

**Music at MIT Oral History Project**

**William Grossman**

*Interviewed*

*by*

**Forrest Larson**

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**Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
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### **Contributors**

**William Grossman** (1947–2010), received two degrees in computer science from MIT, S.B. (1969) and M.S. (1971). He was active as a pianist, French hornist, conductor and arranger in the MIT Symphony Orchestra, Concert Band, Festival Jazz Ensemble and the Musical Theater Guild. After studies at the Manhattan School of Music and New England Conservatory, he became a well regarded conductor, arranger, editor and rehearsal pianist for Broadway Theater productions in New York. He also was involved with training of orchestral conductors at The American Symphony Orchestra League's conducting seminars.

**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 May 3, 2003, in the MIT Lewis Music Library. Duration of the audio recording is 1:19:49.

### **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. Current occupation (00:01:05)

FORREST LARSON: It's my distinct pleasure to have William Grossman, MIT 1969, for an interview today. It's May 3rd, 2003. Thank you very much, Bill, for coming.

WILLIAM GROSSMAN: Thank you for asking me.

FL: And the—one of the reasons for this interview is that this is the 40th anniversary of the MIT jazz program. And there's a reunion and concert tonight. Bill played both piano and French horn with the Festival Jazz Ensemble. Um, so what was your MIT degree in?

WG: Uh, it was a bachelor's and a master's in computer science, which was a, uh, sub-specialty in Course VI—

FL: Okay.

WG: —EE [Department of Electrical Engineering].

FL: And tell me briefly, we'll get into it more at the end of the interview, about your current occupation right now.

WG: Currently, I'm a freelance musician living in Kew Gardens, New York, just outside Manhattan. Uh, among the things I have done is I was an assistant conductor for a number of years with the show *Cats* in New York for about the last 14 years of its run. Uh, I've done a lot of work as a Broadway pianist and/or assistant conductor.

Uh, I worked with the show *Sugar Babies* [by Stephen Sondheim] for about two years as a pianist and assistant conductor. I was an alternate pianist with a show called *Side by Side by Sondheim*. I was an assistant conductor and keyboard player for a West Coast tour of *Pacific Overtures* by Sondheim. And prior to that, I had done some rehearsals for that show in New York while it was running.

I did some rehearsal piano prior to the opening of the original production of *Sweeney Todd* [by Sondheim] that I was very proud of. And among my assignments for that show was, uh, I—I'll name drop. I got to coach Angela Lansbury. And she gave me a little credit once in the newspaper. I coached her and—and sat and helped her learn her music for all of her musical numbers in the show, uh, in a number of sessions.

Um, let's see, what else? I also have done some music preparation, meaning I do scores and parts for composers on a computer. One of the projects I did, which was a number of years ago, I offered to do a piece for the MIT band. And I think they subsequently paid me, because it was a lot, a lot of work. But it started out sort of labor of love. And they were nice enough to me some money.

Uh, I said to John [Corley, conductor] something like, what would be a project that you could use some music for that you don't have music for? And it turns out they did not have a really proper score for Gregory Tucker's piece called *Prelude and Allegro*. Uh, it's also called *Centennial Overture*. I got some materials from Special Collections, which is right down the hall here.

So I worked from a set of parts. Uh, I recreated a score. And then, uh, sort of edited the score to make all the writing consistent. For some reason, the dynamics, the articulations, the slurs didn't seem to agree up and down the score. And there was no reason that they shouldn't agree. So John and I worked for a little while and got them to the point where they were, you know, it was a sort of good looking editorial piece of work, rather than just leaving all this inconsistent stuff on the page.

And they put—they made a recording, and put it in the can. I don't think it's been released yet, but John invited me to come up and guest conduct it, at one point.

FL: Fantastic.

WG: Um, let me see, your question. So that's sort of what I'm up to in New York.

I also play piano for some conducting workshops. Uh, workshops for conductors typically begin with sessions for piano and five string players. The five strings kind of stand in for the full string section, and I play what I can of the winds, brass, and percussion—

FL: [laughs]

WG: —which I've been doing for a while for groups, mainly the American Symphony Orchestra League, also occasionally the Conductors Guild, and some other organizations that aren't related to either of those, one called the Conductors Retreat in Maine for two summers. And lately I've been doing something called the California Conducting Workshop, which is—these are all a weekend long, usually.

So that sort of describes most—if I can think of anything else, I'll let you know.

FL: That's—that's great. There's, um, many questions I'll have.

WG: And by the way, you may notice the French horn has been conspicuously put away. Although I did play it for one job. Uh, I did a summer stock tour of *Shenandoah*—John Raitt was the star—in 1976. And I played piano and French horn in that production. And also, one of the Broad—one of the Off-Broadway shows I did, I had the pleasure, and still do, to work for Harvey Schmidt, the composer of *The Fantasticks*, and *I Do! I Do!*, and *Celebration*, and *110 in the Shade*.

They had a theater in the late '60s and mid-'70s called Portfolio Theater. It was an early example of a theater doing workshops and noncommercial work. And in one show I played percussion and French horn. Another show I played a little bit of trumpet and piano.

They never really found anybody who could play percussion and French horn—

FL: [laughs]

WG: —and I sort of was a little bit of a Jack of all trades, and not quite the master of any one of them. My piano playing's my—my best skill that I, you know, do professionally, and conducting, mostly for musical theater.



## 2. Early history and influences (00:05:54)

FL: All right, um. So, kind of turning the clock back a little bit, tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

WG: Uh, let's see. I was born December 5, 1947. I grew up in Long Island, a town called Roslyn, New York.

FL: And um, tell me about your—your family. There are musicians in the family and how many siblings you have?

WG: Uh, I have two younger brothers. My father was a very good amateur pianist. He doesn't play as much as he used to now, a little bit of arthritis, unfortunately. My mom, I think, was a little bit of a pianist, but I mostly recall my dad playing a lot of piano.

When I first started to learn piano, he had four-hand versions of the Beethoven symphonies that he got during World War II from Leipzig. He served in Europe during the war. And he brought these, uh, uh, publications back. And it's one piano, four hands. So I would sit at the bottom of the piano and he would sit at the top, and we'd get through these symphonies. It later helped me in good stead because I ended up getting a job because I knew the symphony four-hand parts really well. And someone gave me a job because I sat in and played them really well once.

So my father was a strong influence. And my whole family was brought up that culture should be an important part of our lives. And since we lived close to New York, we took advantage of the opportunity to see shows, musicals, that, I mean, Saturday matinees, I just sort of remember, uh, going to the New York Philharmonic, some of the Young People's Concerts.

Um, I didn't get a taste for chamber music until years later. My father wasn't into it that much. But I—I do like it a lot, string quartets and that sort of thing. I heard piano recitals. I remember when I was a kid I heard Artur Schnabel at Carnegie Hall. My father used to take me there. He played every Valentine's Day.

Um, so some pretty major important stuff. I mean, it's—it was a great asset to be living near New York with a sort of comfortable family—you know, comfortably off financially, and taking advantage of the culture of New York. Nothing quite like it, as I'm sure you would agree.

FL: So—

WG: Although Boston is not bad at all.

FL: Yeah, fantastic. Tell me about some of your earliest musical memories.

WG: Well, there's the playing four hands with my father. Um, just generic memories, I—I - I was assigned to play musical instruments. I actually remember, I think in like fifth or sixth grade I got thrown—I got kicked out of percussion class because I didn't play a double flam or a 16-stroke roll. And I took up the trumpet, stuck with the trumpet for while.

They needed French horns in high school or junior high. And I switched to the mellophone, which is like this sort of bastard French horn instrument.

FL: Yeah.

WG: Easier to play the overtones or down an octave. French horn, your lip has to find overtones that are all spaced together closer than on the trumpet, of course. Uh, French horn.

And I kept playing. I didn't do much musical theater work as a player in high school. Actually, when I got to MIT was when I really started, uh, spending a lot of time playing piano for musicals and Gilbert and Sullivan.

Um, uh, let me think. Earlier than that, I don't know. Of no consequence particularly to MIT, but I did happen to meet Edgard Varèse when I was a kid.

FL: No kidding.

WG: Yeah, I got—I knew where he lived. He lived on Sullivan Street, there's still a plaque there. And at that time it was a kinder, gentler New York. I think it was 1965, which is the year he died. And I just walked and rang the front doorbell, and he let me in for a few minutes. I just remember asking him a few questions. You know, it's one of these things, you meet some idol, and, you know, having met him I'm not quite sure what to ask him.

Oh, I—I went to Interlochen [Summer Music Camp, MI]. I remember Interlochen in the summer of '64, uh, '64 and '65. And it must've been at Interlochen in '64 that I got my first taste of Edgard Varèse. Because there was this old album. Robert Kraft conducted the Columbia Symphony freelance players. And, uh, I fell in love with that Varèse music.

FL: I did too.

WG: I never heard anything like it in my life. I later came to realize that it was not a particularly accurately played recording. That was before people played that music with great respect and care. It was kind of thrown together. I have feeling it was free—you know, there were missed notes and kind of not—not a good caring sound. I mean, there were nowhere near the profusion of contemporary, knowledgeable contemporary music players in New York that there are now. Um, so the—the recording has a rough edge.

And I seem to remember that—that-- I remember vaguely asking Varèse, so, did you like Robert Kraft? He says, oh, I didn't like Robert Kraft so much. And I'm guessing that maybe, maybe he didn't—I didn't ask him why or—but maybe he didn't like Robert Kraft because the recordings weren't too—weren't really all they should have been. Now you get much better recordings, I have no doubt.

Um, so what else? I met Harvey Schmidt when I was young to ask him for the music for *The Fantasticks*, which I'd heard on the record. And he gave me a photocopy back then at cost, very nice. We've stayed professionally—now I work for him, I do a lot of his music preparation.

FL: Fantastic.

WG: Yeah.

### 3. Early exposure to contemporary music and jazz (00:11:27)

FL: So when you first heard Edgard Varèse, was that, um, was that—I mean that's obviously a lot different than some of the music that you were describing that you'd heard growing up. How did that—how did that, um, it must have really—was that a real—something really different for you or had you heard other, um—

WG: Well, yeah, I—I understand your question. It was pretty different. Uh, my ears were already a little bit opened up. At Interlochen there was a lot of music going on. And there were some people, the name escapes me, but there were one or two people who were specializing in contemporary music.

And I remember there were little recordings floating around of *Zeitmasse* by Karlheinz Stockhausen. And I was as interested in the way the score looked as the way the music sounded. Um, I mean the score looked unbelievably challenging. I—as I recall it's still a challenging piece, incredible extremes of speed and dynamics.

Um, and there were people—*Kontra-Punkte*, I think some Stockhausen piece. Forgive me, I'm not a modern music scholar.

FL: That's okay.

WG: I'm not a—I'm not a full-blown devotee. I like—I like the stuff I like and I don't like the stuff I don't like.

FL: Yeah.

WG: Some people are more righteous about it. You know, modern music, yes, yes. I—I-- I can't—I can't go there. It's not—It's not me. I make my judgments as they come.

But, uh, um, so sometime in that summer, there was this place to listen to LPs and somebody who was more into modern music at the time than I was, more knowledgeable I should say, I didn't have anything against modern music, just hadn't heard much of it, just said, here's this Varèse record. And I thought, wow, this is great! It had tremendous energy. I think it started off with *Ionisation*. I mean, there was a *Density 21.5*.

It's a well known LP, probably got transferred to CD by now. And, uh, I remember I enjoyed following the score.

Oh, I also remember in high school they needed ringers for the Hofstra Symphony Orchestra, it was a college orchestra. And Elie Siegmeister, the late Elie Siegmeister, wonderful American composer and spirit and forward-thinking person, and champion of, uh, American composers as a cause, he conducted the Hofstra Symphony, and I played under him. Played his own Third Symphony, played *Integrales*, played percussion in *Integrales*, and a couple other things.

FL: That's Varèse, right?

WG: Uh, yeah, yeah, uh-huh. And, uh, late—years later when I was at MIT, John Corley let me guest conduct for the band. And one of the pieces I got to do was *Ionisation*.

FL: No kidding.

WG: On tour. Can you imagine taking all those instruments on tour? [laughs]

FL: Wow. That's great.

WG: I'm rambling a little, but, uh—

FL: No, this is good.

WG: Yeah.

FL: That's good. Um, so we'll get back to some of this—this train of thought, but I want to get back to the subject of—of jazz. Um, did you grow up listening to much jazz?

WG: Well, no, not really. We lived near the Westbury Music Fair, which was a venue for booking, uh, different acts, sometimes shows. I think it's probably like the—if it still exists—the Cape Cod Melody Tent or the North Shore Music Theatre. It was, you know, popular entertainment for audiences in Long Island and an alternative to going into New York City for the night.

And I remember hearing Dave Brubeck there. And at the time, I thought Dave Brubeck was—that was it. I was pretty ignorant. And I'm still not real well-versed. I mean, a lot of people I know in New York know much more about jazz than I do, much more knowledgeable.

Uh, and actually I remember—this is related to MIT very specifically—I lived in Senior House, and my sophomore year, I think it was the Holman Wing—it's all been changed now, but there was six wings back then. And I was a roommate of a young guy named Larry Cohen, C-O-H-E-N. [film producer]

I don't whatever happened to him. He may have dropped out of MIT and not finished, for all I know. And he knew avant-garde jazz. He was schooled in it. He knew the Blue Note albums, Ornette Coleman, uh, John Coltrane. He was listening to things—

Senior House was a pretty, kind of Dave Brubeck, white bread kind of jazz oriented bunch of students. And this poor guy was getting put down for listening to these records. A bunch of—I mean he was right and they were wrong, as far as I'm concerned. He knew exactly what was happening. And he turned me on to some of these records.

I remember he used to put down Dave Brubeck. Uh, he would say—because Dave Brubeck's—you know, it was like a big thing that Dave Brubeck played in 9/8 or in 5/4. And they would call time out, time further out. And he would say, oh, you know, what is with this Dave Brubeck? How's your time? What's the time? Give me the time.

He was very outspoken. Uh, and it was—it was very courageous because, you know, Senior House—uh, the average sort of musical layman at Senior House could be pretty insistent on their standards. You know, I like Dave Brubeck, and who are you to tell me that Dave Brubeck is no good?

Anyway, under this guy's auspices, I heard a lot of jazz, his LPs, a lot of, uh, the Blue Note—I think the Winter album with Ornette Coleman and David Izenzon, and I forget the names. And I remember this guy was in heaven because in 1967 John Coltrane played in [MIT] Kresge Auditorium. I remember he played one uninterrupted 90-minute set. That was the—that was the performance. He was just there, played whatever he played for 90 minutes.

FL: Wow!

WG: And, uh, it was—it was pretty exciting that MIT got him. I think that may have been the last year of his life. I don't know my statistics. So me and jazz.

Um, I once heard the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Band during my college years when it was the original incarnation at the Village Vanguard with the original generation of players. It's still a great band now, but back then it was legendary.

Um, but I didn't really—and I was in a stage band in high school that played these stock arrangements. Um, you know, later on I found out how really, uh, unadventurous they were. Things like it would have written out solos. You know, you know, jazz by the numbers or, you know, kind of jazz with a helping hand, like babysitting the players.

Um, and, uh, I don't know, leading up to the MIT Jazz Band, I can't remember quite how I got involved. I guess I was a pianist who thought he could play a little bit of jazz. And, uh, and I ended up being involved with the Jazz Band here at some point.

#### **4. Musical training before coming to MIT (00:18:34)**

FL: So we'll get to that. I want to backtrack just a bit. Tell me about some of your training, musical training before you got to MIT.

WG: Well, it was—it was not, um, um, cata—I don't know, how can I put it? It wasn't by the book. I didn't take a lot of formal classes. I learned a lot from my father.

Uh, I remember I would also—I was in the habit of listening to records before I ever saw the music. And then with excitement I would go to the New York Public Library and look at the music to see how the music looked in relationship to what I heard. And sometimes I was—I would be surprised. You know, the downbeat wasn't where I thought it would be and stuff like that.

The notation would surprise me. I remember for years I heard *The Rite of Spring* [by Stravinsky], which, of course, is famous for, among other things, the “Danse Sacrale” at the end where almost every measure the time signature changes. And, uh—and some measures the time signature, uh, is a conceit on Stravinsky's part because you don't hear the downbeats—

WG: [sings beats]

—the empty downbeats, downbeats with no music. And people probably analyze—is it a downbeat or not, and so on? But anyway, so I heard the music and

finally saw it. It was very exciting. I can't—I don't know what the analogy was, but, um—

And I learned to read scores then. The first score I ever learned the mechanics of reading the score with, you know, reading left to right and two systems on a page, uh, my parents, I think, bought me *Billy the Kid Suite*, by Aaron Copland, still near and dear to my heart, that score.

Um, I somehow absorbed it, somehow absorbed all this stuff, learning to read, learning to be interested—it started with an interest in the pieces. I—I heard music I liked and wanted to find out more about the music. And my formal—my ears were good, my formalization of theory knowledge was not great. I mean, I couldn't give chords the right names, but I sort of knew what they were.

I remember going to camp, uh, summer camp. I was in about 10th grade and I discovered by accident that I had perfect pitch. [laughs] I remember somehow I was in a dining—and empty dining room that had piano in it. And I said to some kid, said, play—play a note. And I turned my back and walked away. I said, like, you know, whatever, is than an F? And one summer I discovered I had perfect pitch.

Um, so it was sort of a little bit accidental and unstructured, some of the learning. I still have gaps. Um, let me think.

But—but, I kind of—I kind of sought it after for proportionate to the amount of pleasure I got. Uh, I—I haven't studied string quartet scores as much as I've studied orchestra scores. And I—I think most of my interest originally was with orchestral music. I know some piano music, but not nearly any large portion of the repertoire. But I've—I've been through a lot of orchestra music. You know, you put a page of a Beethoven symphony up in front of me and I could probably tell you what piece it's from, that kind of thing. I can recognize the music. I took piano lessons also when I was a kid.

FL: Uh-huh. What, uh, led you to come to MIT?

WG: [laughs]

Well I was a math and science whiz and that's where my parents thought I should end up. I had a friend who was a few years older than me named Barry Skeist, S-K-E-I-S-T. I think he was a senior when I was a freshman, so maybe he was in the '66 maybe? And he lived near me.

And in the kind of school atmosphere I went with—went to, it was very achievement-oriented and you were supposed to go to the best school you could. You weren't just supposed to go to some half-assed school. You were supposed to get into the best school you could get into.

And I think at one point I had dreams of getting into Harvard. I was steered away from that at some point for whatever reason. And I was very good in math and science in high school. And, uh, [coughs] excuse me, it seemed like a sort of natural place to, uh, set my sights on.

FL: Did you know about the music program at MIT before you came here?

WG: Uh, only in very bare terms. I think I have a vague recollection before I went to MIT that my parents had gotten wind of a concert—a Town Hall that the MIT Concert Band was doing one night. Um, I don't think I knew much about music at MIT. I—I probably—I mean I don't think I assumed that there was no music, I just didn't know anything about it.

FL: With your enthusiasm for music, you know, prior to—to college, had you given much thought what you might want to do in college? I mean—

WG: You mean musically?

FL: Yeah.

WG: Uh, no. No.

FL: Mm-hm.

WG: I gave it a lot of thought the first week I came here, which I'm sure we'll get to. [laughs]

FL: Yeah, yeah. Um, so in some ways the—the—the, um, music program here probably came as a pleasant surprise?

WG: Yes. And I would add the—the adjective the EXTRA-curricular music program. Pretty much all the activities were not for credit, extracurricular. I mean, there was the courses, such as they were, but the music that I immersed myself in was with the groups, the performing groups, all extracurricular. Later on, for credit, a few of them.

## **5. Herb Pomeroy and MIT Jazz Ensemble (00:23:55)**

FL: So did you—when did you first start playing under Herb Pomeroy [director of jazz bands at MIT 1963–1985]? Was that your freshman year?

WG: I'm a little shaky on the dates. I have a feeling that would have happened. Yeah, might have been around then.

FL: And you first played piano, I understand. Is that right?

WG: I believe so.

FL: And then French horn.

WG: Yeah.

FL: Yeah. Um, and when you were in the—the band, was it called the Festival Jazz Ensemble then, or was it still the Concert [MIT Concert Jazz Band]—

WG: Band, Band, Jazz Band. The word ensemble wasn't part of the title.

FL: Okay.

WG: I can't remember, the MIT—the MIT Jazz Band. Oh no, the word festival wasn't in it. I think it became festival when—when a second entity sprung up.

FL: Right

WG: As you mentioned—

FL: We're trying to figure out exactly that date. Because—

WG: Well, it's

FL: —even Everett's [Longstreth, director of MIT Concert Jazz Band, 1968-1995] not sure if it's—

WG: Oh.

FL: If it's with '67 or '66, and—

WG: Gee, I couldn't help you on that, sorry.

FL: Okay, yeah, okay. Um, I've seen some other dates that are—even make it even more—more murky. We're trying to see if we can—can get that out.

WG: I'm sure, you know, there'd be—if there's any record—I mean, the—the performances were a matter of public record, so somebody would have listed them in, you know—

FL: Right

WG: —*The [MIT] Tech* [newspaper] or—

FL: Yeah.

WG: —whatever handouts there were.

FL: Right. Um, when—in my interviews with Herb [Pomeroy], in asking him about his rehearsal technique and stuff, he was, um, he took the—the rhythm section very seriously and—and did a lot of work with them. And you being the pianist and part of that rhythm section, do you remember the kinds of things that he, uh, he worked on, either with you specifically or with—with the rhythm section in general?

WG: Um, that's a very fair question. I'm not sure I can give you a real helpful answer. I don't personally remember. And it took me a long time to realize that, to be perfectly honest, I wasn't nearly the quality of—of, uh—of jazz band piano player I thought I was. I vastly overestimated my skills.

What I was, was an excellent reading piano player, uh, and, you know, with a fairly good sense of rhythm. But I really was way, uh, under, uh, not up to speed in the real important areas of—that make jazz band piano playing what it, which is comping and soloing. I mean that may sound silly to say, but I thought, hey, I'm a pianist, I'll play in this group. I played in every other group that needed a piano, why not this group?

Uh, and it took me a while to be humble enough to realize that there were some people around that I should be paying attention to. And I remember, I think at the time I was around, that I was asking Herb about this gentleman. He was a guy named Brage Golding [MIT class 1966], soft-spoken pianist—Herb would remember the name—that Herb thought a lot of. And it took me a while to—I was also, I told Herb, I was sort of a smart-ass know-it-all when I came here, like folly of youth or something. Took me a while to get to be humble and be a good listener and just keep myself out of the equation and just stop and listen and learn.



But Herb was raving about Brage Golding. And later on, I understood why. He was just a tasteful, skilled player. I really didn't have good—I was lacking in a lot of jazz skills. I will say, among other things about Herb, he was—he would never go for the jugular and cut somebody's ego.

I mean, he never came over to me and said, you really don't know the first thing about comping. Or - he would never put anything in a negative way. He would sort of make an allusion, you know, let me try Brage Golding on some of these pieces. But he had an absolute instinct against wounding anybody's ego.

He would never lie to anybody. But he was extremely diplomatic and tactful and considerate. That's just the way he is as a person.

I could tell you what a superb role model he was, not just as a musician, but as a person. That's the main lesson that I have taken from Herb Pomeroy.

FL: And we'll get into some more questions that I have about that for you.

WG: Oh, forgive me. Your rhythm question, again, I don't remember myself being one of these people that could tell you a lot about him paying attention to the rhythm section. I knew he needed to have a good rhythm section.

And one or two years—he hated to go outside MIT for players. He just didn't feel it was the spirit of the group. And he only did it when he felt—I think the way he put it—when if I were to not go out of MIT for one player, it would jeopardize the experience of the other fifteen or sixteen.

And one year, he went out to get a drummer named Harry Blazer, who was wonderful. It just—I'm sure you can understand not having a skilled drummer would just ruin the experience. So I know that on certain occasions, he would have to make that decision.

He made it very reluctantly, and only with the greatest amount of care and concern for how people were going to feel about it. And again, it wasn't for his ego. It was for making everybody else's experience as worthwhile as possible. And it was—that was strictly the way the judgment was made.

FL: Wow. So in subsequent years, you played French horn with the FJE [Festival Jazz Ensemble]?

WG: Right. I think he probably figured out maybe I should be doing something other than piano. [laughs] I don't know. He saw my enthusiasm. I can't remember. I'm being a little facetious. Sometime, I don't know, I guess there was a discussion—I don't know how it came up—but that seemed like—or maybe some of the arrangements that Herb was using started to have French horn parts under consideration as a sort of extra member of the trombone section.

FL: So your role was kind of related to the trombones? I was going to ask about that. Where—

WG: Well, the role of the French horn. I'm not an expert jazz arranger, but typically the horn goes with trombones very well. It could go with the saxes a little well.

It isn't quite a trumpet sonority.

FL: Yeah, it's got such a huge range, so it can get the timbres—

WG: I'm simplifying. Or course, it can play with trumpets and so on, and so on, but it used to be voiced with the trombones, mostly. Although also, I seem to remember actually it could be the lead trumpet down an octave. He would just say, this is what you'll play on this piece, if there was no existing French horn part. So I'm wrong.

But by and large, I think when arrangers thought of it, well, it could be lead trumpet down an octave, or it could be with the trombones.

FL: And then, Herb was telling me that there was a point when you were joined by a second French hornist.

WG: Yes, I remember Robert Schmidt [MIT 1970], the name Robert Schmidt. I think the two of us—yeah, it was quite something to have two French horns [laughs].

FL: How did that change the sound of the band? Did it have a big effect?

WG: Well, you'd have to ask someone like Herb who was doing most of the listening. I'm sure it did. And, uh, sorry, I'm a little incoherent. Uh, just I guess what you'd expect, that the mellowness of the French horn would create certain possibilities. I just—I couldn't give you a specific like, it sounded this way before the horns and this way after. Gee, I just don't remember.

I have to say, bands have survived with French horn, but they've also survived worldwide without French horn. French horn is, I would say, still an auxiliary instrument. I don't think the Count Basie Band—I don't think any of those famous bands ever had French horns. Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Band has had French horns. And Sauter-Finnegan Band was a whole different thing. It wasn't a standard instrumentation to begin with. But the French horn's auxiliary.

FL: Yeah. In New York, he used to be in Boston, a jazz French hornist, Marshall Sealy. Do you run across him?

WG: I don't think I know the name.

FL: He used to play with [MIT Lecturer in Music] Mark Harvey's Aardvark Jazz Orchestra. And he would take these amazing solos. He was a real jazz player. He took long solos. And Mark featured him in a lot of pieces.

WG: Uh-huh. There was—I don't know if it's any relationship—there was a trumpet player named Nate Seely at MIT [ 1970] But maybe no relation, anyway.

FL: So with your time with the FJE, did you get a chance to do any writing or arranging for the band?

WG: No, except once, I remember when I was a freshman—this is going to show you about my lack of knowledge and so on, the movie *Goldfinger*—this is a really silly story, hope you won't mind my telling it—opened like 1964, '65. And I heard the original soundtrack album. And there was about a seven minute piece of background music called *Dawn Raid on Fort Knox*. Just this music. It doesn't really sound very interesting without the movie. And I transcribed it.

Oh, I also played in a Long Island [NY] stage band when I was in high school, last two years, stage band of people, some of whom were from around Long Island.

And I wrote this piece out, took it off the record. I do more transcribing than arranging—I don't know, I haven't found a creative voice if I have it. But I like to transcribe.

And I wrote this thing out. And, uh, I brought it up to MIT. I was all excited because maybe the MIT Jazz Band would play my piece, the piece I wrote out. Not my piece, John Barry's piece.

And it was—it was a ridiculous idea. It had just endless high notes for the trumpets. [sounding] Bap! It had this, like F chord. And the trumpet had to keep playing written high Ds over and over and over again. And Herb, who was nice enough to read it through. And I vaguely remember. He was—he was very solicitous. And he said—he said, you know, you don't think you'd like to swap the parts, give the trumpet player a rest?

I said, no, no, something, like know-it-all. And—and somehow, he explained to me that he didn't think this was the right piece for the Jazz Band to be performing. And, uh, I remember I used to laugh about it years later. That's right, Bill Grossman, *Dawn Raid on Fort Knox*. [laughs] So, uh, apart from that transcription effort, I don't think I ever arranged for the jazz band.

## 6. Musical and personal values of Herb Pomeroy (00:34:55)

FL: With you being quite the, um, the conductor and an astute observer of other—other conductors, um, do you have any comments about Herb Pomeroy as a—as a conductor? In jazz, you don't often talk about a conductor. But it is a way that he is a conductor. And, um—

WG: Well, I mean, you're opening up a question that deserves a, you know, a long answer. Uh, I mean, as the conductor and, you know, music director of the Jazz Band, he was the inspiration for everybody in that group to—to want to play at the level they did and to be able to play at the level they did.

He provided the inspiration, the skills, the knowledge, uh, in many, many ways. Uh, I would have to start with the human qualities. He never treated us like we were inferior to the kind of people he expected or was accustomed to working with. Namely, like his Berklee [College of Music] students and, of course, his professional associations.

Uh, he never really would say anything to let us know that we didn't play our instruments as well as the guys over at Berklee. Uh, he was not judgmental in that way. Uh, so first of all, our group started out with incredible self-esteem.

Uh, and he—well, he's probably told you all his anecdotes about, he wasn't sure if he should come. Then he came. And then he pretended that he had conflicts so he wouldn't have to come to the concerts and all those stories about the evolving years.

And some of those I wasn't sure I was a part of. I think he started a year before me, a year or two before, the fall of '65. Um, I remember, well, his choice of music.

He—he had this whole batch of people that were like a farm team of writers of arrangements from Berklee. And eventually some people from MIT, Richy [Richard] Orr [ 1962], and maybe some others I can't think of.

Uh, he would play anything anybody wrote. He would read it through and maybe put it in a concert, but he would definitely give it a read through. So his own taste was exquisite, exquisite. I haven't heard the old records from his old band. They're very famous. I just have not gotten my hands on them. I don't think they've been reissued as CDs yet, unfortunately.

But his taste—I mean, everything that came, everything that was put on the stand was, uh, exciting, challenging, worthy music. Uh, and different. And it was progressive. I don't think he liked moldy fig, or whatever the word is. He didn't like just kind of anything that sounded like a stock arrangement. It had to be something interesting and fresh and challenging.

And, uh, so we got great charts. And he would rehearse with great care. And I remember he never faked. Uh, I see in the outside world a lot of conductors who pretend they'll hear a chord and know whether it's right or wrong. He made sure he knew if it was right or wrong. And he wasn't above going note by note to just double check. He had no vanity.

I mean, his ear was fantastic. And his ear still is fantastic. But what I'm trying to say is, he didn't try to act like a maestro. He was just—it was all about the music. And, uh, he, uh, it was all—I can't remember when he was ever really wrong about something. And he would also couch things in a nonjudgmental way.

He'd say like, I think that should be a B-natural. If anybody was playing a B-flat, they should play a B-natural. Instead of saying, what did you play? Did you play B-flat? Well, you should have played B-natural. That B-flat's wrong. Nothing like that. Sort of like some of what happened the other night in the rehearsal, uh, last night, the rehearsal I taped.

Um, I do remember sort of anecdotally—and this is maybe getting far afield—we—and I told him later—we had more fun than I think anybody had a right to have in those rehearsals. And he was one of the people at MIT that—it was a unique combination of having a lot of fun in rehearsals, which a lot of—a number of MI groups—MIT groups—did have a lot of fun, and having a very high standard in what he wanted for the performance, which a lot of MIT groups did.

But I would say his group had the best of both worlds more than any other group. I don't want to name names. But that was the way I felt about his group. We had fun, and we sounded great.

Uh, maybe it was owing to the fact that this group was a particularly felicitous kind of group to assemble. You know, the instrumentation may have been what students were good at or whatever. But anyway, it was fun. And we played at a level that we were all very proud of and he was proud of. And, you know, we got recognition from the outside world with the festivals. But it was a great source of pride. I'm sorry, just trying to make --.

Oh, yes. And occasionally, little things would get him upset. I remember little anecdotes, or little phrases he would say.

He had a way of just using like a word to describe when things were not going well. Somebody left all their music at home. Or one player forgot to bring his mute. Or one player forgot to do this. And, you know, it would be a drag. And he would say, excellent, excellent [laughs], with a—with a nice little sarcastic dry martini twist. Excellent, excellent.

And the maddest he would get, uh, is he'd say, that really burns my ass. That really burns my ass. And then you'd know he was pretty upset. But it would take a lot for him to get upset. I think missing—missing players in rehearsal, missing bodies, was very upsetting. It was upsetting to all of us.

Things would happen, you know. There'd be—you know, in an academic world of extracurricular music people, would sometimes unfortunately have to make something else a priority. Um, but he was very kind and pleasant about all of that.

But I was talking with some of my colleagues, alumni. And "excellent" became a part of our vocabulary. You know, you get to a traffic jam. Excellent, excellent. [laughs] You know, it was—I thought it was great.

Rehearsing. Oh, I remember he had one tune he called the spittoon. And pi-toon, pi-toon, something, it was the figure in the tune. Um, I mean, this is sort of anecdotal. We were having—it was an amazing, an unerring combination of fun and hard work. I've—I can't recall anything like it since.

I've been in a lot of groups that worked hard, a lot of groups that had fun. But this combined both of them. Um, he worked on intonation. He drilled principles into us, which I still heard him enunciating the other day. If you have a minor second, play the lower note a little softer than the upper note. If you have a drop off of pitch of a chord, establish the pitch before you drop.

If you're going to have an upbeat to a—to a note, one, two, three, four—bah! Then you miss—you miss the counting of the one. You have to kind of let that go by. One, two, three, four—bah!—two, three, four. So the playing and anticipation kind of—be prepared to lose your awareness of where the next downbeat is, if I'm making sense. Um, don't try to count one, two, three, four, and—one, two, three four—bah!—two, three, four.

Um, things like that. Attention to the longs and shorts, articulations. Uh, just going back and forth from the big picture to the small picture. It wasn't Herb that said God is in the details, but he embodied it. Um, I don't know, have I—is that enough of an answer?

FL: That's really good.

WG: That's just, you know, sort of my feeling my way around this subject. I mean, he was, I think—I would be surprised if you spoke to anybody that played for any length of time in that band that Herb was not a role model for the rest of their life. It was just incredible, incredible. Anyway.

FL: So what are some of the things that, um, lasting kind of musical values that you've taken from him that you feel like in your working life as a musician today?

WG: Well, some of them are not that easy to translate. The working world is a little tougher than the world at MIT in some ways. Um, uh, the atmosphere that Herb created in rehearsals is not always—I have not—I should say, I have not always found it easy to see that replicated in the, quote, professional world. It can be very businesslike and, uh, people play to earn an income. And that is sometimes what matters to them. It's their right. But you can't expect people to fall in love with everything they do professionally. Uh, I'm sort of generalizing, but that's the point I would make.

Um, respect for people, and just kind of learning what you're going to do, learning—knowing what you're going to do. If you're going to—if you're going to be conductor, learn how to use your ears and hear the difference between a minor seventh chord and a major seventh chord. Uh, know when somebody gets lost. Know when the rhythm's wrong.

Uh, I think, although Herb didn't say it explicitly, I think the most important asset somebody can have next to the technique of playing their instrument is great ears. It took me long—far longer than I feel proud about to learn that. Without great ears, you're nobody.

Uh, and um, let me see. Uh, the professional world—I don't know. My ears, I would say, got better and better every year in my life. They continue. And, um, I don't know if Herb started that. I—and no one—and no one really came to me and said, improve your ears! Improve your ears! You know, the more your ears work well, the better a musician you'll be.

But I kind of figured out that somehow, myself. I wish somebody had told me when I was about seven. Would have saved a lot of time. Uh, so, hm. Let me—just trying to think. Well, just—and—and he cared about people a lot. I mean, I think he's even interviewed—I think he—he puts the people at—are at least as important as the music or maybe even more important for him sometimes if he verbalizes it.

And it's a good thought. It's—it's sometimes hard to put into practice. There are some musicians who will eat you alive if you come on like a sort of nice guy. It—it all depends on the circumstance. Uh, I guess I would say I've learned to try and be nice to people as a—as a starting point, and, you know, slow to anger. Uh, and try to be sympathetic.

There have been times when I worked with just unpleasant people. And, uh, it wasn't necessarily personal. They just somehow did not like doing what they were doing. They didn't like doing it with me. And, uh, not too much I could do about it except weather the storm and move on to the next project.

But to try and—try and radiate a little humanity. And not—not fake. Not—not fake. That was—Herb never faked in his life. Um, uh, don't pretend you know something when you don't. And that may sound elementary, but I see lots of faking in the musical world. And, uh, it'd be a better world if it weren't there.

## 7. John Corley and the MIT Concert Band (00:47:00)

FL: Wow. What a—what a great experience you had working with him. And the legacy he's left with so many people is—is fantastic. Um, I'd like to talk some more about your involvement in other MIT musical groups. Did you play—how much did you play with the MIT Concert Band with John Corley [MIT Concert Band conductor 1949–1999]?

WG: I played a lot [laughs]. I joined the Concert Band in 1965. And let me just double back and say I was very depressed as an MIT freshman. They had—I don't know if they still have it—but rush week was the first thing you did when you got to MIT. And uh, I hold the MIT—the powers that be in absolute contempt. This is no way to treat a person new to the college experience. It was awful. You were plunked down at an airport. Some guy from Pi Lam[bda] picked you up in a car. And you then had a week of rejection in front of you. It was awful. I don't know, I—

FL: They're working on changing that.

WG: Well, I—it was MIT being selfish. They didn't want to have to house people for their freshman year if they could avoid it. Uh, I would have to say just as an overall arching thing, my experiences with people like Herb and John Corley and the other people that I've worked with were in contra-distinction—Is that a word? The right word? In contrast to the overall absolute lack of concern for people as human beings that I found pervasive at the school, I'm very sorry to have to say.

FL: Wow.

WG: And music was my salvation. I remember walking the hall near this library from—between Building 10 and the glass enclosed wing. I was just depressed. And I found the activities cage, the Rockwell—it's probably not still there. They used to have an activities midway at Rockwell Cage, one of the first things of freshman year.

And I saw all these excited people. And they were playing Gilbert and Sullivan. And I became a member. I—I found music as a sort of salvation starting with the Rockwell—with the activities midway at the Rockwell Cage, early, first week of my freshman year or something.

Uh, Concert Band, I joined in '65. I joined every group I could be in. I just was attracted to music, you know, like a filing to an iron magnet or whatever it is, iron filing to a magnet.

Uh, I was in the band until I left Boston in '73—uh, 70—spring of '74. And I actually returned once or twice for some projects. Came along with John Corley and John Bavicchi [MIT student 1940–1942; composer] on a [MIT Concert Band] tour once. Conducted that little piece that you have there, the—what's it called? *Festive Prelude* that I wrote for a commencement, I think in 19—there was a commencement that I wasn't in, which was my graduating class's year, '69. And I wrote that for John's [Corley] brass group [Boston Brass Ensemble] and another piece for 1971, or maybe two more pieces.

Anyway, uh, so I was in the Concert Band from fall of '65 till '74 actively, with return visits up until... Well, I was an audience member and participant in, I think, his last concert [May 1, 1999]. I don't know if that was one of the concerts where alumni were invited to sit in. And I—I was sitting in.

FL: I was at that concert, yeah.

WG: I think it was *Prelude and Happy Dance* [by Andrew Kazdin, MIT 1963]. I can't remember what—or maybe John Bavicchi's *Suite for Band*, whatever the piece was. So spanning I guess about thirty years, maybe more, over thirty years, most of the activity between '65 and '74.

FL: And you always played French horn with that group?

WG: No. I think I started on French horn, and they heard that I could play piano, so they handed me some mallets. And they said, go play in the percussion section. We need some mallet players. You know, you can read a keyboard. [laughs] It was that—that quick. You know, as things happen in the musical world, amateur, you know, educational, high school, people go where there's a—you know, where there's a vacancy. They needed—they needed percussion players.

FL: And that thinking on your feet has really helped you professionally, it looks like.

WG: Well, a little bit. I mean, I never pass myself off—I did earn a living on a couple jobs where I played some percussion. But I wouldn't—I wouldn't do it now. I mean, I wasn't really a great percussionist. I was—I was sort of okay [laughs].

FL: Well, um, if there's time, we can get back to—well, let me, before we leave John Corley and the Concert Band, he was just an incredible person and conductor and musician in so many ways. It's an unfair question to kind of throw this at you, but just talk about John Corley a little bit.

WG: Sure, be happy to. Uh, John was also kind of a person who would inspire people, not just conduct the rehearsals and a concert. Uh, people gravitated towards the band. And the year I came to MIT was a year after he was also the conductor of the [MIT Symphony] Orchestra. He'd been conductor of both for many years [1955–1965]. So the history of the orchestra predates my time.

But he had admirers in the way that Herb did. People—people loved working with John. I got to work with him once. He guest conducted the Harvard Radcliffe Orchestra. I remember he did Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* and I think Brahms's Four [Symphony No. 4], some other things, that I played bass drum or something in Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*.

And hung out at various things he did. I would go play in Brookline. He had—we did, like, little runouts of chamber music to Brookline and things like that.

So John, it was just very exciting. And he wanted people to understand the emotions of the music. It wasn't just about the correct execution of what was on the page. That mattered to him, too.

But he wanted—especially what he wanted to get across was the emotion of the piece. And um, I remember he would sing the opening of the [Thomas] Beversdorf



symphony [No. 3], [singing] "Thom-as Beversdorf." He would put words to it. Oh, I can't remember verbalizing things about music.

He would do things—a Vittorio Giannini—I think it was called *Prelude and Fugue* or *Prelude and Allegro [Preludium and Allegro]*. And it used to have a big, loud ending. And he thought it deserved a smaller ending, and he made a sort of retouch and had a diminuendo with a suspended cymbal roll instead of a big, fortissimo cymbal crash. I mean, I'm just sketching the outlines, but...

And I got to learn that he was very knowledgeable about the years of the Boston Symphony under [Serge] Koussevitzky, which were great years [1924-1949], from my awareness of them. I don't know a lot of Koussevitzky recordings. But Koussevitzky was all about the emotion of the music and getting it out of the orchestra. And John, I think, absorbed some of that. I think he studied with Georges Mager, who was the first trumpet of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

And I remember John saying at one point, he had to make a decision in his life. Was he going to be a Tanglewood Fellow [Ed. Note: Tanglewood Music Center summer school provides advanced training for young orchestral musicians], or was he going to go into music education? And I think he opted for music education. It was like a crossroads one summer, and he stayed in the music education field. But he would have been a first-class professional—full-time professional trumpet player if he had pursued it. And he continued to play lots of freelance trumpet in the Boston area, as I recall.

Anyway, what else about John? Oh yeah, a band that did no transcriptions. Very hip. Very hip. And amazing. I mean, this [MIT] is not a music school. Every band in the world does these dumb transcriptions of the Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony and the Shostakovich Fifth and so on and so on. Not for John. What a great idea! The band isn't a poor stepchild of the orchestra, with clarinets playing the string parts.

The band played a lot of new pieces. He had a lot of connections to Boston composers—[William] Bill Maloof, dammit—Eve of St. Agnes—[by] Ed [Edward Madden]—oh, damn. I'm drawing a blank on some of the names. And Gregory Tucker [Professor of Music] for MIT. Andrew Kazdin [MIT S.M. 1963]—a very important name.

FL: Also an MIT graduate.

WG: Yes. Sloan School and New England Conservatory. I met Andrew Kazdin. I don't know him well, but we've met and corresponded once or twice. And Andy wrote a lot for the band, and Andy was, I think, very close to John. Andy, I think, also wrote a bunch of Tech Shows, maybe, too, in the '50s. Not sure about that.

So John encouraged—I remember, I think, Christmas of '65—I never did it, but I said, I'm going to go home and write a piece for the band. And John was just so excited. He told the whole band, and here's Bill Grossman, who's going to go home and write a piece for us. I mean, I think the best I could do was I wrote a piece for brass and percussion that the band played on one of their tours. I think I made an

abortive start of writing a piece for the band, but I never could quite do it. I'm not quite that creative.

We had fun on tours. Went on a lot of tours. I think the touring got cut down. I don't know the numbers. I have this feeling that the MIT music department or somebody cut back their support, and the tours got cut back in scope. Let me think. John Bavicchi. John Bavicchi got to meet John Corley. I remember I asked them how they met, and John Bavicchi said he saw John Corley playing at one of the theaters in the pit. And he leaned over and says, I hear you have a brass group. Why don't you play some of my music? [laughs] Something like a brash introduction by a composer. [See also interviews with J. Corley and J. Bavicchi.]

And Corley said, okay, I'll take a look at it. And Bavicchi wrote one piece after another for the MIT band. The year I came was the year they premiered—I think it was called *Festival Symphony* [Op, 51]. Had antiphonal trumpets. [coughs] And it was a great piece. I don't know if it was ever recorded. I mean, probably concerts were taped. Great, great piece. And I also played the *Suite for Band*. I can't remember all the other pieces.

So the repertoire was very interesting. And I remember John always wanted to have pieces that were a little harder than everybody could play. He wanted to challenge people. And he did. I remember Bavicchi's music had these amazing scales—[sings a scale]—but not a scale like you've ever seen.

It wasn't a major scale. I wasn't a minor scale. It was like probably some—it might be classified as a jazz scale with alterations or something. But he had these amazing scales that were the basis of a lot of his music and terrific, exciting, well-calculated harmonies. Very rich music.

So the repertoire—we had a lot of fun. I wish I could remember some of the jokes he would tell. But we had a good time there. John took on a lot of other activities. I remember a friend of mine, who's lives up in the Boston area named Charlie Kiefer [MIT 1970] helped to organize a reading of *West Side Story* [by L. Bernstein]—a concert performance one night and one summer [August 29, 1969], and John agreed to conduct it. And it didn't occur to me till years later, John Corley probably did so many things without ever asking for pay from people.

He would do extra things for MIT students. When he orchestrated the [MIT] Tech Shows, he got—it's a pitiful amount of money, I think, for his work. In 1968, he got a total of, like, \$300, which even in 1968 dollars was very little. Herb [Pomeroy] orchestrated one number of the Tech Show in 1968, and John did all the rest, I think for time reasons. The orchestrations, the pieces need to be orchestrated at the last minute, so some of the work is farmed out.

And John, money was never discussed. I mean, it took me years to be cognizant of the fact that John was being too nice to us. Music is how he makes his living. Why was he so nice to us? It just was his nature. He gave and gave and gave. He would never say no to a project if he thought it would be helpful to us.

It was also through John that I met the first professional-level player that I knew, Boston Symphony player named Felix [Phil] Viscuglia [woodwind coach for

MIT Concert Band]. He used to be the bass clarinetist of the Boston Symphony, prior to the current bass clarinetist. And I got to know Phil and learned a little bit about what it's really like, taking the mythology out of what it's like to be a professional working musician. And some of those thoughts I kept in my head for years. I remember I asked Phil about the Boston Pops, what's it like to play in the Boston Pops. And he said, it's a drag, but it's a well-paying drag.

He was very honest, and he was the kind of person that would give you—it wasn't a cynical answer. It was an honest answer. I mean I realize that Boston Pops is not what these people went into music to do, but it's what the Boston Symphony needed to keep its books balanced.

And I remember talking with Phil about different things. I remember telling him Armando Ghitalla sounded great in the Bach *Brandenburg* [Concerto No. 2], the one with the trumpet solo. And I said, oh, he sounded great. And Phil said, yeah, well, if he doesn't, he gets fired. Just little ideas of introduction. And I had once the temerity—I think [Erich] Leinsdorf [conductor 1962-1969] was doing *Petrouchka* [by Stravinsky] series of concerts—

I used to go to the BSO a lot the last couple undergrad years. I started the habit of going in my junior year. I would go to the Friday rush hour concerts. And I heard a couple performances of the same piece sometimes. And as I said to Phil, rather untactfully, I said, gee, that performance tonight wasn't as good as the night before. What happened? The other night was really good.

And he said in a very nice way, he said, you can't expect perfection out of a performance. That's rare. You understand it when it happens, but you don't have the right to expect that. It doesn't happen every night that the orchestra gets together.

And he also—I was kind of lucky in a way that these people didn't chew my head off at some of the really direct questions I would ask, or presumptuous questions. They were all very nice. And John knew a lot of people from the working world of music around Boston. Will [Willis] Traphagan was a tuba player. I remember he was around from time to time.

I remember I used to go with John to some of his outside work. I remember watching him—he would come and watch ballet dancers before he'd conduct the Boston Ballet and a whole bunch of various things. But he kind of—I was always welcome to go watch whatever it was he was doing. He was very nice to me and kind of encouraged me to write, and I wrote a couple pieces for the commencement. And he took them around—he had a brass choir. I think it was called the Boston Brass or something like that.

And he would play at a lot of [college] commencements, and he'd play my music over and over again. And of course, to be honest, I never asked him for any money. I wouldn't have dared. It was not the point, absolutely not the point.

## 8. MIT Symphony Orchestra (01:02:57)

FL: Wow. I hope at some point to do an interview with you where we can get in more detail about your work with John Corley. Did you play with the MIT Orchestra at all?

WG: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yep. My freshman year was, as it were, David Epstein's [MIT Symphony Orchestra conductor] freshman year. I remember the fall of '65 a bunch of freshmen were invited over to the Delt house. I think it was down Mem [Memorial] Drive toward Burton House. It was this sort of fancy fraternity house. And we were introduced to David Epstein, the new Professor of Music. And Klaus [Lipmann, MIT's first Professor of Music] gave this distinguished introduction of David Epstein.

And then he got up to speak. And out comes this guy with a kind of rich, New York, Brooklyn, accent. Well, great—I can't imitate him, but he didn't sound elitist at all. He sounded like a very interesting guy, and I got to play in the orchestra. I would have to say—and this is not controversial, but it's just a fact of the MIT life—there were a number of people, I learned later, that were upset that John Corley was let go as the orchestra conductor.

So David Epstein's first year was an orchestra practically made up of freshman. There were people who did not—who boycotted the orchestra. It was not that they had anything against David Epstein. They were upset that John Corley was let go. That's the truth. It's an unpleasant truth. And I'm not aware enough of what the goings on with the orchestra were or the issues, but it was very touchy.

But anyway, at the time, I played in the orchestra. I think I started out playing French horn, eventually played percussion. I may have played some piano parts now and then. I remember I played timpani. The orchestra went to Carnegie Hall. John Butrick [pianist, MIT professor] played the *Emperor Concerto* [Piano Concerto No. 5], by [Beethoven] and I played timpani, which has a duet with the piano at the end. And I also played "l'Histoire [du soldat," by Stravinsky], percussion, under David Epstein. I kind of recruited him.

And I remember once, speaking of players—we needed a bass player. We really didn't have a bass player to do "l'Histoire." And I found this young guy at New England Conservatory to come play bass for us. And that young guy is Lawrence Wolfe—Larry Wolfe—who's now the assistant principal bass of the Boston Symphony and principal bass of the Boston Pops. So around 1969, this shy, unassuming guy who played his ass off. Anyway, interesting story.

FL: Wow. Wow. Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to interview David Epstein. I had an interview scheduled with him, but it was the week before he died that he called me and told me that he was in the hospital.

WG: You might try talking to his widow, Anne [Epstein]. Maybe she might shed some light.

FL: So I certainly want to be interviewing people who played under him. And I don't have MIT Orchestra questions prepared. But let me just throw out a general question. You've talked about some of the repertoire that you did with him. Talk about him as a conductor.

WG: About who?

FL: David Epstein.

WG: Well, I don't know. I will be blunt and say John Corley was a little more fun. And David Epstein may have been a little more demanding. That's to generalize. Having said that, David was—set a very high standard for the MIT Orchestra and took great pride in getting the orchestra to play at a very high level.

It was very serious, and the tone was a little different. Some of us, I think, felt maybe we were a little spoiled by not quite having as much fun as at some of the other groups. And I don't fault David for that. I'm just drawing a distinction. And also, I didn't realize it consciously, but poor David Epstein had this burden of—he had three classes of students that hated his orchestra. It was—it's tough going.

I mean, it happens in the world of academia. People take over for a beloved person, and there's resentment. And I mean, he never talked about it to me, never talked about it—he alluded to it with some other people. So I wouldn't begrudge him if he felt a little bit out of sorts about some of the mood of MIT. It took, of course—in years things smoothed out, as they do.

But I remember he took the orchestra very seriously. And he would kind of boast a little—over boast. He said, we can do things the Boston Symphony can't, because we have time to go into depth in rehearsal. And I sort of thought—I don't know—I think he was saying it to kind of make everybody feel really excited about the orchestra. But it was sometimes a little over the top.

But having said that, he did great repertoire—great repertoire. We did Schoenberg *Music for an Imaginary Film Scene*; we did Roberto Gerhard, *Dances from Don Quixote*; we did a piece called *Vent-ures* by David Epstein. I think it's V-E-N-T dash U-R-E-S, a play on the word "winds." it was a piece for winds written for the Eastman School [of Music].

Charles Ives's Third Symphony in my freshman year; Walter Piston, one of the suites. And David Epstein turned out a lot of recordings. I think they were after my time. Incredible amount of recordings for, was it the Desto label or something—I forget the label—that are still around as some of them may have become CDs.

FL: Yeah, some of them have been reissued.

WG: Walter Piston, *Incredible Flutist*; Aaron Copland *Dance Symphony*. I mean, I can't remember them all. But he really made the orchestra a very active and vital part of music making in the world at large. People knew about it in Boston and through the recordings, you know, people got to hear the MIT Orchestra play important repertoire that had been neglected by other companies, which is a great thing to do.

It's the sort of thing Gerry Schwarz—Gerard Schwarz—does with the Seattle Symphony, recording all these neglected American works. It's a terrific idea. The world does not need more Beethoven symphony recordings, God knows. Not really. Not even with Roger Norrington around.

Trying to remember more about David Epstein. Yeah, he did *l'Histoire*. We had a great time. And he was a wonderful teacher of theory. And he did relate it in

some way to his thinking about conducting, particularly in relationship to tempos and motive—motivic unity within music and tempo relationships within music. The two books he wrote, the articles. And so that was very, very interesting, his form and analysis class.

I also remember I did a—I sent in a small submission to the Conductors Guild. They printed articles, tributes after he passed away. And I remember the day after Martin Luther King [Jr.] died, whatever the class was after Martin Luther King died, David Epstein took that class, and he talked about Martin Luther King. He didn't talk about whatever was assigned that day. It was just too important to talk about Martin Luther King and what this meant.

And I'll never forget it. I mean, I've said it in other venues. And I still remember other MIT classes, some professor, Arthur Evans, EE [Electrical Engineering], and we went to our class on computer science in the PAL language or whatever the hell we were doing. And it was just, okay, the next lecture—and I thought, this is a disgrace. David Epstein was a mensch. And a mensch in a community of non-mensches—I mean, for him to have done that, that was one thing he did—and I'm sure it bleeds into how he must have felt about music.

But it just—I'll never forget that—never forget that, that he wanted us to understand the world we're living in. This is not an ivory tower where you just shut out the world and go on to your assignment of the day. And he talked about Martin Luther King that day. And it was great. It was wonderful.

## 9. Conducting MIT Musical Theatre productions (01:11:55)

FL: So you got your start as a conductor and getting some basic conducting skills while at MIT.

WG: More or less. Like a lot of other kids, I got to stand up in front of my high school band or orchestra, but I'm pretty sure I didn't know what I was doing. I may have known the beat patterns, but I didn't know really what I was doing. I got opportunities.

Actually, I came here my freshman year, and I was this wonderful rehearsal pianist. I had a good facility for it from hearing musicals when I was in high school and all. And at that time, there was no Musical Theatre Guild. There was the Gilbert and Sullivan Society. Fall of '65. they did *Yeoman of the Guard*, directed by Steven Gilborn—G-I-L-B-O-R-N, who now is a working actor. He's been in a lot of *The Practice*—I think he's been an attorney on the show *The Practice* on TV, and a bunch of credits.

Anyway, he was the director. Mickey Rainier [name unverified] was the conductor. And everybody thought I was this great rehearsal pianist. And I must have opened my mouth and said, I want to conduct. I want to conduct. And I got to conduct. It was unheard of. The second half of my freshman year, I got to conduct the Gilbert and Sullivan show. It was *Pirates of Penzance*.

That was the good news. The bad news is, nobody wanted to play in my orchestra [laughs]. The orchestra was sort of word of mouth. If they heard the conductor—oh, Mickey Rainier's conducting. We're going to sign—you know, it was all for love. Nobody got paid. But you could get together great amateur orchestras.

I did later, when I became better known and better skilled, but they were almost going to do the show without an orchestra. My little group sounded so bad. I mean, they were breaking my heart. I was breaking their heart. They listened to this orchestra that had been assembled, and I probably wasn't doing too much damage, but I wasn't doing a whole lot of good, either. But I had to beg and beg and beg just to get warm bodies to play.

Years later, I got to do a lot more of it. I think one of the guys who got to play in my orchestra immediately started conducting on his own, a talented, ambitious guy named Steven Weinberg [name unverified]. He was a clarinetist. I think that's his name. He conducted the Gilbert and Sullivan group, and he did a concert with them. Unheard of. He did, like, *Quiet City* [by Copland] years ago in La Sala de Puerto Rico [performance space in the MIT Student Center]. Talented, ambitious guy.

But years later, I got to do more. Somehow, I got back into conducting. I had this disgraceful—like, fall from grace, like Icarus, that goes too far to the sky. And bam, I crashed down. I didn't conduct for a couple years. Then I started doing some shows. And I had wonderful productions that were actually springboards to New York. I did *Company* at MIT in '71. I have a reel-to-reel tape of it somewhere. And Sondheim came and listened to it and remembered my name enough that when I met him in New York, I wasn't a total stranger.

Did *Company* at MIT. Did *Man of La Mancha*. Did *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Did *Charlie Brown* one freshman year for freshman orientation in the Little Theater. Oh gosh, and a lot of conducting. I don't think I—David Epstein almost had me guest conduct the orchestra once, but it would have been a [Camille] Saint-Saens cello concerto, and I think he was worried that—he wanted to serve the soloist well, and it wouldn't be fair to have a kind of starting-out soloist and a starting-out conductor wouldn't be fair. So he did the piece himself. I think he had me do a sectional once of Mahler Five.

But I did a fair number of things for the band, conducting-wise. John let me do some conducting, and we split a lot of conducting one or two years when he wasn't feeling well on tour. He was very nice about letting me do it. I probably did more of it than I should have, because I definitely didn't give people the experience that they would have had with John up on the podium. I mean, I was competent, but John was special. I wasn't special. [laughs]

## 10. Concluding thoughts about MIT (01:15:53)

FL: Wow. Unfortunately, we're soon running out of time. I want to give you a chance to just give a parting shot about your time at MIT and just any thoughts, stuff that we

might not have covered in just in a couple minutes. And I have somebody else coming for an interview at three.

WG: Well, as I said before—not to dwell on the negative—but MIT was a downer for me my freshman year, my freshman first couple weeks. And music was my salvation. I remember the walk across Mass. Ave. to Kresge Auditorium or the Student Center where rehearsals—I would spend usually at 5:00 in the afternoon, a rehearsal. There'd be a 5:00 to 6:30 rehearsal, then a little bit of dinner. Then there'd be a 7:30 to 10:00 rehearsal of the Musical Theatre Guild or something.

And I started writing the Tech Show. I actually stopped going to a lot of classes after three terms. Second half of my sophomore year, I stopped going to a lot of classes. I did well in the school, but amazingly enough, I didn't go to the classes. Just learned the stuff out of books.

I immersed myself in music. It was a great joy, and it kept me sane here. I—if somehow somebody said, there's no more music at MIT, I think, ultimately, I would have transferred out. I just couldn't take it here anymore. I didn't like the atmosphere. There were too many nerds here for my tastes. I mean, I was probably in danger of becoming a nerd. I felt the place should have been more of a place of growth as a human being.

I still remember this pathetic sight of going up to the fifth floor of the Student Center, which was a library with little study carrels. And people would have fallen asleep on top of their problem sets at 2:00 in the morning. And maybe it was well and good. I mean, people got a good education out of MIT, but this is not preparation for becoming a more—a functioning adult and a more humane, humanistic adult. I missed any humanistic element of MIT except for music.

And I got to flex my wings, and I was, if you will, a big fish in a small pond. I remember going down to Harvard. Every dorm there—every house had their own orchestra. It was scary. Like, every other student at Harvard was a musician. MIT, it wasn't quite that broad a base. So anybody that wanted to do music got to do it. I was very grateful for that opportunity. I would have gotten lost at a bigger school with a lot more competition.

So the MIT music experience was a lot of fun. Apart from that, I loved linguistics. The linguistics department at MIT was wonderful. And some special courses—David Epstein's course [Ed. Note: David Epstein offered seminars in advanced musical topics]—but it's few and far between, except for the linguistics department. They were a whole lot of fun, bunch of crazy left-wingers. God forbid if you were a Republican in the linguistics department. So that's it.

FL: Did you study with [Samuel] Jay Keyser [trombonist and MIT Professor of Linguistics]?

WG: No, never studied with him. Didn't really know him.

FL: Well, we've just touched the tip of an iceberg with you, and I would like to, at some time, have you come back, if you're at MIT or in the area, to talk about more of your work with the Tech Shows. And there's so much. And then, of course, your work as a



conductor in New York, and there's so much to talk about. I wish we hadn't run out of time here. But I want to thank you very much for your generosity, and—

WG: I hope I didn't get off topic too much.

FL: This was really, really good, I assure you. So thank you.

WG: My pleasure. My pleasure.

[End of Interview]