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 Eliasen, 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. Eliasen encouraged his iconoclastic streak.

Mr. Eliasen 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...
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. Eliasen 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. Eliasen, 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 Eliasen 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.”