

# Inspiration, In Person

BY DAVID LUDWIG

Composers in residence motivate Curtis's student performers and creators in new and exciting directions.







**Every now and then in a rehearsal for one of my pieces, a performer or conductor will remark to me how nice it is to have the composer present—**

something along the lines of, “if only we could ask Beethoven these same questions, too!” For many musicians, the opportunity to tap directly into the creative source of a work they are playing is an unusual and special experience. This was less true for performers in Beethoven’s time, when musicians played music by living composers as a matter of course to a much larger extent than their counterparts today.

Granted, centuries ago there was far less repertoire by composers of the past to begin with (much less even a concept of a “canon”). Regardless of the reason, it is hard to argue that there hasn’t been a major shift over time in our larger performance culture in terms of playing contemporary music. But it is also hard to argue against the tremendous value of working with a living composer, a process that allows the performer to play a unique and active role in a piece’s evolution.

Whether it’s historical fact or simply widespread anecdote, I’ve heard from many composers of prior generations—and many have written about this—that when they were students, they felt constrained in their work by Modernist orthodoxy. The long reach of the Darmstadt school pervaded conservatory education in the middle decades of the last century. By the account of one of my teachers, every concert of student works he attended in those years featured pieces that, with few exceptions, all sounded like Webern. That time was perhaps as close as we’ve come to a “common practice”—a stylistic contraction following the great explosion of new schools and techniques of the earlier part of the 20th century.

Today, by contrast, the diversity of voices in the world of composition is great and only growing. The notion of “genre” is a near-anachronism at this point (and has been for years). Composers of our time—certainly including our composition students at Curtis—draw from the broadest range of styles and techniques to establish their own unique and personal voices. That a composer today would or wouldn’t write so-called “tonal” or “atonal” music seems of little concern or relevance when the overall message of the work is what matters most. Throw electronics, alternative venues, and digital media into the mix, and we have as fertile a variety of sounds and artistic possibilities as at any time in the history of music.

## COMMISSIONS AND COLLABORATIONS

At Curtis, performers work with their student composer colleagues on a frequent basis, playing their music on the Student Recital Series and in an annual orchestra concert of student works. And that’s just to start. I don’t know of a school more supportive of its own creative life than this one. Few schools regularly commission their students and alumni;

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Opposite: Krzysztof Penderecki conducted a concert of his works at Carnegie Hall’s Zankel Hall as the culmination of his residency in 2014. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Top left: Curtis’s first composer in residence was John Corigliano, whose residency recital in 2009 included a solo violin work played by Elizabeth Fayette. PHOTO: L. C. KELLEY

Top right: Kaija Saariaho speaks to the audience at her residency recital in October. PHOTO: MICKEY WELDE

fewer still create so many opportunities for their composers to hear new work. And for most of the last decade we have deepened and enriched these collaborative experiences even further with a composer-in-residence program, developing personal connections between students and some of the leading artists of our time.

With Kaija Saariaho's visit last October, the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble featured the school's eighth composer in residence in a concert dedicated to her extraordinary music. Her longtime collaborator, violinist and Curtis alumna Jennifer Koh, joined the ensemble to present a program of chamber music that concluded with the chamber orchestra version of her violin concerto, *Graal théâtre*. Ms. Saariaho also gave a master class for student composers and presented her vocal music to voice and opera students. (As of this writing she has two operas in production in New York and is the first female composer in over a century to have a work running at the Metropolitan Opera.) She and I shared a pre-concert conversation that was streamed live, and she met with composition student Emily Cooley and me to record an installment our vodcast series "Revolution: Modernism."

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Ms. Saariaho's residency in October built on a program that has featured some of the most influential, august voices in the field of composing today. Nine years ago, I asked John Corigliano to be the first composer in residence at Curtis. John had been my teacher when I attended a New York conservatory (whose name begins with J), and I knew him to be a committed educator in addition to being one of the world's most recognized composers. At that point he had very little contact with Curtis, which I felt was a bonus: Our students got to know the work of a living master, and John got to know the artistic excellence of the school firsthand.

Our second composer in residence was the inimitable Joan Tower, and with her residency began the practice of seeking repeat performances in New York and elsewhere. The Curtis 20/21 Ensemble took her portrait concert to Columbia University's Miller Theatre, a destination venue for new music where we have since developed an ongoing relationship. Joan was thrilled with our students' embrace of her music—indeed, the *New York Times* commented that “Ms. Tower could hardly have hoped for more passionate performances.”

### LEGENDS AND ROLE MODELS

Following Joan in 2011–12 was George Crumb (to whom Curtis gave an honorary doctorate in 2016). Dr. Crumb performed his *Mundus Canis* onstage at Field Concert Hall with his friend and frequent collaborator, Curtis guitar instructor David Starobin. Curtis 20/21 then took his music to the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. for the annual Conservatory Project there. I remember one student, after coaching with the iconic composer, emerging from the practice room to say, in a daze, “I just spent an hour with *George Crumb!*”

The next year we invited Steven Stucky, one of the greatest composers—and people—I've had the pleasure to meet in my life. That Steve passed away at a relatively young age a year ago only highlights how lucky we were to be able to work with him. Steve was the most tireless advocate for new music and composers, and he was the best role model we could ask for to work with our students. We commissioned and performed a chamber version of Steve's song cycle *The Stars and the Roses*.

We celebrated Krzysztof Penderecki's 80th birthday in 2013–14 with a concert at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, where he conducted Curtis 20/21 in two of his pieces for string orchestra. The next year brought us Steve Mackey, who did triple duty: hosting a concert, conducting his *Indigenous Instruments*, and shredding on his *Physical Property* for electric guitar and string quartet. For that program we had the help of Eighth Blackbird, the supreme American new music group whose three years as ensemble in residence at Curtis made a huge impact on our students.

In 2015–16 the superb Korean composer Unsuk Chin joined us for a residency, and she was so taken by our students' artistry that, following rehearsals of her music, she asked them to play other repertoire—whatever they were working on—just so she could sit and enjoy hearing these extraordinary young musicians play. They have been performing her phenomenal *Piano Etudes* at the school ever since.

The ability to bring in composers of this caliber from all over the world has been a game changer for the performance culture of the school. There is an ever-growing appreciation for new music among Curtis students, and performing contemporary works, whether by world-renowned resident composers or fellow students, will have lasting effects on the breadth of their careers and scope of their artistry. Our students will become the next generation of leading musicians who play contemporary music as an essential part of their careers. Their students, in turn, will observe and inherit this practice, completing a virtuous circle of commitment to the continuation of the art form we care so deeply about.

These young musicians—and all of us who are composers, performers, or simply passionate listeners—can take heart in the vitality of our music of our time, and the powerful voices of living artists who speak directly to us through their work. ♦

*David Ludwig is the Gie and Lisa Liem Dean of Artistic Programs and Performance, a member of the composition faculty, and artistic director of the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble.*

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Opposite:

Top left: George Crumb coached pianist Andrew Hsu during his residency in 2012. PHOTO: DAVID LUDWIG

Top right: Unsuk Chin in conversation with David Ludwig before her residency recital in 2015. PHOTO: MICKEY WELDE

Bottom: Steve Mackey conducted and played electric guitar in a performance with students and members of eighth blackbird in 2015. PHOTO: MICKEY WELDE