

# A Commitment to Young Conductors

BY DIANA BURGWIN

Curtis conducting fellows flourish under the mentorship of the Philadelphia Orchestra's Yannick Nézet-Séguin.







**It's not exactly common to see three conductors take turns on the podium in a single symphony.** But for the students in the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, it's a monthly occurrence. In these highly anticipated reading sessions Yannick Nézet-Séguin—music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, music director designate of the Metropolitan Opera, and mentor conductor on the Curtis faculty—coaches conducting fellows and the orchestra through standards of the symphonic repertoire.

On a Saturday morning in December, Carlos Ágreda, one of Curtis's two conducting fellows, launched into the opening movement of Schumann's Symphony No. 2, with Mr. Nézet-Séguin eyeing his technique from a seat behind the violas. Next to him, also observing closely, was conducting fellow Conner Gray Covington, who would soon pick up the baton for the slow movement.

After coaching each of the conducting fellows in detail—with kernels of advice for the orchestra sprinkled throughout—Mr. Nézet-Séguin took the podium himself, rehearsing the students with verve and commitment through the second and fourth movements. Similar sessions in September and November had traversed Beethoven's "Eroica" and Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2, while January and February brought whirlwind tours through Strauss's *Don Quixote*, Mozart's "Linz" Symphony, and the Mahler Fourth.

Carlos and Conner are the current fellows in a unique and highly selective two-year Curtis program initiated in the 2013–14 academic year after the retirement of the distinguished pedagogue Otto-Werner Mueller, who had taught at Curtis for a quarter of a century. Developed by Curtis President Roberto Díaz and senior staff, and launched with generous funding from Rita and Gus Hauser, the new conducting fellows program was designed specifically for conductors at the post-graduate level who were already starting their careers. It was intended to fill a lack commonly felt by these young artists: insufficient time on the podium, both in rehearsal and performance.

Above: Mentor conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin confers with Carlos Ágreda and Conner Gray Covington, Curtis's Rita E. Hauser Conducting Fellows, before an orchestra reading of Schumann's Symphony No. 2. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Left: The conducting program offers many performing opportunities for the fellows. In February 2016 Conner led the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in Busoni's *Berceuse élégiaque* at Carnegie Hall. He also prepared the orchestra before the arrival of guest conductor Ludovic Morlot. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

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Those admitted to the conducting fellows program rehearse and perform regularly not only with the symphony orchestra but the Curtis Opera Theatre, the Curtis Chamber Orchestra, and the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble. “In a sense,” says Paul Bryan, dean of faculty and students, “they serve the purpose for us that staff conductors serve at a professional orchestra.” And they are free to take on outside engagements.

### ENERGY AND ENTHUSIASM

For the conducting fellows, the opportunity to work with Mr. Nézet-Séguin in the monthly orchestra readings is invaluable. He is a man of boundless energy, his genuine enthusiasm pervading the room. “Olé!” he might say as one of the young conductors concludes his run-through of a movement, or “I love it!” or “Isn’t that the most gorgeous thing you ever heard?” Then he offers a careful critique of what could be improved: a crescendo, an attack, the size of a beat, the phrasing within the strokes, the articulation, tempo. Most salient, are the conductor and orchestra being true to the spirit of the work?

Schumann’s state of mind when composing the Second Symphony, he reminds the fellows and the orchestra, was “unstable,” “obsessive,” even “manic,” and this is reflected in the music. He then asks for a repeat of the movement, and this time he interrupts frequently to dissect key moments more thoroughly. Rarely is he still. He paces the room, sometimes almost running; he backs up to a wall, even hops on the podium with the conducting fellow and gestures alongside him. Sometimes he seems to disappear entirely, only to pop up somewhere in the middle of the orchestra: Having encouraged Carlos to give a specific signal to the woodwinds to evoke a softer sound quality, he subtly settles himself cross-legged on the floor in front of the flutes, so as to evaluate the young conductor’s cues.

Often Mr. Nézet-Séguin quizzes the fellows to find out what they are seeking in a particular phrase or note. “These are already experienced, advanced, mature musicians,” he explains. “So they have a certain authority. I am guiding them but also letting them be on their own, which is important for every musician but particularly conductors, who have to be clear in both intentions and gestures. My goal is to make sure that every fellow here leaves the program with more trust in his or her own capabilities, free to be a more expressive musician. That is what makes a more compelling conductor.”

The two-year program admits one fellow a year, so that there is one experienced and one new fellow in each academic year. Because they have already reached a high level of development, Mr. Nézet-Séguin pays careful attention to what each most needs in order to achieve the stature of a mature conductor. Conner, for instance, who formerly had been assistant conductor of the Memphis Symphony, “came to Curtis fully developed technically, with clarity, consonance and energy,” his mentor noted after the Schumann coaching. “But his heart and soul were somehow relegated to a background role. That often happens in assistant conductor positions, where all they have to do is be clear in their directions. So we worked on that.

“Today I was looking at Conner while he conducted and thinking ‘Here is a musician who lives the music.’” As Conner led the poignant *Adagio* of the Schumann symphony, says Mr. Nézet-Séguin, “the whole room became very different. It was very moving.”

### PODIUM TIME

Life at Curtis is busy for the conducting fellows. They spend a week before each Curtis Symphony Orchestra concert preparing the orchestra for a guest conductor, a responsibility that involves creating flexibility in the ensemble. They take private lessons in important areas that need strengthening, such as piano or counterpoint, and also have the opportunity to work independently with faculty on topics in which they have a particular interest. They consult with musical studies chair and conductor Jonathan Coopersmith. And they perform, taking charge of individual works on Curtis Symphony Orchestra programs. Conner has also led fully staged Curtis Opera Theatre productions of Benjamin’s Britten’s *Rape of Lucretia* and Rene Orth’s *Empty the House*, and when the renowned Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho did a residency at Curtis last fall, he conducted her violin concerto. Carlos, in his





first few months as a fellow, conducted at Curtis recitals and at a family concert where he charmed the young attendees, leading Poulenc's *Babar the Elephant*.

How does the orchestra view the conducting fellows program? "It's really special. It's a mutual evolution that makes the program so valuable," says concertmaster Maria Loudenitch. The fellows, she notes, "get this valuable time and a chance to explore their own craft with an orchestra that's willing to learn alongside them." From the fellows' point of view, the excellence of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra provides a special opportunity. "It's difficult to find an orchestra that gives everything they have, every second, like the Curtis ensemble does," says Carlos. Adds Conner, "Their ability to do immediately what you ask them is pretty astounding."

In the reading sessions with Mr. Nézet-Séguin, orchestra members are learning and growing every moment. Oboist Cassie Pilgrim, commenting after a session in the principal chair, notes that "when you're playing an emotional solo, a very personal side of you is exposed. But Yannick and the conducting fellows are so encouraging and inviting that I'm able to be vulnerable and open up."

That, says Mr. Nézet-Séguin, is exactly what he's after. "There are many facets to being in an orchestra. You need to listen to the others, to blend, to be note-perfect, to quickly master things. But at the end of the day what makes the difference between this musician and that one, between this orchestra and the other, is the ability to communicate something vital. That's why we still play music. We want people to feel it, cry with it, laugh with it, reflect, mourn, hope, dream, and all this comes from the human heart." Maria marvels at what the young musicians can do under Mr. Nézet-Séguin's leadership. "Just when you think that this particular spot can't get any more exciting, he gets onto the podium for two seconds and he makes it happen," she says.

His role in developing Curtis's orchestra is not limited to his time on the podium, however. Behind the scenes, Mr. Nézet-Séguin communicates directly with the students' teachers—many of whom are members of his own Philadelphia Orchestra—and with Mr. Bryan about what he hears in the various sections. "He's actively seeking ways to grow his involvement in training the orchestra as a whole," says Mr. Bryan.

Top left: Mr. Nézet-Séguin coaches Conner in the third movement of Schumann's Symphony No. 2.

Top right: Mr. Nézet-Séguin coaches Carlos in the symphony's first movement.

Bottom left: After working through two movements with the fellows, Mr. Nézet-Séguin spends dedicated time rehearsing the orchestra in each session.

Bottom right: A lighter moment at the break in the December reading session

PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

Opposite: Carlos made his Curtis conducting debut last fall in a family concert, leading a chamber version of Poulenc's *Story of Babar the Elephant*.

PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

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## READING THE ROOM

One great benefit the conducting fellows enjoy is Mr. Nézet-Séguin’s availability, not only at the monthly Curtis rehearsals but throughout the academic year. This is very important to him. “When I was young,” he says, “I wanted to attend the Montreal Symphony rehearsals. I tried three times, but each time was told ‘no.’ This is not unusual among professional orchestras. But as a result, I decided that wherever I would conduct in the future, rehearsals would be open to any young conductor who wanted to be there.”

Conner and Carlos not only attend Mr. Nézet-Séguin’s rehearsals at the Philadelphia Orchestra, but are encouraged to consult with him at breaks and afterward. What they see on these occasions is not only his approach to the orchestra but the orchestra’s reactions to his leadership. “Yannick,” says Conner, “has an incredible ability to read a room and read an orchestra, and know exactly what to say and when to say it and how.” This is a key lesson for young conductors beginning their careers, who risk not being taken seriously by players of an older generation; they have to project a certain authority while respecting the players.

Conner will put his skills to work after becoming the program’s third graduate in May; he’s already been appointed the new assistant conductor of the Utah Symphony. Edward Poll, the 2016 graduate, has achieved distinction as assistant conductor of the Glimmerglass Festival, where, among other responsibilities, he rehearsed and conducted Bernstein’s opera *Trouble in Tahiti*.

Kensho Watanabe, who in 2015 was the first fellow to graduate from the Curtis program, attended the December coaching session. He’s pleased at how well the program has become established, with an increasing number of young conductors interested in participating. Before benefiting from Mr. Nézet-Séguin’s mentoring at Curtis, he was Mr. Mueller’s last student. “I was very invested in seeing his work continue, and I’m happy that many of his values are still being taught,” says Kensho, who is now assistant conductor at the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Mr. Bryan remarks that the conducting fellows program is still a work in progress. “We need to determine the right amount of conducting that should be allotted to the fellows. We also have to make sure that the needs of the orchestra members are being fully met. And we want to maintain a very high level of guest conductors.”

Asked how he feels about the conducting fellows program after mentoring Curtis students for four years, Mr. Nézet-Séguin responds, “I didn’t know quite what to expect because this is such a novel approach. But I’ve seen so much progress,” both in the conducting fellows and in the orchestra.

“What really exceeded my expectations was what it did for me,” he adds. “As a conductor you have to conceptualize your ideas. Of course it’s also instinct, but if you can’t explain what you want, how can you get a hundred musicians to do it?”

“Now, after interacting with such talented young people, I couldn’t live without it.” ◊

*Diana Burgwyn is a Philadelphia-based writer whose articles have appeared in Overtones, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and Symphony, among other publications.*

PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON



## WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Carlos Ágreda

“Conducting is a very difficult art to teach, because it requires high level of musicianship and knowledge. A conductor needs sophisticated technical and musical tools. Besides that, a conductor needs experience, years of study, and social and artistic wisdom that are only developed with ‘flight hours.’

“This is what makes the conducting fellows program at Curtis special. This program is designed for young conductors who are already experienced, with tools that can be developed at a further level. Curtis gives us real-life opportunities to let us develop our conducting under the guidance of the best possible mentors.”