers on the fingerboard.

“The Baroque bow requires many more inflections in the articulations than the modern bow,” she adds. “So one has to deal with the changes in technique and then execute a different system of phrasing with that technique in order to get the style across.”

As Baroque trumpet instructor Kathryn James Adduci suggests, the prospect of teaching modern brass players how to play valve-less instruments can seem a bit daunting, but a can-do attitude will achieve wonders.

“We just start them out,” says McCroskey, who’s seldom had a harpsichord student who knew how to read a figured bass before he or she arrived at UNT. “You’re not born learning how to brush your teeth. Somebody has to teach you.”

A skeptic might worry that Berry and students like her, who are learning a variety of styles to enhance their marketability, might learn a little about each but really never master any at all.

McCroskey acknowledges that possibility but suggests that the potential gains far outweigh the risks. “One has to remember that we are giving students tools. This is the place to be versatile. The academic world is the place to try it all on. Learning doesn’t stop here. It barely begins here.

“And when the student is done with school – hopefully, and I think it’s true with the kind of education we give them – they don’t stop learning at all. They can go further and maybe decide they like, say, jazz better and so proceed into graduate school for more specialized work. Many of the members of our early music orchestra and choral groups are undergraduates. That’s the place to figure it out.”

Dean Scott also believes that students must develop a sense of when to imbue their playing with early music knowledge and when to take a more modern approach. Judges at an audition for a spot in a modern orchestra may want to only hear the latter, even in the performance of a piece by Bach, and students must adjust accordingly.

Scott himself still plays a little Baroque flute, a pursuit he began in an already developed professional career. Although he no longer performs with it in public, early music “has certainly informed my thinking,” he says. “Every time I play a piece, it represents a new truce between what I know and the instrument and setting. There are inherent conflicts that have to be resolved. But that, in itself, is a very stimulating experience.”

Looking ahead
In any music school program, there’s always room for improvement. Scott maintains – and Nordstrom agrees – that UNT’s early music program is too dependent on what Scott calls “fractured” appointments. There are but two full-time instructors: Nordstrom and McCroskey. The rest are part-timers. As Scott says, “they can probably never get together at one time in the same place to have an early music faculty meeting.”

Scott is pleased with Nordstrom’s decisions but feels that more full-time faculty with a greater commitment to UNT’s early music program would enhance communication on a range of issues, from the choice of repertoire to have an early music faculty meeting.”

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