

A Keen Ear and a Sharp Mind

Poet Jeanne McGinn, liberal arts chair at Curtis, is a discerning and generous listener.

BY DAVE ALLEN

Composers aren't the only ones at Curtis who occasionally struggle to find a title for their works.

In a poetry seminar taught by Jeanne M. McGinn, finding the right phrase to title a poem can be fraught, but it's also sometimes a celebratory occasion. As students passed out copies of their works last spring, someone exclaimed, "Monica wrote a title!"—that's organ student Monica Czausz—and exultant kudos were shared around the table in the second-floor seminar room of the Rock Resource Center.

A member of the Curtis faculty since 1994 and chair of liberal arts since 2001, Dr. McGinn is charged with fleshing out the non-musical education of young musicians. Regardless of her students' disposition toward poetry or literature, she supplies food for thought and space to reflect; in every student, she aims to bring out previously untapped artistic potential.

"For students here, the center of their life is music, but they need to think and write and express themselves in a parallel vernacular," she says. "I suppose my job is to make room for them to grow and to protect that space."

Monica, a post-baccalaureate student, signed up for Dr. McGinn's poetry seminar without knowing much about the professor; in fact, with a degree already in hand, she wasn't required to take liberal arts courses. "I just like poetry," she says. "I'm happier when I have something going on outside of music." Though Monica says she admires Dr. McGinn for the "elegant ease in the way she carries herself and runs her class," she's found her poetry teacher even more inspiring outside of the classroom. "She follows what all her students are up to, and she comes to our recitals and concerts, because she really cares."

During class, Dr. McGinn holds forth in a mode that would be welcome in any music teacher's studio: listening thoughtfully and taking everything in, then providing feedback that both exhorts and encourages.

Along with weekly assignments in both creative writing and analysis, her poetry students also contribute to a running definition of what poetry is and make additions during each class. One of these definitions jumps out as especially resonant in a conservatory setting: "Poetry Is... conversation with past traditions."

"Students here understand that in order to break with tradition, you have to know the tradition," she explains. When writing, playing music, or making art of any kind, she has found, "we're actually in conversation all the time, and through that, I can make parallels with *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*, or Brahms saying 'hi' to Beethoven" in his First Symphony.

A LIBERAL ARTS LEGACY

Not long after completing her Ph.D. at Bryn Mawr College, Dr. McGinn took on the role of liberal arts chair, succeeding Joan Hutton Landis, another poet and former Bryn Mawr faculty member. Though Dr. McGinn teaches poems from Dr. Landis's collection *That Blue Repair* and draws on books Dr. Landis donated to Curtis, she honors her late predecessor in other ways as well. "She was so generous, and she made Curtis into a family and a community of learners," she says. "The idea of learning deeply in addition to technical mastery—I think that is part of the legacy, too."

In addition to teaching courses in writing and literature, Dr. McGinn also helps to curate a liberal arts faculty with particular strengths and sensitivities. Under her guidance, everything from a convocation address on academic integrity to a monthly faculty meeting can be the occasion for wit and eloquence, says James Moyer, who joined the liberal arts faculty in 2015 and teaches courses in philosophy, film, and literature.

"She's the quintessential leader by example. She's exquisitely aware of Curtis's culture, and of the students and their needs," he says. "She's a great listener, and she sincerely wants to know your concerns."



Jeanne M. McGinn, Ph.D. holds the Ruth W. and A. Morris Williams Chair in Liberal Arts at Curtis.
PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

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Opposite: Dr. McGinn in a literature class
PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA



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Further evidence of close listening appears in Dr. McGinn’s own poetry, in which rhythm and sibilance roil placid-seeming images. When writing (as Jeanne Minahan), she says, “sound is first for me. Sense comes later.” With no published volumes yet, she is, interestingly, a poet more heard than read; more than half a dozen composers, many of them connected to Curtis, have set her poems. Jennifer Higdon, the Milton L. Rock Chair in Composition Studies and an alumna, was the first, plucking six from a hand-delivered manuscript. The resulting work—*The Singing Rooms*, for choir, orchestra, and violin soloist—has now been performed throughout the United States and abroad.

“It’s humbling and terrifying,” Dr. McGinn says of hearing her words sung back to her. “The idea that a line could move someone is such a joy, and so the possibility of hearing many lines in a variety of moods is really fun.”

Most recently, Ya-Jhu Yang, a 2011 graduate in composition, premiered a song cycle titled *Five Minahan Songs*, which strings together a story of smoldering desire from spare yet evocative lines. Having now worked together with Dr. McGinn on two settings—the first, *Rain Out at Sea*, was premiered in 2011—Ms. Yang has been able to measure her growth as a composer against Dr. McGinn’s writings. “She’s always so gracious, never interfering,” the young composer says. “She feels as though her poems are being well taken care of in a new art form.”

Whether students come to her to fulfill an academic requirement or a compositional need, Dr. McGinn provides the assurance of a keen ear and a sharp mind. Those with a deep-seated literary bent, like violin student Tsutomu William Copeland, find themselves uniquely satisfied. Will, as he is known on campus, sought out Dr. McGinn’s Irish Literature course after taking a trip to Ireland before his sophomore year. “I think she makes a point to teach things she herself finds incredibly fascinating,” he says. “It seemed like she was learning and discovering new things along with her students.”

He then took a second course the following semester: *Paris Between the Wars*. Though it had the largest workload of his classes, he says he found the challenge well worth the reward. “She really shines in whatever she chooses to teach.” ♦

MORE ONLINE

Watch video of a musical setting of Dr. McGinn’s poetry at Curtis.edu/Overtones

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PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—JEANNE M. MCGINN

More Reasons at Curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis

“Curtis is a gathering of artists choosing to forge a community. It’s a place where art can live and (if we let it) thrive, and I think the community of fellow artists striving alongside one another allows us to share in the excitement of making. Making—whether composing, singing, conducting, or performing—is a cycle: The hard work and devotion that we bring to making can inspire a colleague, just as we can be revived, challenged, exhorted, or changed by the hard work of others.

“At Curtis, when we give young artists the room and the tools to grow to be their best selves, then we carry on the founder’s vision; and we ensure that the gifts of true artistry will continue to flourish.”