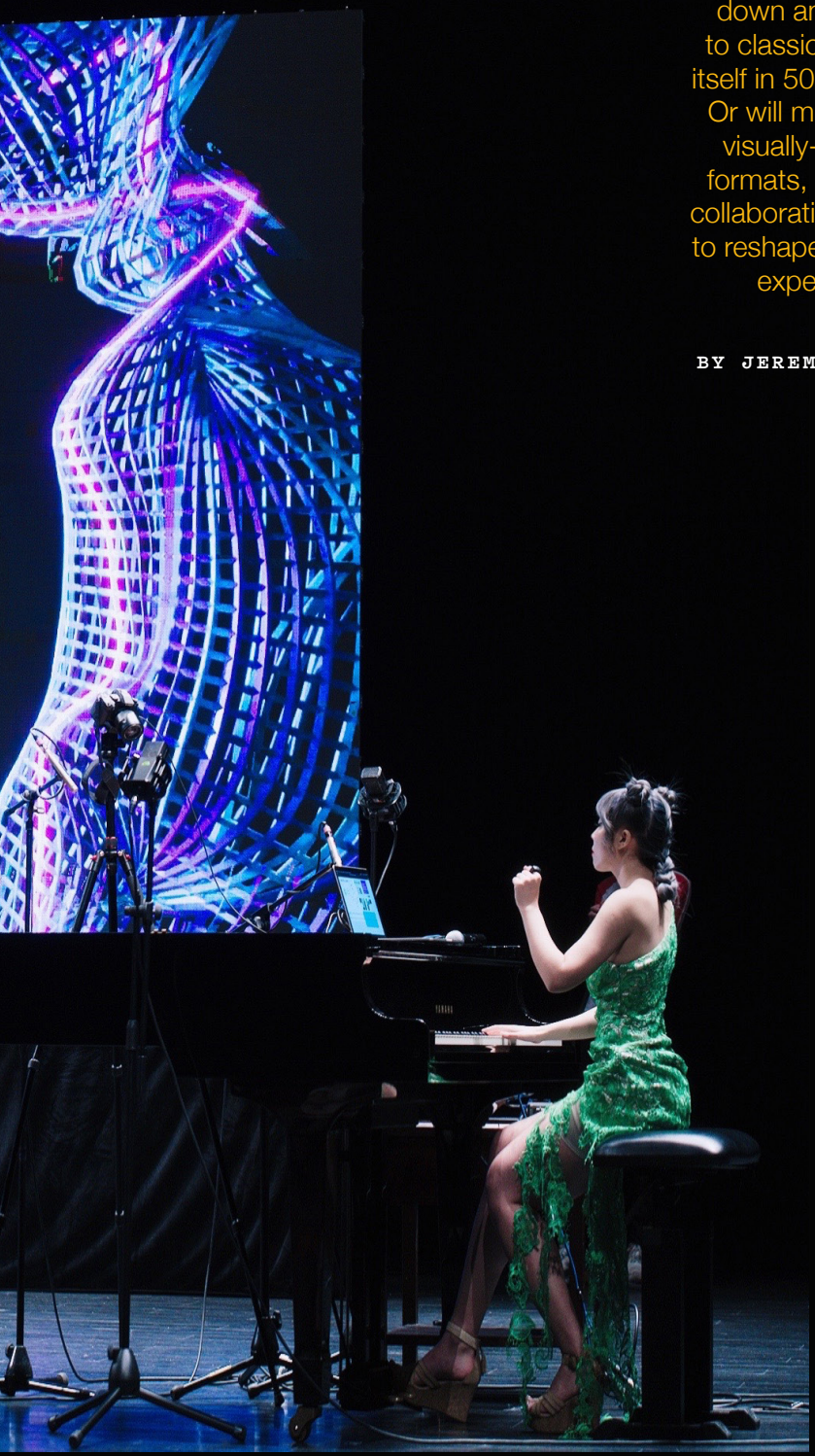
The CONCERT

of the FUTURE

Will we still be sitting down and listening to classical music by itself in 50 years' time? Or will mixed media, visually-enhanced formats, and remote collaborations continue to reshape our concert experience?

BY JEREMY REYNOLDS



Jenny Q Chai

WHEN THE PITTSBURGH Symphony Orchestra performed its ambitiously titled series "Concert of the Future" in 1991, the orchestra paired video projections with famous classical works like Debussy's *La Mer* and a light show with Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra. The orchestra hosted a Q&A during intermission and provided a short slideshow presentation before racing through Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* and even included some electronic music during the concerts.

"It was really weird at the time, but everything we predicted 30 years ago in Pittsburgh, we've already crossed that threshold, now," says Barbara Yahr (Conducting '86), a former staff conductor at the Pittsburgh Symphony who now leads the Greenwich Village Orchestra in New York City.

Orchestras have indeed adopted many of the innovations Ms. Yahr mentions and more, and there's no question that technology, including AI, is going to change the ways musicians learn their craft and interact with each other and the public. What, then, would a "Concert of the Future" program look like today? Is the future of classical music still about adapting to new technologies more seamlessly and imagining techniques to attract new listeners? Or will the core experience of communally listening to music by itself endure?

A quarter-of-a-century into this new millennium, *Overtones* asked a range of Curtis graduates, including musicians and administrators to speculate on what the future may hold for the classical music industry in 50 years or more.

TECH BOOM

Fast forward 30 years from Pittsburgh's "Concert of the Future" and across the state to Philadelphia, where Curtis created an immersive installation of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* in 2022. The project captured live audio and used 360-degree video technology to allow visitors to experience the work from *inside* the orchestra, bringing Rimsky-Korsakov's stunningly colorful score into the 21st century. "I see our role at Curtis as sort of an R&D lab for the field," says Vince Ford, Curtis' senior vice president of digital strategy and innovation.

Mr. Ford, who has a long history of working with orchestras like the New York Philharmonic and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, makes the case that conservatories and universities are ideally positioned to experiment with new technologies and concert experiences and that they are the logical place to look to for guidance on where the classical industry is headed. "Maybe there will be some dead ends, but it's OK because we're a conservatory, and we can take that risk," he says, pointing out that it's more cost-effective for universities than professional orchestra and opera companies.

Most musicians say they believe that institutions large and small will continue to add visual elements to their perfor-

Tim Fain performs his multimedia recital "Portals."

MARYANN BATES

Immersive Scheherazade, a performance installation, was presented at Curtis in 2022.

mances in the future, ranging from film to dance or immersive projections, but they disagree on whether they are necessary for classical music. "I think we cannot stay in the old times where people are used to just sitting still for two hours, watching nothing and only listening," says Jenny Q Chai (Piano '04), a pianist, lecturer, and educator on the forefront of blending new technologies with the concert experience. "I think that time is just gone."

Ms. Chai's website showcases numerous performance videos of her playing with video projections, including some where the projections use AI to respond in real time to her playing. In one series of videos titled *Juicy,* different fruits appear and rotate or flash or burst across the screen in time with her playing, a curious musical twist on still-life fruit bowl paintings. She says that these sorts of multimedia concerts will become more mainstream, and that teaching new music and media will become more essential in the years to come.

What effect will bringing new media into the concert hall have on composition? Jonathan Bailey Holland ('96), a composition faculty member and a composer with several residencies with major American orchestras under his belt, points out that technology has democratized access to compositional tools. Mr. Holland, who is also the dean of the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University, says he's seeing more and more high school-aged artists trying their hands at orchestral works, opera, and film scores. The latter path, in particular, no longer carries the same "less-than" stigma that it did historically.

"The field of composing has blown wide open, and there's less pressure to be a specific type of composer," he says, continuing, "I think there are plenty of folks who still want to write for the concert hall—everybody wants to write an opera these days—but then there are composers who want to create music that falls between concert music and something that might be more appropriate for like an art museum. That's where it becomes a part of the experience and not only an

aural experience. There's a broader range of what's possible and considered 'composition' within the field now."

Timothy Fain ('98), a violinist and composer whose music appears both in the concert hall and in film, still writes his music out with pencil and paper, at first, since using pencil and eraser leaves marks in a way that allows him to refer back to old versions of ideas on the page as he works. (Mr. Fain's daughter, who dabbles in composition as well, also prefers pencil and paper, he says.) Other musicians, too, were skeptical of digital sheet music ever fully replacing printed music, as many orchestral parts, in particular, act as living documents, with historical markings that evolve from conductor to conductor—a "retro" quirk of the classical world.

Mr. Fain sees developing technologies like instrumental synthesizers as a useful tool in music production and recording, but not as a force that will fundamentally change the way music is produced in the future: "I imagine that in 50 years, we may have surmounted our real problem: latency," Mr. Fain says. Today's technology cannot completely eliminate lag in streaming media, and even a fraction of a second delay is to be too imprecise to effectively rehearse remotely, he says.

Conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya

Barbara Yahr leads the Greenwich Village Orchestra and focuses on special needs children.

Even with new player piano technology like Steinway's Spirio and Yamaha's Disklavier, both of which can link pianos anywhere in the world to stream a live performance, lesson, or masterclass, there will never be a replacement for actually being in the room, Mr. Fain argues. "It's elusive, what it means to be in the same room with somebody else. It's picking up on micro expressions on peoples' faces that give us insight into what other people are thinking or how they're going to react."

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

"I used to joke with my clients that, you know, in 30 years, we're going to see that we're going to have holographic concerts that we can tune in to instead of going to concerts," says Earl Blackburn (Timpani and Percussion '76), a veteran arts manager and the founder of Kazen Arts. "But whether you're looking 50 or even 20 years down the road, I think the most important thing is that people ask the question: 'What are the principles that further this industry?'" Mr. Blackburn says that personal relationships between artists and managers will continue to be essential in the decades to come, even as the ways artists are able to connect with the public evolve.

He adds that social media will become increasingly critical in an artist's ability to build a following, an idea that Ms. Chai echoes: "I just set cameras up and hit stream, and I'll see thousands of people watching. Maybe a room can only hold 200 people, which might not make the concert feel worth it, but with streaming, I can play for a much larger audience, even though it's not the same as being there," she says, noting that some of her fans who found her through social media have traveled hours to hear her perform live.

But a local following could be crucial in the future, as well.

MICHAL NOVAK (HARTH-BEDOYA); CLAUDINE WILLIAMS (YAHR)

> "The field of composing has blown wide open, and there's less pressure to be a specific type of composer."
>
> —Jonathan Bailey Holland

Miguel Harth-Bedoya (Conducting '91), now the director of orchestras at Rice University in Houston, was previously music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. "After every Sunday matinee, I would drive home, and I would stop at the supermarket," he recalls. "I cannot tell you how many people I ran into that had come from the concert." Mr. Harth-Bedoya became a fixture in Fort Worth, launching a composting initiative and personally inviting countless residents to the hall. He says he's not one to suggest to other conductors what they should or shouldn't do, but that living locally allowed him to connect more regularly and deeply with his orchestra's community.

Ms. Yahr, too, lives in her orchestra's area in New York City. She began to research music therapy after her friend introduced her to her nephew, who is autistic. "I got completely, you know, blown away by this thing that you could communicate with non-verbal children through music," she says. Ms. Yahr says that music's impact on mental and physical health outcomes led her to the idea that music therapy could become a larger part of performing arts institutions' core missions and activities in the future. She's also founded a program, "Together in Music," a new kind of orchestral concert designed to forge partnerships between orchestras and the special needs communities.

Regardless of the screens at concerts or other bells and whistles and remote collaboration technology concerts, everyone interviewed agrees that performing both great historical repertoire and new works at the very best level would remain a critical part of the industry. "I actually talked to David Beckham [the English former pro soccer player] about this idea in Madrid," says Mr. Harth-Bedoya. "He told me that the one thing in soccer that will never change is that you kick the ball to wherever you want it to go. You can put on nicer uniforms, you can advertise more on TV or on social media, but if you cannot kick the ball to where you want it to go, then you and the whole sport will disappear. And, ultimately, it's the same in music."

Jeremy Reynolds is the classical music critic at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette *and the editor of* OPERA America Magazine.

Out with the old school: Jenny Q Chai at Curtis.