

BY ANNIE SARACHAN

A REUNION AND A HOMECOMING

Curtis alumni return to campus to teach and reconnect during Summerfest.

SUMMERFEST RECITALS
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Faculty recitals at Curtis Summerfest, now public hallmarks of the summer season, started in 2012 as intimate affairs, with only a few dozen program participants in the audience. By 2015 Summerfest programming had quadrupled in scope, leading staff to take a gamble and offer faculty recital tickets to Philadelphia concertgoers.

There was no way to know for sure if there would be much of an audience, apart from Summerfest participants and Curtis staff wanting to reconnect with the Curtis alumni who made up much of the Summerfest faculty. No one could have anticipated the magic that first recital in 2015 would hold.

It could have been the capacity audience: 90 exuberant participants in the Young Artist Summer Program (YASP) witnessing up close the artistry to which they aspired, plus some 150 additional ticket buyers thirsting for music in Philadelphia’s parched summer months. Maybe it was the programming freedom granted to the players, or the chance to collaborate with new chamber music partners, guided by the vision of YASP artistic director David Ludwig (Composition ’01) and program director Amy Yang (Piano ’06).

Or perhaps it was the performers’ keen awareness of the audience’s excitement. How often does the first piece on a chamber program receive a standing ovation lasting several minutes, with actual exhilarated whoops of appreciation? Such was the sincere reaction to Patrick Kreeger (Organ ’13), YASP choral director, following his 2016 performance of Bach’s Toccata in F major, BWV 540. That summer the same audience would be holding their breath, captivated when Ms. Yang and YASP oboe faculty Katherine Needleman (’99) offered Poulenc’s poignant, lyrical Sonata for Oboe and Piano in an exquisite performance.

These moments have become typical of the sold-out Summerfest recitals, which have “roundly killed the myth that there was no summer audience for classical in the city,” according to a glowing review in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. They also made clear to the public what Summerfest participants had known all along: Curtis alumni on its faculty are the key. “The

Opposite, clockwise from top left:

Summerfest faculty, all Curtis alumni, perform in recital: Soo Bae; Katherine Needleman; Amy Yang and Sharon Wei; and Anthea Kreston.

PHOTOS: ANNIE SARACHAN





YASP program director Amy Yang in a chamber music coaching PHOTOS: DAVID SWANSON

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– Amy Yang,
YASP program director

Summerfest faculty has been a beautiful synthesis of the finest and most generous pedagogues and performers across the alumni body,” says Ms. Yang. Whether they met while students or are connecting for the first time at Summerfest, these alumni have a deep connection to Curtis that enriches the learning experience for every program participant.

DEMAND MEETS DEMAND

Curtis Summerfest hosts a variety of programs for all ages and levels, providing broad access to a world-renowned conservatory experience. It has fulfilled an urgent demand from music enthusiasts of various kinds: teenagers grappling with their artistic futures; highly successful doctors and engineers with a long-curbed passion for music; and very young musicians with talent beyond their years. Who better to meet these diverse needs than artists schooled at Curtis?

The demand among applicants has integrated seamlessly with an internal Curtis goal to help the school’s alumni connect with one another. Of 70-plus musicians on the Summerfest faculty, more than three-quarters are alumni. Particularly for YASP, the largest Summerfest program, Dr. Ludwig intentionally rotates faculty positions among alumni when possible. “Part of what makes YASP really exciting for young musicians is that they get to dive into a conservatory experience while hearing a wide variety of musical perspectives from Curtis alumni,” he says, adding that what they share is “an unwavering commitment to artistry and the music itself.”

Violin faculty Anthea Kreston (’93), writing in a 2017 blog, summed up the Curtis ethos she transmits to summer program participants as “the germ of individuality, the determination, the ability to think for yourself.” Curtis alumni who teach at Summerfest often challenge the artistry of young participants in ways they haven’t previously experienced. They seek to pull out a student’s personal artistic voice, asking even the youngest to access an emotional core. Viola faculty Toby Appel (’66) enjoys observing epiphanies among participants, with “students from literally all over the world getting a real feel of what full immersion in high-level music making can mean.” In just a few weeks at YASP, he says, “I see some truly amazing progress.” Like Curtis’s main curriculum, Summerfest “extends the role of the musician from just a performer to an empowered citizen servicing humanity through the gift of music,” says Ms. Yang. “We aim to share this Curtis ideology and musical knowledge with our Summerfest students.”

In addition to motivating participants and becoming closer to colleagues in the summertime, alumni also look forward to performing in those eagerly awaited faculty recitals. “I was able to perform and reconnect with wonderful musicians and friends whom I went to school with,” says YASP cello teacher Soo Bae (’01). As YASP program director, Ms. Yang attends every faculty recital and plays in many of them. She especially enjoys “cheering on the stellar performances” by colleagues that she knew as a student at Curtis.



A viola sectional (left) and a private lesson with Toby Appel PHOTOS: DAVID SWANSON AND ANNIE SARACHAN

CONNECT AND RECONNECT

For the alumni on its faculty, Summerfest is both a reunion and a homecoming. “Each year I’m very happy to connect with old friends,” says Ms. Bae, one of many faculty members who have returned over the past several seasons, offering consistency to the program and reinforcing its supportive atmosphere. Most have been working at summer festivals in other locations for years, so returning to Curtis to do similar work has become a natural evolution in their careers.

Japanese-born Mari Yoshinaga (Timpani and Percussion ’12), who serves on YASP’s faculty with her performing partner in the Arx Duo, Garrett Arney, offers a unique perspective on reconnecting with classmates. She’s now a fluent English speaker, but when she first arrived at Curtis as a student, her English was limited. She enthuses about fully getting to know Joshua “J.D.” Gersen (Conducting ’10), Natalie Helm (Cello ’11), and other former classmates in a new way now that they are teaching at Summerfest. Occasionally the percussion faculty will step into the YASP orchestra when their repertoire requires additional percussionists, and so Ms. Yoshinaga has come back under the baton of Mr. Gersen—now assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic—when he conducts the the YASP orchestra. “It’s been great reconnecting with [J.D.] because I can see he grew up a lot as a conductor, but still he is casual and a really good friend.”

Once alumni faculty have taught and performed together, they often forge new artistic relationships. Ms. Yang has collaborated with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, where YASP violin faculty Steven Copes (’94), is concertmaster. Besides teaching percussion students, Ms. Yoshinaga and Mr. Arney work with the composition department. As a result the musical studies coordinator and composition coordinator—Nick DiBerardino, a Curtis composition student, and recent alumna Alyssa Weinberg (Composition ’16)—have written pieces for the Arx Duo.

In addition to YASP, Summerfest continues to bring students and alumni to Curtis for workshops in flute, harp, and voice, all working directly with current heads of departments, Jeffrey Khaner, Elizabeth Hainen, and Mikael Eliassen, as well as other current faculty, alumni, and guest artists. In a long weekend of chamber music, adults of all levels (amateur to semi-professional) will also play side-by-side with Curtis students and be coached by alumni. The connection that many of the faculty already have to Curtis energizes the summer community and makes the space feel more like a family home—with welcoming smiles, friends and neighbors near at hand, and chatter in the entrances—even as it provides the younger students a vision of their potential future trajectory. ♦

Annie Sarachan is the manager of Curtis Summerfest.

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