

# MAGNUM OPUS

Over three decades at Curtis,  
Mikael Eliassen has built an  
unparalleled training program  
for vocal artists.



When Mikael Eliassen arrived at Curtis in 1986, he came with an unconventional background. “I barely graduated from high school,” the Danish-born vocal coach and accompanist told Heidi Waleson in a 2011 article for *Overtones*. He was an exchange student in the U.S. and Canada, sampled the Vienna Hochschule—and then quit, in favor of private studies in accompanying. And he went to the opera, every night: “That was my education. I’ve seen thousands of live performances, and that colored greatly my way of thinking when I started here. I thought the most important thing was to get up and perform.”

His philosophy was tailor-made for Curtis, where “learning by doing” is favored. Once he took charge of the vocal studies department in 1988, he set the Curtis Opera Theatre at the center of the curriculum, with three to five staged productions a year. He carefully chose repertoire and roles to suit—and appropriately challenge—each student singer, offering even the youngest singers performing opportunities from the moment they arrived at the school. He hired professional directors and designers to give students a “real-world” experience in theatrical production. And he kept the department to an intimate 25, allowing him to work personally with each student in multiple coachings and classes each week.

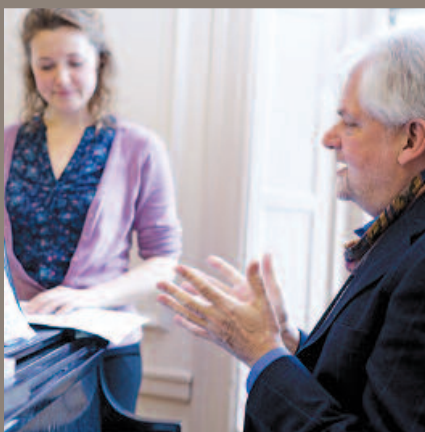
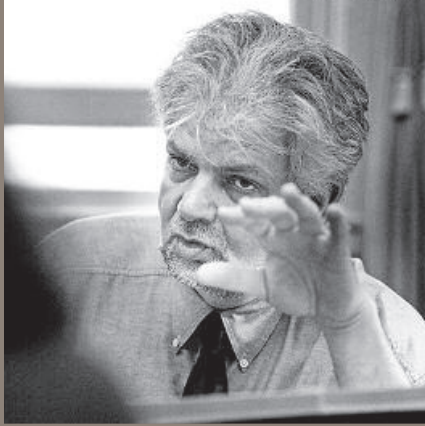
Among many important aspects of his philosophy, Mr. Eliassen prioritizes repertoire that he feels is important for his singers to know, whether “standard” or not. This has led him to present works like Hans Werner Henze’s *Elegy for Young Lovers* or Viktor Ullman’s *The Emperor*

Above: Mikael Eliassen, artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre, is the Hirsig Family Chair of Vocal Studies. PHOTO: DARIO ACOSTA

Above Left: Mr. Eliassen, Marlina Malas, and Gary Graffman with visiting artist Galina Vishnevskaya (second from right) after a 1990 master class at Curtis by the celebrated Russian soprano. PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES/DON TRACY

of *Atlantis*, among many other examples of 20th- and 21st-century works over his tenure. He has prompted singers to work on chamber music with Curtis students in other disciplines, and on new music. He has encouraged composers (both students and faculty) as they ventured into the creation of new operas.

All these choices—so many of them unconventional, and all of them crucial—have made the Curtis Opera Theatre a highly sought-after learning experience that has left a lasting influence on the careers of three decades' worth of graduates. Mr. Eliassen concludes his tenure this spring, passing the program he built to master coach Danielle Orlando, a longtime member of the Curtis faculty, and distinguished bass-baritone Eric Owens, a 1995 graduate. On these pages, students and colleagues honor the architect of a unique learning experience.



“Performing (and a lot) is the best way for a singer to learn and advance. Being given the opportunity to not only study and practice behind closed doors, but to actually get to do it live in front of real public, was the best-ever practical way to improve!

The utmost thing Mikael taught me was to celebrate my individuality, my expression, and my passion. Beyond that, the fact that I was given the opportunity to perform and excel—and grow in a safe and supportive environment—allowed me to maximize all the technical tools that I was given: languages, secure vocal technique, and all the rest of my classes.

Coming from a small town in a small country, I couldn't believe my good fortune to be able to work people that until then I had only heard of and read about—and all of a sudden I got to actually know them personally and learn from them, face to face! A dream come true. ☺☺

– *Rinat Shaham (Voice '95, Opera '98)*



“From our student days at McGill University in Canada, through our years of performing and recording together in recital internationally, and over the exciting and fruitful years together at the Curtis Institute of Music, Mikael has been and continues to be my dearest friend and inspiring musical partner. He has created a miracle at Curtis in the vocal studies department. ☺☺

– *Joan Patenaude-Yarnell  
Curtis Vocal Studies Faculty*

Clockwise from bottom left:

Mr. Eliassen coaches each singer in the vocal studies department weekly; this session with Jazimina MacNeil took place in 2008. PHOTO: DAVID KATZENSTEIN

A coaching in 1998 PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES

Mr. Eliassen has often appeared in recital with students, as in this performance with contralto Meredith Arwady, a 2004 opera graduate. PHOTO: CURTIS ARCHIVES

With mezzo-soprano Rinat Shaham at the alumni reunion in 2012 PHOTO: PETE CECCHIA

“ I remember in one of our first meetings Mikael asked if I knew a bunch of different operas he listed off the top of his head. Sure, I had listened to them once or twice, but by this point I had come to learn that there was a difference between “knowing” and having seen or listened to a piece once—especially with Mikael. When I told him “no,” he looked at me like I was insane. I copied down the list on an index card, studied them intently, and learned so, so much through further conversations and meetings with Mikael afterwards. I feel so fortunate to have had access to such a wealth of knowledge and strong opinions. That same index card still hangs above my desk, and I smile every time I see it, as I think about how much Mikael has influenced, challenged, and mentored me in my work and thoughts about the great art form of opera. ”

– *Rene Orth (Composition '16)*  
*Composer in Residence, Opera Philadelphia*

**MORE ONLINE**  
 Additional tributes and a slideshow of landmark productions of the Curtis Opera Theatre are at [Curtis.edu/Eliassen](http://Curtis.edu/Eliassen)



“ Mikael Eliassen is one of those unique teachers that each of us gets only once in a lifetime: very caring, teaching from a deep well of knowledge and experience, and tempered with a great sense of humor. I adore him and his humor and his 110 percent-honest approach to everything. I will also forever be indebted to him for being an inspiring, guiding light for this first-time opera composer. ”

– *Jennifer Higdon (Composition '88)*  
*Milton L. Rock Chair in Composition Studies*



“ My time at Curtis not only shaped me as an artist, but helped develop me into the person I am today. Mikael encouraged me to bring myself—J'nai—into everything I sang and performed. When I entered Curtis this was a challenge for me, but by the time I graduated I had a great sense of who I was and was able to express myself in ways I never thought possible, not only on stage but also in everyday life. I am forever grateful to Mikael and what the Curtis vocal department instilled in me. ”

– *J'nai Bridges (Opera '12)*

Clockwise from top left:  
 Mr. Eliassen with former board chair Nina von Maltzahn (center) and a Curtis on Tour ensemble, visiting Berlin in 2011  
 With composer Rene Orth before the premiere of her first opera, *Empty the House*, by the Curtis Opera Theatre in 2015 PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA  
 With Danielle Orlando (second from left), Eric Owens (center), and students and alumni of the Curtis vocal studies department after a 2015 performance. Ms. Orlando and Mr. Owens will succeed Mr. Eliassen at the helm of the department next fall. PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

“ I have known Mikael Eliassen for many, many years. He is my beloved friend and colleague, an esteemed and valued artist in our business, and a most loved member of the Malas family. He has taken the vocal department of the Curtis Institute of Music to great new heights and the highest level of vocal artistry that could ever be imagined and wished for. I am grateful and honored to call him my colleague and my friend. ”

– *Marlena Kleinman Malas (Voice '60), Vocal Studies Faculty*

“ Mikael Eliassen’s influence on me as an artist and as a person is immeasurable. The incredible care that he exercised when strategizing about, building, and constantly reevaluating each individual singer’s experience during their time at Curtis is, to me, the most remarkable gift imaginable and one that he has freely and enthusiastically given to generations of young artists. Thank you, Mikael. I will be forever grateful. ”

– *Nathan Bachhuber (Voice '07, Opera '09)  
Director of Artistic Planning and Administration, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra*



“ Mikael, you are hardly the “retiring” type! You are simply a force of nature. Thank you for showing us all how to savor and celebrate life, music, and each other; how to squeeze every last drop out of every note, every encounter, every experience; how to express and be more ourselves, without fear of consequences; and that the only risk in life is not to take one. You are the best friend and collaborator anyone could ask for: fiercely loyal, honest, liberating, empowering. (You wear your heart on your sleeve, both on and off stage.) For me, you put the “courage” in encourage. I admire and love you deeply—not only for what you have done, and do, but for who you are. ”

– *Pamela Frank (Violin '89)  
Herbert R. and Evelyn Axelrod  
Chair in Violin Studies*

“ Mikael is a once-in-a-lifetime human, as we all well know. There are too many moments to count since I left Curtis where I hear Mikael’s voice say, “I told you so”—and I shake my head and smile.

Mikael knows best how to individually encourage his students to be successful artists. He especially had his work cut out for him when it came to me! I will be forever grateful for his guidance, laughter, musicianship, and faith in me. ”

– *Jarrett Ott (Opera '14)*

Clockwise from bottom left:

Pamela Frank and Mr. Eliassen in 2013 PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

In 2016 Curtis honored Mr. Eliassen at its annual gala, featuring performances by Curtis students and alumni. Here he listens alongside his husband, scenic designer David Zinn. PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

Mr. Eliassen with the Curtis on Tour ensemble that performed throughout the United States in February (clockwise from upper left): baritone Patrick Wilhelm, tenor and 2009 graduate Dominic Armstrong, mezzo-soprano Anastasiia Sidorova, vocal studies coach and pianist Miloš Repický, and soprano Sage DeAgro-Ruopp. PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON