



A Fund to Further Early Careers

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Young Alumni Fund has backed concerts, recording projects, and instruments.

→ Each May, the Curtis Institute of Music sends its graduates out into the world with the hopes they'll take everything they've absorbed at Curtis and spread their wings as artists. This necessary transition from student to young professional is often rocky, and the pandemic has only intensified matters.

Photos: Natalie Helm performs as part of her non-profit organization, Upward Notes.

NOT ONLY DO ALUMNI face an unpredictable touring landscape and a winner-take-all music streaming economy but scattered across the globe, they often lack access to the kinds of physical resour-

es—instruments, recording equipment—that Curtis can provide. It was to address this shift, and to further Curtis's ongoing efforts to strengthen support for alumni in the years after graduation, that in

September 2020, the school launched a new annual grant program: the Young Alumni Fund.

Soprano Ashley Milanese (Opera '18) was among the first group of recipients. "At Curtis, they take care of us so much that [when you graduate], you get a bit of a reality check," she says. "You start to learn about how livable it is to be a performing artist." Milanese received a grant to support the creation of a website and online promotional materials.

In its inaugural year, Curtis offered \$37,000 for distribution through the fund, with over half of it coming directly from donations from alumni and other donors. Grants of \$1,000 to \$10,000 were

awarded to eleven standout proposals drawn from a pool of 41 applicants. An anonymous panel of Curtis alumni evaluated each proposal, assessing the impact that the funding might have on each project's success.

Shea Scruggs (Oboe '04), Director of Institutional Research and Musician Experience/Chief Enrollment Officer, oversees the initiative. "We wanted to make sure that Curtis's alumni had a voice in every part of this program—from design to implementation—in order to ensure that their experiences informed our actions at every level," he says.

To maximize the program's impact, the Young Alumni Fund's focus is intentionally broad. Grantees are invited to seek funding for any project or need, with the only requirement being that they are Curtis alumni within 10 years of graduation. For Joshua Stewart (Opera '12) and Oliver Herbert (Cello '19), grants helped fund the creation of new works. Says Stewart, "The funding definitely helped validate a creative hunch: Why have I never sung music that directly relates to me?" Stewart used his grant to publish a collection of original poetry, which reflects on the stories that have shaped him as a young American Black man now living in Europe. The poems will serve as source material for a newly commissioned song cycle entitled "A Man Without a Home."

For Sonora Slocum (Flute

'11), who used the funding to finance her third studio album, the grant's impact was more straightforward: "I wouldn't have released [the album] if I hadn't received the grant," she says of her collection of Mozart's flute quartets, recorded with members of the Dover Quartet (Quartet '14 and current faculty) and the Escher Quartet. After using her grant to cover the final editing and distribution costs, Slocum released the album digitally last December, capitalizing on timely promotional opportunities, including an appearance on a local PBS affiliate. Without the funding, "it would've been on the back burner."

Tessa Ellis (Community Artist Fellow '18), Joshua Halpern (Cello '19), and Natalie Helm (Cello '11) used their grants to engage and serve their communities. Helm's Sarasota, Fla.-based nonprofit, Upward Notes, brings musical performances to underserved audiences, including prisons, domestic abuse shelters, and dementia wards. "For years we've been working on a budget of zero, so making Upward Notes an official [nonprofit] has been very scary from a financial perspective," she says. "I'm a musician. I was trained to play the cello." The grant has enabled her to hire advisers to help her navigate the complicated process of filing for tax-exempt status. "I can put my passion project in their hands and know that I'm not going to get a phone call and be out thousands of dollars because I didn't cross a T or dot

an I."

Others used the funds to continue moving their careers forward when COVID-19 upended their plans. Tania Villasuso Couceiro (Clarinet '19) was preparing for orchestral auditions when the American audition circuit went dark starting in the spring of 2020. "I didn't want to lose all that work while waiting," she says. "I thought there were going to be auditions that spring, but by the fall of 2020, there still was nothing." With grant funding, Villasuso Couceiro has been able to travel to Europe to continue taking auditions.

Similarly, Jahleel Smith (Bass Trombone '18) and Lyman McBride (Trombone '18) used their grants to purchase new instruments. Smith, who plays bass trombone with the Hawaii Symphony Orchestra, was playing on an instrument built in the 1970s and requiring constant repairs. "It's putting a Band-Aid on a leaky faucet," says Smith. With his grant funding, Smith was able to custom-build an instrument to his own specifications, creating a trombone that will truly operate as an extension of his artistic voice.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Daniel W. Dietrich II Foundation, Curtis now has a permanent endowment for the program, embedding it in the framework of the school's musician lifecycle initiatives for years to come. In conversations with that organization, Curtis leadership learned that Daniel Dietrich, who died in 2015, was a great

lover of music and understood how important it is for artists to have opportunities to take risks as part of their artistic development. The school hopes to carry this ethos forward as it formalizes the program's structure, creating additional resources for alumni applicants, and more than doubling the funds available on an annual basis to support even more ambitious projects in the future.

George Xiaoyuan Fu (Piano '16) used his grant towards production costs for *Solitude with Schubert*, a documentary film about his preparation for a concert of Schubert's music with soprano Lotte Betts-Dean. The film will use the music of Schubert as a vehicle to explore themes of solitude and death, Fu says, while holding hope for life. "For Curtis to believe this much in its alumni, I can't think of another place that does that."

More information on each of the grantees, their projects, and the impact of the Young Alumni Fund is available at Curtis.edu/YAF.

MARY CLAIRE SULLIVAN, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF CAMPAIGN AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, AND BOARD LIAISON, JOINED CURTIS'S STAFF IN JANUARY 2021. A MUSICIAN HERSELF, SHE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT ENSURING THAT CURTIS STUDENTS AND ALUMNI ARE ARMED WITH THE TOOLS THEY NEED TO UNLOCK THEIR CREATIVE POTENTIAL.