

*RECENT CURTIS
GRADUATES TAKE
THEIR FIRST
PROFESSIONAL
STEPS.*

**C A R E E R
O V E R T U R E S**

by Jeremy Reynolds



AS THE WORLD continues its halting recovery from the economic devastation of COVID-19, the long-term impacts on the arts sector continue to play out in surprising ways. Consider: while it's true that freelancing musicians have taken it on the chin for a couple of years now, a majority of players in larger orchestras kept most of their salaries and benefits, often thanks to federal and state money. Still, many chose to retire, leaving behind an unusually high number of open seats at a time when orchestras couldn't safely conduct auditions.

**THERE'S A BACKLOG OF OPENINGS
THAT NEED TO BE FILLED.**

Recent graduates are aware of this. Whether they're pursuing traditional orchestral positions or building a career with a variety of ensembles and other work, the shadow of the pandemic is still present in the minds of many Curtis Institute of Music alumni as they face this brave new world. Below are examples of several class of 2022 graduates taking the music world by storm.

LISA MARIE MAZZUCCO



ORCHESTRAL STABILITY

Take Gabriel (Gabe) Polinsky (Double Bass '22). Mr. Polinsky, a native of Lynbrook, N.Y., in December 2021 won a job with The Philadelphia Orchestra. He began playing with the ensemble in January. Still, the orchestral path wasn't always the plan. "The two careers that I envisioned myself in were either orchestral life or freelancing," he said. "Honestly, a freelance career may be more of what I really want." Freelancing offers more opportunities for variety and travel, as such players tend to work with a mix of large ensembles and chamber groups, and special projects. Mr. Polinsky was also considering additional schooling in historical performance.

What tipped him toward the orchestral life? Due to the pandemic, Mr. Polinsky elected to stay at Curtis for a fifth year of undergraduate work, to take stock after a year of trying to stay busy and exploring different kinds of playing—an opportunity he described as "extremely important." Ultimately, "I decided I wanted an orchestral job out of school to save some money and get experience in a more stable environment."

Another recent Curtis graduate, violinist Takumi Taguchi (Violin '22), recalled being sent home in March of his sophomore year in 2020 and attending FaceTime lessons. "I was really lucky to still be in school when the whole thing went down," he said. Instead of in-person orchestra rehearsals, Mr. Taguchi spent more time in orchestral excerpt classes over Zoom during the pandemic, focusing more on the very material that would win him a job in the Boston Symphony Orchestra in his very first orchestral audition. Such a feat is rare for a young player. He started in September with the orchestra.

"The pandemic accelerated my idea of what I wanted to do," Mr. Taguchi said. "I knew I was interested in becoming financially independent early on, and I've always had an interest in orchestral work." At the time of his audition, Boston was looking to fill four section violin jobs due to pandemic retirements. Mr. Taguchi, a Seattle native who had never even heard the Boston Symphony live, waltzed in and claimed a seat. "I practiced seriously, but my expectations weren't high," he said. "But most of the music industry is all freelancing

From left: Seraph Brass and Takumi Taguchi



and teaching. After the pandemic, I knew I was drawn to a major orchestra due to stability.” Like most orchestras, the BSO requires a probationary year of playing before awarding a new player tenure.

THE FREELANCE LIFE

Orchestras may boast good income and stability, but for some graduates, that isn’t the highest priority. Grace Takeda (Viola ’21, CAF ’22) chose to remain in Philadelphia after graduation and is building a life as a performer, educator, and advocate. She’s now the associate director of institutional partnerships for a New York City-based non-profit, Musical Mentors Collaborative, and she performs as a guest musician with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. “Honestly, I’m still figuring out how to balance it all, but I love everything that I’m doing right now,” she said.

Ms. Takeda is a graduate of Curtis’s Community Artist Fellowship program, which partners students with schools, hospitals, or prisons to foster community development. She worked with an elementary school in north Philadelphia for a year on a music and literacy project of her own creation she calls MUSEical Tales, which combines lessons about storytelling through music and books. “For an eight-week session, we focused on a book called *Anita and the Dragons*,” she explained, adding that she brings in guest musicians to work with the kids on understanding different aspects of storytelling.

Ms. Takeda also performs in a string quartet, the Vera Quartet, and is trying to “kick things up” on that side of her career. “I had a lot of time to tune into myself and what I’m really passionate about during the last couple years,” she said. “One of the best things about my time at Curtis was teachers and professors advising me to try other things and take orchestra auditions later if I want to. That really reassured me.”

Cristina Cutts Dougherty (Tuba ’22) is another young musician building a career based on multiple interests and talents. A tubist who often moved as a child, she earned her undergraduate degree at the Colburn School in Los Angeles before moving to Philadelphia to pursue a postgraduate certificate at Curtis. Like Mr. Polinsky, she extended her program by a year—from two years to three—during the pandemic. “Curtis is a really special place to be a tuba player, as there’s only one tuba player at any given time,” she said. “It was just me—I got tons of individual attention.”

She’s taken several orchestral auditions but has yet to win a job, and that remains the ultimate goal due to the security of such positions. In the meantime, she won a job performing with Seraph Brass, an all-female brass ensemble that takes Ms. Dougherty on the road every other week across the country. “The biggest COVID change for me is I’m a little more flexible about

“THE PANDEMIC ACCELERATED MY IDEA OF WHAT I WANTED TO DO.”

—TAKUMI TAGUCHI

what I want as a musician,” she said. “During my whole undergraduate program, I knew I wanted an orchestra job.” Now, she’s in a gap familiar to many young instrumentalists, that space between school and winning a full-time job. She’s finding purpose in teaching and performing and is currently working on a book about the history of female brass players in American orchestras. She kicked off the project early in the pandemic with a grant and an advisor at Penguin Random House and is hoping to finish and find a publisher within a year, all the while continuing to take auditions as positions become available.

OPERA RESIDENCY

There are a few young artist programs in the orchestra field, but in the world of opera, there are numerous such programs designed to continue a young singer’s training as their voice continues to develop. Lindsey Reynolds (Opera ’22), a soprano who graduated from Curtis in May with her master’s degree, has just entered such a program at the Lyric Opera of Chicago’s Ryan Opera Center. Originally from New Orleans, Ms. Reynolds spent the summer in Chicago preparing for the current season. “As a young artist, we cover lead roles and sing smaller roles,” she said. “It’s a program with lots of learning by doing, typically for about two years though some people stay longer.”

Before graduating, she was considering an additional year at Curtis or a young artist program to start the next stage of her singing career. “I hope to make a lot of connections with companies and managers in the next couple years,” she said.

Ms. Reynolds added that the pandemic highlighted the risks of such a career, with “performances getting canceled left and right,” but, like her fellow recent graduates, she remains undeterred and optimistic about a career in opera. “I never really thought about changing professions,” she said. “The residency program route worked out—the audition was exciting but nerve wracking, and I’m so happy it turned out this way and for what comes next.”

Clockwise from top left: Lindsey Reynolds, Gabriel Polinsky, Cristina Cutts Dougherty, and Grace Takeda

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