

ROOM TO PLAY

During my first several months as president of The Curtis Institute of Music, we have been exploring many issues of longstanding concern. One of these is our need for a dedicated orchestra rehearsal facility.

The Curtis Symphony Orchestra rehearses twice each week in Field Concert Hall, where our students also perform more than one hundred recitals a year. It's an elegant space for chamber music, with fine acoustics and a great sense of intimacy. But that intimacy becomes a limitation as soon as the orchestra moves in. Seated with their instruments, our orchestra players fill the floor of the hall completely—side-to-side and front-to-back. The concertmaster has to watch his bow arm to avoid bumping the lip of the stage; the woodwinds are pressed up against the back wall. And when they play? Let's just say that the sound of one hundred musicians warming up is more than a bit much for this refined space.

This was the scene in January when Michael Tilson Thomas entered Field Concert Hall to rehearse our orchestra for the first time, as part of his three-day residency at Curtis. (See page 8.) As he raised his baton, a hush fell over the hall. "We'll start with Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony, last movement." His left arm swept over the orchestra. "There are many fortissimos in this music"—a smile—"but in this room, let's take them down a couple of notches, especially the brass."

It was the latest acknowledgment of a reality our students face daily. Their artistic home—this world-renowned conservatory—is bursting through the walls of four venerable, overused mansions. Every room does double or triple duty. Teaching studios morph into classrooms, and then into practice rooms. And the remarkable hall in which Curtis students play myriad recitals is also pressed into service for organ practice, sectionals, audio and video recording, and rehearsals of the Curtis Symphony Orchestra. There is hardly a minute when this beautiful performance space is permitted to rest.

Field Concert Hall is a perfect illustration of how The Curtis Institute of Music has "made do" for decades with its limited square footage. There are many other examples. Our shortage of practice rooms, for instance,

is alleviated by the school's longstanding policy of providing Steinway pianos to keyboard majors, composers, and conductors in their apartments, and by allowing others twenty-four-hour access to Curtis buildings. Still, it has been clear for many years that our young musicians need more space.

Less clear has been the route to a solution. Additions to the current buildings have proven impractical. Appropriate sites for additional buildings have rarely come on the market, or have not been affordable.

Now, for the first time, we are positioned to address this problem.

The availability of a potential site within a block of our current campus has prompted a remarkably generous offer from the chairman of our board of trustees, Gerry Lenfest. As I write in early February, the property is under an agreement of purchase that is allowing us the time needed to determine whether a new building there can meet Curtis's most pressing needs—including an appropriate orchestra rehearsal room, a significant number of new studios for practice and teaching, and housing for some of our students. Should this site prove feasible, Gerry has offered to purchase it on the school's behalf.

Gerry's vision inspires our gratitude and our continuing commitment to resolve our space concerns. The Curtis Board of Trustees has responded by expressing its determination to proceed with planning for the renovation of current facilities and for construction on a new site, provided that Curtis is able to raise the necessary funds.

This will, of course, require a capital campaign of major scope. But our students deserve no less. During his Curtis residency in December, Michael Tilson Thomas told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Like all American musicians, I'm grateful to the past and present of Curtis and hopeful about its future."

For those of us who are alumni, parents, and friends of this unique conservatory, that future is our collective responsibility. ☺

Roberto Díaz



President Roberto Díaz ~ PHOTO: L. C. KELLEY