

Endless Curiosity

Paul Kowert (Double Bass '09) has blazed a unique career path through classical, jazz, bluegrass, and folk forms—driven by his desire for musical growth.

BY DAVE ALLEN



Paul Kowert PHOTO: MICHAEL GEORGE

“Being a musician is like constantly being a student. I’m always learning from the people I’m around, and the things you learn seep into the things you do next.”

“There’s nothing wrong with just playing one kind of music, I don’t think.”

You’ll have to take Paul Kowert at his word; as bassist in Punch Brothers, the adventurous acoustic band led by mandolinist Chris Thile, his playing ranges across genres, propelling collaboratively written charts that borrow from bluegrass, contemporary classical and jazz, as well as arrangements of classic American fiddle tunes and songs by Debussy and Radiohead, among others. He contributes far more than walking bass lines, with wild, folk-inflected solos or lyrical excursions into his instrument’s upper range—sometimes while singing backup vocals.

Though Curtis graduates have diverse musical interests and pursuits, Mr. Kowert, a 2009 graduate, is one of the school’s most prominent alumni with a career outside the classical world. Apart from Punch Brothers, whose album *All Ashore* won the Grammy for Best Folk Album earlier this year, his side projects include backing Mr. Thile on his *Live from Here* variety show on public radio; touring with David Rawlings and Gillian Welch, two noted bluegrass performers; and playing in Hawktail, a chamber-folk group formed during his time at Curtis.

“My career reflects my desire to be able to play my instrument a certain way and to be able to express myself. What’s the difference between that and someone who wants to play the Mendelssohn violin concerto really well?” he says. “It’s just a question of, how do you get to the place where you’re playing the music you want to play?”

His path to that place starts with switching from violin to bass at age 9, after which Mr. Kowert says he “never stopped studying classical bass.” There were detours, though, that portended his future. He took up the mandolin after a bluegrass band visited his high school, and he soon received his own instrument and an album by Nickel Creek, Mr. Thile’s first group. Around the same time, he began listening to albums by the genre-bending bassist and composer Edgar Meyer, and playing in jam sessions and learning traditional tunes by ear soon supplemented his development in classical repertoire.

As Mr. Kowert decided on conservatory study, the lure of studying with both Mr. Meyer and Harold Hall Robinson, principal double bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra, drew him to Curtis. “Paul had a natural relationship with the instrument from the first time I saw him,” Mr. Meyer says. “He did not seem to be writing a lot of music early on, but writing appeared to be close to the heart of his interest in music—perfect building blocks.”

“Paul was interested in things that I was interested in, that most Curtis students were generally unfamiliar with,” Mr. Meyer adds. Mr. Kowert expressed those musical passions freely, starting in the apartment that he shared with Alex Hanna, a 2008 graduate who is now principal bass of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Recordings by the Swedish folk group Väsen and Joni Mitchell’s albums with the bassist Jaco Pastorius, among others previously unknown to Mr. Hanna, were in frequent rotation. “Paul’s curiosity rubbed off on me, big-time,” he recalls. “Spending four years with Paul was a huge part of my growth as a musician and a person.”

FOCUS ON RESULTS

Mr. Meyer’s visits to Curtis three times each semester galvanized the bass studio, and Mr. Kowert soaked in every bit of teaching, even drawing diagrams of Mr. Meyer’s hands while he played certain passages. Reflecting on his time with both teachers, who remain his mentors today, Mr. Kowert says, “there wasn’t so much ‘this is how you do it,’ but more discussion and thinking about the results of how you sounded.”

As Mr. Kowert’s catholic tastes influenced his friends and classmates, Mr. Meyer’s guidance helped to expand them further, both in lessons and in workshops like “The Porous Borders



Above left: Paul Kowert joined Punch Brothers after graduating from Curtis. His bandmates are frontman and mandolinist Chris Thile (center), guitarist Chris Eldridge, banjoist Noam Pikelny, and violinist Gabe Witchers. PHOTO: JOSH GOLEMAN

Above right: Mr. Kowert formed Hawktail with mandolinist Dominick Leslie, violinist Brittany Haas, and guitarist Jordan Tice.

of Music,” which convened string players of all kinds at Carnegie Hall in 2006. The workshop brought him into contact with Mr. Thile, and after the two played one of Mr. Meyer’s duets for bass and violin, Mr. Thile came away impressed: “Surely Edgar Meyer is the only one who could play it that way,” he recalls thinking. A few years later, after Punch Brothers’ founding bassist left the band, Mr. Kowert was invited to audition. Not long after the quintet settled into “St. Anne’s Reel,” a traditional fiddle tune, it became clear Mr. Kowert belonged. “That’s when the band really became a *band*,” Mr. Thile says.

Mr. Thile, who has made a serious study of Bach throughout his career, says he admires Mr. Kowert’s Curtis pedigree and the influence it’s brought to the band. “I see a hunger for musical growth in Paul,” he says. “I consider him to be one of the most remarkable musicians I’ve ever worked with.”

Joining Punch Brothers, Mr. Kowert says, “really solidified for me that being a musician is like constantly being a student. I’m always learning from the people I’m around, and the things you learn seep into the things you do next.”

What seeped into his studies after that heady experience at the Carnegie Hall workshop? Along with deepening his immersion in bluegrass and folk music through camps and festivals, Mr. Kowert organized two square dances as social events through the Curtis Student Council. The workshop also brought him into contact with another future bandmate, violinist Brittany Haas. With guitarist Jordan Tice, whom he met at a bluegrass festival in New Jersey, they formed a trio that has, over time and with the addition of mandolinist Dominick Leslie, become Hawktail.

Strictly instrumental and with a leaner sound compared to Punch Brothers, Hawktail’s music draws from Appalachian and Swedish folk traditions, with spacious harmonies and virtuosic ensemble playing that’s closer, at times, to chamber music. That synthesis traces back to Mr. Kowert’s grounding in harmony and counterpoint at Curtis. “Those skills have come in handy,” he says. “I’m able to think of notes in a vertical and horizontal way, and about where all the notes in the band are happening rather than simply by feel.”

Though Curtis and Punch Brothers mark two different phases of his life, common themes of continual learning and growth unite them. “It’s like an education to get to play with people who are better than you and who know things that you don’t,” he says. “As long as you’re learning wonderful music from people who truly excel at it, you’re getting a good musical education.” ◇

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MORE ONLINE

Play a video of music from Paul Kowert’s new CD with Hawktail at

Curtis.edu/Overtones

WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—PAUL KOWERT

More Reasons at Curtis.edu/WhyChooseCurtis

“The student body is filled with great, natural musicians. Just being around people who are so fluent on their instrument and where there’s a culture of playing, performing, and mastery that’s palpable is inspiring. My classmates were all fantastic musicians, and that influenced me; it made me want to figure out: ‘What’s my thing? What can I do well?’ I’m still studying the music of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven right now—it’s wonderful music—and at Curtis, there’s so much to learn from the people who are great at it.”

