

Joel Cohen, who led Boston Camerata early music ensemble to international prominence, dies at 84

By [Bryan Marquard](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 10, 2026, 1 hour ago



Joel Cohen played a Turkish instrument in 2011. DINA RUDICK

During [Joel Cohen's four-decade tenure as music director of The Boston Camerata](#), which he guided from local renown to international prominence, some audiences forgot that the early music ensemble had even existed before his leadership.

“I sometimes have to tell people I didn’t found the Camerata,” Mr. Cohen told The Boston Globe in 1983. “After all, I was only 12 in 1954!”

Combining scholarly precision and warm unpretentiousness, he engaged with musicians and audiences alike from 1968 onward, and he continued his association with the ensemble after becoming music director emeritus in 2008. Praised by critics and musicians for unearthing long-ago musical threads that stitched one culture to another, he helped Camerata performances illuminate the creative bonds that get lost amid history’s political acrimony.

“Music can help reestablish our personal connection with humanity in general, can make us feel that there is hope for humankind,” he told the Globe in 1999. “That is the contribution that musicians can make.”

Mr. Cohen, who used his personal connection to France [to establish the Camerata](#) as an essential part of that country’s musical imagination, [died in hospice care in Haverhill on July 26](#). He was 84 and lived in Amesbury.

“What was captivating about Joel was his energy and the curiosity that he carried for the world,” said his wife and musical collaborator, the soprano and teacher [Anne Azéma](#), who succeeded him in leading the Camerata and is its artistic director.

That intense curiosity was there “for his field, of course,” she added, “but also for the world at large — for art, for landscape, for traveling on his moped when he was younger from one side of Europe to the other. He had a deep appetite and curiosity for life in all its ways. And his energy was boundless.”

He brought much of that energy to bear in reaching beyond standard early music repertoires to present programs that showed how musical ideas migrated across borders separating nations and religions — from Christianity to Judaism to Islam and back again, for example.

Mr. Cohen always found “connections across musical genres, across timeframes, across cultures and countries,” said [Deborah Rentz-Moore, a mezzo-soprano who](#)

[has performed with the Camerata and teaches voice at the University of New Hampshire.](#) “It’s been so invigorating to experience that as a performer.”

By doing so, he also removed barriers audiences felt between music they liked and what they hadn’t yet encountered.

“Joel showed that the same core music bounced back and forth and was augmented and added to by the different cultures,” said [Tod Machover](#), a composer and a professor of music and media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

By doing so, Mr. Cohen helped audiences understand that “this music that they did not know is suddenly relevant to them,” Rentz-Moore said.

“I think he brought the past into the future,” Machover said.

From the outset, Mr. Cohen saw the barriers he would face with audiences and, to some extent, with musicians.

“There is a tendency for early music groups either to specialize in one area, or to skim the top off of everything and keep it lively by hitting the tambourines a lot,” he told the Globe in 1983.

With engaging enthusiasm, Mr. Cohen led the Camerata to musical landscapes other ensembles never dared to visit.

“What you have in the Camerata’s music director,” Globe music critic Richard Buell wrote in 1999, “is a quite unearthly melting together of academic researcher, vocal coach, conductor, high-art lutenist, public educator, and unreconstructed vaudevillian.”

Born in Providence on May 29, 1942, Mr. Cohen was the older of two siblings and the only son of Jacob Cohen, a businessman, and Beatrice Gross Cohen, who had been a social worker.

Though Mr. Cohen’s parents sang in ensembles, “they strongly discouraged him from being a musician,” Azéma said. Mr. Cohen’s parents didn’t think he could make a

living in music.

In a lengthy 1983 interview with [Globe music critic Richard Dyer](#), Mr. Cohen recalled performing as a boy soprano in Providence. He also studied piano, somewhat unhappily, for a few years.

Mr. Cohen received a bachelor's degree from Brown University, his father's alma mater, and a master's in composition from Harvard University.

He took up guitar and considered becoming a folksinger. Instead, the guitar led him to buy an inexpensive lute in Harvard Square, and early studies on that instrument led to an invitation to perform with the Camerata, about a decade after its founding. In the early 1960s, the ensemble was still officially associated with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Around that time, one of his teachers at Harvard suggested he try to study in Paris with [the legendary conductor and composer Nadia Boulanger](#).

"I had no audition, submitted no papers or manuscripts," Mr. Cohen recalled in 1983. "I just had a letter of recommendation."

In France on a Danforth fellowship, he studied with Boulanger.

"She lived in her own world, but there were those astonishing flashes, when she would look at you and tell you your own truth," he told the Globe.

Returning to Boston, he became music director of the Camerata in 1968.

Through personal connections made while studying with Boulanger, Mr. Cohen led the Camerata on many tours of France: in country towns and in Paris, on radio programs and recording for French companies. Reviewers took note that a Boston early music group was teaching French audiences about their own musical heritage.

"We managed to break through the croissant curtain," he quipped about the ensemble's success in France.

While the Camerata was there during one tour, Azéma's voice teacher sent her to a summer workshop the ensemble was conducting in the south of France.

"So I went and the rest was history," Azéma said. She and Mr. Cohen married in 1983.

On the stage speaking to audiences and in his writings as well, Mr. Cohen was "a fantastic communicator," Azéma said.

Critics often commented about his charisma.

"He had a clear way of sharing his talent with joy," Azéma said.

Machover, a friend of more than 40 years who also is faculty director of MIT Media Lab, said that "so many things were special about Joel — his incredible imagination, and his creative courage exploring music and literature that literally nobody knew."

But even more, he added, his voice breaking, "he had this kind of childlike sparkle in his eyes. When you keep that for your entire life, it's just special."

Azéma is Mr. Cohen's only immediate survivor. A gathering in the fall to celebrate his life and work will be announced.

His engaging personality was such that he even filled in as host of Robert J. Lurtsema's legendary WGBH-FM radio program, "Morning Pro Musica," structuring broadcasts much as he built Camerata programs.

"You've got to think about the key relationships and the tempos and the moods," he said of his radio hosting in 1981. "You have to build a rhythm within each section of the program."

Similarly, he compared putting together a Camerata performance to creating a piece of music.

"Building a program was exactly like structuring a compositional experience," he said in 1983. "A concert should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, its fast parts and

its slow parts, its sad parts and its happy parts. It should look backward, and it should look forward.”

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