



BY DAVID LUDWIG

Musical Marathon

IN ITS ASIAN DEBUT—A WHIRLWIND WEEK OF THREE CONCERTS BOOKENDED BY FOURTEEN-HOUR FLIGHTS—CURTIS ON TOUR OFFERED LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES AND PRACTICAL LESSONS.

Above: The Curtis On Tour ensemble gathers in the midst of sightseeing in Seoul.

If I were to write a memoir of my Curtis On Tour trips with students, I might call it *How to Travel with a Double Bass and Other Large Flotation Devices*. Or maybe: *Yes Officer, Those Knives Are for Making Reeds*. Or perhaps, *It's Not A Guitar, But You're Close: It's A Cello And It's Sitting in 22A*. One of the perks of being a composer is that I get to board the plane like anyone else. The TSA isn't going to search the lead in my pencils or stop me for random sheets of music paper. But I've had many friends and colleagues over the years with nightmare stories about getting from point A to point B with their instruments.

So you can imagine what was going through my mind in early October as we attempted to check into the Continental counter at the airport with a double bass and double bassist; two percussionists; a cello (named "Cello Lee" on its ticket) and a cellist; a small wind section; and a couple of singers. And we weren't flying to Boise or Birmingham; we were flying to Beijing—fourteen hours and 7,000 miles away.

I will never forget the feeling stepping out of the airport in China and realizing that I was halfway around the world—tired, dirty, and filled with wonder.

—Sarah Shafer (Opera)

Fortunately, we got onto the plane largely without incident (Tip #1: Make sure to check your bass endpin with your luggage). We landed early at the new Beijing airport and were greeted at the hotel by our own President Roberto Díaz, who was eager to make sure that we arrived happy, healthy, and in one piece. Mr. Díaz had flown over a few days earlier



Above left: Mark Russell Smith rehearses the chamber version of Mahler's Fourth Symphony in Beijing Concert Hall. PHOTO: JARRETT OTT

Above right: Roberto Díaz stands on the steps of Shanghai Concert Hall under a banner advertising the Curtis on Tour performance. PHOTO: DEENA GU LATIES

with three students and alumna cellist Marcy Rosen. They had already played a concert on October 4 in Shanghai with alumnae pianists Jie Chen and Wai Cheng to an enthusiastic, packed house, in the first stop on the Asia tour.

For the second stop on October 7, the Beijing Music Festival had invited us to perform an all-Mahler program: the Piano Quartet in A minor; *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, as arranged by Arnold Schoenberg for chamber ensemble; and Mahler's Fourth Symphony, arranged by Klaus Simon for fourteen instruments. It was, all told, a unique program of important works rarely heard in these configurations.

Conductor Mark Russell Smith joined us in Beijing that evening. We spent the next morning hitting some important destinations (besides the breakfast buffet at the hotel). We saw Tiananmen Square and spent several hours in the Forbidden City. It was a great beginning to the trip, and there was a sense that the sprawling landmarks were metaphors for the scale of our journey.

In the afternoon we split up. Mr. Díaz, Ms. Rosen, and I gave master classes to students at the Beijing Central Conservatory. Meanwhile, Mr. Smith and the student ensemble offered an open rehearsal for the conservatory community that included two student conductors on the podium for Mark to work with. The composition class was fascinating for me. I had asked that the composers present their pieces in live performance. One work incorporated a Chinese mouth organ (*sheng*) and Chinese oboe (*suona*) with the Western cello. The result was an extraordinary and surprising combination of sounds.

I had so much fun—traveling, eating good food, playing music, and getting to know everyone. I really felt that the concert we had in Beijing was quite special. It was certainly magical to share the musical moments with my friends and family.

—Jeong-Hyoun Lee (Cello)

The next day included more rehearsing and the concert. I must add that it's amazing what had to happen *before* the concert started to make it come off so well. Hours of rehearsal, taking apart the music and putting it back together; endless phone calls and e-mails to arrange for travel and visas; every detail that had to be handled and worked out in the months before: all this became worth it at the first downbeat. When the last low notes of the Mahler Fourth sounded, the audience was on its feet. On the stage, our students' faces showed excitement and relief.

In the morning we took a short flight to Korea, where we would perform in the new hall at the Seoul Arts Center. As in China, we met with alumni and parents of current and former students. The Curtis connection reaches far across the globe, and when you spend time with people who have Curtis in common—even if you've never met them before—there is the immediate feeling of family. Alumna pianist Lee Kyung Sook made our concert at the Seoul Arts Center possible, and we were warmly hosted by parents and other friends of the school. Our Korean students took a special interest in making sure we all felt welcome.

Seoul's new hall sounds as exquisitely beautiful as it looks, which generated a lot of excited buzz during the dress rehearsal. Mr. Díaz listened from the audience, offering



Percussionist Yi Fei Fu and conductor Mark Russell Smith take a sightseeing break.

sage advice. Playing in unfamiliar settings is very familiar to him, after years of touring as an orchestra member, chamber musician, and soloist. As the students incorporated his suggestions, the sound changed as if there were a phantom engineer in the walls moving the shifters on a giant imaginary mixing board.

Again, the performance brought the house down. Backstage, a potluck collection of alumni, stage crew, and members of a Swiss orchestra engaged to play elsewhere in the arts center gathered around the monitors to listen. I saw some of the orchestra players shake their heads, unable to believe what these young people could do, the maturity of their music-making, and the poise with which they performed this complex music.

The audience was on its feet as the students left the stage. Backstage, there were tears and hugs everywhere. Just a single week of playing, yet it felt like many weeks—or even months—full of memories and experiences had been packed into every minute of every day.

The experience of being on a jam-packed tour gave me an opportunity to play as a true professional, relying on my musical instincts to carry me through a performance.

—Katherine Jordan (Horn)

At Curtis we often talk about the idea of “learn by doing,” and it feels as if the students are learning by doing now more than ever. Curtis On Tour offers the invaluable practical experience of traveling in a group and learning a kind of flexibility that you need when visiting distant lands and people. But the personal transformation I saw in the students is what is most meaningful to me.

Some of them were close before the trip, and others were not, but all could be seen sleeping on each other’s shoulders on the long flight back. Small funny moments developed into big inside jokes and lasting friendships were formed.

And then there was the music. On the bus or walking around, students would turn to each other without a word and begin singing themes from the pieces they were playing. Living with the music—traveling with it, rehearsing it, eating and sleeping it—creates a bond that you just don’t get from a single performance. Perhaps this is the greatest part of the learning experience students have on Curtis On Tour: to perform again and again until the music is in their bones. The result is joy—to play and to hear.

In 2008, I joined a Curtis On Tour group to narrate *L’Histoire du soldat*; the ensemble was also premiering my song cycle *From the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. It looked like a fun itinerary that included Seattle and San Francisco, among many other venues. And it *was* fun, but it was also real work. There was little time for sightseeing as we darted from one locale to the next.

This trip to Asia was also work, but there was something different about it—more like a marathon than a series of sprints. The students had to make a fast time adjustment: 20 hours of travel, after which lunchtime became midnight. Then they had to focus on demanding repertoire within just a day of their arrival. But this is the life we hope to have as musicians: full of adventure and voyages to faraway places, sleepless nights on airplanes, and days of bleary-eyed attempts to concentrate in unfamiliar concert halls. We are motivated by the dream that we can communicate with audiences far from home—people we can’t necessarily speak to with our everyday words, but to whom we can speak in this wondrous language called music. ♦

The recent tour in Asia was an over-the-top experience that I feel very lucky to have been a part of. The sights of Beijing and Seoul, the delectable cuisine, the beautiful performances, and most important, the newly established friendships will forever be ingrained in my mind. Thank you, Curtis.

—Jarrett Ott (Opera)

David Ludwig is a member of the composition faculty and holds the Gie and Lisa Liem Artistic Chair of Performance Studies.

Robert Spano
PHOTO: ANDREW ECCLES



CURTIS GOES GLOBAL

The 2011–12 *Appassionato* season was planned as a watershed year for Curtis’s global presence. Curtis On Tour’s first visit to Asia joins its annual chamber music tours of the United States and Europe. Plans are underway for tours of Latin America in years to come. Still ahead this season is the Curtis Symphony Orchestra’s first trip overseas in many years, as it travels to Germany in May to perform two concerts at the Dresden Music Festival. Alumnus Robert Spano (pictured) conducts an all-Brahms concert to open the festival on May 15, and three days later will offer works by David Ludwig, Leonard Bernstein, and Bela Bartók. The residency also includes a chamber music marathon by Curtis students and master classes by Curtis faculty. Program details are on the inside back cover of this issue and at www.curtis.edu/Performances. ♦