

Mr. Brey has been principal cello of the New York Philharmonic for two decades. At Curtis he holds the Nina and Billy Albert Chair in Cello Studies.

PHOTO: STEPHANIE BERGER



Enlightened Approach

Cellist Carter Brey follows his curiosity outside the box—and brings students with him.

BY MATTHEW BARKER

Not many musicians could perform the significant cello solo role in Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote*, give a string quartet concert at New York's 92nd Street Y, run the New York Marathon, and teach a day of lessons all in the same week. Then again, not many musicians are like cellist Carter Brey, who has taught at Curtis since 2008.

Musically speaking, Mr. Brey thrives in just about any wheelhouse. Whether it's his historically informed approach to J. S. Bach's cello suites, his championing of contemporary composers, his insatiable appetite for all ranges of music (from Beethoven to Judy Garland to Leon Kirchner to the Beatles), his 21 years as principal cellist of the New York Philharmonic, or his nearly 40-year career as a soloist and chamber musician on the world's pre-eminent stages (with a resumé that includes concerto appearances with virtually all the major U.S. orchestras), there are few stones unturned in his prolific career.

While Mr. Brey's professional experience is an undeniable asset to Curtis students, it's only part of his impact. He finds a cross-section of art and science everywhere in life, and it deeply informs his musicianship. This became evident over the course of a lesson with cello student Joshua Halpern on Robert Schumann's Adagio and Allegro, as the two seamlessly discussed musical theory, history, bowing suggestions, and shifting techniques alongside psychology, mindfulness, physics, and quotes from Joseph Conrad.

"They all sort of seem to feed each other," says a modest Mr. Brey, drawing connections between his artistic, academic, leisure, and even athletic experiences. "The discipline in preparing for [a marathon] and convincing yourself that you can see that through to the finish is very analogous, I think, to a demanding musical project. Sometimes the two things coincide exactly. Around Mile 18, running up First Avenue, I was trying to practice *Don Quixote* in my head

Opposite: Mr. Brey in a lesson with cello student Joshua Halpern PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA



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to keep my mind off the pain in my legs!" Even his experiences as a lifelong sailor find their way into his musical methods. In sailing, "you study how a manmade object is designed to behave in a natural world," he says. "A lot of our discussions of cello technique are the same."

One would be forgiven for wondering how Mr. Brey thrives in circumstances that would completely overwhelm most musicians. "The guy's nuts," jokes Joshua, before acknowledging that his teacher is not just another busy musician. "There's a lot of stress associated with making music, and I don't see that stress in him."

Longtime friend Peter Wiley ('74), Mr. Brey's colleague on the Curtis cello faculty, agrees. "He's so wonderful, fundamentally, in that his concept is very, very relaxed and efficient." He sees Mr. Brey as a great role model for students who lose sight of the bigger picture when bogged down in their musical endeavors. "We need to love and respect music, yet we have to keep a perspective about our happiness, our health, our overall well-being, and where music fits into our life," says Mr. Wiley, adding, "ultimately we can be even freer, more confident, more relaxed, because although we have to treat [music] with great respect, it's not the only thing in life." According to Mr. Brey, it's important to see life's experiences as opportunities rather than obstacles, and to respect his own boundaries.

MUSICAL CHOICES

The two teachers share twelve of Curtis's thirteen cello students, yet they both acknowledge that they communicate very little about their approach to lessons. "Carter and I have always been comfortable with each other, and we recognize there are going to be differences," notes Mr. Wiley. "One of us might say faster, one of us might say slower, but we recognize that it's important for the students to realize that that's what we do as musicians. We have different opinions; we have to make choices."

For Mr. Brey, those opinions and choices are what he hopes the students walk away with when they leave Curtis: "an ability to self-analyze, to engage in musical and technical analysis on their own as fully formed musicians." His goal in lessons is "to get the students to look at things freshly, right at the composer's thoughts"—getting to the heart of the composer's message. "How do you get as close as possible to that?" he asks. "It's a chimera. It's an infinitely receding horizon, but it's good to at least try to start with that goal. And then you figure out how to achieve that on your instrument, on this box with strings on it."

Mr. Brey strives to help his students be the best versions of themselves as they seek to understand not only the music they perform but the world around them. It's a blueprint he understands well because he's following it himself, and it's clearly working. As he approaches his ten-year anniversary at Curtis, he continues to bring his wide range of experience, insight, talent, wisdom, and support to the school's young musicians—all at a level that removes any question of his sincerity or greatness. "What a fantastic thing it is for our cello studio to have someone like Carter," says Mr. Wiley.

"And if you're training for a marathon, or if you're reading Henry James, he can offer his perspective on that too," jokes Joshua. ♦

Matthew Barker is the director of recitals and master classes at Curtis.

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN STEINER



WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—CARTER BREY

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"What continuously impresses me is how supportive these young students are of each other. There's a real *esprit de corps*. Peter (Wiley) and I do our best to maintain that, but I have to say it doesn't take much effort on our part because the students do that. ... They maintain their incredible self-motivation and striving for excellence while helping each other. They always show up to each other's concerts. I have to think that's very rare."