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- DAVID SERKIN LUDWIG



Close-up on Compo

Hong Kong's Intimacy of Creativity festival promotes interaction among composers, performers, and the audience—with audible results.

Curtis on Tour visited Hong Kong last spring to launch a new partnership with Intimacy of Creativity, a festival presented by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). Under the artistic direction of composer Bright Sheng, this annual event is devoted to promoting an intimate dialogue among composers, performers, and audience, and features the evolution of works by five emerging composers as they are honed through open discussion. The festival's unique ethos builds on a Hong Kong tradition of mutual understanding fueled by open communication.

Curtis faculty, alumni, and students made up more than half of the 20 artists in residence at Intimacy of Creativity 2019, which took place in April. The Curtis 20/21 Ensemble—including composition student and clarinetist Andrew Moses, piano student Zitong Wang, and the Vera Quartet, Curtis's string quartet in residence—served as ensemble in residence throughout the festival.

Curtis faculty Jennifer Higdon and David Serkin Ludwig participated as distinguished guest composers. Distinguished guest artists included Curtis viola faculty and president Roberto Díaz and violin alumna Ju-Young Baek, a professor at Seoul National University. Composition student Dai Wei was among the five composer fellows whose pieces were workshopped at the festival. Here a few of the Curtis participants offer their reflections on a new-music experience like no other.

PHOTOS BY WAILOK CHEUNG/
COURTESY INTIMACY OF CREATIVITY



Above: Composer Dai Wei, at left, is applauded by the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble after their performance of *Mandalas in the Rubble*.

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Bridging the Chasm

“Intimacy of Creativity was in part inspired by the music-making process in past centuries. Traditionally, composers were also well-known virtuoso performers and they wrote compositions for themselves and friends. Even then, a new composition would nonetheless go through a vigorous procedure of ‘try-outs’ before the premiere—Beethoven took six months to do just that before the first public performance of the ‘Eroica’ Symphony. Paradoxically, this process is still prominent in theater production and even in popular music making today.

“Unfortunately, in concert music this practice gradually disappeared from the second half of the last century. Today, a new score usually receives only a few hours of rehearsals before the premiere. Most composers are no longer active performers and performers do not compose. Thus, a chasm has formed between the two, and miscommunication has ensued.

“The objective of Intimacy of Creativity is to bridge this chasm.”

— from the artistic statement of *Intimacy of Creativity*



CREATIVE EXPLORATION

It was a revelation to be a “distinguished guest composer” at the Intimacy of Creativity festival, and to bring the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble to Hong Kong with Curtis on Tour. I’ve been to festivals and in residencies all over the world, but none with such dramatic musical results in so short a time. Intimacy of Creativity is unique.

The name of the program conveys its premise: that participating composers will benefit by receiving feedback from mentors, performers, and audience members to improve their workshopped pieces—really, everyone in the room is asked for their thoughts. In open rehearsals, the microphone is passed around the audience for listeners to offer critiques and share impressions of what they have just heard.

The concerts included music by five composer fellows (including Curtis student Dai Wei), guest composers (including me and my colleague on the Curtis composition faculty, Jennifer Higdon), and artistic director Bright Sheng; as well as pieces by Bartók and Hindemith. All—even Bartók and Hindemith!—had their pieces workshopped, and all the composers present received feedback for how to shape and realize their music better.

Some reactions were general (“I liked it when it got louder near the end”) and others more granular (“I don’t feel that the F-sharp doubling in the clarinet in measure 56 is effective”). But every comment helped shape the series of edits and interpretations of the pieces leading up to the performance.

This creative exploration took place on the campus of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and the extraordinary students there were our workshop audience. The experience was transformative. We look forward to continued collaboration with Bright Sheng and the Intimacy of Creativity program with enthusiasm and gratitude.

— *David Serkin Ludwig*
Chair of Composition Studies and
director of the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble



SHARED EXPERIENCE

I appreciated the fact that the audience played a significant role in the process of creation. I perceive this as a condensed reflection of reality. As composers and performers, we are constantly critiqued by the audience, friends, colleagues, and ourselves. When a new piece is performed, the onus of responsibility shifts from creator to receptor. Everyone in the audience has the right to his or her reaction—that immediate impulse.

For me the biggest challenge came early in the festival, when I was still dealing with jet lag. My piece, *Mandalas in the Rubble*, was workshoped the first day. I had to respond to the audience immediately and make clear decisions on how to revise the music within 24 hours.

It was interesting for me to see how individual audience members reacted differently to the revisions I made. Their unique personal experiences, the way that the open discussions were conducted, and the projection of the score as the performers played the pieces—ultimately all of this became part of the way each new work was perceived and remembered. Different members of the audience might have held completely different opinions; however, they all shared a common experience of emotion and empathy through the music. I felt very lucky being accompanied and supported by my Curtis teachers and friends.

— **Dai Wei**

*Composer Fellow at Intimacy of Creativity 2019,
Curtis composition student*



ON EQUAL FOOTING

The idea of democratizing the experience of music is something that I am very interested in exploring, as is our whole quartet. So upon hearing the name and premise of the Intimacy of Creativity festival, I was intrigued. Placing composers, performers, and audience all on equal footing in the creative process sounded like a promising proposition, and indeed it did produce some fascinating results. In open discussions a slight change—suggested and retooled by some collaborative team of audience, composers, and performers—would sometimes produce a totally different reaction from all involved. I particularly enjoyed the process of working on Dai Wei's piece, *Mandalas in the Rubble*; it is a beautiful work that became even more touching after the workshop and revision process.

On a personal level, I was astounded every morning when opening the curtains of my hotel room to take in an incredible view of Clearwater Bay. Especially striking was the diversity of weather patterns and cloud formations that seemed to roll up the hill toward me.

— **Justin Goldsmith**

Cellist, Vera Quartet

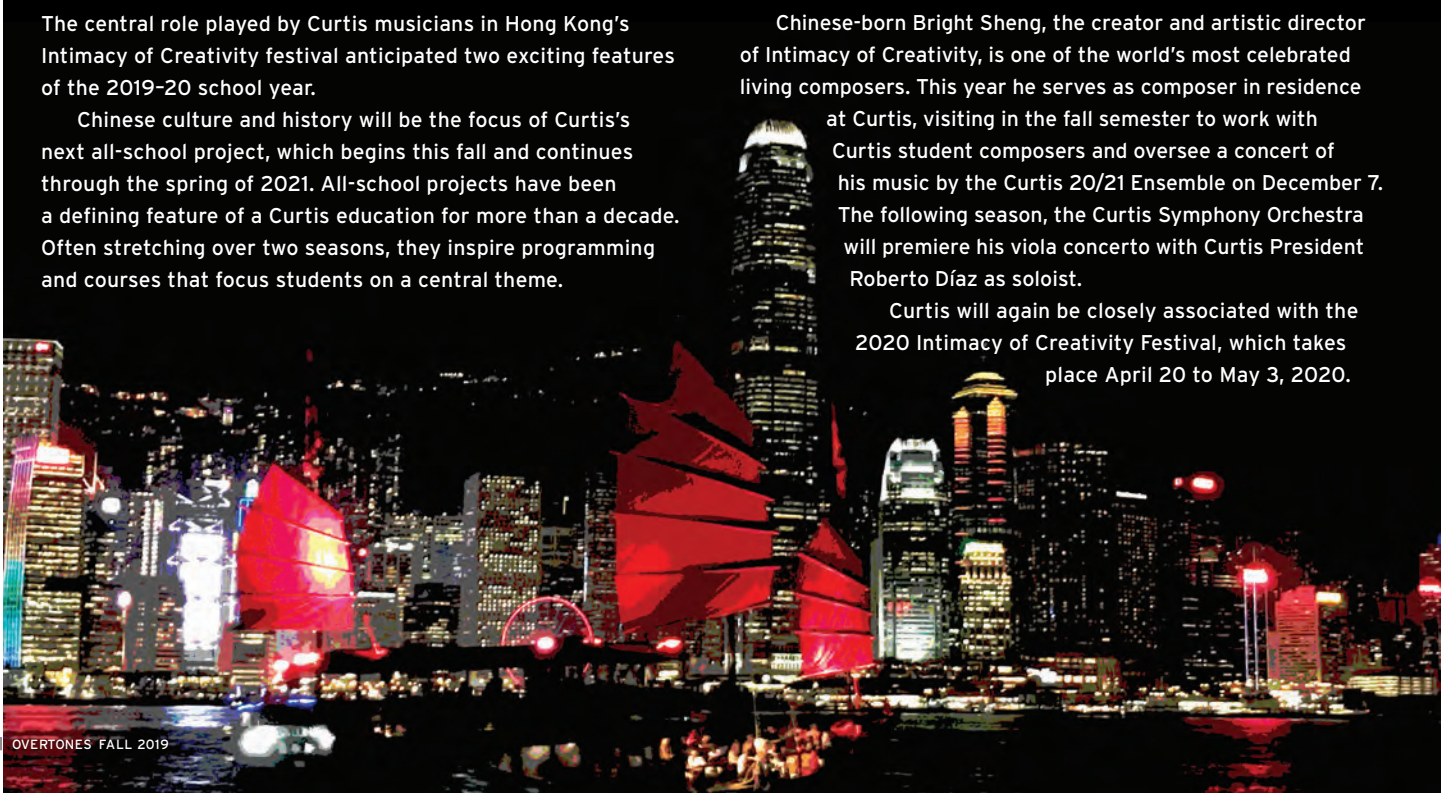
Focus on Chinese Culture

The central role played by Curtis musicians in Hong Kong's Intimacy of Creativity festival anticipated two exciting features of the 2019-20 school year.

Chinese culture and history will be the focus of Curtis's next all-school project, which begins this fall and continues through the spring of 2021. All-school projects have been a defining feature of a Curtis education for more than a decade. Often stretching over two seasons, they inspire programming and courses that focus students on a central theme.

Chinese-born Bright Sheng, the creator and artistic director of Intimacy of Creativity, is one of the world's most celebrated living composers. This year he serves as composer in residence at Curtis, visiting in the fall semester to work with Curtis student composers and oversee a concert of his music by the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble on December 7. The following season, the Curtis Symphony Orchestra will premiere his viola concerto with Curtis President Roberto Díaz as soloist.

Curtis will again be closely associated with the 2020 Intimacy of Creativity Festival, which takes place April 20 to May 3, 2020.



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- JENNIFER HIGDON



WITNESS TO THE PROCESS

Intimacy of Creativity is particular in my experience not only in the extent to which it invests in the premise that musical interpretation is up for grabs—that any interpretative power invested in the composer, is, to an equal degree, invested in the spectator—but also in the way in which this belief manifests itself. At open rehearsals, the directors of the festival strongly encouraged audience members to share their thoughts and impressions, in a kind of audience emancipation.

I found it intriguing to witness this phenomenon and to explore its limits. It was interesting to try to map over a course of two weeks a general trajectory of audience feedback—raising questions about aesthetics and art—and to watch closely, as a performer, subsequent changes being made to various pieces. Often, there was the reminder of how greatly the overall impression of a piece can be affected by, say, a slight modification at the singular, atomic level.

— **Andrew Moses**
Curtis composition student and member of the Curtis 20/21 Ensemble



SUNLIT CLARITY

A magical place filled with wonder and discovery: This is the perfect description of both Hong Kong and the Intimacy of Creativity festival. What a thrill to be able to participate, along with my Curtis colleagues, in this unusual setting where new works are rehearsed and discussed by a large array of audience members, both musically experienced and novice, i.e., university students with no musical background.

The young composers here (including our own Dai Wei) get a chance to receive feedback at each rehearsal, leading to a rewrite, and then a rehearsal of the newly adjusted music. As a composer, it is rare to have the chance to get insights from so many people, and then to incorporate those thoughts within the musical notes on a page. To allow others to participate in the intimacy of creating is a bit like experiencing Hong Kong fog lifting after a brief storm, providing sunlit clarity of ancient edifices and traditions, uniquely combined with modern languages and architecture. This is what writing classical music today is all about: building on tradition, while making new structures to broaden the horizons of us all. That is truly the joy of the Intimacy of Creativity festival.

— **Jennifer Higdon**
Curtis composition faculty ◊



Top: Audience members questioned the composers and performers.

Above: Curtis piano student Zitong Wang, shown playing prepared piano

PHOTOS: WAILOK CHEUNG

Opposite: Hong Kong at night, during the residency by Curtis artists at Intimacy of Creativity 2019

PHOTO: ROBERTO DÍAZ

MORE ONLINE

Hear performances from Intimacy of Creativity 2019, including works by Dai Wei, Jennifer Higdon, and David Serkin Ludwig, at Curtis.edu/Overtones