History of the School

Manhattan School of Music, a major national and international force in professional music education, is the largest private conservatory in the nation offering both classical and jazz training. The School fulfills a major role in society by preparing talented men and women for careers as performing musicians, teachers, administrators, and involved audience members who will keep the legacy of great music alive.

From its beginnings as a small community music school to its current incarnation as a top conservatory, Manhattan School of Music has upheld a tradition of excellence in music education. The School was founded during 1917–18 by pianist and philanthropist Janet D. Schenck. Then called the Neighborhood Music School, it was located on Manhattan’s Upper East Side and tasked with bringing high-quality musical training to the immigrant communities of New York City. By re-establishing the musical communities that had existed in these immigrants’ home countries, Schenck hoped to further the nascent cause of American music. To that end, the School developed its resources to educate the complete musician.

By 1928, enrollment at the School had reached 400 students. Under additional artistic guidance from Pablo Casals, Harold Bauer, and Fritz Kreisler, the Neighborhood Music School erected a new building and, in 1938, changed its name to Manhattan School of Music. In the space of twenty years, the school had built a national reputation. By 1943, the School offered the Bachelor's degree; advanced degree programs soon followed.

In 1956, Dr. Schenck retired and John Brownlee, noted Metropolitan Opera baritone, was appointed director, a title later revised to president. President Brownlee initiated the idea of relocating the School to the Morningside Heights neighborhood; his death occurred only months before his efforts were realized. In 1969, George Schick, Metropolitan Opera conductor, accompanist, and distinguished opera coach, succeeded Brownlee as president and led the School’s move to its present location. John O. Crosby, founder and general director of the Santa Fe Opera, was appointed president in 1976; Gideon W. Waldrop was appointed in 1986; and Peter C. Simon in 1989. Important additions to the curriculum during this era include the offering of Jazz studies in 1982 and the establishment of the Graduate Program in Orchestral Performance in 1991.

Marta Casals Istomin, former director of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, served as president of the School from 1992 until 2005. Her tenure saw the construction of the G.
Chris and SungEun Andersen Residence Hall, which opened in 2001. In addition to student housing, Andersen is home to the William R. and Irene D. Miller Recital Hall and the Alan M. and Joan Taub Ades Performance Space; the Peter Jay Sharp Library; and 108 practice spaces. Dr. Robert Sirota, appointed president in 2005, instituted a graduate program in Contemporary Performance and, in 2010, the Center for Music Entrepreneurship, continuing MSM’s long history of career development offerings.

Under the current leadership of Dr. James Gandre, who assumed the presidency in May 2013, Manhattan School of Music continues to uphold the mission that Janet Schenck began over 90 years ago. Now home to 900 students from over 40 countries, the School is a thriving international community of artists. As MSM continues to grow, its focus remains the same: the education of tomorrow’s leaders in the arts.

Manhattan School of Music serves the international music community, the nation, the City of New York, as well as the local neighborhood. At the present time, 75% of the students come from outside New York State and 41% from outside the United States. The School’s international reputation is confirmed by its continuing and expanding global presence.

As one of the components of New York’s Upper West Side “Academic Acropolis”, Manhattan School of Music shares its neighborhood with Columbia University, Barnard College, Columbia College, Columbia Teachers College, Bank Street College, Union and Jewish Theological seminaries, the Riverside Church, International House, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The School thrives in this atmosphere of ideas, ideals, goals, and achievements. Much of its strength derives from New York City itself, the leading music center of the world. The School’s 270-member faculty is selected from a rich pool of resident and visiting artists, and other internationally acclaimed artists regularly give master classes. The New York City location also gives students an incomparable learning laboratory, providing an abundance of the highest-quality artistic offerings of classical music, jazz, theater, dance, and cabaret. It also provides varied and outstanding student performance opportunities.

In addition to the three academic degrees mentioned, Manhattan School of Music offers an undergraduate non-degree diploma and postgraduate diplomas in classical performance and composition, and jazz performance and composition. The professional studies certificate and Doctor of Musical Arts degree are offered in classical performance and composition.