Three Maestros
Talk Music

Conductors are known for their long lives—Toscanini, for example, lived to be 89. Three Harvard conductors—James Yannatos, Tom Everett, and Jameson Marvin—have also enjoyed professional longevity, waving arms and batons in Cambridge for 38, 31, and 24 years respectively. Yannatos, senior lecturer on music, conducts the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra. Everett directs the Harvard University Band, along with its associated ensembles and jazz program. Marvin conducts the Harvard Glee Club, the Radcliffe Choral Society, and the coeducational Collegium Musicum. Added together, they’ve been making music in Cambridge for nearly a century—working with and shaping the lives of thousands of student performers—and are still going strong.

As musicians, the three have contrasting backgrounds. Yannatos began as a violinist, Marvin sang tenor, and Everett has had a long and varied career as a bass trombonist. And each conductor has his own approach to the auditory adventure.

In the following conversations, the three maestros, who also compose and/or arrange scores, share their views on music and how to make it.

James Yannatos

I grew up in the South Bronx. My father was Greek, my mother American, and her parents were English and Austrian. No one else in my family was musical, but my father used to put on the radio Saturday afternoons for the Metropolitan Opera. He had some Caruso records. My first love, at five years old, was a violin in a shop window. I told my mother, “I want that,” and pestered her for three years until she bought it. I’d get up at six in the morning to practice violin so I could play baseball after school. I was a pitcher—another kind of conductor.

As a boy soprano, I sang in High Episcopal churches in New York. It paid! As a violinist I was concertmaster at Music and Art High School, but I was not very interested in a solo career. Conducting and composing were more attractive. I started writing violin pieces when I was 11.

I’m a violinist and I play lousy piano and monkey around with brass and winds. As a composer, if I want to use an instrument in a way that’s going to be problematical for the performer, it’s for a damned good reason. A professional orchestra will have maybe two or three rehearsals when they look at a new piece; if it is extremely difficult to play, it makes it that much harder to get the piece performed. That’s a fact of life.

Composing music helps me as a conductor—it gives me a kind of insider’s view of structural issues, orchestral issues. You want to conduct from a creative, or re-creative, position, rather than from a mechanical viewing of the work.

In performance, the acoustical aspect is essential. If the Bach Society does a piece in Sanders and the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra does the same piece in Sanders, there’s got to be a difference. One group has 40 musicians, the other has 100—more bodies, more friction. There’s no absolute!

There’s a certain rhythm to preparing a work for a concert. We first read a new piece through, with lots of mistakes—you can’t stop for each one. Then you look for broad structure, the movement of the larger sections. Next we go into more specific things like balance problems—melody versus harmony. You have to tune it, and make sure you don’t overwhelm the predominant voice. I try to transfer all this through gestures, which stand as physical metaphors for the sounds the composers meant. In a way it’s like dance: you must find gestures that communicate.

I’m frightened about the absence of breathe, it’s not real, not human. It has to be connected to our physical beings, to how we live. That’s what makes people “musical”—the way they phrase. I tell the strings to think of the bow as their lungs—they have to breathe with their arms. Listen to the woodwinds—their phrasing comes directly from the breath.

There’s the surface reality and then the hidden reality, the magic part of it. When the notes you’ve written are sounded by the instruments themselves, what they produce in terms of overtones and combination tones makes the whole picture more complex. Even a C-major chord, depending on what instruments play it—an oboe, a flute—sounds completely different. There’s an acoustical magic that goes beyond what’s visible in the score.

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music, and the cutback of music, in schools. And what music is done, is so dumbed down. There's so little contact with the classical tradition; everything is programmed to sell pop stuff. Kids are not developing one of their senses. They're hearing their pop stuff with big earphones—which, after a few years, make them deaf. It's dumbing down something that could be a tremendous spiritual source, opening up so many things in their lives.

There are dedicated teachers, though, who, in spite of the difficulties, engage their students in musical activities that are life-enhancing. There's this film, Music of the Heart, in which Meryl Streep plays Roberta Guaspari-Tzavaras, who started string programs in Harlem schools. I think of myself, coming from the Bronx, and think of these underprivileged kids studying fiddle. Most of them trashing it at first, and then really getting into it, and having their whole family get excited as they see what it's done for the kid. School grades begin to come up, behavior problems disappear, and 80 to 90 percent of these kids go to college. To me, this is what ought to be happening. Music gives you another perspective, another way of viewing life. Especially given the world in which we live—it's not a luxury, it's absolutely bread and butter.

Tom Everett
The trombone fit me and had the variety; I've always been very eclectic in my tastes. Early on I heard some recordings of the Nelson Riddle Orchestra with the bass trombone of George Roberts. I heard a sound I identified with—a sound of relaxation, of singing on the instrument. Berlioz called the trombone “the noble instrument of God,” but in some composers' work it could be threatening, menacing. Roberts's sound had a sonorous, reflective, and lovely quality. Later, when I got to know him, I asked Roberts who he modeled his sound after. He said, “Frank Sinatra.”

I find that one style of music has given me insights into playing a completely different one. In Brahms symphonies you have chorales with three trombones—alto, tenor, and bass. It's like playing a church hymn all alone. We would spend so much time practicing to get the tuning and balance perfect, blending our sounds to emphasize the beautiful sonorities. Then, when I played jazz, I noticed that everyone tended to emphasize the rhythmic feel and momentum: either you could swing or you couldn't. When I rehearsed with big bands, I'd say, “What about this chord here? Can we get this more focused or in tune?” Afterwards the bandleader would say, “What did you guys do? It sounds like there are twice as many of you.” We knew we were onto something.

At all levels of musicianship people edit—a performer will make a decision to take it down an octave, or play a sustained note instead of a trill. Editing is not only acceptable but encouraged; it empowers a student who, for example, may not have the technique to play something exactly as written. Sometimes when the trumpet section is overbearing, I'll say, “Trumpets: at letter A, why not clean out your instruments there? The end result will sound better.”

As the church organist in Weimar, Bach would write a new prelude and cantata every Sunday. He wrote a 20-minute piece each week and copied the parts himself by candlelight! There is every indication that frequently, Bach did not finish the prelude by the time of the Sunday service. So he would improvise. Fascinating. Performance, creation, composition, all tied into one.

Being a band director is very much like being a parent. Sometimes you step back and say, “They'll learn from this one without being hurt.” Other times you step in and say, “This seems fine to you, but there's a contingent in our audience who will not appreciate this.” If you let them have their creativity, when you step in, they'll listen.

The nature of youth is that they are drawn to high, fast, loud. You have to set up Harvard kids to play something slow, because the nature of their minds goes against counting out a whole note. Today you can take a synthesizer or digital piano, push a button, and get a tango beat—it's instant and it's perfect. But a clarinet player who takes up the instrument in grade five doesn't sound instantly good or perfect. It takes years to develop a concept of the instrument, to develop a personal, mature sound. It concerns me when people tend to jump from one thing to another, because these long-term, in-depth learning experiences are not as prevalent as they once were.

I don't think of myself as a teacher so much as a catalyst who creates an environment where things happen. The actual encounter with the music will present its demands emphatically, much more so than my telling them, “I want this.”

You can't play architecture and you can't talk music—you've got to experience it. Music is something aural, yet we teach it visually. We learn by repeating, imitating. Kids often don't hear what they're doing. But ask them to imitate this sound, to play this. Then ask: Can you make it sound madder? Can you make it sound happy? Experience precedes theory. Allow the sound to develop first.

A student might come in and say, “Did you notice that tree that's dying in the Yard? It reminds me of the sparseness of the first movement of that piece we're doing I'll want to go out and see the tree. They are combining visual and aural experiences; tying two things together gives you insight into both.

Jameson Marvin
From age five I took piano. I sang in various choirs at Glendale High School in Southern California, plus my church choir. At UC-Santa Barbara I joined a fraternity, and it was there that I started waving my arms. I conducted guys from Jameson Marvin: “We are wind instruments.”
my fraternity in the “Spring Sing.” Many had absolutely no experience. About 20 of the guys couldn't function at all; I put them in back and called them “mouthers.”

I realized I could hear—my ear could analyze where the problems were, and I really enjoyed being up in front of a group of singers. I knew that quality of leadership from a church group; at one point, I thought of being a minister. From sophomore year on, I knew I wanted to be a college chorus director; I was on fire about this.

We are wind instruments. I'm a tenor. I've never really been a solo singer. Any student will tell you that while I have the volume, the voice timbre is not always the most beautiful! I sang with Robert Shaw on and off for 12 years. What I instantly saw in Shaw was a boyish enthusiasm and a love for the art, which I greatly identified with.

Studying a score, I form a “mental-aural image” of how it ought to go. It’s clear as a bell when I come to rehearsal. Rehearsing comes from the possibility of re-hearing. I measure what the students sing against what is in my mind’s ear. I tell them, “Bach wants ABC, but right now you’re singing XYZ.”

If you started your musical life listening to Brahms, or Ligeti, or perhaps Josquin Des Prés from the fifteenth century, that will affect how you approach a piece. The entry point is actually a very important factor. Professionally, I came into choral music through Renaissance music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which is our richest tradition of choral music. So I might see relationships between a Haydn mass and a mass of the Renaissance—there are principles in common. Someone who didn’t have that background and instead came to the Haydn mass through Shostakovich and Mahler would hear it very differently. It’s the same way with tempos—a conductor’s version of allegro moderato in Beethoven might depend on his insight into Brahms, or into Mozart.

I’m hoping that as a conductor, my physical gestures will call up musical gestures. The chorus has to get in tune, get in balance, get the vowels to match, and get it together! If they all do it, you may have one of those magic moments when they all are doing something the same way. It engenders inspiration. When we sense this spiritual force at work, there may be an awe-filled silence at the end: there’s nothing like it!

Rehearsal has to be at least as good as a performance in order for the performance to happen. That magic quality has to occur so they know what it is. My job is to urge them to greater heights.

There’s an opportunity to be creative in performance, not just repeat what you have rehearsed. The highest level is a sense of music-making that’s absolutely spontaneous—their eyes are totally glued to you, and they pick up on the slightest gesture, and so they start the ritard. three beats earlier than we’ve done before, or build to a crescendo in a certain place where we’ve never rehearsed one. There’s a moment of transcendence; that’s the goal here. Once you’ve experienced it you want to re-experience it, and you come back again and again. I want to create magic moments with them.

~CRAIG LAMBERT