



“In order to be a complete musician one has to experience many roles as pianist—not just as a soloist or a chamber musician, but also as a teacher and as a thinker.”

Meng-Chieh Liu joined the Curtis piano faculty in 1993, immediately after his graduation.

## Meticulous Care

Meng-Chieh Liu challenges students to achieve a perfect balance among the many aspects of musicianship.

BY THOMAS OLTARZEWSKI

Just another chamber music coaching at Curtis. Except for what was different.

One hundred chairs were stacked at one end of Gould Rehearsal Hall, ready to be set out in orchestra formation in a few hours. At the other end, a battery of orchestral percussion and timpani and concert grand pianos—four of them to be exact, nested neatly together so four pianists could make easy eye contact with one another and with two percussionists.

Coaching from his seat at the right-front piano, Meng-Chieh Liu was surrounded by an ensemble of Curtis musicians. They were deep into a rehearsal of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, arranged for this seemingly unwieldy ensemble. But despite the unusual forces and music’s inherent drama, the rehearsal felt as intimate as one for a piano trio or duo sonata.

With a run-through in full swing, Mr. Liu stopped: “Something happened there.” The ensemble backed up a few measures and started again. But Mr. Liu was still pondering. “I’m wondering about the effect with the horn,” he said, and it became clear he had the original scoring firmly lodged in his mind. “I want to try and experiment with that a little.” Mr. Liu and his student Tianxu An tried a few different approaches to the passage, aiming to achieve an effect equal to Stravinsky’s orchestration. Ultimately Tianxu struck the chord with a sharp, staccato attack, as Mr. Liu doubled it quietly to recreate the articulation of a brass section entering *sforzando*.

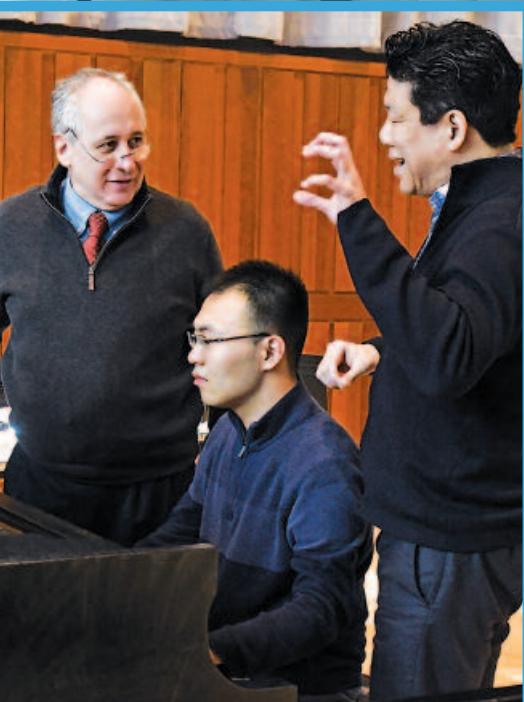
That attention to detail is typical of Mr. Liu’s musicianship, according to alumnus George Fu, who returned to Curtis to play in the Stravinsky *Rite* with his former teacher. “Every single note that he makes, every single touch,” is imbued with the character of the music, George says. “Just a very subtle way of moving the arm or the back will get such a different sound. He really understands that.”

This is Mr. Liu’s 25th year on the Curtis faculty. He laughs as he clarifies that his tenure might be considered short “compared to Mrs. Sokoloff, who was one of my teachers as well.” (Eleanor Sokoloff’s tenure on the piano faculty now stands at eight decades.) But for him, the anniversary holds special meaning, as a milestone achieved after recovering from serious health problems early in his career that threatened to end it prematurely.

### A SILVER TOUCH

Meng-Chieh Liu’s series of performances celebrating his 25th anniversary on the Curtis faculty concludes with a recital of chamber concertos on March 31. For details, visit [Curtis.edu/SilverTouch](http://Curtis.edu/SilverTouch)







Since then, Mr. Liu has filled several roles at Curtis. “In order to be a complete musician,” he notes, “one has to experience many roles as pianist—not just as a soloist or a chamber musician, but also as a teacher and as a thinker.”

Even before his graduation, he had begun to establish a solo career. In his early years on the faculty, he frequently accompanied student recitals. Increasingly he has channeled his passion for collaboration into regular chamber music performances in which he plays side-by-side with students. Chamber music in particular, he believes, is “a core value for the training at Curtis,” and one of the best ways for musicians to learn and grow. “There is a substance and musicianship that you can develop in a young person, just through chamber music, that you can’t get through any other training.”

## MUSICAL PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration is the theme of a series of concerts Mr. Liu has curated this season to celebrate his 25-year milestone. The first, in December, brought together nine of his former and current piano students. “I think my life here is about students,” he says, but given the complications of mounting chamber music featuring multiple pianos, “I haven’t really collaborated with my own.” The December program included multiple-piano works by Bach, Lutoslawski, and Holst alongside the *Rite of Spring* arrangement and the Schumann Andante and Variations, scored for the unusual combination of two pianos, two cellos, and horn. In February Mr. Liu joined with Curtis faculty to perform Paul Hindemith’s five sonatas for solo brass instruments with piano, choosing the repertoire again with collaboration in mind. Each of Hindemith’s sonatas exploits the unique characteristics of its solo instrument, he notes, but “the funny thing about these sonatas is that they are horrendously difficult for the piano!” He’ll step into a solo spotlight on March 31 for the final recital in the series, but again with a collaborative twist: He’ll perform concertos by Bach, Mozart, and Shostakovich accompanied by a chamber ensemble.

Each concert in the series mirrors aspects of Mr. Liu’s philosophy as a teacher, and also recalls his own years studying at Curtis, when he took advantage of as many opportunities as possible to play alongside his peers. Today he encourages his students to do the same. “I always tell my students, ‘play with people as much as you can. They are going to be your lifetime friends, and your lifetime bloodline.’”

As a teacher, he has continued to reach across departmental lines, teaching piano to students majoring in other disciplines and coaching chamber music from within ensembles. “Playing alongside Meng-Chieh in concert and rehearsals was an incredible experience,” says horn student Alex Lane, who participated in the December concert. “Everything discussed in rehearsals was to honor the music.”

“One of the things that I really learn from him is the melding of art and craft,” George adds, noting that any performer can have an artistic vision or excellent technique, but Mr. Liu challenges his students to find the “sweet spot” where the two achieve a perfect balance.

Balance—between technique and vision, between playing as a soloist and blending into a group, between explaining a concept as a teacher or simply demonstrating it as a chamber music partner—is the essence of Mr. Liu’s approach. “For me, artistry, craft, technique, and vision all take an equally important place in the makeup of a musician,” he says. “They are absolutely hand-in-hand with each other, and should be developed both individually and together with meticulous care.

“I experience this firsthand as a performer. Therefore, I put great emphasis on it as a teacher.” ♦

Thomas Oltarzewski, a 2013 composition graduate, is digital content producer at Curtis.

Opposite: Mr. Liu leads a rehearsal for his December recital of works featuring multiple pianos. Among his collaborators were percussionists Yi Fei Fu and Don Liuzzi; and pianists Zitong Wang, George Fu, Tianxu An, and Aimi Kobayashi. PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

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## WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—MENG-CHIEH LIU

“I am very fortunate that, both as a student and as a teacher, Curtis chose me. I certainly would recommend Curtis highly to anyone who is privileged to enter this community. It is the best place one can experience music education at the highest level.”

More Reasons at  
[Curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis](https://Curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis)