

Music at MIT Oral History Project

Adrian Childs

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

September 13, 2000

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Lewis Music Library**

Transcribed by MIT Academic Media Services and 3Play Media.
Cambridge, MA.

Transcript Proof Reader: Lois Beattie, Jennifer Peterson
Transcript Editor: Forrest Larson

©2011 Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Lewis Music Library, Cambridge, MA

Table of Contents

1. Current work and post-MIT education	1
<i>Theory and Composition appointment at the School of Music of the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign—graduate studies in composition at the University of Chicago—composition—Shulamit Ran—John Eaton—Marta Ptaszynska—Andrew Imbrie—music for master’s and PhD theses—music theory and mathematics—studies with Richard Cohn</i>	
2. Early musical education and career plans	3
<i>Piano study with mother—playing in high school ensembles—composing for high school band—H.S. Band Director Doug Terhune—studying mathematics and music at MIT</i>	
3. Musical experiences at MIT	4
<i>MIT Concert Band—John Corley—composing and conducting for MIT Concert Band—Corley’s commitment to original repertoire—John Harbison—Peter Child—performance environment at MIT—MIT Chamber Music Society trio with Dianne Ahmann and Jin Choi—MIT Concert Choir: Mendelssohn’s Elijah—MIT Chamber Orchestra—Jonathan Pasternack—The Premier Orchestra—Alan Pierson—MIT Musical Theater Guild—MIT Shakespeare Ensemble</i>	
4. John Corley, John Harbison, and Peter Child	12
<i>John Corley’s interest in twentieth century concert band repertoire—Peter Eloranta Fellowship—A. Childs: Mass, premiered by MIT Concert Band—A. Childs: Concertino for Piano, Winds, and Percussion for MIT Brass Ensemble—conducting at MIT—John Corley as conductor—tonal composition studies with Peter Child—Advanced Composition Seminar with John Harbison—Harbison’s ability to develop compositional craft and voice—Time Into Gold commission—role of arts and humanities at MIT</i>	

Contributors

Adrian Childs (b. 1971) received bachelor's degrees in music and mathematics from MIT in 1994. At MIT he was active in many performing groups, including the MIT Concert Band, for whom he wrote the commissioned piece *Time Into Gold* (1999), conducted by John Corley. And he studied composition with Peter Child and John Harbison. Since 2001 he has been on the faculty of the School of Music at the University of Georgia, where he teaches composition and theory. His compositions include works for orchestra, piano, as well as vocal and chamber music, have been performed widely throughout the country. As a music theorist, his research has focused on mathematical modeling, the dissolution of tonality.

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.

Telephone interview conducted by Forrest Larson on September 13, 2000, in the MIT Lewis Music Library.

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 work and post-MIT education

FORREST LARSON: This is an oral history interview with Adrian Childs. I'm Forrest Larson and Adrian is a graduate of the class of 1994. And, Adrian, I want to thank you very, very much for agreeing to do this.

ADRIAN CHILDS: Oh, sure. It's my pleasure.

LARSON: So what I wanted to start with is talking about some of the stuff you're currently doing. And then, we'll get back to your MIT experience. Can you just briefly talk about what you're currently doing employment-wise and music-wise?

CHILDS: Sure. I'm currently working, during this school year, the academic year 2000 to 2001. I have a visiting one-year appointment to the faculty of the School of Music of the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. I am teaching theory. My appointment is to the Theory and Composition Section, although my teaching duties will all focus on theory, undergraduate theory and ear training, counterpoint. And in the spring I get to teach a course of my own design, which is on mathematical models in music theory.

LARSON: Wow, that sounds great! That's a nice melding of your two degrees here at MIT.

CHILDS: Yes.

LARSON: What are you doing composition-wise there at the school?

CHILDS: At the school, formally I don't have any involvement in composition other than the fact that I am a composer. I've been participating in the composition forum. And a lot of the graduate students that I'm working with, including my TAs and just sort of people who are a part of the community, are also composers.

Outside of school, I am trying to continue to make time for composition. It's a challenge. Early in a teaching career at this level I have to spend a lot of time in course preparation and that—that gobbles up a lot of my free time. So I haven't been composing as much as I might like to be. But that's, uh—I'm trying to do as much as I can.

LARSON: Do you think there're any performance opportunities or compositional opportunities at the school, even outside of your official duties as a theory professor?

CHILDS: Yeah. Yeah, I think there are. There's a concert series of new music that's done at the U of I each year in the spring, usually in March. And I'll have an opportunity to maybe have a piece programmed on that.

LARSON: That's fantastic. Now, digressing a little bit, talk about your graduate studies at the University of Chicago—who you studied with, and I'm going to leave that question kind of open to you. But talk about that experience.

CHILDS: Okay. Well, I went to the University of Chicago directly after graduation from MIT. So I entered in the fall of 1994. And what I was entering was a combined MA and PhD program that was in music composition. So I spent the first two years in fairly heavy coursework. The program at the University of Chicago is very

academically strong and very academically oriented. It was one of the reasons why I wanted to go there. I wanted that strong academic background.

After those first two years, then I took my comprehensive exams that sort of advanced me from the master's program into the doctoral program. The coursework eased off, and I was able to focus more on my own creative work. And also research work.

Composition-wise, I got to study with quite a number of people. My primary teacher and my advisor for my composition work was Shulamit Ran [Andrew MacLeish Distinguished Service Professor of Music, composer], who's been at the University of Chicago for a very long time. She joined the faculty in the early '70s, 1973 I think.

I also worked with the other full-time members of the faculty, John Eaton [Professor Emeritus, composer] and Marta Ptaszynska [Helen B. and Frank L. Sulzberger Professor of Music and the Humanities, composer]. And I also had an opportunity to study with Andrew Imbrie [composer], who was a visiting member of the faculty in a year when Shulamit Ran was on leave. So those are the four people that I worked with primarily for composition.

I had a fair number of performances. The University of Chicago has a resident ensemble that gives one concert annually of music by graduate students in composition. I had two different pieces programmed on that. They were my master's thesis piece, which was a—a chamber piece, a smaller chamber piece for piano, clarinet, and bassoon. And then I had my doctoral dissertation, which was a much larger song cycle for soprano and a sort of mixed ensemble of seven players, also programmed on that series.

And I got to perform quite a bit. There is an active new music ensemble that performs twentieth century music both by students and also by more established composers. And I also had opportunities to have my own pieces performed by that group as well.

LARSON: Now when you were performing with that group, what instruments were you playing?

CHILDS: Pretty much just piano. Other things that I had played at MIT more or less went by the wayside. I don't own my own bassoon, so that made that fairly challenging. And I haven't really done much celloing, although I do have a cello. But I focused mostly on piano.

I also did some conducting with that group, trying to keep those skills up. I did have an opportunity to study conducting as a part of my graduate study.

LARSON: Now also at the University of Chicago you did some work in music theory. Can you talk a little bit about that?

CHILDS: Sure. As a part of the doctoral program in composition, I had to declare a minor field within the academic portions of the music program. And I chose theory. Most of the work that I did was very mathematical in nature, drawing on my math background from MIT and affinities between music and math that have always seemed very

strong to me. My advisor for my theory work was Richard Cohn [later Battell Professor of Music Theory at Yale University], who himself does a fair amount of work in the more mathematically-oriented music theory.

The relationship that we had was actually very interesting working on this material because he came to it as someone who was trained mostly as a musician and learned the math so that he could work on it. Whereas, I had learned the math to begin with and sort of always done it together with the music. And so the relationship between the math and the music material for each of us was quite different. And that played off of—we were able to play off of each other well as we worked on these things because our approaches and backgrounds did have that distinction.

LARSON: That's such an interesting topic and I'm hoping to get a chance to interview you in more depth. And that's a subject that I'd like to get into.

CHILDS: Sure.

LARSON: But for the purposes of this interview, I guess we need to move on.

CHILDS: Okay.

2. Early musical education and career plans

LARSON: Now, going way, way back, talk about your education, your musical education before coming to MIT.

CHILDS: Ooh, okay, before coming to MIT. A lot of that would be centered mostly in performance. I started playing the piano when I was three. My mother was a piano teacher. And, essentially, at the time she decided she wanted to start teaching, she chose me over my brother, who was only about four months old at the time. I won by virtue of being older. And so I studied with her for several years. And also with some other people in the community.

And as I continued through school, as different ensembles came into existence, I participated in them. I sang in choirs and I played in the school bands and orchestras, picking up additional instruments along the way as things saw fit. I also played in jazz ensembles, some on piano in high school.

LARSON: Did you do any composition before MIT?

CHILDS: I did. Although nothing in a very formal basis. I didn't really ever study composition with anyone. I just sort of did things on my own. I wrote quite a bit for the piano. It was easy to play my own music. And I also wrote several band compositions that one of the high school band directors was willing to program, which was a really tremendous resource.

I have learned throughout my education that one of the most important parts of studying composition and growing as a composer is being able to hear your own music. And when you want to work with large ensembles, those resources can be really hard to come by. I feel very fortunate that the high school director was willing

to do that. And then when I came to MIT, I found similar support from John Corley in the MIT Concert Band as well.

LARSON: So what was the name of the high school band director that you had?

CHILDS: Sure, his name was Doug Terhune.

LARSON: Okay. I want to talk about your career plans before you came to MIT. Were you thinking of a dual major in mathematics and music before you came? Or—

CHILDS: Not directly or formally. And I went to MIT with the intention of majoring in mathematics, with the intention of being a mathematician. But also knowing that there was a strong music program and that there was a lot going on there musically. I always had the intention of being very active in music, and certainly taking a fair number of courses. I don't know if early on I really knew that I wanted to do the double degree in those terms, even though by the time I sat down and looked at all the classes I wanted to take, I realized I was majoring in music anyway. [laughs]

LARSON: [laughs] When you got to the point that you realized you wanted to major in music, was it easier for you to decide to stay at MIT as opposed to going to a more traditional music school?

CHILDS: Hm. You know, I don't know that leaving MIT is something that ever occurred to me. I really enjoyed the time that I spent at MIT, and I think even while I was there I was aware of the fact that it was really, in many respects, a very ideal environment for me, both in terms of the resources and also in terms of just the atmosphere and the people, the sorts of things people were interested in doing. Particularly the sorts of things that people were interested in doing in the realm of music. And really, in other things that I was interested in as well.

The notion of leaving didn't really—didn't occur to me. Even as—and certainly there was a point of transformation there where I realized that I probably wasn't going to continue career-wise with mathematics. And that, in fact, my emphasis was going to change to music.

3. Musical experiences at MIT

LARSON: Can you talk about some of the formative musical experiences at MIT? I have some more specific questions, but I want to leave this question open at first here.

CHILDS: Okay. Well, as I mentioned before, certainly my participation in the [MIT] Concert Band would have to rank fairly high. Not only because it was a venue for me to work on my own materials and not only going to grow as a performer by continuing to play, but John Corley [Conductor of the MIT Concert Band, 1949-1999] was willing to program my pieces, and he also gave me opportunities to conduct. So I was able to really work on those skills. But also because the ensemble only played twentieth century music. And so that really helped me to grow a lot, just in terms of being aware of what was out there in the world of music from the last hundred years or so. And getting into forming opinions about that music, understanding some stylistic

norms and tendencies, and just sort of growing as a person who needed to know a lot about new music.

I would also say very high on the list are interactions with the faculty. Because the community of music majors at MIT is very small, I think as majors we have the luxury of really working closely and significantly with really world-class faculty. In composition, I would certainly single out John Harbison [Institute Professor of Music, composer]. The year that I got to work with him in the advanced seminar was very formative.

And also, Peter Child [Professor of Music, composer]. I didn't work as much with him on, say, composition within my own voice, but I did take the full year of tonal composition with him, which helped me to grow tremendously just in terms of my command of basic material and the ways that I thought about form, and how things went together, even though I don't write in a tonal idiom. So that the music was, to a certain extent, foreign to what I was doing. That was also a very formative experience.

Performing in general, I think also really has to be highlighted. The performance community at MIT is very enriching, and I think a lot of that is owed to the fact that the people who are playing aren't music majors. They aren't worried about whether or not how they do on this next concert is going to cost them their chance at Juilliard, or cost them a chance at a career, or an important audition, or anything like that. Music is a venue for an outlet. It's something other than what they're spending the majority of their time on. And that makes the musical community a little looser, but also just more enjoyable.

LARSON: Would you say that, in some ways, it's more focused because they're doing it because of the music and not because it's a requirement?

CHILDS: Um, yeah. Just that the direction of the energy is different. They're doing it solely out of sheer enjoyment of the music itself, and of the act and art of music making. There isn't this—there was never this sense of worry of having to have things done a certain way because their careers were going to depend on it. There really wasn't anything on the line other than the enjoyment of the group.

I'd also add that the atmosphere for performing music is very similar at the University of Chicago, which was another reason why I gravitated toward that program.

LARSON: Oh, that's very interesting. I mean, I have found—and maybe you can confirm this too—the performance atmosphere here, it has that purpose for the music. And yet, with that, there's a professionalism, even if it's done on a so-called amateur basis. And I'm really, really struck by that.

CHILDS: Yeah. Yeah. And I wouldn't mean to imply at all that players are somehow more careless or less involved because something isn't on the line. The quality of the work is very strong. I like that terminology you used, actually—a professionalism that's amateur.

LARSON: Also, you were involved with the musical community at MIT in so, so many ways. There were other groups that you played with. Can you talk about some of

those—the MIT Concert Choir, the MIT Chamber Music Society, and the MIT Symphony [Orchestra], and various other groups?

CHILDS: Sure. Out of all of those, beyond the band—I was in band for four years—I was also in Chamber Music Society for four years. And actually, for a substantial amount of that, I played with a trio that remained fairly consistent. It was myself on piano, Dianne Ahmann [MIT PhD 1996] on clarinet, and Jin Choi [MIT class of 1994] on violin. And most of the time we worked with John Harbison as our coach. And actually, I'd have to list that as a formative experience too, going back to your previous question.

Getting to work with that same small group of people—I'm trying to think how long. I want to say we spent five semesters together. We focused on twentieth century repertory, which was very exciting for me. And actually, toward the end, at about the time I was going to graduate, Jin Choi was also graduating. He was also in the class of '94. We gave a full recital as just a part of being that trio.

Other ensembles—let's see. I did sing with the [MIT] Concert Choir for a semester. We did [Felix] Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. And I was in the Symphony for my freshman year. And also, came back at least once that I can remember, maybe twice, and played orchestral piano when there were parts that called for—pieces that were programmed that called for the piano.

I played in the [MIT] Chamber Orchestra a little bit, at the time that it was directed by Jonathan Pasternack [MIT class of 1990] and just organized as a student ensemble. I don't actually know what its status is now. And I'm trying to think, other student groups.

The Premier Orchestra, which was Alan Pierson's [MIT class of 1996] group. I was quite active with, worked with Alan with its organization and programming. And I did things with theater as well, played for [MIT] Musical Theater Guild sometimes. And actually, another formative experience. My memory is a little slow tonight.

Spent the entirety of my senior year working with the [MIT] Shakespeare Ensemble, and writing incidental music for their projects. That was a—that was a particularly unique experience. It was the kind of thing that I think most people at that point in their careers don't have the opportunity to do. And I'm thankful for that experience. It was a very different way of relating to music. And it's just sort of an unusual circumstance in that here I was coming into an existing close-knit group that was focused not on music, but actually on theater. And trying to work with them within a musical realm or bounds was—it just forced me to see things in a very different way. And that was a powerful experience.

LARSON: Was there any other formative experiences that come to mind as we progress?

CHILDS: Others will probably come up.

LARSON: Yeah.

CHILDS: I hope I've hit on the major.

4. John Corley, John Harbison, and Peter Child

LARSON: Okay. I want to talk more about your work with John Corley, the importance of the MIT Concert Band, and with John Corley and your musical development. If you want to just expand more in general about that, then we can get to more specific questions.

CHILDS: Okay. Let's see, I'm trying to think of details, even to sort of describe how that relationship really began. I had played in band in high school and knew that that was something I was interested in continuing to do, and was particularly interested in the [MIT] Concert Band when I learned that it only played twentieth century music.

I would say that the relationship with the band and with John Corley probably turned into something, say, more than ordinary. When I proposed, in my sophomore year—I wrote a proposal for a Peter Eloranta Fellowship. And that was a successful proposal in which I proposed to do some research into early music, something that I had become very interested in through the music history sequence, and have as an outlet or response to that research, an original composition that I would write for the band.

And when I went to John with that proposal, he was very supportive, and said that he would definitely be willing to have the band play that piece. I actually conducted it. It was actually programmed twice. We did it as a premiere after the project was successful, and then John chose it as a part of the repertory for our tour in January of 1994 when we went to Maine.

LARSON: Was this the *Mass*?

CHILDS: Yeah, that was the *Mass*. And, and that really sort of got the ball rolling. Once that had started, I had also become very active in the organizational structure of the band. I was elected the band president at the end of my sophomore year. And I served in that capacity for two years. So that I also got some experience just from the administrative end and the organizational end, which was also very valuable. And I continued working then. I conducted some pieces that were not my own. And also wrote another piece for the band in my senior year that actually included a piano solo part that I played myself.

LARSON: That was the *Concertino* —?

CHILDS: That was the *Concertino*, yeah.

LARSON:—*for Piano, Winds, and Percussion*.

CHILDS: Exactly. John [Corley] also asked me, because he directed—he directs the [MIT] Brass Ensemble that plays for commencement, he asked if I wanted to write a piece that would be used in my own commencement. I was honored to do that.

LARSON: Was John helpful for—well, he was obviously helpful. But your conducting experience with the MIT Concert Band, was that some of your first conducting experience? And was John particularly influential that way?

CHILDS: It was. Yeah, I would say it was pretty much my first conducting experience. Certainly my first extended conducting experiences.

I don't know that I would say John was especially influential. The biggest thing was that he was willing to let me sort of learn on my own what would succeed and what wouldn't. And we would talk about certain specific things if he had specific suggestions. But mostly, I think he understood that it was an early and formative experience, and that I would learn the most just by doing.

LARSON: That's certainly the MIT way and such a powerful way. Can you talk about John Corley as a conductor himself, as you're playing under him? And what—not only what it's like, but musically, what that relationship was with him as a member of the band?

CHILDS: Sure. Well, one thing that I would say upfront is that over the course of the times that I was with the band, John was continually in failing health. And that certainly manifested itself. There were things that I know he probably would have done more effectively if he had been in better health.

The thing that I remember most is John shared—he had a tremendous passion for the music that he programmed. He believed strongly in new music. And he had a tremendous capacity for understanding the music and for communicating that understanding.

When you study conducting technique, you're told that a good conductor should be able to communicate just gesturally. I think John was not as able to do that, and I suspect part of it was simply complications of age and/or health. But he was always able to communicate that understanding verbally, which was certainly more than sufficient. That's what I remember most. And I think was probably the most important part of his relationship with the band, is just the fact that he was so effective in communicating why he liked and chose the pieces that he chose. And what their particular interests or features were in helping us as an ensemble to shape the pieces in a musical way, and perform them in a convincing fashion.

LARSON: Do you have any comments about his real commitment to contemporary music, and how that had an effect on the other musicians in the band who may have come in expecting to play more traditional concert band repertoire that would have also been orchestral transcriptions?

CHILDS: I don't know how much I can say about that because I actually was someone who went to the band knowing that it would play twentieth century music. And so that sort of formed part of my expectation.

From my own previous experiences, I was certainly grateful not to be playing transcriptions. I will admit, I've developed a fairly strong prejudice against music in transcription. In part just because I've come to realize—maybe this is a composer-oriented prejudice—that the act of transcription is really almost a sort of decomposition. Too many things that are an inherent part of how the composer originally conceived of the work have to be lost in that process.

Certainly, there are ways that transcriptions can be done well. But I think probably the biggest part of the prejudice is that usually they're not done so well.

I certainly know that there were people who came to the band not having had any prior experience with new music, who may have initially been put off by the repertory. But certainly, you know, it was easy for people to leave the ensemble if they didn't enjoy playing the material. I think in part because—in a large part, I think, because John was very good at communicating his love for the music, people came to enjoy the repertory, even if it was something new or forbidding to them.

LARSON: John was just incredible that way. So moving on, as you mentioned earlier, you studied with John Harbison and Peter Child. Do you want to talk a little bit more about what you learned in your studies with them as a composer?

CHILDS: Okay. As I said briefly in my response before, a lot of that is actually based on what it was I was studying with them. The year that I worked with Peter Child was through the tonal composition classes. And I would say that that was really the first time in which, as a composer, I was actively thinking about the act of compositional craft. Thinking hard about how a piece gets put together, what materials are involved, how they're manipulated, how they can be manipulated effectively as opposed to not effectively.

Peter has a tremendous ear for that. And even though we were working in a somewhat more limited medium by only doing tonal composition, he was able to really make me work at those things, and make me think about how improvements could be made along those lines, especially in my composition. And I still find myself relying on the sorts of things—just the basic thought processes that were involved there.

LARSON: Since your basic instincts as a composer are non-tonal, how was that spending a year writing tonal music for you?

CHILDS: To a certain extent, it was a little frustrating. But at the same time, the tonal medium really just was—it was another layer of challenge. Certainly, from my own performance background I had plenty of experience with tonal music. And actually, one of the things I would say I really gleaned from that class was an added respect for particular composers. I might single out one of the projects we did in that class was to write a keyboard invention in the style of Bach. And if you analyze the keyboard inventions, they seem to be very simple. They generally only have one theme. And it tends to be imitated more or less in the same way. And the inventions tend to go through the same sorts of key patterns.

From an analytical standpoint, the inventions seem compositionally very simple. To this day, that is still the hardest thing I've ever had to do as a composer, was to try to write that invention. It was very challenging. And I, I earned a tremendous amount of respect for Bach through that.

LARSON: And then, talking about John Harbison, what are some of the things you worked on with him?

CHILDS: Sure. The year that I studied composition with John, that was in my senior year. And that was the Advanced Composition Seminar. By that point, I already had a fairly close relationship with him just from the fact that he had frequently been my

coach for [MIT] Chamber Music Society. And I think it was useful to have established a relationship already.

The advanced seminar was—it was really a very enjoyable experience. There were seven of us in the class, which I think is fairly large. I don't think usually there are that many. And John was able to get us really good performances. And if I were to single out one thing that was particularly good and useful about that class in retrospect, it was the fact that, once we were done with the pieces we were working on, we were able to hear them performed very well. And you need that to happen as a part of the educational experience as a composer. Because then you really learn what it is that you wrote that worked. What it is that you worked that didn't.

And that sense of not working could be on many different levels. It might be a musical problem that you didn't realize from just, you know, sitting at the piano and playing a reduced version of your composition. Or it could have been a technical problem with the instruments. And that was something that we frequently talked about. But it's also something that you kind of just—you have to see it happen so that you can really make those connections.

John is very good at helping people to realize their own compositional voices. There are a lot of composition teachers who are not good at that, where they expect that because you are studying with them, you want to write music that sounds like their music does. And that's not something that John ever did.

The seven of us in the class were writing in really a very wide diversity of styles. And he was always able to get inside that style, to think to a certain extent about the piece in similar ways to how we were thinking. And then, at the same time, to step outside and make his own insights and guide us in directions that were musically more fruitful.

LARSON: So, moving on so we don't run out of time here.

CHILDS: Sure.

LARSON: Who were some of the other professors and instructors that were important to you at MIT? And this can include non-music people as well.

CHILDS: That's a difficult question. Particularly tricky to answer because you fear for leaving someone out.

LARSON: Yeah. I'm sure they'll forgive you. [laughs]

CHILDS: [laughs] Let's see.

LARSON: We can come back to that if you'd like. I have some more—

CHILDS: Why don't we come back to that?

LARSON: Okay, sure.

CHILDS: That's tricky to answer.

LARSON: That's a tough question.

CHILDS: Yeah, it is.

LARSON: So I can appreciate your taking a deep breath and saying, hm. Were there aspects of the unique MIT environment that helped you as a musician and composer that you might not have had at a traditional music school?

CHILDS: I definitely think there's one key aspect, which we've touched on a little bit, but I can certainly expand on, and that's the fact that just the atmosphere for music is fundamentally different. And certainly getting an even better exposure to this now that I am teaching at a very traditional music school. And actually, before coming here to the University of Illinois, I also taught for a semester at the University of Wisconsin, also a very traditional music school.

And the fact that the students that I have now are planning careers in music, they're intending careers in music, and they know that there are a lot of other people out there who essentially do the same things that they do, and probably do them about as well if not better as they do, it may—it creates this...competitive isn't quite the right word, but it's maybe the best I'm going to come up with. It creates an atmosphere in which the other people who are also making music or working in music around you are not so much your peers or colleagues as your adversaries. And I think that's a real problem with the ways in which we educate musicians. And we had none of that at MIT.

The MIT environment is about collaboration. And it's about learning by doing. And I really felt—felt then and feel now in retrospect that that was an incredibly nurturing sort of place to be in at that stage of my music career.

LARSON: So, moving on, that's—that's really opening up all kinds of other questions that I want to get to in a future interview. Your piece *Time Into Gold* was commissioned by the MIT Concert Band for the 50th anniversary concert on May 1st, 1999. And that was also John Corley's last performance with that group. And the piece will be performed again for the 50th anniversary of the MIT School of Humanities this coming October 6th. Can you talk about the inspiration and genesis of this piece, or anything else you'd like to say about that?

CHILDS: Well, let's see. There was a sort of tremendous amount just of personal energy invested in the piece because the commission was coming for a very special occasion for the Concert Band, which I've already talked about a lot, which is obviously a very important part of my MIT experience. And also, on the occasion of John's retirement.

There were some things that I did in the piece as I was working on it that were sort of my own personal little tributes, kind of insider composer things. I don't know how important it is to know or be aware of those things for—for an appreciation of the piece. Certainly while I was working on it I did have a sense of the piece wanting to have sort of an atmosphere of—on the one hand, a sense of celebration, and on the other hand, a sort of reflective or retrospective tone that was appropriate for the occasion of a retirement.

The title of the piece—this was actually sort of somewhat unusual. Oftentimes I will know the title of a piece well before it's finished. And I finished this piece and still wasn't entirely sure what I was going to call it. And actually spent quite a while—my husband, Craig, and I sort of talked out a whole bunch of other options.

In the end, I settled on *Time Into Gold*. Time, besides having its obvious connotations associated with a retirement and with a 50th anniversary, also was something that I was thinking about actively in the piece—a sense of temporal process, and particularly proportion. There are some materials that recur at various points, and that's something I've always been interested in as a composer, is how we perceive sort of rehearing things that have happened before. And what effect that can have on the reception of a piece.

And gold in the title is really just sort of golden anniversary. I also kind of liked the idea of titles that feel a little sort of off-kilter philosophically, or maybe sort of feel like they might be mixing their metaphors. So the idea of juxtaposing time with gold in that way also appealed.

LARSON: Wow, that's great! To tie this interview up, do you have any final thoughts about the broad question—this is an unfair question, but I'll try anyway.

CHILDS: Okay.

LARSON: Just the thoughts or feelings about arts and humanities at MIT, and what that means here, and how it might be different—we talked about it to some degree, how it's different from other schools. But can you just talk about, in a broad sense, on arts and humanities at MIT and any thoughts you might have?

CHILDS: Sure. I am very gratified by the fact that the—it'd be very easy for the Institute to sort of box off the arts and the humanities and sort of treat them like something that has to be there because somewhere along the way someone decided they were an important part of a well-rounded education. Sort of in the same way that certainly I have students now who think about the one math class they have to take in order to graduate. It's sort of the reverse situation here, they're being very steeped in music and so it's science or engineering that sort of gets boxed off. And while certainly, I think there are people at MIT who may think of the arts and humanities in that kind of boxed-off fashion, but they're definitely in the minority.

For the most part, the MIT community realizes that there are fundamental human relationships between the arts and humanities and things like the sciences and engineering that are more the strength and the core of that community. And I think that that just makes for a very sort of mutually-supportive relationship that I think is very strong. A kind of symbiotic relationship in which both are equally strengthened by the presence of the other in the fact that they're—they're not ignored.

LARSON: Wow, that's a beautiful tribute to the spirit that I also feel very, very much the same way. I'm asked that question quite a bit by people. Well, for now, I want to tie this interview up. Thank you so, so much for your generosity of spirit in this interview.

CHILDS: Oh, sure.

LARSON: You brought so much to music at MIT when you were here. And just talking to you again, it reminds me so much of what you brought to, to MIT.

[End of interview]