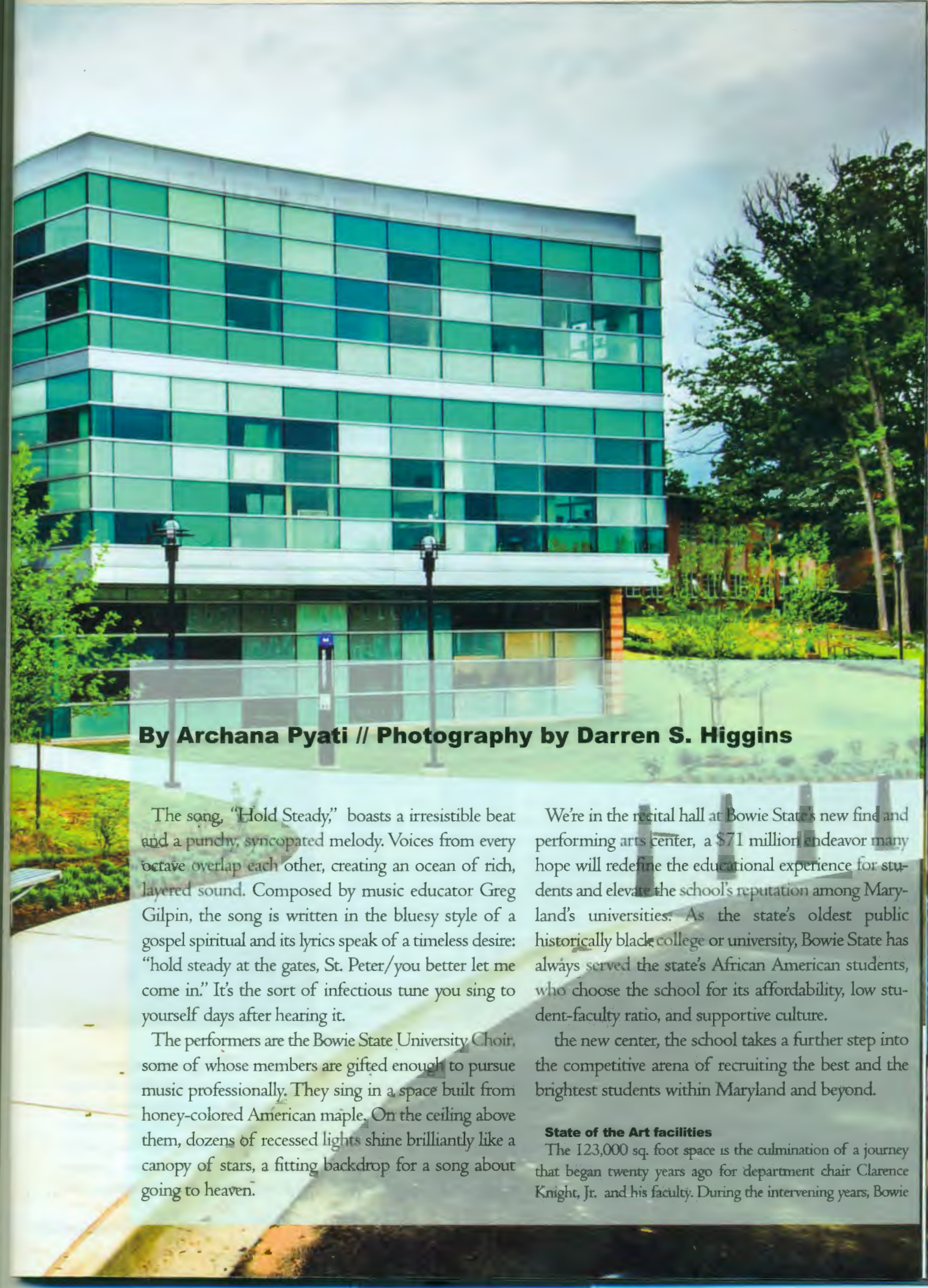




State  
of the Art



**By Archana Pyati // Photography by Darren S. Higgins**

The song, “Hold Steady,” boasts a irresistible beat and a punchy, syncopated melody. Voices from every octave overlap each other, creating an ocean of rich, layered sound. Composed by music educator Greg Gilpin, the song is written in the bluesy style of a gospel spiritual and its lyrics speak of a timeless desire: “hold steady at the gates, St. Peter/you better let me come in.” It’s the sort of infectious tune you sing to yourself days after hearing it.

The performers are the Bowie State University Choir, some of whose members are gifted enough to pursue music professionally. They sing in a space built from honey-colored American maple. On the ceiling above them, dozens of recessed lights shine brilliantly like a canopy of stars, a fitting backdrop for a song about going to heaven.

We’re in the recital hall at Bowie State’s new fine and performing arts center, a \$71 million endeavor many hope will redefine the educational experience for students and elevate the school’s reputation among Maryland’s universities. As the state’s oldest public historically black college or university, Bowie State has always served the state’s African American students, who choose the school for its affordability, low student-faculty ratio, and supportive culture.

the new center, the school takes a further step into the competitive arena of recruiting the best and the brightest students within Maryland and beyond.

**State of the Art facilities**

The 123,000 sq. foot space is the culmination of a journey that began twenty years ago for department chair Clarence Knight, Jr. and his faculty. During the intervening years, Bowie



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State officials waged an intensive lobbying effort in Annapolis to convince state leaders that students pursuing careers in the arts deserved the best facilities to hone their craft.

“It opens up a different avenue for things for us. ...Everybody’s ecstatic, it’s like moving into a new house,” says Knight.

All the performance venues – the recital hall, the black box theater, the main stage theater, and the movement studio – emphasize intimacy between performer and spectator, rarely felt in Myers auditorium, the university’s previous performance space. With seating for nearly 1,000, the auditorium, housed in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Communication Arts Center, offered a one-size-fits-all approach to each discipline.

The new center gives spectators a different venue to experience the distinct virtues of dance, theater, and music. The main stage is designed vertically so performers feel the audience pressing in on them; the black box, emphasizing creative staging and experimental works, further erodes the boundary between actor and spectator.

“They’re getting a true sense of what a theater space really is, especially a state-of-the-art theater space, and all of the work that goes into readying that space for a production,” says theater program coordinator and professor Gail Medford.

Some call the recital hall the center’s crown jewel, not just for its physical beauty but the rich sound produced by its superior acoustics. Echoes are dampened by sets of royal blue curtains that hang from the ceiling at the hall’s rear and behind the stage. Architects Einhorn, Yaf-

fee, and Prescott, the firm behind American University’s Katzen Arts Center, worked with top acoustical consultants to achieve a sound quality rivaling professional houses throughout the state.

A frequently cited annoyance of the MLK Jr. center was poor soundproofing between classrooms and studios, making it impossible for students to rehearse, perform, or create without interrupting each other. Now, every practice room, studio space, and venue in the new center is soundproof so students can pursue their projects simultaneously. A sculptor using power tools to chisel stone on the first floor can work at the same time the marching band is rehearsing and a senior vocalist is giving her final performance on the second floor.

“The acoustics of the building are just exquisite,” says music professor Marymal Holmes, a soprano who conducts the choirs. “We are no longer filtering into each other’s spaces by sound.”

EYP achieved this acoustic separation through a unique design: the center is actually five separate buildings connected by large isolation joints; they are held together without their walls actually touching. These gaps make it impossible for sound waves to travel from one space to another. “[D]ue to the level of complexity, this is one of the best acoustically designed spaces in the state of Maryland,” says John Baxter, EYP’s project executive and education sector leader.

The theater program, along with fine arts, digital media, and music, is set to explode in the next few years with a surge of new majors. In



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addition to acting, directing, and stage management, students will build their own sets in the set construction workshop and design and sew their own costumes in the costume shop.

Yes, the theater resources are amazing, but not at all unusual for a university theater program – particularly in the greater D.C. region, one of

**Getting A Leg Up:** The new performance center will prove to be a great attraction for talented students who seek careers in the arts.



the country's top markets for theater -- that takes itself and its students aspirations seriously, says Professor Bob Bartlett, a playwright in charge of the directing program.

As we walk through the main stage theater where the technical crew prepares for an upcoming production of David Auburn's play

"Proof," Bartlett says exposing students to every aspect of a production makes them well-rounded in a field where a young actor may have to take multiple gigs to make ends meet. The main stage, black box, costume and set construction shops exude the authenticity of the real world that awaits them. "Just about any

professional theater company could make its home here and be very happy," he says.

#### **Preparing Professional Artists**

Historically, Bowie State has prepared students for specific vocations -- teaching, agricultural science, engineering, and nursing. In 1865,

it opened its doors as a “normal school” whose purpose was to train African American school teachers. Over time, it made way for other disciplines, but its focus has remained on the practical and lucrative fields of science, technology, and business.

The new center forces the question: is it possible to make a career out of art and music, notoriously competitive pursuits where success can be elusive? Faculty say the only way for students to seriously explore a career in the arts is to have the very best resources at their disposal. You can never achieve greatness if you don't know what greatness sounds or looks like.

Last year, the state authorized Bowie State's music department to be an “all-Steinway” program, making it the second HBCU behind Spelman College to receive that designation. All four of the school's performance pianos are Steinway grands and its 28 practice pianos are Steinway-designed. The pianos account for \$553,000 of the center's budget, and must be tuned and maintained according to a strict schedule.

Says Holmes: “Our students are starting with an advantage for a change, not a disadvantage,” she continues from her office, where one of the smaller Steinway grands sits. “They're playing

on precision instruments. . .that have a tone that's going to help develop their ear.”

As funding for HBCUs has fluctuated over the years, arts programs haven't always survived. But the tide may be turning. Each discipline within the center is expanding its curriculum with new concentrations in children's theater, dance movement studies, and fashion design, and resurrecting defunct programs, like music education.

“There was a period when HBCUs were closing down their arts programs, but we've been revitalizing,” says Peggy Blood, professor at Savannah State University and president of the National Alliance of Artists from HBCUs.

Survival skills in the arts means teaching students how to market themselves and negotiate contracts, says department chair Knight, who built a career as an ensemble musician for top jazz, pop and R & B acts. “When students come to this institution, they need to learn how to do that and be competent in their art form, he says.

There is also the issue of equity, and the importance of giving a historically underserved population what's been denied it in the past. With in-state tuition \$6,347 for the 2011-12 academic year, Bowie State is still an affordable choice in an era of soaring tuition rates.

“Many of the students I work with have limited means,” says Phyllis Audrey Wilson, chair of the visual arts department at Suitland High School. “[T]he fact that they have. . .something available to them that is local and affordable that will provide them with a nationally and internationally elevated education is of immense importance.”

Adia Wright, a 23-year-old senior, is a soprano with a long career ahead of her. She comes from a musical family: her father is Symphony of Soul band leader Adolph E. Wright. She notes that the instruments, acoustics, and rehearsal spaces are better than many of the graduate programs she is auditioning for. “It helps you from the ground up,” she says after a recent concert.

Wright is just the sort of student faculty want to fill the center's studios and rehearsal rooms. Since moving into the new space in January, sculptor and art professor E. Clarke Mester Jr. has already noticed a greater intensity of purpose among his students: “They see it more as a profession because of this building, and see themselves more as professionals in training be-

**Learning verve:** Professor Tewodross Melchishua, coordinator for the visual communications digital media arts program, shows a student how to best utilize technology and the creative process.



cause of this building.”

**Forging Ties Between Art and Commerce**

Digital media professor and program coordinator for the Visual Communication & Digital Media Arts concentration, Tewodross Melchishua likes to insert an “a” to “S.T.E.M.,” the popular acronym used in education circles. It stands for “science, technology, engineering, and math,” fields in which American students lag far behind their Asian and European counterparts. The “a” stands for “art,” and by turning “S.T.E.M.” into “S.T.E.A.M.,” Melchishua places art squarely inside the educational paradigm that will determine the U.S.’s global competitiveness.

As he trains the next generation of graphic designers and multimedia artists, Melchishua wants his students to explore ideas of sustainability and to tackle social and economic challenges like clean water and health care delivery in their projects, going beyond creating art for art’s sake.



**"We Should Make A Bold Statement"**

—Rhonda Dallas, PGACHC

"As opposed to creating designers, I'd like for them to be globally and socially conscious problem-solvers. . . [by] looking at a local issue, whether it's in Maryland or Prince George's County [or] a global issue," he says.

One problem the new center addresses is raising the profile of the arts in Prince George's County by giving local artists needed rehearsal, teaching, and exhibit space, says Rhonda Dallas, executive director of the Prince George's County Arts and Humanities Council. "We need to make a bold statement within the county that the arts are alive and well here and that we're serious about retaining our cultural talent. . . If the [center] is successful, then the entire boat rises."

The school's new multimedia suite would be the envy of any boutique graphics design firm as it houses Apple computers loaded with the latest design software, but also green screen room and a motion graphics editing suite. The latter allows students to

pursue sophisticated 2- and 3-D animations, the type used in video games, industrial design modeling, and commercials. Melchishua envisions contracting with local businesses to hire students to design advertising campaigns for print, TV, and the web.

Roderick Woodruff, co-founder of the Urban Video Game Academy, an afterschool program that teaches kids digital animation skills, says facilities alone will not give aspiring artists the careers they want. Mentoring and internships must be a component: "If [students] don't know these people exist, we can't do anything about emulation." It turns out there is no substitute for real world experience, whether you are a dancer, a costume-maker, an industrial designer, a singer, or a sculptor. In the new fine and performing arts center, Bowie State's motto—"prepare for life"—is more alive than it's ever been.

*Archana Pyati is a freelance journalist based in Silver Spring, MD. Her work has appeared in a variety of outlets, including the **Portland Oregonian**, the **San Francisco Chronicle**, **Minority Nurse** magazine, and **New America Media**.*

