



Lambert Orkis

## A Purpose and a Passion

Lambert Orkis (Piano '65) strives to transport listeners each time he plays.

BY JAMIE McCRARY

Lambert Orkis is a paradox. He's a world-renowned pianist who didn't come from a musical family. He's a soloist and a sought-after collaborator. He's a contemporary music aficionado who's also known for his performances on period instruments.

The thing that's always consistent? His passion for, and dedication to, music. "I love sharing my excitement for whatever music I play," he says. "My job is to affect audiences—to move them." He defines himself not by the notes he plays, but by the message he transmits. "Classical music is a whole kaleidoscope of feelings," he says. "It's up to us as performers to discover them, reveal them, and play in a way that the audience feels connected."

Mr. Orkis, who started at Curtis when he was just 14, has always been a purpose-driven player. Performing, he says, is a responsibility—a "sacred duty."

Eleanor Sokoloff, his teacher at Curtis, was a key motivator, demanding the utmost perfection. "I would leave my lessons soaked in sweat," he says. "They were a mental, physical and spiritual workout." The grueling sessions instilled a work ethic that sets him apart to this day. "Lambert was one of the hardest workers I've ever had," says Mrs. Sokoloff. She recalls receiving a call from the director of Curtis one day, complaining that young Lambert had damaged school property. He'd practiced so long on one of the Curtis pianos that he forced the hammers up through its strings. "It was unbelievable," Sokoloff says. "Nobody has done that before or since."

She never let him lose his love for music, though. Mrs. Sokoloff nurtured a hunger for artistry in her young pupil. "Passion for our work was always the most important thing," he says. And today, his teacher still sees him as "among my most outstanding students."

### A MUSICAL EVOLUTION

After graduating from Curtis at age 19, Mr. Orkis hit the ground running. In the years since, he has forged a world-class reputation as a soloist, chamber musician, orchestral player, and professor. Though best known for his collaborations with violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, he also holds a professorship at Temple University and has been the keyboard player for the National Symphony Orchestra for 38 years. "I always just wanted to play," he says simply. "I took advantage of any opportunity I could."

His hard work has paid off. "The exceptional beauty and artistry of his playing is inspiring," says Mr. Orkis's National Symphony colleague Lisa-Beth Lambert (Violin '93), who has frequently

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performed with him in the Smithsonian Chamber Players and other chamber groups. She especially appreciates his “exquisite timing and shaping of phrases.”

“When collaborating, he picks up every nuance, and delights in exploring together the depths of each piece,” she says.

Mr. Orkis has built his career through such meticulously-prepared playing. “Every time you perform, you make an impression. You never know who is going to be listening and what that could lead to,” he says. For him, the key is careful, deep, and intentional analysis of the music. Thoroughly understanding a piece’s mechanics creates a reliable foundation on which to perform. It’s one of the many musical tools he learned from Mr. Rostropovich, whom he played with for more than eleven years.

Their first performance together was a pivotal experience—but not in the way one might think.

Walking on stage, Mr. Orkis’s performance anxiety hit a peak. His hands were ice-cold, his mind unsteady, his heart racing. The recital went well, but he knew that if he wanted to be a successful pianist, he desperately needed to ease his stage fright.

Afterwards Mr. Rostropovich told him something he’d never forget: Think the right thoughts. Integrate positive, passage-specific thoughts into the music when practicing to ensure a steady mindset when performing. It’s impossible to accomplish this without knowing a piece’s structure, through and through.

It was a revelation. “My scores started to look very much like Rostropovich’s—very marked up,” he laughs.

## COMMUNICATION AND CONNECTION

This new perspective put Mr. Orkis one step closer to mastery—a lifelong goal he knows he’ll never fully meet, but will always strive for. He wants to play his best not for himself, or even for the music, but for the audience. He’s committed to transporting his listeners, connecting them to a force outside of themselves that’s real and profound. “It’s a responsibility I take very seriously,” he says.

His 29-year musical partnership with Anne-Sophie Mutter is rooted in this shared objective. The duo has toured the world together, from New York City’s Carnegie Hall to Vienna’s Musikverein, always aiming to move their listeners in a profound way. In this regard, “Anne-Sophie and I are the same,” Mr. Orkis says.

They’re also deeply bonded through their mutual love of playing with one another. “There is no better musical companion possible than Lambert Orkis,” Ms. Mutter says. “After all these years, he is still a treasure to me.”

A musician’s life isn’t easy, but for Mr. Orkis, it’s worth every moment. He’s a pianist of heart and soul, with curiosity and a lot of tenacity mixed in. “It’s a demanding life, but I never take it for granted,” he says. “The music—that’s what makes it all worth it.” ♦

Jamie McCrary, based in Washington, D.C., is a writer for American University’s Kogod School of Business. Her work has appeared in *On Tap Magazine*, *Connections Magazine*, and *NEA Arts*.

Opposite:

Top left: Mr. Orkis with his longtime recital partner, Mstislav Rostropovich

Top right: Lambert Orkis

Middle left: Mr. Orkis has performed and recorded with violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter for 29 years.

PHOTO: HARALD HOFFMANN/COURTESY DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

Bottom left: With Ms. Mutter at Carnegie Hall

PHOTO: DARIO ACOSTA/COURTESY DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

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“The school’s location in Philadelphia is an added bonus. It’s a vibrant cultural city with a world-class resident orchestra. Having access to such wonderful music, both in school and in your city, is such a gift. You really learn what it means to be a musician that way.”

