

Interview with Richard Taruskin

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The Japanese Kyoto Prize, which is a counterpart of the Nobel Prize, addresses itself more to the arts, while literature, humanities, and sciences are also within its orbit. Composers receive a remarkably warm welcome. Among its laureates, we find Witold Lutosławski, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, John Cage, György Ligeti, and Iannis Xenakis.

However, since its institution in 1985, musicologists had never been nominated. Whatever the reasoning behind the previous lack of nomination, granting this award to a musicologist has justly elevated the prestige of this profession in public opinion, and the candidate, Richard Taruskin, was a particularly commendable choice. Even his opponents could hardly suggest an alternative candidate of similar caliber.

Min-Ad, as a representative of the Israel Musicological Society, congratulates Richard Taruskin—the 2017 Kyoto Prize laureate. This event provided a good reason for an interview by correspondence.

M.R.: Your contribution to musicology, and more generally to culture, goes far beyond publications. You have taught generations of students throughout your career. Many things have changed—the world itself, students, and probably you too. Would you like to draw some conclusions about the nature of these changes?

R.T.: You have made me very glad that I agreed to this interview, because you started right off with the thing that makes me happiest about my career in musicology. I have trained about forty PhDs over the years—a big number for the humanities—and I can't begin to describe the pleasure I get every year from attending the national meetings of the American Musicological Society, and seeing my Doktorkids performing so prominently and so impressively. That's why I haven't presented a paper of my own at these meetings for such a long time: I want to be free to go wherever my kids are showing off.

How have things changed? For the better! Musicology is so much more interesting now than it was when I was a student. The purview of study has expanded to the point where I can't think of any subject that would be considered unworthy, and the methodological lens has widened accordingly. Social and cultural contextualization has replaced narrow philological and poietic studies as the dominant mode (and of course the broader purview can accommodate the narrower, so that nothing has been lost). We do face problems, and your next question seems to address them, but the problems are external far more than internal now.

M.R.: Many people, even the young who generally are technologically advanced, feel and acknowledge a certain confusion in this unprecedented and rapidly changing world. Do you feel this? Every day, we encounter new apparatuses for once easily and humanly

maintained operations. How do you cope with this? Do you try to be constantly updated or, in contrast, do you manage to suppress this confusion in the hope of living your life without too many technological complications?

R.T.: Technology doesn't bother me as long as I don't have to run the machines! I am singularly backward in that department (I can't even prepare a decent PowerPoint), but I welcome anything that makes research easier, as long as imaginative and energetic people are doing the research. Advanced technology in the right hands enables one to accomplish more in the time one has.

I have heard young scholars express a bad conscience now and then over how easy it is to do research online, but I try to remind them that finding things is not what scholarship is about, but knowing what to do once you've found them, and that if they did not have a hypothesis into which they could insert what they have all-too-easily found, finding it would do them no good. Technology cannot (yet) do their thinking and imagining for them. It only helps with the inductive side, and that is all to the good.

M.R.: Musicology has also changed. Is there anything left in twentieth-century musicology that you regret? On the other hand, what advantages do you find in contemporary musicology as compared to the past? I don't mean merely informational availability and the general growth of musicological studies, but rather the approaches used.

R.T.: I have already indicated my answers to these questions. But I know better than to make predictions. I have a book coming out at UC Press called "Cursed Questions" (Marina will know what that title means!).¹ In it, I talk about the biggest and most intractable issues at suitable length. But let me just reiterate that the progress of musicology during my time with it has been extraordinary—and there is no reason not to expect it to continue. There can never be an end to diversification, even as the process of contextualization—the area I have been most concerned to encourage—is going in directions I myself have no interest in following: I mean the maximalized contextualization of "sound studies" in which music is getting swallowed up, so that the musical products and objects that have always engaged my curiosity and motivated my research are becoming invisible. But if music is being swallowed up now, I am sure that eventually it will be disgorged, or possibly expelled at the other end, and will once again become something to be engaged with freshly. I am quite sure that, by the middle of the twenty-first century, musicology will look strange to me—should I come back from the dead to see it. At least I hope it will. If it stayed the same, it would mean that the life had gone out of it.

M.R.: Musicology is diverse today as never before. How can you define tendencies that could probably be dominant in the near future, while some others perhaps show signs of decay?

R.T.: I seem always to be anticipating your next question. Sound studies and utilitarian genres (including "ludomusicology," in which my Doktorsohn Roger Moseley has so

¹ The phenomenon of "cursed," or, as Russians translate it, "accursed questions" (*proklyatye voprosy*), relates to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian philosophy and literature debating ethical and moral dilemmas, as well as social, religious, geo-political, and national aspects.

distinguished himself) seem like growth areas—but so do Cold War studies, which is something I have invested a lot of intellectual energy into encouraging. I used to say that the chief task of twenty-first century musicology would be the revision of the historiography of twentieth-century music, and that is certainly happening, much to my satisfaction. But the other trends I have mentioned are things I did not predict, and I am sure that many other exciting turns I have not imagined will transform the discipline. Not everything will be great. There are a couple of trends right now that I could do without. One is actor–network theory, which seems to me a regressive simplification, and another is “reparative” musicology, which so far looks more like a constraint than an enabler. But the weather is changeable.

M.R.: Young musicologists have disproportionately small opportunities for their purely academic careers. But you are not that pessimistic about other fields where they can find themselves. How do you see their possible prospects beyond occasional freelance jobs—something more stable?

R.T.: Now you are again broaching the issue that worries me. The ominous and confusing things that young musicologists face have more to do with employment prospects. As I have already implied, the graduates of our programs are better prepared and equipped than ever before, and surely much sharper in critical intelligence, but the problem of overproducing candidates for employment in a shrinking job market is getting worse. It goes beyond musicology, of course, and I am not the one who will solve such problems, but the irony of the situation—more and better scholars coming just when prospects are dimming—is something that worried me greatly in my last years of teaching. I am afraid that the solution will have to be producing fewer, rather than expanding the market. The former is something we can control, the latter something we can only hope for. The place of academic art and scholarship—as with any labor-intensive and low-yielding endeavor—is precarious at present in the ruthless global economy, and much threatened by current trends. When someone invests so much time and energy, not to mention financial resources, into a program of professional study, and completes the program successfully, he or she should be confident of finding employment in that profession. Our own students have thus far been successful in finding situations for themselves, partly owing to their persistence and their good showing, and partly, I am happy to say, on the strength of the UC Berkeley brand. Their morale remains high and their optimism undiminished. But as my time as a teacher went on, I became increasingly vigilant to make sure that our students’ career ambitions were congruent with their true interests and the requirements of the academic job market. In a couple of cases, I actually counseled students to switch to other lines of work that seemed to be more in keeping with their inclinations—one to political activism and the other is now getting her MD degree (she’s a double doctor!). A professor I knew long ago used to say (of music, but it is just as true, or truer, of musicology) that it’s a field you should not get into unless you can’t stay out of it. That is even more the case now.

M.R.: Your role in the representation of musical critique in journals for the broad intellectual audience is well known and highly appreciated, elevating you to the rank of “public musicologist.” What is going on in this field today?

R.T.: There are still a few PhDs in musicology who write for the general press. Well—one, anyway: Will Robin, who is now an assistant professor at (I believe) the University of Maryland, with a PhD from the University of North Carolina, and who seems to be a regular now in the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, where I frequently appeared between 1990 and 2012. Michael Markham, one of our PhDs, was writing for a while for the *Los Angeles Times*. But here, too, I have to report that prospects are shrinking. *The New York Times* has cut back on its arts coverage, and, within the arts, the coverage of classical music has been cut back the most severely. My editor there, James Oestreich, is now retired. He was always unusually receptive to the work of scholars (Michael Beckerman was another of his regulars), so my falling in with him, in the early 1980s (when he was founding the short-lived *Opus* magazine), was a stroke of great and perhaps unrepeatable good luck. I always encouraged my pupils and colleagues to write for these media, and placed their work when I could, often through Jim Oestreich. But very few tried to do it—out of a combination, as I saw it, of reticence (sensing, correctly, that standards would be high and strict), and a more defensive sense that popular media were beneath the level of a professional scholar. Too bad. It was where I learned to write. I wish everyone could have that experience, but it was a fluke for me, and even less likely now.

M.R.: You wrote many, perhaps even most, of your works on commission. You invested the same hard work and inspiration in them as in the works you yourself initiated. Did you ever decline serious commissions?

R.T.: The only project I wrote on commission, strictly speaking (in the sense that it was originally someone else's idea and I signed a contract and received an advance for it before writing), was the *Oxford History*, which was not supposed to be a six-volume monster but just a college text. I got carried away and, fortunately for me, so did Oxford. Actually, there was one other such book: a volume on the history of Russian opera that I agreed to write for Cambridge University Press about thirty-five years ago, and never wrote. Because I had a contract, I have been getting royalty statements twice a year ever since: about seventy statements, totaling exactly zero dollars. I did not get an advance and so there was never a legal problem. And there was the textbook I wrote with Piero Weiss called *Music in the Western World*. This was already under contract when I joined in. (Piero had the contract and was having trouble getting started—so again, a lucky break for me.)

Nowadays I get many invitations to speak, often to give keynote addresses on subjects that have already been decided upon. I have filled a couple of books with essays that originated in such invited talks (and *Cursed Questions* will be another such volume), but that is perhaps something other than a commission. None of my pieces for *The New York Times* or *The New Republic* were commissioned. They were usually my own idea, although sometimes Jim Oestreich would suggest my reviewing something. All my work on Russian music, including the big Stravinsky book, were projects of my own devising. Who would commission such things?

M.R.: *The Oxford History of Western Music*. A lot has been said and written since its publications in six (2005, 2009) and five (2010) volumes. Oxford decided to speak in your voice, giving you carte blanche—and this was an honor, for both Oxford and you. So, your

voice was free, as ever, and you wrote what you felt necessary. The *History*, which I would call an *opus magnum*, is full of daring and innovative approaches. You had to be sure enough in their value. Can you analyze your path to these approaches— which certainly was not formed just at the time of writing this work?

R.T.: A full answer to this question would be another book, but to give a short answer: the *Oxford History* was basically a fleshed-out and expanded version of the music history lectures I have been giving since the late 1960s. Many, if not most, of the pieces discussed in detail were pieces about which I used to lecture to classes. The big ideas or innovative approaches to which you were kind enough to refer were the strategies I devised to make my courses coherent. So the *Oxford History* was a kind of distillation of three or four decades of teaching. It was the only one of my books that did not have a defined period of research before writing, because my whole life up to that point had been that period.

M.R.: At the beginning of your Commemorative Lecture at the Kyoto Prize² award ceremony, you said that you prefer not to think too much about the future. Nevertheless, do you have any projects in mind that perhaps have haunted you for a long time, but on which you have hesitated embarking? (details, if you like).

R.T.: I have two books currently in mind. One would be an attempt to unpack the concept of “Western classical music,” less as a body of works than as an evolving social practice that has been going on since the late eighteenth century—in a sense, a “theorization” of the subject matter of the *Oxford History*, but a short book rather than another Ox. (That will be a challenge for me, since it usually takes me about 100 pages just to sign my name.) The other would be a book about doing musicology, based on my long experience teaching the introductory proseminar for entering graduate students both at Columbia (since 1977) and at Berkeley (since 1988). A lot of that sort of thing has been spilling into my essays lately, so I am beginning to waver about writing the book, but it is something I have long wanted to do.

M.R.: At the end of that lecture, you presented different views of the role of the musicologist in culture. Is it possible to quote these paragraphs here?

R.T.: I think you mean this fragment:

Musicology, I seize my opportunity here to declare, deserves its recognition among musical pursuits. That it should be regarded as secondary to composition and performance—that Jean Sibelius, speaking on behalf of composers, should have been thought wise to observe that no statue was ever put up in honor of a critic—is only an historical happenstance, a prejudice. There have been other views. The philosopher Boethius ranked the three types of people who concern themselves with music in precisely the opposite order. At the bottom were performers, whose “efforts are devoted to the exhibition of their skills with instruments,” and who “therefore act as slaves, without reasoning or thinking.” In the middle came what we would call composers, but Boethius called poets, that is, “makers,” who “compose more with their natural instinct than through the exercise of thought or reason.” And on top were

² The 2017 Kyoto Prize Commemorative Lecture presented by Dr. Richard Taruskin, laureate in Arts and Philosophy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJkfyEKE94M> (accessed 21 June 2018).

the people like me, whom Boethius exalts by calling them critics, that is, “judges,” those who, because they are “wholly devoted to reason and thought,” are “able to judge modes, rhythms, the genera of songs and their mixtures,” by virtue of their ability to use reason and thought in a manner “especially suited to the musical art.” So there.

I won’t insist on that hierarchy, or any hierarchy. But I do think that we who tell the story get the last word, and deserve recognition for that. Those who presume to outrank us forget that we are the ones who have assigned them their place. One of my favorite stories—and, for reasons you will surely understand, one of the favorite stories of my pupils, to whom I loved to tell it—concerned the great Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, who, when warned by one of his teachers that he should be more respectful toward his elders, “because it is we who will determine your promotion,” answered “Yes, but it is we who will write your obituaries.” (I read that, as it happens, in Myrdal’s obituary.)

To that extract from my lecture I would only add that a musicologist needs to be a fully trained musician, and preferably one who has studied composition as well as harmony, counterpoint, analysis, and all the rest (taking music history for granted). That is the base on which the superstructure of our specialized training needs to be erected, and from which we build our bridges to our sister disciplines in the humanities. A great strength of recent musicology has been its high awareness of, and response to, general issues in sociology, critical theory, and political economy. But unless the response is informed by a firm grounding in musical thinking and practice, it will be a deflection from our task of understanding music in its manifold social and cultural contexts. I used to stress to my pupils that anything they do as a musicologist should require a musicologist to do it.

M.R.: It can be noticed that you preface your recent books with autobiographical notes. Have you considered granting your future readers a kind of autobiography, perhaps interlaced with reflections on culture, music, musicology?

R.T.: I have enough experience with the memoirs of others (e.g. Stravinsky) to know better than to write my own! But I too have noticed my tendency toward reminiscence. When you get older, your past is very present in your mind, and lived experience is another resource on which to draw—so long as you treat yourself the way you treat other sources: as a witness, not an oracle, and subject to corroboration and other forms of testing. I always preach skepticism, and that applies to my own memories as well as those of others. Reading over my answers to these questions is another dis-incentive to write memoirs. It might be a dull book, to judge by my dull answers. I did not live in what the famous Chinese curse calls “interesting times” (although the Cold War had its scary moments), and my life has been lucky, so probably too much like a happy family as described by Tolstoy.

M.R.: I don’t think it was dull. We conversed with respect to a scholarly journal, where there is not much place for thrilling or provocative discussions. I have, however, two questions that I believe you may like to ironize in your response, and give a reader a certain zoom-in into your (inevitably scholarly) personality. The first: What do you usually think about when your glance falls on the cabinet with your publications?

R.T.: What do I think when I survey all my books in a row? I don’t actually have such a cabinet. What I do have is a sort of dumping ground in the basement where I keep the books

and journals in which my articles have appeared, including ancient offprints (a thing of the past), and there is a carton of old NY Times Sunday arts sections et. cetera. Upstairs, I have a shelf where I keep the *Oxford History* within reach, and where I have been entering corrections since 2009, when the paperback revision was issued. My monographs (Stravinsky, Defining, etc.) are shelved with others on the same subject. There is also a shelf where the recent collections of essays are kept, in multiple copies, to give as gifts. Come see me and take some.

M.R.: How do you relate to the “early Taruskin”? I know that your objectiveness applies also to yourself, just as it does to others. Do you reread your works sometimes?

R.T.: Do I reread my stuff? Yes, I do when I come across references to it, particularly challenges to it. Sometimes rereading is reassuring, sometimes not. I often feel, when reading old stuff, that I am reading the work of someone else. (In a way, that is actually true: the human body replaces itself cell by cell, except for teeth, every seven years, so some of my old publications were issued as much as six Taruskins ago.) Sometimes I am surprised at how well that other person could write, sometimes I am embarrassed. I am sure my relationship to my past work is similar to that of many others. People who write a lot, however, if I may generalize on the basis of introspection, are usually thinking of the present task and future ones. Edmund Wilson (American literary critic) once wrote that he always feels as though he is just beginning to learn how to write. That hit home with me!

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