



BIRDS OF

A LEADING NEW-MUSIC ENSEMBLE PROVIDES A MODEL FOR CURTIS STUDENTS TO FOLLOW.

BY MATTHEW BARKER

When Curtis opened its doors in the autumn of 1924,

Leopold Stokowski offered the prescient prediction that the school “will become the most important musical institution of our country, perhaps of the world.”

But the musical world is not what it was in 1924. It’s not even what it was in 2004. Increasingly it can seem as if classical music is falling on the wrong side of the wheel of fortune: Orchestras fold, record companies dwindle, and winning prestigious competitions no longer guarantees top-flight careers. As rapidly as the wheel is turning, maneuverability and adaptability have become great advantages for young musicians and the institutions that train them.

Fortunately these qualities are among Curtis’s strongest characteristics, thanks to its small size. In addition, Curtis’s magnetism for young talent has always been the access it offers to world-class artists. Frequent exposure to leading musicians such as the Borromeo Quartet (see sidebar) is the linchpin of the school’s plan in training its students to carve their own path to success. “We are invested in the idea of ‘learning by doing’ at Curtis by encouraging projects with faculty and guest artists in collaboration with students,” says David Ludwig, Gie and Lisa Liem Artistic Chair of Performance Studies and artistic director of Curtis 20/21. To advance this goal, a creative approach to artist residencies has emerged.

Rather than dip a toe in the water, Curtis cannonballed straight into the deep end by welcoming contemporary music sextet eighth blackbird to the Curtis community for a three-year residency that began in Fall 2012, funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Kicking off with three weeks at Curtis in the fall semester, the eighth blackbird residency has already become the “centerpiece of our commitment to collaborating with visiting artists,” says Dr. Ludwig. “Their recognition of the importance of contemporary music helps keep us vital artistically, and their entrepreneurial perspective offers a great model for our students to follow as they enter a classical music culture that is full of exciting possibilities we couldn’t have imagined at Curtis just a decade ago.”



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— *Yvonne Lam*

A FEATHER

MORE THAN A MASTER CLASS

Guest artists frequently come through Curtis’s doors, but eighth blackbird’s residency visits offer something substantially more. “A one-time master class can feel like a drive-by lesson,” says eighth blackbird violinist and 2005 Curtis graduate Yvonne Lam, while “having an ongoing residency allows for a deeper relationship with the school and the students through multiple coachings, rehearsals, and performances. We get the chance to really invest in the students by working with them intensively towards a goal. The process of engaging with students over time and watching their progression is incredibly fulfilling.”

One of the more ambitious year-long projects under eighth blackbird’s purview revolves around the study and memorized performance of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, an eighth blackbird standard. The handpicked student ensemble has been keeping in touch with eighth blackbird members via e-mail and Skype throughout the year to ask questions and report on their progress, and coaches feverishly with the blackbirds during each residency visit. “We are usually lucky enough to have all the members present in coachings,” says student flutist Patrick Williams, “so it really becomes a one-on-one experience as each member of eighth blackbird can provide personal instrumental expertise that directly corresponds to each of us in the group.”

That expertise has given the Chicago-based ensemble the freedom to fearlessly shun traditions and become standard bearers for innovation and excellence in classical music—something they intend will rub off on Curtis students. Flutist Tim Munro explains, “eighth blackbird is a mostly self-made group, having built itself from the ground up, and we want to pass on some of the ballsy, unique, entrepreneurial chutzpah that makes us who we are.”

The blackbirds wasted no time in making their mark on Curtis. They opened the Student Recital Series in October with a riveting performance of Derek Bermel’s *Tied Shifts*. They teamed up with a Curtis quartet in November for concerts in Princeton of another Bermel work, *Soul Garden*. And in December flutist Tim Munro and pianist Lisa Kaplan joined

Above, clockwise from left: Pianist Lisa Kaplan and flutist Tim Munro of eighth blackbird rehearse with students Luosha Fang, Tessa Seymour, Tomasz Kowalczyk, and Stanislav Chernyshev; Lisa Kaplan, Tessa Seymour, and Stanislav Chernyshev; Tomasz Kowalczyk and eighth blackbird percussionist Matthew Duvall; a career forum led by eighth blackbird PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

More Online

For more information about the eighth blackbird residency visit www.curtis.edu/8bb

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Curtis students for two performances in Gould Rehearsal Hall of the kaleidoscopic *Arpège* by Franco Donatoni. Mastering the challenging Donatoni work wasn't easy, requiring "cajoling and wild gesticulations and verbal fancy-flights" over several days of rehearsal, says Mr. Munro. "By the performance they were fully invested, and it showed.

"Lisa and I were proud as could be. There were hugs and high fives all around."

TRADITION PLUS

Beyond the coachings and performances, these extended visits allow for more than teaching. The blackbirds engage the students in leadership and career development forums, along with individual mentoring sessions for those in the Community Artists Program (CAP), as well as any other student that they take under their collective wings. It's not unusual to see a group of blackbirds at student performances or Wednesday Tea. When several of them popped up at the annual Holiday Party it was clear that they came to Curtis as faculty, but would leave as family.

Such an auspicious start to their residency yields considerable optimism for the future, and also puts some uncertainties to rest. As a recent Curtis alumna, Yvonne Lam felt some trepidation about bringing the blackbird style to her old stomping grounds. Those fears were quickly assuaged. "I was surprised to find that the culture of tradition, which was sometimes overwhelming when I was at school, is still there, but the students don't seem burdened or inhibited by it. Instead, they are encouraged to push the boundaries and think outside the box."

Times change, and new paths are opening up for an emerging generation. The next two and a half years promise to be significant for both the future of Curtis and of classical music. Says Tim Munro, "Our ideas are focused on encouraging intelligence, engagement, and creativity in these students, many of whom will be classical music's head honchos in a decade or less."

We're counting on it. ♦

Matthew Barker is the director of student recitals and coordinator of outside performances at Curtis.



Above: The Borromeos play Bartók from original manuscripts, projected for the audience. Above right: first violinist Nicholas Kitchen PHOTOS: DAVID SWANSON



Primary Sources

eight blackbird wasn't the only ensemble to leave their mark on Curtis last semester. November saw a weeklong visit from the Borromeo String Quartet.

In addition to chamber music coachings and a quartet master class, first violinist and Curtis alumnus Nicholas Kitchen led an open-door class on original manuscripts, which previewed an illuminating public lecture-demonstration in Gould Rehearsal Hall. The first half of the evening

focused on draft material from the string quartets of Bela Bartók that was fully developed by the composer but deleted prior to publishing. In the case of the first and second quartets these sections were world premieres, their presentation made possible by the Bartók Archives.

After intermission Curtis students joined the Borromeo members for a rare performance of the original 1825 version of Mendelssohn's famous Octet. Scores were displayed on a large overhead screen for the audience to follow, controlled from laptops by the players as they performed. It was an impressive use of the acoustical and technological advantages of Gould Rehearsal Hall.

The week culminated with a marathon performance by the Borromeos of all six Bartók string quartets in Field Concert Hall, tracing the evolution of a remarkable composer and the string quartet as a form, all in one life-changing afternoon.

—M.B.