



David DePeters

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Onstage and Off

DAVID DEPETERS (TIMPANI AND PERCUSSION '85) FINDS HIS OWN PROFESSIONAL PATH.

BY AMY MILLER

World-touring percussionist. Ski instructor. Manager of an exciting, emerging ensemble. It seems like an unlikely resumé—but it captures the professional life of percussionist David DePeters, who has been “inventing” his career almost since his graduation from Curtis in 1985.

“When I was in school, 90 percent of the students were focused on three things: becoming soloists, chamber musicians, or orchestra players.” Back then, he recalls, “you didn’t say, ‘I’m going to create my career.’”

Mr. DePeters followed the traditional path at first, winning auditions for the Buffalo Philharmonic and the Baltimore Symphony. When his wife, harpist and Curtis faculty member Elizabeth Hainen, won a position in the Philadelphia Orchestra, he returned to Philadelphia. He performs frequently with both the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic, among other groups, and finds his combination of jobs is more fulfilling (and lucrative) than a full-time position in one of the ensembles for which he auditioned. “The musical experiences are really special and amazing. I’m really lucky to get to play with two of the greatest orchestras in the world.”

Though the variety of a freelance music career suited him, Mr. DePeters was concerned about burnout. He took a winter off from playing in 1990 to work as a ski instructor.

“When I came back and started playing music again, I was fresh, wanted to be there, and was loving music and enjoying myself.” His second career continued for ten years, during which he helped manage the ski resort as well.

This experience also brought another, unexpected benefit: Working at a commercial enterprise helped him develop new skills. “I was very fortunate. I was nurtured by incredible



IRIS Orchestra with its music director, Michael Stern

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skiers and instructors. They not only taught me how to ski better, but how to be a better teacher [and] communicator, and how to run a business." The latest addition to his CV draws on this knowledge; for the last two years Mr. DePeters has been the executive director of IRIS Orchestra, a Memphis-based ensemble he'd played in for several years.

IRIS makes daily use of his experience on- and offstage. "We needed somebody who knew Memphis and the music business, and could market an orchestra, sell tickets, and raise money, because we weren't hiring people to do each of those things," he says. He still plays in IRIS, too: "It's sort of a musician-run organization," with players taking on administrative roles like personnel manager and community engagement liaison.

COOPERATIVE EFFORT

IRIS was unique from the outset. Its music director, Michael Stern—a fellow Curtis alumnus—was approached by the manager of the Germantown Performing Arts Center near Memphis in 1998 to create a resident orchestra. "He proposed that IRIS should be a center for American music, and a friend to American composers."

In the years since, IRIS has become a destination for musicians. "IRIS musicians come from all over the country, but more importantly, all over the profession: orchestra veterans, conservatory faculty, chamber musicians, freelancers from major cities, and students," says Mr. Stern. "I have not witnessed the level of camaraderie and cooperation anywhere else. It stems from a

healthy sense of democracy; there is no real hierarchy in the group. For example, if someone plays concertmaster one week, they play second violin the next."

Adds Mr. DePeters, "Everyone stays with host families, and some orchestra members have been staying with the same family for thirteen years. Their hosts have gone to see recitals in New York, and the musicians have flown to Memphis for graduations. Some musicians look at these hosts as almost closer than their families."

Curtis is well-represented in an orchestra that has built the concept of family into its structure. Violist and recent Curtis graduate Ayane Kozasa notes, "When I first started playing at IRIS, I was immediately greeted with the warmest, most welcoming orchestral community you could imagine." For double bassist Mary Javian, IRIS is "a rejuvenating experience for me artistically. The players are not only exceptional musicians, they are great people who are committed to everything they do. No one treats IRIS like a gig; we work with Dave and Michael in a mission-driven way."

Though Mr. DePeters's Curtis experience trained him for a very specific role—orchestral musician—he found his own path. His experience sets a powerful example for today's students, who face a much different career outlook upon graduation. "Music has changed, the landscape of being a musician has changed," he says; and today "Curtis is doing a better job showing that there are other options out there."

Even after journeys around the world, and jobs both musical and nonmusical, he still remembers one pivotal moment at Curtis that changed his entire way of thinking: "The Curtis orchestra was on tour in France. The concert did not go well, and some students were laughing about it afterward. [Curtis's director] John de Lancie came up to us, and without judgment, said, 'You never know who's in the audience.'

"That shaped everything I have ever done since. And in the larger scheme of things, it means: You never know who you're talking to. That's one of the best things anyone ever said to me." ◇

Amy Miller is Curtis's director of institutional relations. Her blog, Recovering Oboist, features interviews with professional musicians who also have non-music careers.