THE Q+A

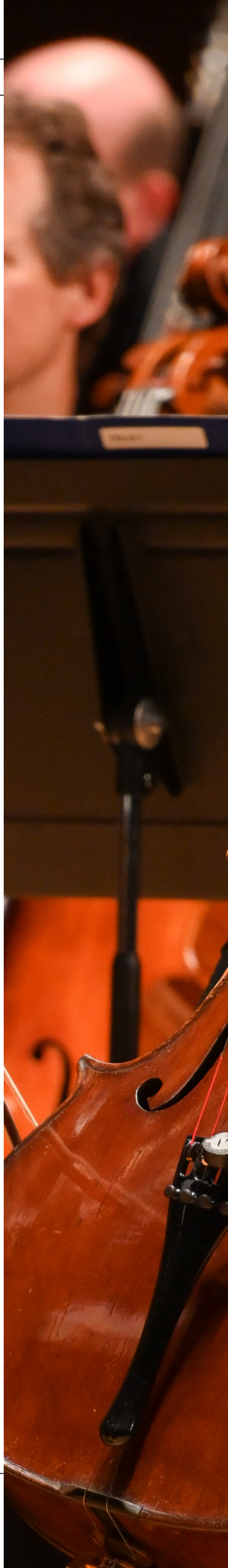
Yumi Kendall

One of three new cello faculty members at Curtis talks about her wide-ranging career as a public speaker and a member of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

BY BRIAN WISE

→ **AS INSTRUMENTS** go, the cello has attracted its share of iconoclasts, activists, and outspoken types. For cello faculty member Yumi Kendall ('04), the instrument has been a launch pad to a secondary career in public speaking and podcasting. After earning a mid-career degree in positive psychology, she started giving talks on leadership, group dynamics, and inspiration. Her audiences have included surgery residents, management consultants, and fellow string players.

On a different stage, Ms. Kendall is the assistant principal cellist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, where she fills out the section's leadership duties, linking the front of the cellos with the very back. All of this grows out of family roots: her older brother Nicolas Kendall (Violin '01) plays in the trio Time for Three, and her late violinist grandfather, John Kendall, introduced Suzuki education to the United States. She tells *Overtones* why she's a "forever student and a treasure hunter."



Many cellists come to Curtis for its proximity to the Philadelphia Orchestra and its famous string sound. What's unique about that sound today, and how do you experience it when you go to work?

I still remember my first time subbing. I was sitting in the back of the cello section, in front of the basses, and it was like being wrapped in a cashmere blanket. It's when sound becomes texture, sound becomes feeling. It's still that way. The quality of sound is so velvety and textured. And that's just the strings. This is my 21st season, and that love of sound has been a big crescendo.

In terms of the cognitive awareness of the history, it comes to me in our actual printed music. We still have fingerings and bowings and pencil marks from three or four generations ago—from people who were under the batons of Stokowski and Ormandy. It's amazing to see that physically written. We're so digitized now, which is necessary in so many wonderful ways, but it's fabulous to see that I'm touching the same parts that were used in the orchestra back when Rachmaninoff wrote the *Symphonic Dances* for us.

How do those old bowings then translate into sound?

Historically, our sound came from the Academy of Music, where we played for the first 100 years of our existence. The hall there is notoriously dead [acoustically]. That is where our Philadelphia string sound evolved from: We use a lot of free bowing—the concept of many people playing together and hiding our bow changes, meaning, we're not changing our bows at the same time as our stand partners. Cumulatively, it would mean a much more lush, full, vibrant, and deep sound.

Philadelphia has also cultivated a forward-looking identity. The orchestra's repertoire has grown to include a Florence Price symphony cycle and works by Valerie Coleman and William Grant Still, for example. What has been the impact of this?

When I think of our responsibility in premiering brand-new works like Valerie Coleman's [Concerto for Orchestra], or resurfacing works that should have rightfully received their premieres when the composers were alive, repetition of these new works [is essential]. Everything is new at some point, and our role is to keep playing this music so that our collective ears determine what stands the test of time, and what is telling our human story over time.

During the Philadelphia Orchestra's Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganization in 2011, you first developed the idea of returning to school. You were accepted to the University of Pennsylvania's Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program. How did that relate to music?

It's coming from a place of struggle and wanting to know how other organizations and entities flourish when they go through struggle and how they come out of it even stronger. It comes from my love of orchestra and an appreciation and belief in the power of the arts. I wanted to do my part, and so I just read a lot. When the bankruptcy happened, I found myself in Barnes & Noble reading many books that led me down this path to positive psychology.

You attended Penn in 2016–17. Several years on, how is positive psychology part of your career today?

PETE CHECCHIA

The current manifestation of the intersection of positive psychology and my love of our orchestra is *Tacet No More*, the podcast that I do with my [Philadelphia Orchestra] colleague Joseph Conyers (Double Bass '04). We're also giving keynotes, and I've given keynotes on my own. That has been really enriching to see how other organizations and industries are looking to learn from classical music, and about how we approach what we do.

What sorts of things are organizations looking to learn?

When it's Joe and me, we cater our keynotes to the organization and their goals. For me, it's about excellence and artistic striving, and my identity as a forever student and treasure hunter. Those are the two identities that I carry, speak about, and share based on those inspirations. I incorporate my life experience in music and relevant aspects of positive psychology for that particular audience.

Your clients run quite a wide gamut, from the Association of Program Directors in Surgery to the management consulting firm CRA to the American String Teachers Association and the Suzuki Association of the Americas. What is the throughline?

The lens of positive psychology is about what makes us thrive at the individual level—think, solo Bach—what makes us thrive at the dyadic or relational level—think, partnerships of any kind. And then, what makes us thrive at the societal and group level? It's been so rewarding to get to explore those realms through music.

This seems to relate to your work as an assistant principal cellist, too. You must regularly deal with group dynamics in your section.

I see myself as a connector. The principal [cellist] is usually making bowing decisions or on-the-spot decisions in a rehearsal. Because I sit with or directly behind her, my role is to communicate those decisions smoothly and efficiently to the rest of the section. And then, I'm also occasionally stepping into the principal role myself—planned or unplanned. That means being prepared to the point where I could play solos without rehearsals, which has happened before. It means being on the ball for everything.

Cellists have a reputation for being the iconoclasts and rebels of classical music. One thinks of Mstislav Rostropovich and Pablo Casals, or the cellists who've made viral videos by playing in war zones in Ukraine and Iraq. What is it about the cello and this urge to speak out?

Maybe it's that the cello is closest to the human voice. It's got such a genuine range and depth. It's just such a natural expression of the human voice and the human experience. There's an element of beauty and solace and serenity in a Bach suite. And in the emotional spectrum of Bach, there's the dance and the joy that is so relatable.

This conversation was condensed and lightly edited from two interviews.