

Interview Transcript - October 10th, 2016

Teacher: Rivoli Lesulauro (Piano)

Interviewer: Aidan Witvoet

Interview

Aidan: So how many years have you been teaching?

Rivoli: It's hard to believe, sixty five.

Aidan: Wow, and what would you say is your favourite part about teaching? What is it that makes you the most joyful?

Rivoli: When I see my pupils being successful, like you. Going on to something bigger, and I know I'm gonna hear about you 5-6 years from now.

Aidan: And why is it that that success makes you happy? Does it inspire you?

Rivoli: Well, absolutely! When I leave, I will have left something behind with many, many students. I'll be part of their life.

Aidan: How have your teaching methods changed over the years? Can you give any examples?

Rivoli: Oh you're always evolving, yes. Well sometimes I will stress something in my teaching more-so than I did, say, a year ago. Oh, such as technique or maybe a particular composer.

Aidan: And then, even from the very beginning of your teaching career... If you look back at that, how different are those days compared to now?

Rivoli: I was atrocious! [laughs] When I look back at what I did, I can still remember these two brothers I had at first. And what I did to them was so... I would assign a piece at a grade two level, and then maybe two weeks later, I'd give them something about a grade four level. Not knowing that it was a grade four level! But... I made it very difficult for them.

See, you know, there's only one way to learn how to teach, and that is to teach. And you realize the mistakes you've made and you try to eradicate those while you try to improve.

[Aidan](#): So, those methods... do you follow a curriculum? I know you are an RCM teacher and part of the ORMETA.

[Rivoli](#): Well, I stick to the Royal Conservatory curriculum, but not only that. As you know, I've assigned many pieces from other books.

[Aidan](#): And are there any other ways that you stray away from the curriculum?

[Rivoli](#): Well, that's my main standby, is what the Royal Conservatory has suggested. They have suggested to teach these series of pieces, and some of them I find very interesting, and some I don't. But I realize why they select a certain piece, it's because of certain skills they want you to acquire.

[Aidan](#): And do you find that you alter it per student?

[Rivoli](#): Yes, it depends on the weakness of the particular student.

[Aidan](#): So what do you think the definition of a "good" student would be? Or a "successful" student?

[Rivoli](#): A good student is not necessarily the best performer, but a good student is one to take music seriously and devote time to it. Follows my directions. And the student has to have natural talent to begin with you know. I really believe that I can do nothing with a student who has no talent.

[Aidan](#): And then what would you define as "talent"?

[Rivoli](#): The ability to **feel** this piece, not just to play the notes, but to make music from those symbols on the paper. To play expressively.

[Aidan](#): Why do you think it's important to the student / teacher relationship to have a good student? What are the benefits of having this good student? Does it inspire you, does it make your job easier, does it challenge you?

[Rivoli](#): It really inspires me. Yes, you know, the talented student I can work with by the hour. What drains me is the student who doesn't practice, and has no talent. I then gently shift them away.

[Aidan](#): And what do you think makes a "good" teacher? Or an "effective" teacher?

[Rivoli](#): Well, the ability to inspire the student. You know, that's the main thing. If you can inspire that kid, he'll do his own learning.

[Aidan](#): So to have the reciprocity of the student being inspired and the teacher being inspired...

[Rivoli](#): Oh absolutely!

[Aidan](#): Now in terms of, I mentioned this before, how important do you think it is to veer away from the curriculum? What are the benefits of "creating your own curriculum" in a sense?

[Rivoli](#): Well, you have to assess what are the weaknesses of this student. Which pieces would improve that weakness. Just like, for example, not being able to play arpeggios very well. Then you look for a piece that contains arpeggios.

[Aidan](#): And again, taking it back to your earlier days again, what kinds of things influenced you to change your methods? Are there certain stories you have or mistakes that you made that...

[Rivoli](#): I was very lucky because I taught with the Herald Bradley School of Music when I was young. And, we were about twenty teachers, and we had a group lesson every Friday morning, it was the whole morning. And we all had to perform, and we all had to perform different pieces. And he would select maybe a series of preludes for a few lessons, then maybe nocturnes, and we all played different nocturnes or different preludes. And we would discuss how to go about teaching them, as we performed, the others would make

comments about what they thought was derogatory in our playing, but what we did well also. Like a masterclass. But, you see, I learned so many pieces because maybe I didn't play a particular piece, but we discussed, I had heard it, we talked about it for many lessons before we would move on to something else.

[Aidan](#): So, now, have you found that any... Are there any specific teachers like Philipp that influenced you or have you taken away any of their styles or teaching methods?

[Rivoli](#): Every teacher I had influenced me in some way.

[Aidan](#): How have they influenced you, can you build on that?

[Rivoli](#): Okay, well of all the teachers I had, the first teacher I had, I think she gave me the love of music. Also, I was her pet, so she spent a lot of time with me. She was very good to me. I miss her, Helen Heeley. And then I was at the Herald Bradley. That's when I had this experience of teaching, and I really loved it. All the other teachers were older than I, I was the youngest one in the group. And they were all experienced teachers, and they all were very kind to me, giving me information of what to do. See, you don't know what to do... Now they've got pedagogy classes at university, now they didn't in my day, so you learned by making the mistakes! You say, 'oh gee, did I do that?' [laughs]. But now they advise you what to do, give you ideas. So I absorbed from all these different teachers. So, and Herald taught me a lot, he was very good to me. And then I went to Philipp (Philipp Isidor), and of course he was an excellent teacher. A very patient man. I was not his best pupil [laughs], by far. Then he dies, and then I went to Mona Bates. I didn't learn very much from her, I only stayed with her for about a year. I didn't feel she was the best teacher, but she was an **excellent** coach. Like, someone who's already a fine performer, which I was not, she could bring them up to a much higher level. She played beautifully, she specialized in performance, and not so much the teaching. I was afraid to ask a question, because then she would spend the whole lesson trying to

search through her music to give me an answer! She was a good person, and I'd say she played well, but I didn't feel I learned a lot from her. Then I studied with Pierre Soulvre, a Swiss concert pianist. Here again, he was so busy concertizing, like I'd have one lesson and then miss four, then we'd have one lesson and miss two, because he was concertizing all the time. I didn't learn very much from him either! I was with him about a year, and then I went to Myrtle Guerrero. I learned a lot from her, as far as tone reproduction was concerned. Bach, she was a Bach specialist. I was supposed to study with her husband, Alberto Guerrero. He was the teacher of Glenn Gould. I was supposed to study with him, I went for an audition around April, and he accepted me as a student, but I couldn't start until September. Well, he died that summer, so I never did study with him. So that's when I decided, well, I'll go to his wife, because I'm sure they teach in a similar fashion, because they would be discussing music all the time. I learned a lot from her, she was very good.

[Aidan](#): And where was she located?

[Rivoli](#): The University of Toronto. I was with her for three years. And then I went to Earle Moss, I learned a great deal from him. He was a concert pianist, played extremely well. He gave me a lot of ideas on how to teach. Because what I would do with him, I went right back to the beginner books. And I mean the beginner books! And I learned every piece, and he would discuss how he would teach it. He would first ask me how I would teach it, and then he would tell me what he would do, and what he would stress, and which pieces he would select and why he selected them. And we went right through the grades, and that was very, very good for me. Now, I thought he knew how to teach.

[Aidan](#): And from all your experience from these teachers, I know you said you didn't learn much from the some of the ones that were the performers, because they spent so much time

performing and perfecting their own skills instead of perfecting their teaching skills, do you still feel like it was worth your while to study with them?

[Rivoli](#): Oh yes, because they would inspire me by just listening to them play. You know, every lesson I had with Philipp, as soon as I would sit down there and he's here... I already improved. Just being with him [laughs]. Kinda brushes off on ya. You know even now, you, at university, don't you feel you're working much harder now? Being around people who are just like you?

[Aidan](#): I do, yes definitely.

[Rivoli](#): When you were here with me, well maybe you had a pal or two who performed, but over there you're amongst all musicians! And you feed off of one another. One another inspires you.

[Aidan](#): And you had said before, about selecting pieces that work on specific things for the students, the weaknesses... Most people would say that I use these sorts of methods because they "work" for me and they "work" for my students... In your mind...

[Rivoli](#): Well there's no one method, I've never believed there was only one method, and all these new methods that are being published... Just because they're new doesn't necessarily mean they're better. I still use, with a beginner, the method book that I used sixty five years ago. And I've tried every new method book that's come out, I go through it. I buy them, and discard most of them.

[Aidan](#): But in terms of what "works", what would your definition of "works" be? Other than the fact that these books and methods are focusing and improving on particular skills of the students, is there any other reason that some method..."works"?

[Rivoli](#): Well, the one I like best is Leila Fletcher. And I like that book because it progresses easily and slowly, not too fast. Like, a lot of these method books, especially the ones for adults, they move too swiftly. And the adult thinks he's really progressing, but he isn't

because he hasn't acquired the skills. Fast-tracking, and not building a strong foundation. Leila Fletcher is slower-paced, and there's just one area in that course that I don't like, because every piece, around forty, forty one, forty two, there's a new concept introduced in every single piece, and I think that happened too swiftly. They should stick with this concept for several pieces, and **then** move on to something else. There was also another method book that I used to like, called The Music Tree. It began with the black keys, when most pieces begin with middle C. They're 'C' centred, and then they move away. But see, she begins with the black keys, Chopin always stressed this too, to teach these three notes first (F# / Gb, G# / Ab, A# / Bb) because it fits the hand nicely. So this is what she did, she was a Philipp student. Watts, Lloyd Watts was her name. Yeah I really liked that method book, the pieces were so un-musical. They would just be something like this [plays un-musical example using the three black notes]. So I didn't like that there was no musicality there for the first couple of books. But that's not why I stopped using those books... They were too expensive... Thirty five dollars, now I'm going back thirty / fifty years ago, that was a lot of money for a youngster, for the one book!

[Aidan:](#) And for older students, such as myself, what methods do you think work best for you and these students?

[Rivoli:](#) Well you try to decipher where this student is weak. For example, when you first came to me, right away I knew you had ability. You played well, but not neatly. Because you didn't spend enough time working on little fragments. You were always thinking of the piece as a whole, and I was trying to get you to work at just little sections. That's what I did with you. To check carefully. Very often, for example, you made an error and you didn't take the trouble to check "what did I do? what went wrong? was it notes, fingering, what was

it?". Instead, you would just alter the note hoping it was the correct one [laughs]. But yes, no two students are alike... they might be similar, but not alike.

[Aidan](#): So I guess your definition of what "works" means, according to our discussion, is what helps the particular students to develop, and to be inspired...

[Rivoli](#): And to progress, yes.

[Aidan](#): And when you are teaching students, what is your goal for them?

[Rivoli](#): You know, not every student is going to become a professional musician, that's for sure. Few of your students will become professionals, but you do hope that they take the music seriously, and you teach them as if he is going to become a professional. This student may not be as talented as this one, but you still teach this student as if he were going to do exams and perform. Deep down you know that he probably won't, but you still teach him in that fashion. What I'm getting at is this: say the student just wants to play recreational piano... I don't particularly like that kind of student, but if I have a student like that, I still teach them as if they are going to be professional musicians, and go to Western like you did.

[Aidan](#): Yes, I've had students like that too, where they just played a piano somewhere and said "hey this is fun, I should take lessons to play my favourite songs".

[Rivoli](#): And they don't realize how much work is involved.

[Aidan](#): Exactly, exactly, it's a whole different approach to teaching than when you're teaching someone who enjoys music and enjoys the craft...

[Rivoli](#): Or "I have a vision of becoming a musician of some kind". Like, some of my students, they're not necessarily teachers, I have a student who is an editor for Novello. She edits music, I have one who is a performer at the Skylon tower, a jazz pianist. That's another thing, see, he focused on classical music, and then he veered off to jazz.

[Aidan](#): Yeah, so you start with the foundation...

[Rivoli](#): And then he went his own way.

[Aidan](#): And you mentioned before how originally, you wanted to become an artist?

[Rivoli](#): Well not that I wanted to become an artist, but I did enjoy art. I loved it, I still do. But it was a choice between art and music, and I knew I was going to starve to death with art because what I would do, I would paint furiously for two days, three days, five days, then set the brushes aside and I wouldn't touch it for...a month. And then I'd do it again. I thought, I'm never going to make a living this way! And actually for music, I wanted to become a singer actually, an operatic singer. I never told you this story, well, there was a very fine teacher, voice teacher, in Lewiston, New York. Mrs. Perageaux. She taught many operatic singers, and she already had heard of me before I went for an audition with her. And she made me sing something, and she politely told me after I sang "Oh Rivoli, stick to the piano" [laughs]. I never forgot, she was very kind. But I did want to become a singer.

[Aidan](#): Now, because you said you chose music because it was more reliable work, more steady... What's more important to you, that your students leave with passion and leave inspired to follow what they want to do? Or do you hope to instil some reality and guide them towards something more sustainable like teaching?

[Rivoli](#): Well, you have to do both, yes. Well I've heard this with many musicians, especially in Mexico, for example. Like, you see young men playing the guitar, where they play at cafés... Now they don't make much of a living, but they're just living the bohemian lifestyle. That's great for a while, but the time will come when they have to stop. And take things more seriously, is what I'm saying.

[Aidan](#): I'm not sure I have any more questions... Is there anything else you might want to add? In terms of teaching... any stories about maybe you teaching a student, or from you and one of your teachers, that helped you to develop?

[Rivoli](#): You see, I think it was Herald Bradley who said to me, he said, “Rivoli, you’ll never become wealthy teaching, but you’ll live a marvellous life.”. And I did. I mean, I lived well, but I never earned a **great** deal of money. I would do the same thing all over again. I’ve taught so many students... Gee I’m not exaggerating... I think I have about six hundred student who are all now professional musicians in some way. Easily six hundred. And that’s my greatest satisfaction, that they’ve gone on to become successful. So I feel I’ve done something, a little something, that I’ve touched a part of their lives. And many of them are still in contact with me. They call me or email me, and ask “are you still teaching?” [laughs].

[Aidan](#): Now, I guess to end it off, is there any advice you’d give to me, in terms of teaching and music education?

[Rivoli](#): Try to absorb as much as you can from Stephan and your other professors. As much as you possibly can. Work as hard as you can, because you only have so many years to do this. you have to eventually do something with your life where you make a living. You know, you won't be studying all the time. And do the **best** you can. It may not be super playing, but do **your** best. See, when I went to New York... when I was in this area (niagara), I’m just stating a fact, I’m not bragging, but I was very good. I was super. But I went to New York and I was nobody. Because there’s thousands there, just like me or better. And mostly better. So then I had to face the reality... I went there with the idea to become a concert pianist, but I had to face the reality that wasn’t going to happen. So the next best thing for me was to teach.

[Aidan](#): One last question... The reason you became a teacher, what would you say that was? Would you say it was because of the security factor, or would you say that you did have a passion for it?

[Rivoli](#): Like I said, I was a fine pianist here, but in New York, too many were just like me or better. As a concert pianist, you have to have the ability, but you have to have something special too. different from all the others. And I don't think I had that. So I went into teaching, and I enjoy teaching. In fact, even now, I'm eighty five! And on my way to eighty six. And my family keeps asking me "when are you going to retire?". I will never, I will die here. Because I love what I do, this isn't work for me. And I have a purpose to get up "hey, I get to work with this particular student today". And I just love what I do. And you will too.

What I've Learned

From the interview, I learned a great deal about what it means to teach and what it means to live with purpose. From a holistic perspective, you realize how important it is to do what you love to do. As my piano teacher said, teaching piano doesn't feel like work to him, and so he will never retire, because it gives him purpose, and it brings him joy to inspire his students and help them to develop, and to be a part of their lives.

I also learned how incredibly important it is to tailor the curriculum to each individual student. Not just in a private studio setting, like in the context of this interview, but also in a classroom setting as well. The student / teacher relationship is very special and needs to be strong. When a teacher can understand a student's strengths and weaknesses, they can then help that student to succeed and to achieve their own personal goals.

As my teacher said, each student may also have different intentions. The most productive students, for both the student AND teacher, are those who are interested in what they are doing, and devote serious time and effort to improving. When both the student and

teacher are committed, magic can happen in the classroom. And of course, even the students that you know may not have the same potential or may not succeed must be treated as though they will. Because as the instructor, you want what is best for your student, and you want your student to reach their true potential and to be successful and happy. Even if the student isn't reciprocating the passion for what you are teaching, it is still possible to inspire them and be a good figure in their life.

Also, my teacher speaks a lot of his failures and his journey to get where he is today. Specifically, he discusses how he was the best pianist in the area, but once moving to New York City, he realized that there were many that were as good or better than him. He then faced the reality, and made decisions accordingly. He still pursued what he loved... He didn't completely ditch music and become an accountant or something, he just focused on a particular area where he knew he could be successful, and that was teaching. This kind of reality, but inspiration, is also important to instill in one's students as well. It is important to discuss failure, and make sure that your student understands that failure is okay. Failure builds and develops one's future, and that sometimes failure can actually help by leading us in the right direction.

All in all, this interview was an incredible experience, and I am so glad that I had the opportunity to do it. My piano teacher is a very wise man, with lots of experience, and lots of stories. I believe that one of the most important things about education in general, and something that is much too often lacking in the classroom, is passion. When the teacher is passionate about what they are teaching, the students can feel it, and even those who may not be interested in what is being taught, will see it and it will inspire them to be passionate about what they DO love. Walking away from this interview, I am so excited for the days where I get to inspire my students, and help people to follow their dreams and achieve true happiness.