CHAPTER 5

Rolf Lislevand in Conversation with Randi Margrethe Eidsaa and Daniel Henry Øvrebø

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On 26 October 2020, we were so fortunate as to participate in a digital conversation with renowned early music performer and educator Rolf Lislevand. Our conversation addressed topics related to early music: research, performance, pedagogy and education. The interview was conducted by Daniel Henry Øvrebø and Randi Margrethe Eidsaa. Daniel Henry Øvrebø works with contemporary music and did his PhD in communication and musical experience of postwar modernist works for solo flute. His own chapter in this anthology relates to how contemporary musicians "quote", and otherwise refer to Baroque music, exemplified by

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Citation: Øvrebø, D. H., Eidsaa, R. M. & Lislevand, R. (2022). Rolf Lislevand in conversation with Randi Margrethe Eidsaa and Daniel Henry Øvrebø. In R. Rolfhamre & E. Angelo (Eds.), *Views on early music as representation: Invitations, congruity, performance* (MusPed:Research No. 4, Ch. 5, pp. 139–148). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.157.ch5

flautist Felix Renggli and violinist Aisha Orazbayeva. They both explore the expressive potential of Georg Philip Telemann through various contemporary approaches. Randi Margrethe Eidsaa is a professor of music didactics. In 2015 she completed her doctoral study on creative concert productions for professional musicians and children. Eidsaa teaches musicology, music pedagogy, concert production and composition. Her other contribution in this anthology is an analysis of an interdisciplinary artistic production based on repertoires from the Renaissance and the Baroque eras.

The following text is a transcription of the conversation, done by both Daniel and Randi, and with minor editing for the sake of readability.

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Rolf Lislevand [RL]: I am a performer, and have been working for 30 years as an early music instrument teacher. I started with a professorate in Germany and, simultaneously, in a tradition different from that of the mid twentieth century, became involved with the early modern repertoire, regarding very specific assumptions. My background is not primarily classical music, but belongs in a jazz/rock context, which has perhaps led me to question certain premises of doing classical music based on notions of "authenticity". I find it important to combine faithfulness to original sources with a creative and individual artistic credo, leading to the problem of [the] information gap in how "we do things".

RME: So when you reflect upon your own practice, you also include audiences and students in your approach? It's not just "tradition" anymore, it's "tradition and you".

RL: Definitely. We need to remind ourselves that the purpose of all forms of performance art is to communicate. The explanatory model of thought is such: You find yourself in a situation in which you know how a given composition was meant to be performed, and you possess the means to realise this performance today. We know which instruments were used, how they sounded, how they were played, at which tempi and so on. However should a modern audience be able to experience this as it was intended to be experienced in, for instance, the seventeenth century? An important choice is placed upon the performers. Should they decide

to still, after all, realise it in the manner that we, with a great degree of certainty, can say it was in fact realised in the seventeenth century, or should they do something else, so that the *experience* of the audience today can approach the *experience* that the seventeenth century audience may have had? There is always the possibility of finding oneself in a situation in which we have very strong evidence demonstrating how it was specifically done, but modern audiences do not, by virtue of being humans in given historical contexts, necessarily possess the same sensibility in many areas. Audiences change over time, and I think that what is important here is that we may have to change certain important musical-instrumental factors, so that the genuine content, be it aesthetic, spiritual or ethical, is actually revealed. Consequently the communicative situation dominates above all else.

DHØ: Can you say a bit more about this historical development that you indicated?

RL: There are two points in the history of music in which people were interested in placing themselves within a different standpoint as performers, so to speak. First it happened in the interwar period in Germany. They started to pick up a lot of earlier music in their repertoire and perform it on the instruments for which it was originally written. Then, for historical reasons, this practice vanished, but was resumed during the 60s, parallel to many other forms of radicalisations. In a way, early music was part of the radical attack on everything that was perceived to be conservative in one way or another. So we can think of early music performers as critiquing the classical tradition as it had come to be, because they perceived it as degenerate and far removed from its origin. So, early music performers became, in a way, 68ers or a "hippie" generation phenomenon, and they eventually produced some leading figures, who were also tremendous artists and great musicians, leading them to attain a much higher degree of credibility when performing what eventually would be called historically informed performance.

RME: Is it possible to ask where this came from? Are we talking about Southern Europe or the Scandinavian countries? Are there specific places or specific environments/milieus that this emanated from? Or is it a general change that you are referring to from the 60s?

RL: We are talking first and foremost about the countries that maintain a tradition going back to the period itself. Another phenomenon that was perhaps not so related to the "rebellious" attitude, was the fact that it was also used to highlight questions of national identity. One reason for all the attention it got was related to how it facilitated the promotion of a stronger national identity through a unique, historical national culture. So, in countries such as France, Spain – not so much in Italy because they never seem to identify as one country – and England, this became a topic and a means to focus on the country's own national history. So, France in the 1600s and 1700s, Spain even in the 1500s, and England, not least through Elizabethan music, as well as movements later in the Baroque with the development of English opera. So once again there was a connection to political development, and it was supported by a range of institutions that benefited from a sense of national identity fortified through culture. I can also add regarding this a small anecdote that is perhaps not shared so much, at least not in Germany. As I said, this revival started first in Germany in the interwar period. They started with what they called "Hausmusik" – Germans visited each other and played quintets for gamba and recorders and lute, music that they found in libraries. Eventually, this became more closely associated with propaganda for German national socialism. The Nazi Germans were very much concerned with exploiting historical German culture in their propaganda material, so they used artefacts from the German late romantic and medieval periods. In many ways, German early music acquired equal status with Richard Wagner as propaganda material. Consequentially, when the war ended, it became very difficult to reintroduce this music, due to its heavy associations with Nazi German propaganda.

DHØ: Regarding this development of performing early modern music: Is it possible to identify any current international trends? What does the big picture look like?

RL: What is interesting is that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were tremendous differences in terms of individual national styles and how they perceived music. There were lots of polemics, and our access to written sources shows in particular, tremendous polemics between French and Italian styles for instance. Now, in a

strange way, this is something I find to be the case even today. I mean, the timelines go way back, and our present modes of communication are very close and intimate, but still – one could speculate whether it's due to the mentality of the people or the national identity. I see this very clearly, because I maintain a very close relationship to and living and working in Germany, France and Italy. It is almost parodically how, for instance, France struggles when performing high quality German and Italian music. And whenever they do, one can hear loud and clear that it is performed by French musicians. The same is also the case for Italians and Germans. In any case, it relates to very specific musical issues – if you listen to Italian musicians performing French baroque music, then you can know in advance that there are issues of tempo and articulation, and the general force of expression will be performed in a different way because the musicians are Italian.

DHØ: Yeah, I noticed things like this when I spent a year at the Hochschule für Musik in Würzburg, Germany. Even when it comes to repertoire from the mid-to-late twentieth century, they were more preoccupied with German composers – Heinz Holliger, Hans Werner Henze and so on – rather than French composers, such as Betsy Jolas, whose music I was studying at the time.

RME: How do you clarify your own position between research and performance?

RL: There is an emerging trend towards combining these two roles, in terms of what is considered research activity and what is considered artistic activity. In a way, I think it sometimes seems wrong to think that these two can be united. In the early music department, in particular, there remains for me a distinction between these two. I've never seen anyone who has successfully managed to break down that separation. Musicology seems to me still to be predicated on a very old idea of what science is, an idea that goes all the way back to Newton. The notion of verifiability or accountability grants a work of research the status of "scientific". There are aspects of music and the arts that are not concerned with this. The most important thing for me is how research and performance meet in this, as I mentioned earlier, "empty space" and how this serves as inspiration. Of course, it is essential to be able to describe and

systematise what has happened throughout the history of music. But as a performer, I know that research only gets me so far regarding accuracy and knowledge of a certain practice. This is a bit special because research on a particular type of music that has not survived due to aural traditions is preoccupied with everything that is written down. We need to bear in mind that the reasons for describing things related to music and the arts are completely different today than what they were in the seventeenth century. In that period, when you wrote something down, it was for different reasons than it is for us today. We tend to forget that in that period, the most important element of handing down artistic impulses was that it happened directly: orally, not written. It also happened within the same regional and cultural space. A consequence of this was then a lack of motivation to write such impulses down.

Furthermore, the selection of [the] information available was then entirely conditioned around that. There is something I've often thought about: What we have of documentation from the Renaissance and Baroque originated shortly after the invention of book printing. Gutenberg's invention was in many ways the social media of the time, because it facilitated what was (at the time) speedy duplication of cultures. If we consider what has happened in our time, during the last two decades, with social media and the ability to communicate, extremely quickly, very private and personal things – it makes me think that, let's say for instance, in 200 years some researchers may want to figure out what happened in our time based on data material from Silicon Valley consisting of text messages. It could end up being completely detached from what the reality was, entirely contingent on the medium of communication. It seems that this was also the case at that time in the Renaissance. They were so entertained by the idea that one could write a preface to a score and it would be published, that they didn't think through whether what they wrote was essential or meaningful or important. Now, in terms of source criticism, it's important to question precisely how much authority should be given to these descriptions, even though they could be very well written and could aptly describe a given musical phenomenon. But the question remains whether the selection of texts remains representative. If it isn't, we are left with a radically different image of that period and the stylistic phenomena in question.

DHØ: Yes, this is an exciting way of thinking because as a musician and a researcher, I think it is possible to combine this distinction appropriately so that it also serves the work of art itself, and not merely a scientific work that stands on its academic legs.

RE: I am thinking of a concept in music pedagogy that is now often referred to when discussing music curricula in schools: the relational turn. According to this perspective, each music activity situation is concerned with relational factors. You mentioned the topic of communication, and my question is whether the demand for communication is being taken a little too far. We are so fascinated by communication that maybe this could mean that we may forget the value of the music itself.

RL: Despite what I have already said, I belong with those who believe that the value of the work is judged to be higher, and is also more respected when you have developed deeper knowledge about it. Consequently, you may use or re-create the context that was relevant when the musical work was created. Finally, this is what we are doing. We believe that if one can re-create the conditions that were relevant at the time the piece of music was created, then this will be the best approach. Although I started from another perspective by saying that one could suffer a break in communication with the audience and then face a dilemma, I think it is fascinating to have academic and solid information when musicians start the process of re-creating a work, even for audiences today.

RME: When working with improvisation, is the state of feeling "free" the point of departure, or is it the knowledge of the work you have become acquainted with? Which is the best starting point for improvisation?

RL: Improvisation is precisely what turns the whole concept of historical authenticity into a practice of construction. In fact, it must be thrown away since it is no longer valid. Because the moment you improvise, this is a kind of spontaneous composition. And the moment you compose something new in an old-style framework, it is no longer an authentic continuation of that style. In a way, you should think that if you improvise, then you have to play the concert that was the day after the last concert was played at the time, and which never took place. It would be a kind of concept, as well.

DHØ: I sense a similar parallel between the role of an academic and the role of a performer. There is a kind of ethical responsibility in this. Perhaps

in the last twenty or thirty years, at least in social research, this understanding of the researcher's role has gained greater relevance. The researcher is not just a neutral observer who works with a phenomenon from a distance, but he or she takes part in something that can always unfold in various ways. There is a crucial ethical responsibility in the decisions the researcher makes. And this is a bit like what you are talking about; the way we play and make choices when we either choose to improvise or relate to a kind of authentic ideal.

RME: W*ould you say that there are some unique things in the pedagogical practices that we work with, where you see changes? You have been working as a performer for many years. Are there some things you feel are essential in higher music education? As an experienced musician, what would you think characterises present-day performing music education?*

RL: This is an important and, also a difficult question. Perhaps one thing I experience is that in many of the institutions I have been in contact with and worked for, there has been a strong desire to be creative and trendsetting. In a way, institutions aim to be historically upfront, and at the forefront of what happens in music cultural life in society in general. I am not sure if this is possible, nor if such goals should be the main task of a higher music education institution. I think of the fact that in Norway, people tend to call higher music education institutions music conservatories, we preserve something,[1] in the sense of storing objects. Perhaps we sometimes store things without necessarily asking if we have chosen the most important elements.

And this has been one of the hallmarks of music institutions: When a phenomenon, a musical style, or a musical practice becomes old enough and clearly defined, it enters the conservatory or a college in order to be passed on further. However, there are many institutions that seem to want it the other way around: The institutions themselves create new styles and practices. I do not know, in fact, how far it is possible to sustain this development.

I experience that what we communicate to our students is a mixture of methods for and knowledge of how to progress in certain areas.

1 Norwegian: *konservere*.

And then, of course, we need to work with original material. Students ask for information and they seek knowledge about music. But, for the students, the most important experiences in their lives often occur *after* their education is completed. On the other hand, these experiences probably wouldn't have happened without having completed their degrees in higher music education.

RME: So, one needs to consider the balance between what to take care of and what we present among recent cultural trends. You do not always need to mirror a cultural "frontline".

RL: No, exactly. And there are a lot of differences in Europe in terms of how strong a country's national history is. What is unique in Norway is that in our music education we work mostly with music that does not have a particular Norwegian national history, since it is not our national music. And there are some continents that have the same situation, such as South and North America and many Asian countries, where European art and music occupy such firm positions. But still, European music is not part of the history of these countries. From my perspective, there may be a minor reference problem to understanding something based on one's own culture. However, it can also be an advantage, because one does not have the burden of the whole European tradition and culture on your shoulders when pursuing a free-thinking and creative artistic career, which I find very good as well.

In my experience from Scandinavian music education, we tend towards a very liberal relationship to what we are used to, especially compared to Germany. Here in Norway, we approach a lot of things without necessarily relating them to a bigger historical or cultural context. This is something I have always experienced. I maintain a deep respect for Norwegian musicians, in particular in the tradition of contemporary and improvised music. This is a unique Scandinavian phenomenon which began with Jan Garbarek: a type of Scandinavian music that's not exactly jazz, but more impressionistic improvised music. This tradition is an innovation based on the background we have in Norway, liberated in particular from American improvised music, but also from other European styles in general. It manages to create something that is connected to the Norwegian way of life, our feelings for nature and

space, which can be considered distinctly Norwegian compared to Central European music.

DHØ: Perhaps a final question. In terms of teaching practices, when you talk about how to make choices where you do not have sufficient knowledge to know precisely how to perform strictly, in a credible way, in accordance with the source material: How does that dialectic work in specific teaching situations?

RL: As a teacher or supervisor in higher music performance education you may focus on current historical knowledge, and then emphasise that there are multiple approaches towards interpreting this historical information, before quickly adding that this is not everything there is. As part of the work process, you need to relate to the material in a way that *you* feel is important. We have the principle of freedom under responsibility: It is essential to know what one is doing differently, and perhaps even doing contradictory to the rules, thereby calling things what they are. It is very much a matter of acquiring as much as possible of the source material you know, then trying to understand it alongside source criticism: Is this a representative selection of information according to the topic in question, for whom was it written, why was it written, and can it be understood in any other way? Furthermore, when you have completed this process, you cannot get very much further when trying to view it from different perspectives. The remaining lack of knowledge then becomes a space for creative artistic freedom. What always applies to artistic activity is personal taste and universality, which means whether one's choices are recognised as valuable in a community. This is a standard criterion for all kinds of artistic activity. This is what applies, and there are no principles and no "Baroque police" that can override my decisions. This is the essential component, and we may then use this lack of information as a source of creativity.