



THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA'S PHILADELPHIA

COMMISSIONS MICRO-FESTIVAL PUTS CURTIS TALENT

BY MARGIE SMITH HOLT

**Just minutes after giving the world premiere** of David Ludwig's *Pictures from the Floating World*, Philadelphia Orchestra Principal Bassoon Daniel Matsukawa had a tiny suggestion: Change the name—to *Pictures from Cloud Nine*.

"Because I'm on cloud nine!" he beamed. "I live for this kind of writing. And that it's written for me, and this premiere, this orchestra—wow. Again, it's a dream come true. I can say every cliché ever written. And this is why. It's really amazing. Remarkable."

"I'm totally overwhelmed," David Ludwig chimed in. "I'm overwhelmed by Danny and Yannick and the orchestra. Yeah, I'm overwhelmed! A little *verklempt*, actually."

The euphoria backstage was palpable as the Philadelphia Orchestra premiered three new works from October 31 to November 2, each written for a principal player and all highlighting Curtis talent. One composer and all three soloists are members of the Curtis faculty. In addition to Dr. Ludwig and Mr. Matsukawa (who are also Curtis graduates), Principal Flute Jeffrey Khaner gave the world premiere of Behzad Ranjbaran's Flute Concerto and Principal Harp Elizabeth Hainen gave the American premiere of Tan Dun's *Nu Shu: The Secret Songs of Women*, Symphony for Microfilms, Harp, and Orchestra.

Their students loved it. "They were so excited and just so happy," says Ms. Hainen. "They were very sweet and very proud of me as their teacher."

"I run into people on the street who stop me and tell me how much they enjoyed it. It's really been fantastic," says Mr. Khaner. "It was a tremendous honor and thrill to play something new. ... It's one of the things musicians live for."

Composers, too. "Listen," says Ranjbaran, a former member of the musical studies faculty at Curtis, "when you hear Jeff and the Philadelphia Orchestra, it's better than what you imagined."

All three commissions were conducted by Philadelphia Orchestra Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who this year also serves as Curtis's first mentor conductor (see page 11). He calls his colleagues "genius" musicians. "They are among the most virtuosic and the best in their field," says Mr. Nézet-Séguin. "Elizabeth and Jeffrey and Danny—they owned their pieces as if they had played them so many times."

## CONSERVATORY REUNION

The Curtis influence in the Philadelphia Orchestra's triumphant weekend underscores the deep ties between the two institutions. Just over 40 percent of the orchestra's members are Curtis alumni. At one sectional rehearsal for the bassoon concerto, everyone in the room—composer, soloist, and two featured cellists, Acting Associate Principal Yumi Kendall and Acting Assistant Principal John Koen—was a Curtis graduate.



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CENTER STAGE.

Jeffrey Khaner, Behzad Ranjbaran, and Yannick Nézet-Séguin PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

Elizabeth Hainen premiered Tan Dun's *Nu Shu*. PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

Daniel Matsukawa and David Ludwig following the premiere of *Pictures from the Floating World* PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

“Curtis is a very small and very accomplished family,” says Dr. Ludwig, a member of the school’s composition faculty. “When we all get together, there’s a commonality of experience that brings us together. We all kind of grew up in this place ... and out of these relationships, the music is born.”

Dr. Ludwig and Mr. Matsukawa have been friends ever since meeting at the Marlboro Music Festival in the late 1990s. Dr. Ludwig describes “Danny” as not only one of the greatest bassoon players he’s ever heard, but also “a fearsome softball player.” Mr. Matsukawa says he’s been asking his composer friend for years, “Where’s my piece?” Now he has it and, he says, it’s perfect.

“Everything I asked for,” he says. “It’s beautiful ... I can’t stop singing it!” Singing was part of Matsukawa’s process learning the concerto—a technique he tries to impress upon his students. “I don’t even like the word practicing. I like the word familiarizing,” he says. “I want to feel, as a listener, that the person is familiar with what they’re doing.”

All three commissions offer inspiration for the classroom. “This is a piece that all the students are going to have to learn,” says Mr. Khaner, who believes the flute concerto will become standard repertoire. “It’s very challenging but it’s very rewarding. ... It offers the opportunity to play slow, lyrical, beautiful lines as well as the flashy, technical stuff. It’s got everything that a soloist would want and everything that an audience would want.”

*Nu Shu*, meanwhile, is “just so unlike anything that’s ever been written for the harp before,” says Ms. Hainen, who, via her own nonprofit Lyra Society, has been committed to expanding the harp repertoire through compositions by Curtis students. “It’s so important to encourage young composers to write for a technically challenging instrument,” she says. “We give them a lot of information so they’re not intimidated by the instrument but rather embracing it.”

Ms. Hainen, who holds the Maryjane Mayhew Barton Chair in Harp Studies at Curtis, will perform *Nu Shu* again with the Philadelphia Orchestra in China this spring and with the Adelaide Symphony in Australia in September 2014. For encores of the other works—stay tuned. “I think this piece will really have a life ... that will continue long after mine is over!” Mr. Khaner laughs. Mr. Matsukawa says he’s already had a request from former student and recent Curtis alumnus William Short, now principal bassoon of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, to perform the new concerto. His first reaction?

“No!” he laughs. “This was written for me! Mine, mine, mine! Mine!”

“But,” he concedes, “it should be played everywhere with all the bassoon artists in the world.”

“Thank you for letting it go,” Dr. Ludwig says to Mr. Matsukawa, adding: “I would like you to play it again and again and again.

“And, also, again.” ♦

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*Margie Smith Holt is the former director of communications at the Kimmel Center. She writes frequently about the performing arts.*