



Striving for new highs

When a music college wants to demonstrate its commitment to excellence, there is no better way than by becoming an All-Steinway School. Tim Glynne-Jones speaks to the chair of an American faculty that has done just that

High Point University in North Carolina is a college with ambition. In 2007 it embarked on a major development project that has already seen close to half a billion dollars being invested in new buildings, renovations, academic programmes and scholarships. And in January this year it became the 110th All-Steinway School.

Fourteen brand new pianos were delivered to the Department of Music at HPU on 11th January. Among them were 6ft and 7ft Steinway grand pianos and upright pianos that were hand crafted in New York, as well as a couple of Boston pianos. To the man responsible for initiating the purchase, it represented an excellent investment.

Dr Marc Ashley Foster was appointed chair of the Department of Music in July 2009. His task: to help it grow and give it a sense of regional distinction. The music programme was only four years old when he took over, but apart from two concert grands, the facilities left a lot to be desired. "Our pianos were lacking to say the least," he says. "They were in deplorable condition. I kid you not – in one practice room there was an old player piano with the scrolling music. I hunted around and replaced it with a 1909 Starr piano that I found hidden away."

If the department was going to live up to HPU's commitment to excellence, Foster knew his first priority would be to improve the quality of the instruments. He looked at a number of options but only one really met his requirements.

"The more I talked and reflected on it, the more it came down to All-Steinway School designation. High Point University is an extraordinary place and it is committed to excellence. There may have been cheaper options, but for the quality of the instruments and the long-term investment, Steinway was the best choice.



Above: the Hayworth Fine Arts Center, impressive landmark and home to the Music Department
Opposite: the concert hall in the Hayworth Fine Arts Center
Below: the Qubein School of Communication, one of the new buildings at High Point University
Bottom: Dr Marc Foster (centre) watches a student put one of the new Steinways through its paces

"Theirs are the only pianos made today that appreciate in value after purchase. Our investment will grow measurably in a matter of a mere five to ten years."

High Point University was founded in 1924 as a joint venture between the City of High Point and the Methodist Protestant Church. Today it has around 3,700 students from 50 countries and 44 states. Only a quarter come from within North Carolina itself. The development project has seen the campus expand by 120 acres to 210 acres, with ten new buildings and two stadiums being constructed. More than 1,000,000 square feet of new space has been added and they are also breaking ground on a new Greek Village that will have fourteen new buildings as well as a new School of Education building.

The Department of Music is based in the Hayworth Fine Arts Center, which was completed just prior to the new investment. It has a 500 seat concert hall, which Foster describes as "stunningly beautiful", but he is now pushing for funds to improve the teaching and practice facilities.

It is his aim to increase the number of practise rooms in order to accommodate a rapidly rising demand for student places within the music department. And with the university investing so much in development, Foster wants to make sure his students reap the benefits.

"Our mission here is to prepare students to be successful musicians in the 21st Century world, in whatever field they choose. The administration's willingness to go to All-Steinway designation is evidence of their commitment to excellence and we've grown by four times in the last four years.

"This growth is strongly evident in three areas: one, we now have upwards of 60 majors and minors, up from 22 in July last year; two, the number of students signing up for applied lessons in piano, voice and other instruments has



Photography: Courtesy of HPU

quadrupled to around 300, which is remarkable; and three, in spring last year we had 33 choir members in all – this year we sang at the baccalaureate with 85, and it's still growing. We're looking at 120.”

In addition to adding classroom and practice rooms, Foster has submitted a proposal to install a music technology lab, equipped with “everything kids would need to be a professional musician today”. The proposal has been approved and the lab will open before the students return after the summer break.

Becoming an All-Steinway School was the first part in Foster's plan to develop the Department of Music at HPU into a truly state-of-the-art facility that offers students the very best teaching and experience on their path to becoming professional musicians. To current and prospective students alike, the All-Steinway designation is a powerful symbol of the department's intent.

“Any musician would recognise the Steinway brand,” says Foster. “Our ability to pair the Steinway brand with that of HPU (the *US News & World Report* ranks HPU as No.1 in ‘Best Colleges: Up-and-Coming Baccalaureate Colleges in the South’ as well as No.5 among all ‘Baccalaureate Colleges in the South’) enables us to show that our commitment to excellence is not just words; we mean it.

“For current students, the ability to perform on the world's greatest instrument is a huge advantage. It prepares them for what they're going to be performing on in their professional life. I think it also makes them realise that the university cares about them. This is \$60,000 worth of instrument and they treat it with respect.”



Above: regularly tuning and maintenance keeps the new pianos in top condition
Below: HPU's new University Center, which opened last year
Bottom: one of the practice rooms with its new piano



Foster is excited to see the effect being an All-Steinway School will have on his department's development. He has described the transformation from the old pianos to the new as “like going from an old Toyota Tercel to a 2010 Rolls-Royce”. Now he is looking forward to the ride.

He has already been impressed by the after sales service. “Our local Steinway rep, Christopher C Fulk, owner of Piedmont Music Centers in Winston-Salem and Charlotte, is extremely responsive to any issues. Whenever we have any little problems with one of the pianos, their own technician comes out immediately.

“We also get the continual evaluation of the instruments. To have someone come and tell us what we need to do to make sure the pianos are kept in the best possible shape is invaluable coming from Steinway.”

So now begins the process of trumpeting the college's All-Steinway status. “We're redesigning the Department of Music website and will be using the Steinway logo on that, as well as on all our print material. Every publication we put out is going to be mentioning this because it is an example of our excellence.

“We also have about 12,000 people a year come and tour the university, so when they do, we want to put a Steinway piano in the lobby with a big poster talking about our association with Steinway. And we're planning several concerts highlighting our first full academic year as an All-Steinway School. There will be some significant performers.”

Since High Point University became the 110th All-Steinway School, the roster has kept growing. As colleges and universities strive for ever greater levels of excellence, the value of becoming an All-Steinway School is increasingly clear. As Dr Foster says, a quality instrument and a valuable investment, backed up by the most respected brand in the business: it's an easy decision.