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

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/voice/vol62/iss2/17

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State of the Arts

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.
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 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.

“That 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

"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.”

“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

“That’s central to what makes theatre
so powerful as an art form,” says Dordt
Theatre Professor Dr. Teresa Ter Haar.
“But all art has the power to move us. It
can prompt us to ask questions. It can
trouble us. It can make us laugh, or cry,”
says Ter Haar.

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.
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.

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

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. “There are times when you think, ‘What am I doing? How am I going to use this degree?’”

Kornelis most recently appeared in the Wayward Theatre’s production of Moliere’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
effort 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
bird near the window, or two people leaning in to talk to one another on a train. And you’re trying to call the reader’s attention to that particular thing,” he says. “It’s a type of attention that’s really rare these days, with our attention being so divided.”

Getting lost in a story—or a painting, or piece of music—cultivates a form of attention we bring back with us into our ordinary lives, DeYoung says. Van Ee says art can direct that attention inward, too.

“We’re not still very often,” she says. “But to really get something out of a performance of classical music—to really hear it—you have to be quiet. You have to commit to finding a stillness in yourself and accept what comes.”

Music, like all art, brings us to this state of attention by appealing directly to our senses. We hear it with our ears, but we also feel its vibration in our bodies; even our heartbeats speed up or slow down to match its tempo. In a similar way, an abstract painting can evoke a visceral, emotional response simply through its use of line and color.

In engaging us in this way, art appeals to us as creatures who don’t simply think, but as creatures with imaginations who love, desire, and feel.

“That’s really a cliché, I know—that the power of imagination. But it’s the start of some really good and important qualities,” says DeYoung, whose first novel for young adults will hit bookstores in April. “Imagination allows you to feel empathy for people who are not very much like you—to imagine them with just as rich an interior life as yours, living through experiences that might be very
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: “The Perfect 'Body.'”

“With this piece, I wanted to challenge people to think about how God created us, carefully knitting each of us together. And I wanted viewers to consider the ways our culture judges the value of what God has created,” Wilgenburg says. “Making art as a Christian doesn’t necessarily mean painting scenes from the Bible or exploring obviously Christian themes. Art can challenge us to open our eyes to new things and to challenges in the world that go beyond our own experiences.”

Jason Kornelis ('11) says theatre, too, can raise challenging questions. He’s now an actor in the Twin Cities, but during his senior year at Dordt, he directed Bat Boy, an “edgy and out there musical.” The show is about a character—half boy, half bat—discovered in a cave and trying to integrate into a small, deep

“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
Rachel Clemens (‘09) has gotten used to sitting down with executives from global corporations like Microsoft and Pepsi. She’s a practice manager at SAP, a multinational company that creates software that businesses use to optimize their hiring processes. Clemens works on the “front end” of the software platform. Her design courses at Dordt, along with internships near Dordt and in Chicago, prepared her to design elegant, functional websites.

“When it comes to designing a web page, design and functionality are inseparable,” she says. Clemens designs the “front-end” of websites—the part users see and interact with. “It’s surprising how often I design something I think looks pretty good, but then when we put it into practice, we realize it doesn’t work very well,” she says.

“Along with my degree in art, I was a business major. I’ve never really been interested in creating art for art’s sake. I’ve always been interested in how to communicate something clearly, or make someone’s life easier through good design,” she says.