

A TEMPO



Boldly Going Where No Curtis Ensemble Has Gone Before

A *Star Trek* cruise offers an unusual performance opportunity for alumni and faculty.

BY PATRICIA K. JOHNSON

A CHAMBER ENSEMBLE of Curtis Institute of Music alumni performs for science fiction fans on a Caribbean cruise called *Star Trek: The Cruise VII*.

Is that sentence the result of a strangely-themed Mad Libs exercise? Nope, it actually happened this past February—thanks to actor John de Lancie.

Mr. de Lancie is well-known for his role as Q in the *Star Trek* franchise. He's

also the son (and namesake) of former Philadelphia Orchestra principal oboist John de Lancie ('40), who served on the Curtis faculty from 1954 to 1985 and as the school's director for the last eight of those years. John de Lancie, the son, was born in Philadelphia and told the *Inquirer* last year that "I sort of grew up with the Curtis. I think of it very fondly..." So, of course, when Curtis asked him if he

would take part in an eight-city tour in March 2023 narrating Stravinsky's *L'histoire du Soldat*, he readily agreed.

As it turns out, there was also a new work on that program, composed by Nick DiBerardino ('18), dean and chair of composition studies. Mr. DiBerardino just happens to be a longtime *Star Trek* fan, so naturally, his piece was inspired by the series. Entitled *Darmok & Jalad*, the work is "an unabashedly nerdy piece of music," Mr. DiBerardino says. The title is a reference to one of his favorite episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, where the crew encounters a spacefaring civilization called the Tamarians. The *Enterprise* crew is unable to understand the Tamarians' language, even with the ship's universal translator. Their computer can translate the Tamarian language into understandable (individual) words, but those words seem to have no connection, making the phrases entirely incomprehensible.

As a result, the *Enterprise* crew lacks the necessary context to understand the



meaning behind Tamarian words “darmok” and “jalad.” “For example,” Mr. DiBerardino says, “saying ‘Romeo and Juliet’ might mean something like ‘star-crossed love’ for you and me, but that’s only true if we’ve both read Shakespeare.”

Although most Trekkers (especially *TNG* fans) will likely immediately get the title reference, Mr. de Lancie admits that he didn’t. “I had no idea what he was talking about. None. I thought he said something about gelato!” he admits. But once he heard the piece in performance, he loved it.

The Tamarian language contains bits and pieces of familiar words used in a strange context. Similarly, *Darmok & Jalad* contains some of the underlying vocabulary of tonal composers, which may feel familiar, but rendered into something unique. It takes the standard grammar from Mozart and Beethoven and twists the once familiar patterns into something “slightly strange,” says Mr. DiBerardino.

But the 2023 tour was only the beginning of the Curtis/*Star Trek* performing relationship. During the tour, Mr. de Lancie invited Mr. DiBerardino and Curtis to participate in the February *Star Trek* cruise, performing Curtis/*Star Trek*-themed shows for passengers. Mr. DiBerardino and Curtis readily agreed.

Following months of planning and writing, Curtis set sail for *Star Trek: The Cruise VII* on February 22, 2024, from Port Canaveral, Fla. The trip included several days at sea and stops at Willemstad, Curaçao, and Oranjestad, Aruba, before returning to Port Canaveral on February 29. In addition to Mr. de Lancie and Mr. DiBerardino, the Curtis ensemble included Yan Liu (Clarinet ’20), Joshua Butcher (Bassoon ’16), Tessa Ellis (Trumpet ’17), János Sutyák (Trombone ’17), Sijia Huang (Timpani and Percussion ’20), Bella Hristova (Violin ’08), Robin Brawley

(Double Bass ’18), and Chelsea Komschlies (Composition ’18).

During the weeklong cruise, Curtis was the focus of three concerts. The opener was a preview of a work they’d perform later in the week: *Star Trek*-themed medleys arranged by Ms. Komschlies. Mr. DiBerardino says that was a galvanizing moment for him: as each song in the medley began, the audience would erupt in cheers. “They’d get it immediately—and they loved it,” he says.

On the third night of the cruise, the ensemble performed an hour-long show about Curtis, led by Mr. de Lancie, called “The Story of Curtis Through a Personal Lens.” For months leading up to the voyage, Mr. de Lancie researched the school’s history and drew upon his own childhood memories here to craft this moving and personal look at the school. Woven throughout were excerpts of standard classical music repertoire arranged by current master’s student Alistair Coleman (’22) for the musicians in the Curtis ensemble. Mr. de Lancie’s enthusiasm for the school throughout the cruise led to a packed house for this show, with audience members staying for a wide-ranging Q&A session following the performance.

Their final show featured three works, including *We Believe*, created by Mr. de Lancie and Mr. DiBerardino, and consisting of text from a 1971 speech by *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry. Mr. Roddenberry’s speech unfolds much like a credo, putting forth the ideals he wanted *Star Trek* to live up to: that it would serve to connect otherwise disparate people, underline their commonalities, and bolster mutual understanding and acceptance.

And given how enthusiastically the *Star Trek* cruise audiences and Curtis musicians embraced their experiences together on this cruise, maybe Roddenberry was really onto something.



Make Way for More Maestros

Conducting program will expand its training in opera and symphonic repertoire in 2024–25.

The podiums at Curtis are about to get a lot busier.

The school announced in April that it is expanding the scope of its conducting program, hiring pedagogues James Ross (Conducting ’89) as the director of orchestral studies and promoting current faculty member Yannick Nézet-Séguin to head of conducting. The number of conducting students will increase from two to three and the program’s duration will lengthen from two to three years.

The program expansion, which takes effect in the 2024–25 school year, is designed to deepen and enhance training in both orchestral and opera conducting—patterned on Mr. Nézet-Séguin’s own versatile career as music and artistic director of The Philadelphia Orchestra and music director of the Metropolitan Opera. In addition to studying opera conducting with Mr. Nézet-Séguin, students will work with the school’s voice and opera department under vocal studies chair and principal opera coach Miloš Repický. Among other conservatory conducting programs, the primary focus is typically on orchestral, choral, or wind conducting, but seldom opera.

Mr. Ross is the founding orchestra director of the National Youth Orchestra of the USA, run by Carnegie Hall, where he oversees all artistic and educational activities. He discusses plans for the program in an interview on page 20.