

DU's Playground Ensemble releases debut album of modern chamber music

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By: Greg Glasgow

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The Playground Ensemble is an anomaly in the world of classical music: Rather than performing works by Beethoven, Bach and the other usual suspects, the group takes the bold step of performing pieces by composers who are still alive – or were alive in the 20th century.

“Modern music has always been this controversial thing in the classical music world,” says [Conrad Kehn](#) (BM '96, MM '00, MBA '10), founding director of the modern chamber ensemble. “People think it's dissonant and it's ugly and it doesn't go along with what most people think of as classical music, but it's something we all love, and we thought it wasn't getting enough attention.”

The 6-year-old group is an artist-in-residence at [DU's Lamont School of Music](#), and many of its members are faculty or graduates of the music school. In addition to an ambitious concert schedule – which kicks off this year with a program of “20th century masterpieces” on Oct. 13 – the Playground is committed to education and outreach, traveling frequently to area K-12 schools to spread the gospel of modern music.

“I don't think I'm going to change the minds of anybody that is a traditional classical music fan, but I think we can go out to the young kids and say, ‘You know what? This is a living art form,’” Kehn says. “‘This isn't dead people. This is actually vibrant and exciting. This is the rock music of the classical music world. This music has an edge.’ And the kids really respond to that.”

To further spread its message, the Playground Ensemble recently released its debut album, *Dreams Go Through Me*. Recorded over the course of a year and funded by a grant from the American Music Center, it features pieces by group members and composers Kehn, Reggie Berg (BM '10) and Brian Ebert (MM '07), as well as commissions by Todd Swingle (MM '09) and Andy Akiho. Akiho's composition “NO one To kNOW one,” which opens the 13-track CD, was commissioned for the Playground by the Newman Center for its 2010 Mile High Voltage Festival.

“Because we commissioned so many of them, we thought that would be a great place to start,” Kehn says of choosing the compositions to record for the album. “If we're going to pay somebody to write the piece for us, we should record it. The rest of it filled in with people we thought were integral to the group that we wanted to reward for helping us out.”

The album reflects the ensemble's musical diversity, with pieces that are driving and dissonant next to those that are slower and more melodic.

“People think they don't like modern music; well, modern music doesn't have to be dissonant and ugly,” Kehn says. “That doesn't mean you won't see some of that on our concerts, you definitely will. But next to that will be a piece maybe from another country, and next to that will be a piece that is actually far more traditional. We just think that modern is now, and that it can span a lot of ground and a lot of genre. The philosophy from the start was that we want to break molds on what people think of as modern music, we want to show them that it's far bigger than what they think it is.”

Dreams Go Through Me is available through CD Baby. For more information on the group, including a concert schedule, visit <http://www.playgroundensemble.org/>.



The Playground released its new recording in June 2011.