



A Kaleidoscope of Knowledge & Expertise

Curtis performance faculty offer an array of opportunities to a new generation

BY DIANA BURGWYN



Among the Curtis faculty (from top) teaching today's students are Ida Kavafian, Ignat Solzhenitsyn, Don Liuzzi (blue shirt) and Robert Van Sice (fourth from left)
PHOTOS: DAVID KATZENSTEIN, PETE CHECCHIA



Mary Louise Curtis Bok called it “castle-in-Spain building” when she spent evenings with conductor Leopold Stokowski and pianist Josef Hofmann, talking about the conservatory they hoped to create in Philadelphia.

That “castle” became a reality when, in 1924, the Curtis Institute of Music opened its doors. The basic philosophy was simple but ambitious: hire a faculty composed of internationally known performing musicians who would impart their vast knowledge and experience to a group of exceptionally gifted young students. The students in turn would make up a new generation of outstanding performing artists.

That formula worked well from the beginning. What’s more, a significant number of the early graduates returned to Curtis as faculty members, thus carrying on the tradition.

The Curtis of 2010 exists on the firm foundation of the past, with some significant differences. The acceptance rate for Bachelor of Music candidates is less than 5 percent, which, according to *U.S. News & World Report*, makes Curtis the most exclusive conservatory in the country. It is often said that the newly admitted Curtis student is now typically at the level of a Curtis graduate back in the early days. The relationships among faculty members are far more collegial than in the past, and students are treated more as young colleagues than neophytes, nurturing the small school’s traditionally strong sense of family.

The diverse nature of the current Curtis faculty enables the students to gain a unique and personalized education. The faculty cover four areas: performance (including major lessons, chamber music, and ensemble and repertoire studies), musical studies, liberal arts, and career studies. A sampling of members of the major performance faculty reveals a kaleidoscopic breadth of knowledge and expertise that are transmitted to a new generation of musicians.

COME TOGETHER

Ignat Solzhenitsyn, a 1995 Curtis graduate, has an active career as both pianist and conductor. He is in his final season as music director of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia. As a pianist, he holds an extensive touring schedule in the United States and Europe, performing concertos with leading orchestras from Boston to Paris to St. Petersburg.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn joined the illustrious piano faculty in 2004 at the invitation of his former teacher Gary Graffman—a singular honor for one so young. “The faculty at Curtis is so very distinguished, and they all love to teach,” Mr. Solzhenitsyn says. “I am recharged by listening to my students.”

Mr. Solzhenitsyn notes that “there has been a tremendous continuity in the approach to teaching in the time I’ve been associated with Curtis. And that is an integral component in its success.”

In addition to his private students, Mr. Solzhenitsyn gives informal group master classes for all of the pianists and also coaches chamber groups. “It’s very healthy to bring them out of their practice rooms and cubby holes,” he says about the opportunity for students to hear each other play.

CONNECT WITH PROFESSIONALS

Ida Kavafian, who has taught violin at Curtis since 1998, is one of the busiest faculty members, with ten students. She is a highly versatile musician, playing viola as well as violin, and her numerous collaborations include being an artist-member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and, formerly, violinist of the legendary Beaux Arts Trio.

Ms. Kavafian has developed strong connections between her professional affiliations and Curtis. As cofounder of the piano quartet OPUS ONE, she brought the ensemble to Curtis in November for a residency that included recitals integrating students and quartet members. And, in her capacity as director of Music at Angel Fire, a chamber music summer festival in New Mexico, she selects ten to twelve Curtis students to take part in the program for three weeks in August.

“I love working with young talent,” says Ms. Kavafian, “and Curtis is very special because of its incredible tradition. The level here is different from anywhere else.”

DISCOVER COMPLEMENTARY VIEWS

Of Ms. Kavafian's ten students, three also study with Joseph Silverstein, who holds the Aaron Rosand Chair in Violin Studies. This approach of providing multiple primary teachers—unique among conservatories—provides students with a different but complementary point of view or approach while maintaining consistent private instruction when their main teacher is performing away from home. For example President Roberto Díaz, who holds the James and Betty Matarese Chair in Viola Studies, maintains an active career as a soloist and chamber musician, and he shares some students with faculty members Michael Tree or Misha Amory.

Students also have the opportunity for informal coaching with other faculty members, to benefit from a particular expertise. Among those who are notably enthusiastic about this openness on the part of the faculty is Mr. Silverstein, who has a long view of Curtis as a former student of Efrem Zimbalist. After graduating in 1950, Mr. Silverstein spent several decades with leading orchestras both as violinist and conductor. He joined the Curtis violin faculty in 2000.

Mr. Silverstein points out that each of the former Zimbalist students now on the Curtis faculty (Aaron Rosand, Shmuel Ashkenasi, and himself) deals differently with students. "Our teaching is a reflection of our experiences," he says. "If I have a student who wants to study the William Walton violin concerto, it would be sheer folly for me to deprive that student of the opportunity of studying that concerto with Aaron Rosand, who has been performing it for half a century. On the other hand, when Mr. Rosand has a student who wants to study the Sonata for Solo Violin by Bela Bartók, he will send that student to me."

The Curtis composition department shares students through a new rotating system that allows students to work in sequence with the three members of the Curtis composition faculty: Richard Danielpour, Jennifer Higdon, and David Ludwig. This is particularly important for young composers, because individual styles of composition among the faculty can differ markedly.

For instance Dr. Higdon, who holds the Rock Family Chair in Composition, emphasizes the business side of being a composer, in addition to the music itself. One of the most frequently performed of American composers and a two-time Grammy Award-winner, she works with her students on such matters as creating a website, self-publishing, submitting scores for a grant, negotiating contracts, and applying to graduate schools.

Because she travels so often it would be easy for her to fall short on individual lessons. Instead she uses phone, e-mail, and fax to communicate. "It's amazing how a student can send you a PDF of a score," she says, "and you're both looking at the music together!"

PERFORM

For voice and opera students, Mikael Eliassen feels strongly that it is not enough to have voice lessons, coachings, and acting classes. "I believe in the Curtis creed," he says, "that you learn by doing." Hence he is careful to include all the students in the operas performed, so that they are in multiple productions during the year. "Even an eighteen-year-old," he says, "learns by taking on a minor role."

Mr. Eliassen, who holds the Hirsig Family Head-of-Department Chair and is the artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre, joined the Curtis faculty in 1986 and has been professionally associated with some of the finest opera companies in the United States and Europe. His role at Curtis is multifaceted: In addition to selecting the voice students, coaching them, and maintaining constant contact with their teachers, he is responsible for all aspects of the Curtis Opera Theatre, including the choice of repertoire, the production and creative teams, and the conductors.

Among the most exciting joint ventures Mr. Eliassen has overseen in recent years is the collaboration among the Curtis Opera Theatre, Opera Company of Philadelphia, and Kimmel Center Presents, which has resulted in such productions as the contemporary opera *Ainadamar* by Osvaldo Golijov and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*. The latter opera had not been performed in Philadelphia since its 1931 American premiere, when it was conducted by none other than Leopold Stokowski, with Curtis students in both the orchestra and cast. The most recent collaboration, this March, brings Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* to the Kimmel Center's Perleman Theater.

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The level here is different
from anywhere else.'

– IDA KAVAFIAN

'Our teaching is a reflection
of our experiences.'

– JOSEPH SILVERSTEIN

'Teachers want to come to
Curtis knowing that it gets the
best students. Students want to
come because of the teachers.'

– PAUL BRYAN

PLAY IN AN ORCHESTRA

The Curtis Symphony Orchestra is a source of great pride, and it is often compared favorably with professional ensembles. Given this experience, it is not surprising that a large number of graduates join major orchestras, often in principal positions. The lineage is particularly strong at the Philadelphia Orchestra, whose current roster includes forty-five Curtis alumni.

The school's practice is to enroll as many students in a particular instrument as are typically in a symphony orchestra. Hence Philadelphia Orchestra bass trombone player Blair Bollinger has just one private student each year at Curtis, while Nitzan Haroz, principal trombone at the Philadelphia Orchestra, has three students. Once again the faculty's collegial approach to teaching comes into play: "Often one of Nitzan's students asks to take a lesson with me and vice versa," he says. "It's wonderful for them because there is so much more input." Mr. Bollinger also conducts the brass and percussion ensemble and teaches orchestral repertoire.

The one department at Curtis where students study not one but several instruments is percussion. And sometimes those instruments are pretty unusual. Philadelphia Orchestra principal timpani Don Liuzzi, who teaches timpani and orchestra percussion at Curtis, remembers a particular series of Philadelphia Orchestra concerts this past fall. "I had to play in a work that didn't use timpani," he says, "but it had a variety of gongs and ceremonial temple bowls, and I also had to sing into a gong."

This kind of versatility will be expected of Curtis students who join an orchestra, so the curriculum provides it. All of the faculty members in the Timpani and Percussion department teach for a specific number of weeks, focusing on their own area of expertise, and specialists are called in to work with the students on such instruments as jazz vibraphone, African drumming, and Latin percussion.

Something else that is unique to percussionists is the time spent on preparing their instruments on stage, and this, too, is part of Curtis training. "We have to tune the drums and timpani," says Mr. Liuzzi. "That means the pitch has to be in the ear—you can't tune electronically. We have to know what sticks to use, the right kind of weight, how our sound blends with the rest of the orchestra. Sometimes it seems like we spend half of our life on setup!"

Looking at the daily functioning of the Curtis Institute with its eighty-three performance faculty members, it is a wonder that the school runs so smoothly. In large measure that is due to Paul Bryan, registrar and associate dean of academic affairs, himself a Curtis graduate. "I am basically Curtis Central Command," says Mr. Bryan, who also teaches "Elements of Conducting" at the school and maintains his own performing career, which includes the position of artistic coordinator and conductor of Bravo Brass, the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra's brass ensemble.

"Mrs. Bok certainly set the stage," Mr. Bryan says. "She wanted a faculty made up of great performers and brought them to Curtis to teach gifted students. Very little has changed. It's a two-way street. Teachers want to come to Curtis knowing that it gets the best students. Students want to come because of the teachers." ♦

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

The Curtis Institute of Music is considered to be one of the best conservatories in the world—if not *the* best. But no leader can rest on its laurels. In 2007–08 Curtis developed a strategic plan, studying all aspects of Curtis and formulating five-year goals to assure the school's continued leadership position. Goals relating to the faculty are key elements of the plan, which went into effect in 2008–09.

At Curtis, we remain committed to seeking, hiring, and retaining the best teaching performers, as we know that the presence of a superlative faculty attracts the very best students. In order to support the faculty in their important work, we are preparing to appoint full-time department heads, who will also serve in the role of liaison to the president and dean, and we are making progress in securing donors for the naming of endowed chairs. We continue to expand the existing practice of having our faculty share students across studio lines, giving them the opportunity to benefit from, in terms of repertoire and professional experience, the various specialties of our faculty. All these initiatives and others are well under way.

It is an ambitious agenda, but Curtis has never settled for anything less.

—John R. Mangan, Curtis dean