

# ORCHESTRATING OPPORTUNITY

**Business skills are essential to music careers. But how do you embrace entrepreneurship? Five alumni offer their insights.**

BY RYAN LATHAN

Success in today's cutthroat classical music landscape demands more than technical skill or artistic excellence—it requires an entrepreneurial mindset to carve out a sustainable career. Five acclaimed Curtis alumni—**Adrian Anantawan** (Violin '06), **Joseph Conyers** (Double Bass '04), **Helen Liu Gerhold** (Harp '18), **Mary Javian** (Double Bass '99), and **Johnathan McCullough** (Opera '17)—offer tips on how young musicians can become better entrepreneurs in the 21st century.



For **Joseph Conyers**, the key to entrepreneurial success lies in shifting one's perspective from individual achievement to broader impact. The award-winning principal bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra and renowned educator is the founder and vision advisor of Project 440. Originally launched in Savannah in 2007 and now based in Philadelphia, the organization teaches leadership skills to high school-age musicians, with a mix of college preparedness workshops and after-school programs devoted to community-focused skills.

**Recognize that teaching and mentoring fuel your artistry:** "I like working with young people because I like providing opportunities for them. I think music is a wonderful thing that all people should have in their life, but it is also an investment in the future of this wonderful art form. All those levels end up actually fueling me as an artist."

**Diversifying your focus can enhance your musicianship:** "Some musicians think concentrating on anything other than your art is a distraction, but it could actually be the one thing that keeps them going throughout their career. Look at the world as an opportunity—what can I do with this [instrument] in my hand? How can I make things better with it?"



Over the years, Canadian violinist **Adrian Anantawan**—artistic director of Shelter Music Boston and the Music Inclusion Ensemble at Berklee College—discovered his calling at the intersection of music and disability advocacy. His inspiring Virtual Music Instrument (VMI) Initiative at the Holland Bloorview Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto brought together experts in technology and rehabilitation to enable musicians with disabilities—especially those with paralysis—to perform chamber music.

**Recognize the power of your uniqueness:** "I challenge young musicians with a call to hope: The world needs what you have to give, in all of your uniqueness and individuality, anchored by your values."

**Embrace both tradition and disruption:** "Conservatories like Curtis are a celebration of tradition but also disruption. The possibilities are endless and know that you already have all you need to realize a more beautiful, equitable world."



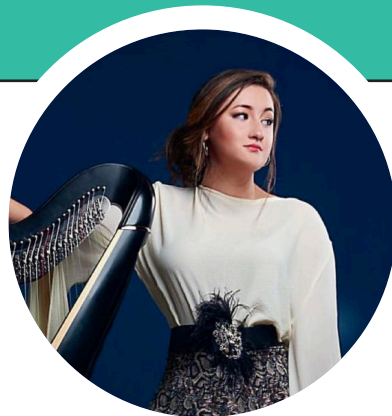
**Mary Javian**, esteemed Curtis faculty member and bassist, advocates for a broader perspective on the global music scene. As chair of career studies, she has developed a social entrepreneurship curriculum that helps students develop community partnerships that blend artistry with social impact. These inspire many graduates to launch their own educational programs, innovative ensembles, and music festivals worldwide.

**Understand your unique value and create community:**

“Young artists can build upon their passions and talents, but they must consider what is needed in the world. How are they unique? What does their work as an artist provide that makes the world a better place while sustaining themselves? We all need a community in order to achieve our goals, and entrepreneurs are experts in building community.”

**Embrace an iterative process and continuous learning:**

“The process of creating something is always iterative. We create a prototype that people can react to, and then we do what musicians do best: we listen. We take that feedback [from audiences and peers] and allow the idea to morph and ask new questions. The process never stops.”



Understanding the business side of music is critical to entrepreneurial success, and Curtis alumna **Helen Liu Gerhold**, executive director of the Lyra Society and a recent M.B.A. graduate, encourages musicians to develop fundamental business acumen, from understanding contracts and intellectual property to budgeting and tax management.

**Form a unique personal brand and offering:** “Pretend you’re on *Shark Tank* and you’re selling yourself as the product. What is your ‘market differentiator?’ How is what you are selling different, newer, and/or better than what anyone else is selling? Create a clear narrative online and in-person about who you are as a musician and what you stand for, whether it’s a particular style, a focus on innovation, or a deep connection to classical traditions.”

**Build trust by humanizing yourself—especially on social media:** “Everyone likes to see a perfect performance; however, people connect with each other through vulnerability, which builds trust. We’re not robots; being human brings beauty to music. Connecting with your fans and patrons via social media platforms creates a community of support.”



Grammy-nominated baritone and director **Johnathan McCullough** believes success comes from persistence, preparation, and sometimes, teaming up with inspiring fellow creatives. An international opera singer, guest speaker, and opera program director for the National Children’s Chorus, leading their Vail Opera Camp, he uses his platform for social impact. Moved by high veteran suicide rates, he reimagined David T. Little’s opera *Soldier Songs*, incorporating film to deliver an immersive experience of PTSD. He suggests you first find a cause that resonates with you.

**Create a pitch deck:** “No one can see your vision as clearly as you can, so put it on paper. I started using the digital painting and illustration app Procreate on my iPad to more clearly portray my idea. In your deck, answer the key questions: What is it? Who is involved? How much does it cost? Why is it important right now? Create a visual snapshot of the project’s aesthetic and final form. Remember, people don’t invest in uncertainty, they support clear, well-articulated ideas.”

**Explore alternative funding options:** “Grants, sponsorships, and partnerships can provide financial support if traditional funding isn’t available. Securing the first bit of financial backing is the hardest. Once people see that someone has taken the initial leap of commitment and trust, they are more likely to follow suit.”