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Oliver Herbert holds the Edwin B. Garrigues Annual Fellowship at Curtis. PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG

A Quiet Conviction

Cellist Oliver Herbert calmly sets his musical course.

BY MATTHEW BARKER

There’s a kind of transformation that occurs when Oliver Herbert sits down to play the cello in performance. After a humble bow that gives away his introverted nature, he closes his eyes and breathes deeply. A change has occurred. The sound that emerges from the cello seems to have been summoned from another place or time, and in that moment the audience is transported to where Oliver feels most comfortable. “There’s something very exciting to me about trying to get into that world, trying to put myself in that space,” says Oliver. The result is immersive, thoughtful, and at times audacious.

Modest and soft-spoken, the 21-year-old cellist is on the cusp of a professional career. Despite his gentle demeanor, he’s tenacious, self-aware, and mature beyond his years. “I have a very clear idea of what I want to hear, and I don’t really ever achieve that,” he says. “In my practice I try not to get too down on what I can’t do. I try not to be too self-critical because improvement comes over time. Improvement doesn’t come from negativity. It’s never going to be exactly what I want, but I know I’m closer.” His persistence and clear-eyed perspective are directly related to the musical independence he’s afforded at Curtis. “I feel like the more



At right: Oliver played the extended cello solo representing the title character in Strauss's *Don Quixote* with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra and conductor Juanjo Mena in October 2017.

Above: After his *Don Quixote* performance, fellow orchestra members congratulated Oliver backstage.

PHOTOS: DAVID DeBALKO



Oliver, according to one of his teachers, Carter Brey, is “someone who lays the foundation for a career as a musician brick by brick, very carefully, and makes his move when he feels ready, not before.”

that I grow as a person, the more I grow as an artist,” he says. For him, Curtis is “the place to experience those moments of growth.”

The past year included several noteworthy musical achievements for Oliver at Curtis and abroad. Last fall he performed the solo part in Richard Strauss's epic tone poem *Don Quixote* with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra at Verizon Hall, and in the spring he performed alongside piano faculty Meng-Chieh Liu ('93) and gave two riveting performances of J.S. Bach's sixth suite on a five-string baroque cello. In between he was a prizewinner at the Lutoslawski International Cello Competition in Poland. This fall he makes his debut as a soloist with the San Francisco Symphony, playing Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*, and performs the Elgar Cello Concerto with the Marin Symphony.

His ease in balancing several major projects prompts comparison with one of his teachers at Curtis, Carter Brey, often noted for his versatility. Mr. Brey, who is principal cello of the New York Philharmonic, is well-known for his interpretation of *Don Quixote*, as well as his acclaimed performances of the Bach suites (not coincidentally, on the same baroque cello he loaned to Oliver). But Oliver is “completely his own man,” says his teacher. “Both as a player and as a human being, he has a tremendous depth of strength ... He's like the force that will not be denied.”

A FACT OF LIFE

There's never been a time when Oliver wasn't supported in his musical endeavors. His family tree is full of professional musicians going back generations, and much of his early musical training came from his parents and grandparents. Growing up in the Bay Area, he regularly attended San Francisco Symphony concerts and tours thanks to his father, David Herbert, who was the orchestra's principal timpanist (a post he now holds in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra). Oliver never felt pressure to become a professional musician, but says it was an easy call even from an early age. “I never really thought about doing anything else,” he says, speaking of music as a calling: “I don't see it as a career or as a job. It's just a part of who I am. ... If a profession is supposed to be your contribution to the world, then that's what I feel like I can try to do.”

Like many musicians at Curtis, Oliver credits the work he's done away from his principal instrument as making the real difference in learning what it means to be a 21st-century musician. “At this school I've had the opportunities to develop my sense of self in other ways,” says Oliver, citing his “access to so much variety when it comes to mentors” and the independence to build



his own projects based on his interests. In addition to his private study with Carter Brey and Peter Wiley, he mentions his time with Ford Lallerstedt in musical studies, Leon Schelhase in baroque interpretation, and composition faculty David Ludwig in new music, among others. “Curtis creates an environment where not only do I have access to these mentors, but they are actually approachable,” says Oliver. “Learning from all these wonderful people has been crucial in developing my artistry, but equally important, getting to know my mentors as human beings has given me access to so many ways of thinking, which has been invaluable to my growth as a human being.”

Above left: Oliver played Mozart with Curtis classmates as part of an all-day quartet marathon in November 2016.

Above right: Oliver rehearses in Field Concert Hall with piano student Janice Carissa
PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

ENDLESS EXPLORATION

Oliver’s musical collaborations span generations, from such seasoned veterans as violinists Pamela Frank, Miriam Fried, and Shmuel Ashkenasi and clarinetist Franklin Cohen, to young Curtis alumni like pianist Xiaohui Yang, who met Oliver in 2017 through a tour for Ravinia’s Steans Music Institute. The two have since formed a duo, with recitals scheduled through Curtis on Tour this season and a forthcoming CD. Ms. Yang relishes the fresh perspectives they offer one another in both new and old repertoire: “It’s always fun working with someone who never ceases looking for challenges and possibilities in programming.”

Clearly Oliver continues to live the double life that is all too familiar around Curtis—at once a student and a professional—and he’s learning that the two aren’t always so different. “I’m starting to understand things that I thought I would never understand,” he says. “I still have a lot of growing up to do, but I think I came to the realization that it’s okay to not know everything, not to be totally grown up.” He feels confident—“Being confident and being arrogant are not the same thing,” he smiles—and Mr. Brey has confidence in him, too. “He’s someone who lays the foundation for a career as a musician brick by brick, very carefully, and makes his move when he feels ready, not before.”

That foundation is firming up as Oliver makes new discoveries about the connections in his life. “Every experience you have is valuable,” he says, adding “the bad or stressful things that can happen to you as a person are still things to be grateful for. I have so much less resentment towards everything than before I came [to Curtis].” And that freed-up energy is going back into his music, or wherever else he wants it to go. “If I have something that’s there to do, I want to do it and put my all into it.” Just try and stop him. ◊

Matthew Barker is the director of recitals and master classes.

MORE ONLINE

Watch videos of Oliver’s recital performances at Curtis.edu/Overtones

WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—OLIVER HERBERT

More Reasons at Curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis

“[At Curtis] I always feel like I’m an individual. I’m treated like a person. I think every student here is different, and has different interests, and wants to do different things, and the school’s very accommodating of that.”

PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG

