

Notables

Episode 6: Michael Repper

TRANSCRIPT

Michael Repper: We have kind of a responsibility, when we're performing on and off the stage, to remind communities why music is completely integral to their lives and indispensable. And maybe that's what professional musicians can aim to do more is to entertain the public so well and invigorate them so well with our performances and with our community initiatives that we as a society remember that this is actually important, that people's lives would be meaningfully worse without music and without music education you are listening to notables an Education Through Music podcast.

Noah: As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm joined today by Michael Repper. Michael is the music director of several notable orchestras, as well as the youngest American conductor to win a Grammy for Best Orchestral Performance. Michael, thanks so much for joining me today.

Michael Repper: Oh, thank you so much, Noah, for having me. This is a real, real honor.

Noah: We have a lot to talk about and I'm really excited to get into everything. But just to kick things off, I wonder if you could share the story of how you got involved at first with music.

Michael Repper: Yeah, listen, I was very, very fortunate to be surrounded by people who love music themselves. My grandmother was a pianist and loved, loved playing and she used to take me to these concerts for kids and she, you know, saw that I was really interested in it, that once the music started, that I was glued in and she suggested to my parents that I take piano lessons from that piano teacher that I had when I was four that was when I was four years old all the way through my entire music education, or you know, my entire personal education, I was very fortunate to be surrounded by people who really understood how to educate very well. They were powerful communicators, they were energetic very well, they were supportive, they were selfless and not selfish. And I, you know, consciously and subconsciously, a huge part of who I am is and you know how I go about. You know my conducting and my educating is just because of the inspiration of the myriad of people over the course of my early childhood and then childhood and development and early adulthood who have really looked out for me and been really excellent educators. But I started because I had a grandmother who noticed that I love music and I was very lucky for it.

Noah: It is a somewhat unusual thing for someone to get involved so young in conducting. Typically there's more of a circuitous path, I think, from music student, through performer, through eventually to conductor. As someone who must have expressed a sort of divergent interest in music, I wonder what it was specifically in your education that made room for this divergent interest so that you could go on to do what you do today.

Michael Repper: Yeah, that's a really, really good question. You said that typically people either don't get interested in conducting or don't get opportunities in conducting until later on, and by

later on I mean at least past their undergrad, maybe into their master's where they might have studied an instrument or whatnot. And that was true when I was I mean just in general, when I was a teenager and then going through college I was able to get out of that, but I'm very heartened to know that it's actually have experienced that it's changing now and I'm seeing more and more young conductors and also more and more opportunities for young conductors, which I think is great. So the culture is changing, the reality is true. I actually had a lot of people including at many potential undergrad institutions where I was considering going that basically told me look, you're a great pianist, but we know you're interested in studying conducting and we don't really have any opportunities in in for undergrads who want to study conducting. And that was just the reality of of what it is. I was very fortunate and, as you said, divergent to have been basically given a baton when I was eight and I was in Australia and I was at another one of these kids concerts and a teacher of mine. Her name was Nahama Patkin. She was very influential and I can talk about why, but she she handed me a baton and said hey, kid, go conduct this orchestra. And from her on through my first formal conducting teacher, on through to Gustav Meyer and Marin Alsop, who are my two, you know, most formal conducting teachers and mentors, they all exhibited this completely. What I would maybe think is untraditional view of conducting, which is that young people can conduct, and that may have been not normal at that time. It's becoming more normal now. But I'm 32, and I've been conducting now for over 20 years and that is very uncommon and I just am very fortunate for it. I'm very quick to be thankful and grateful for the people who made it possible, but I think that my philosophy in conducting and educating has been also shaped by those people. It's not just that I was given opportunities and that I try to pay those opportunities forward. That much is true. But I think back to Nahama. Nahama Patkin was somebody who invited me to. She was a teacher in Australia. Her specialty was early music education, and by early music education I really mean like 15 and younger, and when she had students who became older teenagers. That really wasn't what she did a lot of. She was an expert and she was probably the most well-known teacher for this in Australia and one of the more well-known teachers in the world for doing that. Unfortunately, she passed away several years ago. But one word that I would use to define her is energy, just all the time. I remember the second time I went to visit her, I flew from Los Angeles. Landed in Sydney or landed in Melbourne. She lived and, um, we left the airport, we went to an opera, we went to a piano recital, went to a piano masterclass, then went to her studio where she taught, before we even, like, went to the bathroom after the airport, you know, after a 14 hour flight, and, and and that was who she was it was a go go, go, go go mentality and her students, including me, I think they excelled because they fed off of that energy and she didn't necessarily teach me that that's the way to do it, but when I think of when I watch video of myself or when I sort of really think about how I go about trying to work with kids, which is a huge part of my mission. I think, subconsciously, I have a little bit of Nahama in my head, of this person who is just always go, go, go, go go. And I think Nahama might be the one person I've ever come across who actually had more energy than I did, who actually outlasted me in terms of just her ability to just go all the time. Very, very inspirational. But you know, it's this unyielding belief that our responsibility as professional musicians, and a key responsibility of the conductor, is to look out for the next generation of people in the communities where they have influence, and it should be what all professional musicians are doing, and as a conductor, you have a responsibility to do it.

Noah: Yeah, and let's talk more about what that role of conductor entails, because it is such a unique role in an orchestra and a teacher is often, you know, regardless of what kind of classroom they're in, whether it's an orchestral program or a modern band or not even a music classroom. I think educators and conductors share a lot of the same responsibilities and also privileges.

Michael Repper: That's absolutely true. What makes, first of all, what I would say, is that the term that is used, maestro in Latin speaking countries, the term actually comes from the same term for teacher. It's the same term that people in Italy or in Spanish-speaking countries would use to actually call a teacher's maestro. It has a different connotation here, but in any case, you're talking about the parallels between educators and conductors, and very much there is even a lingual parallel. You think about what makes a good educator, and it's the ability to inspire people to learn and to grow right. Fundamentally, when it comes down to it, it's about how inspirational, how good of a communicator, how gripping can they be in terms of their communication and their ability to inspire people to grow right, because people will become educated when they, when they grow as people, when they, when they learn, when they, and they can only happen when the teacher is well. It happens the most effectively when the teacher is inspirational, effective communicator, et cetera. Same thing for a conductor, because really, in the performance component, you know when a conductor is performing, the only person not making the sound is the conductor, right? The orchestra is actually making the sound. So, on a granular level, what is the conductor actually doing? The conductor is inspiring, or they should be inspiring the musicians to make the best music that they possibly can. There are 9 million ways of doing this well, which is why every conductor looks different, and there's 9 billion amazing conductors out there who all have different techniques and all different styles, and all that blah, blah, blah, and there's not one right or wrong way to do it. But what, fundamentally, the common denominator is? Just the same thing, I think, as being even a math teacher or being a social studies teacher or whatnot, or a music teacher is about. How can you inspire people to be the best that they can be? How can you communicate your ideas? So, fundamentally, yes, it's very much the same traits that you look for. And then, on the flip side, there's a whole other set of responsibilities that a conductor has, and the arm waving and the performance component is a very important part of the job, obviously, and a conductor needs to be able to perform to the highest artistic level, and that's something that should never be sacrificed, but it's also a basic job responsibility, right? In addition to that, the conductor needs to be somebody who wants to take their orchestras and make them true members of the community and connecting not just with young people but all people within a community, and you know using their position to do that, um. And you know using their position to do that, um. And there are a lot of parallels between that being successful in those things and being successful as an educator. Fundamentally, it goes down to you know you really think about what makes a good educator, and it's their, it's their charisma, it's their. It's you know how, how inspiring are they, how good of a communicator are they. And fundamentally, that's what conductors are doing too.

Noah: And now for a short break. This podcast is made possible by Education Through Music. ETM partners with under-resourced schools to provide music as a core subject for all children

and utilizes music education as a catalyst to improve academic achievement, motivation for school and self-confidence. A lot of the rep that your, at least the New York Youth Symphony and I suspect, some of your other groups perform is new music, and I wonder what role that has in this process of reinvigorating the community and reminding them how important music is in their lives.

Michael Repper: Yeah, really good question. It's very important for all musicians to be performing new music, including young musicians, including musicians who are just starting out, including musicians who are just starting out. It makes you a better musician and it's exciting to be working on music of today with New York Youth Symphony. You mentioned New York Youth Symphony, for decades, has always played a piece of new music at every one of its concerts. And for the musicians in the orchestra, one cool thing is that they get to work with the living composer. I mean, the living composer actually comes to the rehearsal and works with the orchestra, and that's normal actually, even in the professional world too, but it's actually not an experience that is typically had, certainly before college, and so, again, you're providing invigorating ways to interact with art that is being made now and that's absolutely critical, and all musicians should be playing music of the now. There's no question With orchestras. You know there's so many fantastic initiatives that you see out there, and one of my favorite things to try to do is to work with local artists composers, bands, visual artists, poets. I've done all kinds of concerts, that sort of integrate local artists to, I mean, you know, to wherever that orchestra is, whether it's a commissioning project in this upcoming season. At the Ashland Symphony we have a commission from a local composer. For example, in Virginia, at the Northern Eck Orchestra, we've collaborated with the Poet Laureate of Virginia, for example, who lives in the area where the orchestra is. There are all kinds of things we can do collaborating with Boys and Girls Clubs and creating new music, new art. It's important because, you know, we shouldn't just be performing music from 250 years ago. It's only getting older. We need to be creating and, as the industry, you know, far too late, but as the industry focuses on attempting to become more diverse, that's going to be incredibly important or integral to that process, as working on the music of today, I think exposing young musicians from an educating standpoint to the music writing of today is, you know, critical, otherwise you're not really doing the job completely

Noah: And perhaps this is a good point to transition and talk about some of the new music that you in the New York Youth Symphony recorded that resulted in you being the youngest US conductor to win a Grammy for Best Orchestral Performance.

Michael Repper: Thank you so much. Yeah, it was an absolute thrill to make this album with the New York Youth Symphony, just to tell the story briefly. But, of course, in 2020, the world collapsed and performances were canceled and all educators everywhere were trying to figure out what we could do to continue A educating our kids, but also, you know, invigorating them and keeping it meaningful. And everybody had this challenge. And for a performance organization of a large scale, you know orchestra we had 110 people in our orchestra. We had a particular challenge because, you know, when we couldn't perform, we couldn't perform, and I personally got to thinking, ok, well, what can we do? That would still be an educational experience, and one of those was recording, because it's, you know, teaching kids to record is

very, very important. It's a completely different style of playing, to performing, to performing, and so we decided to make an album. We had to design a crazy way of doing it, because it was in November of 2020. There was, you know, we could. Still, it was pre-vaccine, right, so we couldn't gather as a large orchestra. We had to use a process known as overdubbing. It's a very common way of recording, but not in classical music. We had to incorporate click tracks, all kinds of things in order to get it done. But one of the more exciting things about the album was the music that we played and you know all of the tracks on the disc are debuts in some form. There were four works of music that we performed. For some of them it quite literally was the first recording ever made. In the case of Florence Price's Piano Concerto, it was the first recording made of the original orchestration, Florence Price's original orchestration, which was, you know, covered up for decades and, you know, only recently uncovered. And they were, you know, we got to work with living composer Jesse Montgomery and Valerie Coleman and, yeah, we'll talk about a transformational experience for everybody, including myself, to be able to do that. And you know, of course, it really the entire initiative behind making the album started and concluded actually as an educational thing. It was about, okay, we want to provide a high quality educational product to the kids. We succeeded at that after the sessions were done. That was. It was a huge success. But you know, it didn't get released until a year and a half later, after it had gone through the whole editing process and whatnot. And it was never the, never the goal, never the. You know, primary goal was never. The reason we did it was to win a Grammy was never even in our wildest dreams. But I think one of the things that the voters maybe resonated with and one of the most special parts about the project is the fact that it turned out so well as an educational initiative. Very much is rewarding of always believing in flexibility and the ability to really be able to give back to young people. When you are, when you can be creative and flexible and it wasn't just me, it was a whole team of people that figured out how to make it possible. I mean, it was my crazy idea, but there's 9 million people who made it possible and it was a huge, huge team effort. And the thing that makes me the proudest as an educator two things. One was, in the moment, how seriously the kids took it and they knew that this was an important thing and they took ownership of it themselves. They knew that this was an important thing, that they took ownership of it themselves and very much took on leadership roles of figuring out how to do this in the middle of the pandemic and to do it well. So that made me very proud in the moment. The other thing that made me proud was seeing their ownership and their reaction to the win, both in that moment and also post. You know, of course, in the moment of the win, you know the moment that we want everybody is jumping up and down like crazy and you know the fact that they took ownership of it so well. You know that made me very, very proud. But also even for their standards, being the New York Youth Symphony being one of the most advanced and impressive youth orchestras on the planet, even for their standards, that high. After the win, seeing them play with a new level of confidence and energy and excitement, and even going up a level, I would say in terms of their playing ability, like that, I would say in terms of their playing ability like that, you know, as an educator, as somebody who takes that part of the job very, very seriously, I shed several tears because I was like that's what it's all about. That wind will follow them forever and many of them will be teachers in their own way, in nine million ways. They'll either be they could be a school teacher, they could be a music teacher, they can go be a doctor and work at a medical, at a training hospital. There's nine, there's everybody in this orchestra is going to go on and do amazing things in 9,000 diverse

ways, and I think that they learned a lot about how to manage a project like that through what we did and it'll follow them forever, whether they go into music or not. Um, and hopefully by doing projects like this, you know, we arrive at a society that takes music education more seriously. Um, and I think you know that that that would be maybe my personal, my personal goal is, you know, if you, whenever I die, you know, however long that is from now, I think, if you ask me, you know, was your career a success or not? The really only metric that I would use is well, how effective was I at giving back to the communities where I am? I at giving back to the communities where I am, and that's really actually the role of the conductor. The performance component is very important, but it's just a piece. It's just a piece of the actual job of being a music director.

Noah: Michael, thanks so much for spending the time and sharing your insight and your story.

Michael Repper: Oh, thank you so much for having me, Noah. This was an honor to talk with you and look forward, and best of luck with the podcast.