WHEN YOU ASK Robert Aubry Davis, a classical music radio and television veteran, what's he up to, be sure you're in a comfy chair because it takes a while to hear the answer. “I've narrated a film about ancient religious sites in Turkey, I've been elected a trustee of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, I’m talking with Gene Murrow about doing something with the New York Early Music Celebration, and then I’m off to Budapest where I plan to spend some time with Laszlo Dobszay and Janka Szendrei, the conductors of Schola Hungarica, get some audiotape, and see what they've been up to. And I re-upped my relationship with Radio Nederlands for the Holland Festival of Early Music in Utrecht, which I’ve done for over a dozen years.”

Davis is also the producer and host of Millennium of Music, a groundbreaking and highly influential early music program heard on public radio stations nationwide and on XM Satellite Radio. And he’s program director for the XM program Vāς, dedicated to classical vocal music. “I’m celebrating my 29th anniversary at WETA with Millennium, and it’s the thing I’ve said they will have to pry from my cold, dead fingers,” says Davis.

Davis is an insider who has seen the early music movement from all perspectives and is delightfully forthcoming with his opinions. “I’ve been thinking about what we haven’t done and what we need to do in this field,” he says. “I have this thing about Renaissance festivals; my analogy is that a Renaissance festival is to the Renaissance what a Playboy foldout is to an actual woman. I clench my teeth when I walk into one of those things because you see everything from roughly the sixth-century Scythian to the early Baroque era represented. I also think of all the films and video games that represent not so much the real Middle Ages and Renaissance, but the fantasy Middle Ages. It breaks my heart when I think of the music used in them. “Music was an omnipresent factor in the lives of the people who lived then, and we need to do a better job to raise the consciousness of the literary, film, and gaming universe about just how important music was to the place and time,” says Davis. “A little bit of pseudo-lute was not what these people were experiencing. So you have to say to today’s producers, ‘Hey, think about what their musical experience was and go from there.’”

He continues, “I think about David Munrow, who was all over this kind of thing. Where is that voice now? Munrow was a genius; he had one foot in the field and one foot on that vast shoreline that’s everybody else. That’s what we need. I truly admire Sting for what he did with Dowland (See Profile, Fall 2006). I have no doubt that he introduced Dowland to...
a vast audience who would not have known him otherwise. The point is that we should do our best not to discourage anybody. We need to get to the next stage, which is other people looking at this repertoire and extending the franchise.”

On the other hand, “Sometimes people who crossed over are famous just for crossing over and that’s it. In the real opera community, Andrea Bocelli is anathema. I don’t think The Mediaeval Baebes are taken very seriously by the larger Medieval music community, either. I would suggest the 20th-century artificial separation between music and so-called art music that has evolved is particularly unhealthy.”

What gets Davis excited these days? “One of the best things, and it’s a 10-year phenomenon, is that people have gotten excited about unrecorded pieces by great composers and secondary composers who have never been recorded before. People are going into studios and committing it to disc, and that’s fantastic,” he says. “Another great trend I’ve seen is cross-cultural explorations like Katrina Livjanić’s Croatian programs, Ben Bagby’s Chant Wars and Beowulf, Dominique Vellard’s programs [which explore new music], and my dear radio compatriot Angela Mariani’s work in Celtic repertoire. We need a whole lot more of this.”

With his radio programs, Davis is also opening ears. “One popular new area is Eastern Orthodox music. I put a lot of it on Vox, and I get these letters from people who are nuts for it,” he says. “These are people who do not usually listen to this kind of music. Those are the people you want—not the people who listen to early music, not even the people who listen to classical music. You want the people who are flipping the dial and hear it and say, ‘What the hell is that? I want to hear more of that.’”

—Craig Zeichner