

KATE SHEERAN APPOINTED AS EASTMAN'S EIGHTH DEAN

BY ANNA REGUERO

WHEN KATE SHEERAN RETURNED TO ROCHESTER in mid-July to begin her new position as the Joan and Martin Messinger Dean of the Eastman School of Music, the first person she saw was Professor Peter Kurau, her undergraduate French horn teacher.

“We walked around Eastman on the Sunday before I started,” she said. It was a quiet moment in-between summer programming, “except I heard a horn down the hall, and I thought, ‘I know that sound.’”

Dean Sheeran is an alumna of Eastman, earning an undergraduate degree and performer’s certificate on the horn in 2002. Now, she is the school’s eighth dean and the first-ever woman to lead the school. Her Eastman days set her on a career trajectory that landed her at the helm of her alma mater. And she’s allowing her experiences as a student inform the kind of leader she hopes to be.

“I came in loving to play chamber music and loving to be in orchestra and then whole worlds were opened up to me when I came here,” Sheeran recalls. “I can trace a lot of the things I became interested in throughout my career, or interests that were sparked, back to my time here.”

She recalls plentiful significant experiences at Eastman, from playing in the student-led new music ensemble Ossia to participating in the school’s burgeoning Arts Leadership Program. But the most important experience of all, she said, was the friends made along the way.

“I don’t even hesitate, it’s the relationships,” she said. “That has been sustaining. My friends from Eastman are my close friends. I’ve kept in touch with teachers and mentors, and my friends from my Eastman years have become important collaborative partners in my career.”

Sheeran’s time at Eastman in the late ’90s and into the early 2000s coincided with the start of Ossia and the beginnings of the Arts Leadership Program, when an early wave of entrepreneurial zeal jump-started ensembles like Alarm Will Sound and the JACK Quartet. It was the relationships made through those pioneering programs that unknowingly put her on the path to becoming Eastman’s dean.

“I think there was a spirit of ‘the world was our oyster’ and we were all just excited about lots of things all the time,” she said, unaware of its significance at the time. It was a time of impromptu sight-reading sessions, of playing friends’ compositions, of catching as many concerts as they could pack in between coursework and performing.

After Eastman, Sheeran pursued her master’s degree at Yale. When her time there was coming to an end, and the ensemble Alarm Will Sound—an outgrowth of Ossia—landed a residency at Pennsylvania’s Dickinson College, it was those friendships formed at Eastman that led the ensemble members to ask Sheeran to join them as their manager. It was a position that launched through Eastman’s ALP internship funding. With members of Alarm Will Sound, Sheeran hunkered into a farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania—an unusual place to start to a career in music—and began carving a professional life teaching in the college, performing in regional orchestras, and managing a new music ensemble.

Plans for what she once thought would solely be a performance career transformed as her interest in leadership came into focus.

“What I didn’t know was that this year to try different things would help me really solidify what I was uniquely suited to do.”

By the time she was hired to direct the preparatory division of the Mannes School of Music in New York City a few years later, “I was very calibrated to trying new things.” And by the time she left to become the provost and dean of the San Francisco Conservatory, Sheeran had dabbled in a little bit of everything, from managing continuing education programs to developing curriculum for the college.



[1] Dean Sheeran speaks with students at Eastman’s Institute for Music Leadership in July.

[2] Dean Sheeran on Gibbs St.

[3] Dean Sheeran participating in an Alumni Weekly reading session during her undergraduate studies. From left to right (front row): Professor of Horn Peter Kurau, Marie Lickwar ’02E (MM), and Kate Sheeran ’02E.



2

Three years after that, she was ready for an even more expanded challenge: directing New York City’s Kaufman Music Center, a singular institution that combines a K-12 public arts school (Special Music School) and community music school (Lucy Moses School) with a concert presenting arm (Merkin Hall). The union of all three programs under one roof gave Sheeran a unique vantage point that she says will help her steer students at Eastman.

“I’ve gone back and forth between K-12 and higher ed and presenting in my previous roles, and I like that. I think all of the different perspectives inform the rest of the work. Working with K-12 students informs what I think college students need, and vice versa. Working with professional artists gives you a perspective on what’s happening in the professional world and how we can best prepare students for it.”

And perhaps it was some of Eastman’s entrepreneurial training that contributed to the development of an unprecedented Kaufman Music Center program that helped New York City musicians survive during the Covid-19 pandemic. Musical Storefronts was a socially distanced pop-up concert series that provided needed employment to musicians as well as connection and solace to audience members during an isolating time.

Sheeran’s Eastman experience, however, will inform what she hopes to accomplish as dean, which includes leaving room for students to be individuals and carve unique career paths. “How do they get exposed to enough

things that they’re not overwhelmed but can find ways to create their own career? Because that’s what happened to me here. That’s what happened to my peers. And then we all went down different tracks and used the education to shape the different careers we have.”

John Hain ’02E (MM), ’07E (DMA), Senior Associate Dean of Academic and Student Affairs at Eastman, said that there is palpable excitement on campus for Dean Sheeran’s tenure. “She brings a wealth of knowledge from her past leadership of arts organizations across the country, and we’re all excited to learn more about all of the ideas and expertise she will bring with her to Eastman. Personally, I’m looking forward to doing all I can to help her as she rolls out her vision for the future of music at Eastman, the University of Rochester, the Rochester community, and beyond.”

Eisenhart Professor of Music Teaching and Learning Christopher Azzara ’88E (MM), ’92E (PhD), who sat on the hiring committee, said, “Kate Sheeran is a thoughtful and enthusiastic leader who understands the unique breadth and depth of the Eastman School of Music. She is sincere and articulate and has the personal qualities to effectively lead the school in the twenty-first century.”

As for rising to Eastman’s top post, “I feel the gravity of it, in a good way,” she said. “I wasn’t looking for a new job, I loved my job. But I really care about this place. When the opportunity arose, I was increasingly drawn to being here in this place, at this school, in this extraordinary University, and in this time. And it’s an exciting time, the beginning of the second century, to think about, ‘What is the role of a music school in 2024?’

And who are these artists we’re creating? And who can help us to shape that education for them?” It’s a big deal. I don’t take it lightly.”

Dean Sheeran is currently busy settling into Rochester, making connections with colleagues at the University and throughout the City of Rochester, and embarking on a listening tour to hear the visions faculty, staff, students, and alumni have for Eastman. “It’s really a listening tour because you want to hear what’s happening in the building, hear the music and get to experience it before you can have an informed opinion about helping to shape it going forward.”

And while many things have changed about the school—including Eastman’s East Wing, an entirely new building that was erected after Dean Sheeran’s student days—some have stayed the same. Friends, she said, ask about some of the elements they remember most about the campus.

“Catching a glimpse of the chandelier in Kodak Hall on your way to class, or the certain pleasant smell in Lowry Hall, or feeling the grooves in the marble staircase—we’re all nostalgic for those things,” she said. “I think it’s comforting, in a way, because you think about all the people who’ve been here who we knew and also those we haven’t known. And now, I think about taking care of our school for future generations too.”

But of all of Sheeran’s hopes for her time as dean, “I want people to feel joyful here as much as possible, to feel connected, to feel safe, which is how I think about this time for me when I was a student. I’m excited about the possibilities that lie ahead to chart the course for Eastman’s next chapter, and to help shape the future of music.”



3