When Steve Haber came to RIT, he didn’t know many other students.

He joined RIT Singers, then auditioned for and was accepted into Eight Beat Measure men’s a cappella vocal ensemble.

“Eight Beat has been my support system,” says Haber ’09 (information technology). “It’s been a big part of my RIT life.”

Haber is among 400 to 500 students who participate in RIT’s growing music program headquartered in the Fine Arts Department of the College of Liberal Arts. That number includes members of 11 performing groups as well as students taking academic classes ranging from music theory and music history to Bach and the Baroque and The Blues as Personal and Social Commentary.

Students from all colleges sign up for classes, and more than 200 students are pursuing music concentrations and minors.

In the coming school year, a new music minor is being rolled out: Music and Technology. It’s a logical step for RIT, says Carl Atkins, director of the music program. Music plays a part in film and animation, multi-media, digital recording, electronic games and a host of technological devices and systems.

“We talked to people in several of RIT’s other colleges, and there’s a lot of synergy,” says Atkins. “The program will be multidisciplinary.” To complete the minor, students will take eight credits in required courses plus 12 credits in electives. Down the road, Atkins hopes Music and Technology will become RIT’s first music major.

It’s part of the goal of developing what Atkins calls “a music program that’s right for RIT and right for music.”

Music has some history at RIT.

Going back to the early 20th century, there was a “glee club,” and NTID had a very active music program in the 1970s and ’80s. The NTID groups included the NTID Combo (consisting of four to six deaf and hard-of-hearing students), the RIT Timestompers (hearing and deaf students), and a concert band.

When Associate Professor of Music Edward Schell arrived in 1982, music at RIT consisted of a few performing groups (including NTID groups) and a handful of music appreciation and music history courses. The music room in the Student Alumni Union didn’t exist; the only rehearsal space was in the lower level of the...
College of Liberal Arts building.

RIT Singers had 17 members; by comparison, the group today comprises 80 to 100 students.

“We began to develop an academic curriculum,” says Schell. “It took time. We had to persuade people that there was a need. We’re not trying to become a music conservatory, but many students are interested in music and one of our goals is to help them grow their abilities and also give them the tools to appreciate music on a deeper level.

“You know we had that saying, at RIT you learn how to earn a living, live a life,” Schell notes. “Music is part of living a life.”

By the time Atkins arrived in 2002, the evolution of the program was underway, but music was still considered by many to be “more of a recreational activity,” he says.

“At first, I wasn’t sure I wanted to teach music in a technical school,” says Atkins, an accomplished musician who was teaching at Boston’s New England Conservatory of Music. The former director of Rochester’s Hochstein School of Music, and former president of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Atkins has a doctoral degree from the Eastman School of Music in conducting and music theory.

“I was impressed with the administrative commitment to make this a comprehensive university,” says Atkins, explaining his decision to join the music faculty. “Music and performing arts are part of providing a comprehensive education. As professional musicians, we take it very seriously.

“It’s unfair to the students to go into it in any other way.”

Today, there are four full-time music faculty members and eight adjuncts. The performing groups include RIT Singers, Chamber Singers, four a capella groups, RIT Orchestra, RIT Concert Band, Jazz Ensemble and World Music Ensemble. The groups perform regularly at RIT and at Rochester community venues and participate in collegiate competitions and festivals. In addition, several student-led groups are supported by the music program.

Students can receive academic credit for participating in the ensembles, and also have the opportunity to take private lessons. Currently, clarinet, saxophone, flute, violin, viola, tuba, trombone, piano, percussion and voice lessons are offered.

“Many students have had lessons right up until they arrive at RIT, and they’re playing at a high level,” says Atkins. “But without one-on-one instruction, they begin to lose that edge. The lessons have really enhanced the ensembles.”

Luke Auburn ’09 (professional and technical communications) agrees. He played cello in the RIT Orchestra throughout his four years at RIT. Auburn says the orchestra has improved dramatically in that time, due to the private lessons. (His brother Zeke, a third-year public policy major, plays viola in the orchestra and takes lessons.)

Being involved in music “keeps me mentally balanced,” says Auburn. “I use different parts of my brain when I play music. It’s therapeutic.

“It’s a constant struggle to find the time,” he adds. “But I would have been sad to put down the cello.”

Many students seem to have that need to feed both sides of their brains.

That was the situation for Paul Melnychuck ’83, ’84 (chemistry, imaging science). He started to play the piano and violin at age 9. He also loved photography.

He continued his love of music at RIT, becoming the first concert-master of the RIT Philharmonia and also singing in RIT Singers. He began his career at the Kodak Research Labs in 1981 and left in 1998 as founder and senior vice president, Kodak

“Music and performing arts are part of providing a comprehensive education. As professional musicians, we take it very seriously.”

Carl Atkins, director, RIT’s music program
RIT’s Performing Artists Concert Series owes its existence to David Perlman’s mother.

Perlman, an RIT electrical engineering professor (now emeritus), was visiting his mom at an assisted living facility in Florida in 1995 when a young woman – with a baby in a bassinet – sat down at the piano to play for the residents.

“I thought, ‘Yuck – I’ll have to listen to more patronizing elevator music,’ but all of a sudden I heard this incredibly played Chopin,” Perlman recalls. “I was astounded.”

**An idea grabbed him** and wouldn’t let go. “It occurred to me that there were many talented musicians thirsting for opportunities to play, while, at the time, there was a nearly total absence of professionally performed classical music and jazz on campus.”

He took his idea to the RIT administration.

**Concert series is engineer’s gift to RIT**
“They said ‘If you’ll run it, we’ll fund it,’” says Perlman.

What Perlman then called the Emerging Artists Concert Series was launched in the 1995-96 school year with two concerts — including a recital by Russian pianist Eleonora Lvov, the young pianist Perlman had discovered in Florida.

The 15th season, which begins Sept. 25, 2009, will feature five concerts.

Perlman has proved a passionate and tireless impresario. He and his wife, Marjorie, are long-time arts supporters with many and deep connections with arts organizations. David has served on the boards of the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and Geva Theatre and Marjorie has worked for the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts and is currently on the boards of Friends of the UR Libraries, Friends of Eastman Opera, Park Avenue Dance, and Project U.N.I.Q.U.E.

He has had no problem finding performers and audiences for the RIT series. “I think I stumbled onto something,” he says with characteristic modesty. He believes there are several reasons why performers are enthusiastic about participating:

• RIT’s 500-seat Ingle Auditorium is an ideal size.
• Performers present music they want to play; Perlman is open to their ideas.
• Musicians perform with people they want to play with.
• RIT offers musicians a chance to reach students as well as music lovers from the Rochester community.

“Plus,” says Perlman, “We do innovative things that musicians like.”

Rochester jazz pianist Rod Blumenau concurs on all points. Blumenau and his trio opened the first season and he has returned at least once every year since with ensembles made up of some of the area’s finest jazz musicians.

“David is very interested in the concert content,” says Blumenau. “He thinks ‘out of the box’ and we always have animated discussions about the themes of my concerts, but once we decide he gives me a long leash and doesn’t micromanage, which I really appreciate. David is very supportive throughout the process, especially going beyond the call of duty to promote the concert in publications, posters, radio interviews and ads, etc.”

On Dec. 11, Blumenau and his group will perform a jazz concert based on music of the Beatles. Past efforts have included “Legends of Jazz Piano” and “Music Recycling 101,” in which Blumenau demonstrated how composers borrow from their predecessors.

Performing Artists Series also provided the setting, in 2003, for the premiere of Sydney the Sea Squid (poem by Barbara Stewart, music by Paul Stuart), commissioned by RIT and performed by the Equinox Symphony Chamber Orchestra. A concert this past May in conjunction with the Imagine RIT Festival brought the world premiere of a concerto grosso written by Eastman doctoral candidate Paul Coleman for the Rochester string quintet Quartsemble and electronics, commissioned by the Performing Artists Concert Series.

The series has succeeded in tapping into the depth of musical talent in the Rochester area, as well as bringing in up-and-coming performers from as far away as Moscow. The Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and several of its subsets have performed numerous times, as have ensembles and faculty members from the Eastman School of Music. In a memorable trio performance, internationally known pianist Jon Nakamatsu was joined by RPO principals Kenneth Grant (clarinet) and Melissa Matson (viola). Lang Lang, who has become one of the world’s most famous classical pianists, was 17 when he came to RIT to perform with the RPO in the 1999-2000 series.

The audience for Performing Artists Series concerts is growing — particularly students, who have accounted for as much as 50 percent of tickets sold. Sellouts or near sellouts are not unusual. Not surprisingly, the classical concerts attract a different audience than the jazz performances, although both groups seem equally enthusiastic about the shows.

“Oh, I have no particular idea why,” says Blumenau, “the audience at David’s concerts is always very receptive to our efforts. They are the most intent and appreciative audiences I run into each year.”

For Perlman, the series remains a labor of love — and make no mistake, there is a lot of labor involved. How much?

“I don’t know,” he says. “A lot.
“ ‘But I’ve got to say, honestly, I can’t think of anything I’ve ever done that gives me more pleasure.”

Kathy Lindsley

The 15th season

The 2009-10 season of RIT’s Performing Artists Concert Series features the following concerts:

• **Louis & Ella**, Sept. 25: Herb Smith, trumpet; Joilet Harris, vocals; Michael Lasser, narration.
• **Andrey Pisarev Returns**, Oct. 30: Recital by the Russian pianist, back by popular demand.
• **Jazz Impressions of the Beatles**, Dec. 11: Rod Blumenau Quartet with Jeff Campbell, bass; Gabe Condon, guitar; and Brad Paxton, drums.
• **Four Classical Stars**, April 2, 2010: Soojin Ahn, piano; Michael Larco, viola; Rachel Barton Pine, violin; Wendy Warner, cello.
• **The Ying Quartet**, April 30, 2010: Classical string quartet.

All concerts begin at 8 p.m. in Ingle Auditorium (Student Alumni Union). Tickets are $5 for students, $15 for faculty, staff and alumni, and $20 for the general public. Tickets may be purchased at the RIT Student Alumni Union Candy Counter or at the door on concert night, if available. For VISA or Master Card phone orders, call the RIT Gordon Field House Box Office at (585) 475-4121.

For more information, visit www.davidigital.com.