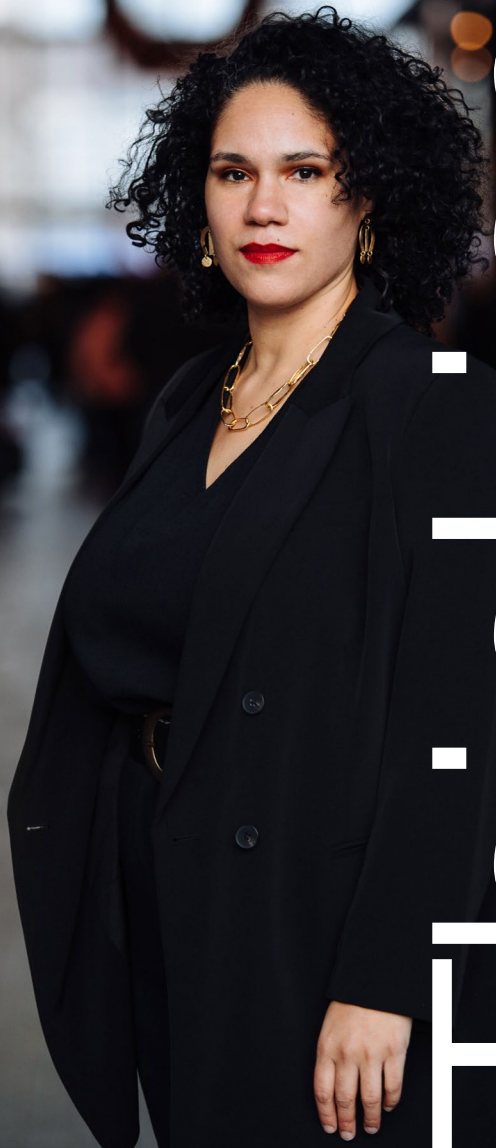


Thinking



Move over string quartets, piano trios, and wind quintets—chamber musicians are exploring a host of formats beyond the more conventional molds.

BY HANNAH EDGAR



ASHLEY GELLMAN (OWLS); JIYANG CHEN (MONTGOMERY); EBRU YILDIZ (WESTERLIES)

Left to right: clockwise: Composer Jessie Montgomery, the Westerlies, Gabriel Cabezas, Time for Three, and Owls.



Outside



ZOE PRINDS-FLASH (TOP), LAUREN DESBERGN (BOTTOM)

the Chamber

Violin. Cello. Bass.
Flute. Saxophone.
Piano. Guitar. Drums.

Any pieces come to mind for that particular instrumentation? Probably not. But that wasn't the point when Curtis' 2025–26 composer in residence Jessie Montgomery formed the Everything Band, a flexible unit of composer-performers, after the pandemic. Instead, she was thinking of the artists themselves. Whose creativity meshed with the sound she was seeking?

"The musicianship was really important, but so were the interpersonal relationships," says Ms. Montgomery, who also plays violin in the group.

The same guiding principle—working with musicians you admire, even without a blueprint or built-in repertoire—has inspired a renaissance of groups with unusual instrumentations. In addition to playing cello in the Everything Band, Gabriel Cabezas (Cello '13) is a founding member of Owls, a string quartet with two cellos rather than two violins. Curtis faculty clarinetist Anthony McGill ('00) recently started Trio Afiori with mezzo-soprano Fleur Barron and pianist Gloria Chien. Going back further, Nina von Maltzahn Chair in Violin Studies Ida Kavafian played in Tashi, a boundary-breaking quartet of piano trio plus clarinet active in the 1970s, and Grammy Award-winning *Pierrot*-plus-percussion ensemble Eighth Blackbird was in residence at Curtis in the early 2010s.

"It doesn't really matter what instruments people play," Mr. Cabezas says. "You just need to figure out how to make a compelling product and hang out with people you like."

But what does that look like in practice?

The Humans Behind the Instruments

During the 2019–20 season, Mr. Cabezas was curating concerts for the New York-based Metropolis Ensemble. He had the idea to invite other musicians he admired onto the series—like Curtis classmate Ayane Kozasa (Viola '12, String Quartet '16) and her partner, cel-

list Paul Wiancko, whom Mr. Cabezas had commissioned before. The three of them were also fans of violinist Alexi Kenney, one of the classical circuit's leading young virtuosos.

"I had the thought that if I could just get some cool people together, we could probably figure something out," Mr. Cabezas says, "and I've always enjoyed grouping players in ways that aren't just the string quartet."

They found a span when Mr. Kenney was free and holed up in Mr. Wiancko and Ms. Kozasa's Brooklyn apartment to hash out repertoire. By the end of the week, the quartet had more than an hour of music under its belt, much of which it recorded on Owls' 2025 debut album, *Rare Birds*: Wiancko's *When the Night* and *Vox Petra*, and Franghiz Ali-Zadeh's *Rags*, from the Kronos Quartet's sweeping *Fifty for the Future* commissioning project. (As it happened, Kozasa and Wiancko joined Kronos themselves a few years later.)

"It felt very core to the roots of chamber music: people in a room, hanging out," Mr. Cabezas says.

That's precisely how hit pop-classical trio Time for Three started, too—but the room in question was a Curtis practice room, after hours. Following orchestra rehearsals with Otto-Werner Mueller, the original Time for Three members would link up for jam sessions. Violinist Nicolas Kendall ('01) incorporated hip-hop influences sponged up at Questlove's open mic nights at the University of Pennsylvania, founding violinist Zach DePue ('02) leaned on his background in Appalachian fiddle, and Ranaan Meyer (Double Bass '03)—a transfer from the Manhattan School of Music, where he was classmates with "heavy jazzers" like pianist Jason Moran and vibraphonist Stefon Harris—brought his jazz chops.

According to Mr. Kendall, their two-violin, one-bass configuration didn't register as odd at the time. "We weren't thinking about anything other than the humans behind those instruments," he says.

Through those late-night sessions, the young musicians had so many run-

ins with campus security that they got called into the dean's office. When the trio explained what they were doing, however, Curtis administrators were intrigued. They gave the group its first paid gig, at a corporate event in Washington, D.C.

"Even though what we were doing was not necessarily the vocabulary taught at Curtis, I think they recognized the creativity and passion," Mr. Kendall says.

That creativity and passion have taken the trio a long way. Time for Three won a Grammy in 2023 for Best Classical Instrumental Solo, for their album *Letters for the Future* with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and they've been the dedicatees of



Clockwise from left: Jessie Montgomery at Curtis, yMusic, Trio Afiori, Time for Three with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra.

five concertos to date, with two more forthcoming. (The trio connected with *Overtures* from St. Louis, where they were playing one of them: Kevin Puts' *Contact*.)

"When we first started out, I think there was some doubt in the industry—like, 'The world's not ready for you,'" Mr. Meyer muses. "Now, 25 years into existence, we're going places where, if there are doubters, they're hiding from us."

Making It Work

Ms. Kavafian faced her share of doubters when she, pianist Peter Serkin ('64), cellist Fred Sherry, and clarinetist Richard

ALLIE IPPOLITO (TOP); COLLEEN CLAGGET (BOTTOM)



SHERVIN LAINEZ (YMusic); DANIEL ASHWORTH (TRIO AFIORI)

Stoltzman formed Tashi in 1973 to play Olivier Messiaen’s monumental *Quartet for the End of Time*. Her peers pool-pooled the idea of joining an ensemble so early in her career, lest she “be pegged as a chamber musician instead of as a soloist.”

Luckily, Ms. Kavafian ignored the naysayers. Not only did she successfully pursue both careers, but, during its short lifespan, Tashi became one of the most influential chamber ensembles of the 20th century.

“Having musical goals is crucial. But having career goals, I think, is a mistake,” she says. “If you’re only striving for one thing, you miss some other incredible opportunities that come along.”

Thanks in part to the group’s advocacy, the *Quartet for the End of Time* went from being a work Tashi had to “sell” to presenters to a cornerstone of the chamber repertoire. As the group ascended, composers like Tōru Takemitsu and Charles Wuorinen were inspired to compose new works for them, building out the repertoire for that particular instrumental combination.

At its height in the mid-1970s, Tashi was a full-time commitment, says Ms. Kavafian. But many of the groups forming today boast members with robust solo or orchestral careers—they can’t dedicate nonstop time to their ensembles.

Especially with non-traditional groups, “it’s a little bit more common for people to approach it as a part-time job then evaluate as things get better or worse,” Mr. Cabezas observes. “[Owls] just kind of do things when we feel like it... So far, it’s worked to our benefit.”

For the Everything Band, that’s a feature, not a bug. Ms. Montgomery feels “there’s no other point in [her] career” when she would have been able to convene the group. She continues to build her relationships with venues, including the Kaufman Music Center in New York, just as she also builds partnerships with her bandmates. She even played in an earlier project with Everything Band bassist Eleonore Oppenheim called big dog little dog, a violin/bass songwriting duo that was unusual in its own right.

She also notes that the Everything Band’s members are so established—and busy—that an opportunity like this one can feel like a respite rather than a risk. “I think all these people would have done this many years ago, but now it feels like something they can really dig into,” Ms. Montgomery says. “It’s a bridge between professionalism and play, which is more accessible now that everyone’s had a good run so far with their careers.”

It’s no coincidence that many of these groups—with the exception of Tashi, who were able to lean on a canonical work as a vehicle—count composers among their ranks by necessity. They are, in many cases, inventing their own repertoires.

In fact, Addison Maye-Saxon (Trombone ’19) first learned about the two-trumpet, two-trombone group the Westerlies after being drawn to their published arrangements. The group reinvents everything from string music by contemporary classical composer Caroline Shaw, to jazz miniatures by guitarist Bill Frisell, to the catalog of

indie folk band Big Thief, and even shape-note songs.

After playing Westerlies arrangements for years, Mr. Maye-Saxon fulfilled a longtime dream when he joined the quartet full-time in 2023. “It’s like joining Queen back in the day, as a young guitarist,” he jokes.

Sometimes, an ensemble’s novel instrumentation can do the opposite: signal what it won’t play and sidestep tussles with presenters or managers who might expect standard repertoire. When Mr. Cabezas isn’t playing in Owls or the Everything Band, he’s also the cellist of yMusic, a similarly genre-fluid sextet of flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, viola, and cello which “work[s] on both sides of the classical/popular music divide.”

“yMusic does not look like a string quartet, so you cannot possibly expect us to play Beethoven on your series,” Mr. Cabezas says. “If you’re working with other people in the music industry—agents, managers, whatever—what’s most important is that they understand what it is that you do.”

And if one has any hesitation about starting an offbeat project with accomplished colleagues, Mr. Cabezas suggests casting it to the wind. A colleague in yMusic initially assumed the cellist would be booked up after graduating from Curtis. In truth, Mr. Cabezas was free for the group’s spring gigs. He subbed with the ensemble, which eventually led to his formal invitation to the group later that year.

“Always ask,” he advises.

Likewise, though the Everything Band is now buoyed by Ms. Montgomery’s industry experience, she stresses that it wasn’t always that way. Young ensembles may have to blaze their own trails, as Tashi once did. That can be scary—but rewarding.

“I had to create my own space around composing initially,” Ms. Montgomery says. “I would never discourage anyone from trying to do the same.”

Hannah Edgar writes about classical music for the Chicago Tribune, New York Times, and Musical America, and produces radio for WBEZ Chicago.