

Forum ■ Stirs a Passion for Creativity

Students absorb the lessons of a music-career conference

BY LAURA C. KELLEY



Three students had an idea: to engage their classmates in creative endeavors outside the box of tradition. It was a bug they caught in Texas, at an intercollegiate forum.

In October Teddy Abrams (Conducting), Patricia Franceschy (Timpani and Percussion), and Stanford L. Thompson (Trumpet) traveled to Rice University's Shepherd School of Music to attend Careers in Music Performance: Convening Student Perspectives and Creating New Models for the Twenty-First Century. There they encountered the work of nontraditional creative artists—including the Chiara Quartet, eighth blackbird, and alumna Sarah Rothenberg. Forum moderator Eric Booth, who is a nationally recognized arts education consultant, and Shepherd School personnel developed the weekend's events to demonstrate new ways to consider an artist's career. Students would create their own interactive presentations. Faculty and staff would generate ideas for integrating such work into their own schools.

In advance, each student prepared a piece of solo repertoire, and at the conference teams were drawn randomly, grouping several

students from among the sixteen participating schools. Their assignment: to create a twenty-minute interactive program using their odd assortment of instruments and music, with two rehearsals and little guidance. And to perform it on the forum's final afternoon.

The uncertainty of having few instructions led, eventually, to one-of-a-kind presentations. Ms. Franceschy's group, for example, created *Conversations*. Ms. Franceschy used the vibraphone to connect the program's stories. As she later wrote in an e-mail, "During a conversation, you talk about many different subjects, but the process is very organic (there is always a connection point that makes the transition from subject to subject very smoothly)."

The musicians scattered around the room. A soprano from the Cleveland Institute of Music spoke a song text, which Ms. Franceschy linked to a Weber work performed by a bassoonist from the Peabody Institute.

A soprano from the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati, laughed as an introduction to a showy Italian opera aria. Her final note equaled the first of Ms. Franceschy's extended improvisation, which, in turn, segued to a Berio piece performed by a flutist from Oberlin Conservatory. Ms. Franceschy bridged that piece with the first song, which this time was sung. The program's seamless movement from one musician to another was dramatic. The process made Ms. Franceschy realize the importance of a presentation's musical quality and the performers' commitment to the work.

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Discussing the forum with faculty attendee Mary Kinder Loiselle, director of community engagement and career development services at Curtis and their teacher for the new Foundations of Engagement class, the students repeatedly mentioned how compelling the guest artists' showcase performances were. On the first evening, travel fatigue vanished as the Chiara Quartet gave its presentation. The next evening, when it was contemporary chamber ensemble eighth blackbird's turn, Ms. Franceschy "couldn't *not* pay attention to them. Part of it was the product—their concert was amazing. And it was really well put together. Also, you could see the type of persons they were on stage."



(From left) Stanford L. Thompson, Patricia Franceschy, Eric Booth, and Teddy Abrams

~ PHOTO: MARY KINDER LOISELLE

That echoes a point that Mr. Booth makes often: When it comes to teaching, *who you are* makes a stronger impact than pedagogy or curriculum itself.

Mr. Thompson, who frequently gives presentations at schools as part of Curtis's Community Engagement Program, enjoys addressing an audience. But now new ideas are percolating. "Instead of me just getting up and trying to teach them how a trumpet works," he said, "I could have an interactive presentation that would make them walk away truly immersed in the instrument."

Mr. Abrams is also questioning his standard, lecture-like mode of presentation. "Think outside the box" sounds like a mandate for creativity, rather than a cliché, when he speaks about it. "As classical musicians," he said, "we've automatically, just by title, put ourselves kind of in a box. There's such a nice, established tradition of how to act in almost anything. How to rehearse, how to perform, how to present, how to just be that type of person, typecast." While he accepts that the box holds many happy, successful musicians, he's eager to see what's outside.

As the conference continued, Mr. Abrams later said, he realized that doing things differently, in response to today's world, and being creative make a healthy route to an artistic life. His forum experience solidified what

he considers to be important in his life as an artist: In addition to goals of happiness and success, he feels, should be "making an impact ... and feeling a connection to people on a wide level."

Ms. Franceschy recognizes the comfort found in being given options, yet she broadened the presentation exercise to thinking about her career and her life. "I wonder," she said, "what would happen if we were actually not given any options? Then we're free to make our own artistic path. And then, just by the fact that at the end we have to do something with it, that will be enough drive to actually make it happen."

Spread the passion

A postconference conversation with Ms. Loisel became its own creative act, as the students began to design a way to share a fresh view of life as an artist. Mr. Abrams relates it to his definition of being a successful musician, citing Curtis conducting alumnus Leonard Bernstein as a model. "It's when you have this vision," he said, "and you're trying to achieve it. ... And whether you make it or not is not really the issue. ... But it's that in reaching that goal you spread that passion, and you spread that creativity around you."

Now this trio of inspired students is working with Curtis's career office to produce a career forum and workshop on April 12

by the dynamic Time for Three—Zachary DePue, Nicolas Kendall, and Ranaan Meyer, who graduated from Curtis within the past five years and have shaped an endeavor full of concerts, master classes, commissions, and recording. Their music blends classical virtuosity with bluegrass traditions and jazz-like interactions.

Beyond the typical music-making focus of a master class, the Curtis forum will explore the "concept of artistry—of how to make art," as Ms. Franceschy described it, and give "a life example" of career possibilities, like the conference's featured performers did.

As details were being developed, Ms. Loisel said, "The day's events will include performances by Time for Three and students in various forms, workshops on improvisation and how it can bring new energy to all playing, and talk with Time for Three about their career paths and how they got where they are today."

If there are any boxes involved, expect their lids to be open wide. ☺

Visit <http://music-careers.rice.edu> to learn more about the Careers in Music Performance forum, which was funded by Rice University's Faculty Initiative Fund.