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The Modern Musician

STEVEN FRANKLIN EMBODIES THE COLLABORATIVE, CONNECTING MINDSET OF A 21st-CENTURY MUSICIAN.

BY DAVE ALLEN

What prompted him to choose the trumpet?

Steven Franklin doesn't exactly recall. A serious student of the piano as a child, he saw the trumpet as a social outlet, and the instrument didn't much matter: It was a way to join a band formed for fellow home-schooled children. Ever since, for him music has been a way of connecting to others, even as the trumpet has become the focus of his primary study.

When Steven started private trumpet lessons at age 14, he began to take on some very advanced repertoire. "I didn't know it was supposed to be hard," he says. Piano was his main instrument, and so time spent on the trumpet—even playing conservatory-level works—felt like a diversion. Joining a local youth orchestra provided his first exposure to orchestral music; later, after joining the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra, a performance of Debussy's *La Mer* moved him so deeply that he felt spurred to pursue music as a profession. "I got goosebumps," he recalls. "I thought, 'This is it. This is absolutely what I want to do.'"

That sense of music's power and purpose comes across today as an introspective streak in Steven's otherwise outgoing personality. Orchestral music certainly has taken root in him, and his facility was evident as he ran through audition excerpts during a recent lesson with his teacher David Bilger, principal trumpet in the Philadelphia Orchestra. Mr. Bilger remarked on Steven's ability to land very close to the mark the first time, both stylistically and technically.

His student returns the compliment: To him, the opportunity to study with Mr. Bilger is a privilege. "His playing has such refinement and clarity, with every phrase coming from somewhere and going to somewhere," Steven says. "That's what he teaches, and that's how he plays with the Philadelphia Orchestra."

A MODERN MUSICIAN

A musical environment as close-knit as Curtis leads to students crossing paths and collaborating frequently, and it seems everyone who has worked with Steven—students and faculty, across all instruments and disciplines—has praise for him as a person and musician. Eric Huckins, a 2016 horn graduate, has played alongside Steven in a brass sextet, in the orchestra, and in other ensembles over the past three years. "He's the first person I think about asking to join a group," Eric says, noting Steven's willingness to give and to do whatever is asked of him. "He wants to be an orchestral player, but I see him doing much more than that. He encompasses what I think of as the modern musician."

"One of Steven's greatest strengths is connecting with others," says Paul Bryan, dean of faculty and students. "His ability to cultivate relationships with colleagues, performers, students, and others with whom he's involved has played a significant role in the success of his many musical endeavors."

Beyond being well-liked, though, Steven has bonds with his peers that have grown deeper through what he calls "musical honesty"—being open in his approach to playing and to giving and receiving feedback.

Soon after arriving at Curtis in 2013, Steven says he felt the need to show his fellow students that he really had what it takes. Playing a mock audition for a trumpet studio class during his first week, he choked up, and struggled to catch his breath. The tense, unsatisfying performance led him to reassess. He realized that he should try to improve rather than impress and, perhaps even more daunting, be open with his peers about the flaws in his



Steven Franklin is the David H. Springman Memorial Fellow. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Opposite, clockwise from top left:

Steven practicing backstage and performing onstage with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in April PHOTO: DAVID DEBALKO

Steven received the Presser Foundation Undergraduate Scholar Award at Commencement last spring. PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

The Brass Project maintained a busy schedule of teaching, coaching, and performing last year. Members include (l. to r.): Eric Huckins, Steven Franklin, Andrew Doub, János Sutyak, Caleb Wiebe, and Daniel Schwalbach. PHOTO: JÁNOS SUTYAK/MARIÉ ROSSANO

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playing. This frank sharing, he says, “is like a secret weapon. If you can learn from that, and learn from others, you’ll be better for it.”

After that initial bout of nerves, Steven appears at ease both in performance and off-stage at “trumpet hangs”—that is, socializing with the entire trumpet studio—and sessions both performing and teaching with his brass sextet, the Brass Project. The group spent a recent semester guiding teenaged musicians at South Philadelphia High School as part of Eric Huckins’s community artist program (CAP) project, and went to New Mexico to coach high school musicians in April under the auspices of the Music from Angel Fire festival.

COMPOSING ON THE SIDE

As the Brass Project undertook a commissioning project for new works for brass ensemble earlier this year, collaborating in yet another CAP enterprise curated by composition student Nick DeBerardino, Steven’s role in the group expanded further. He gathered feedback for the participating composers, organized performances and recording sessions, learned nearly 30 challenging new pieces—and composed one of them, a lush, harmonically rich Nocturne.

In fact, even while pursuing his trumpet studies, Steven has honed this separate but fully realized musical pursuit: He composes, regularly and seriously, in a straightforward, surprisingly Romantic style, and is beginning to see his works performed. Violin student Marié Rossano asked him to write *Fantasy-Journey* for her graduation recital; and his trumpet sextet was played by the Curtis trumpet studio at the 2016 National Trumpet Competition, netting them first prize.

Composer and pianist Noam Sivan, a member of the musical studies faculty, first encountered Steven in his Harmonic Thinking in Performance course. Not long into the semester, Steven mentioned that he liked to compose, and the small class gradually evolved into a composition seminar for students majoring in other disciplines. Since then, Mr. Sivan has encouraged Steven’s forays into composing during one-on-one lessons, something previously offered only to students majoring in composition. “This year, he began to use some of the elements that we had set as goals and make them into part of his language,” Mr. Sivan says. “I was happy to see that he could take input, even if it was sometimes general or hard to define, and compose with that in mind.”

Steven’s work as a creator informs his playing: He values fidelity to the score and the intentions of the composer. In his Nocturne written for the Brass Project, though, the composer takes a back seat. Steven scored the piece for the ensemble’s four lowest voices, so in performance, he sits out as his colleagues play.

“I’ve gotten to know their playing, and them as people, so well over the years,” he says. “It’s a treat for me to be able to write specifically for them.” ♦

Dave Allen is publications and social media manager at Settlement Music School in Philadelphia. His writings on music have appeared in Chamber Music, Overtones, Symphony, and the Courier-Post.

PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Steven Franklin

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www.curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis

“The music I’ve heard and the people I’ve met at Curtis have changed me, and those things really go hand in hand. Everyone here loves music so deeply that it changes them as people. I go to school with artists—people who love what they do and who are so good at it—and I’m impressed every day by the level of music-making here, both by students and faculty. They all have motivated me and inspired me on such a high level.”