



THE RIGHT TUNE
Fabiana Claire and William Villaverde hope their idea draws an audience.

2ND PRIZE – GRADUATE: \$5,000

Upgrading Musical Education

A harmonious duet orchestrates Superior Academy of Music.

FABIANA CLAIRE (DMA '11) and William Villaverde (DMA '11) met in his hometown of Havana, Cuba, where both were immersed in music education. Beyond piano lessons, their comprehensive studies featured music theory, music history, ear training and choir. In 2002, they were awarded scholarships to the College of Charleston toward bachelor's degrees in music. "We got to the first theory class, and they were starting from scratch," Villaverde says. Adds Claire: "We were going over fundamentals we had learned since we were 8." But many of the other students lacked that fundamental training.

The couple married in 2004 and continued their music education, ultimately ending up in the doctoral program at UM's Frost School of Music. They continued to see a lack of pre-college fundamental training among music majors. "We kept asking ourselves, 'What's going on?'" Villaverde says. "There is something with pre-college music education in the U.S. that is messed up."

They discussed the issue at the Music Teachers National Association conference in Albuquerque, N.M., in 2010. "They were trying to create a system for teaching fundamentals to music students before they get to college," says Villaverde. That's when he said to his wife, "There's great potential here for a business." Spurred on by the music business courses Claire was taking, they developed the basic idea for Superior Academy of Music, which would be staffed with highly qualified faculty. "We've always wanted a career that combines performing and teaching," she says, "so we need to have business tools."

The couple envisioned SAM providing both teaching and mentoring, helping students understand the audition process and how to look for scholarships to college. They later expanded their idea to accept students who might not want to become professional musicians, yet who value having a strong extracurricular activity on their college applications.

Their experience teaching both at Frost and at their private studio has granted them some business acumen, as well as an appreciation for the differences between their all-day music education and American students' routines. "We had to adapt SAM to the realities of life here and how students are committed to other activities," Claire says.

The pair began work on their business plan at The Launch Pad, a UM entrepreneurial initiative housed through the Toppel Career Center, then refined it for the competition. Using the prize money and contributions from friends and family, they leased space in the Greenery Mall in Miami and opened SAM in late August. "We see ourselves as a Kaplan for music," Claire says, referring to the giant test-prep company. "[We'll be] preparing students for higher degrees."

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