Under the relaxed banter bouncing around Tharp Rehearsal Hall one cool April afternoon was a layer of tension. Student composers from John Anthony Lennon’s class were about to hear their new string quartets performed on real instruments for the first time, by none other than the renowned Vega Quartet. These undergraduate composition students capped a semester’s work with this chance to soar before their peers and master musicians. Professor Lennon called the gathering to order and gave the ground rules: the quartet would play through each piece, provide their feedback and hear comments from the student composer, and then play the piece again. Students could record the session for their own archives, but never publish or post this informal, unrehearsed reading as a performance of the Vega Quartet.

The students’ pieces differed in style, and suggested varying influences of classical training, video game sound tracks, and popular songs. For new music, the students’ pieces were often tonal, and took advantage of the Vega’s rich sound. The musicians showed their love of teaching in a combination of constructive criticism, helpful suggestions, and encouragement for the young composers. When their turn came, the students engaged with the musicians without intimidation and were grateful for the feedback. Student composer Esteban Maldonado said: “It was a great experience to have professionals interpret what I’ve written. It helped me with issues of clarity in notation and it made me shift from thinking about the notes on paper, and how the scoring program plays them, to how my work will be experienced by an audience in live performance.” Professor Lennon reflected: “One of the joys of working with composition students is to hear their ideas come to life through professional musicians like those in the Vega Quartet. It is an experience that has left a deep and lasting impression on many of our undergraduate composers.”

During the semester, the Friends of Music funded a visiting composer, Bill Sears, a jazz composer and Director of Jazz Studies at the Interlochen Arts Academy, for a lecture and improvisation workshop. Now, at the invitation of Professor Lennon and the Vega Quartet, a handful of Friends of Music sat with the students in Tharp to listen to their new music. Taking advantage of this opportunity via the Backstage with Emory Music program, Hank Siegelson, a Friend as well as founder of the Emory Jazz Alliance, was impressed with the reading process and the opportunity to share in it: “It was incredible to witness these students having their compositions played by professional musicians. Only one or two other universities in the country offer this.” Domenic Salerni, first violinist of the Vega Quartet, said that he jumped at the suggestion to open the Vega’s classroom visits to the Friends of Music, because it fit the quartet’s commitment to reaching out to the entire Emory community, and provided an opportunity to show their gratitude for the Friends’ support of the Music Department and its students.
Classroom education was also on view thanks to Dr. Kristin Wendland, who opened her course in *Music, Culture and Society* (the study of music as historical and cultural practice) to Friends of Music. The sessions included focus on Argentine Social Dance, West Side Story, Wagner, The Beatles, Global Pop, and Beethoven’s Ninth. At the West Side Story session, Dr. Wendland played clips from the film, and elicited observations and opinions about how Bernstein’s music, Sondheim’s lyrics, and Robbins’ choreography enhanced the portrayal of the story’s culture clash. A much older Friend attending the class was welcomed to add an occasional comment, providing a different perspective to the discussion.

Backstage With Emory Music opened a total of 25 events to Friends of Music in the Spring 2015 inaugural semester. In addition to those highlighted above, Friends could visit open rehearsals of the Emory Symphony Orchestra (Dr. Richard Prior) and Chorus (Dr. Eric Nelson), the Emory Tango Ensemble (Kristin Wendland), the Emory Wind Ensemble (Dr. Nikk Pilato), the Emory Concert Choir (Dr. Eric Nelson), Stageworks 2015 (Director Bradley Howard), a two non-music classes at which the Vega Quartet performed and talked with the students: *Cell Structure and Musical Form*, with Dr. Arri Eisen, Senior Lecturer of Biology; and *Wagner and German Aesthetics*, with Dr. Andrew J. Mitchell, Associate Professor of Philosophy. Look for more fascinating topics and opportunities in Fall 2015.
Smoothly running logistics is essential to the success of a program like Backstage With Emory Music. The Music Department has been 110% supportive and cooperative, and in fact essential to taking the program from conception to actuality. Deborah Thoreson Slover, the Department Chair, strongly endorsed the program and was supported by the faculty, both in theory and by opening their classrooms and halls.

Launch would never have happened without the unflagging efforts of Kathy Summers, who made faculty contacts, confirmed the schedule and location for open events, liaised seamlessly with Friends of Music, and even handled reservations when the number of visitors to events had to be limited, as well as Martha Shockey, who provided invaluable advice and interface with the Development staff. There was nothing left for us to do but format and send the email announcements to the Friends of Music.

**More About BACKSTAGE WITH EMORY MUSIC**

- In the Fall of 2015, Backstage with Emory Music will continue to open several student classes and rehearsals to visitation by Friends of Music members. The open sessions will range from master classes by visiting artists to regular rehearsals of orchestral, wind, vocal and chamber groups, to classes such as music theory (to be determined).
- Watch for emails announcing future open events.
- There will be no charge for attendance.
- **Reservations:** when a class venue is small, attendance will be by reservation. Watch for emails announcing these small sessions, and respond as directed in the email to reserve a place at the session.
- Sessions at larger venues will not require a reservation.

**Why Friends are Excited About Backstage with Emory Music**

- Gaining an appreciation of the work behind the music enhances our enjoyment of performances
- Getting to know performers and their teachers on a more intimate level makes the music a more special experience
- Seeing how our contributions to Music Department are making a difference
- Gaining a greater appreciation of the depth and complexity of the artistic accomplishments of Emory Music and of its value to the community

**JOIN US BACKSTAGE !**