

‘What if we could take all our students on a common journey with relevance to all, culminating in performance?’

## A QUARTET FOR 160

One of Curtis’s special qualities has always been its intimacy. Social encounters are easy among our 160 students, who share a common focus on music and constantly cross paths. And yet the demands of rehearsals, lessons, and classes can take them in diverse directions, each student following a highly tailored course of study. Meeting the demands immediate to one’s own instrument and repertoire can make it difficult to step back and approach the art form in a holistic way.

As we approached the new school year, we wondered how we might unite the student body around a single musical endeavor, prompting new and meaningful conversations among our young instrumentalists, singers, composers, and conductors. What if we could take all our students on a common journey with relevance to all, culminating in performance?

Of course there is no one work in which all our students could perform; we could accommodate a symphony orchestra and twenty-five singers—but the fifteen or so pianists, four organists, six composers, and four conductors might pose a problem of proportion, not to mention staging! Instead we posed the question more broadly. Might we study a work not just through performance, but also in the classroom? Might our Musical Studies and Liberal Arts courses approach the chosen score and related works through analysis and through their cultural context?

Choosing a composer was surprisingly easy. Beethoven came immediately to mind: a creator of significance in all musical forms; a great thinker, whose eloquent letters and conversation books testified to his complex inner life; and a tireless worker, who left behind laborious musical sketches that provide enlightening clues to his creative process. Beethoven, of course. But what work?

We settled—paradoxically, perhaps—on a string quartet. Beethoven’s quartets are a world in themselves, fruitful for chamber music study but also for analysis. And his forward-looking, experimental String Quartet, Op. 95 (“Quartetto Serioso”), offers special opportunities. Op. 95 inspired a transcription for large string orchestra by Gustav Mahler, born a century later into a very different age and interpretive tradition. Mahler saw symphonic scale in this quartet, and his homage transforms the piece.

This core idea has taken shape as our Beethoven Op. 95 project. Each string chamber group is rehearsing Op. 95 from the beginning of the fall semester. By December all of our string students will have gained an understanding of Op. 95 from the inside out—as chamber music. Then it will be time for a fresh look, as orchestra rehearsals begin for the February concert, which includes the Mahler transcription.

Meanwhile, Op. 95 will feature as a subject for analysis in a Musical Studies course dedicated to Beethoven. Several Liberal Arts electives will hone in on Beethoven’s letters. A guest lecture, “Opus 95 and the Bipolar Beethoven,” by the composer Bruce Adolphe will shed light on the questing mind behind this magnificent work.



President Roberto Díaz ~ PHOTO: J. HENRY FAIR

As our students probe deeply into one of the most expansive minds in music, they’ll have a platform for both formal classroom discussions and informal, lively dialogues of their own. These will be a highlight of our fall and winter months. In December the circle will widen as our friends and our student recital audiences hear student quartets playing Op. 95 and other students performing music by Beethoven during the week leading up to the composer’s birthday, December 16.

Then, in February, larger audiences will join us in Verizon and Carnegie halls as the Curtis Symphony Orchestra performs the “Quartetto Serioso” as re-imagined by Mahler, under the direction of Alan Gilbert (’92). Those performances will contain the efforts not only of the string players we see on stage, but of all our students who have contributed to an animated and rich discussion. ☺

Roberto Díaz