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Young Artists of Note

Jim Stewart '76
Furman University

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Young Artists of *Note*

Three talented alumni appear destined to make their marks in the world of music.

It can be risky to try to single out individual graduates of the Furman music program for recognition in university publications.

One need only visit the music Web site at www.furman.edu/depts/music to see the depth and breadth of the department's talented alumni. From conducting to vocal and instrumental performing, teaching and composing, graduates of the Furman program have made an impact on the musical landscape on the regional, national and international levels. Many of them have been featured in past alumni publications.

Stories by Jim Stewart

In this issue of *Furman*, we focus on three young artists whose talents are already bringing them critical attention and acclaim:

■ **Scott Jarrett '97**, conductor of the Back Bay Chorale in Boston and the Oratorio Singers of Charlotte, N.C., and director of music and university organist and choirmaster at Boston University's Marsh Chapel.

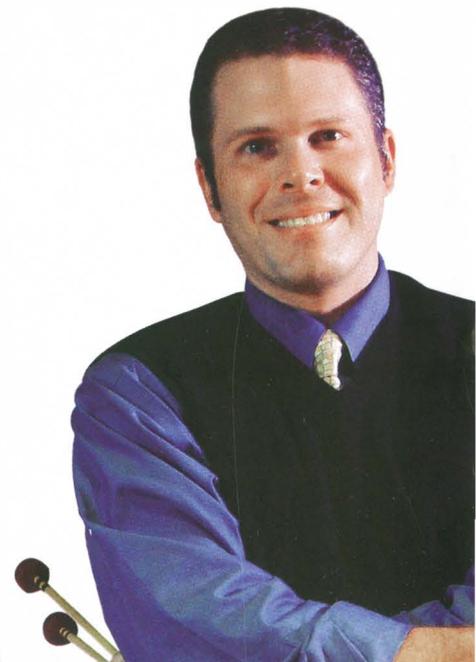
■ **Edie Johnson '96**, organist and associate director of music for St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, Ind., and instructor at Christian Theological Seminary.

■ **John Parks '93**, assistant professor of percussion at Florida State University and a popular clinician and soloist.

As representatives of an up-and-coming generation of Furman music alumni, they join a long and distinguished line of artists who, through their lives and works, have served as cultural ambassadors for both the university as a whole and for one of its most public and respected programs.



JEFF CRAVOTTA



The remarkable thing about Scott Jarrett is that, even though he has three full-time jobs in two cities, he seems totally unruffled.

In fact, he thrives on the challenge of juggling his roles as conductor of Boston's Back Bay Chorale; university organist, choirmaster and adjunct faculty member at Boston University's Marsh Chapel; and conductor of the Oratorio Singers of Charlotte, N.C., the resident chorus of the Charlotte Symphony.

"I'm pretty organized, and I do a lot of long-range planning," he says. "It's good discipline for me."

He's also helped tremendously, he says, by having highly capable assistants in all three places. They take care of most of each area's administrative needs, leaving him time to study musical scores.

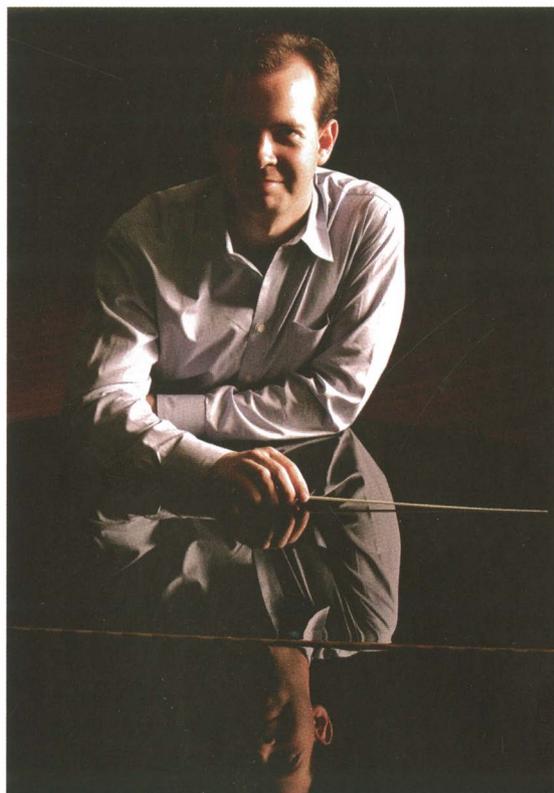
"I don't feel stressed," says the genial, 29-year-old Jarrett, a 1997 Furman graduate. "The hardest part isn't the travel or the schedule, but the amount of music you have to learn."

Jarrett is clearly delighted (and somewhat amazed) to be in his current positions — especially since, about this time last year, he was "biting his nails" about what his future might hold.

He was finishing his seventh year in Boston where, while doing graduate work at Boston U., he had been active in the bustling local music scene. Having completed everything but his doctoral dissertation, he knew it was time to face the daunting task of job hunting.

His uneasiness didn't last long. About the time he applied for the Charlotte job, he began attracting attention for other positions — which prompted Boston U. to create the chapel position for him.

Then the highly regarded Back Bay Chorale, with which he had worked in the past, called and invited him to be guest conductor for its May



ESSORAS M. SUAREZ/THE BOSTON GLOBE

concert. Turned out that the group's conductor had resigned. Jarrett's talents quickly won over both the performers and the chorale's board, and a brief negotiation led to his signing a three-year contract.

As if all this weren't reassuring enough, Charlotte called to say he was a finalist for its job. After interviewing and rehearsing with the Oratorio Singers, he emerged as the top choice — so much so that to get him, the board agreed to waive its stipulation that the conductor live in Charlotte.

Jarrett is still a bit dazed by how fast it all happened. As he says, "Ten years ago I never would have thought I'd be a professional conductor. It wasn't in the realm of possibility."

He enrolled at Furman in 1993 thinking he would become a high school chorus teacher, and

Above photo published with permission of Globe Newspaper Company, Inc.

he wound up earning his secondary school certification. By the time he graduated, though, he had decided to pursue college teaching, which led him to Boston U. and the mentorship of Ann Jones, the school's director of graduate studies in choral conducting and a longtime associate of Robert Shaw.

Boston is a mecca for the arts, and Jarrett took advantage of the wealth of opportunities available. He worked summers with Jones at Boston U.'s Tanglewood Institute, sang in choruses such as the Boston Bach Ensemble, and became choral director of the Brookline Chorus and at Walnut Hill, a leading prep school for the arts. It eventually dawned on him, he says, that he "could actually make a living as a professional arm-waver."

Furman, he says, was a great place to begin his journey. A native of Lynchburg, Va., he discovered the university through a music department brochure some friends had picked up at a camp where Bingham Vick, Jr., longtime conductor of the Furman Singers, was the clinician.

"A big city conservatory would have been too much for me," says Jarrett. "Furman was the perfect place, a maturing place. When I first drove through that gate, it was like entering a fairy tale. The department rolled out the red carpet. They make you feel really special."

Vick remembers his former student as an "unusually gifted" pianist, baritone soloist and student conductor. "Scott was very personable,

and at the same time demanding on himself academically and musically," Vick says. "He was well-liked by his peers and by the faculty, and he had all the personal and musical attributes to succeed as a professional conductor."

Vick would get no argument on that score from the folks in Boston, where the growing buzz about the Back Bay Chorale conductor has been fed by strong early reviews ("Jarrett established himself as the most promising young figure to emerge on the local choral scene . . . he's tasteful and talented, someone to keep our eyes and ears on") and a follow-up feature story in *The Boston Globe*. Plus, the folks in Beantown are fully aware that Jarrett comes from excellent stock, given that he shares an alma mater with Keith Lockhart '81, now in his second decade as conductor of the Boston Pops.

While Jarrett's schedule includes frequent flights between Boston and Charlotte, where he often stays with Furman friends such as classmates Jay and Kate Kalbas Norton, he embraces the demands of his work — and counts himself fortunate.

"I now know why conductors work until they die," he says. "There's something spiritual about what we do, an energy that comes from the musicians, the music and the community with those in the room.

"Music making is a baffling and wonderful thing, and it's a joy to be able to produce these sounds that are so life-transforming and life-enriching."

*Positive*voice

Edie Johnson a dedicated ambassador for organ music

Charles Tompkins describes Edie Johnson as "one of the most talented young organists I've encountered during almost 25 years in teaching."

Tompkins, organ professor at Furman, is not alone in his assessment. *The American Organist* has raved about Johnson's talent, and she has twice been featured on National Public Radio's "Pipedreams" program.

Not surprisingly, when it came time to choose the first Furman alum to present a recital on the university's new, million-dollar Hartness Organ, Johnson, a 1996 graduate, was tapped for the honor. The concert was scheduled for March 8 in Daniel Chapel.

When contacted in December, Johnson was looking forward not only to being part of the Organ

Dedicatory Series, but to playing a Furman organ that was stationed on solid ground. As she said with a laugh, “It’s got to be better than hanging off the side of the wall in McAlister Auditorium,” a reference to her student experiences with the somewhat precariously placed Holtkamp organ.

More to the point, she’s fully aware of the importance of C.B. Fisk Opus 121 to the music program and to the university as a whole.

“The new organ is exciting for Furman,” says Johnson, who serves as organist and associate director of music for St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, Ind. “No doubt it will help attract new students, and it can really enrich the cultural life of the university and the community.”

Community outreach is something Johnson takes seriously. In Indianapolis, where she also teaches at Christian Theological Seminary, she is active in an interdisciplinary program called “PipeWorks.”

Developed by the American Guild of Organists, PipeWorks introduces upper elementary school students to the pipe organ. By taking a “traveling” organ into schools and featuring “guest appearances” by the likes of Johann Sebastian Bach, the program integrates concepts in science and social studies with music in a way that engages and informs.

It’s important, Johnson says, to help coming generations understand the organ’s place in music history — and its continuing relevance. Along those lines, she often showcases new organ compositions, especially by women, during her recitals.

“I see part of my job as promoting organ music and making it accessible,” she says. And while she acknowledges that some think organ music is good for little else but inspiring staccato clapping at sporting events, she counters such talk with a straightforward response: “The organ has been around for centuries, and it’s withstood the test of time.”

She became interested in the instrument as a child in Greensboro, N.C. Her mother played the organ, and her church, Christ United Methodist, actually had its own C.B. Fisk creation (Opus 82).



L. BRENT SMITH (2)

Fascinated with the sound, she began playing at the age of 13 and says she quickly grew to love the literature.

In high school she studied with Johnny Bradburn, a 1965 Furman graduate who helped steer her to Furman — and vice versa. Charles Tompkins says Bradburn called him in 1989 to alert him to a “rather precocious” 10th-grade organist. “When Edie came to audition at Furman two years later,” Tompkins says, “it was quite evident that she was a ‘must have’ for us.”

Blessed, as Tompkins says, with superior talent, a strong work ethic and “a cheerful, fun-loving disposition that made her a joy to teach,” Johnson went on to earn her master’s degree and, in late 2003, her doctorate in organ performance from Indiana University. During the summer of 2003, she was one of four people chosen for the Summer Institute for French Organ Studies, a select program in which advanced organists

travel to France to practice and perform on unaltered organs.

At St. Paul's, she is an integral part of a prestigious church with a nationally known music program. The church even has its own choir school and an intergenerational choir that features singers from 8 to 80. Johnson has played the organ on CDs recorded by the choir, which has performed internationally.

Johnson's husband, Jason Overall '95, shares her musical interests, although from a different

perspective. A talented organist himself, Overall is president of Goulding & Wood, a pipe organ builder based in Indianapolis. He has worked on recent installations in the Greenville area, at Christ Church Episcopal in 2001 and at First Presbyterian in Greenwood in 2002.

And since *American Organist* has described his wife as possessing "seemingly limitless virtuosity" and being "destined for prominence," it may not be a pipedream to think that one day, he'll be commissioned to build an organ specifically for her.

Drumroll

Demand growing for John Parks' percussive talent

Watching John Parks perform Joseph

Schwantner's "Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra," one is initially tempted to label him the "Hardest Working Man in Show Business" — if the name weren't already taken.

And if he didn't look as if he's pulling it off so effortlessly.

Moving with a carefully honed rhythm amid the 20-something percussion instruments assembled across the stage, Parks is rarely still during the 30-minute piece. He's darting back and forth, bobbing his head in time with the beat, then pausing on cue to crash the cymbals, offer a melodic interlude on the marimba, tap out a quick phrase on the *almglocken* (Alpine cow bells) or showcase such instruments as the crotales, vibraphone and bass drum. At one point he even plays a water gong (he strikes it, then immerses it).

Schwantner's award-winning 1994 concerto is a tour de force for both orchestra and soloist. For Parks, it's "a lot of fun — aggressive, visceral and physical. It has these schizophrenic moments as well as beautiful, melodic lines."

He could also have described it as "educational." Because the concerto places percussion instruments front and center, the audience enjoys a rare firsthand view of their unique variety and

musicality. And Parks, an assistant professor of percussion at Florida State University, is the ideal instructor.

Parks, a 1993 Furman graduate who returned to campus in October for a weeklong residency and performance of the Schwantner piece with the Furman Symphony Orchestra, is rapidly developing a national name for himself as a soloist and clinician.

John Beckford, his percussion professor at Furman, describes him as "a rising star in this profession. The endorsements he is receiving from major percussion manufacturers, the requests for clinics and concerts, and the caliber of his studio at Florida State all confirm that he is one of Furman's finest."

You can add recording artist/producer/director to the list of Parks' accomplishments as well. A few years back, while teaching at the University of Kansas, he received a grant that led to production of a CD titled "Dusk: Percussion Music from the Heartland."

Parks commissioned original pieces from composers whose talent he admired, then recorded the works with the help of his students at Kansas and, subsequently, at Florida State. Released last year, the CD provides a textured sampling of the

often hypnotic beauty and range of percussion music.

Parks oversaw all phases of the CD's production. "I now have a whole new respect for administration," he says with a laugh. "But everything turned out great. The student performances are fantastic, and they had a wonderful opportunity to discover new music and to experience a professional recording environment."

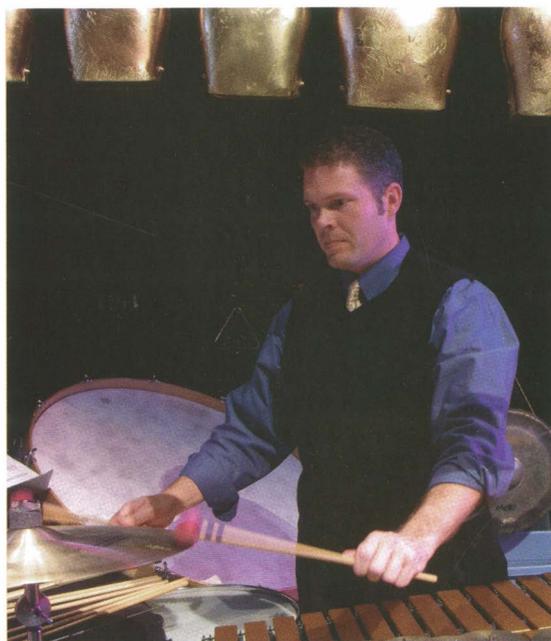
All this is pretty heady stuff for a guy who had never taken a percussion lesson until he arrived at Furman. He taught himself to play a drum set by watching videos on MTV, and although he played in his high school marching band in Gastonia, N.C., he enrolled at Furman thinking he might become a concert pianist.

There was just one catch: While he loved the piano, he hated practicing. Once he started playing percussion in assorted Furman ensembles, he discovered the options and opportunities available to percussionists — and he knew which direction to take.

Beckford picks up the tale from there, saying that when Parks "got serious" about percussion in his junior year, his gifts quickly became apparent. Wanting to capitalize on his student's newfound motivation and enthusiasm, Beckford recalls assigning him a complex Bach prelude and fugue, transcribed for marimba.

"I was hoping to make a connection between his piano background and his interest in percussion," says Beckford. "This was a piece most percussionists wouldn't attempt until late in their graduate studies, but John just assumed it was what percussionists had to learn and went about learning it. To this day, I have not had another student I felt could perform it."

Since Furman, the 33-year-old Parks has made stops at Northwestern, where he earned master's degrees in performance and in jazz pedagogy, and at Eastman School of Music, where he acquired a doctoral degree in performance. Along the way he maintained an extensive performing schedule (including a six-week trip to Japan with the Eastman



CHARLIE REGISTER (2)

Wind Ensemble) and taught at Samford and Kansas before landing the post at Florida State, which he calls the "perfect match" for his talents and interests.

Furman remains his home, though, and he and Beckford maintain a mutual admiration society. Beckford strongly encouraged Parks to pursue the Florida State position and, in turn, was the first guest artist Parks invited to FSU. "He was and is my most important teacher," says Parks. "I still can't bring myself to call him John."

Beckford, in turn, marvels at Parks' energy and enthusiasm. "Although this may seem a bit presumptuous so early in his career," says Beckford, "I consider him one of the leading percussion instructors in the country." ●