

# Be Prepared

*Otto-Werner Mueller trains conductors on and off the podium*

BY AMANDA MITCHELL-BOYASK



WHAT THE PUBLIC THINKS of as conducting — standing in front of an orchestra and giving visual direction — is a mere 5 percent or so of what's really involved. Preparation for the first rehearsal is invisible yet all-important. “The worst insult that a conductor can give to an orchestra,” according to Otto-Werner Mueller, “is to step in front without being prepared.”

Those facts shape the Helen F. Whitaker Fund Conducting Program at Curtis under its head, Mr. Mueller, who holds the Rita and Gustave Hauser Chair in Conducting Studies.

Study begins with the score — learning its structure and orchestration in order to hear the piece mentally before it is played. Sometimes it means figuring out a passage on a keyboard, while keeping in mind that an orchestra will respond a moment *after* the conductor indicates.

“When they stand in front of the orchestra, they must have their sound in their head,” Mr. Mueller said of his students. “As you play an instrument, you play the note directly. As you conduct, it’s the moment *before* that determines what’s coming after.

If you want to do something at the moment of the note, it’s too late, and that’s hard for many people to learn, particularly for pianists who want the sound to be there in the fingers.”

Most of the preparatory work, he explained, is in “learning the score really well and knowing instrumentation — and that you can deal with each individual player and follow each part.”

Mr. Mueller has been the “paterfamilias” of the tight-knit Curtis conducting department for the last 20 years. He is widely renowned for the intensely difficult task of developing in students the formidable range of skills needed to conduct an orchestra. He headed the conducting departments at Juilliard and Yale School of Music, as well as at Curtis. In June, he turned 80, a milestone to be celebrated at the October 22 Curtis Symphony Orchestra concert in Verizon Hall, conducted by Mr. Mueller with violin soloist Hilary Hahn.

While for most Curtis students a one-on-one lesson with a master teacher is central to each week and at the core of their studies, conducting students focus on intensive study as a class, usually of four.

Two mornings a week, for two-and-a-half hours each morning, they meet with Mr. Mueller to study score analysis, instrumentation, and technique.

Mr. Mueller selects the works for class study mindful that he has new and returning students together. They engage in a fundamental study of score analysis and basic orchestra repertoire, as well as works being prepared by the orchestra for readings and performances.

The class also studies elements of technique. In this, Mr. Mueller never asks the students to copy him exactly, preferring to allow the personality of each student to come through as long as his or her basic gestures are clear and helpful to the players.

## **TRAINING ON THE PODIUM**

Some techniques, skills, and strategies may be taught in the classroom, while others require working with performers. Mr. Mueller points out that the willingness of Curtis instrumental students to prepare chamber works with conducting students provides invaluable experience. After all, conductors must be able to transpose and read all of the clefs used by different orchestral instruments, and they need a basic knowledge of how each instrument works — what it can and can’t do.

The conducting students have a weekly two-hour session with a “lab orchestra” — a term coined by Mr. Mueller for a small group of students he formed at both Curtis and Juilliard to work with the conducting students — during which he will comment on their performance.

Mr. Mueller points out that in their role as a teaching tool, the lab orchestra members have to follow exactly what each conducting student communicates, even if it’s wrong. In order to help the conducting student learn from his or her mistakes, they must play exactly what they see, and this is especially important when they play for applicants during the audition process.

Most important, the lab orchestra provides an opportunity for the conducting student to learn, as Mr. Mueller said, “to hear from the front of the orchestra, which is very different from hearing from the hall. First of all, you hear the strings that are in front of you much closer than the winds, and if you want to



*‘The best part of training with Mr. Mueller was learning how to learn on our own...’*

Working with student Andrew Hauze during lab orchestra, spring 2006 ~ PHOTO: JOHN PAUL LACOVARA

(Facing page) With the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, fall 2005 ~ PHOTO: JELENA STJEPANOVIC

(Below, from left) With Virginia Allen, Jeanne McGinn, and student Kuok-man Lio ~ PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



have the brasses sound right where you are standing, then they're too loud [to the audience]. But to learn this balance takes a while.

"At the beginning of the year I usually interrupt very, very much," he said. "Then I let them go through for stretches." Those longer periods are, of course, followed by feedback.

The ultimate goal, he said, is that the student be ready for what follows the successful audition: preparing for the first rehearsal. Mr. Mueller poses a scenario faced by all recently employed conductors: "When the audition is over and they are sitting at their desk with a new score that they have never conducted, how do they organize that material in front of them? And prepare themselves for the first rehearsal?"

That preparation has become very helpful to Miguel Harth-Bedoya, who spends a lot of time studying scores these days as music director of the Fort Worth Symphony and a prominent guest conductor for orchestras and opera productions nationwide. He studied with Mr. Mueller at Curtis from 1988 until graduating in 1991. "The best part of training with Mr. Mueller was learning how to learn on our own — how to keep studying new scores using our own resources, knowledge, and judgment," he said. "Certainly having learned a solid conducting technique from

him has allowed me to add my own personal style in a very natural way over this strong foundation, which makes me feel very free while on the podium."

The basic conducting curriculum at Curtis is completed by observing orchestra rehearsals. Conducting students are required to be at all readings, rehearsals, and performances of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra. They also have special admission privileges to most rehearsals of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

### **THE AUDITION PROCESS**

Admission to the Curtis conducting program is based upon a three-part exam. The first part extensively tests the candidates' ability to hear and identify pitch and to demonstrate their general knowledge of music.

Candidates who pass that test then meet individually with Mr. Mueller, who interviews them and tests their score reading and ability to transpose at the piano.

Successful candidates from round two are invited back to conduct the following day. They begin with a symphonic work of their choice, then perform an excerpt from Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* — "to see how they deal with complicated rhythms," Mr. Mueller said. He emphasizes that it is essential that candidates possess a strong sense of rhythm, noting that rhythm can be improved to a certain extent but cannot

be instilled into someone who lacks its basic sense.

Choosing whom to admit to the program is, for Mr. Mueller, a "very, very difficult responsibility." He doesn't like to block anyone who demonstrates reasonable competence in the skills required, yet he is deeply concerned about wasting the time of a candidate who may not develop further and would be better spending time concentrating on something else.

He has evidently made many good choices. The list of Curtis graduates under his tenure includes music directors of the Cincinnati, Fort Worth, and Harrisburg symphony orchestras; the Philadelphia Singers; and the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, as well as chief conductor of the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. Then there are the associate conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra and assistant conductors of the Cleveland, Minnesota, and Philadelphia orchestras and the San Francisco Symphony. Still others conduct opera orchestras, symphony orchestras, conservatory orchestras, and youth orchestras around the world.

Clearly Mr. Mueller's reach extends far beyond the podium. ☺

*Amanda Mitchell-Boyask, a former Curtis vice president, is working for the Waldorf School of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Orchestra.*