Sound Expertise – Episode 6

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS
Jesse Rodin, Will Robin

Jesse Rodin 00:00
Maybe we have these three people, in this very intimate intensive environment, singing directly to another group of people, and conveying something quite powerful. I mean, the texts of these songs, they hover around similar sets of themes, usually unrequited love. But Wow, I mean, it's often pretty heavy. My only sorrow is that I'm not dead. It's the way one of Ockeghem's songs begins. Right? If you take that seriously, I mean, if we think they're not joking around, then you have to find some way of conveying that.

[Music] 00:28

Will Robin 00:49
If you're someone who cares a lot about say, Beethoven, there are things that you know for certain -- what Donald Rumsfeld used to call known knowns. We know that Beethoven wrote nine symphonies, 32 piano sonatas, one not so great opera. Although there's always the unlikely chance of a new discovery of a Beethoven piece, we generally have a sense of what Beethoven composed and what he didn't. And having that knowledge be standardized for a couple hundred years, alongside a seamless tradition of performances of Beethoven's music, means that we have been able to devote a lot of time to figuring out what makes a performance of that music sound great, and what it means to bring it to life. But what if the history behind the music that you cared about was not so cut and dry? What if you weren't sure who even composed it, or who performed it, or where it was performed, because it had been confined to dusty archives for many centuries. If you are a scholar of this music, say, the polyphonic vocal music of the Renaissance, you would have to dedicate your career to answering much more basic questions, who composed it and when; who performed it and where. You would create new additions of old manuscripts while puzzling over how to correctly name and date them. You would spend a lot of time debating with your colleagues questions like, was this music written by the famous composer Josquin? Or has it instead been misattributed? For decades these questions have preoccupied musicologists who study early music, and rightfully so. But as my guest today makes clear, the basic questions of who, what, where and when don't tell us everything. Because when we get caught up in issues, like say attribution -- who wrote the music -- we can miss out on the crucial *why* question, the reason that the music existed in the first place hundreds of years ago, to be sung and heard in real time. This is Sound Expertise, and I'm your host, Will Robin. Today I'm talking to the musicologist Jesse Rodin, an associate professor at Stanford, who has spent many years trying to bring the music of the Renaissance back to life, not just reconstructing the notes and words of centuries-old manuscripts, but trying to reconstruct the lived experience of the distant past. He has

published extensively on this era, leads a vocal ensemble dedicated to this music, and oversees a large-scale initiative called the Josquin Research Project. I hope that you enjoy our conversation.

[music] 03:12

Will Robin 03:24
I've been reading some of the work you've sent me, and one of the really fascinating papers that you sent makes use of martial arts manuals and cookbooks from the 15th century, to kind of make some interesting points about music from this period. Why martial arts manuals and cookbooks to talk about Renaissance music?

Jesse Rodin 03:45
So the problem is that we don't have any sources that actually talk about Renaissance music in the way we want. And so I was trying to grapple with that problem. I mean, I think there are good reasons for why we don't. They boil down a little bit to the sort of unpleasant circumstance that polyphonic music wasn't that important to most people in its details…

Will Robin 04:06
As opposed to cooking and martial arts...

Jesse Rodin 04:09
Well, right. And other things like painting that, you know, you would commission, and *you* had to be in the painting. So maybe they have some documents about ... payment records, but also plans for what needs to be in there and what shouldn't be in there. Whereas with music, the details... maybe we know that it needs to happen in some way, but it doesn't matter so much when and where and what's in it, exactly. So that's the problem. And then the, you know, it's really a kind of shot in the dark in a way, but what I'm trying to do is ask the question, how do they think about time bound experiences, time bound, aesthetic experiences, you know, in general. And we have ... all we have are these particular kinds of sources, which are each in their own genre. A cookbook is a very particular kind of thing, as is a martial arts manual, but they begin to get us at least toward the idea that they care about details, and they're not embarrassed by them, or they're not afraid to give you a long, long list of details of moves, of, you know, recipes, with just to do this, and then do this, and then do this, it sort of proves something I think we already knew, but it's nice to see it in various places, which is that they, they're willing to go down to the micro microscopic level and walk you through an experience, or what should be part of an experience. And I think that when you look at the way they compose music, they think about composition in a similar way. This is not as sometimes characterized -- is not a generalized sound bath, but something that's really poignant and vital from moment to moment. So it's sort of the background of the kind of argument I want to make.

Will Robin 05:43
And so, I mean, in a way, I guess a score is kind of like a cookbook, in that it is a set of instructions, right? But what you're feeling is missing from the kind of documentary record in this period is really a sense of how people experienced this music.

Jesse Rodin 06:00
That's right. That's right. I mean, first of all, the analogy only goes so far, right? But it is... but there's something there. Yeah, they don't tell us that. What we have in the way of comments are generally from outsiders to the practice, folks who show up... lay people who show up and say things about how sweet it sounds, how angelic heavenly voices, which is all very nice, but it's almost useless.

Will Robin 06:23
So generic that it doesn't...

Jesse Rodin 06:25
Yeah. And then when you get into the styles, and the pieces and the genres, and you realize that -- wow, they're working so hard, the composers are, and presumably, the performers are working so hard, from second to second, minute to minute, to make these very dramatic, I would say very gripping experiences. And you can see that in the musical language. How do we get access to that?

Will Robin 06:47
And so who are the kind of main composers that you're engaging with in when you talk about this kind of aesthetic experience that's happening in the 15th century? And what are the kind of main genres that they're working in?

Jesse Rodin 06:57
Yeah, so I mean, the most famous composers going sort of one generation to the next, are Guillaume Dufay, Johannes Ockeghem, and Josquin Desprez; those sort of cover the -- long 15th century as like we call it. But actually in recent years, I've tried to cast as wide a net as possible, doing a lot of anonymous music, and a lot of music by composers whose names aren't as familiar across the the major genres, which are polyphonic mass, settings of the ordinary of the mass; motets, which is a grab bag of a genre that includes all sorts of Latin texted sacred music, and songs, above all French songs, _chansons_, which are overall in this period in a series of fixed poetic forms that have associated musical forms: Rondeau, Virelai, and Ballade. And so those have been the centers of gravity, but in you know, recent months actually, I've been working also on Italian Carnival songs, and the Lauda, and all sorts of other kinds of music that are being made at the time.

Will Robin 08:04
And so I mean, a lot of I think musicologist, even musicologists who work on early music, will focus on one composer, or maybe even one book of music, or maybe even just like two or three pieces. And you seem to be tackling a lot of different stuff -- like, what is... what do you get out of handling so much different music from this period that you wouldn't get if you just look at a famous mass by Josquin or something like that?

Jesse Rodin 08:30
Well, it's extremely daunting for one thing, and humbling. Because you realize how as a field, I think it's fair to say, we're really not there yet. And that was my feeling writing my Josquin book, actually, that it was just the beginning of wrapping our arms around these styles, thinking about how one composer

interacted with other composers in the same institution, how their styles intersect or don't intersect. So in a way, it's that same question but in a broader frame, because I think there are certain stylistic norms that cut across these genres. There's a certain world that they inhabit, I mean, and that world evolves over the decades, of course. But you can begin to get texture for how it changes and where and when, and how these individual genres, and sometimes their associated formal schemes, afford possibilities for composers that then performers can take advantage of. I'm interested in both sides of that question.

Will Robin 09:26
And so kind of back -- and I want to talk more about this big project that you're kind of working on now -- But backing up a little bit like, how did you get into all of this music? From a scholarly perspective? Are you someone who sang this music growing up? Like how did you kind of immerse yourself in this world and decide you wanted to spend the rest of your life researching it?

Jesse Rodin 09:43
It's a great question with a strange answer, which is that I didn't grow up with it at all. I grew up with a huge amount of music in my ear, and singing a lot of music, even in choral situations, but not with this stuff. And it was very late, really, as an undergraduate at U Penn that I discovered this music, and it was thanks to some great teachers there -- Norman Smith, Laurence Bernstein, Crystle Collins Judd -- that I was drawn to this repertoire where it seemed to me at the time, and it still does that, you know, this is the only place where you can go for four voice music where all four voices are just about equally interesting and exciting, and you're part of...

Will Robin 09:48
What was your vocal range?

Jesse Rodin 10:20
Uh, kind of baritone, yeah, a little flexible.

Will Robin 10:23
So those are more interesting parts in this than they might be in other contexts. .

Jesse Rodin 10:28
Definitely. And just the feeling of being part of this polyphonic web that can at times be very dense and very complex, and at that moment, for me very hard to make sense of, and it just drew me in through concerts. As a freshman I sang an Ockeghem mass, which was ... at the time felt almost impossible, but it was a great entree into the stuff. And just through luck of studying with some of these wonderful people I mentioned, I found myself in a graduate program at Harvard and getting deeper and deeper into the world, thanks again to other faculty I came into contact with.

Will Robin 11:04
And as you got deeper, how did you ... Where did you see that kind of lacuna? The gaps in what -- I mean, this is ... this being I think, a huge field! Like a, you know, this is kind of like at the center of what musicology has been for a very long time. Right. So, it's often, you know, there are all these areas that

people like me are working in, where it's like, it's wide open, there's, you know... but this is, you know, not... it's not something that's been under-researched either, right?

Jesse Rodin 11:30
Yes. And that also was daunting as I started. And I said, You know, I think I want to work on Josquin. And people said, are you crazy, don't you know, first of all, how nasty it is. But second of all, how... you know how big the literature is, and...

Will Robin 11:40
how nasty in terms of the battles around the scholarship already?

Jesse Rodin 11:44
Yeah, there are battles around the scholarship, although, at the time I entered, they were dying down a bit. And also, I think they tended to be concentrated around the biography, which at that time, was undergoing, you know, massive shifts, and I really was protected from those. In fact, I was really, I felt embraced by the Josquin community, they were happy to have a younger person working on this stuff. And, and so, you know what I... as I read the literature, what I felt was, on the one hand a sense of awe at how much had been done, how much archival work; how much, you know, work with the sources; you know, we really had, through decades of hard, hard work, gotten our arms around so much. But on the other hand, you know, I felt pretty dissatisfied with the discourse around the music. It felt like it was often kind of... either yoked into certain narratives that felt inappropriate for what the music was actually doing, or it just didn't engage at a sufficient level of detail or with sufficient empathy with what I saw in the pieces from, at that time, a fairly narrow experience. But over time, you know, I found my way to the writings of certain scholars who I think were doing more of that kind of thing. And I slowly found what I hoped was my own voice in that picture.

Will Robin 12:58
And so when you talk about engaging with the music. I mean, part of it is obviously, you know, spending a lot of time with these scores. But you also write about this idea of kind of music as a lived experience. What does that kind of mean to you? And how does that kind of relate to what you're trying to do in this and your other projects.

Jesse Rodin 13:17
From the very beginning, the way I learned this stuff was to... was through various means, but it involved listening to recordings on repeat, I would take the commuter rail from Philly back to New York where I lived and I would listen to a Kyrie 12 times before moving on to the Gloria... [laughs] crazy stuff! It involved playing the pieces into Finale, you know, pieces that weren't recorded, maybe, in real time, to kind of hear the piece build up as I entered the voices, singing it myself, singing from notation, getting together with others, sort of score study, every method I could find to kind of get into it -- because it seemed like this was singers' music, this was music that wants to be heard, and that has a kind of drive and life to it, that, to some extent, I heard in the recordings, but to some extent, I felt I needed more work. And so as I began working with better and better singers, I felt like I was beginning to kind of unlock some of the music's secrets. And that's a journey that I've been on since the beginning, and that I'm very much still on, it feels like actually only in the last year or so, has my

ensemble -- has cut circle -- gotten to a point where we feel like we have made real progress and getting closer to what this music can be.

Will Robin 14:30
How do you... I mean, the kinds of secrets that you are talking about... Like what, what's an example of something where you feel like, looking at this music on a sheet of paper, on a manuscript says one thing, but learning it, like internalizing it as a singer, like what does that bring out of it? I mean, even its specific example from the kind of music that you're looking at.

Jesse Rodin 14:50
Sure. I mean, there's so many ... to take a song, you know, we just recorded all of Ockeghem's songs, and one of the most famous is the Virelai "Ma bouche rit" ...

[music] 14:56

Jesse Rodin 14:57
One of the most famous, this Virelai "Ma bouche rit," is this stunning thing. And there are many recordings and some of them are lovely. But what we did, what I did through this process was trying to memorize all the poems, first of all, and more or less memorize all the music, and once you know a lot of songs, and once you can kind of pit them one against the other, you see where the special moments are. And you also start to have ideas about how to work through the forms, because these forms involve two musical sections, A and B, and you're going back and forth between A and B, with sometimes the same text, sometimes a different text. But the poems are not these static things. And I think that the performance tradition and to some extent the scholarly tradition, have given the impression that it's kind of like you read the phone book, and then it's done. And I think someone like Christopher Page has called that view into question. But I think more can be done. And so sometimes in a piece like that, to give a very specific example, there's an A section which is the end of the first part and ultimately the end of the whole song. And then there's a B section which is contrasting. And when you get to B, there's a change of mensuration sign, one of these obscure symbols that tells you something about the meter, but also the tempo. And that's... the new sign tells you to accelerate. And in all the performances, I've heard... almost all the performances I've heard, there's no change of tempo. So just by kind of taking on board this basic notational information and singing it that way, you realize that -- Wow, there's a huge change of character in the poem. And lo and behold, that comes across with dramatic textural change, change of tempo, change of affect. And then when you go back to the A section with new words, the drama is increased because the contrast is that much greater. So this is the kind of thing we're starting to feel like we can get at.

Will Robin 17:21
So it seems like in some sense, the performance tradition was this kind of like beautiful wash of sound in which every line is like balanced, and you can hear everything very clearly, but maybe there's not a huge sense of like, I guess some drama through the performance, and what you're getting at is almost like what's treat this like a Schubert song or something where, where like, when it comes back again, it's different and every singer knows to do it differently or whatever.

Jesse Rodin 17:47
Yeah, exactly. And that idea opens me up to critique so you know, you're taking a romantic ideology and pasting it into the fifteenth century, but I just can't accept that for a minute. I mean, this is a period where from everything we have, you know, emotions are not something that are hidden; emotions are out there. And the you know, the Anglican choral tradition mixed with some sort of, well, some version of Bel Canto technique have resulted in this sound that -- really built up by the English choral tradition of the 1980s, and following, I'd say that did a lot for us, you know, I don't want to knock that because the Tallis scholars for example, showed us how shimmeringly beautiful it can be, how it can be in time and in tune and pristine and you can hear everything. And without that, I don't know that I'd be here at all. But I do think there's this tendency to sort of map on this generous church acoustic onto a repertory that ... even sacred music was often sung inside chapels and pretty intimate settings, right. The choice of tempo, timbre, vocal technique, all of those things come together, combined with just what we see on the page, I think to invite a very different reading, one that's much more engaged. If it's a song, we're talking about the words we are setting, it is setting a text. And I think just the sources by themselves indicate that the singers would have had those texts basically memorized, and the music, too.

Will Robin 19:12
So what are the kinds of sources? I mean, besides the scores? What are the sources that help tell you ... that are kind of driving your direction in terms of how you interpret this music?

Jesse Rodin 19:21
So some of it is what we don't have. The more you know about the Bel Canto technique and its origins, the more you realize that it probably doesn't apply to music this far back. And so all the things that voice teachers tell you to do, drop the larynx, create all this space, make this rounded sound, chances are low that they would have done that with any regularity in this period. So what happens when you do the other thing, and when everything like the instruments of the time is forward, and placement is forward, the larynx is up, you're singing a little bit like we speak. And suddenly final sonorities ring in the room and this totally different way. When we record, we bring the microphones very close, and create an acoustic that even if it's a church acoustic, reflects the experience of someone who's pretty close to the singers. And again, while the details snap into place, rhythmic gestures that in one recording or one context might feel kind of limp, suddenly scream, because the singer is huffing and puffing maybe in a high part of the range, the tempo is brisk. The phrase moves, and when combined with everything going on in the other voices, it can be very, very dramatic. So the goal, you know, is not to have a one setting that we apply to everything. The goal is actually the opposite. It's to have a flexible technique and a flexible approach that tries to honor what we see in terms of the words and the music as it changes across time and across genre.

Will Robin 20:47
What kind of pushback have you gotten for this?

Jesse Rodin 20:50
So far, none. But I have to say that we have ... all the Ockeghem songs are being released this May, and another album of hard masses, anonymous masses, being released in September. And it's really

here that we're showcasing this new approach. The album's we have out reflect this method to some extent, but it'll be once these albums drop that we that we get the flack we deserve.

Will Robin 21:14
Great! We'll look forward to that. And so, kind of moving from performance to you're working on this book on form and 15th century music. And how does all this work apply to how you're, I guess, maybe conceptualizing or reconceptualizing musical form in this period?

Jesse Rodin 21:30
Yeah. And I've been moving away just so you know, moving away from the word form, because it implies...

Will Robin 21:35
All right, OK, nix that!

Jesse Rodin 21:36
No no, it's quite all right. But it implies a certain tendency... it's hard to get away from a certain sort of stasis, you see, in the word form or architectural form or something like that, because I'm precisely interested in the experiential quality. You know, the question of the book is really how does the music work, and how does it work in time, because I think in the 15th century composers start -- thanks to features of this style that have coalesced in the early decades of the 15th century, they have a new toolbox. And they start to create dynamic shapes, where processes of intensification can happen over several pages, over a 35-minute mass cycle, for example. And again, you know, the performance tradition will either bring that out or not, up until now, it basically hasn't brought that out. But I think it's right there. And you can see it in some scholarly discussions, when scholars talk about the last Agnus Dei of a mass, for example, often being the place where you see the compositional fireworks. That's a great example. How does the composer get there? What's happening not only in the voice that's quoting some chant, but what's happening in all the other voices to bring the piece to a conclusion; and oftentimes, what I see is one form or another of hugely contrastive aesthetic, right? It's not always about intensification. But it is about moments of a higher or lower energy level and getting between them in really interesting ways.

Will Robin 23:00
And so I mean, when I think about form, or not form, or whatever, in this period, like, you know, in undergrad, we memorize all these _formes fixes_, and it's all the uppercase letters and lowercase letters and it's like, you know, you spent three weeks memorizing them, and then you forget it forever, and then spent three weeks in grad school, memorizing them again, or you make it your specialty for your entire life. Right? But like that, it seems like maybe that those are the lessons that, you know, are teaching us how to think about formal structure in this period in a way that doesn't actually serve what the music's doing in some way.

Jesse Rodin 23:32
Right, exactly. And it's like the example I mentioned before, you know, the, getting your A's and B's straight is a pain in the neck by itself. And it's so abstract and even on the page of a modern score, is

so abstract. But if you pick up the songbooks that we have, and you look at the way they're organized, all of a sudden that makes it a little bit more real. And then if you think about what it would take to get from those books to a performance, and you realize, I'm actually going to have to memorize more or less all of this, because it's just ... the information isn't laid out in a way that invites sight reading, I have the words I have to sing that don't fit under the notes. Then that, in turn, you know, raises questions about what's the performance situation like, Well, wait a minute, maybe we have these three people in this very intimate intense environment, singing directly to another group of people. And conveying something quite powerful. I mean, the text of these songs, they hover around similar sets of themes, usually unrequited love. But Wow, I mean, it's often pretty heavy. My only sorrow is that I'm not dead. It's the way one of Ockeghem's songs begins, right? If you take that seriously, I mean, if we think they're not joking around, then you have to find some way of conveying that. And I don't think that the only way is a way that is familiar from 19th century, you know, ideology. I think there are ways that that we can find that are intrinsic to this style in this period, even if we can never be sure.

Will Robin 24:50
I see. And it's, I suppose, shaping all of this has been the Josquin and research project in a way so what what is the Josquin Research Project and how did you kind of develop this?

Jesse Rodin 25:02
Yeah, so the Josquin research project is a digital platform, a tool for exploring a large corpus of music from the long 15th century. So we curate thousands of scores that are fully searchable, you can search for melodic or rhythmic or intervallic patterns. And you can also run analyses on individual works or on a whole corpora. You can think about dissonance treatment or rhythmic activity or ranges on a broad scale. And so for me, it's been an incredibly useful tool, but just one tool of many. But it allows me sometimes to ask a question of a whole corpus of pieces, a whole group of pieces. Is this thing that I'm looking at right here that I think is special? Is it actually special? Does it happen anywhere else? So it's, it's the constant forests and trees problem that with music is so very difficult, because in order to have control over that, you need to know a vast amount of music and you can't just flip through scores and know them, not even a little, you can answer one very small question that way. But if you want to have the pieces under your belt, you more or less have to spend lots of time with them. So I do all of that, as many of my colleagues, but this tool lets you reach even deeper, or ask different kinds of questions of a larger corpus of pieces.

Will Robin 26:22
And so it's almost I mean, it seems like what you're, again, like the Schubert analogy, like, there are 100 and blah, blah, blah, Haydn symphonies and so on, but everyone ... like you can look at one and tell if a minuet is weird or not, right? And that's because everyone knows that music, even if they don't know all hundred and four, or they at least can like slice into it and kind of like know the structure. It's not a form another structure of a theme of variations and then say Haydn doing something weird here like or this is like the most straightforward version of it, and ... but we didn't have that really for this period. And... is that is that kind of what you're after?

Jesse Rodin 26:54

I think that's right. I think we don't have that. I think individuals among us have that for slices of the repertoire, I'm one of those people, but I think that having that sense of the whole is really challenging when just getting to the point where we can perform it plausibly at all took so much, so much work. There's tons of music that's not recorded, that's in editions that are, well, some of it is not edited at all, others that are in editions that are hard to work with. One of the things the Josquin research project does is present all the music in the same format, we use unreduced note values, which means the note shapes you see on the page are one to one with the ones in the manuscripts. And that means that while there's a you know, a one-week learning curve to get used to the idea that the whole note gets the beat. Once you're over that, you can compare everything and it's apples and apples. So again, you know, trying to sort of cast the, you know, a wide net, and take in a lot of different kinds of music and to get your arms around it. That's still the goal for the discipline that we haven't reached.

Will Robin 27:56
And I mean, so you amass all this data. I mean, it seems ... I guess it makes sense where there's, like, you're dealing with the kind of like the big data thing, but also, the big data is what yields like, makes the individual piece more interesting or compelling. Or you can like figure out what's going on at the individual level, too. Right?

Jesse Rodin 28:15
That's right. And to be honest with you, most of those observations that I make come from my own experience, not from the digital tool.

Will Robin 28:22
Right. It's not like you, like, have some equation that tells you what pieces, is... Yeah.

Jesse Rodin 28:25
Exactly. On the contrary, I think the digital tool -- and I say this a lot -- can be misused, you know, you can find something that's a false positive, you can make terrible interpretations based on it, if you want to. No: you have to also take the time to learn the repertory. But it is a powerful tool to add to what you already know, to cause you to ask questions you didn't even know you had, to point out things that probably the composers didn't know were there. You know, if you ask Josquin, so -- do you use more of ascending... passing tones of this kind or of that kind? You know, once you got around the conceptual issues, he might not know? Or do you use more passing tones than LaRue? [Both laugh] Are you kidding? But if we can know the answers to those questions, we can start to separate composers and styles. Yes, it's useful for questions of attribution, but it's useful for all sorts of other questions about style that orbit around those.

Will Robin 28:53
So I mean, for folks not super familiar with Josquin as a figure, and kind of the history of this. I mean, attribution has always been a core question, right? Like, is this piece by Josquin? Is this piece by *the* Josquin? Is there a *the* Josquin? Like, can you kind of break down that history of that issue and how the Josquin research project might help with it, or not deal with it at all or...

Jesse Rodin 29:40

Yeah, right. I mean, it's a problem because Josquin was so famous for so long; he's more or less the first composer whose fame outlasts his death by a long time, and also the composer who reached the height of his fame right at the moment when music printing, polyphonic music printing takes off. So he's in the right place at the right time and benefits from this in all sorts of ways but it creates big problems down the road. So there are more than 300 pieces attributed to him. And if you kind of take a hard-nosed musicological view where I say, Alright, well, I need sources that have a piece with his name on it from his lifetime, and hopefully multiple sources that seem independent from one another, they both have his name on them, if that's my corpus of absolutely secure pieces, pieces where we're as sure as we can be, then the problem is that you have 50-something of those and more than 300 in total. And the Josquin community has wrestled with this over a long period. Oftentimes by just sort of trying to knock one piece out of the canon. It turns out this piece we thought was Josquin isn't, which has been useful, but a little you know, the process has been a little bit of piecemeal. Meanwhile, you know, research has proceeded apace, and there are new findings all the time that actually help us get our get our arms around it. I think overall, actually, the problem isn't as bad as it's made out to be. We have this core corpus of solid pieces, there's a corpus that hovers on top of that, that's pretty good. That's, you know, we can feel pretty good about, then there are a whole lot that don't have a prayer, you know, that are published way after his death in one peripheral source, or maybe a kind of piece that's attributed to another composer in many sources and Josquin just once kind of by accident, you can rule a lot out that way. And so when you get down to it, there are definitely probably a few dozen hard cases. But it's not this horrible monster that it's sometimes made out to be. And indeed, we can develop on the basis of the secure pieces a very clear, or at least very sophisticated view of Josquin's style, which again, I think is getting better all the time, as we're able to say a little bit more about how his style changes over time, and the different places he worked. And I think now we're at a point where this question is, of course, not answerable. It never will be, but where we can do pretty well. And where we can put forward a fairly coherent picture of the composer and his music, and also where we can tell a pretty interesting story about his posthumous reception, because the view that the 16th century, the mid 16th century had of Josquin is not the same as the historical Josquin, their view is already very skewed in interesting ways. And both of those are worth our time.

Will Robin 32:13
How does all of this work? Both the kind of assembly of resources like the Josquin research project, but also kind of how you're reconceptualizing this music shape, how you teach this music, and kind of what your dialogues have been with your students around this?

Jesse Rodin 32:30
Yeah, I think one thing is that I try as much as possible to bring the students in. I remember the feeling as a student, and it wasn't the fault of my professors, it was sort of the fault of the literature and the way the scholarship works in general, the feeling of it being so hard and so far away. How can I ever master this? Where do you even begin...

Will Robin 32:47
Right -- you listen to things you like, memorize some facts, but you like don't get to immerse yourself...

Jesse Rodin 32:51

Yeah, what does BRUS BR 9126 mean, you know, and so as much as possible, I try to demystify and clarify. And increasingly, what I have done is take the approach of having them actually make music. You know, when I teach notation we sing, that's our main activity. We sing, and then we extract the rules from what we've done. But if you start with something you know, it's a whole lot easier to master the rule than if you're mastering it in the abstract and then trying to apply it to a piece you still don't really know. And so that approach has overall been very satisfying. I'm also trying in my courses to broaden out or to embrace as much of the kind of 15th century experience as possible. So we just did a concert where we were lucky enough to sing directly from the 15th century Florentine chant-book, and we made the theme of the concert Florence itself. So we sang Carnival songs and _Laude_ and all these pieces, all this music that would have been sung in the streets of Florence and in sacred spaces and beyond. Last term, I taught a really wild course which is about medieval feasting, where we meet in the Stanford farm. And we cook medieval recipes every week.

Will Robin 34:04
When you said Stanford farm that didn't quite register. There's an actual farm, OK...

Jesse Rodin 34:07
There's a place in the world known as the Stanford Educational Farm, that already should... Yeah, it is California, but it's a wonderful place and they opened their doors to us. They have a wood fired oven in a seminar room, and we got funding for ingredients... ... and so -- and they teach real courses there! But yeah, we cook the recipes, we interpret the documents, students do presentations on ingredients and where they come from, we talk about music, but we also talk about visual culture, poetry, politics, gender, I mean, you can't escape these issues. And so it ... you actually start to get quite a lot. It's a... feasting is is an area where you know, it's multidisciplinary no matter what, whether you like it or not, and so we hear from food historians, art historians, all different sorts of people and even take the course up into the present, because we have to deal with what it means to cook today, issues of sustainability and the environment... But no, the thrust of the course is in the Middle Ages and the core are three 14th- and 15th-century cookbooks that are these fascinating documents where they start to tell you things like, you know, stir for as long as it takes to say three Hail Marys. What does that tell us about how they think about the passage of time and what their worldview is? And how do we you know, so that that has been incredibly fun and also just to realize, like the music, that the food's great, food's delicious...

Will Robin 34:19
A seminar room! That's great, ok... I had not known! Like, what are you eating? Like...

Jesse Rodin 35:31
What are we not eating? We're eating pheasant, partridge, goose you know, we're, you know, we're making ... it was the great age of gamebirds, among other things. Vegetables, really all sorts of things, but the techniques are on the one hand, not as foreign as you might think, you know, the idea that the sauce is invented much, much later is nonsense, there are sauces all over this stuff. But on the other hand, they use spices, for example, that are totally foreign in a place like France today. You know, they're using galangal and mace and grains of Paradise, which they're getting through the spice trade, so...

Will Robin 35:31
Well, I mean, like, how does something like that... You know, I guess realizing that cooking is more vibrant than we think it is. I mean, it's like, maybe it's almost like too much of a parallel with music, the music was more vibrant, but like, where do you get the students kind of thinking about where the where the intersections are there?

Jesse Rodin 36:22
I don't push the point. But I think we end up finding parallels, you know, when we talk about moving from a music manuscript to a performance, you know, you can't avoid to some extent the analogy, it's not a perfect analogy, but you can't avoid the analogy to some extent, because they've been spending the whole, you know, week after week reading these recipes that are usually just three or four lines long, do this and then do this and then do this. And it assumes a lot, because it's written for professional cooks. It's not written for somebody who's never been in a kitchen before. So they don't give you quantities. Basically, they -- you know, they really rely on your practical knowledge that's already in your hands. And I think to some extent, the musical sources are the same. You know, we have the notes and the rhythms and the words, but it does rely on a practical knowledge of what it's like to sing the stuff, that you can only get by doing it quite a lot. And by having grown up in a world where chant is something that's happening all the time, where non notated polyphony is something you've learned to do as a kid... If you have that baseline, it's not so impenetrable.

Will Robin 37:25
Great. Well, thank you. This was a really fascinating conversation. Appreciate it.

[Music] 37:29

Will Robin 37:42
Many thanks to Jesse Rodin for that great talk, I encourage you to check out the Josquin Research Project at josquin.stanford.edu, and the music of his ensemble Cut Circle. Information on that and more is available on our show notes over at soundexpertise.org. I'll be tweeting about today's episode @seatedovation. If you like how we sound, check out my producer D. Edward Davis's work on Soundcloud at warmsilence. Please subscribe to Sound Expertise on your platform of choice. And we'll see you next week for a talk with a guest I'm really, really excited about, the composer and musicologist George Lewis. Bye!

[Music**]** 38:15