

Violist, educator, and tech professional
Jessica Chang PHOTO: PHILO LEE



Whole Cloth

CURTIS VIOLA GRADUATE JESSICA CHANG WEAVES AN ARTISTIC LIFE FROM MULTIPLE STRANDS.

BY JESSICA CHANG

When Curtis piloted the Community Artist Program in 2012, I was excited to sign up. I designed and launched Chamber Music by the Bay, which has continued and grown ever since.

As soon as our string quartet finishes playing for a group of middle-school students, the youngsters explode into action. Whiteboard marker in hand, one student argues, “That’s not the train! That’s the boy frolicking in a field!” Another chimes in, “Yeah! And then he runs home to his family!” These members of the after-school orchestra at Redwood Middle School in the San Francisco Bay Area are debating their interpretation of the first movement of Janacek’s Quartet No. 1 (“Kreutzer Sonata”). I love watching them draw out storyboards to discuss the music, in a remarkable display of teamwork and creative thinking in action.

This event is typical of the interactive chamber music programs I’ve been leading since 2012, when I created Chamber Music by the Bay through Curtis’s Community Artists Program (CAP). Five years later, Chamber Music by the Bay continues to thrive, and is one of a few vital strands within my life. I’m a violist and a teacher; and I also work full-time at Dropbox, a tech company headquartered in San Francisco, where I’m currently a program manager for trust and security initiatives as part of Dropbox’s legal team. (Friends often ask what it’s like to have a “9 to 5 job.” Truthfully, there hasn’t been a single day where I’ve only worked from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; being part of a tech start-up is a lifestyle of nonstop work to help the company succeed.)

I’m typing this on a Sunday afternoon when I usually juggle a few things: preparing to coach chamber music at California Preparatory Music Academy, a pre-college music program where I’m the director of chamber music; teaching private viola lessons; and transitioning back to the week at Dropbox. Weaving together a life in both music and tech has been deeply meaningful for me and has shown me how to live as both an artist and a citizen. It is a path that I’ve chosen consciously and am grateful to have.

UNCONVENTIONAL ROUTE

Entering Curtis in 2009, I was hardly the archetypal conservatory student. When I picked up the viola in middle school and joined the orchestra, my not-so-secret goal was to hang out with my musical friends. Later, my undergraduate studies at Yale focused on public school administration and policy. I dove into educational theory, observed urban classrooms, and spent a summer teaching creative writing to at-risk middle-school students.

Yet I was always surrounded by music. I picked up a work-study gig in stage management at the Yale School of Music. I played in the Yale Symphony, dabbled in summer festivals

Photos on opposite page:
Souvenirs of Chamber Music by the Bay
events, including an outline of a musical
work from a young audience member



1. The person is running, running from the orphanage, because he didn't like it there. (Choppy tone color)
2. He runs into a part of town he never had been to before (mysterious tone color). At the end of a road, he bumps into a stranger. He blacks out.
3. This mysterious man kidnaps him on a train.
4. It turns out this man is his father and his father tells the story of how he lost him.



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including Aspen and Tanglewood, and was fascinated with the role of the viola in chamber music. I was also fortunate to study viola with Daniel Panner, a Curtis alumnus. When it came time to make a decision about graduate school, I applied to education programs, but also sent in a few applications to music schools, too, figuring that if I was a musical misfit, I simply wouldn't get in.

That's how I wound up at Curtis. It was a shock to someone who had self-identified as playing the viola "for fun." The only way I was able to take stock of my new surroundings was to throw myself in head-first. At Curtis, I stretched to learn how to practice, to play, and to perform. My colleagues were world-class at age sixteen and I learned from every one of them. My teachers and coaches taught and inspired me in ways that words cannot capture. While at Curtis, I also took on an internship at the William Penn Foundation in Philadelphia as their Arts and Culture Program Intern. Between Curtis and my internship, I didn't have time to wonder if I was a misfit. I was learning everything simply by doing it all.

When Curtis piloted CAP in 2012, I was excited to sign up. With the mentorship of alumna pianist Natalie Zhu, I designed and launched Chamber Music by the Bay to bring interactive chamber music programs to audiences in schools throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, with a focus on teamwork and creative thinking. CMB has continued and grown ever since, even as I graduated from Curtis, studied at Juilliard, and toured with the Toronto-based Afiara Quartet. CMB has used works such as Janacek's "Kreutzer Sonata" quartet and Bartók's String Quartet No. 2 to engage students in musical language and storytelling.

CMB has also grown its Side by Side Project annually to foster student learning and engagement via side-by-side performances with its faculty members (including violinist Zenas Hsu, a Curtis alumnus). In April 2016, Chamber Music by the Bay celebrates its fifth season by commissioning a short fanfare for our Side by Side Project from another of my Curtis classmates, Daniel Temkin, to share the spirit and responsibility of working with our peers as active commissioners and interpreters of the music of our own time.

ART IN THE OFFICE

And then there's that "9 to 5 job" at Dropbox where, in addition to my work from day to day, I've been fortunate to host concerts and reading parties in the office that have included colleagues at Dropbox, other musicians in tech, freelance musicians, and members of the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Ballet. By building a creative culture in the workplace, we nurture a community that believes in and supports the arts and chooses to engage in learning more about music.

During my time at Curtis I was fortunate to focus solely on music. Within the collaborative and supportive community that Curtis offered, my peers and I learned how to work with others and to work toward deadlines. We learned to tackle goals step-by-step and also to understand that our work would never be fully done. We began to fully understand that music brings good to the world and is deeply needed.

As performers and artist-citizens, our "success" is difficult to qualify and to quantify. Like my Curtis colleagues, I have defined what this means for me over time. I've learned that success is directly tied to my own vision. There's no such thing as being a misfit if you believe deeply in the importance of your life's work. Why let others dictate our happiness or sense of worth for how we each contribute to music and society at large?

My experience at Curtis helped me recognize the importance of pursuing my unique path. I've found my voice by creating educational opportunities through music that build broad abilities for youth and communities. Knowing that there is more than one way to define success as an artist is one thing, but it's another to believe that this combination of work is my life's mission.

With that, it's back into the rest of Sunday, where I'm looking forward to living up my own definition of artist-citizen with a full day of coaching, teaching, and at some point in the evening, preparing for what the week brings at Dropbox. ♡

Jessica Chang is a 2012 graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music.

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Learn about Chamber Music by the Bay at chambermusicbythebay.com