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## **Merging Music and Academe**

By Elaina Loveland

Born to a musician couple in Santiago, Chile, Roberto Diaz started his journey to his professional performing career from early childhood. Little did he know that his path from practicing music to performing to teaching would now lead him to the unexpected culmination of his career: heading the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music as its next president in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Diaz began studying the violin around age six or seven. “I don’t quite remember when,” he says. His mother was a professional pianist and his father was a violist, who also taught at the Chilean Conservatory.

“It was the kind of thing where I’d go to my lesson on Saturday mornings and wait for my father to finish teaching so we could go home,” Diaz explains.

At the time Diaz was growing up, there was no youth symphony and there was little choice in which instrument a child would study. “It seemed like everyone played the violin,” says Diaz.

Of course, Diaz’s parents had a large influence on him studying music in the first place, but the choice of making music his career choice was all his own. He describes a turning point in his teenage years.

“Our family moved from Chile to Atlanta, Georgia, and my father joined the Atlanta Symphony,” he says. “I was about 14 or 15 at the time, and I was able to switch instruments.”

Choosing to play the viola once he came to the United States was a life-altering decision. “To be honest, I wasn’t particularly interested becoming a professional musician when I was playing the violin—playing the viola changed that,” he says.

In 1978, Diaz’s entrance into academe began as a student at the New England Conservatory in Boston, Massachusetts. Diaz later studied for one year at the Curtis Institute of Music, where his career would one day come full circle. His professional performance career began when he auditioned for his first violist position with the Minnesota Orchestra in Minneapolis. Needless to say, he earned the spot and his journey as a performer—coveted by many classical music students hoping for his success—had taken flight.

Diaz’s career has led him to many different parts of the United States. After performing with the Minnesota Orchestra, he performed with the Boston Symphony for five years. It was there when his teaching career in academia merged with his music career. As soon as

he started playing with the Boston Symphony, he joined the faculty of the Boston Conservatory.

When asked why he began teaching, Diaz says simply, “I’ve always done it. You’d be hard pressed to find a musician who hasn’t taught,” says Diaz. “It’s something that is just expected of you, I think.”

His career would take him to yet another city, to Washington, D.C., where he was principal violist for four years. But his teaching days were far from over.

Diaz secured a tenure track position teaching at Rice University in Houston, Texas, where he taught for two years. He also taught for a year at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore.

“I try to teach students to teach themselves how to play better,” explains Diaz in regard to his teaching philosophy. “I try to teach them how to train their ear...to align their hearing to find what is wrong with how they are playing piece and to learn on their own to fix what they hear.”

Nine years ago, Diaz moved to Philadelphia to join the Philadelphia Orchestra as principal violist.

He joined the faculty at Curtis in 2001. Once again, Diaz merged both his talents—performing and teaching—twin passions that have led him to his next step: a university president.

Heading a university was not something that Diaz ever imagined would happen to him. In fact, when he was asked if he would be interested in the post, his first reaction was “no.”

“Actually, I thought they were joking,” recalls Diaz. “I thought I should ‘steer clear’ of it.”

At the time, Diaz was serving on the search committee to assess candidates for the Curtis presidency as a faculty representative. The head the Curtis Board of Trustees and the search committee, Richard Doran, first approached Diaz with the possibility of becoming a candidate for the university’s highest post in casual conversation.

The fact that academe can be somewhat political did not escape Diaz. “I work with a lot of my fellow faculty members at Curtis since many members of the Philadelphia Orchestra teach here,” explains Diaz. “I didn’t want to be put into that ‘why him and not me’ situation with many of my colleagues.”

But many months later, despite his initial disinterest in becoming the next president of Curtis, Doran singled him out again.

This time, Diaz gave the possibility a second thought. He changed his mind. He was interested after all. “Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad,” he told himself.

Doran says that “Roberto Diaz strikes the balance we have been looking for.” Not only does he call him “a performing artist of great stature and a teacher of distinction,” he also says that “he continues the Curtis tradition of having the principal executive come from the ranks of leading musicians.

Diaz also has the blessing of his predecessor. "Roberto Diaz will make an excellent president/director of Curtis," says current President Gary Graffman. "He is someone I have admired and worked with, and I look forward to a cooperative working relationship during the transition. Above all, he will have the respect and confidence of the people who make Curtis the excellent school it is: our faculty, students, and staff."

Diaz will start his term as president of Curtis at the end of this academic year, in June 2006. Although Diaz won't continue to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra, he will continue performing independently. He says he will do some solo performances and well has chamber music—and he'll keep teaching a couple of classes at Curtis.

Diaz, as a performer and as an administrator, still has many lessons to teach Curtis students. Throughout his years as a performer, Diaz has collaborated with the world's most important conductors and composers. Performing in both his solo and chamber music performances have reached audiences around the globe. His solo orchestral engagements include the Philadelphia Orchestra; Pittsburgh, National, Nashville, and Russian State symphony orchestras; Boston Pops; Les Violons du Roy; Bavarian and Saarbrücken radio orchestras; Orquesta Simon Bolivar; and Orquesta Nacional de Espana. An active chamber musician, Mr. Diaz has performed with Emanuel Ax, Yefim Bronfman, Yo-Yo Ma, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Christoph Eschenbach, and Isaac Stern, among many others, and is a member of the Diaz Trio.

“I’m very excited,” says Diaz about his appointment as the next Curtis president. “I’ve already learned a tremendous amount. It’s an opportunity to open my vision to new and exciting things. I am honored to follow in the footsteps of Gary Graffman, who has been such an inspired leader for the past 19 years.”

“It’s nice to be able to walk into an institution and not be saddled with a lot of problems from the get-go,” says Diaz. “Curtis has been doing well in all areas for several years and it’s a pleasure to be able to lead the institution on its continual path of excellence.”

Music conservatories are their own breed in higher education—but even among them, Curtis is different. Founded in 1924 with an endowment established by Mary Louise Curtis Bok, every student who attends Curtis has a fully paid tuition scholarship. Because the sole criterion for admission is talent and each student is fully funded, selectivity for admission is extraordinarily high.

What this yields is a closely knit student body—of only about 160 students—all of whom have a professional music career in their future. Nearly all of Curtis faculty members (99

percent according to Diaz) are professional musicians and the student faculty ratio is high ensuring that the individualized study of music for a performance career is unparalleled.

Due to its unique ability to fund all students among the most talented young musicians in the world, Curtis is recognized for being one of the world's best music conservatories.

Students perform in more than 100 orchestra concerts, operas, and solo and chamber music performance per year—the institution's philosophy of “learn most by doing” rings true.

“The Curtis Orchestra is as good if not better than many professional orchestras in the world,” asserts Diaz.

“Graduates of Curtis don't just become professional musicians,” he says. “They hold the highest positions that professional music has to offer.”

Diaz notes that the life of a professional musician has changed a great deal in recent decades.

“Just playing your instrument doesn't make careers anymore,” notes Diaz. “Students need people skills. They need to be good business managers. They need to manage their own career, their finances and public appearances. Nowadays, recording contracts aren't the same as they used to be. A lot of professional musicians are now producing their own music.”

Curtis alumni have kept up with and continue to excel within the changing facets of classical professional music scene. Alumni can be found in nearly every major orchestra and opera company around the world. A number of alumni are principal chairs in America's leading orchestras, singers with the renowned Metropolitan Opera and a few lead orchestras.

“Some Curtis alumni are even household names,” says Diaz. “The school has a lot of influence in professional classical music.”

With graduates like Leonard Bernstein, Curtis is sure to continue its legacy of excellence in both the world of music and academe. And with Roberto Diaz at the helm, it certainly will.