

A photograph of a conductor, James Ross, in a teal shirt, leading an orchestra in a concert hall. He is holding a baton and looking upwards with an expressive face. The background shows the wood-paneled walls of the hall and the silhouettes of orchestra members.

CONDUCTING

BUSINESS

with

JAMES ROSS

RETURNING TO HIS ALMA MATER TO TEACH, A CONDUCTING
PEDAGOGUE CONSIDERS THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE.

BY LISA B. ROBINSON



WHEN JAMES ROSS (Conducting '89) joins the Curtis faculty as director of orchestral studies in 2024–25, the dynamic pedagogue will already be a familiar face around the school. His recent experience includes running a three-week team-building workshop to kick off the Curtis Symphony Orchestra's fall 2023 semester. And some may be familiar with him through his other roles: as orchestra director of Carnegie Hall's National Youth Orchestra of the USA (since its founding in 2013); as a professor and director of orchestral activities at the University of Maryland for 16 years; and as music director of the Alexandria Symphony Orchestra since 2018.

A self-described improviser, horn-blower, questioner of concert rituals, and man who likes to move, Mr. Ross first began conducting while an undergraduate at Harvard. He later became the first American member of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, serving as principal horn from 1981 to 1984. In an email conversation, Mr. Ross spoke with *Overtones* about his new role and aspirations for Curtis's expanded conducting program.

Could you provide some insight into the specific responsibilities and functions of this role, and how it complements the existing structure at Curtis?

Now comes the hard part—and the fun part! I believe in the broadest sense that I've been invited to join the Curtis faculty to help take responsibility for the quality and energy of the educational experience for all members of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra. My job will be to serve as a guide for our players towards learning what playing in an orchestra joyously entails. This goal will be approached through our intensive [team building] start of each semester, orchestra reading sessions, Saturday conductors' labs (which I will lead in tandem with Yannick [Nézet-Séguin]), and by keeping a finger to the wind in seeing how the orchestra schedule affects the lives of our students.

How do you envision the coordination between your role and that of Miloš Repický, Hirsig Family Chair

in Vocal Studies, who will teach opera conducting?

The new component of our symphonic and operatic conducting program is indeed the committed work of our three [Rita E. Hauser Conducting] Fellows within the Curtis Opera program—learning all that goes into the preparation of an opera performance. Miloš will be our organizational partner for that component and my partner-in-crime in devising other ways, beyond the three Curtis Opera Theatre performances, that the world of opera can gently infect the lives of all our players year-round.

What are some hallmarks of your teaching philosophy and/or methods, and how did you arrive at them?

As a teacher, before I arrive at saying anything that needs to change, I am first asking myself, "What would my body or mind be doing to produce this result? What would it feel like?" I live with that empathetic response...and then, if moved to do so, I let my own body/mind improvise a commentary

or coaching in some direction. You can only change people by first being with them where they are. Of the many important influences in the grab bag of my life, I'd especially want to credit the Feldenkrais method, gymnastics, books about horseback riding, and having been involved with the Quakers during my time in Philadelphia as all having shaped me.

How has the training of conductors evolved since your time as a student at Curtis?

I believe conductors today need to be advocates for wider swaths of musical styles and diverse repertoire, to be vivid storytellers, and to be psychologically astute leaders of the great collection of humans arrayed before them. Although we stand in front of (and slightly above) them, our support of orchestral players is actually from underneath—we are lifting them, and the music, up. We are looking more for amicable, inspiring partnerships these days than for challenging power-based confrontations. The perceived divide between player and conductor has dwindled over time, thank goodness.

Are there ways that your work at Curtis could benefit non-orchestral students?

I believe conducting is a tremendously helpful potential gateway in the music-making of pianists, composers, and singers. Anything that pulls pianists out of the isolated sound world of the practice room is a boon. This year already we were able to pull Curtis pianists into the world of conducting in a few ways, such as Friday "piano labs," in which conductors lead piano quintets, and a January lab devoted to conducting from

the keyboard.

Composers also work in isolation, imagining and inscribing sounds, but then are suddenly confronted with the challenge of leading others in their works in jarringly public settings. I believe composers make the most interesting conductors! And opera singers need to be innately responsive to the physical language of conducting since they live with its influence all the time. Singers who conduct often get a great sound out of the orchestra since they are used to letting their bodies "be" the sound. This aligns with the principle that all good conducting is based on inner singing.

Many conductors are pianists or violinists. Do you feel that being a horn player gives you a unique perspective?

As horn players, we learn to transpose very early on, which is a vital help in score-reading. We also develop a strong "inner hearing" of the note to be played. Otherwise, chances are, we won't find it. We are a fulfillment of the strengths or weakness of our expectations! I would also say that we are especially sensitive to the psychology of the groups we play in and the conductors we play for. It has been of great help to me as a conductor to have sat on the receiving end of bad leading when I'm about to do something hard on my instrument. I believe and hope that has made me a better supporter of others when they are facing their own Waterloos.

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Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.