



“MUSICAL GOLD”

Young musicians from the Curtis Symphony Orchestra reflect on their epic 2017 European tour.

BY CARLOS ÁGREDA, MARIA IOUDENITCH, AND LYMAN MCBRIDE

It was the most ambitious sojourn for the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in nearly two decades. Covering nine cities in eighteen days, the orchestra’s 2017 summer tour of Europe was a whirlwind of music-making, rehearsals, last-minute adjustments, and—just occasionally—a smidgen of free time for 100-plus students and recent alumni. Along the way they marveled at the acoustics and décor of classic old-world concert palaces and ultra-modern symphony halls. They reveled in their collaboration with renowned guest artists. And they gained grounding in the sometimes grueling pace that professional musicians maintain on tour.

It started a couple of days before the buses pulled away from Lenfest Hall, when the orchestra’s percussion battery, harps, cellos, and double basses were packed onto their own plane bound for Helsinki, the tour’s first stop. After a two-day residency, the orchestra was off to Germany, with concerts in Bremen, Berlin, and Dresden. A quick flyover to London was unexpectedly extended when all flights from Heathrow Airport were cancelled, giving the musicians a free day to roam the British capital before boarding a hastily chartered plane to Salzburg, with a “run-out” to Vienna. The tour concluded in Poland, with performances in Wrocław and Łusławice.

In these pages, three young musicians share their reflections.



Top: The Grosser Saal of the Wiener Konzerthaus
PHOTO: IGOR RIPAK

Above: The orchestra performs in Berlin.
PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

MORE ONLINE

Look for added tour observations and photos at
www.curtis.edu/Blog

Opposite:

Top: Musicians make their way to the Konzerthaus in Berlin. PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

Middle left: President Roberto Díaz spoke to the orchestra, Curtis alumni, and an international group of friends and supporters at a reception following the concert in Berlin. PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

Middle right: The imposing façade of Berlin's Konzerthaus PHOTO: LYMAN McBRIDE

Below (left to right):

Large instruments made the transatlantic crossing on a chartered plane. PHOTO: JONATHAN HUMMEL

The orchestra in transit PHOTO: DREW SCHLEGEL

Chamber ensembles from the orchestra performed during a two-day residency at the Sibelius Academy. PHOTO: DREW SCHLEGEL

Mark Rubenstein, Curtis's board chair, with his predecessor, Nina von Maltzahn, at the post-concert reception in Berlin PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

The historic streets of Bremen beckoned musicians on a free afternoon. PHOTO: DREW SCHLEGEL

Piano soloist Peter Serkin confers with oboists Virginia McDowell and Cassie Pilgrim at the Berlin rehearsal. PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

BEING THERE

BY LYMAN McBRIDE

It's Tuesday night, May 23, and I'm about to leave the Konzerthaus Berlin. I've finished my part in the concert and I want to go back to the hotel and rest, when I meet a friend who is surprised to find that I am not attending the post-concert reception. After some light convincing, I find myself again in my tuxedo, heading for the Beethoven-Saal, where the reception is being held.

I enjoy some easy conversation with some friends when I make eye contact with a couple to my left. They approach and ask how I'm doing. They are from Berlin, and often attend concerts by the Berlin Philharmonic. "Our favorite piece was the Penderecki! We think that it suits this orchestra well." I gladly thank them, though in my mind I think back on the experience playing it just two hours before. It didn't feel comfortable or easy. Regardless, I'm glad it came off that way!

I listen to Mr. Díaz, our school's president and one of the soloists on the tour, give a round of thanks to important members of the tour. "And I thank, with much gratitude, Osmo Vänskä." Joining in applause along with a few hundred other people standing around me, I peer over my right shoulder and see our revered conductor less than ten feet from where I stand. A few days ago we saw his baton immortalized in a glass case just inside the Helsinki Music Centre. Just to my left I notice Benjamin Schmid, a world-famous violinist touring with us. Just a little further away, Peter Serkin. It is with these musicians that I rub shoulders on a daily basis. Just a year ago, I couldn't have imagined such a sight. Today I am one of them.

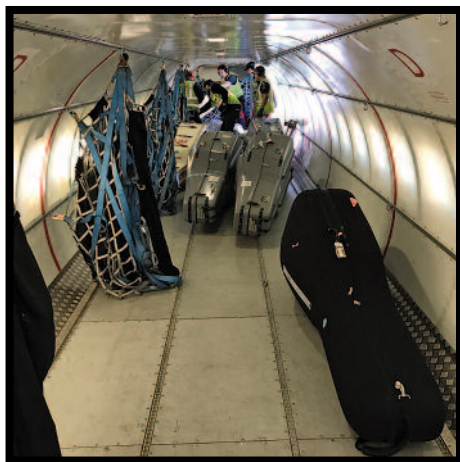
I leave the reception quite glad to have attended. I go to the hotel, I sleep, and in the morning, I strap on my running shoes. Berlin is more than one of the greatest musical centers in the world. It was here that the most recent marathon world record was set. For me, this ground is holy.

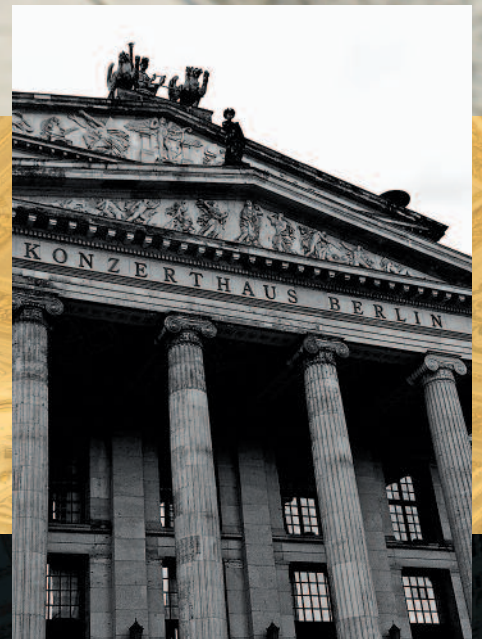
I run the streets where the marathon took place and think, *Here a man ran a 4:40 mile pace for over 26 miles.* I cross the Brandenburg Gate and John F. Kennedy flashes in my mind, speaking the famous phrase: "Ich bin ein Berliner!"—and Ronald Reagan, 25 years later: "Tear down this wall!" I find my way to Checkpoint Charlie and gaze upon the old station where so many were killed attempting to escape communist East Germany.

Feelings like this can't be taught. They are shown. You may study about this in school, but until you come, you cannot truly say, "I understand." ♦

Trombonist Lyman McBride entered Curtis in 2016 and holds the Susan and Frank Mechura Annual Fellowship.

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Opposite top, clockwise:

Conducting fellows Carlos Ágreda and Conner Gray Covington helped Osmo Vänskä adjust balances in widely varying acoustical spaces. In London's Cadogan Hall, a converted 18th-century church, the small platform was built out to accommodate a 110-piece orchestra. Berlin's Konzerthaus offered the orchestra a classic 19th-century "shoebox" concert room with resonant acoustics and clear sightlines for the capacity audience. At the Dresden Festival, the orchestra rehearsed and performed in the brand-new, state-of-the-art Kulturpalast.

PHOTOS: CHRIS CHRISTODOULU, OLIVER KILLIG, KAI BIENERT

Below (left to right):

In the moments before rehearsal

PHOTO: CHRIS CHRISTODOULU

Rehearsing in Berlin PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

Principal cello Joshua Halpern at rehearsal in London's Cadogan Hall

A capacity audience in Vienna PHOTO: IGOR RIPAK

CONDUCTING UNDERCOVER

BY CARLOS ÁGREDA

On this tour I never appeared on stage in a performance, and never played a note. But I was busy all the time.

As assistant conductors, Conner Covington and I had plenty to do, before and during the tour. In general the duties of an assistant conductor range from leading sectional rehearsals and preparing the orchestra before the principal conductor arrives, to covering rehearsals or concerts when the principal conductor is not able to attend, conducting offstage ensembles, working with the soloists around the rehearsals, assisting the principal conductor with their relationship with the orchestra library and production staff, and serving as a second pair of ears during sound checks at the concert hall.

This last duty is especially important since the acoustics of concert halls are not absolute, and in most cases, the physical position of the podium in the hall does not allow the conductor to have an objective idea of the sound of the orchestra. At this moment, the assistant conductor plays an especially valuable role. Some conductors give the baton to the assistant during the rehearsal so they can walk around the hall to check the balance themselves from outside the podium.

This is why the preparation of the assistant conductor has to be at the same level as the principal conductor. Our job during sound checks is to use our knowledge of the piece in order to open our ears and then give valuable feedback to the principal conductor. Sometimes, the acoustics of a particular hall create specific effects that can influence the perception of the symphonic piece, and in some cases this situation can compromise the musical quality of the performance.

When an orchestra is touring, performing in different halls every day, this role is crucial. During our European tour, we visited nine different concert halls, each one completely different from the others.

Osmo Vänskä prefers to conduct all the time and let the assistant conductor observe the balance and sound from the auditorium. Before every sound check he would ask Conner and me to pay attention to particular acoustic issues that each hall could present, especially on the pieces with soloists, so he could make quick decisions and changes from the podium and help the musicians adjust to the acoustics and circumstances of each new hall. For instance, in Cadogan Hall in London and the Mozarteum Grosser Saal in Salzburg, the stages were particularly small for the size of our orchestra. At Die Glocke in Bremen, the quirky acoustics caused Mr. Vänskä to ask our percussion players to make drastic changes. Our piano soloist, Peter Serkin, was also very aware of our role as assistant conductors and would always ask for feedback during the sound checks.

Mr. Vänskä worked closely with the two of us before and during the tour, sharing his rehearsal plans and asking for our opinion around his rehearsals. He treated us as conductor colleagues with different concepts and opinions about the music and the rehearsal process. We had the sense that he valued a variety of perspectives and could make better decisions with additional input.

For me, to work directly with Mr. Vänskä and watch his process so closely was a wonderful learning opportunity that will fuel everything I do in my next year as a conducting fellow at Curtis. ♦

Carlos Ágreda, who entered Curtis in 2016, holds a Rita E. Hauser Conducting Fellowship and served as one of two assistant conductors on the tour.

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Opposite:

Top: Osmo Vänskä, Peter Serkin, and Maria Ioudenitch

PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

Middle: Maria Ioudenitch receives the London audience's applause for her extended solos in

Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*. PHOTO: CHRIS CHRISTODOULU

Below (left to right):

Trombonist János Sutyák and bassoonist Sarah Tako

at a rehearsal break in Berlin PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

At the Krzysztof Penderecki European Centre for Music in Lusławice, Poland, Roberto Díaz and Benjamin Schmid posed next to a bust of the center's namesake. The two performed Penderecki's Concerto doppio for violin and viola in Lusławice and throughout the tour. PHOTO: MICHAL CYGAN

Backstage warmups PHOTO: KAI BIENERT

HOW PETER SERKIN SAVED A FLY

BY MARIA IOUDENITCH

Ask a handful of participants, “What was one of your favorite parts about this tour?” and many of their answers will be along the lines of, “Being in such incredible cities and the greatest halls of the world.” And who can argue with that? From the vast yet charming paths of Helsinki to the jaw-dropping beauty of the Konzerthaus in Berlin, we were always left wondering, “Is there really something more beautiful?” I have come to learn that indeed, there always is.

But ask me what one of my favorite parts was, and I'd say it was when Mr. Serkin saved a fly during his magical, otherworldly interpretation of the Aria from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, performed as an encore.

Before I get to that, a word about silence. Have you ever heard a silence that made your ears ring? That is what Mr. Serkin and Maestro Osmo Vänskä achieved in the second movement of the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1 during our performance in Wrocław, Poland.

It first started with Mr. Vänskä and our *pianissimo*. No one else can get a sound like that out of our orchestra. We move through our phrase, guided by his presence on the podium, winding our dynamic down to a stunning nothing. And then comes in Mr. Serkin with the purest tone, one note dissipating brilliantly through the air. It was a drop of musical gold.

We live through the second movement together, and the last note is played. Then silence.

No one dares breathe.

The music filled each soul on stage and in the audience. The silence was so loud, it was almost unbearable: 1,200 people sitting, each with their own stories, their own problems, their own happiness and pain—and right there and then, we were all One. Listen to true music-making, and you can know peace.

Fast-forward a bit, and the audience is on its feet—clapping wildly. Mr. Serkin comes on stage once, twice, and at the third bow turns to me. “It sounds like they're booing. Should I play something?”

I laugh. “What?! Of course, please play, please play!”

And then, the Aria.

I won't say a word about it, because there is no point. The magic was there, and it will always be just there, frozen in that moment.

What I will recall, however, is the fat fly who decided to interrupt the magic. After a few manic seconds buzzing around, it landed on Mr. Serkin's left-hand pinky. I could see his eyes peering curiously at the fly. The fly got the memo and buzzed off of the finger and onto the key, dangerously close to the fingertip. The next note he was to play, was with that pinky, on that key.

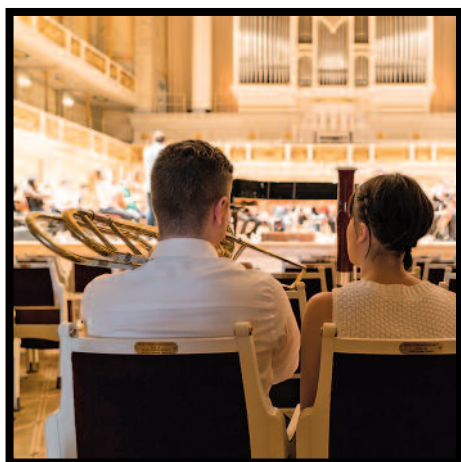
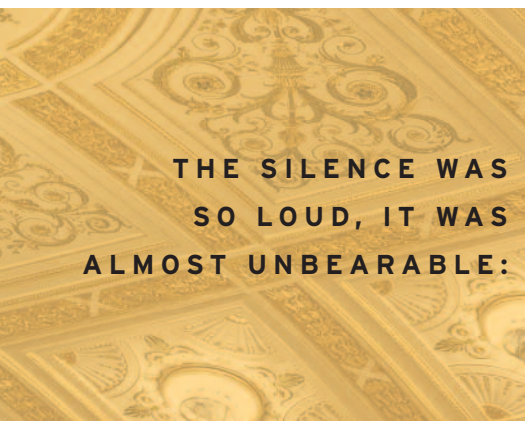
He hesitates, stretching time more than usual, looking intently at the stubborn fly, until the fly kindly buzzes away, after which Mr. Serkin's pinky finally comes down on the key, continuing the phrase, which was caught in a gorgeous standstill. If his finger had gone down earlier, the fly would have probably been caught in between the keys.

Now, whether or not Mr. Serkin really wanted to save that fly is another story. But there's something about the gentleness and generosity with which he approached all of this that is absolutely encompassing of the entire experience that we have had with him on tour. Someone else in this situation might have forcefully put down the finger, or moved quickly to get the fly to fly away faster, but Mr. Serkin used time and patience. The music wasn't going anywhere. The music didn't stop on account of the fly—it kept flowing through him and through us. Time, patience, peace.

We are all caught up in our own worlds, our own desires and complaints. This tour was a great test for all of that. How lucky we are, to have been to all of these places, to have worked with such artists, such soldiers of music! There was no doubt that from the beginning, I would learn so much from Mr. Vänskä. We have all loved him ever since he worked with us two years ago. Without him...well...I'd like to not think what this tour would be without him.

But who knew how grateful I would be for this little golden moment in time with Mr. Serkin and the fly? ♦

Violinist Maria Ioudenitch was concertmaster of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra for the 2016-17 season and the European tour. She holds the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Annual Fellowship.





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OWN STORIES, THEIR
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