



FACULTY HIGHLIGHT

Winds of Change

Imani Winds began its 25th year by embarking on a new role: as Curtis's first-ever faculty wind quintet. The trailblazing ensemble explains how they aim to foster community-minded artists.

BY VIVIEN SCHWEITZER



Above:
Imani Winds



→ **“ONE OF THE GREAT JOYS** of our first year at Curtis has been watching students open up to the possibilities of what they can do on their instruments,” said oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, a member of Imani Winds. “We’re telling them to do things they haven’t been told to do much, like communicate more. We talk a lot about what you can do on stage but also how to orient your career and your sense of what it means to be a musician.”

Imani, whose name derives from a Swahili word for faith, is certainly a dynamic example of a non-traditional career path. Founded in 1997 by the flutist Valerie Coleman to expand the repertoire for woodwind quintet, explore non-European genres, and attract more diverse audiences, the trailblazing ensemble has carved out an innovative and multifaceted path: by commissioning, teaching, recording, and maintaining a busy performing calendar. In 2016 Imani became part of a permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American His-

tory and Culture in Washington, D.C.

The group’s position as Curtis’s inaugural faculty wind quintet is the first such appointment for Imani, which has been ensemble in residence at institutions including the University of Chicago and Mannes School of Music in New York City. Imani has built a relationship with Curtis over the past few years, giving masterclasses and serving as faculty for the school’s summer programs. Bassoonist Monica Ellis said the group had many conversations with dean Paul Bryan before accepting the faculty appointment. She asked Mr. Bryan whether Curtis was truly ready for a group like Imani Winds, and the answer was a resounding yes. It became clear, she added, that Curtis was interested in adapting both its curriculum and culture.

“We didn’t want to come into the old guard. The school knows it has potential for growth and development and I’m inspired by the institutional willingness to evolve and to acknowledge that in many ways

they did not make the right decisions in several instances,” said Ms. Ellis, alluding to the 2020 report of external review by the firm Cozen O’Connor, which led to changes in many areas of the school.

“There is an acknowledgement of the need to evolve and recognize the people they are representing, the students. It’s one thing to be asked to be part of something that has an incredible history and honor, but then you think, ‘What am I walking into? They need me, but do I need them? Frankly, do I want to be a part of this institution, as revered as it is?’ For sure, the answer is yes, because I see that growth and acknowledgement of moving forward into the 21st century.”

EMPOWERING STUDENTS

The Imani musicians have no interest in a conservatory model where teachers are put on a pedestal. Instead, they aim to equip students with the confidence to effectively express their own ideas. The group also wants to change the mindset that students have limited options after graduation. “It’s possible to create the space you want to exist in,” said horn player Kevin Newton, who replaced Jeff Scott in 2021. “Imani is proof of that.”

Community engagement has always been a major component of Imani’s activities. In an endeavor called the Inspire, Mentor and Nurture Initiative (I.M.A.N.I.), the group coaches early-career African American and Latinx musicians, who work with the quintet to teach underserved children at community music programs nationwide. The Imani musicians are also thinking about how to better serve a much wider audience in Philadelphia. “We want to bring the creativity and the awesomeness of these students out into the community,” said Ms. Spellman-Diaz. “In the years to come, Curtis will be more a part of the fabric of the community of Philadelphia at large, and we’ll be happy

to be at the forefront of that.”

Curtis is renowned for producing top orchestral players. “We’re trying to shake things up a bit and show the students what’s out there,” said clarinetist Mark Dover. Imani is not trying to discourage anyone from pursuing an orchestral career, he added, but hopes to convey that chamber music can also be a viable and exciting option. “We’re trying to open their minds and are thinking about how artistically we can shape them into more well-rounded musicians.”

During coaching sessions, said Mr. Newton, the Imani musicians might ask students for their thoughts about a particular measure, focusing on deeper questions instead of logistics such as whether the A-flat is in tune. The students, who might be asked, “What does it mean and what are you trying to communicate?” are sometimes initially uncomfortable with the process, said Mr. Newton, adding that he’s been impressed with their willingness to be open-minded. “Every time they come into a coaching, growth has occurred, and that’s a really beautiful and invigorating thing to experience as a teacher.”

Throughout its career Imani has been an important role model for young musicians of color. During his undergraduate studies at the University of Virginia Commonwealth, Mr. Newton, who describes former and current Imani musicians as his “heroes,” began to lose interest in the horn and even in being a musician at all. “The reason was that I didn’t see myself or hear myself [represented] and I was not feeling the excitement I felt as a kid when I first picked up the instrument,” he said. His eureka moment came when he heard a visiting ensemble perform *Imoja*, by Ms. Coleman, the founding flutist. Mr. Newton felt reinvigorated, founded his own woodwind quintet, and realized that he could cre-

ate a meaningful career as a chamber musician and teacher. He calls joining Imani “a dream come true, to say the least.”

CHAMPIONING COMPOSERS OF COLOR

Ms. Spellman-Diaz said that Mr. Newton and flutist Brandon Patrick George, who replaced Ms. Coleman in 2018, “are invigorating us and inspiring us and bringing so much to the ensemble that we’re so proud of.” For Mr. George, Imani provides a platform to achieve his goals. “Just by seeing people of color on stage performing at a high level is in itself powerful and moving,” he said. “Seeing that the works the group has commissioned have become standard pieces in the repertory is incredible. Teaching and mentoring are incredibly important to me. Whether we play at a university or concert hall, we’re always taking opportunities to work with students and nurture them. I can’t think of another job that would let me do all those things on any given day.”

The Imani’s Legacy Commissioning Project (launched in 2008) has generated many works by composers of color, including Daniel Bernard Roumain, Vijay Iyer, Reena Esmail, Henry Threadgill, and Jessie Montgomery. Upcoming premieres include pieces by composers Andy Akiho, Miguel del Aguila, David Garner, Damien Geter, Yuan-Chen Li, and Mr. Scott. Other ongoing projects include “(im)migration: music of change,” a collaboration with the Catalyst Quartet inspired by stories from the African and Latin diasporas. Imani has frequently collaborated with jazz artists, including Wayne Shorter, Paquito D’Rivera, and Jason Moran.

According to Ms. Ellis, more composers have become interested in writing for winds and wind quintet, and the unsolicited submissions Imani receives are testament





to that. The quality of writing for wind ensemble has also dramatically improved. “I would like to think that we’ve had a lot to do that,” she said.

At Curtis, the ensemble is strongly encouraging students to think creatively while “kindly discouraging” standard wind repertory by composers such as Anton Reicha and Franz Danzi. “We believe in music that has a forward-thinking concept, was written more recently, and that in many ways is more challenging,” Ms. Ellis adds. “These kids are so talented that they can do anything.”

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