



## An Indispensable Addition

LENFEST HALL'S FIRST FIVE YEARS, FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

BY THOMAS OLTARZEWSKI

On a rainy day in September 2011, I arrived on Locust Street for my first official event as a Curtis student. The convocation ceremony in Field Concert Hall welcomed those of us who were new students, and then it was time to celebrate another new addition to Curtis. Students, staff, and distinguished guests filed out into a downpour—popping colorful Curtis umbrellas ordered for the occasion—and reconvened a block away. Despite Mother Nature's attempt to literally rain on the parade down Locust Street, the feeling of excitement was palpable as President Roberto Díaz made the day's big announcement: After years of planning, fundraising, and construction, Lenfest Hall was open for business.

Since that day just over five years ago I have watched, from multiple angles, as Lenfest Hall became integral to the Curtis campus. I was an off-campus student as the building opened, visiting mostly for classes and meals. Then I became a resident, enjoying views of the city from my ninth-floor suite. As a student worker, I spent time looking after the young residents of Curtis Summerfest. Now, as a member of the Curtis staff, I have a front-row seat to observe today's students moving in, moving out, and taking advantage of everything the building has to offer.

Curtis has long been known for its vibrant, tightly-knit community of students living and performing in close proximity to one another. Lenfest Hall added a new dimension to the Curtis experience for all students, not just those who live in its eighteen residential suites. The state-of-the-art rehearsal and practice spaces have been a huge resource, effectively

Above and opposite top left: On opening day in 2011 President Roberto Díaz, with benefactors Marguerite and H. F. "Gerry" Lenfest, led a jovial procession from the main building to Lenfest Hall; later, the Curtis community enjoyed a reception in the expansive Gould Rehearsal Hall. PHOTOS: DAVID SWANSON

Opposite: Life around Lenfest Hall in the dining area, the computer lab, gathering spaces, and practice rooms PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA





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Above: Lunchtime in Gould Dining Hall  
PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

doubling the amount of space available to students. Students are not shy about taking advantage of the freedom to practice at any hour of the day or night; when a resident, I took part in more than a few rehearsals that stretched into the wee hours. The largest space in the building, Gould Rehearsal Hall has had an appropriately oversized influence on musical life here, with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra enjoying a spacious home in which to rehearse ambitious, large-scale programs like last year's memorable rendition of Berio's *Sinfonia*. Gould has also served as a flexible performance space, hosting recitals requiring unconventional set-ups and Curtis's acclaimed Family Concerts (not to mention at least one illicit, late-night soccer game!). As a student composer, I was particularly excited to discover the cutting-edge audio-visual studio overlooking the hall. Over time, more and more students have made use of these technological resources, learning to operate state-of-the-art equipment and incorporating technology in their performances and compositions.

### DINING IN

For both residents and off-campus students, the new dining hall has been one of the most appreciated additions at Curtis. Just having an accessible source of healthful meals represents a huge improvement for students who once had to grab meals on the go from local luncheonettes, street vendors, and the cheese and crackers at Wednesday afternoon tea. The hall's food-service providers, Parkhurst Dining Services, go above and beyond to meet the unique challenges posed by feeding a diverse, international, health-focused student population who eat more like athletes than artists. (More than once, food-service staff have described their awe at the incredible rate at which Curtis students consume salad!)

Beyond the food itself, the dining hall is an important social hub. Because practically every student spends time in the dining hall, meals offer an opportunity for students to interact regardless of their ages, nationalities, and instruments or majors. This has resulted in some unlikely cross-departmental friendships, and quite a few musical collaborations have gotten their start during a lunchtime chat—an especially welcome opportunity for composers, who are always on the hunt for friends to play our work!

Perhaps the most meaningful expansion has been to the Curtis residential experience. For the first time in Curtis's history, undergraduate students follow a traditional college route, moving into on-campus housing for their first two years. Initial worries that this might dampen the famously independent spirit of Curtis's off-campus community faded quickly, as incoming residents formed fast friendships and benefited from a safe setting for their first extended experience away from home or living in a new country. Younger residents focus on their studies and practice while also learning valuable life skills, such as navigating roommate relationships, in a manageable environment. In a few short years, I've seen many students who were paired as roommates by mere chance grow into inseparable friends, often choosing to live together even after they've graduated from Curtis. While it's not required, some older students, including myself, have also chosen to live in Lenfest Hall, taking advantage of the in-house amenities and serving as valuable mentors to their young colleagues, both musically and socially.

On that rainy day five years ago, as we entered a shiny new building, we hoped—but couldn't be sure—that Lenfest Hall would quickly become indispensable to life at Curtis. Now, no longer an addition, it feels like it has always been a part of Curtis. It's a home. It has been a joy to experience the myriad relationships fostered here: Friendships have formed, shy students have found their voice, young students have grown into leaders and mentors.

And one composer had such a great experience living at Curtis that he figured out a way to stick around. ♦

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