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MUSIC

Curtis Institute's New Leader Is Set to 'Clear the Cobwebs'



Mike Mergen for The New York Times

Roberto Díaz gives a viola lesson to Rose Armbrust at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

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PHILADELPHIA — Leading an orchestra section, “you learn people skills and common sense,” said Roberto Díaz, the violist and new president of the Curtis Institute of Music here. “You learn to navigate tricky situations without making people feel disrespected. ‘Always lead by example’ is a good motto to have.”

Mr. Díaz, who was principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1996 to 2006, is a good example for Curtis students. When Gary Graffman, the pianist and former Curtis president, retired in 2006 after two decades on the job, the school had a choice. It could either follow Curtis tradition and appoint a noteworthy performer or choose someone with an administrative background.

Perhaps not surprisingly for a traditional institution, it hired a musician, one whom Christoph Eschenbach, music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, describes as “one of the greatest viola

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players in the world, if not the greatest.” Mr. Díaz also had a strong track record as soloist, chamber musician and teacher at Curtis.

Mr. Díaz inherits what Robert Fitzpatrick, the dean of Curtis, describes as the world’s greatest 19th-century school of music being slowly dragged into the 20th, while everyone else is in the 21st. “We are somewhat of an anachronism,” he said. Mr. Díaz’s job “will be to maintain the value in that anachronism but clear the cobwebs away.”

A boyish-looking 46-year-old with an unassuming, gentle air and courteous manner, Mr. Díaz will be gently brushing those cobwebs away rather than vacuuming them in one fell swoop. Speaking in his elegant office recently, he said Curtis didn’t “need change for change sake, but it does need to keep up with the times.”

Mr. Díaz described his tenure thus far as mostly “smooth sailing,” adding that developing a vision takes time. “For anyone to come in and say, ‘I know exactly what it needs,’ without taking time to find out would almost be a bit dangerous.”

It is a matter of deciding whether Curtis is “a little shy in a certain offering,” then addressing those needs, he continued. Those shy offerings include instruction in period performance, which Mr. Díaz said the school had not paid much attention to but planned to explore. The school is also seen as relatively weak on contemporary music. New initiatives include master classes for cello students in “cutting-edge” repertory next year and a recently instituted contemporary ensemble.

Mr. Díaz said he was mindful that students perform a wide range of repertory, pointing out that the program the Curtis Symphony Orchestra brings to Carnegie Hall tonight includes Bernstein, Stravinsky and the Penderecki Viola Concerto, with Mr. Díaz as soloist. “We are constantly fine-tuning what’s going on at the school,” he said. “As you bring in newer, younger faculty, you bring in newer repertoire.”

Mr. Díaz may be helpful in recruiting younger faculty. Mr. Fitzpatrick, who calls him “a wise and relatively safe choice,” said he would “bring a circle of colleagues that is two generations removed from Gary’s.”

“When Gary first came here,” he continued, “he brought new life to the school by bringing the Graffman circle of performers and conductors. He is now 78, and that circle is contemporary to him.

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I think Roberto will renew that and bring fresh blood to the school.” Mr. Díaz is also committed to nurturing individual talent. One of Curtis’s strengths is the unusual amount of time it dedicates to each student, which the small student body (167 for the 2006-7 academic year) permits. That attention pays off: Many Curtis graduates have solo careers, and 18 percent of the principal chairs in this country’s top 25 orchestras are held by Curtis-trained musicians.

Carrie Dennis, 29, studied with Mr. Díaz occasionally at Curtis and played with him in the Philadelphia Orchestra. She is now principal violist at the Berlin Philharmonic. She describes Mr. Díaz as a particularly giving, encouraging and attentive teacher, who could “clearly tell you what doesn’t sound right in a way that’s not insulting.”

Mr. Eschenbach said that Mr. Díaz, who served as a board member for three years at the Philadelphia Orchestra, had “a gift of leadership” that never became dictatorial.

Mr. Díaz will have to focus those leadership skills particularly in improving the facilities at Curtis, which is housed in a stately 19th-century mansion. The school doesn’t have enough practice rooms or an adequate orchestra rehearsal space.

He will also increase student outreach efforts, “not just to say we’re good Samaritans, but because it’s important for the students to develop certain skills,” he said.

“You can be the greatest player around,” he added, “but if you have bad people skills, it will cost you.” He observed, “It’s not just about sitting in a practice room learning Beethoven sonatas.”

As a child growing up in Santiago, Chile, Mr. Díaz would have preferred to have been playing soccer with his friends than practicing Beethoven sonatas, but his father, a prominent violist, insisted that his four children study music. Mr. Díaz initially played violin but switched to viola after the family moved to Atlanta.

Studies followed at the New England Conservatory and Curtis, and positions in the Minnesota Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Mr. Diaz said that now that he was not pigeonholed as an orchestral player, he had more concerto opportunities. In his previous position his appearances would upset other principal violists. “Now I don’t have a sign around my neck saying, ‘orchestra player,’ ” he said, laughing. “Now I wear another sign, saying ‘administrator.’ So instead of carrying the Philadelphia flag everywhere I go, I carry the Curtis flag.”

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