alent is one thing. Managing both a successful career and an enriching and fulfilling life is very much another. And for many musically gifted kids, crucial choices come early: say, around 16 years of age. The alternatives appear stark, and the air is heavy with often conflicting advice from parents and mentors. A few families choose to put intensive music training on hold, so that the child can benefit from a well-rounded, liberal arts education in the company of other young people pursuing a variety of paths. Others go the conservatory route. Any delay in training to master one’s instrument, they have been told, will be fatal to professional ambitions.

For several decades, some conservatories and university music schools have offered versions of a compromise: a lot of music plus a bit of the liberal arts or, in very few cases, the possibility of pursuing both degrees at the same time, over five years—an option that students can, and often do, abandon at any time. But Bard College, a small liberal arts campus perched along the Hudson River two hours north of New York City, has just put on the table a particularly aggressive plan of action. This fall it is launching a music conservatory with a top-notch faculty, offering a new double-degree program that redefines the education of the 21st-century musician.
BY FRANK GEHRY.

CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

INSET: LEON B. FISHER

professed goal of all conservatories and music schools of music around the country: to produce the biggest crop of the most highly skilled professional musicians. And in their eyes, the allocation of some of a student’s time to pursuits other than performance training is a zero-sum game. While Dean Robert Yekovich of the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University says, “I can’t imagine anyone not supporting the idea that a liberal arts education and exposure to as much as possible is a good thing and enriches the musician and the artist,” he also points out that there are “only so many hours in the day.”

To this, Bard might reasonably retort: “But a young person usually has only one—very precious—and at a college education.” Although Bard’s proposal to require more liberal arts courses seems just a difference of degree (no pun intended), its leaders see the double-degrees program as putting forward a new definition of what constitutes a musician.

What provoked Bard to go out on such a limb? Principal spokesman for the new program is its dean of graduate studies and vice-president for academic affairs Robert Martin, a member of both the music faculty (he’s a cellist who spent ten years with the Sequoia String Quartet) and the philosophy faculty. While getting his own B. Music from Curtis, Martin simultaneously got a B.A. as well, regularly making the 18-mile round trip to Haverford. At Curtis, “My teacher Leonard Rose thought it was ridiculous.” Undaunted, Martin went on to earn a philosophy Ph.D. from Yale. Martin says he is often approached by high school students who are as gifted academically as they are musically, who are aware that he’s both a professional musician and a philosophy professor, and who ask him how they can pursue academic subjects and do serious music as well. It’s clear to him that they feel “in danger of being funneled.” He has written that while these kinds of students are exceptional, they are “not so uncommon among those with strong musical gifts and accomplishments.” He would estimate that at least one-third of strongly musically gifted high school students are also very strong academically.”

By providing a supportive environment—that is, with a college faculty that understands intense commitment to music and a conservatory faculty that takes seriously the student’s nonmusical ambitions—Martin thinks it quite feasible for students to successfully pursue both goals. Bard is taking on the challenge of instilling such understanding in both its faculties.

In creating the new program, Martin has paired up with Mei-rlin Chen, associate professor of music and interdisciplinary studies at Bard. Chen said that it was drummed into him, in high school and beyond, “that you should continue to do music intensely only if that’s the only thing you want to do in life.” He resisted the pressure and went to Yale. “I’m kind of stubborn,” he says. Only after earning his B.A. in physics and chemistry did Chen enter Juillard for violin and piano studies. He followed up with a doctorate in chemistry at Harvard. There, his advisor told him he had to make a choice: you can do chemistry professionally only by setting aside serious music. Ultimately Bard gave him the opportunity to straddle disciplines, offering him a full-time position that he can divide between music and science in any proportion he likes. Chen now holds the associate directorship of Bard’s conservatory.

“There’s a bias in conservatories,” says Chen, “that if you’re interested in something else, you must not be completely serious about music.” He considers Bard’s new program “revolutionary” because it redefines the education of a professional musician. “Having a broad education gives you access to great thinkers. This component is neglected in traditional conservatory education.”

The intellectual heft and pragmatic wherewithal behind the founding of the new conservatory came from Bard’s longtime president, Leon Botstein. Like Martin and Chen, B. Music degree. The program, however, is open only to students who commit to simultaneously earning a B.A. as well, with a major in a subject outside of the arts. As the college’s “Overview” states it: “Every student in the Conservatory will also be a student in the College.”

From now on, when the music world needs to draw the contrast between focused musical training on the one hand, and more “balanced” options on the other, the single-mindedness of, say, Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute will still occupy one pole, but Bard’s obligatory double-degree program will stand—arms folded, as it were—at the other.

We called Michael Manderen to inform him of Bard’s launch. For the past 27 years, Manderen has been the dean of admissions of the esteemed Oberlin Conservatory, which itself is closely associated with Ohio’s Oberlin College and offers an optional liberal arts track to students (see sidebar, “In House—or Outsourced,” pages 21-25.) The intellectual heft and pragmatic wherewithal behind the founding of the new conservatory come from Bard’s longtime president, Leon Botstein. Like Martin and Chen, very strong academically.”

“At least one-third of strongly musically gifted high school students are also very strong academically.” —Robert Martin
Botstein was broadly educated without making sacrifices on the music side. A conductor armed with a Ph.D. in European history from Harvard, he has been music director of the American Symphony Orchestra for the past 13 years. Also a prolific musicologist, he is editor of Musical Quarterly.

Known for his unique and controversial perspectives on almost any subject, Botstein has made an unblinking appraisal of what awaits today’s musically skilled and committed young people. First, he contends, there has been a revolution from the inside out. A conductor armed with a Ph.D. in Botstein has made an unblinking education without making sacrifices on the music side. A conductor armed with a Ph.D. in Botstein has made an unblinking and non-immune from straying toward the increasing infiltration of television, MP3 players, and other popular diversions. About a mile away) for courses not available at the University of Pennsylvania. Curtis’s liberal arts requirements may enroll at NEC. NEC and Juilliard also have significant humanities and science courses at nearby NE Conservatory (about a mile away) for courses not available at the conservatory. The Juilliard School of Music also has its own academic department, but students who prove they are qualified to study music will take courses at Columbia and/or Barnard (a 10-minute commute uptown by subway). Students at the New England Conservatory (NEC) in Boston may take humanities and science courses at nearby Simmons College and Northeastern University, or travel nine miles to Tufts, but only if said courses are not already offered by NEC. NEC and Juilliard also have significant double-degree options (page 15).

At Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, students have the advantage of being on campus with a distinguished full-time academic faculty, a range of fellow students, and the rest of us. Most performance students are going to end up with two careers, one a market-liable “profession” and the other a performing career that, as irregular, part-time, or freelance as it may be, nonetheless will sacrifice nothing to quality. These two careers will run either in parallel or, given dramatic increases in the expectation, in sequence. “We will be getting most of our live music from stunningly good amateurs.” Consequently, he maintains, the education provided for today’s budding musicians must include both strong music preparation and first-rate academic teaching, a demand that puts traditional conservatories at a significant disadvantage. For one thing, he says, they’re unable to recruit liberal arts faculty of real standing: A lack of critical mass in terms of enrollment leaves free-standing conservatories “in no position to field the liberal arts” and they are increasingly outsourcing this function. A second, more general problem is more intractable. “The culture on the ground is wrong.” Botstein elaborates: “Put these students in a place where they will be welcome in two cultures that are not in conflict,” participating in science or social science classes “where this kind of work is of desperate importance to other students”—i.e., don’t segregate them from a fully functioning liberal arts college campus. Given that performing graduates face relentless competition from others—newcomers like themselves, established stars, and a growing and ever-higher-fidelity sound archive of the masters of the ages—Botstein believes that music education itself will have to adjust. Students need to see music as not just something they are trained to reproduce. They must be encouraged to tap into whatever is most creative in themselves, in ways that will stimulate fresh interpretation. At Bard, students will study improvisation, and cadenzas will be their own. All students will be required to take composition.

And on the matter of how music theory and music history will be taught—many ambitious students currently consider these subjects a nuisance, according to Botstein and Martin—Bard will be starting with a fresh slate. Rather than following traditional textbook sequence, such courses will be built around the musical works each student is currently rehearsing. The question will be: What are the resources available to help the student make sense of the place and how musically significant is it? These two careers will run either in parallel or, given dramatic increases in the expectation, in sequence. “We will be getting most of our live music from stunningly good amateurs.” Consequently, he maintains, the education provided for today’s budding musicians must include both strong music preparation and first-rate academic teaching, a demand that puts traditional conservatories at a significant disadvantage. For one thing, he says, they’re unable to recruit liberal arts faculty of real standing: A lack of critical mass in terms of enrollment leaves free-standing conservatories “in no position to field the liberal arts” and they are increasingly outsourcing this function. A second, more general problem is more intractable. “The culture on the ground is wrong.” Botstein elaborates: “Put these students in a place where they will be welcome in two cultures that are not in conflict,” participating in science or social science classes “where this kind of work is of desperate importance to other students”—i.e., don’t segregate them from a fully functioning liberal arts college campus. Given that performing graduates face relentless competition from others—newcomers like themselves, established stars, and a growing and ever-higher-fidelity sound archive of the masters of the ages—Botstein believes that music education itself will have to adjust. Students need to see music as not just something they are trained to reproduce. They must be encouraged to tap into whatever is most creative in themselves, in ways that will stimulate fresh interpretation. At Bard, students will study improvisation, and cadenzas will be their own. All students will be required to take composition.

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The Bard program might have attracted her had it existed when she applied to college. Julia says, noting the advantages of having an integrated program on a single campus.

"One of the problems [at Columbia/Juilliard] is that you’re not focused as much on music as you’d like during the first three years. For one thing, logistics were a constant pain: “Courses at Columbia meet Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Thursdays. At Juilliard it’s either Mondays and Thursdays or Tuesdays and Fridays.”

In any case, she wouldn’t have opted for conservatory alone: “For me, music is a reflection of life in all its fullness. And the more fully you experience what life is all about, the more fully you can do your music.”

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For Scott Yoo, Harvard offered a more realistic model of the outside world, where the musician has to lure the public.
What would constitute success for a conservatory like Bard, with its ambitious goals? Curtis, Juilliard, Oberlin, Rice, and others, tend to keep score of how they’re doing in terms of how many self-sustaining professional musicians they’ve produced. Bard has a significantly different vision. Botstein says he hopes, in a few years, to have produced an elite group of 100–140 alumni from around the world who will have completed their five-year degrees with a wide variety of career objectives. Several “would have successfully fought to make a career in a quartet or as a member of BSO or a soloist or in some aspect of the music business.” And some of those might well be innovators, brought on in part by what they had learned on campus. A second group will “continue to play and be active patrons, supporters, musicians in an active musical life while pursuing other professions.” A third group might decide after this experience to enter the academic world.

As they admit their first cohort to Bard for the 30 places this fall, Martin and Chen find that the double-degree program is having the dramatic and pleasant secondary effect of beefing up enrollments in the college’s science departments. More than half the applicants state that their primary non-musical interest is in the sciences. And those students are every bit as competitive as the straight B.A. enrollees are. One indication: Bard traditionally offers a set of science scholarships to incoming freshmen, and Martin says these awards are now going disproportionately to the candidates flowing in from the new conservatory program.

If students concentrating in music performance have a strong affinity with science, then the converse may also be true. The vast majority of MIT undergrads choose majors in engineering and science but, like all students there, they must also name an “area of concentration” in one of the humanities, arts, or social sciences. As Ellen Harris, the head of MIT’s department of music and theater arts, points out, the field most often chosen is music. Bard’s new, obligatory double-degree program is part of Botstein’s larger long-term strategy to systematically question the appropriateness of traditional education to the real-life skills, desires, and possibilities of today’s youth. For a long while, Bard has worked to undo assumptions underlying the broader educational system categorizes and pigeonholes students. Botstein in particular has thought extensively and rigorously about reforming secondary education, and his latest take on the subject, the 1997 book Jefferson’s Children, asserts that the last two years of high school are a waste of time and positively deleterious to a youngster’s education. Better to send them off to college at that age, or out to do work of any kind in whatever field they have a passion for. Back in 1979, after only four years as president, he saw to it that Simon’s Rock College in western Massachusetts, the nation’s only four-year liberal arts and sciences college specifically designed for students 15 and 16 years of age, became part of Bard. And in 2001, the college created Bard High School Early College, in association with the New York City Board of Education. Located in a building on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the school recruits highly motivated ninth-grade students and, in only four years, moves them through high school and two years of college, granting them both a high school diploma and an Associates of Arts degree.

Gary Graffman, the eminent concert pianist and outgoing president and director of Curtis, takes pointed issue with Bard’s science scholarships for freshmen are now going disproportionately to the candidates flowing in from the new conservatory program.
The Future According to Botstein. In his view, several aspects of the music business are steadily improving: Virtuosi are making more money than the Rubinstein of old ever did, and many more string quartets are giving 50 to 70 performances a year, as compared with the old days, when the Budapest was the only game in town. Not only have musicians become more proficient, he counters, but audiences have become more sophisticated and demanding as well. Perhaps deliberately refusing to engage with Botstein’s revised notion of amateurism, he proclaims: “I’m not going to pay money to hear an amateur.”

Like other conservatory directors, Graffman calls the new program, a “perfectly valuable addition to the possibilities” and “a good idea for a small amount of people,” but he points out that most performers with any degree of fame have chosen to make their instrumental training a “total priority.” Other conservatory administrators similarly temper their admiration for Bard’s insistence on broader learning with skepticism about how many students the new conservatory program will actually attract. They wonder whether it will be able to recruit most of the best prospects out there. According to Oberlin’s Manderen, most “Fives” (i.e., the highest-rated applicants in the informal evaluation system many music schools use) “haven’t compromised in any way and are already thoroughbreds.” He continues: “It’s hard to construct a conservatory only out of double-degree Fives.” Yekovitch from Rice concurs: If high academic demands are going to be made, there will be so few students to choose from that they will comprise “almost a self-selecting pool.” In other words, what the kibitzers are warning is: You’re going to sacrifice the highest musical caliber, and you won’t end up with a critical mass of first-rate players.

The kind of kid who would apply to Bard program is “a rare species,” notes pianist Jeremy Denk, currently a member of Bard’s faculty. But he points out that Bard may well be more attractive to this select few than optional double-degree programs, since the college is building new effective ways of supporting these students into its music program from the very inception.

Denk knows whereof he speaks. Ready for college at age 16, he felt it was too early to make long-term life decisions. All he knew was that he was very attached to other ways of using his brain. They were “hard to give up, and so I didn’t.” He signed up for the double-degree program at Oberlin, where his B.A. major was chemistry. Denk is convinced that his playing today would not be the same had he not taken the literature courses, whose narratives and historical worlds continue to underlie and enrich the music he performs. Nonetheless, he says, even though the Conservatory at Oberlin and Oberlin College were just across the street from each other, they might well have been “separate worlds” in terms of their distinct cultural realities.

Oberlin served as a “lab” for him to confirm that his future was in fact at the piano. He then went on to study with Georgi Sebok at Indiana where he got an M.M., and finished his formal study by completing a D.M.A. at Juilliard.

Near the end of his four years at Oberlin, he found his senior chemistry advisor sitting in the audience at one of his piano recitals. Afterwards, says Denk, the professor pulled his student aside and confided that, “if I could play the piano like that, I certainly wouldn’t be doing chemistry.”

Jeremy Kittay is an adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University. He was founder and editor-in-chief of Lingua Franca, the review of academic life.