



Dennis Chmelensky is the Guna S. Mundheim Annual Fellow at Curtis.

Perspective and Passion

At 23, baritone Dennis Chmelensky embarks on his second singing career with deep commitment.

BY DAVE ALLEN

Is it possible to be both an early bloomer and a late one? Dennis Chmelensky has taken this unlikely dual path in two singing careers: first as a boy soprano in his native Germany, recording albums for Sony and attaining child-star status; and then later as an operatic baritone. Now in his sixth and final year at Curtis with an impressive and still-growing list of roles and performances, Dennis's second phase promises to have much longer staying power.

Having performed widely and pursued music seriously from an early age, Dennis was drawn deeper into study as his voice grew lower, and he has settled into his adult voice as an uncommonly adept performer—one driven by passionate interest in people, their personalities, and their motivations.

"I think I empathize and love and protect the characters I'm playing, no matter who it is," he says. "Every single role I've done here taught me more about myself." Having continued his studies in opera after completing his bachelor's degree at Curtis, Dennis has found that "the longer I've been here, the more of myself I could bring into a role. Even a small part can be interesting if you give it that character—that quirkiness that's unique to you."

Dennis's path to Curtis began at age 12, when he met Mikael Eliassen, artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre and Hirsig Family Chair of Vocal Studies. At that time, he was already singing professionally, on recordings and in the chorus for the Berlin State Opera, building on a foundation of early violin and piano studies. "Mikael's known me since I was half this size," Dennis recalls. "I was the only kid who got to sing for him." Soon after, he began to study conducting,

Moving on to higher-level study at a conservatory seemed a natural choice, and though Dennis could have received tuition-free schooling in Germany or elsewhere in Europe, he sought freedom from traditional European orthodoxy surrounding performance. He came to Curtis at age 17, still setting into his new voice as Mr. Eliassen encouraged his iconoclastic streak.

Mr. Eliassen recalls Dennis being "suspicious of opera, in a way. He was so steeped in oratorio and songs, and I don't think he came [to Curtis] thinking of himself as an opera singer. Finding his voice didn't happen overnight, and traveling that path was sometimes tricky, but he never lost the curiosity and desire for what music and singing is all about."

LEAPS FORWARD

Dennis has enjoyed significant stage time in his six years at Curtis, but two breakthrough roles cemented his emergence as a singing actor: Junior in Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*, which he sang in 2018; and Paul in composition graduate Rene Orth's *Empty the House*, which he first essayed in 2016 and will reprise in May as his last role at Curtis. Junior, he says, "was vocally

Dennis's path to Curtis began at age 12, when he met Mikael Eliassen. At that time, he was already singing professionally as a boy soprano with the Berlin State Opera.

MORE ONLINE

Watch Dennis in performance at
Curtis.edu/Overtones



His roles in *Empty the House* and *A Quiet Place* showcased Dennis's newly mature voice: a pliant lyric baritone with both nuance and considerable expressive power.



a giant jump, an experience where someone might say, 'If he can do that, he's going to the next level.'" It's an emotionally demanding role as well, with mental illness and strained familial relations coloring Stephen Wadsworth's libretto.

Both Junior and Paul (also part of a tense family drama), showcased Dennis's newly mature voice: a pliant lyric baritone with both nuance and considerable expressive power. New music, such as *Empty the House* or composition graduate Ya-Jhu Yang's *Five Minahan Songs*, which he premiered last spring, have held a surprising allure for him, testing both his vocal range and his attention to textual detail. In both new repertoire and old, he explains, "it's better to follow your gut, because otherwise you're just performing someone else's idea of something instead of your own."

Even as his operatic roles grew larger and more complex, Dennis pursued another long-term vocal project. With a fellow student, soprano Ashley Marie Robillard, and Mr. Eliassen at the piano, he has performed Hugo Wolf's *Italianisches Liederbuch* as an ongoing collaboration for several years, including for Curtis on Tour. "Dennis had to convince me to do it, and now I can't imagine my life at Curtis without it," Ashley says. The trio carefully scrutinized the songs, which tell a tale of travails in love, and ultimately decided to re-order them within the cycle. They also incorporated subtle stage moments and added a brief duet to the song "Nun laß uns Frieden schließen"; Wolf's original score has the two voices alternating solos.

Ashley also notes that she and Dennis first performed together when they were the only first-year students in the vocal studies department, singing "Là ci darem la mano" from *Don Giovanni*. Their years-long commitment to the *Liederbuch* mirrors their impressive development, guided by Mr. Eliassen, since that first duet. "We really grew with this piece and got to perform it in so many places," Dennis says. "To do this with the two of them is really a gift."

CLOSE COLLABORATORS

Though Eliassen and Robillard have been among the many receptive and inspiring collaborators Dennis has found at Curtis, none has been as close a musical partner as Jean Kim, a 2018 cello graduate. She and Dennis began dating soon after arriving at Curtis in 2013 and became engaged last spring; performing for one another has been a constant in their relationship, and they supply mutual feedback—or refrain from it—as needed.

Dennis "spoke passionately about what interested him, whether it was the lieder of Brahms or poetry, and never stopped searching for more things to be fascinated about," Jean recalls. "I think that his curiosity and his ability to take risks has had a large part in his growth as an artist."

Sean Michael Plumb, a 2016 Curtis graduate who now sings at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich, has observed that growth over the years as well, having hosted Dennis on his first visit to Curtis and serving as a mentor. "He took his energy and passion for singing and put it all behind his devotion to honing his craft," says Sean, adding that he could foresee Dennis having a career in one of the major opera houses in his home country.

In whatever the next phase of his career holds, Dennis will be well served by the deep and serious consideration he has given each of his performances. He distills his artistic commitment thus: "You don't have to act. All you have to do, if someone else is on stage with you, is listen." ♦

Dave Allen is communications manager at Drexel University's LeBow College of Business, and has written frequently for *Overtones*, *Symphony*, and other musical publications.

WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—DENNIS CHMELENSKY

"I chose Curtis because it allowed me to find something artistically that would have been impossible if I'd stayed abroad. Here you're going to be surrounded by some absolutely amazing musicians and inspiring colleagues, and you'll get a lot of support in every single way: not only the attention of the very diverse staff, but also financially of course, plus assistance for competitions and auditions. At Curtis, I was lucky not only to have people believe in me, but also to find the right people at the right time."

More Reasons at
Curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis



Dennis in a coaching session PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

Opposite, clockwise from top left:

Dennis as the Clock in a concert performance of *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* PHOTO: DAVID DeBALKO

As Junior in Leonard Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*, with Tyler Zimmerman PHOTO: ANDREW BOGARD

As Paul in Rene Orth's *Empty the House* PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

As a member of the Trio in Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*, with Colin Aikins and Tiffany Townsend PHOTO: WILLIAM BROWN

As Golaud in *Pelléas et Mélisande* PHOTO: CORY WEAVER

