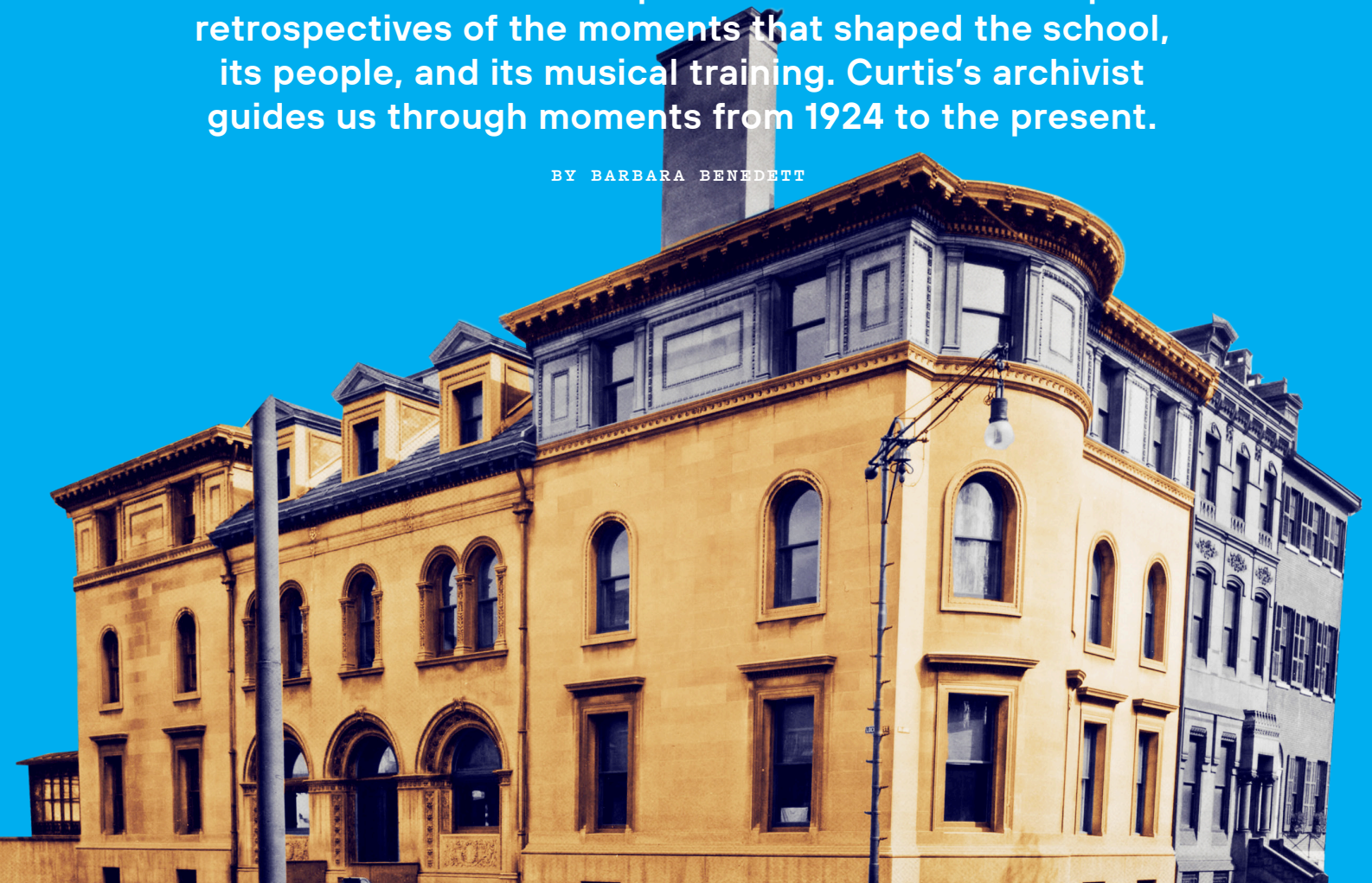


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Impactful Moments IN CURTIS HISTORY

As Curtis's centennial celebration gets underway this season, *Overtones* presents the first of multiple retrospectives of the moments that shaped the school, its people, and its musical training. Curtis's archivist guides us through moments from 1924 to the present.

BY BARBARA BENEDETT



AFTER 100 YEARS, it is easy to underestimate what the 1924 opening of the Curtis Institute meant to classical music in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Orchestra was just 24 years old when our doors opened. The Philadelphia Grand Opera Company was only eight. What would Mary Louise Curtis Bok's music school, named for her father, contribute? Eyes were on us, and for good reason: Mrs. Bok planted the school, full of famous faculty as well as students from all walks of life, right on Rittenhouse Square—in a mansion, no less.

Curious Philadelphians were quickly satisfied. Soon, the local ensembles were not only heavily populated by Curtis students but also performing compositions written by Curtis composers, and sometimes under the baton of Curtis conductors. The school's influence on classical music grew exponentially, expanding past Philadelphia as new generations of graduates traveled to other cities and countries, bringing with them the skills they honed from some of the most prominent, trailblazing musicians of their time.

As the archivist for the Curtis Institute of Music, I am proud to be a part of the school's centennial celebration. Below, I have listed some points on Curtis's timeline that have, in ways both significant and subtle, impacted Curtis. I had many more options, but in reflecting upon this list, I believe it illustrates the range of events that led us to where we are today.



1924 Mary Louise Curtis Bok bought the George Childs Drexel Mansion at 1726 Locust Street to house the school, the Sibley house on 18th Street to hold administrative offices, and the Cramp Mansion at 1720 Locust to house the strings and music theory departments. Curtis's charter was signed on April 18, 1924.

1927 The opening of Casimir Hall (now Field Concert Hall). Without a dedicated performance space, rehearsals and concerts were held in the "Assembly Room" (now the Common Room). The concert hall, completed in 1927, incorporated the Drexel mansion's greenhouse and a small theater room, supplying enough seats for students and faculty. To

combat noise pollution from city traffic, architect Horace Wells Sellers chose a concrete building with no external openings. The inaugural recital took place on December 3, 1927, with a performance by Curtis's director and famed pianist, Josef Hofmann, after whose father the hall was named.

November 27, 1928 Dedication of the Curtis organ. Cyrus H. K. Curtis, who had given the organ as a birthday present to his daughter, Mary Louise Curtis Bok, was the first to play it. A recital by organ faculty member Lynnwood Farnam followed.

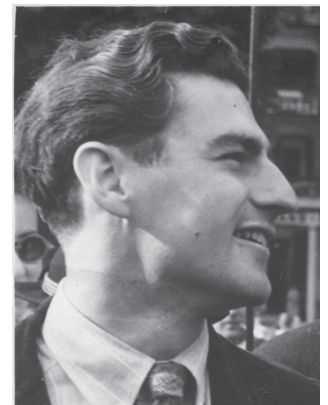
1928–29 school year One of the most notable aspects of the school, its tuition-free policy, is enacted. Initially, students paid tuition fees adjusted for income, but Josef Hofmann soon encouraged Mrs. Bok to offer free tuition to attract the best applicants. The tuition-free policy—still a bedrock of the school—also made it possible to reach out to Philadelphia's large immigrant population, who were still gaining financial security in the city, as well as urge international students to attend. With that, Curtis became the first American music conservatory to offer free tuition.



1930 Curtis harp student Edna Phillips (Harp '31) becomes the first female member of the Philadelphia Orchestra. With the encouragement of her teacher, Carlos Salzedo, Ms. Phillips auditioned for the second harp position. However, after the audition, music director Leopold Stokowski revealed that the orchestra's principal harpist would not be returning due to an injury. Mr. Stokowski offered the position to Ms. Phillips, who was just 23 years old.

1934 The first commencement of the school was held. Curtis had held end-of-year ceremonies from its start—although director Josef Hofmann was never fond of the practice—but it did not originally offer a bachelor's degree program. Coordinating with the University of Pennsylvania, Curtis began offering courses for college

credit in 1926. It took a few more years to set up a full degree program. As such, 1934 saw the first students to complete the bachelor's program. There were 77 graduates in all, including Samuel Barber, Orlando Cole, Max Aronoff, Jeanne Behrend, Jorge Bolet, Alexander McCurdy, and Rose Bampton.



April 1, 1937 Curtis staged the world premiere of Gian Carlo Menotti's (*Composition '33*) *Amelia Goes to the Ball* (*Amelia al Ballo*) at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. Two years later, it was performed by the Metropolitan Opera—proving the work to be more than a local success. The one-act opera buffa not only cemented Menotti's status as one of the great composers and librettists of the 20th century, but also left no doubt that Curtis graduates

were making their mark on classical music.



1943 Mary Louise Curtis Bok became Mary Louise Zimbalist with her marriage to violinist and Curtis's director, Efrem Zimbalist. In his account of their decision to "tie the knot," Efrem asserts that Mary proposed to him. Two years before, Mr. Zimbalist began his 27-year tenure as Curtis's director and helped bring the school back from the financial uncertainty caused by the Great Depression and World War II.

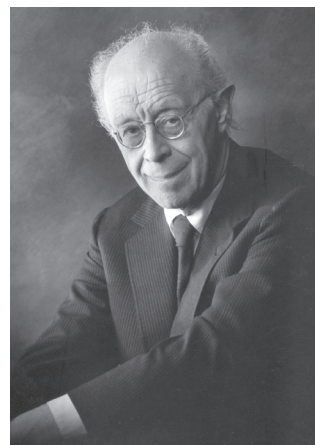
January 31, 1949 A fire broke out on the third floor of 1726 Locust Street when insulation ignited after a worker's blowtorch came too close. The blaze took three hours to get under control, although most of the damage was contained to the roof. A major concern then was the library, still housed in 1726. The *New York Times* noted the 15,000 scores and books that would have perished had the blaze been more severe.

Early 1950s Several protests were staged in Rittenhouse Square by activists against American involvement in the Korean War. Many students joined the protest, carting along instruments and lending their voice to the anti-war effort. Later alumni recall attending similar protests during the

Vietnam War. Whether through music or marches, students and faculty continue to address issues of social justice.

1968 Rudolf Serkin, who had just succeeded Efrem Zimbalist as director of the Curtis Institute of Music, asked Eugene Ormandy, the Philadelphia Orchestra's music director since 1936, to join the Curtis faculty and lead the Curtis Symphony Orchestra (CSO). Mr. Ormandy accepted but insisted that his salary be donated to help students in need. He invited guest conductors of the Philadelphia Orchestra to work with the CSO, allowing students to gain experience under the baton of conductors known the world over—a practice that continues to this day. Mr. Ormandy, who referred to the Curtis orchestra as his "other orchestra," remained on the faculty until 1977.

1970 Mary Louise Curtis Bok Zimbalist died on January 4, 1970, at the age of 93.



1977 After a period of leadership turnover and budgetary uncertainty, Mr. Serkin revived the opera program, which had been languishing after World War II-era budget cuts, and increased chamber ensemble activities. During this period the school made steps for the



creation of its advancement department and raised funds to allow for increased programming and a more public profile for the school.

1983 Renowned violinist and conductor Oscar Shumsky (Violin '36) joined the CSO on its first summer residency at the Rencontres Musicales d'Evian, a festival in France. By 2007, Curtis had expanded its touring activities with Curtis on Tour, a program bolstered in 2016 by a \$55 million gift from Nina Baroness von Maltzahn.

1986 *Overtones* returns. The school's journal, named by Mrs. Bok and established in 1929, returned from a long hiatus. The original monthly format ran until 1932, when the Depression forced a stop to publication. It

made a comeback semiannually from 1937 to 1940, when World War II halted production again. One issue was printed for the school's 50th anniversary. But the publication did not return in force until the spring of 1986.

1988 Curtis bought 1718 Locust Street to accommodate offices and added teaching studio space.

1991 Studio II-J becomes a black box theater. It was the concept of Ralph Batman, then administrator of the voice and opera department.

November 14–15, 1995 George Walker (Piano and Composition '45) conducts a two-day master class for the school's five composition majors. One year later, Walker became the first African American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music, awarded for his composition, *Lilacs*.

1997 Curtis launches its website, Curtis.edu. Two years earlier, Curtis activated its first two email accounts through the regional network PALINET using the Health Sciences Library Consortium server at the College of Physicians.

1990s The city of Philadelphia installed a historical marker on the sidewalk in front of 1726 Locust St. honoring Philadelphia-born composer and Curtis alum, Vincent Persichetti (Conducting '39). Persichetti went on to teach at the Philadelphia Conservatory and Juilliard. A student brass quartet performed at the unveiling. To the amusement of many, "Juilliard" had been misspelled (missing the first "i"). The sign was quickly replaced, and the error corrected. The unlucky marker was destroyed in 2014, when hit by a car.





August 2011 Lenfest Hall, located at 1616 Locust Street, is completed. Named in honor of Gerry and Marguerite Lenfest, who supplied substantial funding for site acquisition, design, and construction, it was designed by renowned Philadelphia architects Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates. Lenfest Hall honors the streetscape of its venerable historic block, while supplying modern class, rehearsal, and performance spaces; dorm rooms; and a dining hall.

2011–12 A new sound arrives at the school with the debut of the classical guitar studio led by David Starobin and Jason Vieaux.

2013–14 After a three-year curriculum review, the school officially adopts the “learn by doing” instructional strategy, applying the research-based principle that *how* teachers instruct is of equal importance to *what* they instruct.

January 15, 2018, Martin Luther King Jr. Day: Students, faculty, and staff converge at South Philadelphia High School for a day of service. All involved spent the morning cleaning, painting, and decorating—giving the band room a needed facelift. Community Artist Fellow Nozomi Imamura (Trumpet '15, CAF '18), who taught

beginning instrumentalists at the high school, encouraged the Curtis community to honor the day by improving the environment for budding South Philadelphia musicians.

2020 As the world was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Curtis embarked on its first foray into wholesale distance learning and its first online commencement. In May the school created its first “socially distanced” class photo for the class of 2020.

2020–22 While the campus was closed during the pandemic, 1726 Locust Street underwent a major restoration, which modernized some features (e.g., renovated classrooms, the installation of the Performance Innovation Lab, modern HVAC capabilities, and an elevator) and restored others, like the original woodwork and flooring. Modern improvements in fire safety enabled the removal of the glass enclosure around the main staircase and balcony—the bane of alumni from the 1960s forward—making the Common Room once again an inviting space for the Curtis community and visitors alike.

Barbara Benedett is the senior archivist and manager of curation and preservation at Curtis.

Three Curtis Trailblazers



A violist, violinist, and pioneering record producer, **Alfred Brown** (Viola '52) began his career as a member of the NBC Radio Orchestra, under the baton of Arturo Toscanini. Entering the then-white, male-dominated studio recording business, Mr. Brown went on to produce albums by Lena Horne, Ron Carter, and the funk band Mandrill, among others. He toured with Ray Charles and Paul Simon and appeared on film soundtracks and in Broadway shows. He was honored with the coveted National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences' Award for Most Valuable Studio Musician in 1984. Mr. Brown died in 2013 at age 84.



Fred Cardin (Violin '27), born in Oklahoma in 1895, was a member of the Quapaw Nation. Also known as Pejawah, he led a multifaceted career, performing early on with the Kansas City Symphony and as a member of the Indian String Quartet, an ensemble that toured on the Chautauqua Circuit. After graduating from Curtis, he settled in Reading, Pa., where he directed the Reading Opera Society and taught in the public schools. He composed numerous works including the *Cree War Dance* for violin and piano. Mr. Cardin died in 1960.



The first African American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize in music, **George Walker** (Composition and Piano '45) studied piano and composition at Curtis. He settled in New Jersey and worked in academia while composing more than 90 pieces, including the lush *Lyric for Strings* (1946). He also wrote concertos, string quartets, and a series of symphonies; his *Sinfonia No. 5* concerns the 2015 Charleston, S.C. church massacre. In addition to the Pulitzer, Mr. Walker received seven honorary doctorates, including one from Curtis, in 1997.