

Looking Back and Moving Forward: A Conversation with Victor Rosenbaum

By Robert Schulslapper ©Fanfare

Victor Rosenbaum's deep immersion in the piano repertoire of the 18th and 19th centuries has been gratefully applauded in many of the world's premier concert halls and festivals: To quote *The Boston Globe*, "The appeal of Rosenbaum's playing is in his musical temperament, in which fervor and gentleness are happily combined and in the velvet of his tone ... he makes up for all the drudgery that the habitual concertgoer has to endure in the hope of finding the real, right thing." Elsewhere his playing has been described as "magisterial," with a "piano touch [that] encompasses bravura, delicacy, and many variations between." His recordings consistently garner glowing reviews—Jerry Dubins, writing about Rosenbaum's recent Brahms release (Bridge 9545) praised "Performances ... that speak with touching expressivity in a very personal voice" (*Fanfare* 44:5), and MusicWeb's Glyn Pursglove found "the whole imbued with an air of mature perception and alert sensitivity." And reviewing an earlier Schubert disc, Susan Kagan lauded the "insightful, sympathetic performances by an estimable pianist" (*Fanfare* 32:1). In addition to his concert appearances, his lectures on musical form, performance, and interpretation are valued by students, teachers, and laymen alike, and he's been a faculty member and frequent guest teacher at many of the world's most prestigious schools of music, including over 50 years on the faculty of the New England Conservatory. While his recordings concentrate on music from Mozart to Brahms, his fervent belief that music is a continually evolving art has led him to perform the works of many contemporary composers. Our recent conversation took place as the pianist approaches his 80th birthday.

When did you set off on your musical journey?

My parents were music lovers and took me to concerts when I was young, but my interest in music started before that. The family story is that when I was around age four we were in a restaurant where a pianist was playing background music and I went over and stood watching him for about an hour, then came home and started "playing piano" on table tops. A toy piano soon followed on which I picked out tunes, and then, finally, in the fall before my sixth birthday, an old upright that my parents found through a classified listing in the newspaper. I started developing "perfect pitch" to that instrument, which was a half-tone low (and couldn't really be tuned to pitch)—something that emerged when I went to lessons with my first teacher and became confused at the difference.

Do you play any other instruments?

No, not really. I had a few school lessons on the violin and was put in a string quartet. I could hardly play, but our little group won second prize in a citywide competition—the standards must have been horribly low!

With whom did you first study?

Fortunately, the best-known teacher in Indianapolis, where my parents moved when I was five, wouldn't take me as a student, saying I was "too young." She recommended a young teacher in

town, Elizabeth Brock, who was beginning to build her private studio. That turned out to be lucky for me, as she was wonderful, imaginative, and dedicated. I stayed with her for eight years, and during that time she opened my eyes and ears to the world of music. She included theory in the lessons, sent me to a composition teacher in town, William Pelz, and was herself always trying new things which she then urged me to try as well. For example, one summer she accompanied modern dance at Jacob's Pillow and came back all fired up about how good it was to be able to improvise, how freeing, and how connected to physical gesture playing became. She gave me a few basic lessons in how to create chords of tension and release, and within a few weeks I was getting paid as a modern dance accompanist. I was 12! That was a formative influence in my musical thinking—experiencing music in terms of tension and release and physical gesture. It informs my teaching to this day.

Betty, as I came to know her, became a close family friend. Even after she sent me to Martin Marks, on the Butler University faculty, at 13, we stayed friends, and in fact, stayed closely in touch the rest of her life—which ended only a few years ago. She was actively teaching into her early 90s, and on more than one occasion I would bring her out to some of my more important concerts in Boston.

I was always pretty serious about music, but I was not pushed or driven. I had a normal childhood in most respects. Like most kids, there were times when I didn't practice a lot. I do remember one heavy discussion when I was 10 or 11 about discontinuing lessons if I wasn't going to practice. Lots of tears were flowing that night. I think it was my first summer at Aspen [the Festival in Colorado] at age 15 that was a kind of turning point. Surrounded by many older hot shots from Juilliard and elsewhere, I was bound to either give up or, as happened, become inspired. I got more serious after that summer and there was, after that, no turning back. I studied with the legendary Rosina Lhévinne (Van Cliburn's teacher) and roomed with some great talents, including the Korean wunderkind Tong Il Han and the young genius James Levine, who at age 14 already had many operas committed to memory. It was a really stimulating and exciting time. That was also where I met Leonard Shure, and I worked with him during my third Aspen summer and also my college years. As an heir to the Schnabel values, Shure was a big influence in my musical thinking.

What sort of music captivated you? Were you always drawn to the classics?

Well, I've played some of the whole range of repertoire over the years, and especially in my student days. But yes, I guess you'd have to say that even in my youth, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, and of course Chopin and Bach, drew me most strongly. I notice from the repertoire lists of entering conservatory students that they often have played little or no Schubert, but I was playing Schubert as a kid and loving it. I just respond to the language of those composers and was always less interested in what seemed like showy music. Maybe I always had an old soul.

Of the seven CDs of yours that I've heard, three are devoted to Schubert, two to Beethoven, and one each to Mozart and Brahms: Are there others?

That's it for now ... at least of commercially available ones. I would like to do more Beethoven, another Schubert (including the G-Major Sonata, which I learned during the pandemic) and discs of Schumann and Chopin.

Writing at MusicWeb, Glyn Pursglove observed that, "The distinguished American pianist Victor Rosenbaum (born in 1941) clearly has a particular interest in 'late' works (even if he would surely not wish to become embroiled in the critical and theoretical discussions around the idea of 'late style')."

I am drawn to music that is deeply communicative, expressive, and emotional. So it seems that composers' late period music tends to be like that. Even the last pieces of Schubert, who died at 31, can be described as "late" since he was dealing with life and death issues, though chronologically young. But lately, I have also been looking more deeply at some early Beethoven sonatas and have a renewed interest in playing them. I will probably never do the complete cycle as so many of my colleagues have, but there are definitely gems among the early and middle period sonatas I want to play more.

In a wider sense, however, I don't think the composers I play most need any defense or justification, any more than Shakespeare or Rembrandt need special advocacy. I don't think I am remotely alone in my estimation that the music of Bach through Brahms constitutes a high period in the evolution of the art of music. That's the music that's most played and admired in virtually every corner of the world. Nobody is forcing anyone to play Bach preludes and fugues or Chopin nocturnes, but they are played the world over. I don't see that changing any time soon.

Is your repertoire of piano concertos drawn from the same period you've concentrated on in your recordings?

So many pianists play the big Romantic concertos well. Except for the Brahms concertos, my interests are largely with the Mozart and Beethoven concertos. But I had a great time playing Gershwin too (playing the *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Concerto in F with the Atlanta Symphony). I enjoy music that is beautiful, and those Gershwin pieces certainly are. But it's also nice to play something fun in a jazz idiom.

Is chamber music as important to you as the solo repertoire?

Playing music with others has always been a big part of my musical life. It's perhaps what I love most! Even as a teenager in Indianapolis, I organized chamber concerts with friends at local venues like the Jewish Community Center. Later, I was a member of two ongoing trios, the Wheaton Trio and the Figaro Trio—associations that spanned several decades—and I've always sought chamber music experiences with faculty colleagues. At the Eastern Music Festival many years ago, I was honored to play with Leonard Rose, the great cellist, whose recordings I had at home growing up. I've been lucky to play with amazing colleagues like violinists Eric Rosenblith, Arnold Steinhardt, James Buswell, and Robert Mann, and cellists Laurence Lesser and Paul Katz. My most recent concerts, after a year of not performing live, were with the wonderful Taiwanese-born violinist Jean Huang. I love playing with young performers, and enjoy not only being able to influence the direction of the performance but gaining from their

energy and imaginations. I also enjoy the Lieder repertoire and have had many happy collaborations with singers, including Jane Struss, Rockland Osgood, Junko Watanabe, and a wonderful Viennese baritone, Georg Lehner. He and I did a short tour of Schubert's *Winterreise* a few years ago. It's surely one of my favorite works, one I'd love to revisit and possibly record.

Are there pianists whose interpretations you especially admire?

I'm not one of those pianists who spend a lot of time listening to others. I love going to concerts and hearing live music being performed, but would rather delve into the music that I play directly, rather than seeing how "it's supposed to go" or how others play it. That said, my teacher during college years and beyond, Leonard Shure, was a powerful force and instilled the values of fidelity to the text that he got, no doubt, from Schnabel. But more important than textual fidelity or analytic insights, Shure's passion was simply inspiring at lessons. I grew up admiring Rudolf Serkin and Rubinstein. Of today's pianists, Goode and Perahia are among the ones I most admire, along with Barenboim and Schiff.

Although your recordings concentrate on "the classics," I was delighted to learn that contemporary music is also very important to you.

Instead of going the conservatory route, I went to colleges and universities (Brandeis for undergraduate, Princeton for graduate school). I wanted to be an educated musician, and also to learn about things beyond music. At Brandeis, my philosophy teacher wanted me to major in it. But I stuck to music as a major. In graduate school I studied theory and composition, and I believe looking at music from the perspective that those studies promoted has made me a better musician and teacher.

I have taught courses relating musical analysis to interpretation. If I do say so myself, I think I am well suited to take on that challenge, coming at it not just from the analytic and compositional perspective, but as an active performer. Several decades of students—and not just piano students—tell me that my Interpretive Analysis class at NEC had a big impact on who they became as musicians. That is very gratifying to me.

I love so many types of music, and would actually prefer, in most cases, to attend a string quartet or symphonic concert to a piano recital. I try to hear as much music as I can, and keep up with what's being written today, even if I feel younger performers are probably better exponents of new music than I. I have done my share of new music and even world premieres, including music by John Heiss, John Harbison, Arlene Zallman, Miriam Gideon, Peter Westergaard, Norman Dinerstein, the Russian composer Vladislav Uspensky, and many others. In addition, I make sure my students are involved with the music of living composers. For example, they recently did concerts that had 24 and 19 world premieres, respectively—music composed by New England Conservatory composers.

In addition to being a performer you're also a composer. Are you self-taught? Would you like to record your music?

As an undergraduate, I wasn't composing much (except musical theater), but I worked with Irving Fine, Harold Shapero, Arthur Berger, and Martin Boykin. And in graduate school, I had some great experiences studying with the likes of Roger Sessions, Earl Kim, Milton Babbitt, and Edward T. Cone. Both all-star casts! I was very lucky!

I am not writing much any more, and feel only those who *must* compose have the right to call themselves composers. I haven't written much for piano, oddly enough; just a couple of pieces, and some short pieces for beginners. I have written a little chamber music (a string trio, some duos), some songs and choral pieces. I also have a show-biz side, and used to write musicals in college, as well as birthday songs for my daughters. My secret ambition is to write a Broadway musical, so if there are any librettists out there, please get in touch!

Do you still enjoy improvisation and other forms of music?

I do a little blues at the keyboard, although not so much lately. When I studied abroad for a year, I encountered an expatriate Black blues player named Champion Jack Dupree. I often went to the coffee shop in Zurich where he played and tried to emulate aspects of his style. And my brother Arthur, a professor emeritus of painting and fine arts at the University of Georgia, is also a Grammy winning folklorist, having made field recordings for six decades. He also plays banjo, guitar, fiddle—pretty much every folk instrument—so I grew up hearing and loving that traditional American music too.

Another arrow in your quiver is conducting.

I didn't really study conducting, except very occasionally. I learned by watching, attending rehearsals, etc. My way of thinking of music as physical gesture made it very easy to translate those musical feelings into the larger gestures of conducting. And players seem to respond to my conducting naturally. The physical part of conducting—at least the works I've done—doesn't seem especially difficult. The hard part is learning the score, and developing the ear. As in all performing, knowing what you want to hear is key to getting the result.

I made up my mind long ago to try never to have regrets about choices made, but there is one crossroads where a choice I made could have been life-changing. During my graduate school days, I was teaching at a summer music camp in the Berkshires, where Erich Leinsdorf's daughter, then about 11 or 12, was studying violin. I was conducting the little orchestra of the camp and the maestro came to our final concert. He must have seen and heard something in me because, afterwards, he asked me if I wanted to be his assistant at the BSO (Boston Symphony Orchestra). Foolishly, as I see it now, I turned him down, as I was in the middle of a degree program. Well, I've had a great life and a good career, but that was probably a stupid decision.

When it comes to teaching, do you believe that students should "soak" themselves in everything available about the composers and their historical/social/cultural milieu?

I think that whatever you learn or know can enrich your understanding of what you play. But I have never been particularly scholarly in my approach. I like studying the music—how it is made and put together—more than I like studying *about* the music. I changed my mind a bit about the

value of historical context after a few summers teaching in Vienna. Walking in the footsteps of the composers, seeing where their music was played, where they lived, and even eating at the table where Schubert met with his friends, was very moving to me. I don't know if it really changed my understanding of the music, but it certainly made my connection to it more visceral.

How about examining/comparing variants often encountered in manuscripts or editions?

I try to work from *Urtext* (or original/authentic) editions and compare them to facsimile manuscripts also. But I try not to go crazy about it. (You know, *Urtext* editions often disagree with each other, which has elicited my quip: Well, take your pick, it's either/ur). As always, judgment counts for a lot. No matter what the text says, you still have to make your own decisions: how strong is that *forte*, how short is that staccato. Every aspect of musical notation involves judgment and personal discretion. Virtually nothing is specified in an exact way (except, for keyboardists, the pitches). And possibly the most important aspect of music—timing and pacing—can essentially not be notated at all! Except for big things like *ritardando* and *accelerando*, all other aspects of timing are up to the performer's discretion and involve how one responds to harmony, texture, character, etc. It's kind of incredible when you think about it—that an art which exists in time has no notation for timing!

What's your opinion of so-called historically informed performance?

I don't mind people who get involved with trying to recreate a performance as it might have sounded in the composer's lifetime. But that is not for me. Take the piano, for instance. The reason it changed so dramatically over the course of the 19th century was the desire of composers and performers for more resonance, more responsiveness, more sustaining power. It's not as if people were satisfied with the instruments of their day. They yearned, begged for change. By the end of the 19th century the piano essentially reached its present form, and a 2021 Steinway is not that different from the 1902 Steinway I own. If the worn out parts are replaced, the 100-plus model will be just as good as a new one, sometimes better. So going back to the more primitive instruments doesn't necessarily serve the music better or even honor the composer's wishes. They were the ones pushing for change. And I don't think there is any treatise that can tell you the way music was played or is supposed to be played.

It's funny that the same historically informed movement has not affected theater for the most part. Do we really want to see a Shakespeare play lit only by gas lamps and with men playing all the women's parts?

What about original instruments, fortepianos, Érards, Broadwoods, and so forth? Have you played some of these yourself?

It is always interesting to play old instruments. But it usually just makes me happier to come back to my rebuilt 1902 Steinway B.

Speaking of pianos, I was very impressed with the instrument you chose for your CDs: Is it by chance an older Steinway?

The Jordan Hall pianos I've used for my recordings are not old but they are, for the most part, wonderfully maintained, and I am lucky to work with some marvelous technicians who are able to voice the sound of the piano to the warm and mellow quality I like. Jordan Hall is a wonderful acoustical environment for concerts and recording. And I have been fortunate to have a wonderful recording engineer, Joel Gordon.

Why do you perform? (Silly question?)

Not a silly question. Performing involves a lot of work, getting nervous, being anxious. I guess some people just love it and do so much of it (think Yo-Yo Ma) that it becomes a normal part of life. I don't give that many concerts each year. So it is never completely normal, and every performance carries with it a sense of occasion. And there are probably very few performers who haven't had the thought, "There must be an easier way to make a living." (I certainly have!) But yet we keep coming back for more. When you feel that special communion with an audience, and then they tell you, after, what the experience meant to them, that they were mesmerized, how can you not want to do it again? Besides, if you love music, it is natural to want to share that love. Without listeners, the cycle of music making is incomplete.

Have you missed performing during the pandemic?

Of course. Playing and teaching on Zoom or some other computer medium just doesn't cut it. Of course, we are lucky to have had the internet during this pandemic. And with online teaching, you can reach anyone anywhere, which is wonderful. But the sound is almost always compromised. And even at its best, it is not real—nothing like being there. The best you can say about it is that it's better than nothing. I've been doing some in person teaching again and it is such a joy.

What is it about teaching that so engages you?

Everything! I enjoy learning through teaching. When you have to be convincing to a student about how something should go or be felt, you become more convinced yourself and understand more deeply. I love the idea that I am helping people to find their connection to something that means so much to them. When I teach, I understand the music more deeply myself, and the shared joy of discovery is like nothing else I can experience.

What sorts of topics do you discuss in your lectures and workshops?

I often talk to schools or teachers' groups about interpretation, how musical understanding can be taught. Some recent and forthcoming topics: "Putting the Muse Back Into Music: The Role of Inspiration"; "Head, Hand, Heart, and More: What it Takes to Make Music"; "Musical Interpretation: Method Or Magic"; "The Perils of Practice: How to Make Practicing more Purposeful." I also like to lecture on individual pieces and then play them. I can talk for an hour, easily, on one Brahms intermezzo!

How do you view your career as an administrator within the spectrum of your musical activities?

Teaching has always been at the center of my life. But I like to think of administration, whether as a department chair (I was chair of New England Conservatory's piano and chamber music departments) or as president of the Longy School of Music, or when I ran several summer chamber music programs, as a kind of extension of teaching. To help create a program and an environment—a culture, if you will—in which learning takes place, values are transmitted, and people buy into a unified mission ... that is very exciting and stimulating.

You taught for more than five decades at the New England Conservatory. Tell me how that came about and why you stayed so long?

In the spring of 1967, as I was finishing my graduate studies at Princeton, I was recommended for a job teaching theory at NEC. The same spring, Gunther Schuller was appointed NEC's new president and he wanted to interview any new faculty who were being considered for appointments. I went to Tanglewood, where he was running the contemporary music program, to be interviewed, and he was very sympathetic to my not wanting to be pigeonholed in one area. Since he himself was an eclectic musician of many talents (horn player, composer, conductor), he seemed sympathetic to my wanting to continue being diverse in my music-making. So, from the beginning, he made sure I had a joint appointment in three departments: theory, piano, and chamber music. It was fantastic! And those were years of tremendous vitality and growth at the institution, and I became an integral part of it. The newly appointed piano chair, Russell Sherman, and I became friends, and he asked me to become his assistant chair a year later. For all his brilliance, Russell was not someone who wanted to spend his time posting on bulletin boards or setting up meetings, so I was happy to help. I started proposing things for the department to do, like a weekly seminar for all the piano students, an annual honors competition and festival, etc., things that remain features of the department to this day. After a year or two he asked me to take over the chairmanship. Can you imagine? I was 28 or 29 and chairman of the NEC piano department!

I continued to coach chamber music (and actually led that department for a few years too) as well as teach Interpretive Analysis in the theory department. I also helped form the Faculty Senate and was elected its first president. I was right in the middle of all that was going on there in those days. Other opportunities came along from time to time, but NEC and Boston were too good to leave. I was lucky to land in such a place for my first job, so there was no reason to look elsewhere. But I did sometimes wonder if I'd have only one position my whole career. That's why, when the directorship of Longy came along [Longy School of Music in Cambridge, MA. Rosenbaum was director and president from 1985–2001], it seemed like a challenge and opportunity not to pass up. And when Larry Lesser (then president of NEC) asked me to remain on the faculty even while being director of Longy, I was thrilled. So it was the best of both worlds—taking on the challenge of reinvigorating a school that badly needed it, and also staying connected to a world-class conservatory.

During those years, the community school aspects of Longy grew exponentially, but we also added a Master of Music program, so the idea of Longy as a small European-style conservatory really blossomed. By the time I left, Longy was on the audition circuit of students looking for a fine small conservatory program for (mostly) graduate work. We also grew the new music program—the composer Eric Sawyer headed the composition department and created a new

music group called Longitude—and added some stellar faculty like Joseph Silverstein, and had many public events, including an annual SeptemberFest, meant to showcase the faculty and some of our best students and alumni. And during 1997 we had an extensive Schubert bi-centennial celebration—with concerts, lectures, symposia, etc. It was a heady and wonderful time that many students (and audience members) remember fondly. I still hear from students from those days who tell me it was the best time of their lives.

Any thoughts on the future of classical music in America?

For decades people have been fretting about the graying of American audiences, and the death of classical music. But I am more optimistic than that. I think that more people are listening to classical music than ever before, and playing it too. Think of the literally hundreds, possibly thousands, of community orchestras around the country. Think of the reach of the Metropolitan Opera's Live HD performances in movie theaters, think of Live from Lincoln Center. And although we have sorely missed live music during the pandemic, so many people have been reached online. Hopefully at least some of them will want to experience the real thing in person.

How does the Asian enthusiasm for Western music relate to the previous question?

In a very real way Asia is contributing a great deal toward the future of classical music. You might even say it is saving it. Many music schools, like NEC, would go out of business, or at least have a much harder time of it, without students from China and Korea. Thousands are taking up instruments in Asian countries and those countries, especially China these days, are building conservatories and concert halls at truly impressive rates.

One of the great things about the career of music that I've been able to enjoy is the travel I've been able to do. I've taught and played in Japan, for example, for at least 25 consecutive years (I've lost count) until this past pandemic year. And I've taught as recently as November 2019, just before the pandemic, in Shanghai and Beijing—my third trip to China. It's been fascinating to see that country's enormous change in the last couple of decades. Still, Japan—even though it was the first Asian country to significantly Westernize—is the country, in my view, that retains its traditional culture and way of life most strongly. There is something about the Japanese aesthetic—valuing simplicity and introspection—that is very moving to me in this complicated hi-tech and kind of loud world.

Do you believe the study of music is important in a well-rounded educational curriculum?

That was obvious to the Greeks in ancient times, and studying music is still an absolutely essential part of an education. There's been a lot of back and forth about whether Mozart makes you smarter. Surely, the discipline of studying music can spill over into other areas of learning. But the most important aspect of studying music is not that it makes you smarter academically. It's that it puts kids actively in touch with something that has been culturally valued for centuries. So much of what young people experience these days is fast-moving, ever-changing, fad-driven. Music connects them to the past, to what has come to be valued by the society, but in an active way that they can be involved with, not just learn about.

I am enjoying teaching pre-college age students now, even as young as nine years old. They are our future. And music is something that people can carry with them their whole lives. Anyone who plays music, I think, will agree that it is part of what saved them during this strange time in our history—the pandemic—when so much of life as we know it was lost. Music provided solace, comfort, and an emotional outlet. And as I tell students faced with whether to do music professionally or not, “you can be a world-renowned heart surgeon and still keep music as an important part of your life, but you can’t be a world-renowned musician and do heart surgery on the weekends as a hobby.” On the other hand, don’t take that as a reason not to go into music. If you love it and it’s what you want to do, you can always make a place for yourself in the world of music.

You told In a previous conversation you told me that even though you’re approaching 80 years of age the future is still bright with musical possibilities.

I don’t think musicians ever really retire from music. One may leave a particular job, but music goes on. I may not be teaching at the college division of NEC, but I am finding outlets for teaching and will perform as long as I am able. I’d like to record more, as I mentioned earlier, and perhaps gather some of my thoughts in articles or a book. And I would like to be doing more teaching, somewhere, sometime. I have an invitation for a visiting professorship in Taiwan and I am open to adjunct and sabbatical replacement positions. And I may finally make my official NY debut ... at 80! Now wouldn’t that make a good headline?