



Paul Jacobs in a Juilliard practice studio
PHOTO: FELIX BROEDE

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Head and Heart

FOR ORGAN VIRTUOSO PAUL JACOBS, ADVOCACY AND ARTISTRY GO HAND IN HAND.

BY WILLIAM ROBIN

Not long before graduating from the Curtis Institute of Music in 2000, Paul Jacobs planned a bold experiment: to perform the complete organ works of Bach, more than 200 compositions, in fourteen consecutive evenings. For the youthful Mr. Jacobs, the music of Bach was the pinnacle of the organ repertoire, not to mention Western civilization. To get the word out, he looked up the address of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and visited the newspaper's offices, but never made it past security at the front desk. A few weeks later, though, a music critic called, and the student organist found himself the subject of a profile on the front page of the arts section. "Going The Distance With Bach," the headline declared.

"I always was interested in expanding the boundaries that organists traditionally have occupied," Mr. Jacobs said recently over lunch near the Juilliard School, where he is chair of the organ department. He once presented that same entirety of Bach's organ works in a single, eighteen-hour stretch; he has also performed nine-hour marathons of the complete organ music of Olivier Messiaen. These feats of strength and endurance are less of a gimmick than a commitment to the oeuvres of two of the organ's greatest composers, for a musician who has continually pushed artistic limits while communicating the importance of an oft-overlooked instrument to the public.

For organists in the classical music world, advocacy is as important as artistry. The organ presents challenges unlike any other instrument: Each organ is unique, and completely immobile. The instrument's pedigree is ancient, but it is little understood by the public; it is nearly omnipresent in the church, but less so in the concert hall. In his performances, Mr. Jacobs is tasked not only with performing incredibly difficult repertoire that requires both hands and both feet, but also demonstrating the relevance of his instrument to classical audiences.



Paul Jacobs PHOTO: FRAN KAUFMAN



With composer Michael Daugherty after the Nashville Symphony's premiere of *Once Upon a Castle*. Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero, standing behind them, led the performance.
PHOTO: COURTESY NASHVILLE SYMPHONY

“His ability to play anything with consistency and virtuosity, and his uncanny ear for creating a brilliant tapestry of sounds from the organ, pulls the audiences in,” says composer Michael Daugherty.

Fortunately, he is well suited to the task. Raised in Washington, Pennsylvania, Mr. Jacobs began piano lessons at age five, but soon encountered the organ in church. “I would work my way into the gallery to watch the organist play the postlude each week, and was transfixed by the colors and energy and complexity of the pipe organ,” he says. He started playing soon afterwards, and by age fifteen was appointed organist of a large congregation nearby. Due to the prominence of renowned organ pedagogue John Weaver, Curtis was the natural next step. Mr. Weaver describes the young Paul Jacobs as one of the best students he has ever taught, a shy prodigy who soon developed musical and personal confidence. “Not only does he play music beautifully and with great expression,” Mr. Weaver says, “but he also plays some of the most difficult repertoire that ever has been written for the organ.”

FROM INTROVERT TO ADVOCATE

Mr. Jacobs pursued postgraduate study at Yale while embarking upon a national career, with tours of the Bach and Messiaen marathons. At age 26, he was invited to teach at Juilliard, becoming one of the youngest musicians appointed to the faculty in the school's history. He is the only organist to have won a Grammy, for his 2010 recording of Messiaen's *Livre du Saint-Sacrement*. And he is perhaps the most in-demand virtuoso and advocate for his instrument today. When the *New York Times* sought to sample the sounds of Manhattan's organs for a multimedia feature last year, Mr. Jacobs was the logical choice as tour guide.

Journalists often refer to Mr. Jacobs as cherubic, but behind his youthful look lurks an Old World demeanor, and a broad interest in the humanities that was cultivated at Curtis. He is hardwired with a sense of duty towards great art, and deeply concerned about the indifference of the mainstream towards classical music. “Justin Bieber is welcome to do whatever he wants,” Mr. Jacobs told me, “but when most people today are familiar with some of his music and yet have never heard a single Beethoven symphony in its entirety, that's a problem.” Towards the end of a studio class at Juilliard, he read aloud to his students excerpts from an article by philosopher Roger Scruton that lamented the noisiness of modern life. The students then offered their own opinions, leading to a feisty intellectual debate of a kind rarely heard in conservatories.

That commitment to multiple viewpoints also extends to Mr. Jacobs's performance practice. He believes that organists have too long favored intellect over emotion, even though "the greatest composer for the instrument, Bach, is known to have reached that perfect equilibrium between the head and the heart." Mr. Jacobs teaches his students to embrace a diversity of perspectives, one informed by John Weaver's guidance at Curtis. Mr. Weaver, he says, "never wanted students to sound like he sounded. He treated students as adults, and he opened up their minds and ears."

REPERTOIRE RENEWED

In November Mr. Jacobs premiered a new organ symphony by Michael Daugherty, *Once Upon a Castle*, with the Nashville Symphony and its music director, Giancarlo Guerrero. He has also premiered works by Samuel Adler, Mason Bates, Stephen Paulus, and Christopher Theofanidis; and next season, he will premiere a new work by Christopher Rouse with the Philadelphia Orchestra. His interest in new music, too, dates back to Curtis, where he took a formative course with composer Jennifer Higdon. He remembers an exercise in which each student was required to create a conceptual work, in the manner of avant-garde provocateur John Cage. "I composed a piece that involved the lowest pipes of the organ," he recalls fondly, "so it sounds like the instrument is wheezing."

Though Mr. Jacobs no longer dabbles in composition, he has maintained that interest in experimentation. "I couldn't think of a better collaborator than Paul Jacobs," says Mr. Daugherty, who suggests that Mr. Jacobs's willful performances themselves represent a form of advocacy for his instrument: "His ability to play anything with consistency and virtuosity, and his uncanny ear for creating a brilliant tapestry of sounds from the organ, pulls the audiences in." While many today seek out newfangled stunts in the hope of making classical music relevant—multimedia elements, informal dress—it's reassuring that a musician's interpretive decisions can be responsible for attracting new listeners.

Working with composers also represents an opportunity to avoid the solitary life of many organists. At Curtis, Mr. Jacobs studied harpsichord with Lionel Party in order to perform continuo with fellow students in chamber groups. Fifteen years later, that collaborative mindset still fuels many of his projects, including a recent acclaimed album with soprano Christine Brewer. She describes a particularly memorable concert in St. Louis, in which the uncanny sound of Mr. Jacobs's playing communicated the relevance of the organ to all present: "As the sound spiraled up into the huge dome of the basilica and we experienced the seven-second reverberation, we felt that perhaps we were experiencing what the composers had felt when composing these pieces!"

"And I know that the audience felt that magic, too. It was palpable." ♦

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WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Paul Jacobs

"Primarily the major teacher John Weaver, in addition, of course, to Curtis's own sterling reputation ... the students could not help but respect him, for his reputation and what he gave to them in lessons.

"I took great pleasure in the art history courses offered by Carla Puppini—I really would say, there wasn't a single course at Curtis that was not valuable. All the teachers cared about what they were doing, and I think that's something to be treasured, and I'm confident that's still the case at the school because of the smallness of it, the intimate setting.

"I learned to make music at Curtis in a way that was full of love—love for the music, and a passion to communicate that love to any listener ... It has that youthful spirit to it, and consequently, optimism. Hope is found in abundance within the walls of that institution, and among the students."



At the organ of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, around the corner from Curtis.

PHOTO: CHRISTINA WILTON

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PHOTO: JIM McNUTT