

Sound Expertise Season 3:10 –

Bach Scandals, Jug Bands, and Vexations with Joshua Rifkin

Transcribed by Andrew Dell'Antonio

Joshua Rifkin 00:00

Before I'm finished, Bob cuts me off. I've barely got to the parts — to the meat of the thing. Bob just says — that's it! And he goes, and he reads his response, which is heavily ad hominem, delivered in a very sarcastic tone, and basically portraying me as a fake or an idiot.

[music] 00:21

Will Robin 00:41

So if you've listened to the show for a while, you've probably gotten the sense that there are two kinds of episodes. There are the very specific ones, where I talk to someone about their book or a journal article and a specific thing they research. And then there are the broader ones, that I usually reserve for more senior scholars, where we dig into their lives more fully, the overarching ideas they put forward, and the impact their work has made. And today's episode is — well, really just the best possible version of that second approach. You're going to be hearing about one of the most fascinating lives that one can lead as a music scholar. I'm Will Robin, this is Sound Expertise, and my guest today is Joshua Rifkin. Professor Rifkin is particularly well known for a landmark discovery he made back in the 1980s, about Bach's vocal music. But if you're not a musicologist, or Baroque aficionado, you've almost certainly still heard — or heard about — some aspect of his work. Whether arranging Judy Collins, playing an iconic marathon of Eric Satie's Vexations, or shepherding the Ragtime revival. This might be our longest episode to date, even though I only went into it with a few questions. The stories you'll hear are extraordinary. And I hope that you will nerd out to them as much as I have. So now let's listen to Joshua Rifkin on his life and work, on Sound Expertise.

02:12

[music]

Will Robin 02:18

So I wanted to start by talking a little bit about your early career. When I was looking at the really fascinating trajectory you had, and I just want to lay out a few data points for myself and for you, and for the listeners. So in 1967, you did the arrangement for Judy Collins's very famous recording of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now." In 1969, and maybe 1968, as well, as far as I can tell, you spent a large swath of time in Florence researching the Medici Codex, a 16th century set of motets. And in 1970, as far as I can tell, and you can correct me on dates, you recorded an album of music by Scott Joplin, that singlehandedly launched the Ragtime revival. So, before you clarify, let me also just say, I'm interested in how all of these things fit together for you as a scholar, but now feel free to correct me as well.

Joshua Rifkin 03:19

Well, the first... the only thing I'd say there is that in 1969, I was only about three days in the library in Florence. It was a short visit. But I worked on that project much longer before and much longer afterwards.

Will Robin 03:36

Okay, well, that's good to know as well. So tell me about what it was like to be a scholar and musician working on those seemingly very different things at the same time.

Joshua Rifkin 03:48

To be quite honest, it didn't seem anything unusual at all, because I had been playing these different fields for some time already before that. When I was a composition student at Julliard earlier in the 60s, I also was a member of the Even Dozen Jug Band with whom I made my first recording. So similarly, when I was entering graduate school and officially doing musicological study, I also did the Baroque Beatles Book and also did my first recording with Judy Collins. So ... and at the same time, I was performing other things, and that led also to Joplin, and led to later things about which I'm sure we'll talk about at some point. So it always seemed very natural to me. I've often been asked, what do I see as the common links, let's say between this, that and the other, and frankly, I'm hard put to come up with any answer beyond — I did that, but I can say that I never wanted to, in a sense, break down barriers or blend different things. I think I respect the barriers that different disciplines, different activities have. But I never saw why one couldn't just jump over them, and why they should be barriers in a sense of keeping you out, rather than defining places where you are.

Will Robin 05:21

That's very interesting. Yeah. So I want to tease out each of those strands a little bit, maybe starting with the Medici Codex and early music, what brought you to early music studies, what drove you to that period, and that kind of interest in particular?

Joshua Rifkin 05:38

Well, I got interested in Bach quite early on, maybe in my early teens — in other words, beyond the Bach that I played as a piano student, etc. And I also then was fascinated by whatever early music I came across. I started, as most of us did, buying LPs of the stuff, and getting LPs of polyphony and LPS of 17th century music and other Baroque music. And I was very, very drawn to it. Again, to give you an example of how there was no real conflict, I do remember that when I was 17, which would be 1971. I was in Darmstadt, the vacation courses for new music, the center of European avant-garde music.

Will Robin 06:35

Wait — that couldn't have been 1971, right?

Joshua Rifkin 06:39

61 — did I say 71? I was 17, but it was 1961, and I was in Stockhausen's composition class. And at the same time, I was visiting the local music shop and taking out a subscription to the Neue Bach Ausgabe, the new complete edition of Bach's works. So one played, as I say, both sides of the fence they were in a certain way, adjacent. Early Music fascinated me just with the sound of it, and the

different-ness of it, and the distant-ness of it. And as someone also concerned with performance, I was fascinated with the fact that it wasn't performed, or didn't seem to be quite the same way, as the Brahms and Beethoven and Mozart with which I'd grown up and which I also loved, and which I also played, etc. But these were different questions, different challenges. So I think all of that was somehow coexisting from the start. I got interested in the research end of it ... again, sort of gradually, but one thing I remember making a great impression on me was reading liner notes to Bach cantatas by Alfred Dürr, who was really the great Bach scholar of that era, and who was the prime mover in what was then the new chronology of Bach's works. This was research done in the 1950s that really, totally upended everything we knew about when Bach composed his music. And I read about this and I was thinking — How is this done? How's this possible? And already when I was 16, I was reading things that had to do with this. So that fascinated me. Then, a little bit later, when I was graduating Juilliard, and I had to face graduate school or the Vietnam War. I obviously opted for graduate school, though I really wasn't too keen on it, in part because I wanted to continue studying composition, but there was no place in the US where I really felt I would be at home. As I say, I was very European in my orientation. And although I was very aware of related developments, let's say with Milton Babbitt and others, that wasn't quite my slant. Now, I decided for that reason to do musicological studies. Ironically, I eventually wound up at Princeton and did a lot of studying with Milton Babbitt. But I came there through a different door. And I went to New York University where I was given a graduate assistantship to assist Gustave Reese, a very famous scholar of Medieval and Renaissance music. And in part, I was thinking, Well, I'm working with Reese. I escort him home after his classes, we talk etc. I think — I'd be a fool not to take advantage of this and start looking more into Josquin and Jean Mouton and other composers of the period. And so that gets me going into that, and that ultimately yes leads me to the Medici Codex and to many other things. Since you mentioned Richard Taruskin, I should also point out that Richard and I knew each other from high school. And one of the things I was led to was to start — a little bit after the Joplin, early 70s, to record early music, and Richard was in the ensemble with which I was doing this, I may be anticipating a question you were going to ask; but you see, these various strands do somehow come together in those ways. It was, I'll just say summarily, a very open and exciting time in New York City at the time, there was new music, there was ferment, there was the opening to pop and rock. There was early music ferment, and many of us just were caught up in this and felt — this is the kind of thing we've been looking for, or the kinds of things.

Will Robin 10:48

Yeah, that's fascinating. I want to return a little bit later to Bach and to Josquin. But let's talk a little bit about that pop side of things. You mentioned the Baroque Beatles project and working with Collins, and you mentioned the jug band, how did all of that come into being? The Baroque Beatles thing, which I've been listening to a lot lately, is such a particular snapshot of its time.

Joshua Rifkin 11:15

You never — as we've learned, you never do it all on your own, by yourself. For all that you might think that that's what you're doing. And really much of it comes down to this good luck of being in that place in that time. I had been first of all introduced to early jazz through my older brother when I was still a sub-teen. And so was very interested in that music. On the piano, I did lots of Jelly Roll Morton and things like that. So that was part of it. And I did listen to pop but I wasn't close to it until the Beatles came. Although let me step back, because between the early jazz and the Beatles coming, there was a

folkie period. And I was a New York, Washington Square, Greenwich Village folkie. And it was through that, that — and this just shows you how crazy things can be. I'm given a phone call one afternoon to ask if I could come out to Brooklyn, and take the place of a guitarist who had fallen ill in a bluegrass concert that very night. And I go out and I play and through a long series of accidents, which I needn't bore you with, that led to the formation of the Even Dozen Jug Band. This is in the summer of 1963. Again, by the way, the same summer in which I was, on another night, playing the first performance of Satie's Vexations in a concert.

Will Robin 12:45

Oh, my God, I forgot you were in Vexations.

Joshua Rifkin 12:49

I was. And again, I cite this less as something about me, per se, then about the possibilities that were there. So the jug band is formed, we get a recording contract with Elektra Records,

Will Robin 13:07

was Dave Van Ronk involved in that, or no?

Joshua Rifkin 13:10

Not directly. Now, I knew Dave van Ronk. I knew Dave actually... I'd known Dave even before I was in the folk scene, because he was somewhat connected with the early jazz scene as well.

Will Robin 13:23

I read his memoir recently, so...

Joshua Rifkin 13:24

... at least by name, and in fact, I first heard of Dave as a very fearsome character, and then I came to meet him, and he was fearsome but lovable at the same time, I adored Dave Van Ronk. And he was yes, related to these scenes, but he was not part of my jug band. But by the end of the summer, there were three jug bands around — it was a brief fad for jug bands. And his band, The Hudson Dusters was one of the three — the other one being Jim Kweskin's jug band up in Cambridge, Massachusetts — where actually now I live, but that brought me to the record company. And not long after that, the record company started a classical division called Nonesuch Records, not exactly unknown. And once again, the head of the company, Jac Holzman, had his eye on me as a Juilliard product, for when Nonesuch gets going. So I'm involved with them, in 1965, the Baroque Beatles book comes up and that album is co-produced by Paul Rothschild who produced the Even Dozen Jug band, and Mark Abramson, who is Judy's producer. And so Judy comes to some of the editing sessions, because I think she was romantically involved with Mark at the time as well. So we talk, I know her. This is, let's say, the autumn of 1965. And in the spring of 1966, I get a call — come down, talk with Jac Holzman, with Mark Abramson, and Judy, would I be interested in arranging her next album, which was to be *In My Life*, which we recorded in London in the summer of 66. And so naturally, I said, I've never arranged before — of course, I'll do it. So that's what led to that connection. And those things, which, as I say, come out of this accidental call to play substitute guitarist really set the course for all of these other things that happened.

Will Robin 15:48

Okay, I have to ask — I forgot about Vexations. I'm working on a book on minimalist music, and we actually reprint Harold Schoenberg's review of that performance I remember now that you are mentioned. So what was that experience like? So this is John Cage, doing the first staging of the full 20 plus hours Eric Satie Vexations...

Joshua Rifkin 16:09

No, I think 18 hours and 40 minutes — well again, you know, it was heady. It was magical. It was wonderful. I I knew John Cage — I was, as I say on the avant-garde scene in New York. I was already connected, at least marginally connected with Fluxus, I did performances with them. In any event, I was invited to be one of the pianists by the composer Philip Corner, who was part of the Fluxus scene and whom I knew fairly well, he was older than I, but we were friendly already at the time. And to reduce what is, of course, a long story — with a piece like that it's gonna be a long story. I had to miss the rehearsal, there was a rehearsal where we all got the music and we talked about the organization etc. And you may or may not know that John Cage had worked out a masterful organization for having this piece played by a relay team of pianists, and I was one of the 10 pianists on the relay team. But because I missed the rehearsal, I had to be bumped from the relay team. Nevertheless, at the end of every go through of 10 pianists, they had a spot for a mystery guest artist, so it was in the program. [Will laughs] And I became a mystery guest artist and I came ... I still hadn't had the music. But I came to the Pocket Theatre down on the Bowery where the performance was taking place, maybe at about 8-8:30, not long after it had begun. And we were all sort of ... those who weren't playing were congregating in the basement. And Chinese food was brought in and we were eating and the music was handed out. I mean, most people had it, but I was given the music, which was a negative Photostat, very, very dim, greyed and fuzzy, of Satie's manuscript. And I sat with that, looking at it and listening — and we could hear the music coming from upstairs, and just trying to absorb the thing like that. So by the time I got out to play, I had never played it. But I had the music fixed in my head and had worked out — it's not technically that difficult. And then in fact, I played my turn. And in fact, as you may know, you first — you waited your turn, you sat there preparing for what was called an interior immobility. That was actually a mis-transcription by John of the French, it was actually an "immobilité serieuse," I think, serious immobility, but ... and then I played, and then after playing, you counted the run throughs of the pianist who had succeeded you, and that's how they kept tabs of everything. So I did that. And then I was supposed to come back maybe...

Will Robin 18:20

So how long did you play for in your turn?

Joshua Rifkin 19:11

It was split up like this. This was the fantastic organization that John had. The piece falls into four units, as you probably know, all repeating the same bass. John worked it out that you played it twenty second increments, so each time was one minute and 20 seconds. And if you play that 15 times, that occupied 20 minutes. So you sat preparing yourself through for 20 minutes, you played 15 times 20 minutes, and then you sat and you marked the performance 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... for 20 minutes. So I did that at about two in the morning. Supposed to come back at about seven in the morning. I went up my then-girlfriend's

house. I fell asleep. I didn't wake up. I didn't come back for the performance... The Times had to send one of its... One of the Times' critics, Alan Kline, wound up playing my slot in the thing.

Will Robin 20:14

So you're the one that ...

Joshua Rifkin 20:17

The interesting thing is that in fact, when I woke up the next morning, the piece was still playing in my head. It was absolutely graven into my consciousness. And I even said, I've got to get rid of this. And I said, I'm just going to go through another piece of music in my mind. And without thinking, I picked Brahms' Second Symphony. So I start running through the Brahms Second Symphony. Well, as you may know, there is a spot about 30 seconds in with this silence, the music stops dead and then silence. And at that point, the damn Satie was still playing. [Will laughs] Now, there is a follow up story that I'm not going to tell now, but I hope you'll come back to it. It'll take us to 1969. And I hope as I say that you'll come back to it because it does connect to these things. And there are still more follow ups with Satie interestingly enough. But — we're in the 60s and I don't want to get you too off topic.

Will Robin 21:22

I want to zero in a little bit — we've been talking a lot about performance — on your musicological work. So what did your musicological work begin to look like in terms of your approach to studying old manuscripts, studying early music, in this period?

Joshua Rifkin 21:40

That's a very germane question, a very good one. It was really shaped by the Bach studies. The thing that was fascinating about this new chronology was not only what they did, but how they did it. It's now common knowledge. But this was all done through identifying copyists, through identifying scripts, and identifying papers through their watermarks. And all of this seemed mysterious and amazing — what fantastic stuff. How did they do it? And something in me was saying ``— I want to do it, I want to — there's a secret out there. Look at what it could do! Look at how it our totally revolutionized our image of Bach. So I set out to absorb all of that. And I got all the literature, I absorbed it. When I went on my Fulbright in 1966, to Germany. I was sent to Göttingen in Germany, which was where the Johann Sebastian Bach Institute was housed, and where Alfred Dürr, a scholar who was already my idol then, my exemplar, was working. And I basically — I'd actually sent Dürr a letter several years earlier about something I think I discovered, which turned out to be true. And he had written back, was very gracious. And so now I'm there. And I go to the Johann Sebastian Bach Institute, and eventually I meet Dürr and he says — come in, let's talk. And he sits me down for two hours! He talks Bach issues with me, a 21-year-old kid from the States he's never met — this kind of openness, this humanity really, made a very deep impression on me. And basically, then he said, Look, he said, come back and work here whenever you want. He said, If you want to come on the weekend, when we're closed, we'll give you the keys. Imagine this. Now, at the same time, I was getting interested in earlier music. And in fact, I guess already by that time, I got the sense — can you do this with Renaissance music? Can you do the same sort of thing. And I realized, in part because of some other work that I found that this was possible, in particular, I got very interested in a bunch of manuscripts from the Low Countries. A bunch of big, beautiful choir books mainly, and I already started working with them some in '67, when I was in

Paris, working with photographs, things like that, but also, I came across an article by a scholar named Herbert Kellman, who was out in Urbana, where he had started doing some of this stuff, pulling together these manuscripts through scribal identification. I said — this is what I want. So I started working also with the older books. And in fact, I saw some original things when I was there. So I was seeing my first manuscripts, not just films of them. And I was already discovering things, that's the wonderful thing about this stuff, you go to it, it'll give you something; open the source, and it'll tell you something. So that was already showing me the path. And I was already again, in '66-'67, very interested in the Medici Codex. This was a celebrated manuscript at the time. So I started kicking around with it. And there, I made some discoveries. So one thing...

Will Robin 25:41

Let me just interrupt. So you said, if you just look, you see things, and you described it as kicking around, but you're obviously doing something specific. So when you're looking at something like the Medici Codex, or a Bach cantata, what is your process for something like that? Or what was your process?

Joshua Rifkin 25:59

Well [chuckles], boy that puts me on the spot [Will laughs] Well, there were two things that sort of go simultaneously, in part one just wants to see stuff, you just got to look at it. And in part, you have a certain question in your mind — where's this from? When's this from? And of course, you can't separate them too neatly, because you're generally interested in figuring out where stuff is from, what it is, et cetera. And at the same time, you don't always have a specific problem there. You got to see.... Let me give you one example. It's just something that came up in discussion with a graduate student of mine recently. He's very interested — brilliant younger scholar of early music — in a manuscript in ... I think a monastery somewhere near Rome. And it belongs to this complex of so-called Habsburg Burgundy manuscripts; that's the one ... these choir books from the southern Netherlands that I mentioned before. When we were talking, I remembered something, I said — you know that's interesting to me for a personal reason. I'd already looked at a few things of these, and I knew sort of what they were, and I was assembling them in my mind, I wanted to do some work with them. And I was during my Fulbright year in Göttingen, I was in the city of Kassel, which is not too far away, which is the home of Bärenreiter, the great publishers and also home of the most significant concentration of manuscripts of Schütz's music and other 17th and century stuff. And was also the home of a great microfilm collection, the German music historical archive, the Deutsches musikgeschichtliches Archiv. And in those days before it was all online, you had to work at getting a hold of the stuff. But I was in the Archiv. And I was looking at various things. And I came across a mention of a manuscript with masses by Pierre de la Rue in their catalog, which I'd never heard of. But this was suspicious for various reasons. And I asked the head of the place — do you know anything about this? He said — No, but let's get out a film and look at it. And I look at this thing. And I instantly see that this is a manuscript from that group — in other words, I recognize the decorative style, the script, etc. So that was just taking a chance, you just see what it is. Now, at certain points, you look more closely. And in fact, with the Medici Codex, this shows the process. Now, the Medici Codex was something of a cause célèbre already in early music studies, because it was the subject of a famous article by a famous and controversial scholar Edward E Lowinsky. And the book was in private hands, he was the only person with access to it, and he wrote a big article on it that was published, I guess, in the early '60s which said, this fantastic manuscript,

greatest manuscript under the sun. And it was written at the French royal court, possibly Leonardo da Vinci had a hand in it, etc, etc, etc, you know, terribly exciting stuff. Wonderful, wonderful fantastic stuff. And of course, you read something like that, and you get curious about it. Now, a while later, I'm at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This is during the same Fulbright year, my girlfriend at the time, future first wife, was living in Paris. So I probably spent more time in Paris than I did in Göttingen. And so I'm hanging out at the Bibliothèque Nationale and I look into stuff, and I'm talking with one of their senior curators, librarians, researchers, a very eminent scholar by the name of Nanie Bridgman. And she was a real force to be reckoned with, Madame Bridgman was, and she had said something about the Medici Codex in a book she published, she said it's not from France. It's from Italy. From Italy, why is this? And I was very interested, by the way, in French sources, because in fact there were no French sources of sacred music from the period. I don't mean France in general, but from the Royal Court specifically. So here was this Medici Codex, which is the only one, so it's all the more special because of that. So I talked to her, I said — you wrote that it's not from France. She says, "mais bien sûr, c'est d'Italie!" [Will laughs] And then she explained, actually, in her very, very distinguished English, he says, Well, that's because it wasn't finished. There are blank pages at the end. Now - the fact is blank pages, you have at the end of just about any manuscript at this period. It was sort of courtesy, they always left some blank stuff. So actually, it wasn't relevant at all. But nevertheless, my curiosity was all the more piqued. So then you fast forward a little bit further, and you're in Florence, I guess, it's early '67. Well, you're in Florence after the flood, which I think was that same autumn. But anyway, I'm in Florence. I'm visiting I Tatti. And I meet a very eminent American musicologist there by the name of Martin Picker, lovely, lovely man, and a very scrupulous scholar. And Martin at the time was the editor of JAMS, the Journal of the American Musicological Society, and he was a specialist in Renaissance music. So — forgive me, I think I have to revise the date a bit because this must be a bit later, because we got to talk about the edition of the Medici Codex that Lowinsky published — in other words, there was the article, I was fascinated with it. But this must be out of ... what am I doing in Florence at the time? I don't remember I'd have to research. But I know that Lowinsky's edition was published in 1968. So I must revise that there. In 1968. I am at Princeton already. I'd gone there after my Fulbright year. And the edition has come out. And I remember this because I asked Martin about it. Because Martin had been a pupil of Lowinsky. He was the first and for a long time the only person to get a doctorate from Lowinsky. Boy, did he have stories to tell about the man, but that's another subject. Anyway, I remember asking him about this. I said — Does it give you any more information about the provenance? And Martin in his very offhand, gracious, manner, says — Yes, really it gives you everything you need to know that the manuscript comes from Rome and not France. Wow. So again, boy this is an object lesson to me. This is really an object lesson. I did meet Martin in Florence earlier, at the time of the flood, but this is now when the edition of Lowinsky comes out. I'm already in Princeton. And because I already knew him, he was at Rutgers, I went down to visit him there. And that's when we discussed the edition which comes out in '68. And I am, indeed, in Princeton, and he tells me that, and when I go back to my apartment in Princeton, I had on the shelves the German music encyclopedia, Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart, and for some reason, I opened it up. A wonderful thing about that encyclopedia, it had tons of illustrations of old manuscripts in it. And I opened it up. And I'd read Lowinsky's article, so I remembered what the scribes looked like. I opened it up, and I instantly — for some reason, the first thing I turned to is a plate that shows a manuscript written by the main copyist of the Medici Codex. Except that manuscript is in Rome. It's a Vatican choir book. Would I have gone and looked at it and found it right then if Martin Picker hadn't said that to me, I don't know. But here I saw that, and I knew

indeed. So I just started researching that, I just started looking through the other stuff. I think I already had in my house, in my apartment, microfilms of all the Vatican manuscripts of the period. And/or they were in Princeton library, whatever it is, I just started plowing through them, and pretty soon I noticed — I found the second scribe of the Medici Codex also writing Vatican manuscripts. So it was a done deal basically. This book couldn't be from France it was done in Rome. These were Roman copyists. And so I worked with that. And Martin, who was the editor to JAMS, contrived to have me given the review of Lowinsky's edition, here I am — by now let's say 1968, okay, I'm a 24 year old graduate student. I'm taking on this work of one of the most eminent scholars in the business.

Will Robin 35:43

Wow.

Joshua Rifkin 35:43

Wow, indeed, and I was never able to write it, and in part because the weight that was on me and also because the work I was going to do ... this was attracting a lot of notice, a lot of controversy. And you'll see Lowinsky intervened; he tried to get Martin Picker to withdraw the invitation, he tried to get his former undergraduate pupil Lewis Lockwood to withdraw it, Lewis was a professor of mine at Princeton. And then when that didn't work, he bearded me at a party in Manhattan, and browbeat me for a couple of hours to try to get me to withdraw, which I also didn't do. But ultimately, I just wasn't able really to do it. But that's how I got into that. I eventually did publish stuff on it, setting out the history, its history, etc. But there's a lot more, which I'd written up, but which I never quite finished, and which will go when I go, unless somebody takes on the dubious job of going through my papers from that period.

Will Robin 36:56

Well, hopefully, they'll end up in an archive at some point. You mentioned controversy, and I want to jump ahead a little bit historically and talk about the controversy you're perhaps best known for, which is the argument you make in the early 1980s that Bach's vocal music — much of Bach's vocal music was written not for a chorus as we traditionally understand that, a large group of vocalists, but instead for a small group of soloists, basically one per part. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to investigate that issue and make the discovery you made?

Joshua Rifkin 37:05

Sure. It does seem that controversy dogs, me, doesn't it? I didn't seek it, honestly. But, that's where you wind up. I'll also give you a slight correction. Actually, none of Bach's vocal music was written for a chorus, as we understand a chorus. Even when there's more than one singer singing a given line of music, I can explain that subsequently. But, it's actually ... this is something that I didn't even quite understand at the start, but actually Bach never wrote music for chorus as we think of as the chorus. But, okay. Again, this has a sort of prehistory. And it's a prehistory that involves performance and scholarship and how they're kind of feeding into each other. I mentioned my fascination with Bach, and particularly with the vocal music and how that started me doing research. And of course, I not only was I passionate about Bach's vocal music, but if I was passionate about it, and I was a performer, also, I wanted to be doing that I wanted to be conducting Bach's cantatas and Bach passions, etc. Now, if you are approaching that music as a conductor, very soon you come up against a very interesting question.

One has this sort of image that let's say a standard Bach cantata there are choruses and there are solo numbers. The choruses are called chorus. And the solo numbers are called recitative and aria, very simple. So you know what's done by the chorus, and you know what's done by the soloists. But if you actually start looking at the stuff, you discover that it's a lot more complicated, there are a lot of movements — A) that are called nothing. There are things that are for four voices and yet called Aria. So what does this all mean? And trying to decide basically whom you're going to have sing where is a really difficult question for anybody conducting this stuff. And one of the indications of this is that, if you go through recordings of that period, you'll find that — let's say any two or three recordings of the same cantata, they don't come up with the same answers. So you're wondering, what should I do, and why didn't Bach tell me? Why doesn't he... (laughs) Why does he leave us in the lurch like this? So that's one side of the question. Another side of this which complicated the matter further. I was very positively affected by a number of recordings, principally of Schütz, done by a German conductor and musicologist by the name of Wilhelm Ehmann — who, as I did not know at the time was a man with a past, this really terrible Nazi. But we didn't know that then. I think people in Germany knew but, but even though I... but I didn't know certainly. But the music, I loved his recordings, principally of Schütz, that really got me into that music in many ways. But he also did Bach, and he had come up with an idea that he was actually not his originally, but it was an idea that had first been broached by a German Bach scholar named Arnold Schering, who was really the preeminent Bach scholar in the interwar era in Germany. And Ehmann took this and developed it and ran with it, which was that **portions** of choral movements in Bach were sung not by the full chorus, but by single voices. And in fact, he wrote a whole book on this, a small book, a thin book called *Concertists and Ripienists in Bach's B minor Mass*. And since I was really grappling with this issue of who sings what where, this also fascinated me. And I listened to Ehmann's recordings where he used single voice ensembles, in Bach and in Schütz as well. And I have to say, the sound enchanted me. I thought it was beautiful. And then I thought — well, how do I get that? But also, I learned enough quickly to know that a lot of what Ehmann did had absolutely no foundation in the evidence, it just was not really well supported. And that had been pointed out by none other than Alfred Dürr, who just said — it would be nice if it were true, but it's not. Nevertheless, that set a process going. So I'm all of a sudden interested in this. Now. In the early 70s, I get the commission to write the Schütz article for the new Grove Dictionary. Basically, I can't remember I was in London, I met Stanley Sadie, the editor, I don't remember quite under what circumstances. And basically, Stanley says to me — what do you want to write? I said — How about Schütz, so he says, you have it. So I have the job. And part of the job is to prepare the work list. Actually, I never got... that too is something I never finished writing. I mean, the article itself, but I did do the biography. But I really wanted to do it... to write the music and that I never got to, because I thought the biography and the work list would be simple. It's all taken care of. It's all straight and easy. Was I mistaken! Yeah, the biography was a total mess, took me forever to straighten that out, and the sources of the music, the worklist was also a total mess. And so I start, I go with this. And here's what happens. I realized that to do this, I had to look at all of the original sources of Schütz, all of the editions that he published and supervised, and all of the manuscripts which were mostly in Kassel, so I'm going through all of them. And again, with manuscripts, I have to do my trick again, date them or, you know, by the paper, by the script, etc. And so, and that had been a total mess before, so I was able really to straighten out a lot of that. But while I'm doing this, I'm also keeping this eye open for anything that has to do with performance. Because that was my concerns, you know, what instruments are there of who's doing the continuo, etc. And what about the voices? What's going on with them? In the course of doing this, I

discover a very simple rule — that in Schütz there is an absolutely inviolable rule that a written or printed copy of the music — that is, a sheet with the music — is given to one singer and one singer only. If you want to have another singer sing the same music, you write out another part for that other singer. And that is absolutely black and white in this music. I mean, there's just no way it can be anything else, and that's just repeated testimony again and again. And one of the things that comes out of that is that fact, a large body of Schütz's music is indeed for single voices — four voices, five voices, six voices, seven voices, eight voices, but it's all single voices. Occasionally, there is a group that will double them, that will sing the same notes, but they do not even stand together with those singers. They stand someplace else. But that's rare. That's infrequent. So then I'm curious. So I started looking elsewhere in the 17th century, Monteverdi, Biber, you name it. And of course, what I discover is that it's all the same — Schütz is not unusual. He's just doing the thing. And of course, somewhere in the back of my mind, I'm thinking — Yeah, but when did that change? When do you get what Bach did? Because everybody knew that Bach had twelve Singers, who read from four parts, they stood together, sharing the parts. So everybody knew that, I knew that, I'd grown up with and I performed the stuff that way, I performed according to this, I believed it all. But now I'm learning... so what happened, when did it change? And I still remember very vividly one day in the late '70s, I was sitting in Isham library at Harvard University. Now, Isham library was a great repository of microfilms of musical sources. And among the things it had, were films of virtually all the Bach sources, which it actually had copied from Princeton, which had them because Arthur Mendel, the professor at Princeton, was a great Bach scholar, and was doing the edition of the St. John Passion for the Neue Bach Ausgabe, and prevailed upon William Scheider, who was a great Bach fan and a patron and was a very wealthy man, to get reproductions of all of those manuscripts and bring them into Princeton. And I had used that archive there, there are lovely photo printouts of them. But through Christoph Wolff, who was a Bach scholar and was by now a professor at Harvard, they at least got microfilms out of all of them. So I'm sitting with a bunch of films in the library at Isham, and I'm going through a reel of performance parts to a Bach cantata. I started looking at parts to Bach cantatas, because as I said with Schütz all of this came out of the parts themselves. In other words I got... all of the music of Schütz, and everything in the seventeenth century basically, survives as performing parts — scores are not really important at that time. And I already knew that if you want to know how Bach is performed, you go to the part you don't look at his scores, they're really for the most part irrelevant to this. So I'm looking at parts, I was already an old hand looking at parts, but I'm looking at these parts. And I turn a reel to a particular cantata — In fact, I can tell you it was the cantata usually numbered 76, "Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes," and I'm turning through it, and suddenly, I see exactly the same thing I'd seen with Schütz. Because with Schütz there was notational evidence that let you know. For example, Schütz would say ... see, you have a part let's say it's just called tenor. That's very neutral, it seems to us. But with Schütz, you could know that that was to be sung from by one person. And one of the things that showed you, paradoxically, is he would say if you want to have your four singers, and their parts are just called soprano, alto, tenor, bass — or Canto, alto, tenor bass — but if you want to have more singers, you copy out more parts, It doesn't say you bring them ... you copy out more parts, and then you set them up as a separate choir elsewhere. But the very fact that he says this lets you know how many read from this neutral part. And these doubling parts are often known as "ripieno" parts. So I came across my first ripieno part in Bach. And I see this, I say — Well, this is a ripieno part. That's a doubling part, but that means — soprano and ripieno — it means the soprano part is used by one singer. So it never changed. It's the same thing.

Will Robin 47:47

Wow.

Joshua Rifkin 49:38

So all I had to do was spend the next two years looking through every damn part of every damn vocal piece of Bach [Will laughs]. Needless to say, I found that Bach was doing the same thing that everybody before him had done. And it was simple — it was black and white, there was no gray area in this. And I had been trained as a very conservative positivist, you could say, my conservative positivist procedures had led to some unpopular findings, but nevertheless, it was very classic in its method. And it was the same thing here. So, quite honestly, I thought, this is so damned obvious that I realized that if anybody had come to me before I had been looking at this all and said — I can show you that... or rather not I can show you, just — Bach did it this way. First thing I would have said is — you're crazy. And if somebody said — I can show you, I would have said — You're crazy. And then perhaps in the next breath — well, okay, show me, being fully prepared to know that it would absolutely be nonsense, and I could bat it down in an instant. So when I discovered this, I thought that, well, this will just be very simple. I mean, of course, everybody will be surprised, I was, but there would be no issue. Can I step off for a little parenthesis, here, just a personal note? Obviously, there is a personal story here. But it happens that this semester, I am running a sort of seminar workshop at Boston University, on conducting Bach's passions. And much of what ... it's mainly performing musicians, and much of what we're doing, when we get started is looking at the parts of the St. John, the St. Matthew Passion. And as it happens, those parts are among the most crystalline examples of what Bach did, and how he performed this stuff. So basically, yesterday, we were looking ... and the week before, we were looking at the parts to the St. Matthew Passion. And we put them up on the screen — they're all online, now; of course, they didn't used to be but now they are. And I just said to the conductors — you see this, what does that tell you? And in an instant, they all said — well, that's a single singer. And a few minutes later said — Oh, my God, chorus one is four singers, and chorus two is four singers. And it's that obvious, and they all saw that instantly, anybody who looks at it really will see this — so, I in my naivete thought, okay, people would be taken aback but they just have to do it. Well... [sighs]

Will Robin 52:48

So you presented on this at the American Musicological Society in Boston in 1981.

Joshua Rifkin 52:55

Yes.

Will Robin 52:55

And apparently, this was a big, big uproar. Can you talk about what happened?

Joshua Rifkin 53:01

Yes, I'll talk about what happened and I'm going to name names here.

Will Robin 53:05

[Laughs] Okay.

Joshua Rifkin 53:06

Because for a long time, I've left people anonymous to protect the guilty. Well, I see no cause to do that anymore. Okay. I first presented something of this in 1978, not long after I'd made the initial discoveries, at a local chapter meeting of the American Musicological Society. I sort of had seen where this all went, and I knew that I have to present on at some point. At the same time, my long-standing relationship to Nonesuch Records, which had been interrupted in 1975 or '76, through some administrative reasons, began to come to life again. And in 1980, we made our first recording for Nonesuch. I already had all the pieces put together for the choral stuff. But after our first recording is done, the head of the label asked me — what should we do next? I said — how about the B minor mass without a chorus? He said — Okay. And they gave us the budget to do this. So I have a recording project. So I also submit a proposal to the AMS that ... because I need to do some concert performing to get the piece prepared for recording. So it's worked out that the performance committee likes it. So I'll do a paper and I'll do, we'll do a concert performance. Okay. Now they knew that the topic would attract a certain interest and at the AMS, it was then the practice that for topics that would be of particular interest, they would have somebody respond to the paper, they'd have a respondent. So, I was asked, whom could I think of as respondents, so I thought a bit, and I thought of a close friend of mine, a very eminent Bach scholar Robert Marshall. Now, as I say, Bob and I were good friends, and we went back several years by this point. I respected Bob and still respect Bob very much, his work was really first class. So I thought, if anybody would be able to respond to it well, and judge the issue sensibly, it would be Bob. So I sent him the paper a week or two before the meeting has to take place, obviously, so that he could read it and think about it. Not long after we talk on the phone, he says — I don't believe it. I said — Okay, why not? And he says, well, because of the Entwurff, that's this document of Bach's where Bach talks about the number of singers he needs in choirs. And I spent part of the... I'd spent the first part of the paper talking about it, because that's what everybody knows. And that's what everybody depends on. And first of all, I sought to show that actually, the Entwurff doesn't say what people think it says, it's been badly misunderstood, but basically to say, it was to say — it's a red herring as far as determining what Bach's performances were like. And the real evidence is in the parts. And now let's look into the parts. So Bob and I talk about this a bit. So he's very determined about this. I said — fine. I said — let's just try to set a couple of ground rules. Principally, he said ... I said — Can we agree on this? And he says — Yes, I said — Good. Let's just say that we agree on this. So we won't waste time talking about that, there was a certain small matter, not an important one, so we set that up. Now, the paper is scheduled for Friday afternoon. It will be the last paper in I think an entire Bach session. But in any event, it will be Friday afternoon. And I will be the last speaker. The concert is Saturday evening. Friday morning is the dress rehearsal. Because it's a big a big blow for the singers to [unintelligible]. So, a dress rehearsal is set up at Jordan Hall at New England Conservatory. And that's fine, because the paper will be that afternoon. On the Wednesday or the Tuesday, I get a call from the New England Conservatory. Something has come up at the school and they're taking over the space for our dress rehearsal time. And we're bumped into the afternoon...

Will Robin 58:29

Uh oh

Joshua Rifkin 58:30

... conflict with the paper session. So of course, I call Bob Marshall to tell him this. Bob is livid. He reacts as if he is an injured party here and how dare we do this to him? I'm not exaggerating this, and I'm thinking WTF [Will laughs] I've got to put up with this stuff. So. Okay. We have dress rehearsal in the afternoon. It's... let's say the session maybe started at four, I don't remember exactly. But I jump into a cab. You know, I race outside, I get into a cab to go across downtown Boston. Well, Boston has recently been singled out by some organization as having the worst traffic in the United States. And let me tell you, it was no better then. So we inch our way across town. I probably could have gotten there faster walking, but I finally get in ... so I get in and everybody's waiting for me, I'm late. Waiting for me, and I don't know if Bob Marshall has told them why I'm late, you know, I'm the heavy coming in this. So I feel pressure on me. And so I walk in and Bob says — Okay, we've got an hour, shall we split it evenly? Now, that's not the protocol. [Will laughs] The protocol of a response is, let's say if a paper is a half hour, the response is 10 minutes.

Will Robin 1:00:10

Sure, yeah, of course. It's a response. It's not a paper. Yeah,

Joshua Rifkin 1:00:13

We'll split it. And, I'm just so under the gun, and I and I just said — Sure. Worst mistake I have made in my musicological life. So, no, my paper was over-late. I do know that, that is my fault. But I started reading it very, very fast. So nobody can understand a word I'm saying,

Will Robin 1:00:36

Oh, my God!

Joshua Rifkin 1:00:37

Before I'm finished, Bob cuts me off. I've barely got to the part... to the meat of the thing. Bob just says — That's it. And he goes, and he reads his response, which is heavily ad hominem, delivered in a very sarcastic tone, and basically portraying me as a fake or an idiot. [Will laughs] I'm not joking, I'm not exaggerating. And I think anybody who was there would have come out concluding that I was a fake or an idiot, I would have if I had witnessed it like that. I was completely shaken by this. Later that day, after it, my soon to be former first wife — but who was still a good friend, and is an eminent scholar in her own right — came across Bob Marshall in a hallway, and she just railed at him. And Bob said to her— "It's a bad idea, and it has to be stopped." And I should add that when I reported this, in a talk given in Germany 10 years ago, I sent Bob the text of that talk, I said — please tell me if my recollection is accurate. And he confirmed that, in fact, he did that.

Will Robin 1:02:03

Wow.

Joshua Rifkin 1:02:04

So he was on a mission to stop this. And that's what really got that one going. So in a certain way, you could say it never really had a chance. It certainly started under a cloud. Now, this is 40 years ago, more than, in the meanwhile. And it's very interesting to think of how things have played out since then. From the start, there were people who did support me, not just personally, but more important, in this

case, the research behind it. And basically, I can simplify it this way: The people who supported me went and looked at the parts, or rather to be more accurate, people who went and looked at the parts came out saying — Yeah, this is true. I'd always said, look, if I am misreading the St. Matthew Passion, let's say those parts, it should be very easy to demonstrate. You go to them and say — well, he infers this from them. But actually, it's not a... But the interesting thing is that I know of no one who actually went and looked at those parts, who came out with another conclusion. So there were people who were, in fact, courageous, and seconded this. Now on the other side, I know pretty well that basically the way it was handled was simply not to look at any of that stuff. And here, I can also report the story. And here also, I shall not protect the guilty. In the year 2000, which is already well after this stuff, the Bach Ensemble was invited to do a performance of the St. John Passion at the big Bach festival in Stuttgart. I should say by the way, that festival was run by the conductor Helmut Rilling, who was a conductor of a very different stripe, and totally on the other side from what I and my band did, but Rilling was a very decent man, and very honorable, and we had friendly relations. And he asked me to come and do the St. John Passion there, because in fact, he was conducting a new passion by I think, Wolfgang Rihm, so he couldn't do a Bach passion. And I'm eternally grateful to him for that, and it shows a certain open-mindedness and this is the kind of man that Rilling is. So, but the organizer of the festival said — should we have a symposium on this, and I still did this. After this and one experience in Leipzig, that same year, I said — I'm just going to never going to talk about this again with other people. A, it's too old, B, it's out there, people can read it and be — I'm just not going to go into a situation where they say this, and I say that. I'm done with that.

Will Robin 1:05:13

Your argument by that point was largely vindicated. Scholars tend to agree that you are correct.

Joshua Rifkin 1:05:19

Well, no, it's subtler than that. Scholars under the age of 60 — or by now 65, in the United States all agree. Scholars in the United States older than that are all opposed. That includes Kristoff Wolf, includes Marshall, includes George Stauffer. German scholars are mostly opposed. Germany is a pretty much... people in Britain, performers and scholars, agree. Now, in fact, here we are in Germany, and I said — Okay, I'll do this. So I did what I'd call my slide show, which is basically like what I described at the session yesterday. But taking a bunch of parts and a bunch of recordings. I'd done this first, actually at the New York Public Library, where they asked me if I would talk at a series they had on their sort of special collections, etc. And so I put that together, I think, maybe '83, something like that, with their assistance. So I had the slides, you'll remember the days when we displayed slides, and I put these up, and basically I'd put something up on the screen and say — Okay, now you're looking at this part. And here's the traditional understanding of it. And here is the other one. And here are a couple of recordings. And you tell me, which you think the part is better suited to what — old hypothesis, new hypothesis. I mean, the deck is stacked, shall we say, but okay, I'm doing the deck stacking. And besides, there aren't any counter examples. So I do this there. And one of the most vociferous opponents of this, a very eminent scholar by the name of Hans Joachim Schulze, who has been personally ... who has also written viciously, personally colored attacks on this, was among the people lined up on the dais, we're all seated there. And I'm showing all of these slides, and they're behind us. So I'm sort of looking back and saying — look at that, look at that. Hans Joachim Schulze did not look back once during the entire talk. He simply stared straight ahead and refused to look at any of them. So

that gives a sense of what it was like, and what it still is like, in more quarters than you would imagine. I never could have predicted this, in all honesty, as I said, I thought that oka, there would be skepticism, there would be this, but you're taught lessons and look, there are climate change deniers out there, right? How many years has this been out there? In fact, I'm in a way grateful because I used to use opponents something... I now use the term deniers for all of these people which is what they are, basically. But so, yeah, it's not over, and it won't be over in my lifetime. And I sometimes have joked, it's gallows humor, that by the time it's widely accepted, it will be totally forgotten that I ever had anything to do with it. [Will laughs] And in fact, I've seen that happen already. In 2004, I was in Basel at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, I was conducting the Schütz program. And I ran across one of the singers in a concert at lunch. So we sit together, we have lunch together. And he says — You know, I heard of this wonderful thing, a fascinating thing — the B minor Mass of Bach with five singers that must be amazing. What do you think of that?

Will Robin 1:09:22

Wow.

Joshua Rifkin 1:09:23

Who you asking? [Will laughs] But that's real life and you live with it.

Will Robin 1:09:34

Well, I think that's a great place to leave it. Thank you so much for these amazing stories and this wonderful conversation.

Joshua Rifkin 1:09:41

Well, I'm very glad. Just between us. I will though capture just one more thing about the Satie. It sort of has a double follow up, follow up number one is 1969. I'm out in Urbana visiting, John is out in Urbana for the performance of his piece harpsichord, and Nonesuch was recording it and I was still attached to Nonesuch at the time. So I go out to Urbana. It's a great time, we're having supper, John and Merce Cunningham are preparing suppers for us and things like that. And John was living at the home of the composer Ben Johnston. There's this, as I say, Saturday night supper and John and Merce have been out, gathering mushrooms the last three days. And they're going to make an entire mushroom supper for us. And they make this fabulous mushroom supper. And it's being washed down with a bottle of 1949 Pommard Epeneaux, a beautiful burgundy, which John had got through the new music patron Paul Fromm, who was a wine merchant in Chicago. So we're drinking bottles of this stuff. And the atmosphere is very heady and it goes on... at one in the morning, somehow the talk turns to Vexations. And John says — the thing about this piece is nobody can memorize it. Now, there's a lot of truth to this. I could have said that when I was listening to it or reading it, the music grew less predictable the more I heard it, it's a weird characteristic it has. And so I really understood where John was coming from. And probably if I had practiced the piece as everybody else jad, I would have forgotten it. But for some reason, the experience was just in the synapses. So I of course, said — I can! [Will laughs] John says — show us. So we go into the next room. It's a room with a small upright piano, there's a candle lighting it, and he says — okay, and I start to play. By four or five notes, I get lost. [Will laughs] John starts laughing uproariously — you probably know at least through recordings his high

pitch cackle of a laugh he had — and that did it I said — John, a bottle of that Pommard Epenaux says I can. You're on. Played it flawlessly.

Will Robin 1:12:14

Wow.

Joshua Rifkin 1:12:18

That stayed — I had the great good fortune that in 2007, Tate Modern in London put on a performance of Vexations. And they asked me to play it, and also to supervise it, because by this time, I was one of the few people still around from the '63 performance, and who remembered exactly how it was organized. So I became now a historical witness. And I was able to organize the performance according to John's version. This time - A, I was the lead pianist, I played first, and I was there for the whole performance. And ten years after that, when I was sure I would never play Vexations again, the Guggenheim in New York mounted a performance in connection with an art exhibition there, which involved this group of painters and mystics with whom Satie was involved. And they had the idea to put on a performance in the Guggenheim. And they actually gathered together I think, all of the few living survivors of that performance above all Christian Wolff, that most wonderful of human beings, just such a sweet, marvelous man. Phillip Corner was there. David Del Tredici, who had played in the '63 performance, I. So it was a bigger team of pianists. But again, I was called on to supervise the organization, they veered from John's model in a number of ways. But basically, we did the same setup. And this time, I had the honor of being the last to play it, and was almost a sacramental sensation to be bringing this whole thing to the close. And I'm sure I'll never play it again. And I think that would be right that I don't play it again. But as you see, and that's part of these unpredictable things, it's somehow followed throughout; so that rounds out that tale. And thank you for indulging me in the telling.

Will Robin 1:14:33

Oh, absolutely. No, thank you so much. I greatly appreciate this conversation.

[music] 1:14:37

Will Robin 1:14:45

Many thanks to Joshua Rifkin for that fascinating conversation. You can read more about his work over on our website, soundexpertise.org. As always, our inbox is open. If you have questions or thoughts, email us — [soundexpertise00 at gmail](mailto:soundexpertise00@gmail.com) — or tag me on twitter or Instagram @seatedovation. Many thanks to D. Edward Davis for his production work, you can listen to his music over on SoundCloud at warm silence, and many thanks to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing our episodes to make them more accessible. This episode of sound expertise was recorded at the National Foreign Language Center with support from the University of Maryland School of Music. And next on Sound Expertise, being a musicologist in public doing public musicology.

Unidentified Speaker 1:15:36

When I came back, I had just a million notifications. And so apparently, this thread had touched a nerve in a good way, in that people understood that this issue of diversity isn't just a yes / no question.

Will Robin 1:15:52

See you then.

[music] 1:15:54