

Arlen Hlusko PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



Moonstruck, Canadian Style

A SCHOENBERG MASTERWORK BRINGS GOOD FRIENDS, NEW REVELATIONS, AND HAPPY TRAVELS TO CELLIST ARLEN HLUSKO.

BY MATTHEW BARKER

Somewhere in Lowville, Ontario, roughly an hour's drive from Toronto, a 1/16 size cello sits in the Hlusko home. Its former user, Arlen Hlusko, has long since upgraded to larger, more luxurious instruments (including an incomparable Giovanni Battista Guadagnini cello on loan from Curtis) but what is essentially a viola with an endpin continues to be a reminder of how far she has come and where she is capable of going.

On a sunny Philadelphia afternoon in May, Arlen is finally able to exhale after nine intense months of music making capped by a whirlwind visit to South Korea with Curtis On Tour, which included a trip to California en route and numerous performances along the way. Fortunately, jet lag and a compromised internal clock aren't enough to keep her from being her usual gregarious self.

Before Curtis started sending her across international time zones, the Canadian cellist experienced her share of travels. With her auspicious introduction as a three-year-old to the miniature cello behind her, she moved from the Toronto area to Calgary at fourteen to further her studies. She started her undergraduate career at the Colburn School in Los Angeles before coming to Curtis in 2011 to study with renowned faculty Carter Brey and Peter Wiley.

In 2012 Arlen, who holds the Jacqueline DuPré Memorial Fellowship, was one of six handpicked students to perform in a Curtis "Pierrot" ensemble as an extension of the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble, with an ambitious yearlong agenda revolving around Arnold Schoenberg's seminal melodrama *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21. On top of their *Pierrot* activities, the group performed on an all-Steven Stucky recital last March with Mr. Stucky conducting, and in the school's inaugural collaboration with the Barnes Foundation in April. In May

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To watch the ensemble's performance of *Pierrot Lunaire*, visit

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The *Pierrot Lunaire* ensemble during its Curtis On Tour sojourn to California and Korea: Patrick Williams, Zoë Martin-Doike, Xiaohui Yang, Anna Davidson, Arlen Hlusko, and Stanislav Chernyshev PHOTO: DAVID LUDWIG

With eighth blackbird’s help on *Pierrot*, says Arlen, the group became “more creative about expressing our emotions and passions through the music.”

they shot a fully produced video recording of the Schoenberg for Curtis Performs, the new video microsite, just prior to embarking on the aforementioned travels with Curtis On Tour. The group’s final concert at the Seoul Arts Centre, featuring highly lauded performances of the Schoenberg work as well as Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Sextet*, with Curtis president Roberto Díaz playing viola, marked the end of a nine-month collaboration.

LIVING WITH *PIERROT*

Rewind to autumn of 2012, when the same six musicians—Arlen and classmates Anna Davidson (Opera), Patrick Williams (Flute), Stanislav Chernyshev (Clarinet), Zoë Martin-Doike (Violin), and Xiaohui Yang (Piano)—began this collaboration, and their relationship with *Pierrot* wasn’t so rosy. “The piece was so foreign to all of us,” says Arlen. “It doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue when you first hear it.”

Fortunately, and not at all coincidentally, the ensemble had members of eighth blackbird, Curtis’s ensemble in residence and arguably the world’s foremost *Pierrot* interpreters, as guides. “They helped us a lot in understanding the piece, especially all the little details because they know it backwards and forwards,” says Arlen, “and as we got more comfortable with each other and with Schoenberg, we were able to flesh out the characters and become more creative about expressing our emotions and passions through the music.” She recalls arriving at a passage that had been through months of deconstruction and reconstruction. “It was just so easy. We knew how it went, we knew who to follow, we knew what went where,” she recalls. “It was so ingrained in us.” The response from the group: “We actually burst out in spontaneous laughter.”

But mastering a piece like *Pierrot* doesn’t come without considerable time and sacrifice, commodities not always available. Outside the ensemble Arlen was also principal cello of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, and carried on with her regular curriculum of chamber music, lessons, and academic classes. Her increased commitments pushed her own limitations, so to stay healthy she worked smarter rather than harder. “I learned how to practice really efficiently because I could only practice an hour a day on top of everything else I had to do, or sometimes barely even that.” This new process was a far cry from her old regimen, which she dubs the “practice-until-you-can’t” approach. She now calls her forced cutback a “hidden blessing” because of the newfound ability to achieve her goals through mental practice, a tool she will use going forward.

With so many great musical projects to tackle, Arlen admits it can be difficult to pull herself away. But when she does, she loves to “explore,” whether it be on foot, bike, or occasionally from 10,000 feet. She is an avid skydiver and has taken the jump every year since she turned eighteen. But it’s the cello (regardless of its size) that takes her places. Arlen already has plans to perform with her old *Pierrot* partners in the coming school year, and she has every intention of continuing those relationships into the future. “For a group that has worked together almost every single day for an entire year, we get along really well,” says Arlen. That is something that will last well beyond their experiences with Mr. Schoenberg. ◇

Matthew Barker is the director of recitals at Curtis.