



Philadelphia schoolchildren collaborate with a Curtis composer and singers in the creation of a new work.

Doing Opera

BY NICK DIBERARDINO

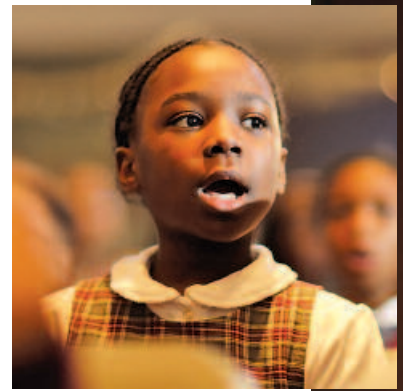
Why is there a moon in the sky? Ever wonder? I did—and that sense of wonder animated every aspect of the creative process for *Anansi the Spider*, a children’s opera to be presented this spring at a Curtis family concert.



As I embarked on this creative journey, I knew my job was to help tell the story of Anansi, a trickster spider from West African folklore. I knew the libretto would recount the accidental adventure that placed the moon in the sky. I knew also that the Anansi story was popular in classrooms across Philadelphia. But still, I wondered. I wondered with my collaborators about deeper questions: How can a children’s opera really connect with children? How might we harness the multidisciplinary energies of opera to make a lasting impact? And how could we further Curtis’s mission to engage both our local and global community?

As the composer of *Anansi the Spider*, I have been getting to know these questions intimately over many months. But the best part of this project has been wondering aloud with a team.

Above: Students in the grade-school choir at Girard College helped compose a major theme for *Anansi the Spider*, and will sing in the production. Curtis Community Artist Fellowship projects at Girard College are supported by Wells Fargo. PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON



Curtis singers Aaron Crouch (above left) and Lindsey Reynolds (opposite, top right) improvised musical lines based on ideas from the Girard students.
PHOTOS: MICKEY WELDE

IF WE WANT TO ENGAGE KIDS FROM AROUND THE CITY, WHY NOT INVOLVE THEM IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS? ON THE ONE HAND, I FOUND THAT IDEA DAUNTING. ON THE OTHER, I COULDN'T GET IT OUT OF MY HEAD.

Our librettist, Kanika Ambrose, has been in constant contact to shape the story and its message. Our director, Julia Bumke, has sharpened our ideas. And our project mentors, Adam Pangburn of the Curtis staff and career studies chair Mary Javian, have been invaluable guides. Even our singers have been fundamentally involved in the creative process. It's an unconventional approach in the opera world, but when your cast includes singers like Curtis students Aaron Crouch and Lindsey Reynolds, you start to wonder: Why not?

Anansi has shown me that amazing things can happen if you spend enough time with “why nots.” Our most transformative “why not” was a deceptively simple question: If we want to engage kids from around the city with our opera, why not involve them in the creative process? On the one hand, I found that idea daunting. I knew it would entail a working method unlike any I had ever experienced. On the other, once the idea of working with kids had taken hold, I couldn't get it out of my head.

The way forward was paved by Mary Javian, who had forged Curtis's new partnership with Girard College, a K–12 school in North Philadelphia for children from single-parent families. When I met their teachers and administrators, I witnessed firsthand Girard's attention to the social, emotional, and intellectual growth of their students—and soon realized what an amazing opportunity we had. The school is deeply committed to fostering the creativity of its students across all grades and disciplines. That commitment would allow us to involve the students in many facets of our work on *Anansi*, all while maintaining Curtis's commitment to the highest possible level of artistry.

A TEAM OF HUNDREDS

In the end, the kids turned out to be the most essential, most creative members of our team. I discovered that truth at our first meeting. In early November, I helped design a workshop at Girard as part of my work as a Community Artist Fellow. Aaron and Lindsey joined me, not only as *Anansi* cast members, but also as students in Curtis's Social Entrepreneurship curriculum. As the three of us waited in the school auditorium, every single one of Girard's students in first through eighth grade filed in.

I can't pretend we weren't a bit tense. This kind of work was relatively new to all three of us, and the building's power had gone out, to boot. As Lindsey would later tell me, “I was



nervous. I worried the kids might brush us off or laugh. Not in a disrespectful way, but just because they might not understand opera.”

Even as I wondered whether we would truly reach the kids, Aaron and Lindsey started the workshop with a bang, launching straight into a duet in the dim, unlit auditorium. Their voices did actually get the kids stirring, but not in the way our anxiety had led us to imagine. As Aaron put it, “I didn’t hear anyone laugh. I didn’t see any students really talking while it was happening. If anything, as soon as Lindsey started singing her high notes, they were like, ‘Whoa, oh my God!’ They paid a lot of attention and were so happy to be part of the process.”

Aaron would later tell me, “That workshop felt so good because many of the students were African-American, and the first opera singers they ever saw were both black singers. It just makes me so happy because they have no reason to think they can’t do opera if they want to.”

In fact, by the end of that first workshop, the kids were *already* doing opera: I helped them design their own musical scores for Aaron and Lindsey to interpret. I asked them to imagine themselves as Nyame, the “god of all things” from the Anansi story, writing down how they would feel if they were the god of everything. I then asked them to compose a few lines of text they thought Nyame might say, making choices about dynamics, tempo, and timbre to bring their emotions to life. When the students handed their creations to Aaron and Lindsey, both singers improvised melodies on the students’ lines with panache. The kids relished that opportunity to create so directly for our charismatic singers.

Afterwards, we sent the kids’ written responses back to Kanika, our librettist, who fundamentally changed the story of *Anansi* to reflect the students’ ideas. In an early draft, our Nyame had been imagined as a benign, benevolent figure. With the students’ input, Nyame suddenly grew some welcome “sass” and personality. The moral of our *Anansi* story, too, became more sharply focused. We traced our narrative arc more tightly around teamwork, a theme the kids highlighted in our workshop.

A MOTIVE FOR THE MOON

I returned to Girard in December to create musical motives with about 60 students in the school’s third- and fourth-grade choir, still wondering exactly how I could effectively incorporate their ideas into my score. Kanika had words to work with, but how would

Nick DiBerardino (above center and right) leading workshops with Girard College students. PHOTOS: DAVID SWANSON, MICKEY WELDE

ANANSI PERFORMANCES

After a premiere at Girard College on March 30 at 11 a.m., *Anansi the Spider* will be performed at two Curtis Family Concerts on March 31 at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. For details, visit Curtis.edu/Anansi.





Above: Girard College students build the melody that will form the “moon” *leitmotif*. PHOTOS: DAVID SWANSON

I actually compose with student ideas? I decided first to ask the kids to choose a *leitmotif* for the opera: a recurring interval that would represent the moon throughout the piece. The students were amazingly enthusiastic as we sang intervals together and eventually voted decisively for a major sixth.

The students would then write the very first notes of our *Anansi* opera, breaking ground on our new project. They joined me at the piano in turns, each student adding one note to a composite melody on the text, “The moon has a lesson.” We sang each melody together as we worked, and by the end of the session, the students had created several options.

The time came to hold a final vote on which melody would make it into the opera. Their hands shot into the air with excitement, and to my surprise, they chose a melody with spiky leaps that I never would have written—I suppose I’ve been too conditioned by my love of 16th-century counterpoint to dream up such a leap-heavy line. But I have absolutely fallen in love with that material, and those first notes the students wrote have woven themselves into the fabric of all the rest of the music for the opera.

Curtis’s deep creative connections with the students at Girard are ongoing. Middle- and high-school students from Girard have created all the sets and costumes for *Anansi*. The choir that wrote musical motives with me will be singing in the opera. They collectively play the role of Nyame, embodying the god of all things as re-imagined by Girard’s own student body.

At the beginning of this project, I wondered if I could connect with a wider community while creating opera. Now, I wonder how I would ever create opera without this kind of community effort. As Lindsey told me, “Opera is just everyday life. It tells the stories that we’re all going through. Our work is showing that opera is accessible to anyone, no matter how much money your parents make, or where you go to school, or where you live.”

Our work certainly has taught me that lesson, and many others. I encourage you to come experience *Anansi* in March, either at Girard or at Curtis—you may find yourself learning from the experience, just as I have. If nothing else, I can promise you’ll discover for yourself that the moon has a lesson, too. ♡

Nick DiBerardino, a 2018 composition graduate of Curtis, is a Community Artist Fellow in 2018-19.

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