

The Translator

Roberto Díaz prepares to lead the Curtis Institute of Music.

Interview by Melinda Whiting

The solid gray mansion is calm and dignified, like many in the neighborhood, albeit with a slightly elevated grandeur. Even the small raised lettering near the doorway—"Curtis Institute of Music"—is a model of patrician restraint. This quiet sign is the only external clue to the massive weight of musical legend that has sustained Curtis's reputation for more than eight decades, and attracted superb young talent to Philadelphia to study tuition-free at one of the world's most nurturing, and most competitive, conservatories.

Entering the Curtis Institute's heavy wooden doors, visitors are enveloped in tradition of the comforting, magnificent sort. Velvet drapes drop two stories from the foyer's coffered ceiling; golden light reflects dully on dark paneling and oil paintings; leather chairs and upholstered couches are thoughtfully, invitingly placed. One is quite certain that no compromises on quality have ever been admitted into this place. Perhaps never even discussed.

Roberto Díaz first arrived at Curtis as a young graduate student in 1982, studying with Joseph de Pasquale. He joined the faculty in 2001, a few years after he succeeded de Pasquale as principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. His association with Curtis is typical of the orchestra's members, dozens of whom studied here. Like Díaz, many teach here, too, reinforcing an intimate connection that has continually buffed the reputation of both institutions.

Díaz follows a string of world-class performers who have guided Curtis: pianists Josef Hofmann and Rudolf Serkin; violin-

ist Efreim Zimbalist; oboist John DeLancie; and most recently, pianist Gary Graffman, who retires in 2006 after a transition year of joint direction with Díaz.

The announcement of Díaz's appointment last spring was a surprise. A three-year search had reportedly produced a

"I've never really been the type to settle into something, and just say, 'Okay, I've arrived. This is it for me. This is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life.'"



philosophical split between those seeking an artist-director in the Hofmann-Serkin-Graffman tradition, and those advocating an administrative type. Genial and quietly forthright, Díaz, 44, has a foot in both worlds. He has never managed an institution before, but as a Philadelphia Orchestra principal, his leadership responsibilities

have been significant. He has served on the orchestra's board and the search committee that recommended Christoph Eschenbach as music director. Along the way, he has earned a reputation for building bridges among factions, experience he will no doubt draw on as he steers Curtis into an era in which conservatories, even the most traditional ones, are increasingly asked to prepare students for new realities.

Melinda Whiting: I'm curious about how you came to the decision to accept this position, because you're at the height of what most people would think is a great orchestral career, and you have an active solo career, too! You could do both for 25 more years.

Roberto Díaz: I think I could. Although, to be honest with you, I've never really been the type to settle into something, and just say, "Okay, I've arrived. This is it for

me. This is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life."

It's a little like when I left the National Symphony—not for a job, I just left when Slava [former music director Mstislav Rostropovich] left. I just thought, "I should try something different." I talked with my manager about it, and she said, "You

know, this will probably be an interesting time to push a little bit more in your solo playing." So when the Philadelphia Orchestra had auditions for a principal position, I didn't participate at first, because I thought I should be doing something else.

Then I got a call, asking if I wanted to just come and meet with Maestro Sawalisch. And we played together, and we talked. Eventually, of course, I played an audition for the committee. But it all evolved out of those couple of meetings; they were such a great experience that I thought it would be crazy for me not to be associated with the orchestra and with him. So when I came to the Philadelphia Orchestra, it was again because it was the right thing at the right time.

And the situation here with Curtis was similar, in some ways. One day several months ago I was discussing, with the chairman of the board, the strategic, long-range planning process for Curtis, just because he wanted to talk to some faculty members. At one point during that conversation, he said to me, "You are aware of the fact that we're looking for a replacement for Gary Graffman." And he asked if I would have any interest in this. I have to say, I just



Díaz in rehearsal for a solo performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Music Director Christoph Eschenbach

laughed. My first reaction was, "Well, I don't know. I mean, I thought you'd have to be a fair bit older." Some months later, he asked me if I, as a faculty member, would meet with one of the candidates that they were apparently quite serious about. I met with this person, and then I talked to the chairman again, about what my impressions were. And eventually it came up again, and evolved from there.

MW: This had the reputation of having been a contentious search up to that point.

RD: There were a lot of rumors. But I was not involved in it at all. I figured, "they'll look at whoever they want." I'd been on the search committee when Eschenbach was appointed at the orchestra. That search was long, too. It went on for a few years. From that experience, I could tell that search committees evolve in a certain way. What is important at the beginning of the search is not always necessarily the most important thing at the end of the search.

MW: Each person you consider influences

your priorities going forward, I'd imagine.

RD: You prioritize at the beginning. And then you're halfway through the process, and all of a sudden you realize that you've changed the order of some of these needs. And by the time you get to the end, you realize that some of the priorities you had at the beginning are perhaps things that you don't even consider important any more.

MW: Do you think directing Curtis will be a more administrative job in the future than it has been in the past?

RD: I would assume so. If there are some new responsibilities for the director, that's fine. We're working to set this up so that there's a very clear list of expectations. Which will affect everything, actually. For instance, the dean's job will be very much affected by the list of responsibilities that I have. It's a good time to organize things, and have a clearer understanding of what is expected. For me personally, this is necessary, because I'm not just adding this to my schedule; I'm actually changing my life to do this.



MW: You seem to understand quite a lot about leadership of the interpersonal sort, and also about those administrative things that most artists might consider merely bureaucratic. Where does this come from?

RD: Well, when I started in the Philadelphia Orchestra [in 1996], we had nine or ten weeks on strike—

MW: That was before you even got to play?

RD: Right. Those were my first ten weeks with the Philadelphia Orchestra, walking the picket line. That was hard. It was hard for everybody. But, in hindsight, a lot of really great things happened in the orchestra as a result. Look at the fact that the Philadelphia Orchestra is making its own records, and producing videos. And we got musicians on the board. This is all because

the musicians decided they had to get more involved in their own future, in their livelihood.

So I served on the board for three years, and—what was really fascinating—for two of those three years I was the first musician to serve on the executive committee of the board. That, I have to say, was a real eye-opener. Because that is really where everything gets decided.

MW: What was your first meeting like?

RD: I don't remember exactly what was discussed, but I remember that it seemed almost kind of ruthless, the way they had to make business decisions. It made me realize that these people are incredibly dedicated to the organization. They're doing it in their spare time, and some of them don't have a lot of spare time. They're giving a lot of time, a lot of effort, and a lot of money—and raising a lot of money—for the orchestra. That was really good for the musicians to see; when it trickled down to the orchestra members that there was going to be a deficit, they already knew that in the executive committee there had been a lot of blood, sweat, and tears about this thing. It wasn't just, "Oh, well, here we go again. Four million dollars in the hole."

MW: And here you were, having participated in those discussions. You could come back to the players and actually confirm...

RD: ...that it wasn't untrue: "They're not saying this because they're just posturing for contract negotiations. It is actually a fact. And money is not necessarily being mismanaged." Because we musicians tend to always say the same thing: "They're mismanaging this," and "Why don't they just raise more money?" Instead, we had the opportunity to see that there was a lot of hard work going on up there.

MW: I suppose the reverse thing would be the board saying, "We have a deficit. Why don't you guys in the orchestra just play better and we'd sell more tickets?"

RD: Right! "What's wrong with you? How could you miss that note?" (*laughs*) So being on the board was very educational, actually. Funny, it's something that, here in this room, that day, we discussed quite a bit.

MW: "That day" being the day that you met the Curtis search committee?

RD: Right. I said that I don't see the role that

I will have here, in relation to the board, as a different role than when I was a musician on the board at the Philadelphia Orchestra. My role was to communicate to them: "This is what we do. This is how we need to feel, to do it to the best of our ability."

MW: You'll be like a translator.

RD: You know, I've always felt that in an orchestra, you have a hundred personalities that can do a lot more than just play music. Person by person, when you look at it, the amount of resources that are in an orchestra, outside of just the playing, is pretty amazing. They have an incredible array of interests. There are some who paint on the side, or have photography as their passion. But they're also playing in the orchestra.

MW: How does an orchestra make the best use of the broader talents of their musicians? Orchestras are looking for ways to reach the audience better, and to raise the public profile of the institution. So more and more, musicians are asked to do non-

"Person by person, when you look at it, the amount of resources that are in an orchestra, outside of just the playing, is pretty amazing. They have an incredible array of interests."

musical things that they may not have been trained to do at conservatory: education, public speaking, board service.

RD: In the Philadelphia Orchestra, since the strike, we've seen people bringing all kinds of talents into helping the organization. I think that the public face of the orchestra has changed dramatically since the time when it was just these people dressed in funny outfits, playing music very well for that very small segment of the community—which has also been stereotyped a bit—that went to these concerts. You see so many more musicians now who are really involved. Some of them are just great with kids, for example. Before a children's concert, they'll sit there and talk to 3,000 kids in the hall.

MW: Should we be training student musicians to take on these new roles? Or should we rely on just their natural inclinations?

RD: So far, certainly for us, it's just relying on

their natural interests and abilities. You have people from all parts of the world, with all kinds of experiences behind them. I mean, we have people who have fought in wars that play in the orchestra. The stories they tell, and some of the experiences they've had—not to tap into some of that is almost criminal. Because it really gives the orchestra, or the institution as a whole, a human face, that maybe it just hadn't had before.

MW: It takes down that veil.

RD: Eschenbach put it very well, with his phrase, "Raising the invisible curtain."

MW: And yet you're going to be the director of a conservatory that traditionally has really concentrated on music alone, and no one's ever questioned that. Have we entered an era when even Curtis needs to think about these other roles that musicians can have, and prepare them accordingly?

RD: It can never hurt for students to get as broad an education as possible, and to have their eyes as wide open as possible to what they can expect, or what might be expected of them, in whatever field of music they end up in: teaching, or orchestral, or chamber music, or solo, or a combination of all of the above.

Some very recent graduates of Curtis are doing wonderful things, inventing their careers. There are people who play different kinds of music—jazz, or country music—and they use their skills as instrumentalists, that they developed here, to mix classical with other styles of music. You have people that are producing their own recordings. Then they have to figure out how to sell this thing, how to distribute it. Do they take it with them when they play concerts? Or do they sell it or give it to someone to distribute for them? Or do they do it through the Internet? They're basically taking complete control of every aspect of their career, in a sense.

MW: Is there a way that Curtis can help them prepare for this new environment?

RD: Well, I think that Curtis has been doing a lot of that. But I have to be honest with you, until very recently my role here has basically been just to teach viola. To try to get as many of my students as possible very well employed, in terms of a chamber group, or an orchestra, so that I could launch them without too much uncertainty.



WORD PROS, INC.

PROGRAM NOTES

Informative and entertaining, with accessible discussion of the music itself, as well as lively historical and cultural background information.

- ♪ Program book editing and layout
- ♪ Special program book articles
- ♪ Understandable musical analysis
- ♪ Text translation
- ♪ 24-hour turnaround on rush jobs
- ♪ Notes for chamber ensembles
- ♪ Audio examples for web sites

Elizabeth A. Kahn, Ph.D.
Joseph S. Kahn, Ph.D.
phone: 919 851-2410
fax: 919 233-4815
wordpros@mindspring.com

Missing Something?



Theft happens...

...protect yourself

Fine Tune Tracker

Advanced GPS recovery system



Pinpoint Accuracy
Real-Time Tracking
Information updated every 6 seconds



Jan-Al Cases 800.735.2625 x120

But I've become aware of the fact—and Curtis is very conscious of the fact—that there are many more expectations from musicians now, than just playing your instrument really well. And that playing your instrument really well does not necessarily equal success. You have to be a very shrewd business person. You have to be very diplomatic. You have to have terrific people skills. You have to have common sense. And you have to be responsible for all sorts of things that maybe we never thought about before.

∞

MW: What will the Curtis Institute be like under your stewardship?

RD: I'm very fortunate, in the fact that this place is in great shape. Artistically speaking, there's really nothing that needs to be changed drastically, at least judging from all the conversations that I've had to date, with many faculty members and staff. The thing that we will do, at first, is just to make sure that everything is organized.

MW: Administratively, you mean?

RD: Yes. And we will need to make sure that the school is always financially solid. Obviously having more money in the endowment is a necessity. We need to look at our fund raising, to try to make it so that anything the students need, or anything we want to try to do here, is do-able. In that sense we're very fortunate that we don't have 800 students, that we only have 160 students.

MW: Especially since Curtis is paying every penny of their tuition! I assume the tuition-free policy won't change?

RD: Absolutely not. That would be a very quick way to turn the school into just another music school. Not that charging tuition is a bad thing for others to do. But Curtis is Curtis, and this is the way it's always been. And there's no reason at this point to think that it won't stay that way.

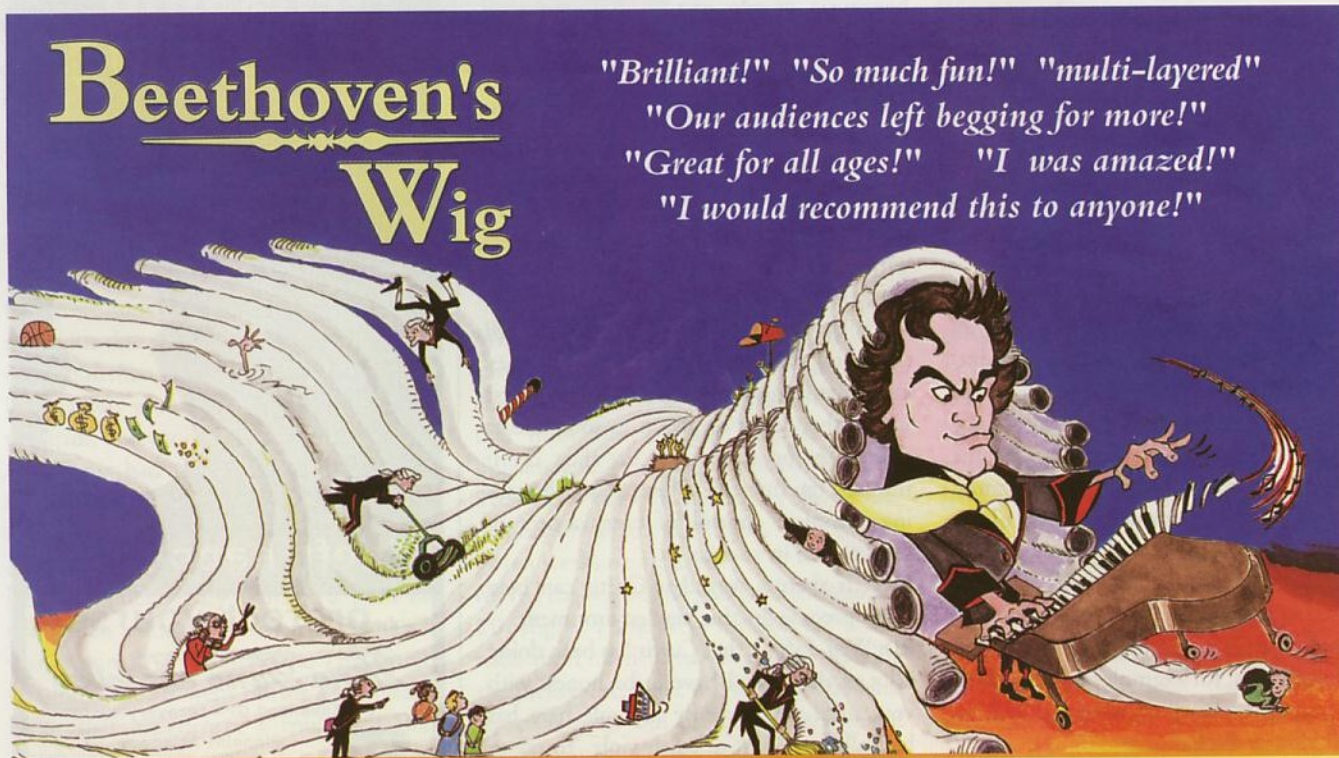
MW: Is there anything that worries you—or terrifies you—about what you're taking on?

RD: I haven't stayed up at night yet thinking about any of it. But I'm sure there will

"Playing your instrument really well does not necessarily equal success. You have to be a very shrewd business person. You have to be very diplomatic. You have to have terrific people skills. You have to have common sense."

be things I'll be faced with that I can't even begin to imagine at this point. I've had some really nice conversations so far with Gary Graffman about what it was like for him to come in and start doing this job.

There will be a lot of issues that we'll need to deal with, certainly. Faculty appointments, and some staff appointments. So I'll need to rely on people to give me advice, and to help me along for a while. One thing that we have to continue doing is to keep the name of Curtis what it is throughout all of the planet. There are schools that are offering students as much or more, financially speaking, as Curtis



Beethoven's Wig

"Brilliant!" "So much fun!" "multi-layered"
"Our audiences left begging for more!"
"Great for all ages!" "I was amazed!"
"I would recommend this to anyone!"

The Grammy®-nominated classical music sensation!

Zany lyrics set to the greatest hits of classical music - a fun foundation that will last a lifetime. Perfect for family, educational and regular season concerts.

Contact:

Regina Kelland

(310) 305-3050

rkelland@earthlink.net

does. Not just full tuition; sometimes they're paying stipends. There are some schools that are actually buying the really top talent. That's something that we can't ignore. I feel that it's part of our responsibility here, to make sure that Curtis really stays unique. I would hope that it would be the place of choice for everyone, the first choice. I think that's a challenge, because there is competition out there.

MW: What will you do differently, in order to compete?

RD: One thing that has already started here in the violin department, is that they now have more than one teacher per student. Ideally, I'd love to see this idea applied more. Take the viola department: Of course I'll be teaching here, and I spend some of my time playing recitals and concertos, and I also have experience in the orchestra world. And Joe de Pasquale, who is still teaching here, has so many years of orchestra experience. And we have Michael Tree, who is the violist of the Guarneri Quartet. Viola students coming to Curtis could have the benefit of all of us, if we could create that system, where a student would come to study viola at Curtis, as opposed to coming to study viola with so-and-so at Curtis.

MW: And this would allow them to figure out what their career path is once they get here, more gradually, instead of trying to make that decision before they go?

RD: Exactly. And also, just to have more guidance available. Say, you're this viola student, and you're working on a Bartók String Quartet. Obviously the person you want to play this for is Michael Tree. I mean, I can try to help you, but I could never help you like he could. Or if you want to take an orchestra audition, Joe or I could prepare you. If you have a certain concerto that you want to work on, and it happens to have been premiered by Joe de Pasquale, then he's the person you play this piece for.

Now, there will always be someone in the faculty who will ultimately be responsible for you. But there won't be this business of, "you're Michael Tree's student," or "you're Joe de Pasquale's student." That could really make the school hard to beat, when it comes to recruiting the best students.

MW: And you'd be opening up the students' minds—they're not slavishly follow-

ing one teacher. They're thinking of different possibilities.

RD: You have to do it carefully, because you don't want to confuse things for the really young students that we sometimes get at Curtis. You don't want them being completely confused with one person saying, "Play it this way," and then the other person says, "No, play it the other way." But it's the kind of thing that can help make the experience of being at Curtis a really full one. And at the same time, when we have to hire new faculty, we know exactly what to look for. If the chamber music member of the viola department retires, then that's what you need. You don't just go out there looking for just another viola teacher. You know that you're looking for somebody who's making their living in a string quartet, or in some kind of a chamber-music setting.

Those are just some of the things that I'm thinking about. Not really changing the place, but seeing what the students' needs are. And spending time just talking to faculty about what they feel is needed. While we were on tour with the Philadelphia Orchestra this summer, I spent some time with my colleagues who teach brass and winds here. I mean, they look at the world of music from a very different angle than string players do—which they should. Just because a certain situation is good for a violist, doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be the best for a French horn player.

MW: It's going to be interesting to spend a whole year gathering this information. Was that your motivation for waiting a year, or was it just that you wanted one more year with the orchestra, to say farewell to that life?

RD: It just happened that way. It was the very end of the concert season when I was asked to come over to Curtis, and so I couldn't really say to the Philadelphia Orchestra, "Oh, by the way, in September I won't be here." (*laughs*) I wouldn't want to do that to them. Also, it will be my tenth year in the orchestra, and Gary was happy to finish out his 20th year here. So it just kind of worked out. I think it's a very comfortable sort of transition time.

MW: What will you miss the most, when you leave the orchestra?

RD: The music. It's great stuff. It's kind of

Tracy Silverman

"The foremost electric violinist of our time" is available for your symphony collaboration or solo concert!



"Fleet agility and tangy expressivity. . . Silverman deftly evokes Appalachian fiddle music, an Indian sitar and wistful jazz riffs with wailing hints of Jimi Hendrix."

- *New York Times*

"Piercing and poignant"

- *SF Chronicle*

"Excitingly raw and raucously toned . . . he was in constant melodic flow"

- *LA Times*

ROBERT FRIEDMAN PRESENTS

415-759-1992

www.rfpresents.com

info@rfpresents.com

Also representing . . .

Angela Au

Il Giardino Armonico

Gyan Riley * Terry Riley

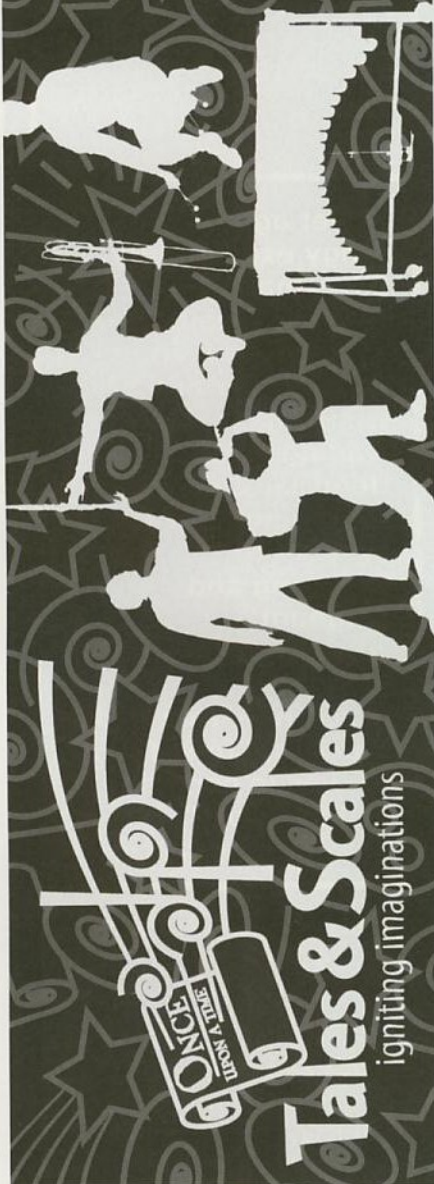
Warren Stewart * Magnificat

Bringing music and stories to life for
children and family audiences since 1986

Family Concerts • Workshops for Children,
Musicians & Educators • Community & School
Engagement Programs

Phone (812) 425-8741

info@talesandscales.org



Green Room

funny that at my age, I would be thinking like this, but while we were on tour this summer, I'd be playing in a concert, and everyone is going at it on Mahler Nine—with everything they've got, playing away like crazy. And I'm thinking, "I may never play this piece again. This could be the last time I ever play Mahler Nine." Or, "This could be the last time I ever play the Bartók Concerto for Orchestra." That is actually kind of a sad thought.

MW: There are also pieces you have already played for the last time without knowing it. That's sad, too.

RD: I know! I know.

MW: And the other odd thing that strikes me is that you're also going to be heading a faculty that includes several of your former teachers. That must be strange to contemplate.

RD: I've thought about it a little bit. I'm kind of used to it, in a sense, from being a principal in the orchestra setting. You have people in the section who are considerably older than you are, but you are ultimately responsible for what happens in your section, and they know that.

Ultimately, it's about respect. You have to understand that everyone has a tremendous amount to offer. You can never forget that. As long as there's respect in both directions, then I think that you can have a very good working relationship.

MW: What other challenges do you want to address?

RD: Part of our challenge is to really keep the history of Curtis in everybody's conscious awareness. Because Curtis *is* its history.

MW: At the same time, you don't want it to descend into—what can sometimes happen with eminent institutions that have a great tradition, that they can become fussy. You know? A little moldy.

RD: (*laughs*) Well, that's why it's always good to keep your ears and eyes open to the present. Otherwise, the competition will run you over. We have to keep our eye on what's going on around the world, and how we relate to what's going on, and how relevant we are. It's not unlike what symphony orchestras have had to do in the community they live in. How relevant are we here? I mean, if we disappeared tomor-

"While we were on tour this summer, I'd be playing in a concert, and everyone is going at it on Mahler Nine—with everything they've got, playing away like crazy. And I'm thinking, 'I may never play this piece again.'"

row, would anybody even notice?

Certainly if you have your head stuck in the ground with traditions, and think that just because it worked 50 years ago, it's still just fine, then you can find yourself in a bit of a predicament all of a sudden. It's something that you have to study all the time: the balance between what worked back then, and what will work now. Does it need to be modernized, or updated, or upgraded? Businesses do that on a constant basis. While you never want to lose sight of where you came from, you also have to have a fairly good idea of where you're trying to go. Are you on track? And are you staying focused?

Just as the musical world changes, musical education has to change. It just has to. Of course there are things that will never change; the way you develop talent is always going to be the same. But are you also conscious of what the newest set of demands are, on the faculty, or on the students?

MW: In a year, I'll come back and ask you how education will change at Curtis. I think you need this next year to figure it out!

RD: There will be, I'm sure, many hours of discussions. Not just with people from here; also with people from other music schools. How is it that we are different from everywhere else, and will stay different from everywhere else? And what are some of the things that are going on in the other places, that we may need to be thinking about? For me, the next year especially is going to be a kind of crash course in thinking about things that I probably have never really spent much time thinking about.

It's exciting. Sometimes I think about how incredibly different this is going to be than what I've always done. But at the same time, it doesn't feel foreign. ∞