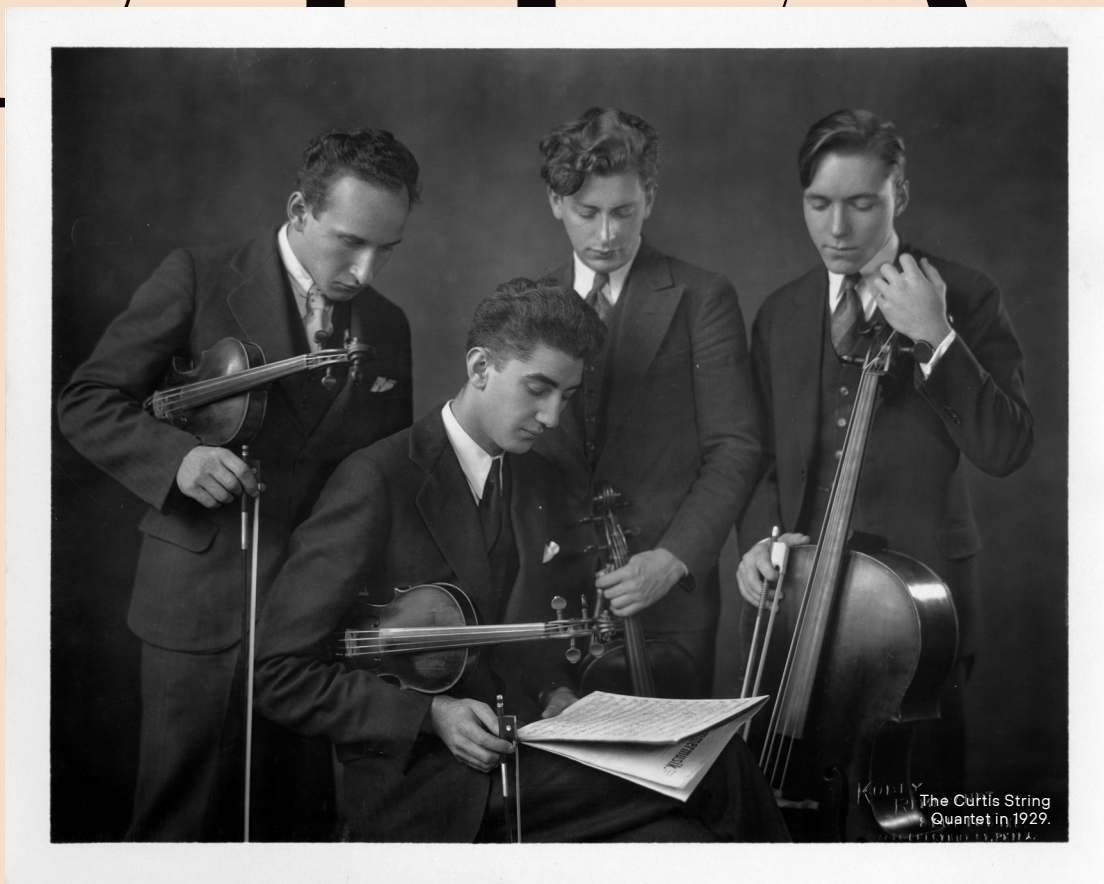


THINKING
OUTSIDE

THE CHAMBER



Once a quirky outsider pursuit, chamber music came to hold a central place in American classical music—and at Curtis—during the 20th century.

BY HEIDI WALESON

AMBER

In the Curtis Institute of Music's 100 years, the American musical landscape has undergone seismic changes. For example: When Curtis was founded, chamber music was considered an avocational sideline rather than a professional goal. Today, it is a vibrant part of the musical scene, and training at Curtis and elsewhere has embraced that evolution.

Although Curtis's initial focus was on training soloists and orchestra players, chamber music played a role early on. Louis Bailly, a French violist and former member of the Flonzaley Quartet, supervised the school's chamber music program, even initiating a series of well-attended concerts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A fixture of that series was the Curtis String Quartet, a student ensemble which soon launched a performing career, touring in major American cities, and playing for FDR at the White House.

In 1935, the Quartet visited London as part of the Silver Jubilee of King George V, for which several Curtis musicians were sent to represent American classical music. In addition to becoming the first

American-trained quartet to play in Europe, it also made a recording of Samuel Barber's *Dover Beach* with the composer ('34) singing. The quartet performed on historical instruments owned by Curtis—two Strad violins, an Amati viola, and a Montagnana cello. In 1939, the Curtis Quartet was named the official string quartet of the school.

Chamber music fell on hard times during the school's financial cutbacks of the 1930s and '40s. In 1942, the Quartet left Curtis though members would return as faculty in the mid-1950s. The idea that musicians who devoted themselves to chamber music would not be taken seriously as soloists by managers held sway; even violinist Efrem Zimbalist, who became Curtis's director in 1941, felt that chamber music was something that musicians did in retirement.

This attitude changed when pianist Rudolf Serkin became director of Curtis in 1968. Mr. Serkin was devoted to chamber music. He, along with Adolf and Herman Busch and Marcel Blanche and Louis Moyse, had founded the Marlboro Music Festival in 1951.



LEFT TO RIGHT
Mischa Schneider
coaches Sara
Johnson (Violin
'80), Anne Williams
(Cello '76), and
Dorian Rence (Viola
'76), and Steven
De Groote (Piano
'77) in 1974.; Arnold
Steinhardt gives a
violin lesson that
same year; Toyin
Spellman-Diaz
of Imani Winds
coaches a student
ensemble in 2019.
Photos by George
Krauss, Pete Chec-
chia (Imani Winds).

Conceived as a summer retreat where busy orchestral and solo musicians could delve into the chamber music repertoire for their own edification and pleasure, the festival had become a mecca, attracting advanced students and professionals on all instruments, who played together as equals in their ensembles rather than as coaches and students.

The chamber music gospel soon spread beyond the borders of Vermont. In 1964, three Curtis alumni—Arnold Steinhardt (Violin '59), John Dalley (Violin '57), and Michael Tree (Violin '55)—got together with cellist David Soyer at Marlboro and formed the Guarneri String Quartet. Steven Tenenbom (Viola '79), violist of the Orion String Quartet, sees the Guarneri as a key component of the chamber music explosion of the 1970s and 1980s. “All four of them were soloists, and when they came together, they elevated the technical polish of quartet playing—the quality of sound, ensemble, and unanimity—without losing their individuality,” he says. “They brought chamber music to an extremely high level of artistry. And they were playing 100 concerts a year, so everyone wanted to do it.”

A handful of string quartets, including the Juilliard String Quartet, which was founded in 1946, were already active. The Philadelphia Woodwind Quintet, comprised of principal players from the Philadelphia Orchestra, also had a vigorous recording presence in the 1950s and '60s. Yet the success of the Guarneri seemed to set off a chain reaction: the Cleveland and Vermeer Quartets were founded in 1969; the Tokyo Quartet in 1970; TASHI, with pianist Peter Serkin ('64), formed at Marlboro in 1973 to play Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*; the Emerson Quartet in 1976. Many more would follow.

A MIND-BENDING BEETHOVEN EXPERIENCE

Though Mr. Steinhardt's student years at Curtis were about learning to be a virtuoso soloist, one experience offered a hint of something different: Mr. Dalley, a fellow student, asked him to work on the Beethoven Op. 130 quartet. “We worked on it all semester long and performed it in Curtis Hall,” Mr. Steinhardt recalls. “It was a mind-bending experience for me. It suddenly opened the doors in my mind to the power of that repertoire and also the comradely nature of playing chamber music, as opposed to standing in front of an orchestra playing a concerto.” An invitation to Marlboro in 1959 led him further in that direction, where he and the other musicians who would become the Guarneri “were like planets entering a gravitational field.”

Mr. Serkin brought the Guarneri Quartet, along with two Marlboro stalwarts—cellist Mischa Schneider and violinist Felix Galimir—to Curtis as chamber music faculty. “We were warmly received,” Mr. Steinhardt says. “Serkin's Marlboro proved that chamber music was no longer a second-class endeavor. Things really changed at Curtis.” For Mr. Steinhardt, it was not just the repertoire, but the process. “Chamber music is the great teacher of music,” says Mr. Steinhardt, who chronicles his time in the Guarneri in his book, *Indivisible by Four: A String Quartet in Pursuit of Harmony*. “Sometimes a friend will behave badly, and I'll say to my wife, that person could never play in a string quartet. You must have respect for a view that is not your own and then, to your surprise, it becomes one that you buy into.”

When touring and teaching schedules were complicated, he would trade off chamber music coaching duties with other faculty, which became a lesson in it-



launched in 1973; many more festivals followed.

Competitions helped boost chamber music's visibility. The Naumburg Competition made chamber music an annual feature in 1971. In 1973, the Fischhoff Competition was founded expressly to promote chamber music, and in 1983, the Banff Competition began. Competition/management operations also recognized that chamber music was on the upswing: Concert Artists Guild, founded in 1951, selected its first chamber group, the Mannes Trio, in 1967; in 1970, Young Concert Artists, in its 10th year, chose its first ensemble, the Tokyo String Quartet.

By 1992, when Chamber Music America published a comprehensive study of the field, the service organization counted 1,120 chamber ensembles and 1,400 presenters. Ninety percent of the ensembles and 50 percent of the presenters had been founded in the previous two decades. One of CMA's first grant programs funded residencies, which created additional employment for chamber musicians; the 1992 report found that 17 percent of presenters offered residencies. This combination of performing, teaching, residency work, and in some cases, recording, helped create a professional path for chamber music.

Mr. Tenenbom arrived at Curtis in 1975 already a "chamber music nut," and Curtis offered him plenty of opportunity to pursue it. Felix (continued on page 30)

self. "If I say that passage is blue, and in the next lesson, Peter Wiley says it's green, it's their job as musicians to choose whether it is blue or green." Mr. Steinhardt taught at Curtis until he retired in 2023. One of his many chamber music students was Roberto Díaz, now Curtis's president.

Along with the increased number of ensembles, the 1970s and '80s saw an expansion of U.S. concert presenters who felt that chamber music could attract an audience, as well as entities devoted to the form. Musicians from Marlboro had begun touring in 1964; in 1969, William Schuman, then president of Lincoln Center, established the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. The Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival was

LEFT TO RIGHT BELOW: Monica Ellis of Imani Winds coaches a student ensemble in 2019. Imani Winds performs with the Catalyst Quartet. Photos by Pete Checchia, Robert Torez/Celebrity Series.



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commission. Being a mom and having two kids, it's hard to perform and be on the road while they're at school. But it's easier to be able to compose, record, and teach at home than it is to travel. One can still grow artistically even if not performing all the time on the road.

As a violist, does having the instrument's sound in your head shape your musical aesthetic?

Yes, I always have the viola in my head. I tend to write from the inside out because it's about the texture and the voicing and

balance from the midrange. It's like in yoga or Pilates: It takes a strong core. It can be harmonic or totally dissonant, but whatever the effect, it must be coming from the core. Then outer ranges are the filigree that gives emphasis or more detail to what's happening in the core. I'm always aware of that core sound, even if it's a sound that doesn't have a core.

You've re-arranged many of your scores for different groups. Is versatility a key part of success in 2024?

I think that there's a demand for it. For example, people kept asking, 'Do you have

anything orchestral?' I didn't, but *Primal Message* would be good orchestrally, and I could have fun with some textures. Composing in 2024 means being flexible and writing into what we have. What I can recommend or wish for is that composers not just have a machine to write into [such as AI], but to collaborate with artists they respect and enjoy working with. That's the extra sauce that pushes composers to do better, and to do more than they could do on their own with a machine. It is my great honor to be writing for people.

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.

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Galimir was an enormous influence—"the greatest chamber music mind I've encountered in my life." When Mr. Tenenbom joined the faculty in 1996 and took over the strings chamber music program, he made sure that all the students were involved in chamber music. "We'd have a chamber music sightreading party early in the year, like in summer camp, so students young and old could get to know each other and form groups," he says. Today, all instrumentalists, except for organists and percussionists, are required to be a part of an active, registered chamber music group each semester, with access to the wide range of Curtis faculty.

Faculty member Amy Yang sees chamber music training as more than a career path. "The students begin to sharpen their sensibility for symbiotic relationships to their partners," she says, adding that chamber music makes students more alert to the give and take of artistic leadership. "They learn ways to modulate their own voices to yield the greatest artistic flourish for all."

RESIDENCIES ANCHOR CAREERS

Curtis graduates have been flowing into the chamber music field for decades. One recent notable example is the Dover Quartet, founded at Curtis in 2008, which swept the prizes at the 2013 Banff

Competition and has enjoyed a meteoric rise. In 2020, the Dover was appointed to the Curtis faculty as the Penelope P. Watkins Ensemble in Residence, carrying on the teaching tradition of their own mentors in the Guarneri; their name is a nod to Barber's *Dover Beach*, and a link to their illustrious quartet predecessor of a century ago.

In 2021, Imani Winds became the first-ever wind quintet appointed to the faculty to teach chamber music. Formed in 1997, the renowned ensemble, which is devoted to expanding the wind quintet repertoire, has demonstrated that wind players can also make a living playing chamber music.

Toyin Spellman-Diaz, the Imani's founding oboist, says that the Imani's mission at Curtis is expansion in many areas. "We coach wind quintets, but we also have a chamber music studio class where students play for each other and brainstorm ideas—like how to put together a concert—to open neural pathways they had not thought about before.

"We're getting student composers to write for wind quintets; we coach contemporary music; we teach a mini entrepreneurship class that's open to everybody. We're also bringing students our knowledge of composers outside the classical realm; how important it is to have different voices—of color, jazz, music from around the world—come into

chamber music."

A major part of Imani's mission at Curtis is to prepare students for a professional landscape that has changed once again, offering space for musical careers that combine many kinds of activities as well as unconventionally structured groups.

Students are looking for ways to take charge of their careers now," Ms. Spellman-Diaz says. "People are coming up with new ensemble ideas, new programs, new places to perform, new audiences to reach. The money is shrinking, but it's still out there, and musicians are figuring out how to tap into it and use their creative potential. Presenters are looking for flexible ensembles who will work with their communities and do more than just mainstage concerts."

Ms. Spellman-Diaz adds, "We are not looking to make a cadre of chamber musicians. We are trying to open up their ideas of what they do in their lives, to realize there is music—and there are ways of playing—outside the traditional orchestra. If they incorporate that into their playing, we've done our job."

Heidi Waleson is the opera critic of the Wall Street Journal and the author of Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America (Metropolitan/Picador).