

Sound Expertise – Season 2, Episode 14 – The Musicologist as Contrarian with Richard Taruskin

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

Will Robin, Richard Taruskin

Richard Taruskin 00:00

I gradually became accustomed to questioning every assumption. I began to see that as basically what scholars do, and then to equate the scholarly mental frame with skepticism. And I've argued this quite passionately over the years, because it seems to me that if we're not skeptics, we're nothing. If we're not skeptics, we have no *raison-d'être*. Unless there's somebody there to question assumptions, then no one's going to question them. And therefore, whenever I see scholarship being seduced into conformism of one kind or another, or accepting assumptions that are untested or unproven -- and of course, unproven *means* untested -- I have to oppose it.

00:52

[Intro music]

Will Robin 01:08

This season of Sound Expertise began with me asking a provocative question: can musicology change the world? Now that we've reached the end of our season, I should probably admit that it was a pretty overblown premise, one that I was mainly using as a hook to get you to listen to our show. Changing the world is probably too big and unwieldy a framing through which to understand the vital, specific, and intricate work of music scholarship. But as I said then, and I'll say now, I do think we have something important to contribute. This is Sound Expertise. I'm your host Will Robin. And this is the season two finale of a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research, which I believe does truly matter. And if we don't always change the world, we can at least change people's world views. That is certainly what my guest today has done. Anyone who has read the many, many, many words he has written over the years has been forced to fundamentally reconsider their views on music and history. He comes across as a polemicist, an intellectual combatant, but he is fundamentally a contextualizer, someone who believes deeply in the idea that music cannot be understood without grasping the social and political histories and ideologies that have accompanied it. My guest today is Richard Taruskin, professor emeritus at UC Berkeley, and author of a preposterously large corpus of writing, from his run of controversial New York Times articles in the 1990s, to his five-volume Oxford History of Western music, to his most recent book of essays, *Cursed Questions*, which came out last year. Professor Taruskin's work has been profoundly influential on my own, I probably would not have become a musicologist had I not encountered his writing in college, and on our broader field as well, I hope you enjoy our conversation. I certainly did.

03:04

[Intro music]

Will Robin 03:10

So, I'd love to start with a question that comes up quite often in your newest book, and also, I guess, in your research as a whole, which is the role of the musicologist or the historian. Can you talk a little bit about how you conceptualize the role of musicologist?

Richard Taruskin 03:28

The role? I take it, you mean, the public role, the social role?

Will Robin 03:33

Sure -- In the Oxford, you have a specific way of viewing what the historian does, for example.

Richard Taruskin 03:42

Well, all I can say is, the historian writes history. And if he's lucky, he makes a little history. I thought you were getting at the -- what used to be my double life,

Will Robin 03:59

I want to come back to your double life, let's stick with the single maybe the single life of how you conceptualize the historian who writes music history.

Richard Taruskin 04:08

Well, you know, my side to go would have been contextualization. And more or less, opposing the idea that art is to be dealt with only on "its own terms," because I don't believe anything has its own terms. We make the terms, and we make the terms within our own horizon, within our own context, something to be taken into account and compared with the horizon or the context of whatever it is that we're studying, but this is very basic hermeneutics. You can find what I'm saying to you now in the work of Gadamer. But maybe it's a measure of the backwardness of musicology, but it still sometimes seems to be a controversial position. The idea that everything must be contextualized. And therefore everything must be relativized, including everything that we say. And so I never presume to be telling the truth about anything, but I do hope to be always telling truth. That the article is the thing I want to object, not the concept of truth itself.

Will Robin 05:33

And can you unpack that a little bit more, where you see the difference between those two?

Richard Taruskin 05:37

Of course. What is true is something that is not yet shown to be false. Because ... and here I guess I'm following Karl Popper, who for me put it best, although he's not a fashionable name now, because unfortunately for him, Margaret Thatcher liked him. But I think he was quite right to say that the we can only know that things are false. We cannot know that things are true, it's the old Black Swan problem, right? You know that. And so, all we can claim is that what we have undertaken to enunciate as true has so far passed the tests that we've made for it, and has not yet shown to be false. Although it may well be shown to be false, but then we can't hold anything to be self-evidently true, or eternally true.

And, of course, we'll never say the last word about anything, which is nice, which means that we as a collective enterprise will never be out of business. I will always be revising, I did my share of revising, maybe I'll still have to do a little more. But I've lived long enough to be revised. [laughs] It's a never-ending process.

Will Robin 07:11

So in terms of developing the idea of the music historian as someone who fundamentally contextualizes, how did you actually come to that, as a view of the music historian or musicologist or historian? What was musicology like when you were in graduate school, for example, that was not necessarily that view of, of what the role was?

Richard Taruskin 07:41

Musicology was very much of an [unclear] thing when I was a student, you have no idea, you young people, you have no idea how narrowly the field was defined in the 1960s when I was introduced to it. That's why I take a somewhat jaded view of all the clamor for inclusion nowadays. I'm all for the inclusion of racial minorities and women, who are a majority after all. In my day, it was already a big battle to include a bit of Russian music in the curriculum. 20th century music was not studied, the jury was still out on 20th century music, you know, there were no settled views, and musicology fancied in those days, that it dealt only in settled views. So 20th century music was not widespread in musicology yet, European music was only Western European music. I was very strongly advised not to do a dissertation on Russian opera. But I did one anyway because it got me over to Russia, where I had relatives I wanted to meet. So I had an ulterior motive. And then I expected I would have a difficult career. But fortunately for me, things began to broaden. And not initially because of my efforts, but I was able to benefit from that. I think the first person who helped me that way, was Dr. Kerman who -- I've told this story, but maybe it's worth alluding to again, when I finished my dissertation, I had what I thought was going to be a white elephant -- it was on Russian Opera in the 1860s. A whole bunch of composers who people were just amazed when I told them in Russia, that I was studying them, because nobody was interested. And I'm not sure -- you might have heard of Alexander Dargomyzhsky, who wrote an opera called *The Stone Guest*, which Peter Schickele took off on -- "*The Stoned Guest*" -- you might remember -- It's Don Giovanni's story, his name is somewhat known, but Alexander Serov, who's ever heard of him? Cesar Cui, well, yeah people have heard of him because he's the fifth member of the five. But I was studying composers who were not considered to be interesting, even in Russia. And in this country, certainly not interesting. And so I thought my dissertation was going to go nowhere. But I wrote it anyway. And then one day, I read an ad, I believe it was in JAMS, the Journal of the American Musicological Society, that there was a new journal being launched in California called *19th Century Music*. And the ad said that it's time now to broaden musicology to include the music. I think they put it, music that people actually listened to. And so -- even though mine was not music anybody listened to, it was from the right century for this magazine. So I wrote a version of the first chapter of my dissertation that made it self-sufficient. And I sent it in with a prayer. And my prayer was answered, I got a letter saying, oh, thank you very much, we'll put it in the first issue. It came out in the second issue, but I wasn't counting. And that's how I hooked up with Joe Kerman. And that's how I hooked up with *Nineteenth Century Music*, which was my home for a while. I think I had four articles in the first 12 issues of *Nineteenth Century Music*, and one of them was split into two issues. And so I had

five in the first 12 issues of this journal, and that gave me a little toehold, a bit of a reputation and Russian music, therefore, was sort of in, which it hadn't been before.

Will Robin 12:03

And so to maybe jump back a little bit, since we're fleshing out this earlier history what was the trajectory towards musicology for you? How did you first realize that was a thing that one could study, I know you spent a long time at Columbia for undergrad and grad school.

Richard Taruskin 12:20

I was at Columbia 26 years, man and boy, undergrad, grad, and up to associate professor. Musicology was always sort of in my consciousness, history, I was always interested, I read a lot of the material that later was assigned to me, even before I got to college. I remember reading Lang's book -- Paul Henry Lang, he became my professor, because he was at Columbia. But he had a book called Music in Western Civilization, which I read when I was in high school. And if you want to know how musicology defined itself, in those days, that's the book to read. You'll see that it stops at the 20th century, and it never deals with anything to the east of Vienna, or to the west of the Azores, or to the north of Germany, or to the south of France, Italy, I should say, to the south of Naples. It was a very, very well-defined field, but nowadays, it would be considered intolerably narrow. That was a thing I was interested in already, I was also interested in making music. I played piano and cello, went to the High School of Music and Art in New York, which was a special school for people who were interested in music and or art, although it was not a professional training we got there. But I did study music theory and composition, and I was interested in composition as an undergraduate as well as music history, and when I started graduate school, I was doing both for a couple of years.

Will Robin 14:10

So you were composing at Columbia in the ... 70s, 60s?

Richard Taruskin 14:16

Yes, but you wouldn't know that I was at Columbia from the music I wrote.

Will Robin 14:19

Yeah, I was gonna say that's a very heated time to be composing there!

Richard Taruskin 14:23

I wrote electronic music, so that had a Columbia sound. But the undergraduate composing was not quite as doctrinaire as the graduate school composing. I had a wonderful composition teacher called Otto Luening,

Will Robin 14:40

Oh, of course,

Richard Taruskin 14:43

He lived to be 96. So he didn't die all that long ago, but he and I were close. He was a wonderful teacher of composition and very, very welcoming, no matter what your music was like. And I enjoyed

his classes so much I stayed with it. And he continued to be on the faculty when I was in graduate school, though I also came into contact with [unclear]. So anyhow, that was Yeah, I was very interested in composition for two years I did both. And then I discovered the viola da gamba and became fascinated with performing early music. And I came within a hair's breadth of making that my career because the New York Pro Musica -- I don't know if you remember what that was, but it...

Will Robin 15:31

I'm aware of it. Yeah.

Richard Taruskin 15:33

Well, that folded by the time you were, maybe by the time you were born, now that I think... But it was the one early music ensemble that could pay its members a living wage. It was the one real professional gig in early music in the 1950s. And they announced an opening for a string player. They didn't specify the instrument. So both viol players and lutenists applied and I auditioned, and they let it be known that it was down to the top viol player and the top lutenists, that was me and one of my best friends. And they kept us waiting a month while they made up their mind. And then they took her and I was dashed, and I went back to graduate school. I said, All right, I'm not going to be an early music player for a living. But then I was given the Columbia collegium musicum to run. That opened up whole new vistas for me, and I became a conductor by the seat of my pants. So that was a big deal for me, performing early music. And if I had been given the Pro Musica job, I would have taken it.

Will Robin 16:52

So there was an arc towards a life in performance that kind of closed off.

Richard Taruskin 16:56

I probably would not have finished my degree at Columbia, or at least finished it soon. And there's a PS to this: about 12 years later, when I had finished my degree at Columbia and had joined the faculty, I was actually the Director of Graduate Studies, which meant I was the one to whom you addressed an application, guess who applied? My friend the lutenist. Now out of a job, because the Pro Musica had disbanded, and there wasn't a professional organization to take its place. So I thought, ah, but for the grace of God,

Will Robin 17:34

karma...

Richard Taruskin 17:34

my apparent failure to get that job was my blessing in disguise.

Will Robin 17:43

What was the pivot at that point from early music to Russian music? Or was it a pivot, or was it both at the same time?

Richard Taruskin 17:52

If you have two minutes I'll tell you a story. I think you have the time.

Will Robin 17:59

I have the time.

Richard Taruskin 18:02

I had these two interests. I had my dissertation in Russian opera, I was interested in Russian opera, partly because I had relatives in Moscow, they'd send me a lot of records. So I knew lots of operas that nobody else knew at the time in America. So I had a strong interest in Russian music. And I also was interested in performing early music. And there was no point of contact between the two, I never expected there would be one, but there **was** one and that was quite momentous. When I decided I would work on Stravinsky, who was a Russian composer whose career took place, as you know, outside of Russia, so I wouldn't have to go to Russia to do the research. And besides Stravinsky was not kosher in Russia in those days. So -- and there was very little to do with Stravinsky for [unclear] actually, because he didn't write anything after the Firebird in Russia. But I was working on Stravinsky, and that meant I was working on modernism. And I wanted to get a handle on the theory of modernism. As you know, by now, the best way to learn something is to teach it. So I announced a seminar on modernism. And it was when I was reading up on -- Well, the early theorists of modernism. I remember particularly Ortega y Gasset, who wrote a book called *The Dehumanization of Art*. And there was a British English theorist named [unclear] who is less well known because he died a young man as a soldier in World War I. But his work was collected and published as a book called *Speculations*. And when I read Hume and Ortega in preparation for doing this course on modernism, I realized that I was actually reading the whole theory of early music historical performance. And that's when I hatched this idea that early music performance was really a modernist idea, not actually a historical idea. And I wrote what was a widely commented on paper about this. And now that idea is more or less well accepted, is part of the conventional wisdom that early music was such a hit, because it answered to modernist ideals rather than historical ones.

Will Robin 20:49

Was that your first actual scholarship on early music, was that intervention?

Richard Taruskin 20:56

I'm trying to remember. Well, I had done other things, editing a lot of music, if you will go back to... there was something called the Hewitt catalog of dissertations. And later on, it became the Adkins catalog, the American Musicological Society put this out. You'd announce a dissertation topic, and I originally announced the topic, *The Masses of Heinrich Isaac*. Because that was what you studied in musicology in those days, so many dissertations were about Kleinmeister... he wasn't a Kleinmeister, Isaac, but I was only taking a portion of his music to study, and we were talking about this earlier, the idea of internalist or contextualized study. What you mostly did was you would transcribe a whole lot of music, and you would do what was called style criticism, you would place it within the history of evolving style without any attention paid to any external factor, the idea being that art evolves according to its own rules. That, of course, is what autonomous means. And so that was the approach you took, and that was the message we got. When that started to get questioned then musicology began to change.

Will Robin 22:31

So how did you actually come to the realization then around context, if you started out with this dissertation that was more in the traditionalist mode. I spoke to Susan McClary for the podcast a few months ago, and she described a very similar arc of doing what started as a Kleinmeister project and became something very different.

Richard Taruskin 22:52

Well, it didn't hit me as a blinding revelation or anything. But when I was doing my work on Russian opera, I was working a great deal with questions about censorship, which was, of course, the wider world impinging the course of art. And I was also talking about the rise of institutions that would support the practice of what we now call Western art music in Russia. It was something that was only first imported into Russia in the 18th century. And Russians only could be trained in it starting in the 1860s, exactly the time when I was working on. So the idea that institutions had an effect on art was hard to avoid. I spent a year in Soviet Russia as an exchange, where I saw the interaction of art and politics in a much more overt way than one saw it in America. But when I came back to America, I saw that there was a tremendous amount of interaction here too, although it was not as overt. And I realized, I think I was maybe the first musicologist to talk about the Cold War as a period in human history. Because I saw that very clearly when I came back from Russia that we also had pressures on us to conform. It wasn't applied directly by the government, although in some ways it was. When I was in graduate school, the Vietnam War was on. And there are a lot of people who stayed in graduate school because the Vietnam War was on, as you might know, and the man who was in charge of the Selective Service, that is the draft, in those days was a man named general Hershey, and I remember an interview with him on television, where he said that the Selective Service was one of the things that had an impact on -- an indirect impact on society in a way that was comparable to what might be called social engineering. And he said, people choose, for example, fields of study, depending on what will gain them recognition of being an essential field, you know, that could be offered in lieu of military service. He said, so if you're doing something in nuclear physics, of course, we will view that as essential, whereas if you're studying something like music, and I thought Oh, boy, thank you very much. But I realized, yeah, there are pressures on us, there are pressures on us. And there was pressure on us, I think, the reason why there was this -- what you now, obviously, have in your mind as a stereotype of university music of that period, you were asking about it before, being very much dominated by twelve-tone composition or other forms of serial organization. And it was a sort of mandatory thing in universities in those days, that was also a cold war idea, that we proved our freedom, our creative freedom by conforming to this stereotype. Obviously, that's a paradox, obviously, that covert value or covert pressure, I began to be aware of these things. And I began to see that. And in the 1970s, Rose Subotnik began publicizing the work of Adorno. Somebody who I have mostly opposed in my own work, because I think his work was doctrinaire and covertly snobbish. Very elitist, although he pretended to be otherwise. So although I don't end up agreeing with him, people say about Adorno, well, at least he asked the right questions. When people say that I always say, Have you ever seen his answers? [Will Robin laughs] He did ask those questions. And we began thinking about those questions partly because Rose was bringing them to our attention. So yes, I was living through a time of ferment. A time of ferment that came after my official studies were over. And I was glad to benefit from them.

Will Robin 28:01

The idea which I feel like we've been talking about basically the whole time, of being able to understand and pull out these underlying ideologies from purported ideas of autonomy or universality in music...

Richard Taruskin 28:24

That's already an ideology!

Will Robin 28:28

[laughs] yeah, exactly. Of course. To a certain degree that came out of your... some of the revelations you had about the relationship between how Russian music was treated in the context of the 19th century. Can you talk a little bit about how you became more aware of abstract instrumental music being not necessarily the main thing, but a result of a German nationalist, romantic project? Have I worded that question poorly enough?

Richard Taruskin 28:58

That didn't come out of my dissertation, which was about opera.

Will Robin 29:05

But the idea of Russia as a periphery to a more central tradition came out of your dissertation too, right?

Richard Taruskin 29:14

I suppose. What I actually ended up doing was opposing this idea that there was some kind of a mystical essence called "Russianness" that found an outlet 19th century instrumental music, in the composing itself. It was very important to the Russians to posit such a thing because it gave them a reason to be taken seriously, outside of Russia, but the very fact that it was an aspect of their exporting their music that made me -- originally gave me a kind of jaundiced view of this idea of the natural essence. And, of course, all essentialism. Something that I've made a profession of opposing. Nationalism is something that I think Jews are, tend to be rather well aware of, because nationalism is never good for the Jews. Even when they became nationalist, they called it Zionism. But that only brought more problems, I think, to their history. So nationalism, was something that was kind of suspect, in that you might say, I have something in common with Marxists, for whom nationalism is one of the basic false consciousnesses. I gradually became accustomed to questioning every assumption. I began to see that as basically what scholars do, and then to equate the scholarly mental frame with skepticism. And I've argued this quite passionately over the years, because it seems to me that if we're not skeptics, we're nothing. If we're not skeptics, we have no *raison-d'être*. Unless there's somebody there to question assumptions, then no one's going to question them. And therefore, whenever I see scholarship being seduced into conformism of one kind or another, or accepting assumptions that are untested or unproven -- and of course, unproven *means* untested -- I have to oppose it. Very often, the assumptions that are untested are very attractive politically. And that's one of the ways in which scholarship, I think, can be seduced into doing something which is essentially unscholarly. If you have a desirable political end in mind, you will skew your scholarship to produce a good result. That's a hard one to resist. And therefore, I feel it's really important to resist. And that's why I made a few somewhat skeptical remarks about all of the pressure for inclusion. That is our shibboleth now in musicology --

well, in the humanities, and I therefore find it important to bring up the question of what is sacrificed or what is lost when you gain -- whatever it is.

Will Robin 32:34

The idea of skepticism, is there a point in your intellectual trajectory, where that snapped into place for you? Is that something that goes back to high school and just your own perspective as an intellectual, not just a musicologist, because... I spent a lot of time reading a lot of your work in the last few weeks, having read pretty much all of it already. Anyway, you know, it's obviously probably the singular through line, as you've just said, too.

Richard Taruskin 33:07

By the time I was writing the stuff you were reading, I had come to that position. I was a rather obedient student, I have to say, I look up to my people, they were worth looking up to, they were very considerable people, although they are not people who are now giving a whole lot of ... even remembered very well, I don't think anybody reads P H Lang anymore. Although his book is still in print, I don't think that he's considered to be an important person in the history of musicology anymore, but he was certainly important then, and I did not question him while he was my teacher, and he was very helpful to me, as a matter of fact, you know, he was an octopus. He had tentacles everywhere. He was the music critic for the New York Herald Tribune. He was the editor of the Musical Quarterly. He was the president of the International Musicological Society. And, well, my very first publication was a seminar paper I wrote for him on Dargomyzhsky, as a matter of fact, that's what got me into studying it. But I gave it in his seminar and when you were in Lang's seminar, you had a little pipeline to the Musical Quarterly. And it was published there in 1970, when I was 25 years old. Please don't read it [laughs]. But that was my first publication. It was because of Lang. And so you know, I felt... and because he liked my work, I felt special and I was not inclined to question. The questioning came later and came about in the course of actual work. Actual independent work, you know, so it was something that was endogenous to my activity as a musicologist. And therefore, I think it had a certain urgency and a certain genuineness, that it wouldn't had I been taught it as people are now taught, as I teach, I teach more like what I am now obviously than what Lang was like. And if they're good little boys and girls they'll be nice little skeptics. Sometimes I was brought up short toward the end of my teaching career at Berkeley, when I would say things like, don't take things on face, don't follow authority, and I would see everybody copying down in their notebooks -- don't follow authority. [laughs] So I would joke about it with the class, I didn't want them to take me as an authority, because that's completely against what I preach. And so I have... if you know, from reading me, if you're going to say things that are going to be provocative, controversial, unpopular, you have to say them in a humorous way. We got to keep them laughing. So I try to keep my classes laughing, too, as I was indoctrinating them.

Will Robin 36:24

The way that you... I don't know, if it's find yourself in these controversies or ignite these controversies, whether it's the Shostakovich thing or the Klinghoffer thing or the early music authenticity thing...

Richard Taruskin 36:41

I don't think I ignited any of those things. Klinghoffer was there before I said boo about it. The Shostakovich stuff came about because of a set of falsified memoirs, which was there before I got into

it. No, I'm a bit of a whistleblower. And, for this you don't get popularity. But I'm undeterred. I think that's an important thing. I think that is actually the role of -- you asked me what's my role as a musicologist? There, you got it. To be a contrarian, my role is to be a skeptic, my role is to not let anything pass unexamined. And, you know, I get, isn't it amazing, that thing you refer to, Klinghoffer? You know, that was 2001. That's 20 years ago, I wrote that piece, in which I denied the claim that an opera is evenhanded in its treatment of the context of Israelis and Palestinians. And there isn't a piece that's written about Klinghoffer now, that doesn't cite usually, in some unfavorable context, that piece of mine, which means that that piece is very effective to get under people's skin. And I think it's because I was correct. You don't have a lasting effect, if you're easily laughed off.

Will Robin 38:17

Are there interventions that you regret, in some way, of feeling like you got under someone's skin? But actually, you ...?

Richard Taruskin 38:29

Why would I regret it?

Will Robin 38:31

Not the Klinghoffer in particular, but if there are other things in the past, controversies that you involved yourself in, you've come to realize maybe this was actually -- I had it wrong.

Richard Taruskin 38:41

The important controversies I still believe I had it right. The one about what is the source of the philosophy of early music performance, historical performance practice? I think I got that one right. I think I had ... the Klinghoffer thing I had, right. The one about Shostakovich and Solomon Volkov Testimony, I think I had right. I don't know. There were things I had wrong, but they were things that are not going to exercise the world. I had a ... let me think. I proposed the wrong attribution for an anonymous 15th century mass. [Will laughs] Le grand Plaisir. I'll never live it down.

Will Robin 39:35

[laughs] It'll be on your gravestone.

Richard Taruskin 39:38

Another controversy that has lived is the one that I had with Alan Forte, about the efficacy of what he called pitch class set analysis, which I said was not a good method of analysis because it didn't prove anything. I notice that that method is no longer taught, as part of every music theory program, you know, even at Yale, even at his own institution. So I think I got the big ones right.

Will Robin 40:15

So you lay out a point in, I think it's in the Ox, or might it might be in...

Richard Taruskin 40:21

Is that what you call it? So do I.

Will Robin 40:24

Only because that's what you call it, or it might be in the "Nicht blutblefleckt" essay, which is reprinted in your new book, saying that espousing positions in a debate is not the role of the historian but of the critic. And so when do you put the critic hat on versus the historian hat on? How do you balance the New York Times versus the Musical Quarterly...

Richard Taruskin 40:49

Well, a historian is more of a reporter. When I'm dealing with controversies as a historian, I say, I give the full range of opinions, including my own sometimes, and people who read the footnotes in the Ox have discovered this, that occasionally, when I say and one critic said, blah, blah, blah. And if you go back to the end notes, you'll find that that critic was me. [Robin laughs] But I'm not speaking on behalf of that position. But I made a claim in the introduction to the Ox that those who don't know my position on things like the memoirs of Shostakovich won't find out from reading the Ox. They have to know it from elsewhere. And people have pooh poohed this claim of mine saying, Oh, of course, we know. But that's because they already knew, you'd have to find somebody who never read anything else I wrote to test this on. I don't know any people like that. [Laughs]

Will Robin 41:44

People don't start with generally the many 1000s of pages, volumes, before reading your shorter stuff. So ...

Richard Taruskin 42:06

A lot of people who read the Ox have already read the Times, and so on, so they know some of my actual opinions, but I try not to write in light of my opinions. I also try not to write in terms of what I like or dislike, although this is also something that people don't believe. They think they can tell what I like and what I don't like, but my accusers are always wrong about that,

Will Robin 42:34

Is there an example of of that?

Richard Taruskin 42:38

Everybody thinks I hate Schoenberg. Whereas I love a lot of Schoenberg's music. I love Pierrot Lunaire. And that Piano Suite op. 25, the Gurrelieder... there are also pieces of Schoenberg's I don't like so much, but I'm not prejudiced against twelve-tone music. People think I am because I do not give it a privilege in my account, the way it has always given a privilege on previous accounts. And so when they don't see the privilege, they think that I'm out trying to negate the importance of the music. Certainly not. Anything that gets a whole chapter in the Ox, obviously, I think it's important.

Will Robin 43:31

One of the things that I was trying to think about, especially, you know, thinking about your work versus Susan McClary's, and I read, I don't remember what essay of yours where you review her career, which was really fascinating, too.

Richard Taruskin 43:45

We did it almost in successive issues of Music and Letters; she reviewed the Ox, and then I wrote that piece on her.

Will Robin 43:53

I didn't realize that, I'll have to look for her review. But if you could talk a little bit about the role of musical analysis in how you conceptualize the role of the historian in something like the Ox. So, given that you are cautious of the idea that interpreters can come up with specific meanings of artworks via analyzing them, which is one of your I think beefs with the so called "New Musicology." How do you conceptualize...

Richard Taruskin 44:20

No, I don't deny that at all. I think that you know, whenever you -- if you'd ever propose to me, as you seem to be doing now, a choice between this and that. I always say -- no no no no, both and, both and, never... And that's how you end up writing 4000-page books. [Will laughs] Because you have everything. There's a lot of analysis in the Ox.

Will Robin 44:48

Oh, I know. Yeah.

Richard Taruskin 44:50

And people often say that I'm against analysis, because I have been against certain dogmatic methods of analysis. The Fortian one. Also I have some skepticism about the Schenkerian methods, although I benefited from them when I was an undergraduate, I studied Schenker analysis without it being called Schenker analysis. It was just called -- This is music. This is the way music works. And I've benefited from it in a way that I don't see many people talking about, when you study the Schenker method, and you are looking at a piece in a rather global way, and then the whole piece can be viewed as a single chord progression, you do learn to listen to the piece in a long-range way, it's terrific ear training for learning how harmony determines form. And then later on, when I taught music history, I began to conceptualize the whole period, from 1680 to 1880, as the period when harmony directed form, or form was created by harmony. And that's an insight you get from Schenker. And of course, that period in music history, from the late 17th century to the late 19th century, is a period where his analysis works. And therefore he thought it was the period when music was good. And anything earlier and anything later was already falling away from the ideal. I don't accept that idea that it's better because it works this way. But I do accept that this is how that music works, and that Schenker is a very good way of finding out that it works that way.

Will Robin 46:36

How have you looked to younger scholars, or even just what's been happening in the field for the last 10 or 20 years? What do you see as important currents going on right now? What do you see as ... Do you see your own legacy of skeptics going off and doing their own skeptical thing?

Richard Taruskin 46:57

Well, I do feel I have a legacy. Because I supervised a lot of dissertations. One time, the Chair of the department called me over in the hall and said -- Hey, I got something to show you. And took me into

his office. And he's been doing stats. And it turned out that I had the most dissertations in the history of our department. Partly because I always taught that introductory course where we did nothing but to luxuriate, as I put it in the book that you read, these "accursed questions" of the discipline. And so students who had enjoyed that class often asked me to then work with them on their dissertations. So we ended up with 40, 40 Doktorinder, which in the humanities is a big, big number. And now when I go to the AMS, I never give a paper myself, because I always wanted to be free to go around and see where my kids are working or acting on, they're also always doing something conspicuous. And many of them... we had a very good bunch of grad students at Berkeley. And it's still I think, a good brand. And so these ... our students are now doing well in the profession. And many of them are doing the kind of thing that I gave them a nudge towards doing, which is contextualization. The thing I see happening in musicology that is most heartening to me, is convergence between musicology and ethnomusicology, it used to be that you would define the difference between the two or the un-prefixed, as I like to say, because what else are you going to call it? The un-prefixed and the ethno is that the ethno sees things in a social setting. And the un-prefixed musicology sees things without it, as autonomous artwork. That no longer is the case. And so we're now using methods which were formerly associated with ethnomusicology to contextualize music. But that's the direction I see musicology going, towards the anthropological, and that's good, because I like it more integrated. Again, it's a both and -- do you look at music internally or externally? No, no, you look at it both ways. I was always telling my students anything you do as a musicologist, ought to require a musicologist to do it. In other words, don't just look at the social side of things; see if you can relate that to the way the music actually works internally. And if you can actually use music analysis to prove a point about society, well, that's terrific -- it means that you are doing some kind of integrated work.

Will Robin 49:57

We've talked briefly about the more public work that you've done, writing for The New York Times, New Republic, other places. But the idea in 2021, that writing several thousand words for a major newspaper about early music and authenticity is going to ignite some big cultural battle seems very distant in the past - how do you conceptualize the relevancy of musicology outside of the discipline now?

Richard Taruskin 50:26

It's true that we don't have the platform now, I got in at the tail end of it. I always got into the tail end of things. But when I started -- yeah, it's true, when I started at the Times, first of all, there was that wonderful, wonderful editor, Jim Oestreich. There's nobody like him now, at the Times, alas. I've written a couple of things after Strider, and it isn't the same. Also, you don't have much space, when I started writing ... the longest piece I ever wrote for the Times, I think it was about 3,500 words. And now I think if you get 2,000, you're pushing it.

Will Robin 51:09

Yeah. 1,500 is generally the...

Richard Taruskin 51:12

1,500, that's more or less... 1,750 is exactly half of 3,500. So you're down to a Haiku length.. And now, I think the limit on the amount of technical discussion you can do is much more limited, I notice now that no name is ever dropped without an identification, so, the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven.

[Laughs] You have to say that sort of thing now. So it's harder, but no, I still think it's worth doing. Whether I'm going to... whether anybody is going to reignite big cultural controversies by writing about classical music in the Times. I don't say that's impossible. It wasn't the usual thing, even when I did it. I wrote a few pieces early for the Times that received so much bad mail, that they filled the whole Letters column. They don't even have one anymore, it's so knee-jerk, but they had one back in the 1990s, when I started writing for the Times. And four times, something I wrote filled up their letter column of letters, the whole mailbag. They loved that at the time, obviously, because controversy is what sells papers. And the idea that a classical piece could be that controversial was great for them. And for me, I don't know that that would happen now. But we wouldn't be able to test it because they don't have letters anymore. And that's another measure, I think, of the lessened cultural clout that writing for print media has. Of course, now there are blogs. And there are people who exert a good deal of influence through their blogs, or podcasts. Like Will Robin. [Will laughs] I've already paid you a little tribute. Occasionally, when people have asked me, is there anybody doing what you used to do?

Will Robin 53:21

Well, I appreciate that, that's very generous.

Richard Taruskin 53:23

You still write for the Times, quite regularly. It's a little different, now. I actually teased you about this, haven't I? That you're not writing anything that's going to make anybody angry.

Will Robin 53:36

Yes, it's true. But we're also different people. So...

Richard Taruskin 53:39

I know. But it's when you make them angry, that you've accomplished something. [Will laughs] I always felt that it was an important thing that I did. For example, when I wrote about the Death of Klinghoffer and made so many people so angry. I thought I'd done a -- well, should I say I'd done a mitzvah, you know, I'd done a good deed, because I got people really exercised about a serious work of art, a work of art that I don't think of as that good, but it was a serious work of art. And the idea that writing about classical music makes people care so much, it means you're making them care about classical music.

Will Robin 54:24

Hmm, that's a good point. Yeah.

Richard Taruskin 54:25

And that's an important thing. The other time I made people that angry was when I wrote a piece about Prokofiev. And I made ... I put the emphasis on his Stalinist piece. I said - let's not have those pieces anymore in concert halls. And then I was of course, portrayed as a censor. And I ... both in that case, and in the case of Klinghoffer, I said, you know, censorship is one thing, discretion is another thing. You can stigmatize discretion as self-censorship, if you like. But in that case, any act of kindness or any act of courtesy is up for derision from any cause, you know. And it seems to me that one can honor the idea that certain things there should be forbearance. Certain things ought not to be performed because

-- out of respect for victims, and that certainly goes for Stalin, and that certainly goes for victims like Klinghoffer.

Will Robin 55:34

I think that's a great place to leave it. Thank you so much. This was really wonderful. I appreciate you taking the time to chat with me.

Richard Taruskin 55:40

It was a pleasure for me as well, so thanks.

Will Robin 55:41

So that's a wrap on season two. I think it was pretty awesome. Many, many thanks to Richard Taruskin, professor emeritus at UC Berkeley, for that incredible conversation. And I'm so, so, so grateful to all our guests over the past few months for providing rich and candid insights into their scholarship and thinking. You can check out more of Professor Taruskin's work up on our website, soundexpertise.org. A few big thank yous to people without whom this season wouldn't have happened. First up, my incredible producer D Edward Davis, whose keen ear makes this podcast sound so good every week, from his theme music to his detailed audio engineering. Last week, we finally got to hang out in person for the very first time since Sound Expertise started. We ate pizza, and it was awesome. Check out more of his work on Soundcloud at [warm silence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warm-silence). Second is musicologist Andrew Dell'Antonio, who was not only a wonderful guest this season, check out his episode with Sarah Haefeli on teaching music history, but has been doing amazing work volunteering his time to prepare written transcripts for all our episodes to make them more accessible. Thank you, Andrew. Many thanks to Julia Hurst whose awesome logo gives our show an extra visual pop. And huge thanks to the Society for American Music, which just awarded Sound Expertise its first grant a few weeks ago: we received a Sight and Sound Subvention, which will help defer some of our production costs for this past season. I'm eternally grateful to my wife Emily, for her support, and to my almost one year old son Ira, for continuing to be a pretty good napper and being, of course, the cutest baby in the world. Finally, an extra extra extra big round of thanks to our amazing community of listeners. We're so grateful that hundreds of people tune in to hear Sound Expertise each week from around the world. And an extra special shout out to our listeners from the world of music scholarship, who remain our most active fans. So what about the future of Sound Expertise now that season two is a wrap? First up, stay tuned for a bonus episode that will air on a to-be-determined Tuesday coming up soon. A call-in show that Eddie and I put together about how music scholars have experienced the challenges of the pandemic year. We may drop some occasional bonus episodes later this year as well. And yes, stay tuned for season three at some point in 2022. I don't know exactly when, but I do know that we'll have some awesome guests and topics, probably some cool new formats, and a lot more. Thanks for listening and see you then.

55:41

[Outro music]