

VIOLINISTS JOSEPH SILVERSTEIN AND AARON ROSAND BRIDGE TRADITION AND TODAY

Sharing Their Professional Experiences and Teaching Students to Teach Themselves

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

When Joseph Silverstein and Aaron Rosand sat at auditions for prospective Curtis violin students last spring, Mr. Silverstein made an observation. “I remarked to Mr. Rosand,” he said during a telephone interview in July, “that the level of playing at the auditions was in many respects vastly superior to what was expected of someone graduating in 1945.”

Both men know first-hand what Curtis was like in 1945, which was Mr. Silverstein’s first year as a student, Mr. Rosand’s second. In those days, they recall, the distinguished faculty had high expectations and strict standards, and the school was more formal. They dressed for their lessons with Curtis director Efreim Zimbalist as for a concert, including jackets and ties. Mr. Zimbalist was available outside of lessons for brief, scheduled appointments only. “The parental aspect of teaching was not really a part of the 19th-century conservatory philosophy,” Mr. Silverstein said.

In 2002, such formality is an exception. “An educational institution has to redefine itself periodically, as the needs for that institution change and as society changes,” said Mr. Silverstein, “and I think that Curtis has moved forward in a most extraordinarily flexible manner.”

He continued, “Today, I feel that the teachers on the faculty at the Curtis take a much more vibrant interest in the totality of their students’ lives than the teachers did in the era in which I was a student.”

Mr. Rosand would agree. He offers an example of this transformation as he bridges the world of the Internet and wireless phones with the days before television. “I, for one,” he said of his student years, “was listening to the radio and listening to classical music all day long when I wasn’t playing. The radio was always on with opera or with symphonic music, so that I had a thorough understanding not just of the Beethoven Violin Concerto but of all the symphonies he wrote and everything else that he wrote.”

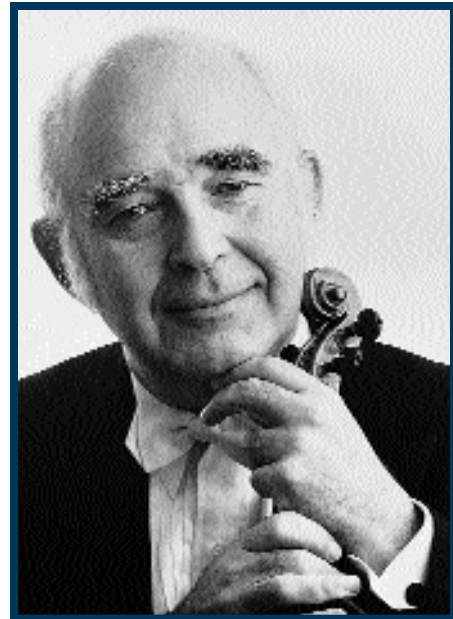
Such immersion into a broader scope of music, and culture in general, is less common among his own students, he said. So he encourages them to visit museums, read more, and connect history to the arts. “It puts them on track,” Mr. Rosand said. “Violin playing only reflects what you are as a human being.”

The musical careers of both Mr. Silverstein and Mr. Rosand, and their observations about the past and present, reflect some of the common ground and diverse pursuits that grow from a Curtis education.

A COLLABORATIVE CAREER

“One of the most important facets of playing professionally, both in orchestras and in chamber music, is learning how to enjoy the act of merging with other personalities,” said Joseph Silverstein (Violin ’50). “This is not a sacrifice of creativity. However, it is using your creativity in a slightly different way: to be part of a performance rather than the dominating force in a performance as when one is a soloist or a conductor. And that is something that can only be learned in professional life.”

He speaks from experience — that of a concertmaster, conductor and chamber musician. Most of Mr. Silverstein’s orchestra career was spent with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which he joined in 1955 as last chair in the second violin section. A few



Joseph Silverstein ~ PHOTO: MICHAEL SCHOENFELD

years later, he advanced to the first violin section, and in 1961, at age 29, he became the concertmaster. In the meantime, Mr. Silverstein founded and performed with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, which included his colleagues and fellow alumni Jules Eskin (Violoncello ’52) and Burton Fine (Violin ’48).

After conducting in educational settings and for the B.S.O. during emergency situations, in 1971 he was also named assistant conductor of the orchestra. “One thing led to another,” he said, “and I became more and more active as a conductor — never, of course, to the exclusion of playing the violin, for which I am very grateful. It gave me a dual career.” In 1983, Mr. Silverstein retired as concertmaster and assistant conductor of the B.S.O. to become the music director of the Utah Symphony, a position he held until 1998.

Since then, he has served as an artistic adviser to numerous North American orchestras, helping to maintain their musical standards by assisting with their season programming and selection of guest conductors while they seek a new music director. He has worked in this capacity with orchestras in Hartford, Kansas City, Toledo, Winnipeg, Baltimore and Louisville, among others. “As in the case of the Florida Philharmonic, where I am involved at present,” said Mr. Silverstein, “I do not have an interest in the position of music director on a permanent

basis, which allows me to be very objective about the repertoire that is chosen for all of the candidates for the post of music director. ... I have to choose repertoire that is not only attractive to subscribers but also music which is challenging for the orchestra and gives them a chance to have a really good critical assessment of the candidates for the post of music director.”

The multiple, collaborative facets of Mr. Silverstein’s professional life are evident in his recent activities. The musical celebrations for his 70th birthday this year stretched for weeks surrounding March 21 (also the birthday of J.S. Bach). They included a performance with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, of which he is an artist member. There was also a solo appearance with the Utah Symphony, a recital at Curtis, and a recording of the complete Bach sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin.

Traveling is a frequent component of Mr. Silverstein’s career, which has taken him on tours throughout the United States, Japan, Israel and Europe. As either a soloist or a conductor, he has appeared with more than 100 orchestras. He often fits a museum visit into his travel itinerary. “My wife and I are devotees of the visual arts,” he said. “We happen to love the Philadelphia Museum because I am a great Thomas Eakins fan.”

Occasionally, Mr. Silverstein slips over to the museum when he’s in town to teach at Curtis. He also teaches at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Mass. “I feel that the most important thing a teacher can do for students,” he said, “is to teach them how to work productively and not waste time. Our job as teachers is to develop the self-critical faculties of the students so that they can really evaluate their own playing and hear their own playing as others do, and thus be able to improve those aspects of their playing that they feel are not satisfactory.”

His first teacher was his father, Bernard, a violin teacher as well as a music teacher in Detroit public schools. Next, Mr. Silverstein studied with Josef Gingold and, after Curtis



Aaron Rosand in 1998, instructing Stephanie Jeong. ~ PHOTO: DAVID SWANSON

and Army service, he returned to Detroit, where he studied with Mischa Mischakoff. But the music all started when he was just a little boy. “At the age of three, when it became apparent that I had absolute pitch,” Mr. Silverstein said, “I was immediately presented with an eighth-size violin. There was no looking back. I’ve never thought of any other instrument for any length of time, and I’ve always loved playing the violin.”

STUDYING WITH THE GRAND MASTERS

Aaron Rosand (Violin '48) also picked up the violin at the age of three, when it was determined that he had perfect pitch. His father, a cabaret singer from Poland, had always wanted to play the violin. “He was not permitted to by his father, who had different plans for him,” said Mr. Rosand, an Indiana native. “So I took to it.”

He took to it earnestly enough to study at the Chicago School of Music with Leon Sametini, then at Curtis with Efreim Zimbalist. His Curtis studies were interrupted by the Army Special Services in 1945-47, when he played concerts of short, virtuosic pieces for American troops still stationed in the Pacific. After graduating from Curtis in 1948, he made his New York debut and began coast-to-coast touring as a recitalist and soloist with orchestra.

Since then, Mr. Rosand’s performance career has emphasized 19th-century virtuoso works. In Europe and Japan during the 1960’s, he championed the work of Eugène Ysaÿe. “I was one of the few violinists that was even playing Ysaÿe at that time,” he said. “And today, most competitions have [a work by Ysaÿe] as required repertoire.”

Mr. Rosand’s signature piece, *Poème* by Ernest Chausson, was written for Ysaÿe. The composition made a lasting impression on Mr. Rosand when he learned it from Mr. Sametini, using Ysaÿe’s score. Mr. Sametini had frequently appeared as a soloist with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra under Ysaÿe. “As I speak to you,” Mr. Rosand said during a telephone interview from his home in Connecticut, “there’s a picture here right over my desk of Sametini and Ysaÿe. [Sametini] had some of his music and that was a gift that Sametini had given to me of Chausson’s *Poème* with Ysaÿe’s original markings in it.

“Having a piece of music like that with fingerings and bowings and notations of a grand master, it gives you a good idea of the way it was played and, perhaps, intended, because the piece was written for Ysaÿe. Any time you pick up an edition that is, for example, edited by Fritz Kreisler or edited by Jascha Heifetz, and if you try to do exactly what is written — about bowing, and analytical placement of bow, position of bow, how much bow, etc. — but following everything,

fingerings and bowings, you are in a sense taking a lesson with that artist.”

That’s what Mr. Rosand did with Chausson’s *Poème*. He offers his students a chance to continue the music-making tradition. “I don’t give exact fingerings and bowings from Ysaÿe, although there are a few things that I still carry on,” he said. “But I always inform my students that this is the way Ysaÿe had done, and if the shoe fits, then I let them wear it. But I never enforce fingerings because no hand is the same. I will give them my part if they want it as reference, but then I like to see what they can do with it. This is terribly important because it is the role of a teacher to teach students how to teach themselves, because you can’t carry on forever with a teacher, and I want my youngsters to develop a fingering sense, a bowing sense. But they should be aware of a tradition.”

‘What is important is that we’re developing a sound musician.’

— Aaron Rosand

Mr. Rosand joined the Curtis faculty in 1981, upon Mr. Zimbalist’s request, after Ivan Galamian passed away. He now holds the Dorothy Richard Starling Chair in Violin Studies in memory of Mr. Zimbalist. He teaches in the same studio where he once studied. “It brings back these fond memories,” he said, “of walking in and always being somewhat nervous to play for the grand master, and then you rarely got a compliment from him. You knew you did well when you didn’t have to bring [the same piece] back the next week.”

Mr. Rosand requires his students to learn a broader repertoire than he did. Mr. Zimbalist, he said, “always felt that the last great concerto of the 20th century was the Sibelius concerto [written in 1904]. And I don’t recall anyone studying Prokofiev, or Shostakovich, or Bartók, that kind of repertoire, or Alban Berg.”

In addition to repertoire, Mr. Rosand focuses on technique with his students. “Of course, people accepted to the Curtis Institute are already accomplished players, otherwise they wouldn’t be here,” he said. “Technique has to be continually groomed. But at the same time, what is most important is that we’re developing a sound musician — we’re developing a person who understands music,

who feels music, who wants to make music their life. And from that, the atmosphere, the ambience of Curtis is remarkable.”

Mr. Rosand’s students may be recognizable among their peers. Look for the ones without shoulder rests, for starters. “In the grand tradition of violin playing, great players never used shoulder rests,” he said. “The violin has to become part of you, your body. You had to learn what the violin felt like, and the body acted as a sounding board.”

A violinist should be looking at the instrument’s scroll, straight down the finger board, with the left elbow tucked under the instrument, he explained. A shoulder rest can throw off that desired alignment. One of the results, according to Mr. Rosand, is a distinctive sound that is missing from many violinists today. “Being at the fingertips, and the hand being rounded to the string,

is an integral part of a person producing an individual sound,” he said. “That vibrato and the sound coming from that fingertip can only be achieved when the instrument is being held properly.

“And I’m a stickler for that, unless the person has an unusually long neck. Then I’ll let them get away with something,” he said. “Now, I’m not saying anything about the right hand — which is just as important — but the basic position of the left hand, which then achieves the individuality of sound which is so necessary for every performer. Not only individuality, but the beauty of sound.”

Mr. Rosand said, “When you see my students, they all look a bit different when they hold their instruments. But they look comfortable and they look right.”

This fall, his students will be among the violin section of Curtis’s symphony orchestra when he performs the Sibelius concerto at Philadelphia’s Verizon Hall. Mr. Rosand has been practicing, which he does continually. “Especially at my age,” the 75-year-old said. “You can’t get rusty too long. If you let it go, those fingers don’t move as fast. And I certainly want to continue to be a role model as long as I possibly can.” ☺