



Mary Javian is chair of career studies and the director of community engagement and professional development at Curtis. PHOTO: CAROLYN BALLEEN STANISH

## The Engaged Artist

MARY JAVIAN'S DIVERSE MUSICAL OUTLOOK SETS THE TONE AS CURTIS SEEKS TO NURTURE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN ITS YOUNG MUSICIANS.

BY IAN VANDERMEULEN

Roughly an hour into an evening video recording session involving Curtis string players and students and teachers from Philadelphia's Village for the Arts and Humanities after-school program, Mary Javian turns to me. "Have you figured out what my job is yet?" she asks, laughing. "Sometimes I'm not even sure."

It's a fair question. During one packed afternoon that Ms. Javian would later call "fairly normal," I watched her pick up fliers for one of her curated shows at World Cafe Live, take two phone calls on her lunch break, lead a seminar session with fellows in Curtis's ArtistYear program, distribute fliers, help set up and run a recording session, and squeeze in a quick on-camera interview for a promotional video. Add to that a vibrant career as a double bassist who performs and maintains a private teaching studio, and her official titles—director of professional development and community engagement, and chair of career studies—hardly encompass what she "does."

Ms. Javian's work at Curtis is, in fact, rooted in the school's new mandate for socially engaged artistry. Brought on in 2011 to mentor students in Curtis's Community Artist Program (CAP), she has since built it into a full-blown, three-part sequential curriculum. In *Social Entrepreneur*, a required course for all Curtis undergraduates, students learn the basics of community engagement and spend time in schools, hospitals, and other social-service organizations partnered with Curtis. Those inspired by that course can apply for CAP, which gives students resources and mentorship support to develop their own community engagement projects. The even more selective ArtistYear program gives recent Curtis graduates a one-year fellowship and additional funding to bring arts access and education to underserved communities.

Much of Ms. Javian's motivation for social impact through music seems driven by the opportunities she herself enjoyed. After starting to play the bass at age 10, she won a spot in the National Symphony Orchestra Youth Fellowship Program, and at 15, she began studies with Harold Hall Robinson, then principal bass of the National Symphony. By the time she arrived at Curtis to continue her studies with Mr. Robinson (who had moved on to lead the bass section of the Philadelphia Orchestra), her desire to engage with the community was already strong. This led her to develop a private teaching studio and to found Curtis's outreach program while still a student.

"It became increasingly important to me, not just that I was being creative, but that the people I was interacting with were having a chance to be creative as well," she recalls. Her



Above: ArtistYear Fellow Stanislav Chernyshev with an ensemble of Social Entrepreneur students at Nebinger Elementary School in Philadelphia. Ms. Javian observed as the group introduced youngsters to basic musical concepts. PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

diverse musical tastes and broad knowledge of the Philadelphia scene led to her curatorial role with LiveConnections, which runs a genre-bending concert series at World Cafe Live, as well as the integrated Bridge Sessions, a series of interactive educational performances that reach some 5,000 underserved youth per year.

Since her 1999 graduation, Ms. Javian has kept performance central to her routine. Today she performs regularly with the Philadelphia Orchestra and the IRIS Orchestra, Network for New Music, Dolce Suono Ensemble, and the Verbier Festival. But as a new graduate, she recalls, her community engagement work was viewed somewhat askance by her performer colleagues. It's a common myth in the musical world—that the true artists are those focused exclusively on their performance craft—and one that Curtis's community engagement curriculum seeks to debunk.

At first she compartmentalized. "I would only talk to performers about my performance life and only talk to administrators about the things I was running," she recalls, but as attitudes began to change, "over time I stopped hiding these parts of myself." Today she's equally frank about the centrality of parenthood in her life—she is mother to a nine-year-old and a six-year-old—and the challenge of balancing multiple professional duties with raising a family.

### IN THE MOMENT

Watching Ms. Javian navigate her packed day, it's striking how little time is wasted, yet how rarely she or her collaborators seem rushed. She keeps everyone focused with minimal hands-on direction. In her ArtistYear seminar, the fellows take the lead, reflecting their mentor's can-do attitude. They brainstorm connections for their projects and specific solutions to problems. Alize Rozsnyai, who is reviving the choral program at South Philadelphia High School, worries aloud about one of her students, a talented but time-challenged teenager making a crucial audition. "Do I have to physically go get her?" Alize wonders.

"You have to keep a fluidity about you," Ms. Javian explains, and be "a good listener. If you are too present with your agenda, you're likely to miss what could happen in that moment." She credits Mr. Robinson with helping her to develop that openness when she was a student. "He was so good at helping us be problem solvers and be our own teachers."

"My philosophy is that people come to what they want to learn when they're ready," Ms. Javian continues. "Giving unsolicited advice never works." Instead, she develops relationships with students based on their interests, and helps each discover his or her own path.

Her passion and easy-going focus provide a model for her students. ArtistYear Fellow Shannon Lee, who first encountered her through the Community Artist Program, notes that Ms. Javian's work with LiveConnections and knowledge of the general scene "opened up the city in new ways." Shannon has now taken on two projects as part of her ArtistYear fellowship: one with the All-City Orchestra and one at the William Cramp Elementary

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## MEET THE FACULTY



Top left: Ms. Javian with ArtistYear Fellow Alize Rozsnyai (third from right) and her students in the choral program at South Philadelphia High School

Top right: The student presenters of Curtis family concerts are coached by Ms. Javian, who makes a point of attending with her own children.

PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON



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School, where she is teaching Suzuki violin. When Shannon recently sent out a text that the school had received an anonymous donation of violins, Ms. Javian responded that the news had “made her day.” “She just really cares about every project she’s doing,” Shannon says.

This natural rapport with students extends, not surprisingly, to the heart of the matter: music. During breaks in the recording session she chats with violist Michael Casimir about orchestral excerpts. As she hears bassist Braizahn Jones improvising on a Stevie Wonder riff, she beams: “You keep playing all my favorite songs!” After the session has wrapped, she enlists Michael and a few other students to put the room back together. Everyone gets one last laugh, however, when Ms. Javian can’t quite follow the recording engineer’s mystical cable-coiling technique. “You’ll get it one day,” Michael teases her.

### CODA

After the recording session wraps, Ms. Javian offers to take me, a first-time visitor, on a quick tour of Curtis’s main building, where all her lessons and rehearsals took place when she was a student. It’s like watching someone give a tour of their childhood home. We visit Field Concert Hall, onetime home to orchestra rehearsals, where the bass section would perch on one balcony, percussion on the other. We head upstairs to the practice rooms, where she shows me her class photo and the former bass studio just down the hall. She recalls the drudgery of hauling the basses off the rehearsal room platform, down the hall, and up the winding 19th-century staircase to that room, day after day.

As we head out I suggest that maybe this is why she’s so quick to pitch in when it comes to the nitty-gritty—“lugging stuff,” as Ms. Javian puts it. She raises her eyebrows as if to agree but opts for disarming self-deprecation instead. “But I can’t even coil up a stupid cable!” she laughs.

It seems that even the most accomplished arts leaders can still learn a thing or two. Perhaps this is Mary Javian’s greatest lesson of all. ♦

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PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON



## WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Mary Javian

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“For so long, I felt like the answer to that question was simply: ‘Because it’s the best.’ And now I actually think it’s: ‘Because it’s the most nurturing environment in which an artist can grow, and explore what works for them.’ Because of the size, because of the student-teacher ratio, and because of the huge range of performance opportunities and projects that students can pursue, [including] community engagement, support for entrepreneurial ideas. And the faculty ... I think they’re amazing. The culture here is extremely nurturing in a way that’s really unique.”