

Conducting Energy

KARINA CANELLAKIS (VIOLIN '04) HAS BECOME A COMPELLING PRESENCE ON THE PODIUM.

BY DIANA BURGWYN

The idea of becoming a conductor was not in her sights until her Berlin experience—and even then, she remained hesitant.

At age 23, violinist Karina Canellakis learned that auditions were being held for the exclusive Academy Orchestra of the Berlin Philharmonic. The gifted young musicians who are accepted into this intensive two-year training program play alongside the professional ensemble in all concerts and often become full members of the Philharmonic afterwards.

Ms. Canellakis flew to Berlin and won the audition. “It was my dream orchestra, my dream job,” she says.

Later, as a member of the Academy, she played in a chamber music concert at the Philharmonie, performing first violin in Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*. Berlin Philharmonic Artistic Director Simon Rattle was in the audience, and soon after, having heard from colleagues that Karina had participated in a conducting master class, he surprised her with an unexpected observation. “I’m sure you would be a great first violinist in a string quartet or the concertmaster of an orchestra,” she recalls him saying. “But if you think you might want to be a conductor, that’s what I think you should do.” A few months later, she conducted a group of colleagues in Berlin, strictly for fun, with Mr. Rattle’s encouragement. His vote of confidence planted a seed.

A New York City native, Karina Canellakis had come to Curtis at age 17 to study violin with Ida Kavafian. “As a violinist Karina had her own sound and a personal style, a singing style that was reminiscent of early 20th-century violinists like Kreisler and Szigeti,” Ms. Kavafian recalls. “Her ethic, her integrity, her passion and drive were evident from the beginning.”

“Ida taught me everything I know about the violin,” says Ms. Canellakis. “She fixed my bow arm in two months.” She also became a trusted friend.

While a student, Ms. Canellakis joined the Curtis laboratory orchestra, which played for a weekly conductor’s lesson taught by the venerable Otto-Werner Mueller. It was her favorite time of the week. Not being a conducting student, she escaped his sometimes withering critiques, but eagerly absorbed the lessons they offered. “Mr. Mueller held everyone to the highest standards,” she says. “He wanted the conducting students to be humbled by the greatness of a composer and to understand the composition’s inner workings.” Still, the idea of becoming a conductor herself was not in her sights until her Berlin experience—and even then, she remained hesitant.

TURNING POINT

At the end of the Academy training in Berlin, Ms. Canellakis felt homesick and moved back to the U.S. She divided her time among chamber music with Musicians from Marlboro and other groups, teaching, doing solo work, and playing regularly in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In 2010 she learned that Alan Gilbert, music director of the New York Philharmonic and a Curtis alumnus whom Ms. Canellakis knew and admired, would begin teaching at Juilliard the next year. The die was cast. She applied and was accepted for study toward a master’s degree in conducting.

Ms. Canellakis remained loyal to her beloved violin, practicing solo Bach regularly. But conducting came first. Every day she spent hours at the piano, improving her keyboard skills and reading through scores. One summer at the Pacific Music Festival she worked with the Metropolitan Opera’s principal conductor, Fabio Luisi, studying arias and recitative, transposing songs, and coaching singers. Back at Juilliard, she spent hours daily in the basement of the Met, watching operas take shape under a maestro she calls “strict, disciplined, and inspiring.”

With her master’s degree from Juilliard in hand, Ms. Canellakis was appointed assistant conductor of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, whose music director, Jaap van Zweden, had also started as a fine violinist. “I am indebted to Jaap for life,” she says. Over two

Photos on opposite page:

Center: Karina Canellakis PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG

An orchestra rehearsal for Curtis Opera Theatre’s *Le nozze di Figaro*, which Ms. Canellakis conducted last spring. PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA



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seasons she covered Mr. van Zweden for every concert. Only five weeks into her tenure and with less than 24 hours' notice, she substituted for him in Shostakovich's massive Eighth Symphony. "Did I just do that?" she asked herself in disbelief afterward. Critics gave her glowing endorsements, noting her technical and interpretive excellence. Another fill-in, for the late Nikolaus Harnoncourt with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe at the Styriarte Festival in Austria, resulted in an invitation from the festival to return in 2016.

Over two seasons in Dallas, Ms. Canellakis conducted some 60 concerts of her own, not counting the times she was called on to fill in for the music director and visiting conductors. In Spring 2016 she won the coveted Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award, open to young conductors with a future in both orchestra and opera. With invitations multiplying for guest appearances, she regretfully stepped down from her Dallas position—"A most unfortunate announcement," lamented one local critic—and arrived at Curtis to conduct Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* in May.

PRECISE FREEDOM

At *Figaro* rehearsals Ms. Canellakis was characteristically clear: explaining her tempi in detail, honing the sound of the orchestra, and encouraging eye contact with the singers. Opera student Elena Perroni, one of two sopranos who sang the role of Susanna, recalls her approach as "very precise, but within that precision somehow she gave us a sense of freedom. She allowed the two casts to be very different. We didn't have to fit into a box." Bass-baritone Thomas Shivone, who sang Figaro, adds: "Karina was very aware that she was in control, but she didn't use that power unnecessarily and she showed a rare humility, a sense that there is always so much more to strive for."

Ms. Canellakis put her stamp on the production in more subtle ways, too, notes Lisa Keller, a Curtis opera and voice coach who played recitative harpsichord for the production. "At first she took out almost all the harpsichord and cello continuo that accompanied the recitative, leaving only the barest harmonic skeleton, so that the singers would build a natural speech-like pattern themselves. Then she restored the continuo bit by bit."

At the performances this intense, graceful, and energetic leader communicated as much with her expressive face as with her arms, body, and baton. She looked younger than her 34 years, but her authority was that of a sophisticated maestro.

After the Curtis performances, Ms. Canellakis made her final appearances in Dallas, then led the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Concentus Musicus Wien. On her agenda for the coming season are debuts in Stockholm, Birmingham (U.K.), Toronto, and Milwaukee, as well as the world premieres of two new operas. Her love of the violin undiminished, she still plays.

It's the very life that Simon Rattle predicted for her. ♦

Diana Burgwyn is a Philadelphia-based writer whose articles have appeared in Overtones, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and Symphony, among other publications.



PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG

WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—Karina Canellakis

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"So many reasons! Because it's small, it's intimate. It's free. Because it's the best music school in the world. ... The people you meet as a student here will be your people forever.

"The new building is incredible. When I was a student, we rehearsed in the old hall. If we played a Shostakovich symphony in there, it was deafening. And I'd have been a much healthier person if we'd had a dorm and cafeteria—I was eating tuna out of a can! It's great for foreign students too, because they have the camaraderie of living in a dorm together."