



# A Century of Striving

Since the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, some of classical music's most august institutions have come to reckon with racial inequities and discriminatory practices that long went unaddressed. The Curtis Institute of Music has been a part of this process of self-scrutiny. But the past also provides a foundation on which future changes can occur. Kristina Wilson explains how Curtis's merit-based acceptance policy was part of its founding ethos.

→ **MARY LOUISE CURTIS BOK** (1876–1970) was born into wealth and privilege. She was the only child of Cyrus H.K. Curtis, founder of the Curtis Publishing Company, and Louisa Knapp Curtis, founder and editor of the *Ladies Home Journal*. But her parents set an example of the importance of social responsibility and philanthropy, supporting local cultural organizations including the Franklin Institute, Drexel University, and the Philadelphia Orchestra. This, coupled with Mary's love of music—she

became both an accomplished pianist and, like her father, an organist—laid the groundwork for what, years later, would be embodied by the Curtis Institute of Music.

After marrying the philanthropist Edward Bok in 1896, Mary became involved with Settlement Music School, where she served as a trustee and President. Founded in 1908, Settlement provided music education to local immigrant children and, while a worthy endeavor, Mrs. Bok saw firsthand that some students, despite their talent, lacked

the funds to train after aging out of the school. She responded by organizing a conservatory department at Settlement in 1922, which, just two years later, would form the nucleus of the Curtis Institute of Music.

Leopold Stokowski, conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1912 to 1941, and Josef Hofmann, the Polish piano virtuoso, were longtime friends of Mary and Edward Bok. As the plans for Curtis materialized, both were instrumental in making Mrs. Bok's vision a reality, leveraging their esteemed positions within



(Left): Leopold Stokowski giving special awards to both male and female students outside the Academy of Music c. 1927. (Right): Al Brown and Joseph Silverstein c. 1951. (Inset) Curtis's original charter.

international musical circles to enlist faculty of the highest caliber.

Although being founded and funded by a woman already made Curtis unique, another facet—its merit-based acceptance policy—further separated it from its conservatory peers. While in theory it only applied to students, in practice, it also extended to faculty and staff. The first Curtis class had male and female students as well as six Black students (at a time when racial segregation was the norm in the United States). In addition, the school's first registrar and dean were both women, and the early faculty roster boasted numerous female instructors, including Lea Luboshutz, Isabelle Vengerova, and

Marcella Sembrich.

In May 1927, Mrs. Bok went one step further in leveling the musical playing field through the creation of a tuition-free policy, made possible by an endowment she established, and from which students still benefit today. Thus, her belief that all qualified students regardless of race, gender, religion, or financial background deserved a place at Curtis was now truly immutable, both legally and financially.

However, Mrs. Bok's conviction that any able student belonged at Curtis was not embraced by all. In 1939 Marcel Tabuteau, principal oboist of the Philadelphia Orchestra and a longtime Curtis faculty member, accepted female oboist Thelma Neft as his student—only to retract the acceptance days later, citing the difficulty women wind players faced in getting placements after graduation. Ms. Neft, in the role

of David against Mr. Tabuteau's Goliath, wrote a letter to Mrs. Bok pleading her case and asking if anything could be done. Mrs. Bok conferred with newly-appointed Curtis director Randall Thompson and decided that Ms. Neft be enrolled as Mr. Tabuteau's student. "If she does well, she has as much right as anyone to be at the Institute, by the terms of the Catalogue," Mr. Thompson wrote. The episode marked a reaffirmation of Curtis's merit-based acceptance policy.

As Curtis entered its second and third decades, another outcome of its merit-based policy emerged, and it is perhaps more remarkable in that it was completely unintentional. As students, faculty, and

staff were accepted or employed solely on ability, this meant that varying nationalities, religions, racial backgrounds, and sexual orientations were represented in the Curtis community. Practicing this tacit acceptance in intolerant times allowed Richard Stöhr, an Austrian music professor of Jewish descent, to seek refuge at Curtis through an employment contract extended by Mrs. Bok, saving him from Nazi persecution. Gian-Carlo Menotti and Samuel Barber were not forced to hide their romantic relationship as, in the words of Seymour Lipkin (Piano '47 and faculty), "we never thought about it.... We knew they were living together. It never, never was an issue." And Louise Parker (Voice '50) and Theresa Green (Voice '50), both Black women, sang lead roles in the 1949 Curtis Opera production of *Eugene Onegin*—only three years after the first Black woman, Camilla Williams, signed with a major opera company.

These and many other stories demonstrate a degree of commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at Curtis, long before these three words became a part of the common vernacular. However, Curtis is not perfect, and stories that cause discomfort, consternation, and anger also need to be acknowledged and confronted as the school moves forward into its next 100 years. The Curtis Archives hope to play an integral role in the ongoing interpretation of the school's history, helping the Curtis community contextualize and understand it in a way that resonates with the 21st-century ethos.

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