

Braizahn Jones holds the
Albert M. Greenfield Fellowship.
PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



The Holistic Experience

Braizahn Jones's rapid rise has been fueled by intense commitment and a thoughtful approach.

BY THOMAS OLTARZEWSKI

It doesn't take a long time talking to Braizahn Jones to realize that he is a young man with a singular outlook on life. What Braizahn terms the "holistic experience" informs everything he does, from performing to teaching to everyday life—and judging by his rapid development since entering Curtis in 2014, that mindset is working for him.

"He's just the complete package, full of love and idealism and talent," according to double bass faculty Harold Robinson, who describes lessons with Braizahn as an opportunity to discuss philosophy and big artistic ideas in addition to the traditional areas of mastering technique and repertoire. "We enjoy each other's company so much that sometimes we just have to zip it, and buckle down and work on the music, or else we would sit and talk, and talk, and talk."

Curtis students are often called "musical athletes," and Braizahn fits this description more than most. Early in life, he was an accomplished athlete, excelling at football, basketball, and other sports. With his large frame and natural physical ability, a career as an athlete was a serious option. "It became a real question, because obviously I was really into sports—but a lot of people are really into sports," he says.

Braizahn wasn't just "into sports." Growing up in Las Vegas, he pursued them in the same tenacious way that gifted young musicians pursue their art. "I was going to camps, and doing all sorts of leagues, the same way that musicians are trying to get anything to give them that experience—go to all the right summer festivals, and get lessons with the right teachers."

Then a friend convinced him to join his high school's orchestra. Braizahn chose the double bass as his instrument, and something clicked. He found himself committing to a new endeavor with the same drive that made him a star on the field. Why the sudden dive into music, with such energy? "It's always worth it, if I'm at all interested in something, to do it the right way," he says.

In addition to spending time in the practice room, he sought out recordings and videos by top bass players, including Curtis alumni Joseph Conyers—whose orchestra career was thriving—and Nathaniel West, then still a student. (Today both are members of the Philadelphia Orchestra bass section headed by Harold Robinson.) Ever thoughtful about his methods, Braizahn focused on what made them not just great musicians, but great bassists. "If I'm interested in making pizza, I'm not going to look for just any culinary book, I'm going to look for a book about making pizza," he explains.

Opposite:

Top left: Braizahn playing with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra PHOTO: DAVID DeBALKO

Top right: With a young fan after a Family Concert PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

Middle: In transit during the orchestra's recent European tour PHOTO: TIMOTHY CHOOI

Bottom left: In rehearsal at the Kulturpalast in Dresden PHOTO: OLIVER KILLIG

Bottom right: Warming up backstage at Verizon Hall PHOTO: DAVID DeBALKO



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This knack for cutting through the noise to seek out key concepts of bass playing served Braizahn well, as he quickly grew into one of the most accomplished musicians in his high school and began to see a future for himself in music. Despite his late start, he won a place at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, and then set his sights on Curtis.

OPEN AND FOCUSED

To Braizahn, these developments are all part of the “holistic experience,” a lens through which he sees connections among all areas of life. It prompts him, he explains, to learn and grow from his everyday experiences as much as he does during a lesson or practice session. “Every single day, no matter what it is, what you’re thinking about, what you’re looking at,” he says, “[you] put yourself in an environment where you allow yourself to develop.” When preparing for an audition, he focuses on his goal while opening himself to anything that can help him prepare, musically or mentally.

Habits bother him, in practice or performance. Rather than fall into “autopilot,” Braizahn strives to think critically about his choices, question them, and act deliberately, rather than allowing a habit to steer the ship. “It’s all about breaking off those habits and tearing them away,” he says. Becoming entrenched in a habit—even a “good” one—can prevent a musician from being fully present in the performing process, he adds.

This level of thoughtfulness has also served him well as he has begun teaching private students, whom he guides by example through his own playing and thinking. Recently, several of Braizahn’s students have seen the benefits of his holistic approach first-hand, gaining acceptance to the New England Conservatory, Peabody Conservatory, and top string seminars.

He has also applied holistic thinking to his work as a resident assistant at Lenfest Hall over the past two years. Maggie Holroyd, director of residence life, describes one of Braizahn’s Sunday night “listening parties” that typifies his approach as a mentor to his fellow students: “On the surface this listening party was a place where students could bring their favorite music of any genre and discuss the elements of these pieces.” More broadly, she notes, “Braizahn was hoping that he could create a ‘safe space’ for residents to voice their opinions about anything happening in their lives.”

Braizahn’s students and peers aren’t the only ones seeing the results of his holistic mindset. In addition to serving as co-principal bass for the Curtis Symphony Orchestra during the 2016–17 season and the European tour that followed, he has found success in auditions, recently reaching the final round for a position with a major orchestra. Recently he has been substituting with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Seattle Symphony.

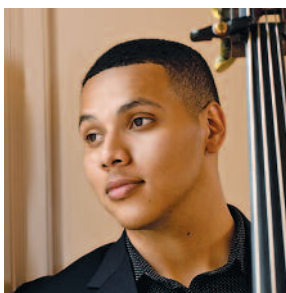
Both of his teachers, Mr. Robinson and Edgar Meyer, are vocal in encouraging each member of the Curtis bass studio to find his or her unique voice and career. So it’s hardly surprising that Braizahn, calmly driven but introspective, has found fertile ground to grow under their guidance. Mr. Robinson says it won’t be long before Braizahn joins the ranks of Curtis bassists with flourishing careers.

“He’s so close; he’s just knocking on the door now.” ◇

Thomas Oltarzewski, a 2013 composition graduate, is digital content producer at Curtis. He has also worked in the department of artistic programs and performance.

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WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—BRAIZAHN JONES

More Reasons at
www.curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis

“I chose to go to Curtis because of the unique opportunities it offers: the opportunity I have to play an instrument of the highest quality for teachers of the highest quality, with the goal of making the highest quality music in mind. ... As far as I’ve seen, it’s the only college that would allow a music major to even potentially achieve this. Curtis has resources that are made available so that any problem can be solvable.”