

BY SARA HUEBNER

Lessons in Leadership

THE NEW COMMUNITY ARTISTS PROGRAM LETS STUDENTS DRIVE INNOVATION.



ensemble39 is led by oboist and 2012 graduate Alexandra von der Embse (far left), and includes Rebecca Anderson, Ayane Kozasa, Gabriel Cabezas, Jessica Chang, Stanislav Chernyshev, and Rex Surany. This season, violinist Nigel Armstrong joins the group.

PHOTO: BRIAN SANTERO

Pass by AxD, a contemporary “hole in the wall” art gallery, on a frigid December night and you probably wouldn’t expect to see an oboist, clarinetist, or bassist scattered among the risqué metallic drawings. Assuming you do catch these classical musicians hanging around an art gallery, you definitely wouldn’t expect them to be dressed in youthful, hip attire. And you most certainly wouldn’t expect them to be all under 25.

But for ensemble39, founded by Curtis oboe student Alexandra von der Embse, this is a typical concert. Launched in 2011 and developed more fully through Curtis’s new Community Artists Program (CAP), ensemble39 has allowed students to push the boundaries of classical performance while learning firsthand what it takes to run a chamber group beyond Curtis.

The eager crowd at AxD, made up of ensemble39’s 20-something peers, mills about the gallery. Looming over the music stands and artwork is an intricate web of wires, cables, and cords, connecting suspended microphones to an army of speakers. Soon these speakers will be brought to life in a compelling mix of electronically engineered voice and live string quartet for Steve Reich’s *Different Trains*—rarely performed as it requires an arsenal of electronics and a sound engineer to run them. The concert is presented by ensemble39 itself, and the musicians waiting to perform are a bit anxious—but also invigorated by the freedom to perform rare, unconventional music in an unconventional space.

Learning the nuts and bolts of running a successful chamber ensemble has been Alexandra's project throughout 2011–12 for the CAP course. It helped her hone a mission for ensemble39 (“expanding the audiences of classical music through innovative methods of presentation, collaboration, and programming”). It also helped her deal with the logistics of scheduling and promoting performances in unorthodox locations, such as AxD and the West Philadelphia club World Café Live!, that would place their music-making before new audiences. Along the way she learned how to manage the little details, often overlooked, that are so necessary to fulfilling her group's mission.

THE NEW WORLD

For more than 85 years, Curtis has prided itself on its tradition of training students for exceptional lives and careers. But classical music occupies a very different place in society than when Curtis first opened its doors in 1924. It's hard to ignore the facts: Less funding is going to arts programs in public schools, orchestras and opera companies are struggling to balance their budgets, and classical music now competes with an ever-increasing number of musical styles and entertainment options. As the demand for classical music softens, traditional career opportunities for Curtis students are becoming harder to find.

Dean John Mangan explains that it's Curtis's job to send its students into the musical world “equipped with those skills that they need to transform themselves professionally to meet whatever the arising challenge is in their careers.” For today's young classical musicians, who can no longer take for granted the public's interest in what they do, this means turning to innovation and creativity.

CAP was conceived to help them develop both. It originated in the Leadership Workshop, a pilot course offered in Spring 2011 that encouraged students to begin thinking beyond the paradigms of the traditional Curtis education. The key principles of CAP began to come into focus. Students would “have to be in on the ground floor,” explains Dean Mangan—creating their own projects. Curtis's “learn by doing” philosophy would also be central, placing students in real-life situations to teach them the difficult lessons of hardship and failure while still within the safe confines of the school.

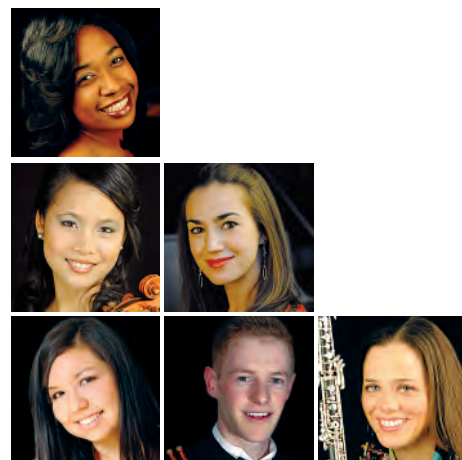
As Dean Mangan and Artistic Chair of Performance Studies David Ludwig planned for CAP's debut in 2011–12, mentorship became a defining aspect. Each of the six participating students was assigned to a mentor who helped structure projects, and then offered help, counsel, and professional connections. Mentors included Curtis faculty, staff, and alumni with relevant expertise.

Alexandra's mentor in developing ensemble39 was Dr. Ludwig, who is also on the Curtis composition faculty. The role was similar to his work with student composers, he says. “You don't get students to write the music you write. You try to get the music they write,” he explains. “I wouldn't put my own personality on it. I wouldn't impose my own will on it. I would try to help that student realize their goals.” Alexandra adds her perspective: “We would have coffee, or we'd meet in his office. I would pose suggestions of things that I wanted to do and he would pick things out he thought were good, and push me farther in that direction.”

CAP students also have the opportunity to connect and collaborate with programs run by CAP mentors. For example, with support from Curtis overseer William Stensrud, ensemble39 spent the 2012 spring break in Georgia, performing and offering community engagement activities sponsored by CAP mentor Joseph Conyers's Project 440, which trains teaching artists.

SPEAKING FOR THE ART FORM

ensemble39 was just one of eight projects pursued by CAP students in 2011–12. Also a member of ensemble39, viola student Jessica Chang felt compelled to join the course with a project of her own, seeing an opportunity to create a career path and to become “a spokesperson for my art.” Jessica designed a chamber music-based outreach program for elementary, middle, and high school students in the San Francisco Bay Area. “I grew



CAP Projects, 2011-12

Six students participated in the CAP course during 2011-12:

MICHELLE CANN (Piano) created *Keys to Connect*, a program at West Philadelphia's Lea School that brings adolescents and their parents closer together through the partnered study of classical piano.

JESSICA CHANG (Viola) created *Chamber Music by the Bay*, a weeklong residency by a string quartet consisting of master classes and side-by-side performances, held in coordination with selected public high schools in San Francisco.

KATERINA KRAMARCHUK (Composition) held composition workshops at the Russell Byers School. She arranged the school song and invited Byers students to Field Concert Hall to record the arrangement with Curtis brass players.

ZOË MARTIN-DOIKE (Violin) created the Community Engagement Mentoring Program, allowing students with engagement experience to mentor students who have less experience in the creation of community engagement events.

MICHAEL SPARHUBER (Timpani and Percussion) brought the vocal ensemble *Roomful of Teeth* to Philadelphia for a spring residency while serving as assistant to the group's director.

ALEXANDRA VON DER EMBSE (Oboe) created ensemble39 to expand classical music audiences and repertoire, presenting rarely performed works in non-traditional settings.

The students were supported by eight mentors, all of whom are members of the Curtis faculty and/or Curtis alumni: **JOSEPH CONYERS**, **JONATHAN COOPERSMITH**, **MARY JAVIAN**, **YUMI KENDALL**, **MARY LOISELLE**, **DAVID LUDWIG**, **STANFORD THOMPSON**, and **NATALIE ZHU**.

PHOTOS ABOVE: JEAN BRUBAKER (SPARHUBER); PETE CHECCHIA (ALL OTHERS)



Left: ensemble39 members work with elementary-school musicians during their residency in Savannah.

Above: Jessica Chang's CAP project, Chamber Music by the Bay, brought engagement performances to nearly a dozen community locations in the Bay Area last summer.

up playing in orchestra at school but I wasn't exposed to chamber music," she recalls. When she first played in a chamber group, she realized the extent to which she "didn't understand how to work together" with other musicians. She wondered: Why not give kids the opportunity to learn that lesson at a younger age? What implications could that have for the future of chamber music?

With guidance from her mentor Natalie Zhu, a pianist who runs the Kingston Chamber Music Festival at the University of Rhode Island, Jessica assembled a string quartet and planned a series of school appearances across the South Bay in May and June—performing for and coaching young musicians. Ms. Zhu challenged Jessica to actively question the need she perceived, and consider how best to make a real impact. Chamber Music by the Bay offered eleven performances, presentations, and coaching sessions at schools, libraries, and community centers; and Jessica, who graduated from Curtis in 2012, is already planning a repeat season in 2013.

PRACTICAL LESSONS

Back at the AxD studio, the *Different Trains* performance goes smoothly. But an earlier concert taught Alexandra the downside of programming pieces that require extra equipment. "We didn't plan it very well," she explains. "We didn't have the control we expected and we didn't know what to do about it." Concerned that the quality of the performance would suffer, the ensemble had to make unexpected adjustments.

Such experiences allow CAP students to learn by doing—in a whole new way. Most young classical musicians don't have the opportunity to learn these invaluable lessons until they graduate. At that point, they may feel they have been thrown into the real world without having much practical knowledge. CAP addresses this issue head-on. Alexandra, who graduated in 2012, is feeling optimistic, with a second season for ensemble39 already on the books.

Curtis, too, is planning its second CAP course, with eight students enrolled for 2012–13 and funding from the Philadelphia Cultural Management Initiative. "The hope is that this is a program students are totally clamoring to do," says Dr. Ludwig. He sees Curtis as setting a positive, forward-looking example for the rest of the music world. "Curtis is different than other schools. We seed the field. Students that graduate from Curtis become leaders." CAP, he hopes, will inspire them to take creative and innovative steps to engage new audiences in new ways.

"We want to create great advocates for the arts and classical music." ♦

Sara Huebner studies trumpet with David Bilger and holds the Philadelphia Orchestra Fellowship. She entered Curtis in 2008.