



Where Ecosystems Meet

PERCUSSIONIST TED BABCOCK EXPLORES THE INTERACTION BETWEEN ELECTRONIC AND ACOUSTIC MUSIC.

BY REN MARTIN-DOIKE

Ted Babcock lives his musical life on the edge. Since being the very first Curtis student to participate in last summer's Bang on a Can Summer Music Festival—described officially as “a musical utopia for innovative musicians”—life for Ted has been, in his words, “pretty wild.”

“I have been experiencing what Yo-Yo Ma called ‘the edge effect,’” Ted confesses, referencing a phrase the famous cellist re-purposed from the ecological term for the point where two different ecosystems meet. “When I go back to Curtis, I’m ‘the Bang on a Can guy,’ and at Bang on a Can, I’m ‘that Curtis guy,’” Ted laughs, adding that he finds the two musical worlds “totally complementary.” His community artist program (CAP) project inhabits the intersection of these two ecosystems.

While he was conceiving his project, Ted was also listening to a lot of electronic music, particularly the English DJ Aphex Twin. “It felt strange that the music I was listening to was so different from the music I was playing on a daily basis,” Ted admits. Caught between the acoustic and the electronic, he “started to be curious, in terms of new music, how the two have permeated and affected each other.” A performance of a Steve Reich work led to a musical “aha” moment: “It became pretty obvious to me that electronic music didn’t necessarily mean electronic instruments.” And from that spark, Ted’s CAP project began to evolve. He resolved to bring together his two supposedly different musical interests, and came up with a theme: “electronic music for acoustic instruments.” He began to plan a recital around this idea, programming works by Reich, John Adams, and Philip Glass.

Further inspiration came from his collaborations with Curtis student composers since he entered Curtis in 2010. Commissioning a new work to be premiered at Curtis was always part of his plan. Ted’s CAP mentor is David Ludwig, dean of artistic programs and a member of the composition faculty, who says Curtis has recently been turning “toward contemporary music and finding new ways to present music.” Today—with CAP projects proliferating, eighth blackbird as ensemble in residence, and the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble more active than ever, Dr. Ludwig notes that these shifts have also encouraged more student interest in music from many different sources, especially living composers.

IN SYNCH

Enter 2013 Curtis graduate Gabriella Smith, who composed her *number nine* specifically for Ted’s CAP project. Influenced by the Beatles’ *Revolution 9*, a seminal work in the

A rehearsal for Ted Babcock’s CAP recital (above), coached by eighth blackbird’s pianist Lisa Kaplan

PHOTOS BY PETE CHECCHIA

“When I go back to Curtis, I’m ‘the Bang on a Can guy,’ and at Bang on a Can, I’m ‘that Curtis guy,’” Ted laughs, adding that he finds the two musical worlds “totally complementary.”

Lisa Kaplan of eighth blackbird says that Ted’s “very real curiosity and creativity” go hand-in-hand with a talent for “curating different kinds of programs.”



Ted Babcock and Lisa Kaplan confer after a coaching.

electro-acoustic genre, *number nine* is scored for eighth blackbird’s signature instrumentation (violin, flute, clarinet, cello, piano, and percussion) and was coached prior to performance by eighth blackbird pianist Lisa Kaplan. The work premiered on the January 22 recital that marked the culmination of Ted’s project.

“Gabriella is a huge source of inspiration for me,” says Ted. “I feel that she is a kindred spirit, and that this will only be one of many collaborations.” *number nine* is the fourth piece Ted and Gabriella have worked on together; the others include *Riprap*, for solo marimba and orchestra, and *Sleep Navigates the Tides of Time*, a chamber work premiered at cellist Gabriel Cabezas’s graduation recital last April. Gabriel also returned to Curtis to perform in Ted’s January recital.

This kind of interdepartmental collaboration, which often grows even stronger after students graduate, is characteristic of Curtis. Dr. Ludwig likens the school and its enduring influence on graduates to a family which is “really in synch and in tune with each other.”

Gabriella is not the only composer who had a new work performed on the recital. Ted’s own *Junctions*, a string quartet, was also premiered in January. Though he “never in a million years” expected he would turn to composing, writing music has “turned out to be one of the things that makes me happiest,” Ted says. Gabe Cabezas, the cellist in the ensemble that premiered the quartet, approached the work in the same way he would any other piece: “you have to find what makes the music tick and communicate that to the audience.” To him, learning a new quartet requires the same kind of full score awareness, rhythmic attention to detail, and yearning to understand what the composer meant by his or her markings that he would dedicate to a quartet by Beethoven or Bartók. It’s this Curtis tradition of musical excellence that Dr. Ludwig is excited to see being applied to the music of today.

Besides playing with other Curtis musicians in his CAP recital, Ted also joined forces with members of eighth blackbird on stage as well. Ms. Kaplan says that Ted’s “very real curiosity and creativity” go hand-in-hand with a talent for “curating different kinds of programs”—including this electronically influenced acoustic recital.

“There are lots of possibilities, and I think it’s good that he is exploring them now when he has at his disposal great musicians to collaborate with at school,” she notes. “He will go and do great things.” ♦

Violist Ren Martin-Doike entered Curtis in 2010. She is the Mitchell Family Annual Fellow.



Ted Babcock is the Susan Dewar DeCamp Fellow.

More Online

Hear portions of Ted Babcock’s recital at www.InstantEncore.com/Curtis