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OFF

What Makes for an Effective Encore?

Five members of the Curtis community tell us about their approach to this anything-goes custom.

BY BRIAN WISE

Michelle Cann ('13)

Curtis Piano Faculty

→ For Michelle Cann, the best encores benefit from an element of surprise and delight. Recently, she has turned to the jazz-style arrangements of Hazel Scott, which transform classical works by Chopin, Rachmaninoff, and Liszt into swinging showpieces. Ms. Cann, who will release an album of Scott's arrangements later this year, explains why they make effective encores.

"What makes these transcriptions unique is that they start out true to the classical version of them. They're completely 'straight' and you feel as an audience that you're

going to be hearing this famous classical piece that you recognize so well. Then, out of nowhere—and this is what's so fun about them—it suddenly changes. The audience starts to realize what's happening, and they're just so thrilled, like we've been let in on this big secret. I felt I needed something fun and showy to follow up on something like Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* or Florence Price's Piano Concerto, and once I came across these, I was like, 'There's nothing better.' I get to be an actor. I start out with [Scott's arrangement of] Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor, and I'm so serious about it. I keep a straight face. Then it shifts.

"When I played Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23, I did this arrangement of Don

Shirley's 'How Deep Is the Ocean (How High Is the Sky).' He would take motives from a classical piece and often mix them with a well-known popular piece. It's so beautiful and so reflective. After the Mozart, which elevates you in a certain way, I wanted to keep them in that space, but at the same time get a little more intimate.

"A lot of it is: How do you want to leave the audience? Do you want to leave them in a space where they're just, 'Wow that was beautiful' and head out for intermission smiling? Or do you want them to be screaming and dancing in their seats and super-excited by the display they just got to see? Both can be effective if you sell them right."

Min Kwon ('90)

Pianist; Piano professor, Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University

→ For Min Kwon, encores are about providing contrast or contemplation. Sometimes, she will encore lighter excerpts from her commissioning project, *America/Beautiful*, in which she asked over 70 composers to each compose a variation on the patriotic song "America the Beautiful." In concerto appearances, she may build on the theme of a given program.

"I recently played Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, and I would have loved to have done Variation No. 18 from his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. That's something everyone knows, and if I play a program of all Beethoven or all Rachmaninoff, I think about extending that arc. So, in this case, I wanted to play the 18th Variation, but with [overtime] rules and whatnot, the orchestra didn't necessarily want to do it. So, I came up with a solo arrangement of this variation, and over the years that worked well.

"When performing in Europe, I find that people are curious about what is going on in America. And strangely enough, they want to hear American pieces, and I don't mean Gershwin and Barber. People are increasingly curious and even hungry for pieces of our current time, because that speaks to our feelings and reactions to things happening in real time. I used to play something beautiful, like a Chopin nocturne that people could go home and hum. But we now live in a time where the encore is a great [opportunity] to give them something that's very *now*."



Elena Urioste (Violin '08)

→ As an American violinist living in London, Elena Urioste has tapped the Great American Songbook when choosing encores for her solo and chamber music concerts. A particular favorite is “Over the Rainbow,” arranged by her pianist and husband, Tom Poster, which drew a particularly effusive response when she played it at the BBC Proms in 2023.

“The Proms was just such an immense occasion for me. It was my first televised Prom, and I was playing a piece that I felt so passionate about, the Coleridge-Taylor Violin Concerto. I wanted to continue in that very personal vein. ‘Over the Rainbow’ is a song that is of great significance for my whole life. I love, love, love *The Wizard of Oz*. It makes me think of my dad. It’s also one of his favorite movies. The way Judy Garland sings it—well, it’s unbeatable.

“With our ensemble, the Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective, often the instrumental permutations are shifting throughout the program, and there are a limited number of pieces for any given assortment of instruments. Tom loves to add to the canon and arrange works from the Great American Songbook for these new combinations of instruments.

“I’m a slow encore girlie, if I had to make a generalization. You know, I’ve done the hard work. I don’t want to play anything else fast and complicated [laughs]. And of course, I feel capable of playing certain things fast and loud. But the music that matters most to me is often the more inward, reflective little songs or melodies that might draw a tear or at least inspire a smile. I’ve also been to concerts where performers give more than one encore, and it’s clear the audience has had enough. I think, always a general rule of thumb, it’s nicer to leave someone wanting more than to overload them.”

Mary Javian (Double Bass '99)

Director and Chair, Curtis Center for Leadership, Innovation, and Partnership

→ When leading students in community engagement programs at Curtis, Mary Javian sees encores as a chance for pure spontaneity. She suggests that classical musicians take a page from the pop music playbook and respond instantly to audience demand. “Music is just music,” she says, “and we can learn from how artists of different genres make their audiences feel special.”

“If you think of a singer-songwriter, they have a set list but there’s also room to deviate from that. That’s a good practice for classical musicians as well: What is the feeling in the room? It’s thrilling for the audience if the performer responds to that feeling. I encourage students to come up with set lists and be prepared to move things around.

“I think the curveball is exciting. The curveball could be, ‘Oh wow, I didn’t expect something so sweet and personal,’ or ‘I didn’t know they could play something that had such a swing.’ It should be a chance to show off an artist’s personality. Yuja [Wang] (Piano '08) is giving you her special brand. There are some things she can play faster and better than anybody else. But she’ll also do more reflective encores.

“Much of my playing is in chamber or orchestral music. But if I end up playing more solo bass work, I will pull out ‘Over the Rainbow.’ I’ll sing it and play pizzicato, accompanying myself. If you’re trying to wow the audience with your technicality, that puts you on a pedestal. But then people do want to get a sense of who you are. Singing always gets a reaction.”



FRANZ GALO (URIOSTE); NICHOLE MCH PHOTOGRAPHY (JAVIAN)

Benjamin Beilman ('12)

Curtis Violin Faculty

→ Benjamin Beilman often favors brilliant solo numbers as encores, such as the miniatures of Fritz Kreisler. But sometimes he will bring conductors and members of an orchestra in on the action. After a recent performance of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 5 ("Turkish") with the St. Louis Symphony, he invited conductor Cristian Măcelaru back onstage to play two of Bartók's violin duets with him.

"It's ideal if you can make sure that the encore is enhancing the piece that you've just played. But at its core, an encore has to be something that you personally play better than almost anybody. Or somehow, it should be so impressive that, no matter what the conditions—how sleep deprived or how jet-lagged you are—it will be bulletproof and mesmerizing at the same time.

"I love Fritz Kreisler's *Recitativo and Scherzo*. It's kind of a perfect solo violin piece in that it starts kind of dark and brooding, and you get to show off some shaping, color, and phrasing. And then it ends with some sparkle and champagne. It takes you from one end of the spectrum to the other, and it has a kind of clever smirk of an ending. So, that leaves people with a little bit of a giggle, and that's always a plus if you can do that.

"I've often played Kreisler after more slightly Viennese things—the Beethoven Concerto, sometimes the Brahms Concerto. I just played the Beethoven Violin Concerto and ended with Bach's *Gavotte and Rondo* from the E-major Partita [as an encore]. That makes a lot of sense because the third movement of the Beethoven concerto is a rondo. So having this allusion to [dance] material and embellishing it or changing it is a nice little thing as well."



Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.