

Music at MIT Oral History Project

Stephen Erdely

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

August 4, 1999

Interview no. 2

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Transcript Proof Reader: Lois Beattie
Transcript Editor: Forrest Larson

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Contributors

Stephen Erdely is Professor Emeritus of Music at MIT, actively teaching from 1973-1991. Among his teachers at the Franz Liszt Music Academy in Budapest were Zoltan Kodaly and Leo Weiner. From 1951-1966 he played in Cleveland Orchestra under conductor George Szell. He was among the first generation of scholars who defined the discipline of ethnomusicology. In 1973 he joined the music faculty at MIT, teaching courses in ethnomusicology, Western classical music, theory, and musicianship. A distinguished violinist, he performed for many years with his wife, concert pianist Beatrice Erdely.

Forrest Larson, Library Assistant at the Lewis Music Library, has attended training workshops in oral history methodology and practice at Simmons College and by the Society of American Archivists, and is a member of the Oral History Association. He is also an active composer and violist.

Interview conducted by Forrest Larson on August 4, 1999, in the MIT Lewis Music Library. Second of two interviews. First interview March 24, 1999. Duration of the audio recording is 0:0:0.

Music at MIT Oral History Project

The Lewis Music Library's *Music at MIT Oral History Project* was established in 1999 to document the history of music at MIT. For over 100 years, music has been a vibrant part of the culture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This history covers a wide variety of genres, including orchestral, chamber, and choral musical groups, as well as jazz, musical theater, popular and world music. Establishment of a formal music program in 1947 met the growing needs for professional leadership in many of the performing groups. Shortly thereafter, an academic course curriculum within the Division of Humanities was created. Over the years, the music faculty and alumni have included many distinguished performers, composers, and scholars.

Through in-depth recorded audio interviews with current and retired MIT music faculty, staff, former students, and visiting artists, the *Music at MIT Oral History Project* is preserving this valuable legacy for the historical record. These individuals provide a wealth of information about MIT. Furthermore, their professional lives and activities are often historically important to the world at large. Audio recordings of all interviews are available in the MIT Lewis Music Library.

1. MIT and ethnomusicology

FORREST LARSON: This is an interview with Professor Stephen Erdely, August 4th, 1999. Interviewed by Forrest Larson in MIT Lewis Music Library. I'm here with Professor Stephen Erdely for another oral history interview. I'm Forrest Larson. We're in the MIT Music Library. It's August 4th, 1999.

And mostly today we're going to talk about music at MIT and the years you were teaching here and your—your chairmanship. And I believe your—well, we can ask about dates and stuff in just a minute. You can confirm the dates that I have. So, the dates that I have for you are 1973 through 1991. Is that correct when you were here?

STEPHEN ERDELY: Correct. Yes.

LARSON: Okay. And that you were head of the music section from 1976 to 1981.

ERDELY: Yes.

LARSON: Is that correct?

ERDELY: Yes.

LARSON: Okay. We had talked about this in a—in a previous interview. But maybe you could just give, a short description of—of how it is that you came to MIT to teach.

ERDELY: MIT announced an—a job position. And think it was in 1973, for, um, a particular position which was, basically, fundamentals of music. And, although this was not my main area, of expertise and interest, I had in my background a very good fundamental training in this system, which Zoltán Kodály in Hungary has been establishing.

I have been teaching, actually, music teachers at Ohio State University how to incorporate this system into public school teaching. And in some instances, this was quite successful, as I have seen the teachers activate this in their schools. Um, and so, I did not have, at the time, a complete syllabus to do the work. But I was teaching, on the side, also, fundamentals for private students.

And I—I think I had some courses also at the University. So I introduced the syllabus in—in my application. And very soon after, they asked me to—um, to come for interview in 1973 and, um, in a deal. So I got notification that I had received the job.

I assumed that, many things played a role, not only my expertise or—or semi-expertise in the fundamental teaching, but the fact that I have been a member of the Cleveland Orchestra, and I have known that situation, and David Epstein, who was, an apprentice conductor at the time, participating in some of the conductors workshops, which [George] Szell [conductor of Cleveland Symphony Orchestra 1946-1970] has been offering in Cleveland. I had both the background of a practical musician who was out in the field as well as, um, my training in musicology and, various scholarly aspects of my activities, um, participation in conferences and writing essays and things like that.

LARSON: Was your background as an ethnomusicologist—was that a factor in your hiring?

ERDELY: Yes. Although ethnomusicology, at the time, was not yet an accepted discipline in the Boston area. Interesting enough, there were already ethnomusicology jobs in various parts of the country, particularly in—in California, which had an Institute of Ethnomusicology, and in Bloomington, Indiana [Indiana University], where, um, ethnomusicology, I could imagine, started. And they built, actually, a library.

Um, Professor George Herzog, who came from Columbia University and was an assistant to Franz Boas—himself was an anthropologist and an ethnomusicologist, a musician—um, established, the archive in Bloomington, Indiana. And then, from there on, Indiana—the University of Indiana became, more or less, the center of ethnomusicology course studies, with various departments participating in developing ethnomusicology as such.

So Boston rejected or resisted—let's put it this way—resisted to introduce ethnomusicology in the universities as a scholarly principle. There were professors who—like Professor [John Milton] Ward at Harvard University—who came to meetings, ethnomusicology meetings and—and had an personal interest. Uh, but it took a number of years before, actually, courses in ethnomusicology were introduced there.

So, um, I would say, MIT, of course, which did not have a fully developed music department at the time, a music pro—program at the time—um, did not think of ethnomusicology yet as a specialized field.

LARSON: Mm-hm. There was a Professor Donald Sur [composer] who taught here who was—

ERDELY: Donald Sur, yes.

LARSON: Yeah. He was—had some expertise in ethnomusicology, like Far Eastern music.

ERDELY: Don Sur, who, um, was a very good friend of ours, and who unfortunately died this year, just a—a few months ago, was, I think, Korean born or—or of Korean background. Um, and he studied composition with Earl Kim, and actually was, um, teaching here more composition than ethnomusicology. When eventually ethnomusicology was accepted, kind of in a general survey course, I—I introduced it, I also asked Don Sur to come and give lectures in Far Eastern music, which he did visit and actually did a survey course in ethnomusicology.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. What were some of the changes that happened in the academic environment here that accepted you teaching ethnomusicology?

ERDELY: It was eventually the recognition that, um, an outlook upon world music is now a generally accepted field. And my colleagues gradually have seen catalogs of other universities where ethnomusicology has been, in one form or another, introduced. And I was always pressing for—for broadening the music history perspective with the musicology courses. And so, gradually, um, it was introduced into the catalog. And that's the way it happened.

LARSON: In your Annual Report you frequently mentioned that—that you want things to broaden and that you felt that students now want more than just, you know, a

traditional conservatory choice of training. And they want more and more options. And also, there was a, um, one of the Dean's reports, Annual Reports, mentions that a, that university education, after World War II, had to change because the times were—were different and that the old ways of teaching weren't adequate. So it looks like there was kind of a convergence of—

ERDELY: Yes, indeed. It has become more and more obvious that, um, Western music has developed in—in one direction, into one complexity, broadening the basic scale and—and the concepts of music, harmony and melody in every direction.

Particularity, we find the harmony of the twelve-tone composers and the melody of the Bartókian and folklorist composers who started to apply folk tunes many times throughout the complex and the rhythms and many times also touching on—on rather unfamiliar tonalities, to—to the Western ear, which made the studies in ethnomusicology more and more acute to—to get a little more feeling of—of what the world is generally offering.

Um, unfortunately, it's—it immediately shoot to reach the stars. Uh, with study of ethnomusicology, which—which, as I have been trained in it, was dealing with the national resources. And the universities immediately introduced world music as—as the basic of ethnomusicology, which—which was a rather, um, broad concept. And very little was known, actually, on so many colleges in so many musics throughout the world, to teach immediately Far Eastern music and South American music, when we didn't know anything yet about the American music and its—its own development—

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY:—and—and its own complexity. So, I have—I tried to first restrict these courses to—to subjects which more pertain us immediately, since I—I was involved as—as a researcher in, what we called at the time, urban folklore. Urban folklore dealt with the inherited or traditional music of, um, different ethnic groups living in American urban surroundings. And that has been proven a very, very fertile ground for ethnomusicology for research. And also, in—in many instances, gave us the possibility to compare music of what ethnic back—groups are singing here in the United States and how ethnic music is practiced in the country of origin.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Uh, which gave us also an—an— a better ground to—to see how some of the development, acculturation affected some of the ethnic musics. Whereas, we didn't—I certainly didn't know anything about Indonesian or Indian or Japanese music and—and Chinese music and history of Chinese music. These were completely out of my perspective.

So, um, when eventually most of the universities started ethnic music with the—the question of world music, the faculty also forced me into introducing world music into the curriculum. And—and I had to develop our library facilities, and I had to study a great deal in order to understand what many of these other fields meant.

And I think we offer a pretty good course in that. But I still feel that the individual, the specialization is so much more fruitful and there is so little done,

actually. But what Ameri—what happens in American music, and there is so much yet to—to be studied, that we were much better off—we would be much better off if we would focus on that particular subject and devote more time to that.

LARSON: What were some of the ethnomusicological courses you taught here? Which one of the course titles?

ERDELY: Well, I—I did teach a number of courses. I taught Musical Traditions in America. Um, I taught World Music, as such. Um, and then I have, introduced courses in, um, I think, in—in just in, um, collecting—in research of—of ethnomusicology, how one goes about it, how one gathers the material.

And then, during the summer course, several summer courses, um, I have taught a concentrated course into the history and methods of ethnomusicology as they developed. And that probably was the most encompassing, the—the broadest course. And it was dealing from—from the very beginning of the movement at the turn of the century, till—till about the '50s or '60s happenings and theoretical considerations and things like that.

LARSON: Now you had received an NEA grant to do urban folklore—urban um—

ERDELY: Studies, history.

LARSON: Studies in—in Boston. Tell me a little bit about that.

2. Development of interest in ethnomusicology

ERDELY: Well, my entire background in ethnomusicology before I even made it as an academic subject or a discipline, started out in Cleveland, where I got my PhD in Musicology. And before I got, actually, into the dissertation, I had two choices, which I felt I could contribute to a dissertation to musicology.

One was, um, in the field of Baroque music and performance practices. And the other one was, um, in ethnomusicology or, anyhow, in the principles of ethnomusicology as it developed in Hungary under the hands of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály

And I selected the other one because, in—in the 1950s, um, there was absolutely nothing known about the achievements of—of, ethnomusicology of Bartók and Kodály. In spite of the fact that Bartók 's book on Hungarian folk music was translated in English in the early 1930s, it was not—never regarded that—that—or never understood that he—he was more than a lover of folk songs who picked up here and there a tune. But his entire, um, activities have been involving lots of field research and organization and—and writing books.

As a matter of fact, when Bartók died, he had something like twelve volumes, if not more, of—of collected material essays and whatnot unpublished. Uh, so, he had, altogether, written some seventeen books of which only about two or three reached publication at the time, which—which explains, also, the tragedy of that man.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: So we knew all about these activities. And we had access to many of his writings, which were, of course, in Hungarian, some of them in German. And so I decided to take up the field. And—and my, um, first attempting at the musicology was a kind of a summary of the—of these two men's complementary research achievements from 1905 till 1945 or so when Bartók died.

Um, and that dissertation was—before even it was accepted at—at Case Western Reserve, it was already accepted in Indiana for [inaudible] for publication. And I am happy to say that this little book has circled around the globe. [*Methods and Principles of Hungarian Ethnomusicology*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1965]

LARSON: And it's been reprinted too fairly recently.

ERDELY: Yes. And—and it circled around the globe, and it had great success. I still, when I'm going to conferences, people sometimes come to me and speak to me and say that—tha— how much it meant to them to read how—how much of an eye-opener that little booklet was.

So that put me into the army of ethnomusicologists. And I joined the [American Ethnomusicology] Society just, ah, one or two years before the dissertation was finished. And the society was, at the time, in the 1960s, a very small society. Uh—Alan Merriam, the anthropologist from Northwestern University, um, followed George Herzog, in the chair in Indiana University.

And he became president of Ethnomusicology Society. And he also, um, started to develop the society as such and invited me to join. We were, the first meeting, something like 35 or 40 members who were present.

Uh, and so I consider myself among, maybe, the founding members of the American Ethnomusicology Society because of my earlier participation and my early papers. And then, as—as my dissertation was finished, I was very lucky in a sense because, the Dean of the Graduate School [Carl Wittke] at Case Western Reserve University, who has taken my credentials and taken me into the university, was also a folklorist himself, and a—and a very fine historian, particularly Ohio history. And he written a very popular book at the time, which he was also teaching, with the title, *We Who Built America* [*We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant*. Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1964], dealing with immigration history and all the people who have come to this country and have been working in different factories and given their life's energy and work to make America what it was.

And he supported my dissertation. And—and also he arranged that I'm getting my first grant from the American Council of Learned Societies to start, um, research among the people in Cleveland. In Cleveland, at that time, we had something like 66 different ethnic communities, some large and some as large as—as 70,000, and some as small as maybe a couple of thousand.

And so I started to go out with my tape recorder and—and started a collection. That was in 1961, 1962, I think. Um, and gradually, I moved from one ethnic group to the other, and gradually, a collection started to come.

The first—after the first grant, the next grant came from the, um, hm—what was it? Yeah. Uh, the—the first one was the American Philosophical Society. The

second one from American Council of Learned Societies, um, which was a little bit larger and permitted me to continue the work.

And then I also became President of the Ohio Folklore Society as such. And—and that gave me also some additional, um, the possibility to, to work with the ethnic groups while, of course, I was teaching and playing in the orchestra. So, that wasn't my main job and occupation.

And then we—when I came to, um, to Boston, the—the preparations for, um, the Bicentennial were in the swing. And, um, I forgot already who, but somebody got the wind that I have done this ethnic music research, and since Boston devised the Bicentennial in such a way that it devoted a year and a half, to the celebration of the different ethnic groups in the city.

[Coughs] Excuse me. They—[clears throat] um, they wanted to also have somebody who is, um, advising on the music of the different ethnic groups. And—and through the City Hall, I got, over several years, NEH grants, which I was working.

And then later on there was another research project, which has been devised by Indiana University to compare, um, the—the tradition as it developed in the United States among Hungarian ethnic communities and as—as the cult of—of traditional music developed in—in a Hungarian village.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And both folklorist and—and myself as ethnomusicologist joined a team of people. And we were sent throughout the summer to—to do research in Hungary in several villages and also here in the United States.

By that time the ethnic group in Cleveland faded away because the early 1960s people were, in the—in the '60s, they were already old. They were immigrants of the First World War era, and—and, um, they were very good folk informants, but they were in their late sixties or so, if not seventy and older, or in the retired age. And—and, of course, when we started to work in the early '80s on these comparative studies, they were not anymore here.

There was also some interesting change between the new—new, people who came to the United States and the old ones. Uh, but the community, which was still rather active, was in Passaic, New Jersey, which is a large Hungarian community there. So I did my American research in—in Passaic, New Jersey, and Hungarian research in several villages in Hungary.

LARSON: Now what were some of the urban folklore studies you did in Boston? At least in, um, John Buttrick's Annual Report from 1974-75 he mentioned that you had done some research in Boston. Was that—maybe, was he misstating what you were doing?

ERDELY: Oh, no. When I did, the, the research in Boston, um, included the same kind of—of studies as I have done in Cleveland, except I found that the—the configuration of ethnic groups in Boston was so much different than in—in Cleveland.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: First of all, there were not that many ethnic groups. But the strong representation was among the Balkan and the Baltic groups.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

ERDELY: So, um, there were excellent, some very excellent, findings among the Albanians in—in Boston. That was a community of something like 10,000 Albanians who are living here in Boston. And then, um, among the Greek people and—and, [inaudible] Greek, and then from the Northern parts, the Latvians and—and, um, the Lithuanians. I didn't have any Estonians.

Um, and of course, and the Irish community, which is another very large representation here. I did not get, unfortunately, to the Armenian community, which I understand is also very large. Uh, the time ran, ran out.

But these were the groups with whom I have been working quite extensively. And um, particularity fruitful was the—as I said, the, um, research with the Albanian people who I discovered had groups singing a very, very ancient, kind of improvised, polyphonic music.

LARSON: And you mentioned in your Annual Report from 1976-77 there was a concert that they gave here at MIT. So tell me about this group, these singers.

ERDELY: Uh, they were about twelve or so people, again the older generation, who called the tradition the iso songs. Now, iso is a strange name because it has a similar sounding to the ison in the Byzantine chant, a kind of chant with a repeated note and—and [inaudible] melody. And, um, they have the same things but in a kind of a folk tradition. Um, and both this ison the—or iso, or sustained note, they sing, um, some improvised melody.

LARSON: Is this sacred music?

ERDELY: No.

LARSON: No.

ERDELY: It's—it's secular, entirely secular—

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY:—music. But it's—it's rather free and—and creates very, very harsh sounds sometimes, parallel seconds and parallel sevenths and—in a succession. And, well, I carried the group to MIT. The—the group was invited to—to sing at Harvard. The group has quite—had a quite successful—and, of course, the group was singing in front of the City Hall when—during the, um, '76 celebration.

LARSON: Did they make any recordings? Or do you have any?

ERDELY: No. I have—I have, um, the recording. I have made the recordings, which—which we took at the time.

LARSON: I would love to hear some of them.

ERDELY: Well, we can—we can—I—I don't even remember whether I left some at MIT. But I can give you some copies of—of their singing.

And then, there was another very interesting kind of singing, which was of a guy who—who played the Byzantine fiddle and sang to that. It's an instrument which you hold with your knees, but—but the tonalities and—and the entire concept goes back, probably, to the 13th century, as far as the music is concerned.

LARSON: Wow. Now this work that you did in—in Boston, where was that research published?

ERDELY: Uh, several of these papers were published in—in various journals in ethnomusicology and reports, were published in the International Folk Music Council at the time. It is now music—*Traditional Music Journal*. Um, some of them were read at meetings. Some of them are still not published.

LARSON: I would—I think the library would very much like to have some of that research at some point. That's—

ERDELY: But—

LARSON:—quite fascinating.

ERDELY:—I am, right now in the—in the process of, um, getting together all my notes for all these researches because histories of the societies, histories of individual people I find are very interesting. And they are still, maybe, only on tape or—or just partly as described this—transcribed. So um, it's still a—a lot of work.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And, to—to—just—just as a side remark, Western Reserve Historical Society knows about my collection in Cleveland. And they would like to have it as an—as a document of the 1960s of the city and its people. Um, and we are, right now, in the process of—of negotiating somehow, because, to—to make—for me to make, at the position would mean that I would still have to copy these tapes. I just cannot give them up for their archives.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: So, there—there is now a growing demand because these—these recordings start to have historical value.

3. Music and the humanities at MIT

LARSON: Absolutely. So to change the subject a little bit and getting more specific to—to MIT, you were head of the Music Section from 1976 to 1981. There was also the position of Director of Music. Was the Chair of the Music Section also Director of Music necessarily? And what does—what does that—what do those two titles mean?

ERDELY: There is no difference.

LARSON: There is no difference.

ERDELY: There was no difference. I think it was more the question of making that particular function more definitive. The other Sections of the Humanities had chairs. And we

had performance organizations as well as academic programs, so once it was chair, once it was director. It depends of what you had been addressing.

But my responsibility was both to, um, overview the—the academic programs, as well as the performance programs.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And I think I have given somewhere—I think you probably have it on your files, some yearly program brochures which the department has given out. And it shows that, um, every year we had about seventy or so public performances of various kinds of the Choral Society, of the [Concert] Band, of the [Symphony] Orchestra, individual faculty recitals and guest events and—and some of the student events. And so all together it was a pretty big undertaking.

LARSON: Absolutely. It's—it's pretty—pretty amazing what you had to oversee. Can you tell me a little bit about the administrative structure of the—the Music Section and how it fit in with the Department of Humanities at the time, because that's changed over the years. And who you reported to and—

ERDELY: Uh, well, we were called sections, actually.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Uh, and to the—the History Department, the Literature Department, the, Foreign Language Department. Uh, and then a little bit of the Anthropology Department, they were all sections under the head of the—head of the Humanities Department.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: And we had weekly meetings as, as chairs or heads or whatever you want to call it, with the head of the Humanities Department. And—and we had to, sort of, hash out and correlate our programs within the overall structure of the Humanities Department.

LARSON: And the head of Humanities that—from, at least, from 1974 to '80—

ERDELY: Uh, it was—

LARSON:—was Bruce Mazlish?

ERDELY: Mazlish [Head 1974-1980].

LARSON: Yes.

ERDELY: Yeah, he was for a while. And then after him, came, I think, Peter Smith [Head 1980-1981].

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Or—or [Richard L.] Cartwright. But Cartwright only for a—a very short time and, um, just to overview some problems, frictions between the Literature Section and the Foreign Language Section. There were some problems.

LARSON: And how did the Dean of Humanities fit into that structure?

ERDELY: The Dean of Humanities—

LARSON: Harold Hanham? [Dean of the Division of Humanities and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences 1973-1984]

ERDELY: Yeah. Yeah. He had—um, he had control over the Department of Humanities. And then, there were, not included in the Department of Humanities in the structure, were, for instance, Linguistics, Philosophy, and – and some of the other groups—I don't know exactly what as—Poli—um, Education, Ben Schneider's department [Political Science] and, which was focusing on—on edu—on the question of education as—as such. So there were some other small departments which were outside of the umbrella of the Humanities Department.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. Right. Because it was the Division of Humanities in the School [of Humanities]—or at least his title, according to what I've read, Dean of the Division of Humanities in this—um, yeah, in the School of—well, there was the Division of Humanities and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, so, yeah.

ERDELY: Yeah. Yes.

LARSON: Right.

LARSON: Were there some particular administrators at MIT who you found particularly helpful in some of your endeavors as Chair and just other times when you were just teaching here?

ERDELY: Well, I do believe that overlooking the entire activities at MIT, which is—which is enormous and, huge, uh, the – the Department of Humanities, as well as the Dean's Office, were always very, very cooperative, as much as they could, in—in our endeavors.

So our major problems were always, as with every department, budgetary. Because many of our performance organizations needed—needed money for one thing or another. The appropriations for the Orchestra or the appropriation for the Choral Society or for the performances, um, were never entirely sufficient.

Also, the appropriations for the library, for the needs to cover the new courses which have come along were very meager. So it was always a hustle and bustle for getting a little more money for this and that. Um, and of course, sometimes for instruments and sometimes for needs—facility needs, classrooms, for the piano laboratory, and um, practice rooms, we had to get it—

LARSON: It's always been an on—an ongoing issue, practice rooms and performance space. Yeah.

ERDELY: Yeah. The—the— these were standard issues. And—and, um, we had innumerable meetings and—and conferences on that. And sometimes successful, sometimes not successful. But those things had to be taken in good strides. And—and there had to be a kind of an—a policy—compromise policy involved where—where things had to be give and take. Yeah?

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: So it was a game, actually, in a sense, it—as— as it is always the case, to achieve some—some improvement, some help in—in many of these directions. In some

years, it was better. In some years, it wasn't quite successful. But I can't say that at any time, um, we got the—a definite no to any of our requests. Only maybe we didn't get entirely what we wanted to have.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: Which is the way of life.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And one has to take it.

LARSON: That's fantastic. During the time that you were Chair, the Department of Humanities and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences underwent reorganization and curriculum changes. How much were you involved in the upper level work with that on the department level?

ERDELY: Well, we got instructions. But in many instances we were a little bit ahead of the game because we already knew what is necessary in order to improve the music department's curriculum. Uh, most of our faculty came from—from prestige universities, where the music programs were more advanced, far more advanced than, um, they found here at MIT.

And so did I come here with—with various views and ideas. And—and so our request for a—a full curriculum wasn't that much affected by the overall changes which the, um, other—other departments faced.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: I really—I—don't remember. There were innumerable meetings in which curricular matters were developed. But hard part, our discussion was always more internal within the department and not necessarily within the overall structure of—of the Humanities.

My job was obvious to be well-prepared and answer some of these questions. And—and I had also been very good terms with, Dean Hanham. Uh, we have frequently discussed the question of the music department and its needs over a luncheon or something like that. Uh, so I—I could manage to, at least to—to cut the administrative hassle and that's what in a shorter way by going directly to the head.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. It probably—or did it—it must have helped that—because the Department of Humanities was rethinking how they were doing—when you came with something new, it probably was less of a problem than if they had—had been entrenched in an old way of thinking.

ERDELY: Well, the music department was in a problem because it—it established itself in an environment which was—which liked music, but did not emphasize training in music in any way, nor did it want to accept performance as an academic activity for a long time. So our entire professional goals, as we look at one, were a little bit misunderstood and a little bit strange to the MIT environment. And we had to overcome or work against this kind of—of— um, of philosophy or understanding in order to push the music department.

I remember that we had many times meetings with high administrators, students, and—and teachers and administrators together in informal conferences where students openly requested, more credits for some of the activities of the—of musical activities. And, um, they were just refused all by the administration, that it is not acceptable, you know?

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Uh, to get credits for—for orchestra participation or choral participation was something which they didn't want to accept at any time. Um, which, in a sense, is understandable. Uh, under—under the current conditions. If the whole structure would have been—whole music structure would have been on the level that the orchestra practices were gearing toward professional—professionalism, would have been different.

But, unfortunately, being as such, these societies depended upon the time and ambition of the students, participants, whether they come to the rehearsal or not. And so, the entire activity, as such, did not really meet the rigor of an ac—an academic course, which would then, um, permit the credits.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. Now you mention in some of your Annual Reports a growing, or an increase—you see a growing skill level. You were saying in one report that you thought that—that 1/3 of the students, their performing levels was—was conservatory quality. I remember that—that really struck me. And that you felt that they were just bet—increasingly prepared, performance-wise and just their perspectives, and that the curriculum needed to change to—to meet that. Can you talk about that?

ERDELY: I don't remember. But I—I certainly understand your question. When I'm looking back, then I—I see, among our student body, which consisted at the time something like, in a year, maybe 600 students who are taking just music appreciation and fundamental courses, and another 600 which are completely divided between all of the different, other courses. And—and out of this—out of these 600, maybe, um, a few who are taking instrumental training and are very proficient.

My wife has been teaching here piano for several years. And she had some absolutely wonderful piano students. Uh, some of them gave recitals with—with highly demanding and technically very difficult pieces. At the same time, they were double-majoring in maybe in computer sciences or—or electrical engineering and—and—and music.

And so it happened also that many of the students who were from the instrumental point of view proficient, um, did not actually take courses in the music department. For some reason, either they found the courses too elementary for their own particular level of proficiency or they didn't have any time to take some of the more specialized courses, history, or theory or something like that.

And so, we have here, again, an—an— a student who is very good, let's assume, in piano or violin playing, but doesn't know anything about history of music or theory of music or the basic fundamental things. And when you look at some— somebody like that, you suddenly feel that he is professionally not trained enough to go into the professional field as such.

So my report may have addressed this—this particular question in, in that—in that way. Uh, that—we wish that we could have trained these people also in—not only in—in their instrumental skills, but also, in other aspects of theory that they should know when they have a broader knowledge of music in general, which is necessary for professionalism.

LARSON: There was one—let's see, the Annual Report from 1973-74 mentions that the first time—class instrumental and singing instruction, what was—what was that about? There's no—were there course—was there a—like a—a group—like group violin lessons or something like that? Or what was—what was the instrumental—what was—didn't—the Annual Report didn't describe in more detail. It just said class instrumental and singing instruction. I'm just curious what—what that was.

ERDELY: I—I don't recall anything of that sort.

LARSON: Okay.

ERDELY: But in '73 and '74 we started to introduce the piano laboratory as an addition to the ear training courses.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: The ear training course I found was a very important and a very useful thing. And I devised it strictly as vocal training, the human voice, um, having a direct relation to—to the musical mind. It expresses what a person knows and feels about music, whether in an elementary sense, whether he understands intervals, whether, um, it can read music, the person can read music, and—and express music, reproduce music from—from the written pages.

And then the faculty was very strongly for introducing elementary piano, for—also for this particular class. So, we had an—a rather meaty course, at least for one semester, for elementary solfege training and elementary piano performance. The solfege was the singing, and the piano playing was the instrumental instruction. Otherwise, in '73, '74, started gradually, um, the, um, from the piano laboratory grew up the private piano instruction for—for students.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: But it was not at the time considered for academic credit.

LARSON: I see.

ERDELY: People came in, like my wife [Beatrice Erdely, nee Epstein], who was engaged to—to teach some of the students who came in. But the students, actually, it was an extracurricular activity. And they had to pay for the lessons, which that's instead of going, to—to the New England Conservatory or to Longy School of Music, they could have actually had the instructions here, right here at MIT.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Is the same qualified teachers.

LARSON: I was reading a little bit about President Jerome Wiesner. He's remembered here as a—a big supporter of the arts. Was there any particular memories you have of your dealings with him in—in terms of—

ERDELY: Yeah. He was, he was very much for art and very much to have music flourish at MIT. And I had many, many sessions and meetings with him. And they were always very fruitful and—and very cordial and very understanding.

Usually, when it came to meet President Wiesner, it was maybe some of the major problems or programs which we had to improve, many times budgetary questions, which, which he could only decide, because he probably—here the Provost had some special funds which they could—from which they could allot some money for the music department's working. Uh, usually, it was around these questions.

LARSON: I also read that in 1940 Jerome Wiesner was Chief Engineer for the Acoustical and Records Laboratory at the Library of Congress and assisted Alan Lomax [ethnomusicologist] in him making field recordings. Did you talk with him about that at all?

ERDELY: Yes. As a matter of fact, he—he was very proud of this particular aspect of his life. And he graduated from MIT as a—as an engineer, electrical engineer. His very first job was to improve the acoustical situation in the Library of Congress. And as such, he joined the Lomax team to go on—on field work. And, um, he enjoyed also the field work part of it. And he had very many fun little experiences.

But what was probably his major contribution that he made wonderful recordings of those tapes which Lomax had been doing in the field and produced wonderful recordings. This job was only for one year for him. But it was—because it was his very first job after the graduation. And he kept friendly relations with Lomaxes ever since.

LARSON: Was he a musician at all?

ERDELY: Uh.

LARSON: Do you know if he played an instrument or sang or anything?

ERDELY: No, I don't think so. I don't—I—I don't know, really, except his—his interest and his involvement in making these recordings, which indicate to me that he had a—a fine musical ear and musical mind. But whether he—he played any instruments, I don't—I don't really know.

4. Development of a music department

LARSON: Starting with—with Klaus Liepmann, who was the first Professor of Music hired here in 1948, and going up to the—and even to the present time, there was this history of hiring distinguished scholars and composers who were also respected performers like yourself. Can you tell me about, particularly when you were here, what the philosophy of—of hiring faculty was in—in terms of those, that kind of pattern?

ERDELY: I cannot really speak directly to this—this question. When I came to MIT, that was Klaus Liepmann's last year. He was not anymore chairman of the department, but he was teaching a course or he was invited to teach a course.

We talked a number of times. And—and in one of my reports, in 1981, I sort of summarized what—what I learned from Liepmann, um, about his years and about his en—endeavors. Um, the question was, in Liepmann's mind, and—and [John] Buttrick's, and anybody who followed, to—to build the department, because there was—there was no department there.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And even when Liepmann came there was no department.

LARSON: That's right.

ERDELY: So the—the history of the music department is, I would say, almost typical of, um, the development of a music department within a university or—or a scientific academic circle.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: That it sort of, um, started out, these glee clubs and—and orchestra performances, and then continued as—as, with one course in music appreciation, a kind of survey. And then, gradually, it started to branch out into one element that is theory and then—then more history courses and things like that, and long before it became a kind of an, a department with degree openings. But that is generally the, um, the history of—of music departments in many universities.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Not for only here. And of course, Liepmann always had a good sense of—of, um, hiring people. When I came here, by that time, [David] Epstein, [John] Harbison and—and [Barry] Vercoe were already here.

LARSON: And Marcus Thompson was here too.

ERDELY: Marcus Thompson and—and—and I came together at the same year.

LARSON: I see. What is your—

ERDELY: [John] Buttrick—sorry, Buttrick was—

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: Yeah. What is your view of the role of music and the arts at MIT, which is a university that specializes in science and engineering? There's a special kind of role that it plays. You know, Klaus Liepmann and his—his informal written up history of music at MIT, he struggles with that—that— that question as to what place music has here. What are your thoughts about that?

ERDELY: Well, I was, uh—we all had to dream certain things of what should and what should happen within an environment like MIT with art. Things have developed on their own natural account and way. When—when I came here, of course, Barry Vercoe was the only one who, who was, um, directing attention and interest towards electronic music.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Which caught the attention and interest of the administration as an area of music which would very much feed into the technological mold of MIT. We were always trying to help his endeavors of creating a studio and get the equipment. Uh, when all this development had become much, much too expensive for the budget of the music department to carry, then eventually the Dean saw a way of introducing a music studio into the Media Laboratory and separating it from—from the music department from the point of the budget.

Barry, on the one hand, appreciated, probably, this division, because he had gotten more budget and—and more freedom to work. But on the other hand, I don't know how he feels, as a composer, to be separated from—from the music department and its own activities. But then he became too involved.

So, the laboratory music media was—it almost seems to be, was, for the outside world as well as for MIT, the logical growth and development of musical questions within—within the Institute. The faculty, MIT faculty, music faculty, however, and—and also the humanities faculty was not entirely on the same view and the same opinion, because they have a great appreciation for the fact that music is an art, a language, and an aspect of the humanities, which should be cultivated as such.

So, we had to work very hard in order to—to get that aspect and that appreciation also accepted, which wasn't too bad, because a large percent of the MIT professors are practical musicians. Some are musicians so—who like to play chamber music and play some instrument. So there was always a sympathetic view for the music department's action. But then, um, the question was, in what direction should the curriculum develop? And how should it develop?

As I mentioned earlier today, I brought in it a special interest for ethnomusicology, which—which I see is—is continuing in—in, in very strong forms nowadays at MIT, although, in a different way than—than I started it originally. And I still believe that the—the question of—of ethnomusicology in America and with the people is not quite clearly understood. And I have always felt that there is a kind of danger.

But I would like to read, from my 1981 report, which—given to the Visiting Committee, of a report of what their department has been doing, how the depart—department has been developing, which I don't want to, um, repeat because that's in this paper.

But the kind of—of—dream I had, a music department should have at MIT, um, I—I'm referring now to the section which deals with the future program of the department, um, and I say that this project hinges upon a number of factors.

"I would like to address myself to them in the following order: educational goals, as seen by members of the music faculty. Two, parameters of growth of the music program set by practical considerations, the economy, student interest, facilities and the like. Three, new views, philosophies, and the application of musical knowledge to a host of fields that give musical studies, particularly at MIT, a new rationale."

"To number one, the music faculty's primary interest is to strengthen the academic program at all levels, introductory, core programs, and advanced studies. The description of courses reflects this goal clearly. There is also an express concern that a musical atmosphere created by faculty recitals, the performing organizations, guest artists and lecture series should be maintained. Our current faculty is composed of members involved in performance and scholarly work alike."

"This balance of interest is regarded as healthy and is carefully guarded in the appointment procedures. The introductory survey and humanities distribution courses, although broadly based, emphasize listening skills. Foremost stylistic trends are taught to be recognized on musical grounds, rather than through parallels taken from other branches of art and literature."

"A glance through the catalog will tell you how wide our subject offerings are and how far our program has progressed from earlier times. Students now can obtain a full panorama of musical happenings from already transmitted traditions through every phase of Western history. They can learn the skills of composition with traditional or electronic means, and can branch out via music into related fields."

"Number two. Is there a limit set to the growth of our program? The attitude of the Institute toward musical studies is generous, understanding, altogether favorable to growth. How, otherwise, can we account for such a flourishing program? We do not need to lobby for the budgets of our performing organizations, nor do we need to defend the rationale of our new course offerings."

"The basic trust placed in the faculty and the judgment in matters of the program, however, places a certain responsibility on our shoulders to offer the right education to our very particular clientele, the MIT students. For the time being, the enrollment figure tells us that our main functions are in the areas of introductory surveys, humanities distribution courses and performing organizations."

"As we move into more advanced subjects, the enrollment figures taper down in pyramid fashion. Although, the number of students has increased over the years in the higher level and interdisciplinary courses, the question of a graduate program, which seems to us just around the corner, is viewed by the administration with guarded concern. I must confess, this is legitimate. For the questions, what can musical training mean toward a career in this depression-inflation-threatened economy of ours, what can MIT offer in this respect? How much should it be? How far should it go?"

"These questions need to be answered in realistic terms. A professional training with no provisions for practical musical instruction, as is ours, will remain, sadly one-sided. The MIT curriculum does not permit the time, the faculty, the credit and the facilities for instrumental studies."

This, of course, was in 1981. I don't know how much we have advanced since.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: This is sort of lobbying for that—

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY:—particular point. “Number three. Yet, we cannot rest our case confronted by these facts. Music, its role in our society and culture, the recognition of its importance to a host of new scientific fields, these considerations urge us to renew our plea.”

"There are two new views to music, one through the telescope, the other through the microscope. As to the former, until recently, the study of music was synonymous with the study of Western musical art. This view does not hold true any more."

"The shrinking world acquainted us with many musical cultures, putting ours into the many as one. We cannot say any more that our music in the West is superior, because it has come down through history in written forms and is thus able to show an evolution. Other cultures are able to show musical developments in their diverse genres, even if they are already transmitted. As a matter of fact, they show complex developments in the whole gamut of composition."

"Furthermore, our own musical art is no longer isolated and immune to influences coming from other cultures. Our tonal music reached the stage of having exhausted its own potentialities by the end of the 19th century and has since begun to infuse elements from non-Western musics. In addition, music has become more dramatic since the French Revolution. It belongs to everyone."

"We speak of folk, popular, traditional, commercial, light classical, and classical or serious music, according to the consumers very much like classifying language according to its conversational, popular, journalistic, or literary usage. Music is no longer the universal language that cuts through all communication barriers. On the contrary, it is recognized as a form of communication which people coming from other cultures or even sub-cultures must learn."

"Not even the elements of music are universal or neutral. The color of sound, the nature of pitch, the formation of musical systems evolved differently under different aesthetic principles in Africa, China, or Italy. The national or ethnic character of [? rhythms ?] answer basic human needs and are subject to selective processes controlled by a host of cultural institutions which gradually give them their characteristic forms and shapes."

"It is this easily seen that music is a social art par excellence. The diet of music varies according to each group's sexes, economic and educational status and ethnic backgrounds. It would be folly to maintain today that the road to music is the same to all people, that one type of literature, because it has been used for centuries, will suit every person's needs. These are the views which tie music into ethnology, cultural anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics, literature and historical sciences."

"Turning to the view through the microscope, we take the individual, what he or she has absorbed from the environment and what constitutes his or her musical language, musical makeup, inclination or bias toward musical growth. We find in every person some musicality, the awareness of formulas belonging to a particular jargon, be it from folk, popular, or art music. Children, through the influence of TV—a little-studied subject—have absorbed a great deal from commercial music. What such an investigation will mean to cognitive sciences need not be emphasized here."

"Music is around us. And it has been around mankind ever since its inception. The effects of music have at all times been recognized."

"We observed that in primitive cultures. Plato speaks about it. The Church was fully aware of it. Revolutions made use of it. And so do our dental offices, department stores, and commercial entrepreneurs."

"Yet the sad thing about music is that it has remained, in spite of all its known effects, the stepchild among the other media of communication, the first to be cut from the curriculum when funds are short. The study of music should not be limited only to its liberal art aspect. Much is to be gained by studying music as a form of instinctive expression, communication, social art, medium interrelated as language, human temperament, growth of cultural institutions and dynamic changes within these institutions. Taking these aspects, music may have a very special approach at MIT and can become a subject that will illuminate its long underrated importance to life, society and science."

LARSON: That's so eloquent. That's beautiful. Wow. I just—the more I look into the question of—or the—the role of music at MIT, it just gets more and more fascinating because, on one hand, it's not a conservatory, but yet music is taken so seriously here. And I—I guess that it's one of those things that, um, it's an ongoing issue for the faculty and the chair of the Music Section to—to wrestle with that—that issue. It's—it's never clear cut.

ERDELY: Well, again, this is, um, this—this statement, as I—as I really did know, after somewhat seventeen years or so it has been written, it's—I suppose it's still, in some extent, valid.

LARSON: It is, yeah.

ERDELY: We, our studies of music I felt at that time, and used this metaphor of studying it with a telescope and microscope, focuses first on the musical events of the world, secondly, on the—on—on the, music as it affects a human being and its—his growth as a person, it's still a valid subject. And I would feel that we're—at MIT where we have so many departments interested more or less with the same questions and—and do research, um, music would be well advised to—to have some closer affiliation and make this connection between the importance of music to the society as such.

To make music here and study, per se, a special study, per se, um, I find is a more difficult subject because of, um, the general requirements which MIT students have to face when they come into the institution. Even if they have the inclination to music and whatnot, they graduate first of all in some form of—of a scientific field, whether it is computer sciences, electrical engineering or—or whatever, biology or whatnot, and—and can add to that the music degree.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: I suppose that has stayed put. Because I remember once, we were in—in, President Wiesner's house and had a meeting with students. And one of the students asked President Wiesner why MIT does not give now full music degrees when we have so many music students and interest in it.

And, President Wiesner just retorted very briefly and firmly, "Over my dead body!" Which sort of expressed the—the MIT stand. And I could not disagree with him because to prepare somebody for music profession it's not enough to, on the student's part, to have that little bit of liking and interest. There has to be so much more, so much more devotion, so much more time spent.

When I'm looking at my background, for instance, when I became eighteen years, I had already recitals behind me. And then I still started all the—all the academic studies, very strenuous academic studies, plus continuing the instrumental training and the—and the theoretical training. And that was full-time for—full academic time for five years.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: Not permitting time for—for other full-time occupation like—like biology or computer science and whatnot, which takes considerable time away from—from practicing or whatnot.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: Or thinking of music. So a man can only do that much. It's very rare and very exceptional that somebody will, um, come through MIT with a—a degree in—in some other scientific fields and turns out to be from a musical point of view so well-equipped and so good that can take up a position in—in some musical organization.

LARSON: Yeah. That's—that's happened. I guess, that first bassoonist of the Minnesota Orchestra [John Miller, MIT class of 1964].

ERDELY: Yes. We always come back to those, over—over the fifty years, we have about ten people whom we can quote. But considering the thousands of students who are coming through MIT, this is a very little percentage on which you cannot base an—a whole program and the whole curriculum.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: That's the problem.

LARSON: Yeah, and—

ERDELY: On the other hand, um, there are people like, for instance, the head of Project Zero at—at MIT—at—at— at Harvard University, who has made a solo music study of children and their intelligence and—and using music to establish basic aptitude toward human growth and—and—mental growth and intelligence in children, which would be, I think, the kind of study which would be very logical here too, if there would be some departmental collaboration.

5. Courses taught, concerts, and colleagues

LARSON: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Besides the ethnic—ethnic music courses that you taught, you taught Music Fundamentals and the course on the symphony. What other courses did you teach?

ERDELY: Oh, I think I have—I have been involved in practically everything in the history of music and—and, um, what else? Introduction to music courses, of course, everybody had to teach that—

LARSON: Yeah. Right.

ERDELY:—um, at one time.

LARSON: Any—any speci—particular genre studies or specific subjects?

ERDELY: Well, symphony, symphony was the logical thing to teach as a genre, of course. I taught contemporary, 20th century music.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And I taught second section of the historic series, among others. Well, I've—I don't remember any more.

LARSON: Yeah. Did you teach any—any of the harmony and counterpoint courses?

ERDELY: No, because we had enough composers here to—at all time, to—to teach that particular subject. But my theoretical involvement was to establish an ear training program and laboratory with tapes and everything, you know?

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: And it was, to my mind, quite slow.

LARSON: I remember the students running through the paces on those tapes. And they were saying how hard they were.

ERDELY: They had to—yeah, they had to work hard—

LARSON: Yeah.

ERDELY:—in order to—it was a one-semester course. And it started from two notes, to the reading of—of music of, um, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and even as much as occasionally of a Wagner melody, which is quite a lot.

LARSON: Yeah. The recitals that you gave with your wife, Beatrice, at MIT—was that just once a year? Or how often were those?

ERDELY: It depended. There were years when we gave more than one recital. But as I became involved as chairman and—and with various researches, I think it was the yearly recital which we—but I think it was, one or two recitals were, more or less, the standard.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. Were there any particular concerts that stayed—remem— that are memorable to you?

ERDELY: Well, I know that we played approximately 35 recitals at MIT over the years. And during these 35 recitals there were only a few compositions which were repeated in the program.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: So that just can tell you that—that we have been giving a very, very wide repertory airing.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: We played, um, several of the Boston composers', works.

LARSON: Like, who were some of those?

ERDELY: Gunther Schuller and [Walter] Piston and the Brandeis [University] composers.

LARSON: Yehudi Wyner?

ERDELY: I didn't play Yehudi Wyner, although he sent some—some music. I don't know whether we had it scheduled or not. We didn't play it at MIT. But we played a number of them. Then there, of course, Stravinsky, Bartók and—and—and [Darius] Milhaud and—and [Paul] Hindemith and—and [Norman] Dello Joio and many, many other composers from the contemporary scene. [George] Enescu, because I remember Enescu too.

LARSON: Wow. I was going to—going to ask you what—what contemporary works did you—you play. Did you do any works of any of the MIT composers?

ERDELY: At the time, there was nothing available yet for violin and piano.

LARSON: And did you ever, um, have guest artists like when you did like piano trios or anything?

ERDELY: No. And it was mostly the reason for—for economy. I mean, economic reasons.

LARSON: Yeah. Were any collaborations with other MIT faculty?

ERDELY: No.

LARSON: No.

ERDELY: No.

LARSON: No.

ERDELY: It was—it was for us, with the existing schedule, it was easier to do the teamwork which we could do at home and on our own time. Which—which was the main reason, not any other, a musical reason for the—time was always an important consideration, because, even during the time I was a chairman, I kept the teaching of two courses.

LARSON: Wow. Wow. The MIT Chamber Music Society was formed during 1973-74 school year. Do you know what some of the, um, reasons behind the formation of that was and what brought that about?

ERDELY: Well, I suppose it was the interest of MIT students to—to play ensemble. Uh, that interest among MIT faculty and students to play chamber music, to play quartets or trios or whatnot was always great. And many of the people, even faculty, liked to play trios with suitable partners.

I know that Porter, Dean [William L.] Porter, at the time, the School of Architecture, um, liked to play trios. And he was coming into, to the music department for practice and for everything. So—

LARSON: What was his instrument?

ERDELY: Pianist.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

ERDELY: He was a pianist. Yeah.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: He's a son of [composer] Quincy Porter.

LARSON: Oh! Oh! I heard about that. I'd forgotten.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: That's right. That's right. You've told me a little bit about Klaus Liepmann. Is there any particular kind of memories or impressions of him that you want to talk about a little bit? He's such a big figure because he really got the program started here.

ERDELY: Well, again, I have a—a rather personal view and approach to Liepmann's career at MIT. And I did not participate in those heroic years when he developed the program. But I have talked to him.

I make here, in this '81 report, some reference to—to Liepmann and his—his work. I—it's—it's, um, well, I can read you a little bit of it.

"I'm frequently told that the late 1940s and 1950s, when music became a part of the Institute's life, were the 'golden' or 'heroic' years of music at MIT. They had the excitement of creating musical productions and the pleasure of listening to such great artists as, among others, the newly-formed Julliard Quartet and MIT's own Ernst Levy, the Busoni kind type of interpreter of piano literature."

In order to recapture the spirit of this era and to learn more about the beginnings and growth of musics, I think I asked Professor Liepmann to research and to write about his 25 years in Boston—the Director of Music, a project made possible by a grant from the MIT Arts Council.

LARSON: Yeah. I've read that report.

ERDELY: So it seems to me that I was instrumental of getting—

LARSON: Yes.

ERDELY:—the project for—for The Arts Council to write his review. I forgot all about that.

"As at many American universities, music at MIT was introduced as an extra-curricular activity. Music appreciation and theory courses were announced in the [inaudible] somewhat later. It is a tribute to Professor Liepmann's organizing talent and musicianship that both the performing and academic aspects of music have taken root at the Institute."

"His orchestra and choral programs gathered the music-minded from the ranks of faculty, students, and community alike. And the music courses offered students the opportunity to gain greater appreciation for musical art and to learn the rudiments of theory. These programs have lasted to the present, but their scope has extended considerably. Our ensembles and academic subjects are tailored to the needs of

students who show far greater preparedness in musical studies than the ones a decade or so ago." That's done.

Well, this was the general impression which I had. And since he has written his report, which is deposited. Probably more details can be learned from that.

LARSON: Yeah. I was just wondering about, if there were any particular memories of him that—that you have.

ERDELY: Well, this was generally the, the impression that he had a—a really a—a difficult, sometimes trying time to establish not only the music, but also to establish himself. Although, he many times mentioned that he had very, very strong support on the part of the president at the time. But, uh, money was hard to gain for—for the program. And, um, so people who remembered him, and there are many, many, speak about that time when he was here as—as wonderful, exciting times of music at—at MIT.

LARSON: What are some of your memories, impressions of—of John Buttrick?

ERDELY: Well, John Buttrick is—is still coming back to—to Boston occasionally. He was a fine pianist. And he was a very good leader of the department and had some very sound and solid ideas of—of how to improve the department.

When he left the chairmanship, there was a little bit of a bitterness in him because he would have liked to con—see the continuation of the growth of the department. And I had absolutely nothing to do with his leaving the chair, department chair. And what happened afterwards seemed to be a little bit of a frustration of his existence.

And, um, I still don't understand why he has, has left MIT because he had all the appreciation and all the support of the greater faculty. And—and those of us who, who knew his—his musicianship and pianism has nothing more but, um, admiration for—for his skills.

LARSON: His Annual Reports were full of eloquence about music here at MIT.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: And I was—I was real touched by that.

ERDELY: Yes. He was very ambitious. And he was very optimistic about events at MIT. He was very positive, very forward looking. Uh, but the fact that he could not carry on, he could not be at the helm, I suppose disturbed him.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. What about Ernst Levy?

ERDELY: I didn't know him.

LARSON: You didn't know him?

ERDELY: No.

LARSON: Okay. Also, there was a period of time when [composer] Paul Earls taught in the Music Section, before he went over to the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. And he was an expert in Turkish traditional music. Did you ever do any work with him about that?

ERDELY: Yes. Yeah. We were good friends, Paul Earls and—and I. And when I came to MIT, by that time he was at the Advanced, it was not—Visual Arts Center, yeah, I think it was where—where he moved.

He, um, started to do music and—and correlating musical events with some—

LARSON: With lasers.

ERDELY:—laser—laser projected images. And—and the first thing—the first year, which we did together was [Giuseppi] Tartini's "Devil's Trill" [Violin Sonata in G minor], which I had to play, and while I was playing, he was projecting some kind of images on the screen.

Uh, but he arranged the “Devil's Trill” in his own fashion, and so I had to learn his version of the “Devil's Trill.”

LARSON: [laughs]

ERDELY: And we repeated that, that several times. And then, um, I brought him in to teach different courses. I think he was teaching appreciation courses and—and at one time, maybe, even contemporary music. So, um, as long as I could, I—I kept him maintaining some—some affiliation with the music department.

LARSON: Yeah. Paul was an amazing guy.

ERDELY: Yeah. I—I liked him very much. Uh, and we remained good friends, through—until very recently, unfortunately. But—

LARSON: Any particular memories, impressions of working with John Corley [Conductor of MIT Concert Band]?

ERDELY: Actually, I don't have too much contact with John Corley and with his band, except that we had to ask him always to give us the schedule and—and to perform on some of the functions, um, at—at events like graduation and things like that.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: I had more contact with John Oliver [conductor of MIT Choral Society].

LARSON: Tell me—tell me about some of that.

ERDELY: Well, I—I knew him from Boston Symphony [conductor of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus] as well as—as, from his MIT activities. And—and I was, I had to be having involved to, to get his budget, because he needed an orchestra which—which was expert, and he could put together the—the programs which he intended to play in a rather short time.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: So that required that he hires an orchestra and that—that also always required considerable amount of money. So we always had to fight for his needs.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. What brought about John Oliver coming to MIT?

ERDELY: I don't—he was already here when I came.

LARSON: He was already here.

ERDELY: Yes. Yeah. He is a, um, a very fine fellow and very capable choral conductor and a good pianist, a thorough musician in every respect, and, highly appreciated here, as well as at the Boston Symphony.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And he did some—some wonderful performances, remarkable performances—

LARSON: I agree. They were—yeah.

ERDELY:—with the Choral Society.

LARSON: One more thing about Klaus Liepmann. Tell me about him as a—as a musician. He was a—a violinist. Was he also a pianist?

ERDELY: Probably he played the piano on the side.

LARSON: But he was mostly a violinist, right?

ERDELY: But he was mostly a violinist. I never heard him play the violin. His career and my career went, of course, in different directions. It's—this is—this is almost a question of immigration history and times when people—he was an immigrant, as I am an immigrant.

But his chances to come to America and—and escape, actually, um, working with, with major orchestras—I say escape because, once you step into a major orchestra job, your time is—and career is—is more or less closed. Uh, in that situation, you cannot do anything else.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: Uh, and he escaped that. And he could actually, um, work himself into an academic situation where he had to work himself up in order to make his life economically and financially feasible. And that's what he did.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: And so his views of American life or American possibilities were entirely based on an outlook from an academic institution and within the potentials the academic institutions can offer, such as MIT.

Whereas, my life was going into the Cleveland Orchestra, which was [laughs] a military organization in a sense, you know? Uh, you—you were reporting early in the morning and on concerts, rehearsals and concerts and—and—and follow the rigorous schedule and—and a rigorous workout.

LARSON: Mm-hmm. I remember, shortly before you retired that there was an international ethnomusicological conference here at MIT.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: Tell me about that. I was out of town that weekend, so I—I couldn't go to any of the—the papers. But tell me what—about that.

ERDELY: Well, that conference, the Ethnomusicology Society asked me to organize the yearly conference here in Boston at MIT. And—and so we set to it. I asked several of my ethnomusicologist colleagues here in the Boston area to be with me on a—a team

of conference organizers. And we had to then work out the conference details. Any conference which you organize in MIT is basically not an—an MIT process.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: But it is a process which had to be supported by funds coming from conference participants and—and maybe some additional occasional donations of some corporations which—which have some interest in the society's activities. So we had 400 people here. And, I don't know whether you have papers from the conference here. I have some papers, um, the programs and everything which—

LARSON: Uh-huh.

ERDELY:—which speak for—for themselves. But it was a—a big international affair.

LARSON: Was there a theme for the—the conference?

ERDELY: Uh, yes. There were several themes. Usually a conference has—all conferences have three or four themes for which people are talking. But it was a full year's complete job of making—to get the conference off the ground.

And we have a—a wonderful conference coming to here, which, which the organizers helps to organize these things. Nevertheless, there are nittys and grittys, all the way through, which the committee is not involved with doing.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: But it was a huge success. And if you need some additional information on that, I will have to put my hands on those programs and—and the announcements and whatnot.

LARSON: It might be—yeah, add that to some of the stuff here.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: In closing here, is there any—I guess now that you're—you're retired from MIT—looking back, are there any particular long-view reminiscences that you want to—want to share with me?

ERDELY: Well, I—I was very happy, in spite of many times throughout the heavy workload, which I have to—I had—I had undertaken, um, I was never feeling any hardship, in a sense, of undertaking even the, the leadership, of—of the department for the number of years. And I did hope that I have been helping, basically, the program of the department and, essentially, the progress of my colleagues in their own careers, which was also a very important purpose of mine, to defend them, defend their progress, defend their tenure procedures and their—their nominations.

And, I would say that—that, in 90% of the cases, I was successful in that sense. So I left the—the chairmanship with a happy feeling that that can be no, um, grudge against my—my leadership at the time. And after that, I could devote more fully my time to my own research and my own academic involvement and—and—and performance involvement, which was also a—a happy change, for what it was. And I'm still continuing along the same line.

LARSON: Yeah. That's beautiful.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: One last thing, in closing, I forgot to ask you about earlier. I noticed—reading in September 1979, is—there's a mention of "Sudden closing of Kresge Auditorium." What was that about?

ERDELY: The—the—the roof had to be replaced.

LARSON: Oh.

[Both laugh]

LARSON: I hadn't heard about that. But I guess that was quite a—quite a battle to, um, find alternative rehearsal and performance spaces.

ERDELY: Yeah. But the, um, Kresge had—had been renovated. The whole thing had to be closed.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: The whole roof had—had been replaced.

LARSON: [laughs] I wondered about that.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: Yeah. Well, I want to thank you, very, very—

ERDELY: I thank you.

LARSON:—much for your—your generosity and coming back for—

ERDELY: It's my pleasure. It's my pleasure. And I hope it—it helps to, um, to establish the history of the music department as such.

LARSON: It's—

ERDELY: Which is a very nice thing to have.

LARSON: It's uh—the more that I get into the—the research of this, the more fascinating that it gets. And it just gets richer and richer. So—

ERDELY: Well, um, it—it is always interesting to see how, within an organization, for instance, music, music starts to flourish. But the point is, you always need at the head of the section people who are really truly interested—

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY:—in seeing the program and the well-being of the people taken care of.

LARSON: Mm-hmm.

ERDELY: There are two important things I've—I've, that should be done.

LARSON: And you certainly did that with distinction.

ERDELY: I—I tried, anyhow.

LARSON: Thank you, again.

[End of Interview]

