NEXUS | PART I
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By Tony Woodcock

I was recently on the west coast for a few days visiting the University of Southern California and the weather really wasn’t what I was expecting. I stepped off the aircraft at LAX and suddenly found myself encountering a thunder and hail storm of Biblical proportions. But a few hours later the downpour had disappeared and was followed by a quite wonderful experience. A walk onto the campus of USC in that beautiful clear washed sunlight that only California seems able to produce. It was a surprising and engaging start to a visit that would introduce me to some educational developments and thinking that I found to be really quite extraordinary.

The USC campus reminds me in many ways of Disneyland. Its various disciplines occupying their own academic theme parks with appropriate architecture—Gothic, Roman, Renaissance, and Modernist. It’s a beautiful “treeful” campus of wide boulevards and throngs of students and more roller and hover boards than I have ever seen. The School of Music, my destination, was founded in 1884 and became the Thornton School in 1999 honoring Flora L. Thornton’s gift. It occupies a number of independent buildings including a concert hall, as well as facilities for faculty studios and teaching, ensembles, and recording all within one small block. Across the street is the new Glorya Kaufman School of Dance, which is just being finished and will be a major addition to the campus. I saw one of the first performances, a dance collaboration with the Music School in a project led by the great Bill T. Jones. Several of the school’s composers had specially written a number of short new works for the performances, which literally took the audience by storm. If this is the standard we can expect from the very first year of dance freshmen, what will see in a few years’ time?

Rob Cutietta (in photo above) is the Dean of Thornton, and he has a great deal on his plate. Having very successfully run the Music School since 2002, he is now also the Dean of the new Dance School. He is a committed and passionate educationalist with a reputation as one of the most creative and innovative thinkers in the field. Cutietta is also a prolific writer and in recent years has produced five books, all on Education or the Psychology of Music. Since 2006, he has hosted Ask the Dean, a popular weekly segment on Classical KUSC, the largest classical music station in the nation. During his tenure he has made a difference not just to the development of the School but also to the wider field of music education. The new work he is involved with at the present might well have the effect of creating a new paradigm for the teaching of music in Higher Education. But I am getting ahead of my story. Let me do a bit of scene setting first.

It is always interesting to analyze how change happens. There is the revolutionary model, storming the Bastille of orthodoxy and establishing, however brutally, the brilliant ideas of the new regime. But as we know this approach tends to suffer from the syndrome “everything must change in order for everything to remain the same.” As the French so succinctly put it “plus ça change...” Or there is the much slower and less violent process that fosters and values systemic change. With process you have the advantage of hearing all voices, providing a platform for involvement and eventual ownership, which can create permanent and positive change. It just takes longer and requires
not only patience but also a refined sense of managing the politics of change. Cutietta is just such a Higher Education manager who leads with a clear vision and a keen eye for what relationships are important to nurture and which discussions are absolutely essential.

The results at USC are very impressive. Always well regarded, the Classical Division has gone from strength to strength. It boasts star faculty such as Ralph Kirshbaum, Midori Goto (in photo at top), Andrew Shulman, and Glenn Dicterow; excellent programs in orchestral and chamber music; and an opera department that mounts two major productions (second from top) a year. It is a School that, in classical music terms alone, can rival the best in the world. And it recruits the finest students as a result.

But this is not where Cutietta has yet promoted his “revolution” of change. That distinction goes to the Contemporary Music Division, which refers not to the usual category of classical contemporary music, but to the music that seems to inhabit all our waking moments from film scoring to pop. I like this new use of the term “contemporary” as in many ways it throws out a challenge to our normal way of perceiving and hearing the music world. All too often we dismiss “other” music that is non-classical as inferior or lacking taste or, worst of all, commercial. And yet the sounds and ideas we too often dismiss represent the very music that makes our contemporary world so vibrant and alive.

Cutietta has created a Contemporary Division within the Thornton School that brings together jazz, music industry, technology, popular music, studio guitar, and film scoring into one single learning environment that currently enrolls 435 fulltime students and a huge applicant pool. And all this in a city that is unquestionably the entertainment capital of the world. It’s exciting stuff.

Among the Contemporary Division’s offerings, the Film Scoring program is rated as one of the best in the world, and Music Production (middle) provides training for an elite group of students who are expected to meet the very specialized requirements of the industry. The Music Industry Program is seen as providing the diverse skill set that students need in order to establish themselves professionally: Entrepreneurship, macro-economics, arts management, accounting, law, licensing, publishing and technology. Then there is the newest innovation of all, the Popular Music Program—one of Cutietta’s most innovative ideas, which has quickly established a vital place for itself in the music world.

What I particularly admire about the Popular Music program is how familiar and old fashioned the objectives are, as it stresses all musical skills from collaboration, to recording, performance and songwriting to music production and entrepreneurship. In many ways it inculcates an updated version of the professional toolkit that Beethoven and Mozart would have recognized as totally essential, but which seems to have eroded in importance in our quest for ever-increasing specialization.

The story of the program’s development over the last six to seven years provides fascinating insights into the management of change and the promotion of innovation. The approach was not to follow the usual policy of institutional accretion. Rather, the School made room for this program by clearing the curriculum path and cutting other less successful programs. Having identified the new program as a priority, Cutietta recruited a leader to “help evolve the School,” choosing Chris Sampson (second from bottom), a USC alum and a classically trained guitarist. Sampson returned to USC in 2003 and began shaping an initiative called “Protegé,” that combined existing mentoring and career coaching with a new
network of skills. By 2003/4 Sampson had established some prototypes that led to a fully developed initiative for a scalable Popular Music Program. For example, song writing classes, formerly “a sleepy elective” with no music major involvement, were enhanced. Their popularity exploded, with staggering increases in enrollment from 13 students to over 175 over four to five years.

Sampson is sanguine about his success and puts it down to better-structured and more enjoyable classes; technological developments happening globally at that time; the opportunities that students themselves rapidly identified with improved content; and the general sense that this was a perfect storm of opportunity. The huge success of these developments provided the foundation for the Popular Music program, created in 2009.

The Program’s current Chair is Patrice Rushen (opposite page, bottom), an outstanding example of a contemporary musician who is best known as a music director and keyboardist. From the Junior Performance Producers and Songwriters class I attended, which simply buzzed with the type of energy and optimism only undergrads can bring to a project, the work being produced is really excellent and speaks well for the future of the form. Industry leaders also attended this class working with the students in the most collaborative and supportive way as the students performed and recorded their own work.

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The more I sat in on classes at USC’s Thornton School, and talked with faculty about their approach to teaching the more I came to realize that Dean Rob Cutietta has been quietly encouraging some quite revolutionary new ideas. Vice Dean of the Contemporary Music Division Chris Sampson summed this up for me: “Music Schools train musicians in a linear way. They naturally start at the beginning and you gradually get better. There is merit to this approach. But we have developed a non-linear way of teaching. It’s serpentine-like, which the old model does not allow for. My approach can best be described as ‘the joy of the unexpected outcome,’ which quite simply allows musicians to develop in all directions. There is total flexibility and openness. The success of our students I feel is a direct result of this approach.”

Rick Schmunk, Chair of Music Production and Technology, speaks in a very similar way after re-examining the old model of teaching. He advocates a “flipped classroom” approach, which basically changes the traditional role of the teacher completely, from being the main focus in the classroom to one of mediator and producer of materials and videos. Such an approach places the responsibility for learning firmly with an empowered student group. This made me think of all those years I spent at the feet of various academic gurus, then the accepted route for the transmission of knowledge and wisdom, which Schmunk smilingly describes as the “sage on the stage.”

Such empowerment extends to
• arranging of internships in the music industry, which is left exclusively to the students. This boosts students’ confidence and selling instincts;
• opening doors in the business but allowing the students as young professional artists to manage their own opportunities;
• making musical arrangements from the most chaotic of material with the refinement of new sounds such as string quartets in song writing (George Martin would be delighted I am sure!)
• establishing a new way of teaching Music History in a non-linear way relating it...
to the student’s own musical experience. Empowerment is also manifested in the School’s Community Engagement activities, a program that Cutietta rightly boasts about. The School has 90–110 students volunteering to take part even though they earn no credits and only receive a few small fees. The program has grown to be the largest of its type on campus. It is all part of USC’s overall mission to support Social Entrepreneurship by working with the homeless, with chemotherapy patients, people suffering with dementia, and those in prisons. The students receive training specific to these new skills of interaction and connection and they describe their experiences as “transformational” and “life changing.”

The Thornton School is part of the massive edifice of USC with its 43,000 students and academic programs ranging from medicine to engineering. The School has about 1000 students at both the Undergrad, Graduate and DMA levels with 435 in the Contemporary Music Program and students drawn from across the States and globally. Tuition is comparable with the best US Schools at $51,442 at the Undergrad level and the School is able to offer scholarship support to many of its students to help with this burden. The Popular Music Program has grown during the brief time it has been in existence becoming even more selective than the School of Medicine and about even with Harvard, with a 6-7% acceptance rate from the 400+ applications that are received every year. This is impressive and shows clearly that Thornton is filling a need nationally for those wanting a new type of musical training plus the full advantages of a university style education.

I was also relieved and delighted to note that the School still allows applications from prospective students who don’t read or write music although they will be expected to learn these skills as part of the program if accepted. This means that Paul McCartney and Jimi Hendrix could still get in if we played “Back to the Future.”

Given the excellence of the Contemporary Music Program, it is not surprising that the industry is taking careful note of the Thornton School and establishing close working relationships and collaborations with it (the Songwriters Hall of Fame, the GRAMMY Foundation, the Recording Academy, Roland, KORG, ASCAP, and BMI, among others). The chances of students being employed at the end of their formal training are high. The School is well positioned to continue to develop its approach together with the small handful of other Schools in the US and Europe that offer similar training opportunities, such as Berklee School of Music, Berklee Valencia, the Royal Northern School of Music, the School of Music at Leeds University, the ICMP in London and those in the Netherlands and Freiburg.

What effect is this having upon the training of musicians specializing in the classical canon, an area of our culture that many people would argue is far more valued and valuable than the ephemera of the pop music world? It’s an interesting question. One part of the music world is expanding and enjoying relevance and a visibility that can only be dreamt of by the classical world, a world that many see as diminishing in importance and significance. The nexus between these two worlds may be at USC and the Thornton School with its balanced emphasis on both. (Berklee School of Music and Boston Conservatory will have a similar opportunity following their recently announced merger). It has already done so much to reinvent its academic training program that it is natural to ask what are the further plans to allow full integration. Students from the two musical worlds meet on campus on a daily basis to chat, argue, attend classes together, have fun, and share experiences and discoveries. It would certainly be an extraordinary achievement to redefine an approach to music education that sees no difference or distinction in the definition of music in the contemporary world.

But such an agenda is fraught with challenges. Indeed, how might a reimagined classical training retain the rich fundamentals of the classical tradition while capturing the dynamism of the pop world? How would students develop the necessary mastery of their instruments? How could the studio model of teaching be developed? Could an emphasis on chamber music with its creativity and flexibility replace the traditional focus on large ensemble performance? Could Entrepreneurial thinking and Social Responsibility become embedded in a school’s DNA? Could modern technology be incorporated into the training? How might the concert production values of the pop world revitalize the tired world of classical presentation? Would this help rebuild the audience? And how could faculty be drawn in to support this new model? The Thornton School has already shown itself to be effective in the management of change so maybe it could successfully take on these challenges. If it wants to seriously pursue such a campaign it will need time and tremendous energy and focus. It already has the academic infrastructure and pop world connections in place and those could make for a game changing development in the classical world.

Given the thoughtful and intentional processes that the Thornton School has demonstrated over many years it is probably the best positioned school in the States at the moment to take this forward. It could be very exciting and it could make the difference.