



The Curtis Catalogue of 1924–25 (left) and today's online iteration



# Catalogue of Virtues

IN 1924 COURSE OFFERINGS AT CURTIS WERE VERY DIFFERENT—AND YET SOME DEEP TRADITIONS HAVE ENDURED.

BY JONATHAN COOPERSMITH

Early in 1924 the first edition of the Curtis Catalogue was published, detailing plans for the school's first academic year. It was an exciting time: George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* had just premiered in New York, and the Roaring Twenties had popularized new genres of music, with famous jazz performers like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. Some major American conservatories had recently been founded: the Eastman School of Music in 1921, the Cleveland Institute of Music in 1920, Manhattan School of Music in 1917, and the Mannes School in 1916.

The 1924–25 Curtis Catalogue was the culmination of years of discussions among the philanthropist Mary Louise Curtis Bok and her good friends Leopold Stokowski, music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the great pianist Josef Hofmann. They had long talked of building, in Philadelphia, a “school of music which equals in all respects the leading conservatories of Europe and America.” In 1924, their dream became a reality. The new conservatory opened on October 1, and on November 14 Stokowski conducted his first rehearsal of the Curtis orchestra in the Common Room.

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## FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS

From its earliest years, the school aimed to “train exceptionally gifted young musicians for careers as performing artists on the highest professional level.” But the first Catalogue reveals that an education beyond the student’s instrument was an equally important part of the founder’s early vision:

Music students require thorough training in certain fundamental elements of music to develop the comprehensive understanding upon which true musicianship is based.

The training includes instruction in rhythm to perfect muscular control and to stimulate mental alertness. Equally important is the development of the imagination

through aesthetic expression, and melodic conception and memory through training of the ear. The student should have an understanding of harmony and musical analysis, as well as the ability to read music at sight. Courses in general cultural subjects are also essential to give the pupil a background for continued study and to develop personality.

These fundamental needs are definitely recognized in the courses offered at the Institute, and the entire curriculum is planned to develop the breadth of vision and the profound love of art which characterize the true and sincere artist.

—“*Fundamental Needs of Music Students*,” 1924–25 *Curtis Catalogue*, p. 12

How beautifully written! No question, one needed a well-rounded education to be a “true and sincere artist,” and in centuries past, the process occurred organically. Professional musicians from the 1600s through the 1800s often came from musical families, their first lessons taught by a parent or older sibling, and many attended choir schools where they learned solfège, sight singing, and keyboard skills from an early age. Prodigies were singled out for more serious study as apprentices to a master. Curtis’s famous faculty during the first few years, most of whom were born in the late 1800s, were products of this era, as today’s faculty recalls.

When Gary Graffman entered Curtis in 1936 at the age of seven, he had already been studying with Isabella Vengerova, who lived four blocks from him in New York. His father was a violin teacher at the Lexington Avenue Y, giving him access to some of the best musical theorists of the time, including Felix Salzer. With regard to the Curtis faculty in those days, Mr. Graffman says, “They were mostly second-generation Eastern Europeans, with very close ties to the musical traditions of the core repertoire.” Similarly, in the 1950s, according to violin faculty member Arnold Steinhardt, “many of the great instrumental teachers of that time knew music theory well, and they had studied piano.”

“We were serious about our theory,” adds Eleanor Sokoloff, who attended Curtis in the 1930s and soon joined the faculty. “When I started, I was put into a class with Madame Renée Longy Miquelle. She was my savior! It was such important training.”

## THEN AND NOW

In those early years, classes began at 8 a.m. every day except Sunday. You could major in Campanology (carillon), or Accompanying, or even earn a Teacher’s Certificate. “Every Saturday morning at 9 a.m., we had to take Platform Department,” recalls Mrs. Sokoloff. “One hour of learning how to behave on stage and walk around a room!”

Today’s students must create their own careers. They must graduate with an understanding of technology and self-promotion, entrepreneurial and collaborative skills, and teaching experience. They need to understand the repertoire they play, both analytically and historically, to provide a context to audiences by speaking from the stage or through written program notes. Current students will play a mix of standard and contemporary repertoire, as well as premiere new compositions and cross over into other genres.

The original Catalogue offered only four “Courses in Musicianship”: Rhythmic Training and Elements of Music; Harmony and Ear Training; Analysis, Form, and Aesthetics; and Counterpoint, Composition, and Instrumentation. The current musical studies curriculum is even more rigorous, recently redesigned to address the challenges today’s students will face as they begin their careers. The current Catalogue, available only online, offers an integrated core study of traditional counterpoint—few schools today teach counterpoint as thoroughly as Curtis—with functional harmony and analysis. There are classes in form, solfège, rhythmic training, sight singing, and dictation, all with a strong emphasis on keyboard skills.

Although much has changed since the school’s founding, we find inspiration in that original Catalogue of 1924. Reinforcing the “Fundamental Needs of Music Students” is more important than ever. “If you are going to make it today, you have to know how to do a lot of things well,” Mr. Steinhardt says. “One should try conducting, speaking about music, organizing concerts—the more you can do well, the better you’ll do.” ♦

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