

D A R M S T A D T

CURTIS TAKES ON THE 20TH CENTURY



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“Revolution: Modernism” is a vodcast featuring David Ludwig and composition student Emily Cooley. Follow their conversation about the all-school project, Modernism, and composing in general, and view Darmstadt-related performances in the 2016–17 season, at

www.curtis.edu/Darmstadt

BY DAVID LUDWIG

Just to the left of the center of Germany, about twenty miles south of Frankfurt, the small city of Darmstadt has become famous—or more accurately, infamous—for its annual summer music festival, the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, which emerged out of the ashes of the Second World War. The terms “Darmstadt” and “the Darmstadt school” are now synonymous with a group of post-war European *avant-garde* composers: *enfant terrible* artists, hell-bent on tearing down the traditions that represented to them an indulgent and disingenuous culture of the past. In their minds this culture had set the stage for the devastation of war-torn Europe. They translated that devastation into radically discordant and abstract art, as if to lay waste to the musical realism of the past.


The Darmstadt festival consisted of concerts, lectures, and symposia featuring some of the most experimental music written at that time—or any time. This gathering of revolutionaries quickly evolved into a center of European Modernism and the spiritual home of composers like Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, Henri Pousseur, Karlheinz Stockhausen, John Cage, and many others who redefined the boundaries of music. As critic Alex Ross writes in his landmark study of 20th-century music, *The Rest is Noise*: “Music exploded into a pandemonium of revolutions, counterrevolutions, theories, polemics, alliances, and party splits ... The dominant aesthetic, in European and American music alike, was one of dissonance, density, difficulty, complexity.”

The Darmstadt school became the subject of last year’s all-school project at Curtis, Darmstadt: The Revolution of Modernism, and this year’s continuation, Beyond Darmstadt. This two-year project was designed to explore influential trends in music through some of the most iconic and controversial works of the last century. Indeed, the music of Darmstadt often provokes strong reactions from audiences and performers alike (not to mention composers!), but to reject this music outright is to ignore its great importance in the long narrative of music history. Darmstadt was a reaction against the emotionally charged music of 19th-century Romanticism, just as so many Modern visual artists, writers, dancers, and filmmakers similarly rejected the Romantic aesthetic at the time. A conventional notion of beauty was not a priority for most of these composers. Instead, broad abstraction, a fierce commitment to process, and a stylistic orthodoxy ruled the day.

Like many polarizing and controversial movements in the history of art and politics, the ideology of the Darmstadt school is as important for the reactions against it as for the principles of the movement itself. The first American minimalists exemplified the strongest rejection of Darmstadt doctrine. Composers like Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley rejected the European aesthetics’ serialist, “atonal” roots, and embraced popular music, jazz, and compositional techniques distilled from other cultures to create a fresh, newly experimental sound all their own. Darmstadt reverberates through the 20th century as a vitally important musical movement, meaningful not only because of its staunch advocates but also because of those who staunchly rejected it.

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S T A D T D B E Y O N D



DARMSTADT—AT CURTIS?

Contemporary music has always been a part of Curtis’s identity. From the earliest days of the school, our visionary founder Mary Louise Curtis Bok saw the value of investing in her composers and supporting their work. But even when considering that history, as a student I couldn’t have imagined that we would (or could) program Luciano Berio’s post-Modern masterpiece *Sinfonia* with the orchestra and our extraordinary singers, as we did last spring. The thought of a dynamic new music ensemble, internationally renowned composers in residence, or a dozen new works commissioned from student and alumni composers every year—this was a reality that lived in some alternate universe. The palpable investment in the creation and performance of contemporary music is something relatively new at Curtis, but it has already become woven into the fabric of school culture.

The French artist Honoré Daumier offered a pithy caveat to his contemporaries: “Il faut être de son temps” (“it is necessary to be of one’s own time”). Imagine getting a degree in creative writing where your study left off at Dickens, or graduating from a visual arts school where your study stopped at Monet. Imagine being a young acting student who never got the opportunity to perform in any plays written after *Uncle Vanya*. The aesthetic, language, and very nature of the drama of 20th- and 21st-century theatre would be completely new to you. It is our responsibility as an institution to expose young musicians to the music of our time and the recent past. This is a key aspect of their preparation for careers as practitioners with diverse performance experiences and informed artistic lives.

PRE- AND POST-DARMSTADT

Last year the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble began the journey toward Darmstadt at the historical point of departure of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, involving an instrumental ensemble of some of our youngest students, aged 15 to 18. The journey continued through a series of four wide-ranging “Road to Darmstadt” concerts, each live-streamed on the Web. Each featured pre-concert conversations to bring listeners closer into the thought processes of the composers, who included such diverse figures as Webern, Messaien, Ligeti,

Carter, Rorem, Boulez, Cage, and several midcentury masters of cabaret. In addition, Curtis student composer Emily Cooley and I have been hosting vodcast conversations about Darmstadt and Modernism, and the school is making plans for a MOOC (massive open online course) on 20th-century music, collecting research and capturing performance footage.

This season the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble will present music of composers who reacted to the Darmstadt orthodoxy, both disciples and dissenters. Last year we performed the remarkable work of composer-in-residence Unsuik Chin, a student of Darmstadt’s second-generation disciple Gyorgi Ligeti. This year, to open our 20/21 season on October 30, we have asked Curtis alumna violinist Jennifer Koh to lead a concert portrait of Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, whose music owes as much to the Darmstadt tradition as to those who rebelled against it. The “Beyond Darmstadt” theme continues on December 3 with a concert titled “1948,” (electronic music at Curtis!); a program of the experimental “New York school” of the 1950s and 1960s on February 11; and a concert focused on American and European minimalism on March 25.

As always, the Curtis Opera Theatre plays an important role in leading our artistic program. Last year Curtis partnered with Opera Philadelphia to present Richard Strauss’s *Capriccio*, which summarizes the lush and expressive traditions of an old world, written at the apex of Modernism. This season features the opera *Doctor Atomic* by John Adams, an American composer whose music is rooted in that minimalist tradition diametrically opposed to Darmstadt.

In less than a decade Curtis will be 100 years old. So much has transformed at the school in the past decade, and it is truly exciting to think of where we will go in the next one. But one thing that has not changed, and will not, is the educational commitment to “learning by doing.” By performing the great works of our time and the recent past under the guidance of an extraordinary faculty, Curtis students are being prepared for the coming century. Now is a time of great musical diversity—a time of both evolution and revolution—that, more than ever, demands passionate advocates for its music. ♦

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