

The



Samuel Barber

ART



Randall Thompson

by Vanessa Ague

of the



Dai Wei

COMMUNITY

CONSERVATORIES HAVE OFTEN PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN COMMISSIONING NEW MUSIC, ONE FREE FROM THE PRESSURES OF THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD.

W

hen composers Dai Wei and James Ra were Curtis Institute of Music students, Curtis Symphony Orchestra rehearsals and performances felt life changing. Mr. Ra (Composition '04) remembers soaking in the culture of the ensemble and learning from conductor Otto-Werner Mueller. Ms. Dai (Composition '19), too, recalls learning from the orchestra, especially relishing the opportunities she had to practice writing for the ensemble. "Once [I got] to write for orchestra and to have the experience of hearing it played live," she said, "it helped me understand sound differently."

During the 2022–23 season, Ms. Dai and Mr. Ra will again write music for the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, to be toured to the West Coast as part of the Curtis on Tour program. And as Curtis looks to its centenary in 2024, the institution hopes to continue to build on its mission of commissioning works from leading international composers working in different styles.

"We've built our careers on the music of past great composers—the canon, if you will—but I think that it's part of our responsibility as artists to promote the music of our time," said Curtis President and CEO Roberto Díaz.

Conservatories occupy a distinct place in the commissioning landscape: Largely untethered from box office pressures, weekly subscription formats, and the regimented rehearsal schedules of professional orchestras, they can offer composers the luxury of workshoping new pieces over the course of several days or even weeks. There is time to critique, revise, prune, and sometimes record works long before they are heard by the public. And by jointly commissioning pieces with other arts organizations, conservatories can help to alleviate the problem of orphaned works—pieces that receive a premiere but don't have a life beyond it—since these works are presented in different places to different audiences.

At Curtis, giving composers the opportunity to write for the symphony orchestra has been a longstanding



Julius Eastman



Efrém Zimbalist

Jeanne Behrend

MISSION



James Ra

and evolving part of its focus since its founding by Mary Louise Curtis Bok in 1924. Works like Samuel Barber's *Toccata Festiva* (1960) and Jennifer Higdon's *blue cathedral* (1999) and Pulitzer Prize-winning Violin Concerto (2008) have been made possible, at least in part, by Curtis commissions.

ACCESS TO TOP COMPOSERS

At times, conservatories can benefit from working with the most established composers of our day. In January the Curtis Symphony Orchestra will give the world premiere of *Of Time and Love*, a viola concerto by Bright Sheng. By commissioning a veteran composer whose music has been performed by virtually every leading orchestra in the U.S., Curtis plans to give students access to Mr. Sheng through workshops, seminars, and rehearsals. "It's not every conservatory that can commission Bright Sheng and have him on-site to work on a premiere with the orchestra," says Nick DiBerardino (Composition '18 and Community Artist Fellow '19), Curtis's



Leonard
Bernstein



Gian Carlo Menotti

Lee
Hoiby

chair of composition studies and senior associate dean of performance studies. "That's a fantastic opportunity for our students. And we view commissioning as a way that the school can impact the field."

In early discussions about a commission, Mr. Sheng voiced a desire to write a piece expressly for Mr. Díaz, a violist he describes as a "virtuoso player with splendid technique" and a "very passionate musical re-creator." The piece highlights Mr. Díaz's skill and draws on the shared feelings of uncertainty that colored pandemic lockdowns in 2020 (its premiere was originally scheduled for 2020 but was pushed back as education went remote).

Spearheaded with the Suzhou Symphony Orchestra of China, *Of Time and Love* is one of several co-commissions that Curtis will introduce in the next couple of years. "Curtis is the one ponying up at the beginning of the process, and then reaching out to partner institutions to make it happen," Mr. DiBerardino explained. "Commissions are obviously a risk for an arts organization. They're not necessarily money-makers, nor is it automatically easier to sell tickets to a concert with a premiere on it, however much audiences value those new works. Curtis is well-positioned to begin the process of commissioning, inviting others on board to bring new music to the world."

Other planned co-commissions will highlight the newest members of Curtis's composition faculty: Steven Mackey, Amy Beth Kirsten, Jonathan Bailey Holland (Composition '96), and Mr. DiBerardino. These pieces are expected to highlight each composer's signature style: Mr. Mackey writes for electric guitar while Ms. Kirsten writes a large-scale theatrical work, for example.

TAKING NEW WORKS ON THE ROAD

Curtis also has a longstanding history of commissioning alumni to write music for its Curtis on Tour programs. While Ms. Dai and Mr. Ra are at different stages in their careers, both stand to benefit from the exposure. "It's very difficult for com-



Jonathan
Bailey
Holland

George
Rochberg

posers to gain traction in the orchestra world," says Mr. DiBerardino. "Orchestral commissions are rare, and until you become known, it's difficult to get things off the ground."

Ms. Dai and Mr. Ra will write openers for orchestral programs, each focusing on an angle or theme of their choice.

TIMELINE Premieres and Commissions at Curtis

May 5, 1930

A remarkable multi-student recital features the premieres of **Samuel Barber's** ('34) *Serenade* for String Quartet, Op. 1, **Gian Carlo Menotti's** ('33) *Eleven Variations for Piano on a Theme of Robert Schumann*, and works by **Jeanne Behrend** (Piano '34) **Alice Noonan** ('35), **Edith Evans Braun** (Piano '33), **Berenice Robinson** ('35), and **Eleanor Meredith** ('33).

Apr. 1, 1937

Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, his first mature opera and first critical success, premieres at the Academy of Music. The Curtis production is conducted by Fritz Reiner and features the soprano Margaret Daum in the title role.

1940

While studying at Curtis, **Leonard Bernstein** (Conducting '41) writes his Violin Sonata. He dedicates the piece to Raphael Hillyer (Violin '32).

Sept. 30, 1960

Barber's *Toccata Festiva* for organ, strings, trumpet, and timpani, op. 36a receives its premiere at the Academy of Music. The piece was a commission from Mary Louise Curtis Bok to inaugurate the hall's new pipe organ.

Feb. 27, 1963

The graduation recital by **Julius Eastman** (Composition and Piano '63) features works for voice and solo piano, and *The Blood*, for clarinet, piano, and nine singers.

Ms. Dai's piece will explore the "Awaken Lion" dance, which is presented during Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations to bring luck and prosperity. The dance features two people who move together underneath a lion costume; the southern style of the dance, which inspired her, often features strenuous martial



Nick DiBerardino

Randall Thompson

arts-influenced moves. It's also a display of artistry and strength of the mind and body—much like playing in an orchestra.

In Philadelphia, Mr. Ra's piece will be presented on a program alongside two major works of the classical repertoire: Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 and Robert Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor. In writing music to go with these tremendous works, Mr. Ra hopes to explore the immensities both composers inhabited. "Composers like Mahler and Schumann...were both looking for a way to [aim] higher, a way forward to a better and more hopeful place. For them, the most promising path ran through music," Mr. Ra said in an email. He added that when he considered the capabilities of the Curtis musicians, he was "moved to compose for larger forces."

"These kinds of commissions can be

career-changing opportunities," says Mr. DiBerardino. "It's a big audience. It's a big commission. It's a big performance. And that can be leveraged into future opportunities."

As Curtis plans for its 100th anniversary, more celebratory commissions are in the works. Several dozen alumni have been approached to write pieces for a solo instrument of their choice; these will be given online premieres in 2024 and 2025. Nearly 60 graduates have already confirmed their participation, including David Krane (Composition '74), whose piece, *Rittenhouse Square*, evokes his memories of walking around Rittenhouse Square, soaking in the brownstones and trees that line the park. He conceived it as a "mood piece, where I would go from dawn to dusk and do little vignettes... from the light to people going to school to drunk people at night," he said. It will be performed by pianist Cynthia Raim (Piano '77), who played a piano work that



George Walker

Steven Mackey



Amy Beth Kirsten

Nino Rota

Krane wrote while they were students decades ago.

For Mr. Díaz, each of these programs shows the importance of commissioning: They offer Curtis the ability to showcase the scope of today's music, and to express not only how we think about our current moment, but how we look towards the future. "Art is a running commentary on the world we live in," Mr. Díaz said. "Ultimately, it's what we leave behind."

Vanessa Ague is a violinist and writer who runs the experimental music blog, The Road to Sound, and writes for publications including The Wire, Pitchfork, and Bandcamp Daily. She is a recent graduate of the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY.

Feb. 9, 1977

Former faculty member **George Rochberg's** ('49) Quintet for piano and string quartet is premiered by the Concord String Quartet and pianist **Vladimir Sokoloff** (Accompanying '38).

Feb. 4, 1993

Gary Graffman (Piano '46) premieres the Piano Concerto No. 4 for Left Hand and Orchestra by **Ned Rorem** ('44). A Curtis commission, the concerto is introduced by André Previn conducting the Curtis Symphony Orchestra.

1999-2000

Curtis commissions a series of works to commemorate its 75th anniversary. They include Jennifer Higdon's *blue cathedral* and **Daron Hagen's** ('84) *Much Ado*, both for orchestra, and **Daniel Kellogg's** ('99) *Sound for the Century*, for brass quintet.

Feb. 2009

Hilary Hahn (Violin '99) gives the premiere of Jennifer Higdon's Violin Concerto with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Mario Venzano. **David Serkin Ludwig's** ('01) *From the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* is introduced in a student recital.

2017-18

Curtis's Ensemble 20/21 commissions a dozen works by **Elise Arancio**, **Aiyana Tedi Braun** ('20), **Viet Cuong** ('19), **Nick DiBerardino** ('18), **Andrew Moses** ('20), **Chelsea Komschlies** ('18), **Jie Wang** ('09), **Dai Wei** ('19), and **Elizabeth Younan** ('21).

Apr. 19, 2023

Faculty member **Richard Danielpour** will introduce a new piano piece, *Song Without Words*, as part of a recital honoring his 25 years on Curtis's faculty.