

On Conducting, Collaboration, and Curiosity in Early Music: Joshua Rifkin in Interview with David Miller (Transcript)

David Miller: Hello everyone, my name is David Miller and today we are embarking on what I hope will be a multi-part interview series for *Musicology Now*, discussing early music, musicology, performance pedagogy, probably other things too, but the intersection of all of that.

Our first guest is conductor, keyboard player and musicologist Joshua Rifkin. Joshua, welcome and thank you for being here.

Joshua Rifkin: Thank you, David, pleasure to be here.

DM: So I wanted to ask you, as a sort of opening gambit here, maybe a kind of general question, but actually we were just talking about this before we started and so I'm kind of curious how you think of it. You're someone who wears different hats within the musical world, you fulfill different kinds of roles.

If and when you meet someone out in the world, someone who's not a musician, not an academic, anything like that, and they ask what you do for a living, how do you describe that to them?

JR: Well, generally I say I'm a musician. And when they ask more specifically, I say most of the time I wave my arms at other musicians, letting them do the real work.

DM: And they know what you mean by that?

JR: Some of them usually do, yes.

DM: OK, good.

To what extent do you do you feel that those roles—a conductor, an instrumentalist, keyboard player, someone who also does academic research, has published in in musicological spheres—how much do you think that those kind of roles overlap with one another or interact with one another in your day-to-day life?

JR: Well, it's of course a mix. In your day-to-day life, you can compartmentalize things. You know, if you are doing source research or writing an article, you really have to focus on that. If you are getting ready for a gig, you have to be studying your score. You have to be practicing if it's going to involve keyboard playing. So in those ways, yes, you concentrate at the particular moment on whatever a particular thing is called for.

But in general, they've always been sort of seamless, the one seems to flow into the other. Indeed, it was for example performance questions that I had as a young musician that got me involved in research. First of all, trying to answer dumb things like on what note you start drills in Bach and eventually too what's chronology in Bach and so forth. So they've always gone in and out and the one will give rise to the work in the other, but it's not unidirectional.

One thing has to be said that nowadays the lines are just not so sharply drawn between these things as they once were. And we have increasingly, you know, people who just do all of the above and do it at a high level.

DM: When do you think that that started to change, in your perception of it?

JR: Oh, it would be graceless for me to say maybe sometime after I got into the business. But I think I think in fact, seriously, the generation to which I belong, which is obviously no longer a young one, may have been the first, or may have seen the rise of that kind of thing, and it may have really developed more after that, so some of us may have had the good luck just to be in at the right place and at the right time.

DM: So the focus, ostensibly, of this series is something to do with early music. Obviously that's a very broad, very sort of vague term. But just to continue this line of conversation for a moment, about different roles and crossover and those sorts of things, I think there's a perception that probably still persists that says, you know, early music maybe as compared to other types of performance—sort of mainstream classical music performance, whatever—is a little bit more intellectual or brainy or something, or a greater number of performers in that world dabble in academic work, or maybe not dabble, really do it seriously, whatever.

Is that accurate do you think? And do you think that that's a good perception, or I mean, what's your take on that?

JR: That's a very good question. I think it's not inaccurate that this perception exists, more so in the US than on the other side of the Atlantic, I have to say. I think like all widespread perceptions, it itself is not wholly accurate.

You know, there are smart musicians and less smart musicians, and I don't think they're that unevenly distributed, although one thing that may be relevant here is that there has often been and often been noticed a sort of parallel in terms of, let's say, thinking musicians, between the early music world and the new music world. It was once said to me by a very intelligent journalist that this may have its roots in the fact that, let's say, when you're in Conservatory, if you're going to do early music or if you're going to do new music, you have to be making a conscious choice, and maybe what motivates people to make choices and to have the courage to make these choices is a kind of heightened perception of what the issues may be, etc.

So I think the best early musicians are smart ones, as are the best players of Brahms, and you know conductors of Verdi, etc., but I think it's true that the perception is out there, and I can tell you that some of my dearest colleagues in the early music trade really get pretty annoyed when people, you know, sort of think of them as intellectual musicians or something. Musicians really work on instinct, it's a question of just how much we question and challenge our instincts, how much we seek to develop them and refine them, but deep down, inside at the bottom, it's an instinctual game—and in that way we're all the same, I think.

DM: Yes, that makes sense perfectly to me and I would just add that what you said about some people within the early music world getting sort of annoyed at that perception, I've certainly sensed that as well. I think there's a feeling sometimes that, hey, people think I'm sitting around reading treatises all day, but I just want to put on a good show like everyone else, you know?

JR: Of course, I mean, I should add as a footnote that of course since the 90s or late 80s, you know, with the rising professionalism and sort of mainstream acceptance of early music, there has been a tendency, or at least there was for a time, sort of to want to soft-pedal anything that seemed historical, you know, and that we are all artists.

And in fact, this went hand in hand with a tendency to ignore a, sometimes militantly ignore, anything that could be considered historical—"I don't want all that performance practice stuff, I just want to..." you know? And I think that's just as pernicious as the over focus on the so-called intellectual side.

DM: Yeah, that's really interesting. I think you're right that there is a tendency sometimes to, as you say, sort of downplay those historical elements to not seem, not try to present it like it's too much of an intellectual exercise or too much of a sort of esoteric niche kind of thing. There is still, though almost always I think a sense that on some level we are, we are trading on the, "historically-informed" moniker or whatever. There's still some juice behind that, even if it's not emphasized in the same way maybe it used to be, I think.

JR: I think you're absolutely right, and I would have to say that, that there are those among us who do trade up on it, I think quite explicitly, without having any of the goods to back it up, if I may say so.

DM: Yes, I think that would be hard to deny.

Well, that is maybe then a good segue, because I know something that we wanted to talk about was performances you've heard recently, or you've been listening to, and maybe in particular anything that you have found interesting or striking or enjoyable.

JR: I must confess, I rarely listen to performances. You know, when you're in the business you tend to focus on your work. What performances you attend or hear otherwise are usually those of your friends, and certainly that's the same with me. So I like many of my friends, I've heard some very nice things from them, and, you know, we have our agreements, disagreements. But I would say that a couple of things I would like to mention. first of all, a general thing, and this is, I suppose, you know, a personal prejudice.

I hear some performances of Bach, you know, a sort of particular field of mind these days, that get everything right in terms of the objective framework, you know the right number of voices, the right number of instruments, etc., etc. I think one can kind of lay that whole business, you know, sort of aside, and say it's very simple to get it right if we just know a few basic facts. And I can think of one instance when I first heard such a performance by a very eminent colleague whom I respect and like a great deal, I was really quite delighted with it.

I thought it sounded wonderful, and I wasn't used to hearing this except for when I was, you know, sort of like in front of the band, so it was very nice to sit in an audience and hear it, but I noticed gradually that the performances kind of just went along without any differentiation and so they grew to me a little bit frustrating after a while, you know, I kept wanting to see something go someplace and have some direction and and that was not there.

And of course it occurred to me, and this is a prejudiced view, that this was not unconnected to the fact that these performances were not conducted. Now, of course, conducting and conducting are very much a dirty word in the early music business, even more so than in the mainstream business.

But you know, the fact of the matter is: A) there's lots of historical evidence that things were conducted. B) composers often lead performances. There's a famous description of Bach leading a performance, and it is him conducting, not playing the keyboard, where he is, in fact doing all the interpretive rigmarole that a modern showboat conductor would be doing. And obviously you know there are certain things that a conducted performance can have that even, usually, the best ensemble performance might not. In particular the sense of larger scale shaping and also refined shaping of balances, things like that. So I do feel the limitations of those. I admit this as a self-serving response, but there is that.

Having said that, I will make one big exception, because there is a recent series coming out of Indiana, not formally part of the university, but affiliated with it, and that's called the Bloomington Bach Cantata Project. It's run by Dan Melamed and I'd like to give a shout-out to them. Although I haven't heard all of the performances straight through, I have sampled them now because I'm on the mailing list, and I have to say I've been delighted with much of what I hear.

They are not conducted, and they may show some of the limitations that I've mentioned, in fact I think some of them do. Nevertheless, thinking about how difficult it was to put the research on vast performance forces into practice, and how difficult it was at one time to find the singer as the instrumentalists who could do this all technically and musically, etc., to see its bunch of if I may call them kids, you know, just doing this stuff as if it were perfectly second nature is fabulous—and doing it at a very high level, I mean the performances are very accomplished. I wrote to Dan Melamed after seeing my first sample, I said this has made me obsolete now. Now I hope that's not wholly true, but I have to say I find it marvelous what they're doing.

DM: That's great, I haven't heard them, but I'll have to go check them out.

I wanted to just follow up on that question of a conductor or sort of leadership more generally, because that does seem to me to be the sort of crux of it, which is to say whether or not someone is actually waving their hands around in front of the ensemble, certainly it seems to me it was the case historically that there was almost always someone who was leading in a broader sense, the artistic leader, the person who was coming with the ideas of how things should go.

JR: Exactly, I call it a controlling intelligence. I don't mean controlling in a negative sense, but the overall intelligence...and of course it was very often the composer himself—as it virtually always was, sadly, in those days—who has the complete piece inside.

I can give quickly one example, by the way. There's a there's a fantastic Bach cantata, BWV 127, *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott*, which opens with one of these great chorale fantasias of the second Jahrgang. But if you listen to the beginning of it, you hear recorders chirping away very, very sweetly in the top. You hear oboes playing a motive throughout that will come back in the voices. And underneath it all, the strings are played laying down a sort of cushion of pretty sound. But if you look carefully, you discover that, among other things, that cushion of pretty sound is in fact a chorale melody. That is not the chorale melody on which the fantasia is based, but rather the German Agnus Dei, *Christe, du Lamm Gottes*. So it is a sort of symbolic counterpoint and thematic counterpoint to what you more obviously hear.

And that's something that people playing from their parts would not recognize, you know, not really know what to do with, particularly nowadays when I really don't think you can expect just about any

violinist, even in Germany, to recognize *Christe, du Lamm Gottes* as they play those long half notes, etc. So that's where our knowledge of what's going on overall is really important and I would say essential for music as complex as that of Bach, whether one is beating the time or not.

And I'm, by the way, always happy not to beat time, you know, below a certain size of ensemble, it's really silly to stand up in front of too-small number of people to, you know, waving one's arms. But on the other hand, past a certain size, they don't need you to keep together, but this sense of helping direct it and working out the balances and knowing what's crucial and what's not, and helping people feel that, that I think is something worthwhile.

DM: I did want to ask though, just to follow up on this whole conductor business is, I wonder why there are...because I have seen and I've participated in plenty of performances of fairly large early music groups playing without a conductor, and I think that there is probably part of that that is motivated by some kind of political ideal, you know the idea that, hey, it would be nice if we could all have a say in the in the music-making process, there's something quasi-democratic about it. But even in a less lofty sense, I think there is the kind of day-to-day reality—and this this reminds me of what you were saying before about early music and new music, that overlap—there's the day-to-day reality of, hey, if I'm a violinist, if I'm a oboe player, or whatever it might be, if I go into early music, if I go into new music, maybe I can have a little bit more say on average in the artistic decisions, the musical decisions, as compared to playing in a 80 person, 100 person symphony orchestra or playing an opera pit, whatever it might be.

I think that is probably still true and probably still possible even if there is a conductor up there, but I wonder—and I wanted to just turn now a little bit to thinking a little bit more about sort of education and pedagogy and those sorts of questions—is there a way that you think of trying to involve the musicians in what you're doing and feeling like they still have agency and that sort of thing, even when you are leading it, even when you are making the ultimate decisions about things?

JR: Oh, absolutely. Just stepping back a little bit on that...of course, as I say, modern orchestras hate conductors too, so that's a well-established tradition in musical practice. You have to add to that in early music—apart from the points that you raised, and as you say there's this longstanding sort of political background—I'm perhaps not the one who should be saying it, but a lot of conductors in early music really can't beat four very effectively. And you know, you have to have some chops in this business, and some do, some don't. Now, when we get beyond that, and you speak of involving the musicians and so forth, I'm also reminded—and this gets us to the political side again—of a couple of really very, very fine musicians with whom I had the chance to work, not conducting, but just really as a colleague and something they were doing at an educational institute that, you know, performing without a conductor gives the musicians, the players and singers a chance really to take responsibility for what they do. And that sounded very good, except on reflection I said, well, don't all musicians, or shouldn't all musicians take responsibility for what they're doing? And having a conductor does not, reduce or eliminate that, you do have this responsibility.

Now, that said, I think the old notion of the conductor really dictating everything has outlived its usefulness, it has in modern orchestral practice. You know, sometimes think that if Toscanini or George Szell came back today, no orchestra would play for them, they'd just shut up. Nobody can make music that way anymore.

So in conducting, your task, well, when I teach conducting, for example, the first thing I say to the students, is well what's the first thing you have to know as a conductor? And finally somebody will say: "they can do it without you." And I say, exactly! You know, they don't need you in a certain way. So then you have to ask the question, what is it that you can do? And I think here it is a matter of kind of bringing musicians in, not dictating but really sort of inviting. I was very lucky, I was disabused of certain conductorial notions by the members of the Bach ensemble, with whom I worked, and I must say I'm grateful to them for that. For example, if you ever say "don't do it that way," well, you'll never get anybody to play it like that.

There's a lovely anecdote about Simon Rattle, by the way, which is very pertinent here. The first time Simon conducted the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, that's a bunch of terrific players and he noticed that they were never looking up at him. Now, you know, the Simon Rattle has one of the best sticks in the business, he shows so much in what he does. And finally, when he stopped he said to them, "you all seemed to be having such a good time with this music, wouldn't you let me in on the fun? Masterly psychology, but of course it points to something very true. As a conductor, you hope to be—to use the Latin phrase—*primus inter pares*, the first among equals, but definitely among equals.

I often think that when I am conducting, obviously I hope to hear what I'd hope to hear, but if I'm really lucky, I'll hear something better. And that's where, of course, the musicians contribute, that they just sort of have a particular way of turning the phrase or can color this in a way that I would never have thought of. And you have to be open to that and hope to create situations that will invite that kind of participation. I'm not judging my personal my success percentage, but that's what you hope.

DM: Well, yeah, we all win some and lose some. But I really like that way of thinking about it. I love that story about Simon Rattle, it makes me think of times when I've been playing under certain conductors and you feel like it's an obligation, like, yeah, ok, I know there's going to be a cut off here so I have to look up, but it's just sort of this logistical matter. And then there's other times where you're playing under someone and it's really fun, as you say, and you look up and you think, oh, this actually enhances my experience of the music by seeing what this person is doing and seeing where they're going and what they're suggesting to me, and I can feel like there's a flow of information back and forth and all of that.

JR: In fact, the contact that you mentioned is something that's terrifically important to me. I sometimes say, when it's going well between me and a band, I can sort of like feel it at the tips of my fingers, you know, and you're describing the other end of the same thing. And that's, I think, what one always hope for whatever end of the stick one is on.

DM: Yes, absolutely. Well, we should sort of try to wrap up here, but I did want to ask you one final question that is maybe sort of...it hits on a lot of things that we've talked about already, but a little bit more future-focused, looking ahead. As we were talking about earlier, you're someone who wears different hats, and certainly there is a leadership or somewhat educational element, it seems to me, to a lot of what you do. Do you think about consciously what you would like to be giving to the generation that's coming up, in terms of whether it's scholars, performers, various people involved in the early music world, is that something you really think about consciously? And if so, is there one of those avenues or one of those activities that you feel like is the best way for you to impart what you have to say?

JR: You know, I have to confess, and it's really a shameful admission, I've never thought about any of it consciously. I've just gone in and done my thing. But I think there is, if I reflect on it, there are a couple of sort of like fundamental lines to it. The first thing is that: one takes nothing for granted. One believes nothing, one believes nobody. One has a skeptical attitude towards so-called authority. And one asks questions and one would pursue these questions wherever they lead. And I think that's the basic thing. I suppose that would be called a critical attitude, and I don't necessarily mean a critical in personal terms or something, but rather in the sense, well, I want to get to the bottom of this, what is this all about what's going on here?

The musicologist Arthur Mendel, famous figure, and particularly at Princeton when I was a graduate student there, you know, decades ago, who himself came from a performing background, always used to say when somebody said something to you, you sort of look at them and say, How do you know that? And I think that's the essential question. You know, how do you know?

There's a wonderful new book that just came out by a very, very smart Israeli news musicologist named Alon Schab on performance and on reading sources and also transcribing music, etc., and he speaks of historical curiosity, and I find that term also very good. You don't even have to say "historical," because it is curiosity.

Again, if I may cite another example, there was a conductor named Max Rudolf who was a very distinguished conductor, German refugee conductor, the sort of main Mozart man at the Met Opera in New York, and also the teacher of James Levine. And in his later life he also became a highly regarded, often-published Mozart scholar. He published several important articles in the *Mozart Jahrbuch*. And he used to be asked, you know, if he's a scholar now, he says, "no, I'm just an inquisitive musician." And I think that's what sums it up and you know, I guess I just hope that when I'm talking with emerging musicians or scholars or whatever, that I'll retain that spirit—if I don't, I really should pack it in—and that some then that some of it may communicate or that we may share some of it and learn in the process.

DM: Well, that's a great way to put it, thank you for that. I really like thinking about it in that way because it seems to me that if you have that spirit of curiosity or criticism, you know, critical spirit, skepticism, however you want to put it, but if you can maintain that within yourself, then really those disciplinary boundaries are sort of secondary, they don't matter so much. That will serve you well no matter how you apply it.

JR: Very nicely put. I sometimes joke that, let's say, and I contrast Northern European countries from Italy, let's say in Germany—of course a country to which I'm very close, so it will sound as if I'm putting it down, but I don't mean to. If you're going somewhere, you know that you're starting off at A and that you're going to reach B or maybe C or whatever, and I like to think that in Italy you start off at A and you don't necessarily have B in mind, but you have a certain way of walking and of moving, and that's what you do. I suppose you could also relate that to a spot in young Frankenstein, where Igor, the servant says to the doctor when he runs "walk this way" and they start, you know, he thinks he's giving him direction, but he's like, no, sort of like "walk *this* way." And without the politically questionable joke, I think that thing is sort of a way of doing, a way of moving, a way of behaving, is, yeah, really the important thing.

DM: Yeah, a process, a mindset, yeah, absolutely. Great, well I think that's a great place to stop. Joshua Rifkin, thank you very much for being a part of this.

JR: David, thank you very much too.