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## THE PHILADELPHIA



Commencement day, 1946, at Sansom and 17th Streets. Front row (sitting): Norman Carol (Violin '47), Abba Bogin; (standing) Lucille Rothman Felsenthal (Piano '50), Josephine Sitjar (Voice '46), Joseph Silverstein (Violin '50) Back row: Theodore Lettvin (Piano '49), Allison Nelson Loebbaka (Piano '49), Burton Fine (Violin '48), Joseph Rezits (Piano '48), Sylvia Zarembo (Piano '47).

**ALONG THE WALK-OF-FAME** sidewalk plaques on Broad Street in Philadelphia, the Curtis Institute of Music is an every-few-feet presence. Gary Graffman, Vincent Persichetti, and numerous others have their own embossed squares alongside the Soul Survivors, Jill Scott, and other icons of more mainstream music. It's symbolic. Though the Curtis headquarters up the street on Rittenhouse Square might seem to be a genteel island of the 19th century, the esteemed conservatory continually defines the Philadelphia identity in ways hugely noticeable—and not.

The most quantifiable, durable, and all-around-beautiful manifestation of the Curtis imprint can be summed up in three words: *Adagio for Strings*. That famous orchestral work by West Chester, Pa.-born Samuel Barber (Composition '34)—finished between his student years at Curtis and his teaching tenure (starting in '39)—was premiered in 1938 by the much-idolized Arturo Toscanini, something almost unheard-of in those years when America was still finding its voice in classical music. “Curtis was in an uproar!” recalled pianist and one-time

GIFT OF JOSEPH REZITS



# ORY

SINCE ITS EARLY YEARS, CURTIS HAS FORGED TIES WITHIN PHILADELPHIA'S ARTS ECOSYSTEM. AS THE SCHOOL TURNS 100, STUDENTS CONTINUE TO HAVE A DYNAMIC PRESENCE ACROSS THE CITY.

BY DAVID PATRICK STEARNS



1726 Locust Street in 1924.





Students pose for a selfie outside Reading Terminal Market.

student Ruth Slenczynska, now 99, in a video interview. Since then, the Philadelphia Orchestra has played the piece some 40 times, averaging almost every other year, often on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, with added narration by Charlotte Blake Alston.

That's only one out-of-the-blue Curtis gift to Philadelphia. In more recent times, the Grammy- and Pulitzer-winning Jennifer Higdon (professor of composition from 1994–2021) had her similarly elegiac *blue cathedral* premiered by the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in 2000, making her one of America's most performed living composers. Some 14 Philadelphia Orchestra performances have followed, played by some of the musicians who were at that first rehearsal conducted by the very unsure composer—since Curtis graduates account for as much as 45 percent of the orchestra.

On recordings, whether found at the Philadelphia Record Exchange in Fishtown or via invisible sound files on Amazon, Curtis directors, faculty, and students are unavoidable and often legendary, such as pianists Josef Hofmann and Rudolf Serkin, not to mention conductor Fritz Reiner leading the populist, summertime Robin Hood Dell Orchestra. In concert halls, Curtis on Tour has given 450 concerts in 120 cities over 15 years, which may have more relevance at Curtis Symphony Orchestra tour stops in London and Berlin—but Philadelphia hears those programs first in launch concerts at the Kimmel Center.

Smaller-scale programs touch down at the Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill and Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square—and they're hardly business-as-usual programs with infrequently encountered names such as Erno von Dohnanyi

and Erwin Schulhoff. Says Andrew Lane, vice president of touring and artist management, "Audiences get to hear music they've never heard before, or only rarely. We can be very flexible with the makeup of these ensembles. We have every instrument at our disposal." Every? Longwood even has a majestic organ installed at its indoor space.

Then there are the rescuers. When Opera Philadelphia's star baritone Nathan Gunn canceled out of Higdon's *Cold Mountain* in 2016, Jarrett Ott ('14) stepped in, having sung the workshops at Curtis. When a power failure at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts made a 2003 Philadelphia Orchestra Beethoven concert a lost cause, Curtis students Zachary DePue ('03) and Ranaan Meyer ('03), both playing substitute gigs with the orchestra, stepped forward, improvised their own hybrid bluegrass, and with Nick Kendall ('01) became the popular Time for Three (a self-described classically-trained garage band). The point is not the rescue so much as the readiness. Though Lang Lang ('02) had a major turning point replacing an ill Andre Watts at Chicago's Ravinia Festival in 1999, his career was already assured, even at age 17, according to his teacher, Mr. Graffman, thanks to the many private-occasion concerts he had played around Philadelphia.

One of Curtis vocal department's success stories—bass Matthew Rose ('03)—had no such Cinderella moments after arriving at the school in 1998. But he left Philadelphia having performed some 20 secondary roles thanks to associations—established by the now-retired faculty Mikael Eliassen—with Opera Philadelphia and the now-defunct Opera Festival of New Jersey. Only two years out of Curtis, he was listed on the cover of an EMI *Tristan und Isolde* recording with Plácido Domingo and has gone on to leads in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*.

What comes out of Curtis is only part of the story. One other part is what comes in—and the numbers are particularly impressive post-pandemic. Among the 100 or so free-with-registration student recitals at Field Concert Hall, attendance has grown 300 percent since 2018–19, says Vince Ford, senior vice president of digital strategy and innovation, thanks to "improved communications" with the public. Online streaming has become a way of life. "Our 75 concert streams have grown by about 1,000 percent to an average of 5,000 viewers per recital last year, with some much higher," he said.

“THE MOST QUANTIFIABLE, DURABLE, AND ALL-AROUND BEAUTIFUL MANIFESTATION OF THE CURTIS IMPRINT CAN BE SUMMED UP IN THREE WORDS: ADAGIO FOR STRINGS.”

The kids reportedly love it; the more ears they have, the better they play.

Less documented is the intensive once-every-January coaching and side-by-side performances with Curtis students and 100 to 120 high school players in the All-City Orchestra. Benefits are apparent on both sides. “This sort of exposure allows Curtis students to view the world more holistically, including examining their role ... as future leaders in the music industry,” said Joseph Conyers (’04), music director of the orchestra and principal bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Outside the so-called “Curtisphere,” students have always been free agents to pursue their causes in the outlying community—and have. Mr. Rose, the bass, was seen at City Hall passing out leaflets protesting the Iraq War as it was starting in 2003 and helped organize a protest concert with members of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Christoph Eschenbach. When not making major debuts with the likes of the New York Philharmonic, Hilary Hahn (’99) took the initiative to play in senior communities, pushing back against the assumption that such performances were just test-driving new repertoire in low-pressure settings. These were thoughtfully curated concerts, sometimes with audience members coming forward with flowers—between movements—that she graciously received.

Guidelines and ethics create invisible boundaries around what the students do outside the school’s walls, perhaps summed up in a word that surfaces repeatedly—dignity—in maintaining the integrity of the artform. Mary Javian (’99), chair of career studies, puts it more directly: “What we don’t do is background music or weddings.” One manifestation of those fine lines is a children’s opera version of *The Three Little Pigs* that toured schools years back and featured singers who are now international stars. But this time, the familiar bedtime story had music adapted from Mozart.

More serious is the ongoing Curtis presence at Philly House in North Chinatown, which is the largest homeless shelter in the city. Visits are monthly, with three to six students. Repertoire ranges from Bach to transcriptions of classic songs such as “Over the Rainbow.” After performances, they all eat lunch together. “We don’t just play concerts,” said Ms. Javian. “Performances are interactive. For a Mozart oboe quartet, four guests stood behind each player to observe that instrument’s role in the piece. Then we discussed the music. One time, a guest broke out his harmonica and jammed with a Curtis harpist.” The key point is making the listeners feel that they’re heard: “These are people who are used to being ignored.”

In many ways, Curtis presents to Philadelphia what is less feasible for more established organizations with marketing and budget concerns. Besides having wider options for mixed-instrument, non-traditional chamber music concerts, Curtis Opera Theatre stages ensemble pieces in non-traditional productions—Leonard Bernstein’s troubled, late-period opera *A Quiet Place* directed by Daniel Fish, for example—often in partnership with Opera Philadelphia.

Such public projects emerge with a strong sense of what, why, and where. In Curtis Opera Theatre’s November performances of *The Comet / Poppea*, past and future collided and coalesced with the new George Lewis opera based on W.E.B. Dubois’ 1920 Afro-futurist science fiction story, juxtaposed with Monteverdi’s 1643 *The Coronation of Poppea* about political skullduggery in the Roman Empire. The high-concept production by revisionist director Yuval Sharon that originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles needed space—and got it with a revolving stage in the unconventional interior of the 23rd Street Armory. All three performances were virtually sold out before opening night, addressing the Philadelphia public in a manner not seen previously and drawing people interested in theater, literature, and social issues. The experience was no doubt transformative for singers, too, by being thrust onto the operatic cutting edge.

“There are new demands on people these days and new skills to develop,” said Miloš Repický, chair of vocal studies and principal opera coach. “It’s less about their aria and more about what they’re doing onstage. It demonstrates that we’re looking ahead and thinking about relevance.”

*David Patrick Stearns is a contributor to the Philadelphia Inquirer, Gramophone magazine and Classical Voice North America. He holds a master’s degree in musicology from New York University.*

Top: Betty Benthin (Viola and Piano ’49) and Joseph Silverstein (Violin ’50), circa 1948. Bottom: Curtis students catch up on the front steps.

