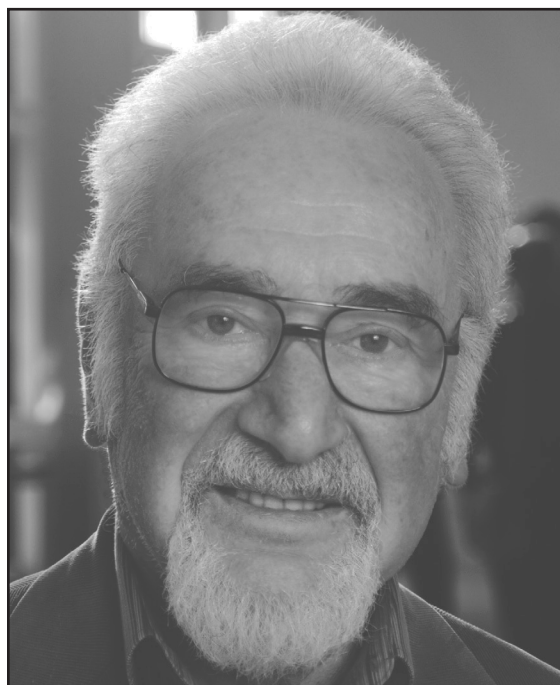

JOSEPH KERMAN



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IT IS HARD for me to think of a remembrance of Joseph Kerman that does not at once also remember his wife, Vivian, who died some years before him. And it is impossible for me to think of the two of them without thinking also of the place of music in their life together.

Music is a solace to most people, and it certainly was one to Joe and Vivian, in different ways that joined somewhere near the heart of their relation. Of course Joe had music almost always on his mind; anyone who has followed musicology and music criticism in the last half-century would know this. Several of his numerous books, particularly *Opera as Drama* and *The Beethoven Quartets*, are classics of musical writing that have touched a very wide readership, reaching well beyond musicological confines; whereas others—here *Contemplating Music* comes first to mind—have served as powerful focusing lenses for scholarly discussion and debate. But this musical mindfulness is different from musical solacing, and to understand Joe Kerman requires understanding the difference. For Joe, music provided not only an intellectual habitation, an object for the writing that was his deepest calling and most constant pursuit; it also offered a refuge where he could open himself to the world in an undefended way, reveal himself, at times unburden himself. Joe was a vulnerable man, a self-protective man, and often a man closed off in good measure from those around him. One felt the effort he needed to make in order to enter into conversation, the hump he had to get over. He had a way of decisively closing his lips—almost smacking his teeth together—when he felt that talking required too much effort.

This was an aspect of Joe that was easily missed by those who witnessed his acuity in casual conversation—that British-flavored quickness of engagement and rejoinder that was prominent in his public persona. Joe's acuity could focus a conversation, bringing it to a productive place others had overlooked; it could vitalize a conversation, redirect it, stop it in its tracks, even on occasion derail it. Many who experienced the acuity laughed at its wit; appreciated its prehensile smartness, its critical nuance, and its wisdom; or (now and then) were stung by its barbs. The impression it gave was one of easy verbal virtuosity, but this was not quite a true impression. The wittiness and the sharpness reflected not a simple deployment by Joe of the powerful capacities he possessed, but something registering a certain resistance: a carrying off with apparent ease of interactions that were, for him, not easy. Conversation cost Joe something, and disguising the cost was part of the function of that public acuity.

All resistance, all difficulty melted away when Joe sat down at the piano. There, the particular kind of solace he found in music came to the fore; there he spoke easily, whether in his Berkeley living room, in the

lecture hall, or in concert. This gift of speaking in music was one of Joe's to us, but it was also music's gift to Joe. A superb prose stylist, he didn't so much write about music as he *channeled* it, allowing music as a surrogate speech to write his books for him. Joe was a modern, scholarly, publishing version of an ancient cultural type—the musical medium.

His functioning in this way brought him into special relation with the composers he particularly channeled: William Byrd, whose expression in music of the struggles of religious persecution in Elizabethan England was a revelation of Joe's early scholarship; Beethoven, whose labored and re-labored sketches epitomized for Joe all true creative process, including his own; and Verdi, whose operas Joe showed to be musical lessons in the processing of emotional bonds happy and not. This kind of close relation persisted down to Joe's last book, *The Art of Fugue*. It was heartwarming for me to watch him work through the challenge of writing on Bach fugues—writing himself *into* the fugues, with exquisite, nuanced perceptiveness—even as his strength began to wane. Joe saw his little book as modestly analogous to Bach's own late, great fugal projects at the end of his life. Joe had contemplated this book years earlier, but he had put it off. I like to think that he had *reserved* it until he could savor in it the biographical congruency with Bach's last efforts.

The saddest development I watched through the final years of Joe's life, on the other hand, was his gradual relinquishing of his musical speech, as he sat at the piano less and less often and finally not at all. These were also the years spent without Vivian, and the timing of Joe's giving up the piano was no coincidence, for the solace music offered to Vivian had always resided in Joe's making it, and Joe knew this. The self-awareness each brought to this transaction defined a musical mutuality that cut very deep. Not that Vivian was a musician herself, or even very musically inclined; her impressive mind worked in other ways. But she would watch attentively and proudly as Joe played—as he spoke from the piano in a public lecture, as he realized *continuo* at a concert, as he welcomed a friend to the bench for four hands or presided from the keyboard at an operatic salon of the sort he liked to convene at home in the Berkeley hills. Vivian would stand up and dance to Joe's renditions of Strauss waltzes with whatever partner was handy, and sometimes even alone. She liked to tell of a long-ago Berkeley dinner party where a Viennese emigrant listened to Joe's Strauss and pronounced it *just right*—*echt Wienerstil*. This was the ultimate compliment to Joe, the sweetest Viennese bon-bon, and in Vivian's proud, loving savoring of it the gift to her that was Joe's music became a musical gift back from her to Joe. It was no wonder that he fell silent once she was gone.

This back-and-forth solacing through music rebounded into other expressions of their life, both public and private. In it we can locate the conception of the music appreciation textbook *Listen* in the 1960s, at a time when such textbooks barely existed. *Listen* was a collaborative venture, and it continues many editions later to bear Vivian's name alongside Joe's. She originally drafted the composer biographies and contributed much to the general cultural context chapters, writing, rewriting Joe's writing, and choosing illustrations with him. In a real way, *Listen* was, after their three children, the central collaborative project of their union; and once I came on board as a co-author in successive editions, I always felt a little like an interloper, an eavesdropper on an understanding between them that was intensely private even as it was public. The understanding achieved was not insignificant, although musicologists might not automatically rank *Listen* alongside Joe's scholarly and critical works. Joe himself was heard to say more than once in his last years that *Listen* was his *most* consequential writing of all, and it's hard to gainsay him, given the hundreds of thousands of undergrads it has touched over four-and-a-half decades. But I believe he said that also to commemorate Vivian.

Joe and Vivian's mutual musical gift entered, finally, deep into her support for his projects. In a *heimlich* but lopsided way that now seems of another era, Joe depended on this support and subsisted on it. It was not without its own barbs since, excepting Joe himself, Vivian was his toughest critic; but meanwhile she always, as we say today, *had his back*. She was quick to anger at those who disparaged him—never forgave, for example, musicologist and one-time colleague Edward Lowinsky for a public broadside he launched at Joe back in the mid-1960s, an attack stimulated by Joe's aggressive efforts to define a specifically American strain of more-than-journalistic music criticism. And Vivian was quick also to swelling pride when things went well. I remember the moment around 1980 when a letter arrived from Frank Kermode, who was working with the British publisher Fontana to gather a series of book-length "master guides" to individual academic disciplines. Kermode wrote to invite Joe to contribute the musicology volume. This would result, a few years later, in the British book titled *Musicology*; it was one of the few books in Kermode's series ever to see the light, and certainly, after its American publication as *Contemplating Music*, it became the most important consequence of that Fontana series. When the letter of invitation came, at any rate, I remember that Joe glowed with childlike delight to have been chosen for the task—a kind of expression he rarely showed the world. And Vivian beamed like a proud mother—a kind of expression she rarely showed Joe.

As Vivian danced to Joe's waltzes, so she enacted her love openly, gesturally, and with unconstrained energy. She once greeted me with a clasp so eager, so crushing that she broke my eyeglass frames. Joe didn't break one's glasses. He always found it more difficult to give his loving embraces bodily form, to let them out into the world as such. Now and then they took shape in movements of easy openness, fleeting moments when all protectiveness fell away; those who loved him came to be adept at recognizing these moments. Most often, they took shape in music: performed, channeled in his writings, listened to and then hashed and rehashed in a conversation that only music could, to that shimmering degree, unloose.

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