



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

Volume 26
Issue 2 *Summer 2017*

Article 5

2017

In the Mix

Nancy Steele Brokaw

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Recommended Citation

Steele Brokaw, Nancy (2017) "In the Mix," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol26/iss2/5>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

In the Mix

The first graduates of IWU's new Contemporary Musicianship major relish how the program has equipped them for multifaceted and independent careers as professional musicians.

Story by NANCY STEELE BROKAW

Roll over, Beethoven.

Meet classmates Ryan Donlin and Tommy Bravos, who this May became the first two graduates of IWU's new Contemporary Musicianship (CM) program. Launched in 2015, the major is designed to give students with wide-ranging musical interests a foothold in the quickly evolving world of professional music. At the same time, it harkens back to old masters like Beethoven who composed and performed across musical styles while administering their own careers.

“Contemporary Musicianship is the first comprehensive major of this type that I’m aware of in the U.S.,” says School of Music Director Mario Pelusi. “It builds on the University’s traditionally strong emphasis on performance and adds coursework in composition, improvisation, world music, recording techniques, music technology, and

music entrepreneurship.”

While many Illinois Wesleyan music students will continue training for a more specialized career — for example, in opera or orchestral music — others can now choose to be generalists.

The barriers between types of music, which were never watertight to begin with, are all but gone, according to David Vayo, Fern Rosetta Sherff Professor of Composition and Theory. Think of Yo-Yo Ma, who is continually expanding his playing field. Increasingly, young, classically trained musicians are performing in clubs and other non-traditional venues as often as in concert halls, “and they are comfortable playing a wider variety of styles than their predecessors of previous generations,” says Vayo.

Donlin and Bravos leave IWU ready for all these situations, notes Vayo, who helped develop the CM program. Through the CM major, students also learn music entrepreneurship as a means to develop practical, self-reliant skills. They can self-produce, record, and market their music. They know how to relate to audiences in a live setting. And they are able to manage the business sides of their careers. No need for an agent to book their gigs; they can do it themselves, says Vayo, “which is a good thing, since the agency-management model has ceased to be relevant for many young musicians.”

Selecting the CM major was a clear forward step for Donlin and Bravos in their eclectic musical journeys. For both, the journey began as first-graders plunking piano keys in private lessons.



Ryan Donlin (left) and Tommy Bravos (right) often collaborated together as IWU's first Contemporary Musicianship majors.

Donlin, who grew up in St. Louis, hated those lessons, and finally convinced his mom to let him quit after four years. But music remained in his life, from the contemporary Christian music played in his home to an endless variety of tracks obtained from a failed radio station's database by his father. From this database, he was especially drawn to heavy metal bands like Metallica before getting hooked on Radiohead, admired by Donlin for their "soft, sad songs."

In junior high, Donlin formed a basement band with several classmates. He sang vocals and also learned to play bass to complete the group's rock sound. By high school, he had picked up a variety of instruments: drums, acoustic bass, electric guitar — and even the once-dreaded piano.

He also began writing original music, finding inspiration in early 20th-century composers like Arnold Schoenberg who "expressed mourning with the grittiness of what it is to be alive." For his high school senior thesis, he composed, transcribed, and recorded eight non-traditional instrumental pieces.

A campus visit that included conversations with Vayo convinced him Illinois Wesleyan was a roomy fit for his musical ambitions. He settled on composition as a major but continued performing, including playing the double bass with IWU's Symphony Orchestra. When the CM major was announced his junior year, he leapt at the chance to focus his diverse musical interests into a single course of study.



As Donlin's musical brother at IWU, it's no surprise that Bravos shares a similar background. Growing up as one of four musical siblings in St. Charles, Ill., Bravos also took piano lessons and sang in school and church choirs. By high school, he added madrigals and vocal jazz to his repertoire. He also joined a band and wrote music for a friend's lyrics, a talent that quickly grew. By his senior year of high school, Bravos had scored an eight-song theatrical show.

On his first IWU visit, Bravos was considering several non-music majors but went ahead and auditioned in voice. As a gamble, he says, he had brought along scores of his music — and got a chance to show them to Vayo.

"It was the first time I'd ever received professional feedback," Bravos says, "and his ideas were so great." It sealed the deal, and Bravos enrolled as a composition major.

What he wanted then, and still wants most, is to write and perform pop music. To do that as well as he could, Bravos felt he needed classical training as part of his foundation, including theory and music history. He was also active in groups such as the Collegiate Choir, Chamber Singers, and Opera Theatre. When the CM major came along he saw that its course requirements were "what I wanted to take anyway." Like Donlin, he seized the opportunity.

Pioneers, with more to follow

Students with a major in Contemporary Musicianship must present junior and senior recitals: solo or ensemble pieces performed and curated by the student, in consultation with faculty, that incorporate innovative programming or presentations. In essence, CM majors are expected to create a signature musical event — placing these recitals in line with ongoing initiatives across the University for every student to have a signature experiential component of their education prior to graduation that will help better prepare them for their future careers.

"If you think about the word *signature* — meaning a distinguishing, identifying mark — it helps explain the uniqueness of this capstone experience," says Pelusi.

As juniors, Donlin and Bravos hosted the first-ever CM recital at Westbrook Auditorium, performed with backup from fellow School of Music students. It was provocatively titled *Love and Violence, in Color* — with the color provided both by twinkle lights and by Donlin's robe, fashioned from sheets of construction paper.

“The appeal was to make myself a dehumanized abstraction,” Donlin explains, adding with a laugh that he experienced some wardrobe malfunctions as the performance progressed.

A year later, for his senior recital, Donlin chose the Young Main Lounge for the venue, turning it into a candlelit, meditative performance space. Included was his original composition, “Teeth,” featuring a string quartet, a rock band, and a choir, mixed with choreographed and acted sections. It was a flip on an animal tale about a fish named Johnny who should have been given sharper teeth. Donlin says it reflected his own personal struggles.

Bravos’ first senior recital featured him at the piano, playing and singing his original piano pop tunes, assisted by the talents of Donlin and fellow CM major Robby Kuntz ’18. Mezzo-soprano Rebecca Buechel ’15 — who is now in Chicago after receiving her master’s in music from the University of Wisconsin — returned to campus to perform a song cycle Bravos composed for her. Several weeks later, Bravos performed a second recital, this one in classical vocal-performance style.

And now it’s off into the wider world of music for Illinois Wesleyan’s first ever CM majors, whom Vayo calls “true pioneers.” They will have in their back pocket what Vayo terms the “liberal arts version of a professional musical degree.” It is thus the kind of interdisciplinary heuristic degree institutions like IWU are best equipped to create. It will hopefully enable them to build a career of their own choosing rather than following a more restricted path dictated by external factors.

Will they make it?

Well, few doubt that being a success in the arts requires a lot of hard work, and this pair have already juggled a complex major, performed countless outside gigs, had a busy extracurricular life, and graduated cum laude.



Donlin, with other Wesleyan graduates, formed the group Red Scarves which is currently enjoying success with its single “Waiting on the Day.”

Bravos recorded an album after graduation and has a summer internship with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, where he is working in the marketing department. He has some commissioned pieces to compose, a few for IWU colleagues and one for international performance. He may also pursue a master’s in vocal jazz or contemporary performance. In the meantime, you can catch him performing his original music — with influence from Ben Folds’ style and the suave demeanor of Panic! at the Disco — in Chicago. That music, including the orchestrated pop anthem “Parking Garage” and booking information, can be found on his Facebook page.

Donlin is also headed to Chicago and perhaps eventually to graduate school for audio recording. He’s looking for a job as a composer — for example, at a startup radio station that focuses on composing for mood manipulation. He’ll also be trying to go big time with his band Red Scarves, one of two student pop bands who performed original music with the Illinois Wesleyan Symphony Orchestra during the 2015-16 academic year. They’re already achieving success, Donlin says, with a unique sound that reflects diverse influences like Bob Dylan, The Strokes, Talking Heads, Dawes, and New

Order. Band members include Ayethaw Tun ’15, Eric Novak ’15, Braden Poole ’16, Kuntz, and Donlin. Their poppish, bossa-nova flavored song, “Waiting on the Day,” is on Spotify, with its trippy accompanying video now on YouTube.

Meanwhile, several students besides Kuntz are following Bravos’ and Donlin’s footsteps as CM majors. Pelusi is certain the major will attract many new musicians to Illinois Wesleyan as word of this innovative program spreads.

The School of Music has enjoyed a national reputation for producing talented performers, composers, music educators, and scholars for more than 15 decades. This new CM major puts them at the vanguard for what comes next. So, same song, brand new arrangement.