

THE CADENZA

UNIVERSITY OF TOCCOA FALLS MUSIC DEPARTMENT

YEAR-END HIGHLIGHTS



UNIVERSITY
OF
TOCCOA FALLS

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NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

We are truly delighted to present the inaugural publication of *The Cadenza*—our year-end music department highlight. This marks a meaningful opportunity to deepen our connection with alumni, current students, and our broader community, both locally and globally.

The mission of our music department, which can be summarized as *“Excellence in music, faith in practice, and glory to God,”* is vividly reflected in these highlights. They stand as a testament to the dedication of our exceptional faculty and staff, the remarkable talent of our students, and the unwavering support of our administration. Above all, they bear witness to the truth expressed in Psalm 118:23: *“This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”*

Throughout the year, we have been continually inspired by our students across all areas of the department and ensembles. They are emerging as thoughtful artistic theologians, pursuing musical excellence with a deep desire to glorify God. From the formation of the new music theater ensemble and the exploration of fresh artistic expressions to worship-centered concerts, choir tours, recordings reaching lives across the globe, and powerful moments of renewal in our campus chapel services—this has been a season of remarkable growth and flourishing for UTF Music.

We remain deeply grateful for our donors, families, friends and alumni whose support makes this work possible. It is our hope that these highlights will fill you with joy as we celebrate the past year and look ahead with great anticipation for what is to come.

Please be sure to mark the dates of our upcoming concerts on your calendar—we would be delighted to welcome you whenever you are in town.

With Warm regards,

Dr. Desmond Ikegwonu

Chair | Music Department

Associate Professor of Music and Worship Studies

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STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

WE GIVE YOU ALL
THE GLORY





TIN TING

GLOBAL ZOMI LENGTHE IDOL

Last summer, Tin Ting had the opportunity to travel to Malaysia to participate in the **Global Zomi Lengthe (Idol)**, an international singing competition for the Zomi people. The competition featured approximately 150 contestants from around the world, including participants from Myanmar (Burma), Singapore, Norway, Australia, and the United States. Out of all the contestants, Tin Ting was honored to be selected as one of the **top 20 finalists** and competed in Malaysia from July 24–29. During the competition, each finalist performed two songs selected by the committee as well as four songs of their own choice. Not only did she advance to the **top 15 finalists**, but she was also given the opportunity to record a song written by a well-known composer.

ADAH CHRISTOPHER

SYMPHONY DEBUT

French horn student Adah Christopher will make her debut with the Toccoa Symphony Orchestra in July, performing as part of their Fourth of July program. Adah is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Music degree.



ELIAS RODRIGUEZ

NEW MUSIC SINGLE

A new single, *"Still Hallelujah,"* featuring Elias Rodriguez and Dr. Desmond Ikegwuonu, was released in February in collaboration with PFC Worship and is now available on all streaming platforms.

Serving as composer, co-producer, and artistic director, Dr. Ikegwuonu shared his enthusiasm:

"It is truly inspiring to witness our Music and Worship students collaborating with Grammy Award-winning producers and creating music at such an exceptional level of excellence. Opportunities like these not only refine their craft but also cultivate professional artistry, discipline, and creative confidence. Experiences like this affirm the value of the exceptional music training offered here at Toccoa Falls within a Christ-centered academic environment. When students are given access to high-level mentorship and production expertise, it is truly transformative."

This project builds on the momentum of last year's worship collaboration, *"Due Season,"* featuring the University of Toccoa Falls Choir, which showcased the collective talent and heart for worship within the student body.



STUDENT RECITAL HIGHLIGHTS

In April, music education majors Emmalee Miller (soprano) and Naomi Hodges (mezzo-soprano) each presented their junior vocal recitals. Both students performed a rigorous 30-minute program, demonstrating strong musicianship and artistry across a range of repertoire, including works by Mendelssohn, Schubert, Handel, and Copland. These recitals fulfill a key requirement of their music education curriculum, and both students look forward to beginning their student teaching placements this fall.

Toccoa Falls Vocal Students Shine at Statewide Singing Competition

In November 2025, four talented vocal music students from the University of Toccoa Falls represented the school at the Georgia chapter of the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) competition, hosted at Kennesaw State University.

This year's event brought together more than 390 singers from universities and private vocal studios across Georgia for two days of inspiring performances and adjudicated rounds.

Four students from Professor Kelly Birgfeld's vocal studio—Elias Rodriguez, Emmalee Miller, Naomi Hodges, and Seth Furce—took the stage to showcase their artistry and technique. Each performed exceptionally, demonstrating the strength and dedication of UTF's vocal program.

A special congratulation goes to:



**ELIAS
RODRIGUEZ ('26)**

2nd Place, Upper Classical
Division (Tenor and Bass)



**SETH FURCE
(Freshman)**

2nd Place, First-Year Classical
Division (Tenor and Bass)

TOUR VOICES



During the spring semester, the college choir toured in Florida during spring break and ministered in 9 churches and 2 schools. Those opportunities to meet and worship with other fellow believers in various communities were a tremendous blessing. Students were hosted overnight in church family homes and further blessed by the extended time of hospitality and fellowship. When asked to reflect on “takeaways” from the University of Toccoa Falls choir tour experience, students responded with the following comments:



SETH FURCE

"Being at different churches and meeting other Christians was truly a blessing especially in those moments when we all collectively sung in worship. Having been on choir tours before I have had a similar experience but being on one at this stage of my life the Lord revealed to me the blessing of the body of Christ."

NAOMI HODGES

"Choir tour has given me a new level of resiliency and a greater appreciation for the gift that it is to go and do ministry. I would recommend doing something like choir tour to anyone who is looking to be formed spiritually and emotionally through a ministry opportunity.

My favorite part of the tour was the connection I made with the other members of the choir. I had the opportunity to learn more about them, pray with them, and have edifying conversations with them that impacted me deeply.

The Lord ministered to me through my host families. The way these people that knew nothing about me welcomed me into their homes and provided for me was such a blessing. I am so thankful for each of my host families and the experiences I had with them."





EMMA CALDWELL

"I really enjoyed getting to know the choir members better over the course of the tour. I also loved getting to bond with the hosts. I was so blessed with getting to see everyone serve the Lord . . . the reason why we were touring in the first place and that was for the Father.

There is so much joy in taking the focus off of yourself and putting it on the Father. You can always tell a difference in people who live their lives in that way. I think that everyone should be able to experience tour and I truly enjoyed it and was incredibly blessed by the opportunity."

JOANNA WUNROW

"Each concert was an incredible time of worship and drawing closer to God. I felt the Spirit moving during our prayer and dedication before every concert, and even when I was getting tired or distracted, God came and ministered to me and gave me strength during the concerts so that I had the strength to lead others in worship. As a junior/senior on the trip this year, I was also blessed to be more in a position of guidance, which gave me the opportunity to practice servant leadership and be blessed by giving to others, which will serve me well in future ministry or leadership roles."



ENSEMBLE NOTES



MUSICAL THEATER ENSEMBLE

Fall of 2025, the music department introduced a new vocal ensemble dedicated to musical theater repertoire. Directed by Professor Birgfeld and accompanied by Mrs. Elizabeth Newey, the ensemble provides students with the opportunity to engage with standard musical theater works, develop their performance skills as actor-singers, and explore creativity in a collaborative and engaging environment.

During the fall semester, the ensemble shared selections from their program with local schools, including Commerce High School. Students performed excerpts from *Godspell* and *The Prince of Egypt* for theater and music classes, followed by an interactive Q&A session about their experiences at Toccoa Falls. In the spring semester, the ensemble expanded to include participants from across campus and presented an April concert themed around Disney repertoire. Students performed and choreographed selections from productions such as *Frozen*, *Encanto*, *Newsies*, and *Tangled*, demonstrating both musical and theatrical growth.

The department looks forward to continued development of the ensemble and anticipates additional performance opportunities within the Toccoa Falls community in the future. Here are some reflections from students in the Musical Theater ensemble:

MILEY BURTON

[SOPHOMORE]

"I loved being able to sing and dance while also being in community with others and worshipping God through it. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to choreograph with such a wonderful group and be able to love them and feel loved by them. I also love how patient Prof. Birgfeld is."



ALEXA BINSON

[SOPHOMORE]

"Every rehearsal, I was able to forget about everything else and just enjoy music. It is a great community that fosters a love and appreciation for musical theatre."



ADAH CHRISTOPHER

[SOPHOMORE]

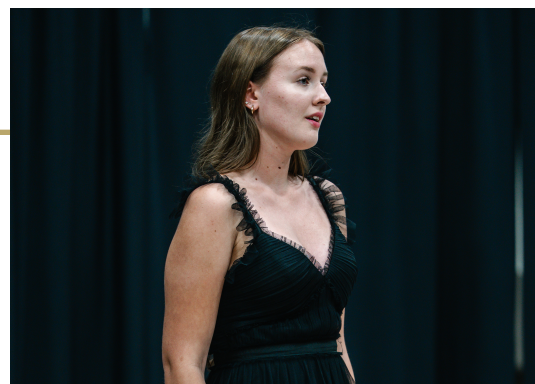
"I really love that I have been exposed to a variety of different types of music through this ensemble. I like that Prof. Birgfeld teaches us how to sing in different styles for each piece. This is an awesome ensemble."



JAMIE SEMPLE

[SOPHOMORE]

"I've learned a lot about blending vocally with others and memorizing pieces quickly. I liked being a part of a team who all love theater."



LILLY KESSLER

[SOPHOMORE]

"I loved having Prof. Birgfeld as our teacher. She is so fun and full of life and clearly knows and loves what she is doing."

CONCERT BAND

Our Band and Orchestral instrumentalists directed by Dr. George Dougherty were actively engaged in four major concert productions this year, in addition to the much-anticipated Homecoming Hymn Sing. These performances included Celtic Voices: Songs of the British Isles in the fall, the annual Christmas at Toccoa Falls, American Rhapsody in the spring, and the annual Spring Concert.

The Concert Band has grown to slightly over 40 members and continues to demonstrate increasing musical excellence, with more advanced repertoire now regularly featured in our programs. Highlights include works by emerging composers such as Brian Balmages and Jay Bocook, alongside enduring band classics by Gustav Holst.

We are encouraged by a growing interest in the band and instrumental music program. We give God the glory for this season of encouragement and growth.

UTF BRASS ENSEMBLE

The UTF Brass Ensemble directed by Dr. George Dougherty has grown to eight members and continues to expand its impact both on campus and in the community. The ensemble has had the opportunity to minister twice at Toccoa Presbyterian Church and performs regularly on all major departmental concerts, as well as at General Student Recitals.

Their repertoire includes classic works by composers such as Bach and Mouret, alongside sacred and hymn arrangements well suited for both church and concert settings.

Members of the Brass Ensemble are emerging as leaders within the Concert Band and the broader music department. Many are also actively involved in vocal and worship ensembles, demonstrating both versatility and a strong commitment to musical excellence and ministry.



HYMN SING

Homecoming Hymn Sing

The Homecoming Hymn Sing is being considered as a recurring feature of the Music Department, with plans to invite alumni to return to campus and participate alongside the Concert Band, Choir and Worship Team. With the inclusion of emeritus faculty—Jim Morden, Dave Stuft, and Donald Williams—enhancing the Concert Band, alumni will have meaningful opportunities to renew connections with former teachers while also engaging with current faculty.

Alumni who are interested in participating are encouraged to contact the Alumni Services Office. Music may be distributed in advance to facilitate preparation for those who wish to take part in the performance. The Concert Band program will include With You (God Be With You 'Til We Meet Again) by Brian Balmages, Where Eagles Soar by Ed Hickey, as well as an additional hymn setting to be announced.

We warmly invite you to join us and witness the continued work and growth within the Music Department at UTF.

UNIVERSITY OF TOCCOA FALLS CHOIR

The UTF Choir and the Singing Men directed by Dr. Tom Council participated in various programs during the 2025-26 school year. The Choir joined with the chapel bands on several occasions to facilitate the music and worship for UTF chapel services. Both choirs presented a Concert of Worship at First Baptist Church Toccoa and also performed in the annual "Christmas at Toccoa Falls" concert on December 4. Then on Sunday December 7, both choirs combined with the local community choir and performed with the Toccoa Symphony Orchestra.

SINGING MEN

The Singing Men presented a full Concert of Worship at First Alliance Church Toccoa in April. Both choirs collaborated once again with the Toccoa Symphony Choir and Orchestra for their concert at UTF in May 2026.

WORSHIP TEAM

There are so many testimonies of God's renewal and awakening in the hearts of our students, staff, and faculty through our chapel services on campus. It is a beautiful stirring within the gathered community in worship as we respond to the divine summons through praise, adoration, confession, and surrender—something made possible only by the active work of the Holy Spirit in our chapel services. Each gathering seems to reveal, by God's mercy, a fresh divine wind of the Spirit that animates our hearts through singing, preaching, prayer, and other liturgical moments.

The rhythm of faith has been deeply nurtured through the collective yearning of our student body and campus community as they desire more of God and boldly declare their allegiance to Him. There has been a palpable sense of spiritual hunger and expectancy throughout this academic year that continues to shape the culture of worship on our campus.

We have also been richly blessed by our Worship Team members, who serve diligently each week with a prayerful posture, seeking to be instruments of praise not only on the stage but also within the broader campus community. There have been many sacred moments in which the continual offering of sung worship has led students to intercede for one another as we intentionally make space for the Lord to move in our services. We are truly grateful for a community that remains reverentially attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Additionally, we have been blessed with worship team leaders and assistants who faithfully embody the gift of service with both musical excellence and grace. They embrace the rigor required for musical preparation while remaining attentive to the divine beauty that emerges when God's people collectively sing in prayer, surrender, and devotion. Each rehearsal has become more than preparation for a service; it has been an opportunity to immerse the entire process in prayerful expectation for what God desires to do through each week's chapel gathering.

It is this posture of biblical faithfulness with expectancy that has continually shaped our hearts throughout the academic year as a habit of grace. We are excited and deeply encouraged by what God is doing on our campus and through our weekly chapel services.

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Here are a few reflections from some of our worship team leaders as they share about their experiences serving and witnessing God's work through chapel this academic year:

JOSIE COLEMAN

"My time here at the University of Toccoa Falls has been completely shaped and formed by my chapel experience. I had the privilege of being on a chapel team my freshman year and leading a chapel team my sophomore year. God has been so faithful to show up for every chapel service, touching the lives and hearts of the student body every Tuesday and Wednesday. To be a part of the worship culture of campus has been such a blessing and an honor. I cannot wait to see what the Lord continues to do in the coming years!"



JADEN WIGGINS

"I have loved having a team that praises God whole-hearted and brings excellence to everything they do"



PAIGE YANG

"Being a worship leader at UTF has taught me so much about the ins and outs of intentional worship. From planning sets, running rehearsals, fostering a healthy team environment, to learning how to live my life daily to a higher standard. And there are countless other things that I've gained through this opportunity. But it has been such a blessing being able to learn from the people I've met and grown with. I will forever cherish the things I've been able to learn and experience."





GRADUATING SENIOR SPOTLIGHT



ELIAS RODRIGUEZ

Congratulations to graduating senior Elias Rodriguez, a Music and Worship major, who was honored with the Music Graduating Senior Award. We celebrate this well-deserved recognition, and the many contributions Elias has made during his time at the University of Toccoa Falls.

Here is what Elias had to say about his experience:

"Being a Music & Worship major over the past four years has not only strengthened me as a musician but has also shaped me into a more confident leader through the opportunities God has given me here. During my time in the department, I've built meaningful relationships with professors who have shown genuine care for both my life and my future as a worship pastor. One of my favorite memories was when my wife and I had the privilege of having two of our closest mentors come to our wedding, Dr. Council and Dr. Desmond who led worship at our wedding—something that truly reflects the heart of this community. Professionally, I was blessed to begin my first part-time role as a worship pastor at 12Stone Church during my junior year and, by the start of my senior spring semester, step into my first full-time position at The Jefferson Church. As my wife and I move into this next chapter of life and ministry, I can confidently say that the musical and professional preparation I received here has been invaluable, showing me the true value of a high-quality music education for anyone pursuing a career in music, whether in the church, in schools, or independently."

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Elias Rodriguez



FACULTY IN FOCUS

DR. YOU JU LEE

In 2025, Dr. You Ju Lee marked a year of distinguished artistic achievement and international recognition. She was inducted into the Steinway Teacher Hall of Fame on October 21, honoring her outstanding contributions to piano pedagogy. Earlier that month, on October 4, she appeared as a featured soloist with the North Czech Philharmonic Orchestra at the renowned Smetana Hall in Prague. Her international engagements also included a recital at the International Klavier Konzert held at the Evangelische Saalkirche in Ingelheim, Germany, on July 25.

In August, Dr. Lee was invited to perform at the National Flute Association's 53rd Annual Convention in Atlanta, where she gave the world premiere of Christopher Caliendo's Sonata for Flute and Piano, further demonstrating her commitment to contemporary music and collaborative performance.

DR. TOM COUNCIL

Dr. Council is celebrating his 20th season as Conductor of the Toccoa Symphony Chorus, marking two decades of dedicated leadership and artistic excellence with the ensemble.

DR. GEORGE DOUGHERTY

Dr. Dougherty is the founding member of Artisans in Brass, a professional brass quintet that tours across the nation presenting concerts, masterclasses, and clinics. As a composer and arranger, Dr. Dougherty's brass arrangements, including "The Lord's Prayer" and "How Firm a Foundation," were recently performed by the UTF Brass Ensemble during several concerts throughout the year. Dr. Dougherty also continues to present sacred solo performances in churches across the United States.

PROFESSOR KELLY BIRGFELD

As a vocologist and vocal coach, Prof. Birgfeld maintains an active voice studio and has served as an adjudicator for numerous competitions across Georgia, including Classical Singer Magazine. Her students have continued to receive acclaim in vocal competitions throughout the nation. As a specialist in Musical Theater, Prof. Birgfeld founded the Musical Theater Ensemble, bringing together students from a variety of disciplines across campus. The ensemble's performances have received rave reviews from audiences while also providing students with a thriving collaborative experience in the kinetic arts, set design, costuming, acting, and the vocal stylings of diverse musical genres.



DR. DESMOND IKEGWUONU

Dr. Desmond Ikegwuonu's new large-scale work, *Hallelujah Ogo* for orchestra and choir, received its world premiere with the Toccoa Symphony and Chorus under his direction. Dr. Ikegwuonu conducted the premiere performance, which was dedicated to Dr. Tom Council. The audience responded with a rousing standing ovation, celebrating a composition filled with vibrant praise and artistic brilliance. Drawing from themes rooted in the native Nigerian Yoruba language tradition, *Hallelujah Ogo* combines moving melodies, rich harmonies, and joyful rhythmic energy. The music reflects festive cultural expressions often associated with Christmastime, creating an atmosphere of exuberant worship. The Toccoa Symphony Chorus and the University of Toccoa Falls Choir brought depth and color to the performance through their powerful choral artistry.

As a jazz pianist, Dr. Ikegwuonu was featured in the Toccoa Symphony Orchestra winter concert, "...And All That Jazz" performing the music of George Gershwin and Duke Ellington.

As the founding Artistic Director of PFC Worship, Dr. Ikegwuonu has composed, produced, and engineered dozens of songs and albums with leading artists across the nation. His newest EP, *Chapter V*, features several tracks including *The Standard*, performed by Zoe Purcaro a UTF Worship Arts Assistant and the 2022 Future Scholar Award recipient.

Reflecting on the experience, Zoe shared:

"I'm so thankful for the opportunity to work with Dr. Desmond on this recording project. This is my third-year leading worship at the University of Toccoa Falls, and I'm grateful for all the doors God has opened for me here to lead others in worship. This recording gave me such an interesting perspective on how precision, excellence, and attention to detail can be worshipful."

In September, Dr. Ikegwuonu released a single "*Good God Never Tired*," a vibrant work that merges elements of Afrobeats with Caribbean rhythmic stylings. His music reflects a rich sonic tapestry that transcends ethnic boundaries while offering a fresh sound deeply infused with biblical hope.

Dr. Ikegwuonu is the recipient of the 2026 Vulcan Teaching Excellence Award, which recognizes the outstanding contributions of a University of Toccoa Falls faculty member towards undergraduate education, student learning, and campus life.



CHRISTMAS AT TOCCOA FALLS

The holiday celebrations at University of Toccoa Falls continue to serve as a cherished musical tradition for both the campus community and the Department of Music. Our annual Christmas Concert and Toccoa Symphony Orchestra performance showcase students, faculty, and community musicians presenting both beloved Christmas classics and new musical works with excellence across an eclectic variety of styles.

This vibrant and enriching collage of Christmas music continues to inspire our community and celebrate the joy and hope of the season. We warmly invite you to join us for Christmas at Toccoa Falls on Thursday, December 3, 2026, at 7:00 PM in the Grace Alford Performing Arts Center.

STEINWAY PROJECT

Music faculty members Dr. You Ju Lee, Dr. Tom Council, and Dr. Desmond Ikegwuonu recently traveled to the Steinway & Sons Factory in New York to select our newest 9-foot concert grand piano. During their visit, the faculty received a tour of the renowned Steinway factory and had the opportunity to experience firsthand the craftsmanship behind these world-class instruments.

The University of Toccoa Falls Music Department is now just four pianos away from becoming an All-Steinway School. God has been gracious to us as an institution, and through the generosity of donors, we have been able to furnish our music spaces with these excellent instruments.



If you would like to support this goal by helping purchase the remaining four pianos, kindly scan the QR code to give. We are deeply grateful for your prayers, encouragement, and generous support of this important project.

A LEGACY OF SERVICE

The University of Toccoa Falls Music Department has been richly blessed by the faithful service, leadership, and ministry of Dr. Tom Council. After 26 years of full-time teaching, Doc will retire from his full-time faculty role while continuing to serve in a half-time capacity as Professor of Choral Music. We are deeply grateful that he will continue to invest in students and lead his ensembles.

Throughout his distinguished career, Dr. Council has exemplified excellence, humility, servant leadership, and an unwavering commitment to the flourishing of students, the university community, and the kingdom of God. Thank you, Doc, for the lasting impact you have made through your ministry, mentorship, and music. We celebrate your remarkable legacy and look forward to the continued blessing of your presence among us.



END NOTE

At the University of Toccoa Falls music department, we are committed to training Christian musicians, scholar-practitioners, educators, and artists who seek to advance the Kingdom through their musical gifts with excellence that reflects the glory of God.

As we continue to train and equip the students God brings to us, we deeply value your continued prayers and support. If you would like to contribute toward our music scholarships and endowments, which help make it possible for students to continue their musical journey, kindly scan the QR code to give.

We look forward to welcoming you to one of our concerts whenever you are in town.



CONNECT WITH US

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PROSPECTIVE MUSIC STUDENTS





U N I V E R S I T Y
— OF —
T O C C O A F A L L S