



Harold Hall Robinson holds the A. Margaret Bok Chair in Double Bass Studies.



Deep Commitment

CURTIS DOUBLE BASSISTS DEVELOP THEIR VARIED STRENGTHS UNDER THE GENEROUS AND FIRM GUIDANCE OF HAL ROBINSON.

BY DAVE ALLEN

There's something primordially fascinating about an orchestra's double-bass section: all those towering wooden figures, often taller than the musicians playing them. It's like a miniature forest—one whose trees are oddly uniform in height—emanating profound, dark tones.

This larger-than-life, somewhat imposing group—in the Curtis Symphony Orchestra as in orchestras around the world—often presents a variety of bow-holds, playing styles, and, of course, personalities.

Personality is just the thing that Harold Hall Robinson employs to unite those diverse elements of the Curtis bass studio. The current crop of bassists at Curtis comprises students from as close by as central Pennsylvania and as far as Australia, and the spread of studio alums is even wider. Mr. Robinson, a member of the Curtis faculty since 1995, can rattle off where they live and where they are in their careers—principal positions in major orchestras, on tour playing bluegrass, and everything in between—at a moment's notice. "I do keep track, although there are some I've lost touch with," he says. "I'm super-proud of all of them."

Under Mr. Robinson's guidance, a loose, collegial feeling predominates; all his students call him "Hal." In his colorful lexicon, top-notch players are "monsters," his fingers—short



Mr. Robinson in a lesson with Robin Brawley
PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

and stubby, in his estimation—are “brown-and-serves,” and playful nicknames abound among the players in his studio.

That jovial spirit coexists with a direct, no-nonsense approach to teaching, as Mr. Robinson cultivates not merely a superb sound informed by technique, but a mindset that seeks to lead from the bottom. Bassists, he says, “hate rushing, and we hate dragging,” and in his position as principal bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra, he takes great pride in helping organize the orchestra rhythmically and, with the rest of the bass section, creating “a pocket they can play in.”

Fourth-year student Samuel Caseday recalls being raw, musically speaking, when he arrived at Curtis, and he credits Mr. Robinson with helping him make technical strides forward that were very much in evidence at his graduation recital—with the other six current double-bass students in attendance and cheering him on—last December. “Even though I play German bow and Hal plays French bow, his concept of sound and the instrument has always been helpful,” Samuel says. “If he couldn’t show me how to do something, I could always figure it out from having him play for me.”

During individual lessons, Mr. Robinson’s manner borders on surgically precise. By careful attention to nuance in both sound and technical matters, he works to turn students’ weaknesses into strengths, and existing strengths into something akin to superpowers.

For Joseph Conyers, a 2004 Curtis graduate, the intense passion in his playing was a strength that set him apart. Rather than inhibiting this emotional quality, Mr. Robinson encouraged it as his promising student took orchestra auditions. “He told me never to get rid of that,” Mr. Conyers says. “He allowed me to become my own artist and got me exactly where I wanted to go.”

If both current students and alumni view Mr. Robinson as a friend, mentor, and teacher, then Mr. Conyers can add “co-worker” to that list of relationships; he’s currently assistant

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principal bass in the Philadelphia Orchestra, two stools away from his former teacher. Mr. Robinson's model of leading by example served Mr. Conyers well when, in his first position after graduating from Curtis, he had to lead a section as principal bass of the Grand Rapids Symphony. "He told me not to make them ask how I want them to play. Just play, and they'll see that," Mr. Conyers says. "As a colleague, he does the same thing."

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Even as a leader, Mr. Robinson's instinct, in most settings, is to step back and put others into the spotlight. This even extends to his sharing of teaching responsibilities at Curtis. Over ten years ago, Edgar Meyer, the Grammy-winning bassist and composer, contacted him and expressed interest in joining the Curtis faculty. It was an unusual request, but Mr. Robinson knew that it came because Mr. Meyer respected his playing. "I was very honored," he says, "and I have certainly benefited from the partnership over the years."

Mr. Meyer comes to Curtis from Nashville to teach three times per semester, and the two teachers keep in touch in the interim, noting students' progress and areas for improvement. Both say that the partnership works well because each offers distinct strengths within his respective areas of specialty: orchestral playing and other classical repertoire for Mr. Robinson, solo playing and music outside the classical tradition for Mr. Meyer. "Hal is genuinely interested in other people's ideas and in other ways of doing things," his colleague says, adding that the shared studio "would not have worked nearly as well with anyone else."

This openness to different ideas was evident during a lesson last fall, as Mr. Robinson and student Robin Brawley explored a selection of orchestral excerpts with varied attacks and different fingerings in a rapid but relaxed fashion. They frequently finished one another's sentences—sometimes with words, though more often by playing.

Robin, a native of Sydney, Australia who already holds an undergraduate degree, came to Curtis during a leave of absence from a position with an Australian orchestra. His instrument was damaged in transit to the United States, and while he waited for it to be repaired, Mr. Robinson let him play his own primary orchestral bass, an Italian instrument from the mid-1800s with a distinctive lion-shaped scroll. Robin retells this with awe, saying, "that's the kind of dedication Hal gives to his students."

Beyond that act of generosity, he has already found his playing—and his life—enriched by his studies with Mr. Robinson. "He basically welcomed me into his family," Robin says. "He's the most dedicated teacher I've come across." Praise like that springs readily from Mr. Robinson's current and former students—the "monsters" that he says make his teaching so fulfilling.

"They're searching for what makes them happy musically," he says. "I'm teaching them how to be their own guides." ♦

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CURTIS PRESENTS Hal Robinson and Friends

On April 3 in Field Concert Hall, Hal Robinson brings alumni and students together for an eclectic program of chamber music—and a few surprises. Ticket information at

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WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Hal Robinson

"Everywhere I've gone, I've always taught. Here at Curtis, there's no dogma. I tell my students, 'I'll take any suggestions, you're the boss.' With me and Edgar [Meyer], you have two juggernauts in the double-bass world; we try to craft the repertoire and the discussions around it, and we help the students develop the true sense of their personalities. Our students have success not because they play just like me or Edgar, but because we give them the information and the confidence to have their own voice. You won't find two students here that are the same. I'm really proud of that."