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# Mixed Doubles

The Curtis Institute of Music and Zarett Rehab and Fitness Forge a New Fitness Routine

BY OLIVIA GIOVETTI

In an effort to help students with their health and well-being, Curtis Institute of Music has teamed up with a local gym to provide personalized training for any interested student. Read about the remarkable results many students are seeing.

Prevailing cancellation notices for musicians—vocalists and otherwise—these days often cite an illness or injury as the reason. In an attempt to break singers of the unhealthy habits that lead to losing out on work, the Curtis Institute of Music has teamed up with Philadelphia's Zarett Rehab and Fitness to set the next generation of singers on the path toward a sustainable lifestyle and lucrative career.

"When we built our new building," says Curtis' Executive Vice President Elizabeth Warshawer of the school's Lenfest Hall (opened in September of 2011 and effectively doubling the size of the school's campus), "we considered whether we should put a fitness facility right in our housing facility. But we determined pretty quickly, given the nature of our students who depend on their bodies for what they do, that we didn't want an unsupervised program for them. If they were going to do this, they really needed to do it right. And they really needed some place that could provide individual, customized fitness and conditioning regimens for each one of our participants based on what their needs are."

Offered as an elective, non-credit course, Fitness and Conditioning for Musicians creates a customized program for each participant that encompasses strength training and cardiovascular exercise, flexibility improvement in the form of stretching, and manual work or massage therapy. The goal is to prevent repetitive strain and injuries through properly conditioning students and teaching them to exercise well and often.

Joe Zarett, who has been in practice since 1989, became familiar with the work of Curtis through Warshawer, who is a client of his practice along with board chairman H. F. "Gerry" Lenfest. With a firsthand knowledge of what makes Zarett's practice unique, Lenfest agreed to underwrite the program, covering 100 percent of the costs in its first year and 50 percent of the costs in years two and three. Sessions, running between 75 and 90 minutes, take place at Zarett's facilities, a short walk from the Curtis campus.

While a large percentage of the Curtis student body participate in the program (as of press time, 48 out of a student body



Curtis clarinet student Kelly Coyle works with Joe Zarett and Brooke Elefant

photo courtesy of Curtis Institute of Music

of 165), it's still a small enough number that a specific routine can be worked out for each musician, taking into account whether they play violin or are a coloratura soprano, previous sports experience, and current health issues.

Essentially the program is rooted in fitness. An hour of each session focuses primarily on the core muscles in order to strengthen the diaphragm. Further attention is paid to upper extremities, which assists in caloric burn and an increase in energy.

"We work on a lot of stabilization muscles and postural muscles," explains Zarett, who notes that many of the incoming students face the similar issue of maintaining proper posture—a major impediment for proper breath flow. "Building that stamina for a long practice session or concert is essential."

Equally essential is the supervision of the students as they work out with a combination of cardio and strength training. Such supervision gives the program a leg up on other conservatories with fitness facilities.

"When people join a gym, in the first 45 minutes they walk you around, show you the machines, and then you're pretty much on your own. And you can do a lot of damage at a gym if you're not careful," says Curtis' Associate Dean of Student Services Richard Woodland, who acts as a liaison for the program between the school and Zarett. "Our students, they're finely tuned instruments. They need to be careful of their bodies,



The exterior of Curtis' newest building: Lenfest Hall

photo by Tom Crane

what they do with their arms or their wrists. All those things, Zarett can give them whereas a regular gym won't have the time or facilities to do that."

Moreover, Zarett is very particular as to which trainers he hires. "I do not hire personal trainers," he explains. "Personal trainers can just get their certificate online. All of my people are college-educated physical therapists with advanced degrees. This is the highest level of education that people in the field can obtain."

In fact, Zarett believes that it's this added guidance that will help students to build a lifetime of healthy workout habits as they learn how to properly use a variety of state-of-the-art equipment, what movements and exercises can be detrimental to their bodies and instruments, and how the muscles should work in each exercise. As injuries can seriously set a singer back, Zarett believes that such fear is what keeps singers from working out at all. Their bodies may supply their livelihood, but how they treat their bodies will affect that same livelihood.

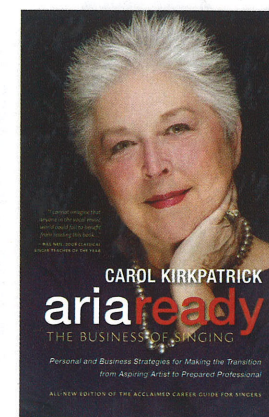
And while abstaining from improper exercise habits can help prevent injury, a lack of fitness is often no better.

The workout, though substantial in terms of how much of a session it takes up, is not the only important slice of the Zarett method. Students remain after a workout for the manual component, performed by licensed physical therapists and massage therapists. With singers especially, Zarett focuses on the TMJ (temporomandibular joint), the joint responsible for opening and closing the mouth and where tension can build up, resulting in teeth grinding, among other ailments.

"The stress is immense; this program is a very intense program. We focus on loosening up those muscles," says Zarett, who will put on gloves and mobilize the TMJ from inside a singer's mouth in order to relax the joint. Further attention is paid to the neck. "Because the vocal chords are right there, loosening up the neck and reducing any spasms or tenderness in the trigger points is huge," Zarett adds. "Sometimes a training session leads to the tightening up of those muscles. Providing the manual work gets rid of any potential negative effect of the exercise. Many people leave and the next day experience a lot of stiffness, a lot of spasms, because the lactic acid builds up. The manual component of each session releases all of that."

In its third year, Fitness and Conditioning for Musicians boasts a high retention rate—of the students enrolled each year, roughly 50 percent return. Most of the new students come from the incoming classes (to whom the program is presented during orientation); others, however, are either returning students new to the program or students who had dropped the course the previous year due to scheduling commitments.

It's in this area that Curtis is strict, acknowledging that with the luxury of this no-cost program comes a responsibility. Woodland monitors the attendance and, per school policy, students can have up to three unexcused absences before they are called in. A fourth absence results in removal from the program, although Woodland adds that they "have some flexibility" when it comes to reinstating drops the following semester if they can prove that their schedule is more conducive to such a commitment.



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Lauren Eberwein in *Dido and Aeneas* at Curtis Opera Theatre

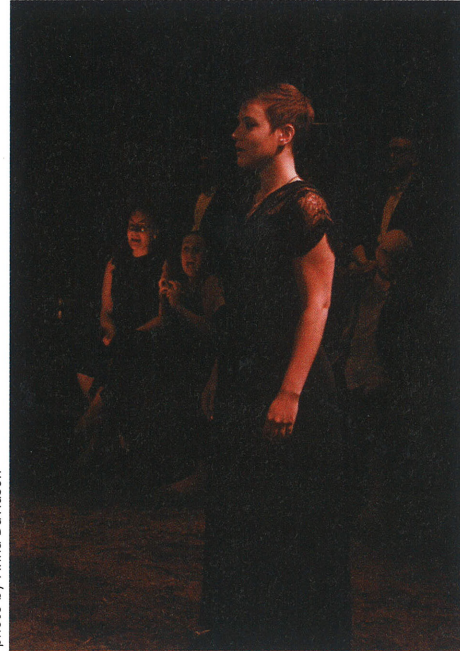


photo by Anna Davidson

“... Zarett’s staff... have quickly become sensitive to a musician’s needs in terms of fitness and conditioning in the weeks and days leading up to and directly following a concert.”

students in terms of scheduling. Hours at the center are fairly liberal, which allows students to schedule around the unflinching timing of classes and rehearsals. And Zarett’s staff, many of whom were not familiar with the world of classical music prior to entering into the partnership with Curtis, have quickly become sensitive to a musician’s needs in terms of fitness and conditioning in the weeks and days leading up to and directly following a concert.

“We’re all over the place, up and down, and a lot of staging on our knees and laying down on a dirt stage,” says mezzo-soprano Lauren Eberwein, in her second year at Curtis and with the Zarett program and, as of press time, working on a Curtis Opera Theatre production of *Dido and Aeneas*. “Sometimes you can create moments of tension with that. To be able to go in and get that massaged out is really incredible.”

Eberwein adds that she’s also learned how to ease that tension, recognizing through her training at Zarett that such

moments can be caused by a lack of support or strength in other parts of the body, such as shoulder tension caused by a weak small of the back. Such shortcomings are fixed in sessions at Zarett.

One of the happy side effects of that can also be weight loss and a slimmer figure. Baritone Sean Plumb, now in his third year of both Curtis and the Zarett program (and a former winner of Classical Singer’s vocal competition at the high school division) has to date lost 90 pounds under the supervision of Zarett’s team.

“We completely revamped my diet, what I ate, how I thought about food. Weight loss was the primary goal, but also cultivating a healthy lifestyle was very important and made my decision to go there,” says Plumb. He credits his trainers at Zarett for being sensitive toward his individual needs: massage therapists help work through the knots in his back and his fitness trainer takes the emphasis off of his abdominal muscles to avoid tightness when it comes to singing.

“This is a serious commitment because there is some serious money being paid for this,” adds Warshawer. “It’s not for everybody, because the students have to be disciplined enough to show up. They have to make their appointments, they have to keep their appointments, they have to cancel their appointments if they can’t show up. It can’t just be a no-show kind of thing.”

In that sense, the Zarett program offers more real-world training in eating right and exercising. And, just like the real world, the program is also flexible with

Sean Plumb



photo by Pete Checchia

“We completely revamped my diet, what I ate, how I thought about food. Weight loss was the primary goal, but also cultivating a healthy lifestyle was very important and made my decision to go there.”

Apart from a significant weight loss, he now boasts longer lines and “exponentially better” support, as well as greater endurance in long rehearsal and performance hauls.

As this duet between Curtis and Zarett is still in its early stages, long-term benefits are still cropping up. Warshawer says that students using the program tend to visit the chiropractor less, and her long-term goal is to keep them from relying on quick fixes like cortisone shots when injuries creep up later in their careers. Such sustainability is bred beyond Zarett Rehab and Fitness, carrying over into Lenfest Hall, which was recently LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified at the gold level and boasts a food services company that specializes in healthful and diet- and allergy-friendly meals.

“We want them to be mindful of their physical well being,” she says. “Whether they achieve that through a fitness and conditioning program, the Alexander Technique, good nutrition, yoga, or whatever, we want them to have a mindset that allows them to have long, productive careers.”

Both Plumb and Eberwein are two examples of that possibility, pardon the pun, working out.

“I think sometimes we get so wrapped up in our schedules as singers that we forget that physical fitness is imperative not only to our health but our vocal health. So it’s really nice to have someone there, helping you and pushing you on,” says Eberwein. “We’re at our healthiest when we can sing and perform at the top of our level.”

*Olivia Giovetti’s bio can be found on p. 14.*



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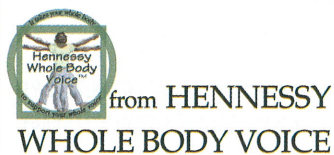
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