



# Growing Artists

Sphinx Performance Academy at Curtis Summerfest offers a taste of conservatory life to young Black and Latinx musicians.

BY ANNIE SARACHAN

## On the second day of the second annual Sphinx Performance Academy at Curtis, I encountered a contemplative youngster, Susie Perez, in the lobby.

It was the one free hour of the day, just after lunch, when participants in this two-week intensive program could opt to run errands, play ping-pong in the student lounge, or—the most popular choice—get in an additional hour of practice. It was not a time when I expected to see a lone 15-year-old violist lingering outside the staff office.

Aware that office-dwellers like me are, by definition, intimidating to students at the beginning of a program, I approached her.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m O.K.” A common non-answer.

I tried again. “Are you looking for something?”

“Well . . .”—timidly—“Is there somewhere I could print something?”

Easy. Lenfest Hall has a student computer lab. “Yes! Is it your music? Do you need another copy of something?”

“It’s music, but I was going to print something new. Something just for fun during free time.” She looked down as she said this, and smiled slightly. I was surprised she wanted to add to her already full plate of new repertoire.

I told Susie how to find the computer lab. We chatted briefly about her chamber music assignment and private lesson coming up that afternoon, and she went off cheerily. Several minutes later I passed by that very office and saw Susie in conversation with a SPA staff member, Linton Robinson, as her music spooled out of the printer. I eavesdropped.

“Do you arrange for strings?” Linton asked her. Stealing a glance, I realized she was printing, not lesson repertoire, but her own composition.

That early impression of Susie’s initiative and creativity was reinforced a day later when, during a session titled Diversity and the Arts, she actively engaged with her peers. Led by SPA

SPA participants on a visit to the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts  
PHOTO: HECTOR HERNANDEZ





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program manager and social worker Hector Hernandez, this series of activities and structured conversations focused on identity, community, and goals for the program. Self-possessed but unassuming, Susie told her new friends about coming from a rural area, what it meant for her to attend a program with other students of color who shared her passion for music, and her goal to stay humble in order to learn.

During this session early in the 2019 program, it was already clear that students had sought out the Sphinx Performance Academy, known to participants as “SPA,” because it represented a safe environment to take musical risks and make mistakes. “Not only does SPA make you better as a musician, but it makes you more confident as being a part of a minority in the classical music world,” says Semaj Murphy, a 15-year-old cellist who attended in 2019. “We had talks with other people like us and it made us more confident.”

### CREATING A PIPELINE

Curtis Summerfest and the Sphinx Organization have now partnered in two successive summers to bring the Sphinx Performance Academy to Philadelphia. This intensive, full-scholarship chamber music and solo performance program for young musicians aged 11 to 17 was launched by Sphinx more than a decade ago to engage young artists from cultural backgrounds that are underrepresented in the field of classical music. It has been presented at multiple conservatories as part of Sphinx’s stated purpose to create a pipeline that supports diversity and inclusion in classical music.

Today SPA operates at the Juilliard School and the Cleveland Institute of Music in addition to Curtis. Each has unique emphases—at Curtis, for example, a musical studies course with an introductory composition element is required—but all comprise an intensive schedule of private lessons and chamber music in addition to master classes, recitals, career enrichment sessions, and mentorship in navigating the classical music world as a person of color.

The program’s curriculum has been honed to maximize the artistic growth of each participant over a mere two weeks. Chamber music is key, according to Jacqueline Jove, director of education at the Sphinx Organization, and every student is assigned to a quartet at the beginning of the two-week session. “Playing chamber music requires high-level listening and awareness, which helps develop all aspects of technique, musicality, and ensemble,” says Ms. Jove. “Perhaps more importantly, this collaborative work allows us to develop emotionally through the thoughtful communication, personal integrity, and humility required to bring a work of chamber music to life.”

Creating a community of classical musicians of color is built into SPA’s foundation. The program also aims to disrupt the ethnic homogeneity that has long characterized Western classical music, making space not just for diversity but also for inclusion within a profession and creative sphere where Black and Latinx artists are sorely underrepresented. Experiencing inclusion—the belief that one is felt, heard, seen, and, above all else, cherished—is the hallmark of real change, and makes the difference for SPA participants. In the words of 16-year-old cello student Vincent Perez (no relation to Susie), “SPA is very tightly knit and like a family, basically.”

Most fundamentally, SPA at Curtis offers students access to Black and Latinx faculty who are alumni of great music schools and conservatories. In 2019 participants also attended master



Project 440 founder and Philadelphia Orchestra double bassist Joseph Conyers, a Curtis alumnus, visited SPA in 2019. PHOTO: MARIELA LEMUS



classes by Curtis president and viola faculty Roberto Díaz and cello alumnus Gabriel Cabezas; and Q-and-A sessions with successful classical musicians of color such as Curtis alumnus Joseph Conyers, associate principal double bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra and the entrepreneur behind the music-education organization Project 440.

For Vincent, hearing about Mr. Conyers’s musical journey was particularly inspiring. “He told us, ‘You will have to work hard and you will have to work a lot,’” recalls the young cellist, who appreciated this honesty about the price of significant achievement. “Mr. Conyers talked about his life and how he got to Curtis, and practiced so many hours per day, and it was a difficult time because of all the practice. This resonated with me because I want to be exceptional like him.”

## DESIGNED FOR DISCOVERY

In a supportive, intentionally designed environment where they were free to express their musicianship, hopes, and challenges, our SPA students thrived this summer. I reveled in seeing their transformation in only two weeks. Epiphanies like Vincent’s popped up everywhere. Susie, the young violist who sought a place to print and share her original compositions, was impressed by a class on practice and warm-up strategies led by SPA cello faculty Mary Ann Ramos and viola faculty Jennifer Arnold. “Practicing is one of the most important aspects of being a musician,” Susie asserts, recalling her excitement when the SPA teachers spoke about “the importance of slow practicing, playing scales, and focus. It made me want to go practice right after, since I now knew the best way to get a lot done.” She quickly noticed the difference in her practice sessions. “I feel like I’m getting more done in the same amount of time,” she enthuses. “I’m sure that I will be using the skills that I learned in their class for the rest of my life!”

A class in improvisation taught by Jessie Montgomery and Javier Orman pushed the creative skills of SPA’s eight string quartets. Cellist Kendall Gonzales, 12, marveled at her peers’ ability to improvise beyond their own expectations. “Their ideas were out of this world! And they used those ideas as a group and they communicated with each other to convey where they wanted to go, until they had created whole new quartets.” At the time of the improvisation class, participants had only been playing together for a few days. “Being able to connect with each other on that level inspired me,” Kendall recalls.

It’s our hope that memorable encounters like these will continue to inspire these students to develop their own artistry, with benefits for the whole classical music field. A safe space at a key moment in their development is fundamental, allowing them to find and express their artistic individuality while creating meaningful connections. Susie’s reflections on creativity are pertinent. “To gain inspiration for my compositions,” she says, “it’s not about the surroundings, but it’s about the connections that I make with people in my surroundings. It’s about the feelings I get from and give to the people around me.”

In its collaboration with SPA, Curtis Summerfest hopes to grow a well-designed and compassionate space for a broader spectrum of young musicians, allowing them to form the bonds that will strengthen the classical music field over time. ♦

Annie Sarachan is director of Summerfest initiatives at Curtis. Alia Wood, Princeton intern for civic service during Summerfest 2019, contributed reporting for this article.

Above, opposite, and on page 15: SPA participants played for their peers, rehearsed with their quartets, and were coached by faculty mentors. PHOTOS: MARIELA LEMUS AND HECTOR HERNANDEZ

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### MORE ONLINE

See more photos from SPA at Curtis 2019 at [Curtis.edu/Overtones](https://Curtis.edu/Overtones)