



## ABOUT PETER DOBRIN



Peter Dobrin is a classical music critic and culture writer for The Inquirer. Since 1989, he has written music reviews, features, news and commentary for the paper, covering such topics as expansions for the Philadelphia

Museum of Art and Curtis Institute of Music, the Philadelphia Orchestra's 64-day strike in 1996, the emergence of a new performing arts center in Philadelphia, changes in the classical-recording industry and the general health of arts and culture.

Dobrin was a French horn player. He earned an undergraduate degree in performance from the University of Miami, and received a master's degree in music criticism from the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, where he studied with Elliott Galkin. He has no time to practice today.

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## Curtis Institute of Music Annex Takes Shape



Special sound-proof, double-layer windows are in. Brownstone is in place. There's still a lot of work to be done between now and opening to students in late summer 2011, but enough detail can now be discerned of the Curtis Institute of Music annex that you can sense what kind of a new citizen Locust Street is getting. I'm not the architecture critic, and so much interior detailing lies ahead that there's no way to judge the way the building functions. But my early, provisional reaction is that Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates has designed a building of quiet individuality. The rich, cocoa-colored brownstone facade strikes a reasonable balance between fitting in and making a statement.

One significant aspect of the \$65 million project is the one you can't see from Locust Street: a ten-story dorm tower set back from the front. Previous projects proposed for the site might have cast a shadow, but it looks like

Venturi found a successful way to give the building mass necessary to house up to 86 students while minimizing visual dissonance on a low-rise, basically 19th-century streetscape. Curtis' new building acknowledges the 1600 block of Locust Street as a rare, intact collection of lovely, old-world materials and detailing. The project restores the facades of two flanking buildings - 1610 Locust (completed in 1893) and 1618 Locust (built around 1855) - behind which much of the new building sits.

The sensitivities, however, continue into the new construction. The fenestration of the new structure is of a sizing and pattern likely to delight some more than others. An angular bay outcropping echoes that 19th-century convention without pandering to it. But the primary material of the facade - 50 tons of Teraina brownstone, quarried in the Lake District of England and fabricated by a Wisconsin firm called Quarra Stone Co. - is an especially nice match to its neighbors. Materials are critical to the visual interest. Some of the brownstone chunks feature naturalistic swirls resembling wood patterns. Another type of stone is used for accents, and yet another for the large relief lettering stripped across a music staff on the front of the building.

For all of its public interface (free student concerts, online video and audio, new phone apps, family concerts), Curtis does not extend a hand to music lovers with this addition - at least, not directly. The new facility will house dorms, a cafeteria, practice rooms, an orchestral library, audio and visual recording studios, and an orchestra rehearsal space with 24-foot-high ceilings - for the most part, non-public activities. But by stretching its campus one block east, Curtis will have a greater presence and generate more street activity than the condos previously proposed for this site. If first impressions are correct, this unusually unified block has acquired 100,000 square feet of new building with its harmony intact and enhanced.

The block may emerge better off, but what about the school? The first significant addition in Curtis' history, the addition will undoubtedly change Curtis' character. The elite music conservatory is based on a 19th-century model, housed in a series of 19th-century buildings, and has focused largely on 19th-century repertoire. One of the intangibles a forward-looking facility can do for a school like Curtis is bring students, faculty, administration and board leaders to a place where a different kind of future can be visualized. This addition is part of a larger evolution in Curtis' thinking - that master classes and auditions via the Internet will be a larger part of life, and that digital technology can help students craft careers of greater diversity than the old modes of aiming for a full-time orchestral or solo career.

In a purely prosaic way, Curtis' addition is the answer to a lot of logistical troubles associated with retrofitting former mansions into a school. Then again, living in cramped quarters has also brought about a fertile social atmosphere that has no doubt led to the birth of many a string quartet and other creative partnerships; will bifurcating Curtis tight society drain away any of its vital creative juices?

But to the extent that the Venturi team has crafted a vessel for bigger thinking - including the courage to confront a society that seems to want to engage classical music on vastly different terms - this new physical manifestation of the school promises to be an occasion for bigger thinking, and perhaps even poetry.