



**In Tune asks schools across the country how they're evaluating candidates today and forming their incoming classes.**

# What College Admission Officers Want



The College of Saint Rose

Oberlin College of Music

Columbia College Chicago

Longy School of Music of Bard College

Oberlin College of Music

University of St. Thomas



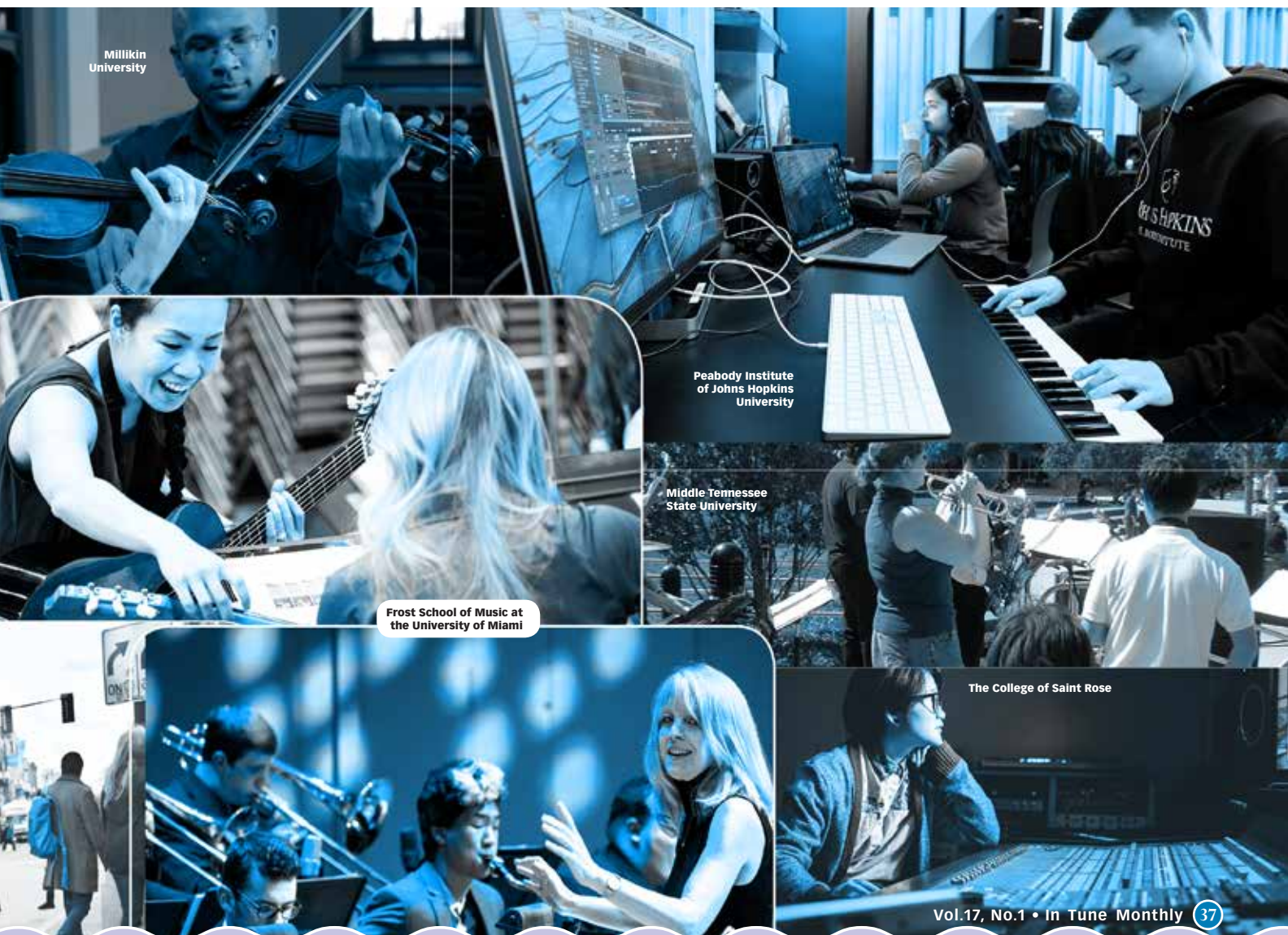
**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Before beginning this year's In Tune special report on "Best Music Schools," we want to affirm that this is a not ranking or judgment of a school's "quality." As we've stated at the start of past reports, our vision is to help students and families determine "the best music school, for you."

By Lori  
Schwartz  
Reichl

**D**IVERSITY ENHANCES ALL AREAS OF LIFE including the musical world. High school students know that they can go to college to learn how to expand their performance and/or music creation skills. And these days, motivated students can study all genres of music. They may have an interest in becoming a music educator, a composer or conductor. But many collegiate music programs are also preparing students for careers they may not even be aware of, much less considering.

For example, an abundance of professional positions exist to adapt, present and promote music, such as skilled agents, performance presenters, digital media and publicity creators, publishers, rights and royalties experts, radio program and online platform directors, recording engineers, instrument creators and repair technicians, as well as other various opportunities. There's now an array of higher music education majors and minors available to prepare students for all sorts of fascinating careers. But, since there isn't a lot of available training in these areas at the middle and high school level, what exactly are collegiate admissions officers

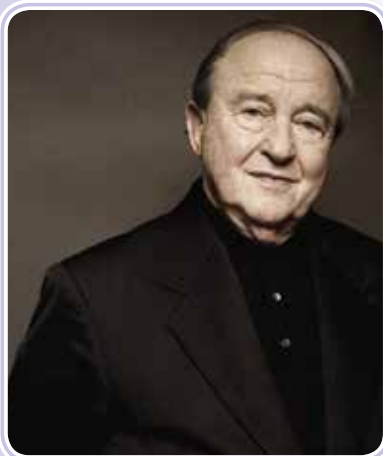
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# Teacher Spotlight

Here are some short vignettes of educators teaching undergrads at schools mentioned in this "Best Music Schools" report. All are notable, but are included only as representatives of the large and varied community of collegiate music educators.

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## MENAHÉM PRESSLER

**Indiana University/Jacobs**

**Dean Charles H. Webb Chair in Music,  
Distinguished Professor of Music in Piano**

**Pressler has been on the IU faculty** since 1955. He has established himself among the world's most eminent musicians and is co-founder and sole pianist of the former Beaux Arts Trio. He also teaches private lessons at IU. He has received six GRAMMY nominations, Chamber Music America's Distinguished Service Award, and the Gold Medal of Merit from the National Society of Arts and Letters. He was elected into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. And in 2007, was appointed as an Honorary Fellow of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. In 2005, he received the German president's Deutsche Bundesverdienstkreuz (German Cross of Merit) First Class, Germany's highest honor, and France's highest cultural honor, the Commandeur in the Order of Arts and Letters award. ♦

## BEST Music SCHOOLS 2020



Frost School of Music at the University of Miami

and music department faculty looking for in candidates interested in such programs?

Dr. Shersten Johnson, Professor and Chair of Music at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota says "There's no single thing the university looks for in an application. Each is evaluated holistically, with academic, extracurricular, and personal achievements all considered." However, an overall theme emerging from institutions of higher learning is that they want students who have investigated and are interested in their particular top-notch training and are *serious* in their musical pursuits.

Dr. David L. Fish, Professor of Music at Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina says that "passion, dedication, and talent" are key elements he looks for in outstanding candidates. Dr. Fish believes that talent and a singular artistic voice are more important than any one particular application component and can be indicators for success in a wide variety of musical pursuits.

Karen Kerr, Director of Admission and Recruitment at Frost School of Music at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida professes "We are

**"We are particularly interested in students who aspire to be agents of change through their music. We want to attract people who are going to make a difference in the lives of others."**

**- Karen Kerr,**

Director of Admission and Recruitment  
at Frost School of Music at the University of Miami



# Teacher Spotlight



## CASSANDRA O'NEAL

**Columbia College Chicago**

**Assistant Professor of Music Instruction**

**Cassandra O'Neal is an American** keyboardist, musical director, singer, composer, producer and Assistant Professor of Music Instruction at Columbia College Chicago. She uses the lessons she's learned from her 20 years of experience working as a musician alongside artists like Prince, Jay-Z, Pink, LeAnn Rimes, Mary J. Blige and Macy Gray to teach classes in music theory, ear training and performance. O'Neal received a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Jazz & Contemporary Music from The New School (New York) in 2018. "My ultimate goal is to bridge the gap between academia and the music industry by bringing both sides together in an education setting. By doing so, I can give students the tools they need to thrive in both worlds." Cassandra O'Neal has been 'in the trenches' and she strives to offer both compassion and motivation to her students. ♦

**BEST** *Music* **SCHOOLS**  
**2020**



looking for talented and bright students—a well-rounded student that is often a multi-faceted musician and has a desire to learn, excel, and advance through valuable training with our faculty." At Longy School of Music of Bard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Tyler Reece, Director of Admissions and Student Services, insists that institutions are looking for more than just good students and proficient musicians. "We are particularly interested in students who aspire to be agents of change through their music. We want to attract people who are going to make a difference in the lives of others."

However, and particularly for conservatory teaching and performance programs, students who are accepted to institutions of higher learning are typically devoted musicians with a strong background in musical training. "Applicants must have prior experience in vocal and/or instrumental music through school, church, or community organizations. Private instruction is very helpful, but not required" says Dr. Michael Parkinson, Director of the School of Music at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Parkinson mentions that music reading skills are essential for all applicants to competitive programs, regardless of instrument or area of interest. He has also seen a recent increase in prospective students applying for admission who have an entrepreneurial attitude about music and their long-term career goals. "This is very exciting!" he says. Programs are adjusting their offerings and creating new and innovative courses to meet the needs of their students and of business trends.

However, while a musical background undeniably offers students the ability to take advanced training earlier in their collegiate careers, Sebastian Huydts, Associate Professor and Acting Chair of the Department of Music at Columbia

## Teacher Spotlight



### DR. STEVE COLE

**University of St. Thomas  
(Minnesota)**

**Clinical Professor of Music Industry,  
Director of Music Business**

**Dr. Steve Cole teaches** 'Intro to Music Business', a course that explores the facets of technology, economics, industry structures, marketing, audiences, and artistic innovations in the music industry. The curriculum allows students to explore their personal career interests. In addition to elective and applied saxophone classes, Cole also teaches a class called 'Entrepreneurial Careers Music' with an emphasis on innovation and self-efficacy as it applies to the skills, values and practices that are essential to creating flourishing careers in music. Steve's former students are thriving professionals at leading organizations in the entertainment industry. His own career as a recording artist began in 1998 when he signed with Atlantic Records, and his eight subsequent releases (Warner Brothers, Blue Note) have earned multiple radio hits, hundreds of thousands of album sales, and millions of streams. He's currently under contract as an artist with Mack Avenue/Artistry records and as a writer with Universal Music Publishing. "I strive to provide a learning environment of empathy and psychological safety that promotes creative confidence, allowing students to realize their full potential both intellectually and professionally." Cole has a bachelor's in economics from Northwestern University; an MBA in Business Economics/Marketing from the University of Chicago, Booth School of Business, and an EdD in Organization Development and Change from the University of St. Thomas, Opus College of Business. ♦

## BEST Music SCHOOLS 2020



College Chicago in Chicago, Illinois mentions, "Our forward looking curriculum is designed to meet students where they are in their development. Highly motivated students who possess a strong work ethic can achieve substantial growth, and increase their potential for success regardless of prior training." Huydts observes that students often come from a great variety of backgrounds and musical styles ranging from bluegrass, classical, gospel, hip-hop, jazz, rock, and R&B through participation in various types of performing ensembles, and the college seeks such diversity in its candidates.

As part of the acceptance process, but depending on the program being applied for, many institutions will require candidates to perform live with a solo audition on their primary instruments. Institutions will indicate requirements for each instrument or voice and often outline an appropriate level of repertoire that should be prepared for an audition.

At Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, Michele Mengel Scherch, Communications Coordinator, says that when faculty audition prospective students, they are not exclusively listening for those who have reached a certain skill level, but rather for students for whom they deem teachable. "Students come to us from all types of socio-economic backgrounds and many have not had the opportunities for extensive private lessons, expensive instruments, summer festivals, etc. The faculty are sensitive to that and are looking for a student's potential, at least as much as the acquired skill level." In addition, faculty are looking for indications of musicality separate from technical skill. "What does a student have to say? Is there an emotional element



## Teacher Spotlight



### JEFF LITTLE

#### Catawba College

Faculty/Artist in Residence, Popular Music Director, Music Business

**Jeff Little is an acclaimed** Appalachian-style pianist who was one of Doc Watson's closest musical associates for many years. At Catawba, Jeff teaches undergraduate courses in songwriting, music technology, audio recording, and music business in addition to directing a roots ensemble. He has over 30 years of experience as a critically acclaimed musician, artist manager, educator and administrator for college music industry programs. He has performed at notable venues and events including the Smithsonian Institution, the American Folk Festival, the National Council for the Traditional Arts Tours, American Piano Masters, NPR Mountain Stage, and the PBS concert "Doc Watson and Jeff Little." He has been featured many times on PBS as well as NPR and has performed for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in such countries as Sri Lanka, Oman, Bahrain, France and Tanzania. He has also worked in many management and production areas of the music industry with artists such as Keith Urban and John Michael Montgomery. Jeff has daily contact with undergrads in the music program and says, "Our goal is to provide our students a broad-based real world education to create their own pathway to the music industry." ♦

## BEST *Music* SCHOOLS 2020



Catawba College

in their performance or composition in addition to technical ability? Music is a means of expression and faculty always evaluate the ability of an applicant to "say something" with their art." And, while many institutions are judging specific musical competencies during auditions, Reece encourages that "sometimes a glimpse of potential is enough to inform our decision."

Students often require a reminder that the audition is only one component of the application process. Dr. Sherwood Wise, Associate Professor and Department Chair of Music at The College of Saint Rose in Albany, New York reveals that "We do not look for perfection, rather a 'musical spark' which can be cultivated. Expect to be nervous, but remember that the audition committee is rooting for you and wants you to succeed; it will be the friendliest audience you've ever performed for!"

For programs that do not require an audition, Huydts says "Music depart-

**"The relationship between a studio teacher and the student is the most important relationship they will have during their education, and it is important for both parties to learn what they can about each other."**

**- Michele Mengel Scherch**

Communications Coordinator Peabody Institute  
of the Johns Hopkins University,

## Teacher Spotlight



### DR. ANDREW KRIKUN

**Bergen Community College**

**Professor of Music**

**Krikun teaches courses in** songwriting, world music and popular music. His band, Andy and the Rattlesnakes, was a seminal force in the L.A. Punk/New Wave scene in the early 1980s. He holds a master's in ethnomusicology from UCLA and a Ph.D in music education from NYU. His research studies have appeared in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters, and he has presented at conferences in the U.S., Great Britain, Canada and China. In 2006, he was awarded a NISOD Teaching Excellence Award from the University of Texas. He served as an executive board member of the Association of Popular Music Education from 2010-2019, he's written music for theatre and film projects and continues to write, perform, and record for eclectic musical projects. "Music studies in the 21st century should include a diversity of musical genres such as popular music, world music, folk music and classical music. In addition, students should be provided with an education that includes state-of-the-art music technology and music business skills." ♦

## BEST *Music* SCHOOLS 2020



Oberlin Conservatory of Music

ment faculty members will evaluate students' music theory knowledge and performance skills before their first semester." The goal of this evaluation is to place students in the appropriate level of coursework. If students do not have formal training, Huydts encourages that "our curriculum will help them gain the knowledge and skills they will need to develop and refine their talents. If students already have formal training, they can enroll in higher level courses that will bring their musicianship to the next level."

Some institutions are permitting prospective students the option to submit recordings or videos that demonstrate musical achievement. Huydts says "When students apply on the college's website, they will be given an opportunity to upload videos of their performances and audio files, as well as original compositions and charts, an essay, and a resume of musical successes to be

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**- Dr. Sherwood Wise**

Associate Professor and Department  
Chair of Music at The College of Saint Rose



## Teacher Spotlight



### GERARDO "LALO" DAVILA

Middle Tennessee  
State University

Professor of Music,  
Director of Percussion Studies

#### Lalo Davila teaches percussion

ensemble, salsa band, steel drum band and marching percussion activities. Davila has extensive experience both as an educator and performer and in 1998 was named one of Nashville's Top Five Percussionists of the Year. He joined the MTSU faculty in the fall of 1987 with a Masters in Music from the University of North Texas, he is a member of the MTSU Long Range Planning Committee and an adviser to several students. He has performed with The Nashville Symphony, Nashville Chamber Orchestra, Nashville Ballet, Nashville Jazz Orchestra, Six Pence None The Richer, Clay Walker, Take 6, Allen Vizzutti, Lalo and Friends Salsa Band and GRAMMY-Nominated Artist Kirk Whalum. His music can be heard in movies such as 'The Equalizer,' 'The Amazing Burt Wonderstone,' 'McFarland USA' and more. Lalo is known as an outstanding clinician and adjudicator; he's conducted clinics throughout the US, Mexico, Cuba, and Japan. His goals are 'to provide our students with life skills (and) the ability to learn a lot of percussion instruments in an effort to keep them employed as working musicians and to make them employable as soon as they graduate from MTSU.' ♦

BEST *Music* SCHOOLS  
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The College of Saint Rose

evaluated." While this is not required, Huydts strongly recommends that students write an essay and include all awards, community involvement, and musical experiences such as participation in all school and social performing ensembles and local, state, and regional festivals. Some acceptance decisions are based on more than musical. At Longy School of Music, creativity is a core component of the search for future students. Reece comments that some of the most appealing applications come from "dedicated musicians who can show us examples of innovative projects that may have impacted the community."

When applying to institutions, prospective students and their families are often concerned about how much emphasis is placed on grades and test scores. However, each institution tends to have a different approach to the amount of importance placed on each. Kerr says "An applicant's academic preparedness is important. We do not have minimum GPA/score requirements because the university does a very holistic review." This review includes a host of factors such as the student's GPA, standardized test scores, a personal or philosophical essay, letters of recommendation, and the rigor of the curriculum. However, some institutions do have grade requirements and often will not consider candidates who fall short of these expectations. Parkinson states "The great majority of our applicants have at least a 3.0 or higher grade point average and an ACT score of 24 or higher. Out-of-state students must have a 25 on the ACT and a 3.5 GPA to qualify for significant academic aid." Most importantly, institutions prefer to witness evidence that prospective students have the ability to dedicate them-



selves to their studies. Reece remarks “There are all sorts of different learning styles that may not be represented best in the form of a grade.”

Cathy Partlow Strauss, Director of Conservatory Communications at Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio suggests a few things prospective students can do to research whether a school could be right for them. “Examine the school’s website, view the school’s live-streamed performances, visit the campus, and connect with faculty by emailing them. Get to know the teachers. Sampling lessons or meetings with faculty are a great idea!” Many institutions encourage Skype calls, too. Scherch offers “The relationship between a studio teacher and the student is the most important relationship they will have during their education, and it is important for both parties to learn what they can about each other.” So, some schools are looking for a personal connection and could see evidence of an applicant’s proactivity in reaching out as a deciding factor in a candidate’s acceptance.

If students and families are still uncertain as to the expectations for admission to higher institutions or concerned about the possibility of acceptance, most admissions teams are very responsive to questions from potential students and their families. Kerr adds “It is important for students to take advantage of all the information available. Websites are a great resource and so are the staff at the

**“Be as true to yourself as possible. We are not looking for one type of student. In fact, the more unique and interesting you appear, the more likely you will jump off the page, so to speak.”**

**- Tyler Reece**, Director of Admissions and Student Services Director of Admission and Recruitment Longy School of Music of Bard College



school.” Reece agrees and mentions that one of the benefits of being a smaller conservatory is that potential students have regular and direct access to the admissions staff. “We welcome interested students to contact us...even just to chat. From there, we are happy to guide students through our application process, in which they will be able to expound upon their skills and background before we hold auditions in February.”

The desire to prepare, research, select, and apply to a higher level music education program can be emotional, overwhelming, and time consuming. However, students’ ability to express and represent themselves individually is essential. Beyond gender, race, community and geography, there are musical styles to consider, certain instrumentalists needed, certain vocalists needed, and people who want to learn about the music industry. The list goes on and on. When putting together a class, admissions teams are looking for diversity in more ways than you might think, and you might be just who they’re looking for!

Reece reminds potential students to “Be as true to yourself as possible. We are not looking for one type of student. In fact, the more unique and interesting you appear, the more likely you will jump off the page, so to speak.” ●

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