

HE'S GROUNDED—IN THEORY

Curtis academic Eric Wen pairs counterpoint with intuition

BY CARI SUNDERMEIER

'Notes themselves are not music, but an image of pitches in another medium. Our ultimate goal is to develop a student's ability to translate the visual representation of notes into sounds.'

Eric Wen has a marketing idea for the iPod: "Instead of advertising 'two thousand songs,' they can say you can put the complete symphonies of Haydn through Brahms on an iPod. *That* would be a selling point!" A recent iPod convert, he revels in the massive amount of repertoire that fits on the palm-sized gadget.

Mr. Wen, a renowned scholar and lecturer, lives and breathes those great composers—Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms—who represent the pinnacle of tonal art, his specialty. He has been sharing his enthusiasm for music theory with Curtis students since he joined the Musical Studies faculty in 1999. In 2002 he became co-chair of the department with Edward Aldwell, and now, following Mr. Aldwell's untimely death last year, he serves as its chair.

When he speaks about his favorite composers and what he wants Curtis students to gain from his classes, Mr. Wen offers a glimpse of his classroom persona. His gestures intensify. His arms wave wildly at times. His voice raises to a fevered pitch. All that's missing is the dash from piano to whiteboard and back again.

"No amount of intellectualizing will get you close to the essence of music, unless you have a great passion for it and feel it in your gut. If I can help Curtis students gain a little intellectual understanding of the music they love so deeply, I feel I've accomplished something," he says. "And I don't water down my teaching to make the subject easy to follow. Combining notes together into a coherent piece of music is a difficult and precise skill. Because of this, I purposely teach at a high and detailed level to show what's involved in the craft of writing music."

Mr. Wen specializes in Schenkerian analysis, a method of studying tonal compositions hierarchically in structural levels. It provides the foundation of Curtis's music theory program. The curriculum emphasizes traditional approaches, such as the study of figured bass and species counterpoint.

"The best preparation for hearing long-range connections in music is a solid grounding in harmony and counterpoint," he says. "Species counterpoint is a pedagogical system that provides a foundation for understanding the basic principles of consonant and dissonant relationships between voices. It instills 'musical law.'"

A Path Musical and Varied

During his childhood Mr. Wen lived in New York, California, and Hong Kong. As a serious violinist in high school, he faced a question common to young musicians: What would be his musical path? He realized he didn't have what it takes to aim for a performance career. Instead of majoring in music, he studied privately (music theory with Carl Schachter and violin lessons and chamber music with various Juilliard faculty) and chose to expand his horizons as an English literature major at Columbia University.

After completing a master's degree in music theory at Yale University, he indulged his wanderlust and took off for Europe. He happened to arrive as the academic community in England was becoming interested in Schenker, and Mr. Wen landed teaching jobs at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and later at the University of London. After a one-year fellowship at Cambridge University, he served as the editor of the *Strad* and the *Musical Times*. He also ran Biddulph Recordings, which specializes in historical reissues. Producing CDs is still a busy enterprise for him, especially during the summers.

Now Mr. Wen is based in New York City, where he lives with his wife and three children—two of them teenagers. None of his children has seriously pursued music, and he hasn't pushed it. "You've got to have that passion so strong in your bones. ... Talent isn't enough. You've got to have the drive and the love that will transcend downfalls you're often going to get being a musician."



Eric Wen ~ PHOTO: JEAN E. BRUBAKER

This combination of academic, musical, and life experiences gives Mr. Wen a personal understanding of the conservatory student and a broad perspective for his teaching. In class he guides students through a composition, adding his technical knowledge and revealing its secrets. He “performs” a piece of music through theory—a style that his academic colleagues think suits him particularly well. “They say I am a frenetic character with the energy of a twenty-year old,” Mr. Wen says, laughing. “I do throw myself into teaching and try to relive the music in doing so.”

This spirited Curtis instructor has also taught courses at the Royal Academy of Music (London), Mannes College of Music, and Yale and presented guest lectures at Harvard, Princeton, Oxford, and Cambridge universities, as well as at musicological conferences in the United States and in Europe. His research has been published in the *Journal of Musical Theory*, *Theory and Practice*, and *Music Analysis*. Recent writing projects include a theoretical article on the augmented-sixth chord for a German publication and a piece on Brahms.

Developing the Ear

As Musical Studies chair, Mr. Wen plans the curriculum he feels is best suited to the needs of Curtis students, noting that the primary concern of the department is the development of the musical ear. “Notes themselves are not music, but an image of pitches in another medium,” he says. “Our ultimate goal is to develop a student’s ability to translate the visual representation of notes into sounds.”

He is excited about recent changes to the Musical Studies curriculum. New theory courses include: Analysis, a detailed study of how the forces of harmony and counterpoint are brought to play in tonal music; Form, an examination of the architecture of a composition; Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Analysis; a third year of Harmony; and a choice of seminars on specialized topics for the third year of music history. It is a rigorous, sophisticated, and very academic curriculum.

“We are very strong in techniques of music,” Mr. Wen says. “That’s something that I am very proud of in this department. I think it’s well suited for performers. It takes discipline to study this—and that’s what Curtis students have in their core.”

And when they’ve completed their studies, they should also have a deeper understanding of the sounds that fill their teacher’s iPod. ☺

STUDENTS SAY ...

Oboist Timothy Sawyer arrived at Curtis with an appreciation for the sheer beauty of classical music and its emotional impact—without understanding why. “Over the past three years, Mr. Wen has taught me a more adult, intellectual understanding of the craft of music, by explaining, lucidly, why classical music is beautiful to begin with,” he writes in an e-mail, adding that his new understanding has not diminished his “initial, youthful ardor for music.”

Classmate Harrison Drake Hollingsworth, a bassoon student and violinist, recognizes that the analytical tools he has learned from Mr. Wen are useful for interpreting and memorizing music intelligently and thoroughly. “But at a deeper level,” he writes by e-mail, “it is Mr. Wen’s own conviction about the music he loves that makes him a noteworthy teacher. You never doubt his enthusiasm about the inherent beauty and worth in the music he loves, and everything he knows and teaches stems from that enthusiasm.”