State of the Arts: Dordt Students and Alumni Explore What it Means to Pursue Fine Arts as a Calling

Aleisa Dornbierer-Schat
Dordt College, aleisa.dornbierer-schat@dordt.edu

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Dordt students and alumni explore what it means to pursue fine arts as a calling

Ellen DeYoung (‘12) (second from right) is among the growing number of Dordt alumni to join the Twin Cities arts scene. She recently stage-managed a production of *Tartuffe*, which was performed for a moving audience in various rooms of a historic mansion.
TWIN CITIES ARTISTS

ANDREW DEYOUNG: NOVELIST, CHILDREN’S BOOK WRITER/EDITOR

Andrew DeYoung (’05) is about to publish his first novel, an intergalactic love story for young adults called The Exo Project. He says the book reflects his interest in the ways “more lowbrow tropes and conventions can meet up with higher-brow literary thematics.”

“The novel is science fiction,” he says, “and it’s about a boy who travels 100 light years across a galaxy and meets a girl. But it’s also a story about struggling with the culture you’ve been raised in, and with the values handed down to you by your parents. The story asks the question: ‘Is there a better way to be as a people and a world?’”

DeYoung wrote his first novel at Dordt under the mentorship of Professor Emeritus Dr. James Schaap. Like most first novels, it ended up in a drawer. So did his second one, though it got him a literary agent. The Exo Project, his third, will come out in April, and it’s part of a two-book deal with his publisher. He says committing to the writer’s life takes persistence, discipline, and a willingness to fail. Often many times.

DeYoung is also director of product development for the Sparkhouse division of Augsburg Fortress, a large Twin Cities publisher. He heads up an editorial team that produces illustrated children’s books, and he’s written a few of his own under a pseudonym for “the under-five set.”

ERIKA HOOGVEEN: VIOLINIST

The Mill City Quartet spends half of its season performing in traditional venues like concert halls and the other half performing for inmates inside correctional facilities.

Erika Hoogeveen (’02) says she’ll never forget the time a woman came up to the group after a performance and thanked them, saying, “You made us feel like we were really human.”

“Inmates become an almost forgotten population,” Hoogeveen says. “The experience of having someone come and play for them is a way of showing them their lives are valuable.”

She says watching string musicians play together live—reading one another’s tempo in the movement of their bows, anticipating changes, making mistakes and recovering—can be like a small glimpse of the unity God calls us to embody as the church.

Aside from performing a regular concert season with the Mill City Quartet, Hoogeveen teaches violin lessons in her studio at home and serves as concert master for Dakota Valley Symphony.
the play’s imaginary “fourth wall.” Even
the actor’s routine movements—dusting,
moving a lamp—invite the audience to
become part of the action of the play.
From their seats, spectators can hear
the actors’ footsteps, see their chests
rise and fall, observe subtle changes in
posture and expression. The audience,
too, is
part of the
performance—the actors
respond to its
sudden hush
or laughter,
its attentive
silence.

“Theatre is
wonderful
in that way,”
says Erica
Liddle (’18),
stage manager of Dordt’s most recent
mainstage production, Silent Sky, and
a theatre and English double major at
Dordt. “To be at a play is to be part of
a once-in-a-lifetime moment. It’s never
the same play twice—you’re creating
something new every night. And the
audience is part of that.”

“That’s what actors thrive on. The energy
that people bring into the room,” says
Logan Radde (’16), who’s acted in several
mainstage productions and directed
And Then There Were None as his senior
capstone project. “The audience is always
part of the show. You show up at the
theatre, you’re part of it.”

“In Dordt’s fine arts programs, students
learn to see the arts as a meaningful way
of participating in God’s redemptive work
in the world. That’s because art, even the

STORY TO TELL

“When deciding what stories to tell, I think it’s the
narrative scope of the Bible that guides us. In the Bible,
there are moments of beauty and horror, tragedy and utter
joy. And I think God asks us to interact with all these different
kinds of stories in our lives,” say Theatre Professor Dr. Teresa Ter Haar.

“As Christians, we have a responsibility to
tell stories of joy, but also stories that are
incredibly fraught or painful. But we never
do any storytelling thoughtlessly. We do it
with great care, and a sense of responsibility
toward our audience. That means we don’t
tell stories just for their shock value, or from a
place of complete despair. We tell stories that
point toward some truth about God’s world.
Theatre can be one way of telling the stories
of this broken world we live in. But theatre
can also point us toward a future we can’t
even imagine.”

Tricia Van Ee (’02), classical singer

“T. Ter Haar

“I knew that music wasn’t going to
be a very straightforward job path,
and that I would need to be open to
where that path led me—even if it
wasn’t exactly what I had planned.”

— Tricia Van Ee (’02), classical singer

Logan Radde (’16) directed And Then There Were None for his senior capstone project. The play is based on an Agatha Christie murder mystery, and he remembers listening to the audio book the first time he drove with his family to visit his sister at Dordt. “It’s always been near to my heart,” he says.
ARTISTS, HERE AND THERE

Across Dordt’s campus, many students and professors devote a large part of their day to creating things that, strictly speaking, are not useful. Students layer oil paints on canvases, compose songs at the piano, or sit perched on a catwalk, installing colored lights. To learn to do these things well, they spend time in study and practice: working through scales on a violin, logging hours with their nose in an art history book, or meeting for improv games in the theatre. This work is at once playful and deeply serious. And it continues beyond campus, too, when graduates of Dordt’s fine arts programs wend their way to places like the Twin Cities, one of the Midwest’s most vibrant cultural centers. Home to a thriving arts scene, the Cities have become the post-graduation destination for a growing number of Dordt alumni artists. Some of those graduates are making a life for themselves in the fine arts, while others have found their livelihood at the intersection of art and application, working in fields like the graphic arts or design, creating websites, interactive museum exhibits, even floral landscapes.

At Dordt, and out in the world, these artists are figuring out what it means to pursue artmaking not just as a profession, but a calling, and to do that, many of them agree, takes bravery.

“When I dropped my communication major my junior year, it was scary,” says Tricia Van Ee (’02), who has performed in operas and classical concerts as a soloist in the Twin Cities. “I knew that music wasn’t going to be a very straightforward job path, and that I would need to be open to where that path led me—even if it wasn’t exactly what I had planned.” Jenna Wilgenburg (’19), a sophomore art student at Dordt, felt the same trepidation. “Whenever I tell someone I’m an art major, their first question is usually skeptical: ‘What are you going to do with that?’ When I decided on my major, I was really excited about it. But honestly, I was most playful or humorous, has the power to change us, and to point us toward who we are called to be as God’s people, says Ter Haar.

TRICIA VAN EE: CLASSICAL SINGER

After Dordt, Tricia Van Ee (’02) dreamed of a life as an opera singer. Several years after she graduated with her master’s in voice performance from the University of Minnesota, the classical musical scene was reeling from the effects of the Great Recession. Within a season, many opera houses across the country closed their doors.

“It was frustrating. I had been told much of my life that I have the voice to do this, and yet it wasn’t working out,” she says. But then she auditioned for the Minnesota Opera Chorus, and began to make a life for herself as a classical singer in the Twin Cities, teaching voice lessons and working an office job on the side. Between 2013 and 2016, she performed a lead solo role in The Magic Flute, an opera “brought back season after season” due to its popularity.

Van Ee says attending a classical music performance isn’t simply about entertainment. “An opera can make us ask questions about ourselves, and about the time we’re living in,” she says. Music can also be a solace. “In a time that’s very divisive, and that sometimes feels chaotic, music makes sense out of sound. It brings the chaos of sound into order. And it elicits emotions that might be very useful for people at a time when there’s a lot of uncertainty,” she says.

JASON KORNELIS: ACTOR

“Being in the humanities can take a thick skin,” says Jason Kornelis (’11), who regularly performs with some of the top theatre companies in the Twin Cities. “I knew that music wasn’t going to be a very straightforward job path, and that I would need to be open to where that path led me—even if it wasn’t exactly what I had planned.” Kornelis most recently appeared in the Wayward Theatre’s production of Molière’s Tartuffe. He’s also the founding member of a company, Conundrum Collective, that stages radio plays. The company recently produced Orson Welles’s War of the Worlds, using 1930s-style microphones and an onstage sound table. The company also has plans to start a podcast.

Kornelis says the Twin Cities theatre community is vibrant, multicultural, and “has a social justice bent.” He’s finding his place there, performing alongside well-regarded mainstays of the theatre world.

“Starting out after college definitely felt like jumping into the deep end of the pool. But I felt prepared—the toolkit was there. And I think that gave me an edge,” he says.
also scared. Ultimately, I think you have to follow your passion and gifts, and trust that God will use them in some way.”

**ART AND ATTENTION**

But how does God use an abstract sculpture or sci-fi novel? What does an opera or symphony have to do with the kingdom of God? Dordt students are busy working that out in their classrooms, on stage, and in the art studio, exploring the materials of their craft, and situating that exploration into a wider—and cross-cultural—history of art’s theory and practice.

Art Professor Matt Drissell says the value of art, and its power, has much to do with the way we move through the world as creatures, with bodies.

“God has created us to be these profoundly multidimensional beings. We’re not just brains that go around analyzing things,” he says. “We don’t experience the world in just one way; we experience it with the full range of our senses. The visual is an important dimension of that.”

Drissell is a visual artist who works in a variety of media, and he spends much of his time in the studio with students, instructing them in their work, often painting and drawing alongside them.

“Today, so much of our experience of the world is abstracted or digitized. We’re not engaging with the materials around us,” he says. “But when you go into the studio, you deal with paint. You deal with glue. You deal with gravity. You’re colliding with a cultural legacy that goes all the way back to people painting figures on cave walls. You’re getting at what it means to be human and to engage intellectually and creatively with the physical world around you.”

Andrew DeYoung (’05), a novelist and children’s book publisher who lives in Minneapolis, understands this kind of engagement in terms of **attention**.

“As a writer, you’re often paying attention to a single thing—whether it’s the way the light falls on a snowbank, or a

**WILL THAT MAJOR GET YOU A JOB?**

Anyone who majors in the fine arts is familiar with this question. And it’s true that graduates in theatre, art, or music don’t always have as clear a professional path as their peers in engineering, education, or nursing. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t good reasons to study the arts, or that there aren’t jobs for them.

“For people in the humanities, or in artistic fields, there are paths to gainful employment and fulfilling work. You just have to be a little bit creative,” says Andrew DeYoung (’05), a soon-to-be-published novelist who also serves as the director of product development for a publishing company in Minneapolis. “In corporate leadership positions, it’s more common than you might think to see someone who majored in philosophy, then went on to get an MBA,” he says.

Research in higher education has shown that students who major in a humanities discipline often earn less right out of the gate, but go on to match or outpace graduates with professional or pre-professional degrees. That’s especially true if those humanities majors went on to earn a graduate degree.

Still, Dordt College has always been guided by a broader vision than simply turning out professionals who work until they retire, says Dordt Music Professor Dr. Benjamin Kornelis.

“We live in a culture that’s really pragmatic, and our ideals of success have to do with income and productivity,” Kornelis says. “But college is about getting an education that teaches you how to get a life, not just a job.”

Beyond simply a salary or skillset, college is about preparing students to live full, rich lives in service to God—as people with families, members of churches, and citizens in a democracy.

That’s not to say students who study the fine arts won’t find their way into enriching careers. Statistics suggest that many graduates today will change careers multiple times, and qualities like creativity, adaptability, and critical thinking are increasingly important in our ever-changing global job market.

Art Professor Matt Drissell says, studying a fine art prepares students for life beyond Dordt: “When you’re in the art studio, you have to deal with messes, dialogue with classmates, learn to accept criticism. All of these things are so important in the 21st century, and they’re nurtured by studying the arts.”

Senior music major and Kuyper Scholar Sion Yang will perform as part of the Chamber Orchestra and Concert Band 2017 Spring Tour.
FEATURES

TWIN CITIES ARTISTS

MATTHEW KUNNARI: FLORAL LANDSCAPE DESIGNER, VISUAL ARTIST

“I remember discovering in my art classes at Dordt that I was deeply interested in color,” says Matthew Kunnari (’06). “I'd be driving down the road, and I'd be struck by certain things: the yellow paint on the center line, the red stop sign, a blue sky. I'd feel compelled to return to that image in the studio.”

Now his medium is flowers.

Kunnari lives on the grounds of the historic Pillsbury Mansion, next to Lake Minnetonka, where aside from tending plants and designing landscapes, he spends time painting in his bright artist's studio in the estate's carriage house.

The room is filled with brightly colored still-life paintings, arranged on easels or up against the wall. “I like to paint the things that have been left behind. A table after everyone has eaten, or a sink and counter filled with dishes,” he says. The paintings are unconventional, but beautiful.

“As an artist, and also as a gardener, you learn patience,” he says. “You're in it for the long game.”

ELLEN DEYOUNG: STAGE MANAGER, THEATRE TOURING COMPANY COORDINATOR

Ellen DeYoung's (’12) last gig as a stage manager involved dressing in a maid's uniform and ushering audience members from room to room in a dark Twin Cities mansion. “I'm used to being in a dark tech booth during performances, so this was definitely out of the ordinary for me,” she says.

The play, Tartuffe, was an experiment—rather than accept the spatial conventions of seats and stage, the Wayward Theatre decided to bring theatre into spaces people already move through and inhabit.

DeYoung is often part of inventive, boundary-challenging productions—usually behind the scenes, as resident stage manager at the Wayward and Mission theatres in the Twin Cities.

During the day, she helps coordinate national tours for the National Theatre for Children, one of the largest touring children's theatre companies in the country. The troupe often performs in low-income schools, and for many of the students, it's their first time seeing a play.

“I feel so privileged to witness the students' joy in having a real person in front of them, communicating something educational through their performance. The kids are having so much fun, they don't even realize they're learning,” she says.
ART THAT CHALLENGES

When Wilgenburg decided on her final project in Drissell's Painting I class, she wanted to start a conversation. She began with three square panels, arranged in a row. Each features part of a woman's figure, graceful but imperfect, floating in negative space: a curving collarbone, the expanse of a back, legs bent at the knee. To display the piece, she set up a projector, and used it to project a variety of images over the panels. One of them was a Victoria's Secret ad featuring a line of similar-looking models, long limbed and nearly bare, behind bold white text:

“It takes a kind of chutzpah, an audacity, to create beautiful things in a culture that values efficiency, productivity, and profit.”

— Music Professor Dr. Benjamin Kornelis

South community that is "very distrustful of outsiders." Kornelis describes the production as part social commentary, part "very strange homage to B horror movies."

“You can challenge people through all kinds of storytelling, but theatre kind
of forces you to have a conversation,” he says. “It’s happening right there in front of you, live and in real time. At the same time, it’s happening to the people sitting right next to you.” That kind of dynamic can start a dialogue, and stretch people to consider ideas or experiences that are unfamiliar to them, he says.

Dordt’s Theatre Department has actively fostered this kind of dialogue, hosting “talk backs” following some of its productions. When a performance includes content or themes that some might find upsetting or difficult, the department creates a structured space for dialogue between the audience, actors, and production team.

“I hope that we instill a deep, critical awareness of audience in our students,” says Ter Haar. “Part of our responsibility, and privilege, as an academic institution is that when we engage with challenging pieces, we have an opportunity to surround them with context and support.” The department often brings in a panel of experts to guide an audience through complex, even taboo, topics like sex trafficking, capital punishment, or incest.

By engaging challenging topics, even in ways that aren’t overtly “Christian,” a play can speak prophetically, she says. But art doesn’t have to unsettles us—or only unsettle us—to be good. Creating art, or encountering it, can bring great pleasure or joy. It can make us laugh—often at ourselves. And it can bring us to a state of attention, curiosity, or wonder.

“It takes a kind of chutzpah, an audacity, to create beautiful things in a culture that values efficiency, productivity, and profit,” says Dr. Benjamin Kornelis, Dordt music professor and choral director. “The arts can foster a kind of imagination about what isn’t, but what could be.” That’s a quality that’s impossible to quantify, but it’s crucially important. Kornelis says, “I often tell students that being part of the choir, or participating in the arts, may be the most important thing they do while they’re here.”