



In the classroom: Jonathan Coopersmith guides a second-year music theory class. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Question Time

CURTIS'S CHAIR OF MUSICAL STUDIES LEADS REQUIRED, RIGOROUS CLASSES WITH WIT, CLARITY, AND ENTHUSIASM—AND PROVOCATIVE QUERIES AT EVERY TURN.

BY DAVE ALLEN

First-year students at Curtis approach Music History I with trepidation. From day one of this yearlong survey of Western music, Jonathan Coopersmith allays their fears and tells them they won't have to memorize dates.

Before long, though, Curtis's genial chair of musical studies is peppering them with friendly but purposeful questions. "What are you practicing right now? Do you know if the composer wrote any other pieces like that one? What if you knew this was the only piece of this kind that the composer wrote? Would you play it differently?" They might be taken aback, but this line of questioning prompts them to think more deeply about what they're playing and to consider chronology and influence.

Whatever the subject matter, Mr. Coopersmith delivers it in seamless style and helps students to make connections that bridge gaps in their musical knowledge. During one class late in the spring semester, the contrast between the polished, unflappable professor and harried students nearing the finish line of their first year was impossible to miss. Still, in rounding out their skills, students couldn't hope for a more enthusiastic guide. "One of my number-one jobs is to take them when they're at their most excited and capture that," Mr. Coopersmith says. "I have an opportunity to get them interested in learning. That goes beyond any one thing that I'm teaching them specifically."

All of the courses within the musical studies curriculum—music history, all levels of harmony and counterpoint, analysis, and solfège, taught by more than a dozen instructors—fall under Mr. Coopersmith's domain. As his students take on and sometimes struggle with

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Jonathan Coopersmith PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

these fundamentals of music, he coaxes them with good-natured humor. “I find many of the lessons I’ve gleaned from him have stuck,” says percussion student Ted Babcock, “not just because of the clarity with which he teaches, but the dry humor and enthusiasm with which he delivers it.”

That self-effacing wit is apparent when Mr. Coopersmith admits with a grin that students don’t come to Curtis for his teaching; they come to make music. For that reason, he attempts to relate every topic to musical performance. Oboe student Joshua Lauretig saw this guidance at work during his first year at Curtis. “He gives us just enough information for us to understand the subject’s relevance,” Joshua notes. At the same time, Mr. Coopersmith “teases us by showing the vastness of potential interconnectivity that the subject has in the grand scope of the musical canon.”

SCHEDULE MASTER

In addition to the core musical studies classes, Mr. Coopersmith also teaches multiple levels of conducting and an occasional seminar in time management—a boon for typically overscheduled Curtis students. He has long kept a busy schedule himself, dating back to his undergraduate days studying computer science and music composition at the University of Pennsylvania. He runs through his activities outside of Curtis offhandedly, as though the list were shorter and far less staggering: serving as associate conductor for the Philadelphia Singers and as artistic director for the Jewish community chorale Nashirah; making frequent guest appearances as a conductor and pre-concert lecturer; teaching composition privately; doing computer programming and design work for VestaEdge, a software company he co-founded. Being a musician today, Mr. Coopersmith explains, involves not only long hours, but switching between multiple tasks. “Students ask me, ‘How do you do it?’ and that leads to some interesting discussions. What’s the most efficient way not just to accomplish everything, but how do I enjoy it? How do I maintain a high level of performance?”

In his approach to resolving these questions in his own career, Mr. Coopersmith sets a good example for his students: literate, well-spoken, and tasked with delivering on all parts of the musical experience. He keeps track of his schedule using a hyper-detailed Excel spreadsheet, with classes, meetings, conducting engagements, and more, all mapped out months in advance. Whether in the classroom, in a pre-concert lecture, or performing on stage, he leaves his students and audiences knowing more about music than they did before.

He’s recently taken on an additional academic challenge: guiding an audience considerably larger than his usual crop of first-year students through a large swath of music history. Along with David Ludwig, Gie and Lisa Liem Artistic Chair of Performance Studies, he is teaching one of Curtis’s massive online open courses (MOOCs) offered through Coursera, entitled *From the Repertoire: Western Music History through Performance*. As Ludwig explains it, this music appreciation course isn’t something that has ever been taught at Curtis, but it shows the best of what the school offers—including Mr. Coopersmith himself. “I thought he would be great to partner with. He’s outgoing and likeable, a very good communicator, and very clear. In my mind, he’s ideal.”

As the course took shape over the spring and summer, the two teachers supervised the selection of new recordings by Curtis students, faculty, and alumni of historically significant pieces. These videos will form the heart of the course. The grading, interaction, and scale are all vastly different from a Curtis student’s experience. But the approach—to be informative yet interesting while conveying a large amount of material—is largely what Curtis students value in their musical studies classes.

Mr. Coopersmith admits he’s more comfortable operating behind the scenes, but he seems unfazed by this new and very public platform for his teaching. “It’s my first experience with this, but I want people to feel they’re learning and enjoying the course,” he says. Whether the classroom is online or in-person, “what’s always worked for me is to throw out a provocative question.” ♦

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More Online

The new online course *From the Repertoire: Western Music History through Performance*, taught by Jonathan Coopersmith and David Ludwig, begins on October 1. Register at

www.curtis.edu/Coursera