



OU ARTS MANAGEMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

'Creating Artpreneurs'

OU's new Arts Management and Entrepreneurship program prepares graduates for careers that combine artistic talent and business acumen.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP



As cellist for one of the nation’s hottest classical quartets, Andrew Yee has shared music with people around the world. But he was keenly aware that one of the most important people in his life was missing out.

“My mother has been profoundly hard of hearing since she was born. In the higher-range frequencies, she is almost completely deaf. Because I play the cello, she can hear most of what I do, but violins are almost silent to her,” says the Attacca Quartet founder. “I would love for her to feel like she is at the same show and experiencing it in the same way that everyone else is.”

Yee had an idea to make that possible: a wearable “garment” that would use Bluetooth technology to produce vibrations at the same frequency as musical notes. “When I play music, I can feel it vibrating in my chest, on my fingertips, all over. I understand music that way,” he says.

The two-time Julliard graduate added sketches for the garment to a notebook full of other thoughts and figured that’s where they would stay. “I have a very active, creative brain, but when it comes time to do anything about it, I sort of throw up my hands,” he says.


Then Yee ran into a friend who is helping artists turn their ideas into entrepreneurship at the University of Oklahoma.

“Many artists don’t know how to get around a balance sheet, how to advocate for why art is so important or how to market their ideas,” says Adrian Fung, associate dean of OU’s Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts and coordinator of OU’s new Arts Management and Entrepreneurship certificate program.

“How do we give artists the survival kit that they need?” he asks. “Sixty-five percent of fine arts graduates are self-employed, according to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics. Eighty percent of them will, at one time, have relied on being self-employed. Are we teaching students how to be self-employed?”

An internationally recognized cellist in his own right, Fung was nominated for a Juno – Canada’s version of the Grammys – and earned an MBA. That makes him something of a fine arts unicorn. It also makes him the perfect person to train OU students for the 21st-century arts marketplace, says Weitzenhoffer College Dean Mary Margaret Holt.

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“Sometimes for artists, commercial success is almost a four-letter word,” admits Holt, whose ballet career took her to companies in San Francisco, New York and Houston before she joined OU’s School of Dance more than 30 years ago. “I remember believing that I was going to establish a successful career based on love. But that’s less and less possible because of economic strains that have affected the arts.”

Financial support from local and national arts organizations has steadily shrunk, Holt says. “Artists must be very creative about how they manage their careers,” she adds. “I became concerned that we hadn’t given our students enough of a practical base as young artists, to help propel their careers forward in being able to negotiate and understand business principles that could help them.”

Holt and Associate Dean Brian Britt researched arts management programs at other universities and discovered that many focus on the policy sector. They believed entrepreneurship would be a better fit for OU students and found a willing partner at the Price College of Business, which recently was ranked 50th in the nation by *U.S. News and World Report*.

“We always talk about ‘competitive advantages’ in the business world,” says Fung, who previously managed a \$10 million budget as vice president of innovation for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. “When I came to visit OU, I noticed several wonderful things coming together that don’t really happen at other universities: collaboration and the spirit of giving. No one is trying to protect their turf.”

With input from Price College, Fung and Holt spent a year designing the Arts Management and Entrepreneurship graduate certificate, which can supplement any OU master’s



Sherwin Lainez

“After I took their advice, my idea suddenly had a reason, a purpose and a foundation,” Andrew Yee says of his experience working with senior fellows at OU’s International Arts Incubator.

degree. Students learn everything from strategy and negotiation to copyright law, nonprofit finances and marketing.

“We think it makes all the sense in the world,” Holt says, adding that the highly selective program launched in fall 2018 and quickly attracted 15 graduate students. She believes the program could double in size.

Fung uses an analogy from the world of classical music to explain the demand for such training. “The day and age when we go into a concert hall, wait in the wings in ties and tail to play, and then go home after the concert is probably over. We need to be the best advocates for our art. Who else can speak to the magic of making art but us?”

Ruby Chou speaks often of that magic as executive director of Salt Lake City’s Mundi Project, a music organization that provides pianos and quality music experiences for low-income families.

Chou had only been on the job four months when she met OU’s Adrian Fung at a national conference. She told him about a vision she was pursuing: an intergenerational music partnership between the Mundi Project and Neighborhood House, a 125-year-old nonprofit that provides care programs for children and elders. “We are using music as a way of bring-



Scott Poller

OU's International Arts Incubator gave Ruby Chou the opportunity to work with professionals who understand the intersecting worlds of business and the arts. That same intersection is the focus of OU's new Arts Management and Entrepreneurship certificate program.

ing generations together," she says.

Both organizations quickly signed on and Chou faced the challenge of making her idea work. Though she has two degrees in piano performance and a doctorate in music, she was worried.

"I have no business background whatsoever," she says. "How can I successfully get this partnership off the ground so we can sustain the program? If you talk to artists, you get one perspective; if you talk to businesspeople, sometimes you feel like there's a brick wall between you."

Fung told Chou about OU's Arts Management and Entrepreneurship program and encouraged her to apply to the program's newest offering: The International Arts Incubator, a "business boot camp for the arts" that serves as both an internship for OU arts management students and a transformational experience for arts entrepreneurs.

"I thought, 'Done,'" says Chou. "I will commit to this to be able to work with people who have business acumen and also understand the arts perspective."

The Attacca Quartet's Andrew Yee remembers having a similar response. "When Adrian described the arts incubator and said, 'We're going to give you the tools to learn the skills

and approach of entrepreneurship, I felt like, 'Oh my God, I'm allowed to know how to *do* that?'" he laughs. "It blew my mind."

After a competitive application process, eight finalists were selected for the five-day arts incubator, which was held last May at OU's Tom Love Innovation Hub in Norman and the Gene Rainbolt Graduate School of Business in Oklahoma City. The finalists represented a wide range of the arts, including opera, theater, classical music and photography, and each brought with them an entrepreneurial idea.

The newly dubbed "artpreneurs" were quickly immersed in mastery sessions taught by Fung and Price College faculty members on such topics as strategy, negotiation, the business canvas model, and pitch preparation.

"The second we've left that room, they get to work trying to build everything into their programs," Fung says. The artpreneurs were aided by a team of graduate consultants, interns from OU's Arts Management and Entrepreneurship program who had studied the same topics in their coursework and reviewed the finalists' projects a month in advance.

Interns employed everything they'd learned, and Yee believes their help was invaluable. "They were a sounding board



for my ideas. They also helped me figure out some of my startup costs and put them into spreadsheets,” he says, adding that the students weren’t shy about offering critiques or asking hard questions.

Kristen Young, an OU Arts Management and Entrepreneurship student from Fairfield, Conn., says she took special pleasure in helping artpreneur Nuné Melik. Melik hopes to digitize what might be the largest-known personal library of classical music from her home country of Armenia and develop an app.

“It was this beautiful intersection of business and art,” Young says of her work on the project.

The arts incubator also has been nicknamed a “*Shark Tank* for the arts” after the popular television show, and participants soon discovered why. On the second night, they pitched their ideas to a panel of “senior fellows” – fine arts experts who would be paired with them as mentors and champions.

“No pressure,” pans artpreneur Ruby Chou. “We just had to give our pitches to a room full of strangers whose titles were ‘experts.’”

Among them was Ryhna Thompson, president of Envision Management of Montreal. Thompson works closely with musicians who often collaborate across multiple art disciplines. “I had faith that the people who would be in the room were ready to take a leap,” she says. “Just to know that these ideas are bubbling was exciting. And it was a surprise how much the process was going to challenge me, as well.”



“Artpreneurs” offer their pitch before fellow arts incubator participants, who were able to offer immediate input and requests for more information using the cloud-based instant messaging platform Slack.



An intergenerational partnership that brings elders and children together through music was one of two winning projects during OU’s first International Arts Incubator. Also receiving the prize was a concept for wearable technology that will help people with hearing losses to experience music.



Adrian Fung believes the International Arts Incubator will evaluate and address unproven, long-held beliefs within the arts marketplace. In addition to a certificate program and the competitively selective incubator, OU Arts Management and Entrepreneurship offers a national conference and underlying research lab for year-round study, analysis and publication.

Each senior fellow delved into the heart, mission and fine details of a project and offered precise, focused feedback through objective-based coaching. Some asked entrepreneurs to further develop their business plans or project expenses.

“Our graduate students went to work on that,” Fung says, adding that in one case, OU students discovered an entrepreneur’s organization had undetected accounting problems and fixed them. “Our entrepreneur took that back to their board; it was unbelievable.”

Soon, it was time for the signature event of OU’s International Arts Incubator: Roles reversed, and senior fellows were responsible for pitching the entrepreneur’s concept to a listening audience.

The senior fellows took their new role seriously. “I had to live and breathe a project from another person’s point of view and try to share it with as much or even more conviction,” Thompson says.

“What I find too rare in the performing arts is an actual belief and interest in artists,” shares senior fellow Shanta Thake, senior director of artistic programs for Joseph Papp’s

famed The Public Theater in New York City. “That was fascinating and magical, the idea that you can be in a supportive room of people who can articulate the value of your project in a way that will strengthen it in the end.”

After yet another late night of work with OU’s graduate consultants and one final pitch presentation, the senior fellows deliberated and chose to split a \$10,000 award between Yee and Chou. The prize was underwritten by senior fellow and 1962 OU alumnus Max Weitzenhoffer, a Tony Award-winning theater producer in New York and London.

“I was floored,” Chou says. “I remember feeling so proud of everyone; any one of us could have won that prize.”

Since May, Chou has gotten Mundi Project’s collaboration with Neighborhood House up and running, and she recently shared her experiences during TEDx Salt Lake City. Ironically, the live speaker event asked Chou for a 90-second video pitch while she was at OU’s incubation lab. “I thought, ‘I’m in the perfect place!’” she says.

The International Arts Incubator hopes to continue being that perfect place for entrepreneurial artists as it grows the event into one aspect of a national conference hosted by OU May 11 through 16, 2020. The conference also will feature research findings from the lab’s first year.

“People don’t think about research in the fine arts,” Holt says, “but it’s a huge part of what we do. Our labs just look different – they’re concert halls and theaters.”

Among outcomes will be an update on Yee’s “garment” project. Thanks to connections formed during the arts incubator, Yee has consulted with the video game software developer for *Guitar Hero* and will work with the virtual reality lab at OU’s Bizzell Memorial Library to develop a prototype.

“I got a feeling of liberation,” Yee sums up his experience with the International Arts Incubator and OU’s Arts Management and Entrepreneurship program. “I realized how well I play the cello doesn’t dictate my worth to the world.

“There’s so much to learn, and it’s so exciting. It’s like a nice, new pair of glasses for the arts.”

Editor’s Note: For more information on the International Arts Incubator or to register for the 2020 conference, visit <http://www.ou.edu/finearts/ame/arts-incubation-lab>.

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