

## MONSIEUR LE DOYEN

*From orientation to commencement and beyond, Robert Fitzpatrick is at the center of all things Curtis*

BY AMANDA MITCHELL-BOYASK

On April 2, 1986, a new era began at Curtis when Gary Graffman was named the Institute's eighth director. That same night Mr. Graffman made a telephone call to a fellow Curtis alumnus who, like himself, had been appointed in 1980 by then-Director John de Lancie. That call was to ask clarinetist and conductor Robert Fitzpatrick to be his dean. The rest, as they say, is history.

The two gentlemen have shared the stage at every new-student orientation since 1986 (from 1980 to 1984, before Mr. Graffman's tenure, Mr. Fitzpatrick also led the annual "romp through the student handbook," making the most recent ceremony his 25th). At the other end of the school year, graduating students have been handed their diplomas, degrees, and certificates by Dean Fitzpatrick and received a bear hug from President/Director Graffman.

A native of Philadelphia, Mr. Fitzpatrick was the only child of a teamster truck driver and an ad-taker for a local employment agency. Neither parent was especially musical and there was no piano in the family home. However, he was soon playing the piano by ear at the home of a friend whose father was a Lutheran minister.

Mr. Fitzpatrick attended St. Joseph's Preparatory School, where a spot playing alto saxophone in the school band became the first stepping-stone in his musical career, one he admits to taking largely because his best friend, Alvin Bowyer, was doing so. A quick realization that the key to real power in the band lay with the clarinet led him to lessons with Jules Serpentine, then second clarinet of the Philadelphia Orchestra (and teacher of Curtis alumnus and faculty member Donald Montanaro). After a year of lessons and a switch from an "awful metal clarinet" to a decent instrument, he was principal clarinet.

His musical career took a new turn in his third year at the school's Christmas concert, when conductor Henri Elkan (of Elkan-Vogel music publishing fame) was delayed and Mr. Fitzpatrick was abruptly told to get up and conduct a performance that he describes as "the only obstacle between 800 high

school boys and their Christmas vacation." He not only got through it but also was widely praised.

After the Prep, Mr. Fitzpatrick entered the music education program at Temple University's College of Music and studied clarinet. He switched to a performance major a year later, entering the studio of the late Philadelphia Orchestra Principal Clarinet Anthony Gigliotti, also a Curtis alumnus. He was accepted at Curtis the following year and entered in 1966.

By the end of the 1960's, with Curtis studies and a Temple Bachelor of Music degree in hand, he returned to St. Joe's Prep to serve as chairman of the department of fine arts and musical director until 1980. Meanwhile, he played clarinet in the Garden State Philharmonic in Toms River, N.J., and the Orchestra Society of Philadelphia, also completing his master's degree at Temple in 1970.

In 1972, history repeated itself when, for a Garden State concert, he was asked to step in to conduct a program when Henri Elkan became ill. This time he had four days' notice and a little more experience — including conducting courses at Temple (which had quickly cured him of conducting left-handed) and seminars at the Ambler Festival of Temple University with Otto-Werner Mueller, Margaret Hillis, and Milan Horvat of the Zagreb Philharmonic. The concert was successful, and Mr. Fitzpatrick became the assistant to Mr. Elkan, succeeding him as the Garden State Philharmonic's musical director and conductor in 1976.

It was conducting that led Mr. Fitzpatrick back to Curtis. In 1980, Director John de Lancie was looking for an executive assistant to help with the formidable task of running a world-class music conservatory. He also needed an in-house conductor for Curtis's symphony orchestra. Mr. Fitzpatrick was asked to "audition" by preparing an alumni ensemble performance of Lukas Foss's *Time Cycle*. Evidently he passed. During the dress rehearsal, conducted by the composer, Mr. de Lancie inquired whether Mr. Fitzpatrick

had ever been in the Army and could take orders. Receiving an affirmative to the latter, he told his candidate that he was hired.

Over the next five years, in addition to regularly preparing orchestra programs for guest conductors, Mr. Fitzpatrick conducted the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in concerts in Philadelphia, at Lincoln Center, and at the Kennedy Center, as well as in Europe at the *Rencontres Musicales d'Evian* in 1983 and 1984. His first orchestra program comprised works by Gene Gutchë, Robert Wykes, Ramon Zupko, John Harbison, and Jacob Druckman — an extraordinary challenge and achievement from a nonpianist who admits that his score-reading and memorization skills are largely self-taught.

At the same time, he worked with Mr. de Lancie's secretary to support the director and, as several registrars came and went, assumed many of the advising and other duties previously carried out by that office, gradually shaping his administrative position toward the one he holds today. (Mr. Fitzpatrick was away from Curtis during 1985 and the first part of 1986 and was special projects director at the Settlement Music School.)

In his Graffman-era tenure, the balance between his two functions changed as the needs of the school developed. On the conducting side, Mr. Graffman was establishing a formal orchestra department, with widely respected pedagogue and conductor Otto-Werner Mueller to head it. On the academic side, after the departure of Dean of Academic Studies William Hires, Mr. Fitzpatrick took on all the responsibilities of the chief academic officer and became the primary liaison with faculty and students. He conducted the orchestra occasionally until the early 1990's, but his expertise was needed more in his new role as dean. He remains deeply involved in artistic matters, also, and, among many other things, runs the annual auditions for several of the string departments, as well as the concertmaster audition.

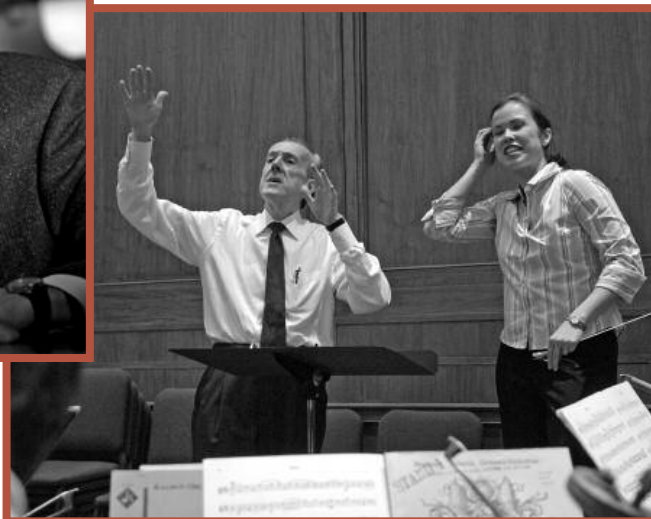
Almost two decades later, he can look back on the many enhancements to the Institute during his tenure, knowing that he



~ PHOTO (ABOVE): DAVID DEBALCO

Dean Robert Fitzpatrick and conducting alumna Sarah Hatsuko Hicks at a student-alumni chamber orchestra reading, May 2005

~ PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA



played a significant role in most of them and the leading role in several areas. He credits Mr. Graffman with artistic enhancements — of which the institution of a master class program and formalization of the orchestra program are just two examples on a long list (see page 9) — and Mr. Graffman points out that almost all of the enhancements were the result of discussions between the two of them.

Of their partnership the dean says: “I certainly couldn’t have done it without him, and I’d like to think he couldn’t have done it without me.” Mr. Graffman enthusiastically concurs and gives the dean particular credit for major achievements in the academic program, which ultimately led to accreditation by the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges in 1993.

The reciprocal arrangement with the University of Pennsylvania enabling Curtis students to take any course at Penn not offered at Curtis was another enhancement in which Mr. Fitzpatrick was a leading force, as was a major technological overhaul, quietly revolutionizing the way Curtis goes about its business. The centerpiece is a refurbished computer studio with 10 Macintosh G5 computers on which composition students can turn their scores into parts at the touch of a button. Curtis’s audio-visual studio is well-equipped for both current and future needs, producing broadcast-quality recordings of every Field Concert Hall performance,

and, last but not least, an intranet network and Internet access have completely changed and streamlined communications among students, faculty, and staff.

The dean’s adept use of the network to communicate regularly with the entire internal Curtis family has underscored his position at the center of all things Curtis, while adding to the personal legend about him; the now-famous “le doyen s’en va” messages signal a departure to his beloved Paris apartment. And while those trips to France represent the rare times that he is not found inside the august building at 1726 Locust Street, he is never completely away from Curtis, as his daily transatlantic e-mails attest.

On most days, he is found at Curtis during business hours and beyond, during performances and rehearsals, making sure all run smoothly — especially the student recitals, at which the audience is often witness to his eloquence and humor, and of which the writer speculates that he has, over his quarter-century tenure, attended more than anyone else in Curtis history. ☺

*Amanda Mitchell-Boyask was Curtis’s vice president for external relations until December 2004, when she left Philadelphia for an extended stay in Cambridge, England. She returned in September 2005 and is currently working for the Waldorf School of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Art Alliance.*