

**Music at MIT Oral History Project**

**Stephen Erdely**

*Interviewed*

*by*

**Forrest Larson**

**March 24, 1999**

**Interview no. 1**

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### **Contributors**

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

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

Interview conducted by Forrest Larson on March 24, 1999, in the MIT Lewis Music Library. First of two interviews. Second interview August 4, 1999. Duration of the audio recording is 1:19:27.

### **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. Education and professional background

FORREST LARSON: This is an interview with Professor Stephen Erdely, interviewed by Forrest Larson. It's March 24th, 1999, and we're in the Lewis Music Library. Steve is here today to talk about first, his—his career at MIT, and we'll also touch on his growing up in Hungary and his education there, some of his ethnomusicological work and his performing career, and other things as they arise.

So, I want to get some background as it pertains to your work at MIT, but also just some of your professional background as far as your musical training and education and various things like that. Want to just give us a little overview of that?

STEPHEN ERDELY: I came to MIT, I was engaged in 1973, and the time I have spent here represents, I would say, sort of the fourth phase of my musical career. It was not the first job which I did hold. Having come through Europe making a living in Europe, and then entering the United States in 1949, my—really my first job was as a performing musician with the Cleveland Orchestra, where I stayed till 1966, from 1950, '51 to 1966. And having obtained a second doctorate at Case Western Reserve University, I entered the teaching profession in 1966 at Ohio State University [University of Toledo]. And then after Ohio University, I was engaged to come to start to introduce certain courses at MIT. [Ed. Note: When Toledo University became a state university, it changed its name to University of Toledo. It then received funding from the state of Ohio as part of the state-funded university system, hence Erdely's possible confusion, but it was not actually part of Ohio State University.]

So this sort of represents the fourth, as I said, fourth phase of my career, and many things which happened here at MIT, and my contribution, if I can say that I did any are the results of previous attainments in my own musical profession.

LARSON: So can you tell me just a little bit more about some of your musical training, you know, you know prior to coming here, and your—your first doctorate, and—

ERDELY: Well, my musical training has also developed, unfolded in several stages. I would say that the first stage was I received my first training in my own hometown, which was in Szeged, in the town of Szeged, Hungary, a southern provincial town which at the time I was born and have grown as a young kid has seen some very, very interesting musical developments due to the people who have been at the time cultural leaders of the town. Then after I received my final degree at the high school, I entered the music academy in Budapest and the Franz Liszt University, and that was sort of the higher degree which I earned.

My life then was interrupted during the German invasion [World War II]. In 1944, I have been imprisoned, and after my liberation in Germany close to Munich, I entered again the profession as soon as my health and my strength was regained, and I felt that after the war, I need still a little bit more of a guidance, and I decided to go to a fine violinist at the time, a concertizing violinist, with whom I had a relationship more or less like a tutor would have to his disciple. And he could listen to some of my performances, to some of my radio broadcasts, as well as give private instruction. So I would say this was kind of a post-graduate education.

When I came to the United States and I was engaged to play with George Szell in the Cleveland Orchestra [Szell, conductor 1946-1970], I felt that I would not like to stay in the orchestra forever because conductors come and go, and once you attain a wonderful performance and high class performance with a conductor like George Szell, to start again and learn the repertory with somebody who himself is at time learning that repertory, would be too much, and so I decided I would like to get more a teaching job, but I found over the years, and that did take quite a number of years, that nobody wanted to talk to me unless I have an American degree.

So in 1957, while still a member of the orchestra, I approached Case Western Reserve University and presented my credentials from Europe, and they gave me accreditation of a past master's degree, and they permitted me to take so many courses and if possible, to write a doctoral dissertation. This sounded very good; nevertheless, it took me still five years to complete the requirements toward a PhD. So I would say that this represents, then, the third or fourth stage of my musical education because I got my second doctorate in 1962.

LARSON: And that was in ethnomusicology, right?

ERDELY: Yeah. Well, it was—the dissertation was in ethnomusicology, but at the time, ethnomusicology was a very, very young discipline in the United States. The society was formed in 1956, the way I remember, at a meeting of the American Anthropological Society and as a branch of the American Anthropological Society, and then it started to recruit members who were interested in music and anthropology, mainly—uh—and by 1960 or so, the first meetings started. So when I joined the society in 1960 on the invitation of its president at the time, Alan Merriam, who was an anthropologist himself, we had in our first meeting only about forty members. So it was rather a small but very strongly decided group, and the journal that was formed and the first articles then appeared in the journals and then the society started to grow.

The word "ethnomusicology" was concocted by, I think, Jaap Kunst, a Dutch anthropologist musician and vocalist, whose work was mainly in Javanese music. But by that time, ethnomusicology was in existence in various different forms. In Europe, in Hungary in particular, where we had [Béla] Bartók and [Zoltán] Kodály starting folk music research, we called the field Musical Folklore Studies. And in Berlin, where [Erich M. von] Hornbostel and his disciples have started the field, it was Comparative Musicology. So that was all before the word "ethnomusicology" has been concocted.

So in 1962, then, when I faced the question of what should my dissertation subject be, I had two choices at the time, to do something in my own field, which was violin music and violin literature, or I should do something which was new at the time and nobody really was fully informed what has happened in the field of musical folklore research in Hungary, in particular the contribution Bartók and Kodály made in general to this broad field of oral musical literature. And so I decided that I'm writing my dissertation on these two men and their particular contribution, and that was the way I became what you would call an ethnomusicologist, is the dissertation.

I wrote a book which—the dissertation, which dealt with somewhat different subjects. It basically dealt with ethnic background of the nation and the research,

comparative research, which the two folklorists had been doing, and their particular achievements in various stages of the musical folklore research was at that time of great interest to Indiana University. And before actually my dissertation was accepted at Case Western Reserve University, Indiana University had already decided to publish it.

LARSON: And that was your book *Methods and Principles of Hungarian Ethnomusicology*?  
[Published 1965]

ERDELY:—musicology. Yes.

LARSON: That's quite a book.

ERDELY: Well, I look at it as a little book today. It ends with research up to about World War II, but it has been very useful and I'm very happy to say that even at this last musicological conference in Boston, several people came to me when they saw my name and told me how much they profited from reading that little book and understanding what Hungarian ethnomusicology was all about at the outset of this field, which I see—which I find rather rewarding and I'm happy about that.

LARSON: That's great. Wow. You mentioned that after finishing your PhD at Case Western, you spent some time at Ohio State University. I went to school there. [Correction: Erdely taught at the University of Toledo, a state university of Ohio; Larson attended Ohio State University]

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: I got my musicology degree from there. Tell me a little bit about what you did there briefly, and then we'll get onto some MIT stuff, but I'm curious.

ERDELY: Well, my landing at Ohio State University—I must be very honest and straightforward about this—was, I would say, almost a mistake. I was searching to obtain a job, and my degree in ethnomusicology was something plus, because many universities started to develop at the time oral history programs [ethnomusicology]. And the conductor [Walter] Hendl, who has been the Director of Eastman School of Music at Rochester University, called me and wanted me to open an ethnomusicology department at Eastman School, which it didn't have at the time. It had some library facilities, but it didn't have any money.

And it was in 1966, February, we were on a tour with the Cleveland Orchestra, and so I stepped out for a half-day in Rochester, and I had my interview with the faculty, and everything went very well. And then, I was supposed to give an answer to Szell whether I will stay for next year with the orchestra or not, or I will resign. By that time, I had my PhD for four years, and during those four years, the market to obtain a job was so bad and so difficult that I could not land anywhere. So this was, to me, a wonderful chance, really, to start an ethnomusicology program in the field I was interested in. And I was waiting and waiting for Hendl to give me the answer.

And the answer, unfortunately, never came, but finally, Szell cornered me on the corridor and asked me, “When will you give me an answer?” So I had to— [laughs] I had to make up my mind whether I want to stay with the orchestra or I take

a chance that Eastman School will come through with the answer. And in a week or so I said, “Well, sorry, I have to resign. I have to take this chance. After all, I have my PhD, I should be able to get a position”.

Well, then we went on a tour throughout the country, and it was somewhere in Colorado or further to the west that I received a letter from my wife, which was wet from the tears, that Hendl informed me that their budget for an ethnomusicology position has not been okayed at Eastman School of Music and so the job has fallen [through]. That, of course, meant that between two chairs, I was on the ground. I was, of course, at that point searching to obtain another position and it was very, very difficult. Interest was there, but the money and the position was not there. And finally, toward the end of the summer, Toledo University turned from a city university into a branch of the Ohio State University [Correction: University of Toledo became part of the state university system, funded by the state of Ohio], and they needed people. And they engaged both of us, my wife [Beatrice Erdely] who taught piano there, and me, who was supposed to teach courses.

Well, this was at least a lifesaving situation, and we moved to Toledo, we had a very nice little place, and the faculty seemed to be very pleasant, but sooner or later, I turned—it happened that we entered a political beehive at the university. And the more we did to improve or create new courses and perform and bring in music to the university life, diversities has gotten for us. Their politics was impossible. So I could not move out from the university and finally, I, um, was ready to resign even if I don't have any other position.

And then all of a sudden, some other possibilities opened up, and one, of course, was MIT, which saved me from complete nervous breakdown and professional breakdown. And so that's the way I came, and that was my life, my biblical years of suffering at Ohio University.

LARSON: Oh, that was Ohio and not Ohio State University.

ERDELY: It was Ohio State University, yes. It became Ohio State University because it got its foundations from Ohio State.

LARSON: Yeah. But I didn't know that Toledo University had become part of, um, Ohio State, because it's not anymore.

ERDELY: Well, it's Bowling Green [State University], and Ohio, both were Ohio State Universities. I think they are still. [Ed. Note: As previously noted, University of Toledo is part of the state-funded university system of Ohio, rather than part of Ohio State University.]

LARSON: Well, in Bowling Green, that's Ohio University now.

ERDELY: Well, when I was there, it was Ohio State and it got its funds from the state, and that's the reason—.

LARSON: And there's the University of Toledo now, so it must have separated later on.

ERDELY: I don't know.

## 2. Coming to MIT

LARSON: That's—I didn't know that. That's very interesting. So was MIT looking for an ethnomusicologist when they hired you?

ERDELY: Well, MIT was looking to improve and increase its courses and were looking for people. And, then when I came here, um, they looked at my background, that wasn't at the time ethnomusicology which delighted them at all, but mostly my background as a performer and as a PhD in musicology. Because they had composers on the faculty, but the musicologist was at the time Rufus Hallmark, who did not yet receive his PhD degree, and there was—ethnomusicology was completely unknown to the faculty and its usefulness in that year at MIT. So it was not immediately that I could really persuade the faculty to introduce ethnomusicology courses. It did take some years before they realized that there is some merit in studying the oral aspect of musical traditions.

LARSON: Was there somebody at MIT who particularly recruited you, that asked you to come?

ERDELY: Well, the faculty interviewed me, and it was, to my understanding, it was a general consent that I should be hired. As a matter of fact, it happened very quickly. I came, I think, the 1st or 2nd of July, and by July 4th or 5th, I had the job.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: So it was not—and I talked to everybody. At that time, the people who have been here were John Buttrick, who was the chairman, David Epstein [conductor, MIT Symphony Orchestra] John Harbison [MIT Institute Professor, composer], and Barry Vercoe [head of the MIT Media Lab's Music, Mind and Machine group]. These were, at the time, on professorial ranks.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: Who had been talk to me, and I didn't talk to anybody else. But we were a very small faculty.

LARSON: That's right.

ERDELY: The first faculty meetings had about six people or so present.

LARSON: Wow, wow. Well, the name Klaus Liepmann [first Professor of Music at MIT] resonates a lot, even still with people here. Did you know him at all?

ERDELY: Well, Klaus Liepmann just resigned at the time, and he was called back to teach I think one course. And during that period, we became very friendly and we had lots of talks together, and he taught me a great deal about how he developed, actually, music at MIT from practically nothing.

LARSON: That's an incredible story.

ERDELY: Well, I'm sure you know that story so I don't have to repeat it. He was a pioneer, actually, who introduced into a school of technology the entire subject of music. He felt even in '73 that music was still regarded—it was appreciated as an art, but it was regarded with certain suspicion, that music can become an academic subject as such.

LARSON: In Klaus Liepmann's book [*A Short History of Music at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, 1980, unpublished], he mentions that that was even a problem at other universities, even such as Yale. He had even mentioned that there were problems. It had a particular manifestation at MIT, but he was saying that he found that conflict of music being accepted even at—particularly performing music—at other universities.

ERDELY: Well, this was—indeed, it was generally true of the university situation that music was an art, but its scholarly or academic merits have been little appreciated or little recognized by people who were in some other field, sciences, because they just could not possibly relate any kind of scientific investigation to music. But of course, by that time, when all this opinions were voiced, or politics was voiced, we had already considerable scientific achievements, particularly in bringing oral music and oral history into the overall framework of music history, per se.

But again, here we felt that musicologists who are finally attained some standing and recognition in university jobs, are very strongly objecting to anything which related to the oral history which actually cannot be substantiated with written documentation. It has to be substantiated through recordings and whatnot.

LARSON: Right. Can you tell me a little bit about the musical climate when you came to MIT? What kind of concerts there were, and just the general feeling for what music was going on here?

ERDELY: Well, I must say that the reception and the academic standard at MIT was so much higher than anything else I expected or have seen in other universities that it was, to me, surprising, in spite of the fact that we have been here confronting a little bit of a fight to get our music department growing and to accept some of the new courses which we wanted to introduce. Nevertheless, the performances and the entire program was supported very, very generously. It was, of course, President [Jerome] Wiesner [President 1971-1980] at the time who had a soft spot for music and for art, and the kind of donations which we received for programs, for instruments, for library, were quite considerable in relation to some of the other universities which already had a music department and were struggling with obtaining budgets from their boards.

LARSON: Well, people have commented. Even looking at the resources we have in the Music Library here, they say that for the kind of music program that is at MIT, they find it surprising. And I guess it was those visionary people from the past who saw that it really needed the kind of support that it had.

ERDELY: There was enormous interest in music on the part of the faculty. I met with several faculty members; one of our dear friend and neighbor was Professor Jacob den Hartog [Professor of Mechanical Engineering], who was a great scientist and a great teacher appreciated here, and we developed a close friendship and he showed me at home that he had, over the years, he had regular chamber music evenings in his house. As a matter of fact, he had, for a string quartet, he had all the four instruments in his house, so in case guests came from some other town, he could invite them. They didn't have their instrument, he could give them an instrument to play chamber

music. And he had a beautiful home, quite ideal to perform and to play chamber music works, and so were many others who were very much interested.

When we started to play our first concerts and series of concerts, our average audiences were over 500 people. At one point, we have had close to 1,000 people. And I remember that one winter, it was a snowstorm, and we just came in to play the concert and to our greatest surprise, the hall was three-quarter full, the Kresge Auditorium was three-quarter full. So that was the interest at the time.

LARSON: Wow. So you did a lot of performing when you were here.

ERDELY: I did over 35 concerts, recitals with my wife [Beatrice Erdely].

LARSON: Now, did you do any other performing, like with other kinds of chamber music or coaching or conducting as well?

ERDELY: Well, no. My job assignment was not chamber music. This has been—for this, Marcus Thompson [violinist, Professor of Music] has been hired, and I wanted to keep out of his—

LARSON: So he was hired about the same time that you came, then?

ERDELY: He was hired as a performer, and then he started the chamber music program, and I had no interest of interfering with his particular area of territory. I had enough territory on my own to make my existence here worthwhile.

LARSON: Now, did you do any performing with him?

ERDELY: We didn't perform together, no.

LARSON: You were also the Chair of the Music Section for a while, was it around—?

ERDELY: I was elected from 1976 to 1981. I was heading the Music Section, yes.

LARSON: Was there anything from that time period, stuff that you did, that you feel particularly good about, or just things that you did in that capacity?

ERDELY: Well as I mentioned to you, I would like to discuss that maybe at another time when we have all the documentations and I can refer, because I have an enormous pile of letters and documents and programs and whatnot, which were initiated at the time.

### **3. Music programs at MIT**

LARSON: When I was reading Klaus Liepmann's book, he goes into great detail about his philosophy of music's place at MIT. It's a very interesting and nuanced position. Some of it surprised me, but I was really impressed with his thoughtfulness. Is there any kind of general philosophy that you had when you were here, and how you saw music, music courses, and the music curriculum at MIT?

ERDELY: Yes, of course. As a matter of fact, every year or two, we had to reevaluate our programs, not only in general, but also in great detail, and I had to formulate the future visions for the program in reports which I presented to the Visiting Committee.

So many of these ideas were set down in these reports, which then were sent to the President or through the Visiting Committee to the board [MIT Corporation]. Naturally, many of these programs sometimes required some support, financial support and increase of library facilities, or increase of equipment facilities which we needed.

One of the most important things which I emphasized at the time, which I felt very important, was an ear training program, which I introduced here. And I felt that there is a great enthusiasm to listen to music and even to play music, but there's very little understanding of what music is all about, particularly in the general student groups. Even among people who came then into these ear training courses, I felt that some of them had five, six, even ten years of piano studies, and they could not identify a little melody like "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" from the page if they have seen one. So to hear music seen from the page was a very important consideration, and I still feel that this is a kind of education which is generally lacking from the general American musical education.

LARSON: Well, that ear training course that you put together was quite something, because when I came to the [MIT] Music Library, we were still—that was still being used when you were teaching the Music Fundamentals course. And I can remember the students saying how hard some of those tapes were.

ERDELY: Well, it was gradually developing, and since I had only the opportunity to teach it for one semester, I had to push the curriculum pretty hard so that when they finished one semester, they can go into the theory program from that point on. The idea and the philosophy was entirely based on [Zoltán] Kodály's system and idea. Kodály had one basic saying which I thought is so important and so deeply rooted in music education. He said that "you have to hear what you see and to see what you hear [Robert Schumann paraphrased quote by Kodály]."

LARSON: Mm-hmm. Wow. So, it occurred to me last night when I was thinking about some of these questions [about] this ear training course, and I was thinking it probably had some relationship with your training as an ethnomusicologist, as far as your interest in oral skills. I can see the connection there with Kodály coming out of that.

ERDELY: That's true, because my experiences with musical folklore studies go back, way back, to my early high school years. We speak about high school when we reach the age of eleven, and we are in high school from eleven to eighteen. So I was about thirteen or fourteen years old when my first theory teacher, who was first-generation Kodály student in composition, carried me into neighboring villages in my hometown, and he went to collect folk music from villages and taught me how to actually notate the songs as we heard them, as the villagers are singing. So this was a very good experience for me to start to visualize what I hear, on paper.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: And that remained, of course, with me because that skill then refined as we went on, and it was used, of course, greater extent when I became more involved in theoretical studies.

LARSON: So your interest in ethnomusicology goes way back, yeah.

ERDELY: As I said, we started, we called it “musical folklore studies,” and musical folklore studies in Hungary began in 1905. So when I came already on the scene, there was two generations already of folklorists who had been trained and exposed to Kodály 's and Bartók 's principles. And it was a very important aspect already at time of theoretical teaching and studies.

LARSON: Getting back to MIT, tell me about some of the guest artists, scholars, and performers that came, that you remember, that you might want to tell me a little bit about.

ERDELY: Well, there were too many to mention over the years. In the average, we had about seventy...between seventy and eighty concert performances at MIT. That included faculty recitals, guest recitals, and some of the lectures. Our office had to prepare and organize these events. Of course, included the [MIT Symphony] Orchestra performances, the [MIT] Choral Society performances, et cetera, et cetera.

So every year, we had a number of internationally-known artists who came and played their recitals here, uh, and we had first rate lecturers who gave their subjects or expertise airing. Well, I can only mention just a few names offhand. Paul Henry Lang [musicologist] has been here, Karl Geiringer [musicologist] has been here, among the musicologists. And several of the European scholars who came to the United States, Bálint Sárosi, Georg Kröll. They are all well represented in our library by their books and by their studies, et cetera, et cetera. I would have to see the programs in order to give you a whole detail, because there were dozens of great performers here.

And of course, among performers, Sándor Végh, who has given here whole weeks of seminars and string quartet playing, and played two recitals, one with the orchestra and one on his own.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: So we had many people.

LARSON: And when I was reading Klaus Liepmann's book, that tradition of bringing internationally-recognized artists goes way back, and that continues today, and that's really something.

ERDELY: Well, it's part of the overall picture. It's important to have great artists so that the students should have some form of comparison of where they are and what the ultimate achievement is in the performance. Otherwise, they sort of get a little bit of a wrong picture of their importance and their genius.

LARSON: Yeah. Well Klaus, in his book, mentioned that they needed a standard.

ERDELY: Yeah. Well, that was basically the overall thinking of the faculty here, too. But Klaus's great contribution was that he stuck it out. He had difficult times to start of his music performance organizations, and then with gradually introducing a music appreciation course and trying to get a foothold in the academic field. All that gradually establishing and then having people come and support him in this field was actually his achievement. And we can call him the Father of Music at MIT, indeed.

LARSON: Were there any students that you remember that kind of stand out in your mind?

ERDELY: I have been teaching all the way through large classes, and it's difficult for me to single out one because I did not have the students for a succession of classes. They could come to my classes maybe for ear training, and then for some other courses, but it was, in my teaching situation, it was not one of successive teaching, like for instance, a theory teacher has a student for three or four years or something like that.

LARSON: Right, yeah. The concerts in the [MIT] Music Library, I never—by the time I came those had pretty much gone. What was that like, with the concerts here in the Music Library? It's kind of hard to imagine what that was like.

ERDELY: The Music Library was just one of the areas where certain concerts could be had. It was resisted awhile because it meant that this middle room, this large room, had to be upset and chairs and everything had to be brought in. But eventually, there was a piano and it was replaced, actually, by Killian Hall.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: But it served about the same purpose. There were not that many concerts. Only at times, when maybe Kresge [Auditorium] or everything was too occupied, and our student recitals were performed here in the library. For a while, we also had wonderful concerts in front of, in the courtyard in the summertime. I have introduced a series of concerts in the courtyard. And that was very, very successful. It was always full, and we used this little extension in front of the windows as the stage, and we had—the piano was anyhow in the library, so it was easy to get out. The acoustics was fine, except for here and there, some disturbance by the airplane which flew over MIT. But in the summer, everybody appreciated it was open. The problem was with the chairs and setting up the chairs. We needed some 400 chairs, which we had to get from every part of MIT, and then we had to hire the people who would bring it or fold it together after the concerts, and whatnot. So it was a very successful program, but, it did cost us some money, and since the concerts were free, we could not get any revenues to cover our expenses.

LARSON: What are some of your memories of the Music Library when you came—the collection, the staff, the librarians, do you remember?

ERDELY: Well, the Music Library was a very, very fine library. I was amazed to find how many excellent things were already collected when we arrived, and I have to attribute that to my predecessors, who have gotten money. [Klaus] Liepmann has gotten money, David Epstein has gotten a considerable sum, to buy certain collections for music. That there were certain areas where the Music Library was deficient is obvious, and we just had to work gradually and skillfully that some of these areas should be gradually built up. And where the budget was not sufficient, not enough, well, we had to use our diplomatic tact of approaching other sources to get here and there \$1,000 or \$2,000 donation for the library.

So it was a solid basis, and to build further on that solid basis, we had to use just common sense. But I know that for instance, reading sometimes in the past about music and *Music in America* [*Music in American Life*, 1956], by Jacques Barzun, that little book, he has in one page, he said the universities are not doing a great deal. And he visited MIT and went into the library, and he found with great amazement how good that little library is for general purposes, which was true, which was absolutely

true. We did not suffer any basic problems or shortages in the library for our particular courses. But as our courses have been growing, we naturally needed more music, and we needed more books, and then more equipment.

LARSON: Right. Who was the music librarian when you came?

ERDELY: Linda Solow [Blotner, librarian 1972-1984].

LARSON: Linda Solow [Blotner] was here. Yeah. Did you remember Eileen Borland at all?

ERDELY: No, that was before, probably before my time.

LARSON: Okay. Well, she died last year, and we'd like to find out more about her. But it was Linda Solow [Blotner].

ERDELY: Yes.

LARSON: Any impressions or memories of her that stand out in your mind?

ERDELY: Oh, she was a wonderful librarian and a great friend. She was very, very solid. She was very knowledgeable and very strict. She was ready to hit our hands if it touched something that was not to be [both laugh]. But she was very, very good. She was a real, well-trained music librarian. We were sorry to see her go, but we were happy to see her get married.

LARSON: Yeah. Well, to this day, I still feel like her legacy lives on, because she had very well-defined collections policies that today, we still follow a lot of those, and she really set a real vision and a real scholarly vision for the Music Library.

ERDELY: Yeah. Well, we relied on her expertise, and we discussed with her many times the areas where the library needs some further improvement or growth. She was a great help.

LARSON: Yeah. Well one subject, and maybe we should wait for this next time, but we've actually had students coming into the library asking about this recently. There's going to be a conference at the end of this semester over at the [MIT] Media Lab. Some part of the conference is going to be dealing with the history of electronic music at MIT, and I know that Barry Vercoe was on the music faculty when you were here. Is there anything you could talk about now, even just some general stuff about how that got started, or anything?

ERDELY: Well, I suppose Barry would be in a better position to speak about the history of technology and music, but he was always interested in these two particular fields and he had courses in technology and music when the Media Lab was not yet established.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: And then eventually, he had computer music and whatnot, which he actually started to develop, and the first concerts which he organized in Kresge Auditorium were extremely interesting. Well, all this was, I suppose, somewhat the legacy of his Princetonian background and Milton Babbitt's [composer] possible influence on the developments here. Both Dean [Harold] Hanham and we have been supporting Barry, but then eventually, the support which the humanities could give technology was not sufficient, and a new institution—sorry—department had to be established, which had

its own particular budget and where all these requirements, what the technology needed could be satisfied.

LARSON: So that was kind of how the Media Lab got started in some ways?

ERDELY: That was where the Media Lab actually—[MIT] President [Jerome] Wiesner was very much interested that something of that sort of should develop, not only in musical line, but in many other fields.

LARSON: Before we close this part of the interview, are there any other things just kind of in general that you want to talk about, or did you have any—any questions for me or anything like that, or just things that maybe I haven't touched on of a general nature with music at MIT?

ERDELY: I really don't have—I'm here to answer questions, not to ask questions. [laughs]

LARSON: Yeah, okay. But I just wondered if there was some area that I may have—general topic that I may have not touched on.

ERDELY: Well, the only thing is that we have today just an absolutely beautiful library here. And being the beneficiary of this library and the whole thing, I'm very happy with what we have here. Sometimes, my research of course requires that I go out of the library, but I find that for some of the basic information which I need, we have everything here.

#### **4. Childhood and musical background in Szeged, Hungary**

LARSON: I don't know how much time you have, or if you want to even wait for another time for a subsequent interview, or how many times, you know—we can have as many sessions as you'd like. But would you rather wait to even have another session just talking about your ethnomusicological work?

ERDELY: Well, it depends whether you have the time. It's not—

LARSON: It's about a quarter after now. But maybe we could just go through some general stuff, and then maybe if we decide later on to get some more information. Also, I've just been curious about when you started playing the violin and how that got started and some of your—your early musical training.

ERDELY: Well, again, when you are a young kid, you do not have a very definite idea of what kind of musical instruments you would like to play and develop it, so when I was a youngster, I started the violin relatively late in my age, mainly because I had too much problems with my tonsils. [laughs] Every year, I had some colds or whatnot, and so I was seemingly not strong enough to hold a violin for a sufficient period of time, and the teacher whom my parents sent me tested me on that account. And so I started to play the violin, I think I was eight and a half. Other kids by that time played the Mendelssohn [Violin] Concerto [in E minor, op. 64] or something like that.

But then, I had a very, very fine teacher in my own hometown [Szeged], and we have been working together for ten years, I was with her, and she developed me

very nicely and gradually. It was a woman who was a product of the Music Academy in Budapest with outstanding teachers.

LARSON: So what was her name?

ERDELY: Pardon me?

LARSON: What was your teacher's name?

ERDELY: Her name was Mrs. Ilona Gábor. She played in the local orchestra, and she had a large number of students, and she was a faculty member of a private school, actually. I should say something about my hometown, which on the map seems like a little southern provincial town close to the Yugoslavian border on the river of Tisza, and it's easy, probably, to go in and get out very quickly because...

But it was actually a very old, historical city. It was already used by the Romans as a port for salt, importing salt to that part of Europe. And then it gradually developed. It was an agricultural city with farms in the background and villages in the background, and then it got a university, which receives quite a notoriety when two of its professors got the Nobel Prize. One was Professor Albert Szent-Györgyi, who is probably best known here in the United States as the discoverer of Vitamin C, and the other one was Professor [Frigyes] Riesz, who has been a mathematician and whose achievements I can't tell you because it's beyond my own comprehension.

But then it was a university with a medical school, law schools and everything, and it was a very fine, very strict school.

LARSON: What was the name of that university?

ERDELY: Pardon me?

LARSON: What was the name of that university?

ERDELY: It was originally called Franz Joseph University, named after the emperor Franz Joseph. Later, it became the University of Szeged. It had, as a matter of fact, it had a sort of a curious history when—well, the history is political, so I don't want to go into that.

LARSON: Sure.

ERDELY: Because I want to rather talk about the music in the town. So to understand the musical atmosphere in this little town, which is about the size of Princeton, I would say, you have to see the people who have been in important positions in music. There was a private school, a music school, led by Mr. [Arpad?] Baranyi. Turned out to be that he has been a student of [Ferruccio] Busoni.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: I learned that on a visit here to Boston, and a talk and a little conversation with the Watham [MA, referring to Brandeis University] Professor Erwin Bodky, who was also a Busoni student and the two were colleagues. And he asked me immediately whether I did know Baranyi. Of course I did.

Well, Baranyi was also the teacher of the pianist [Richárd] Vásári, who has made quite a number of recordings lately, and is taking up now conducting. So he

established the private school, and then there was a city school, city music school, where many of the graduates of Budapest came and was there teaching. Most were striving. My teacher was in the Baranyi school, and Baranyi got a position in another town in Hungary to be the director of one of the city schools. Then the school folded, but his students had been handed over to György Sándor, the pianist, and he came down from Budapest twice a week, or was teaching people twice a week, and also added quite considerably to the city's musical life with concerts, recitals, appearances with the orchestra.

Then we had a conductor who led the Philharmonia. The Philharmonia was nothing of a great or not a first rate orchestra, but it was an orchestra. It was composed of a military band, who provided the brass and woodwinds, and then the string teachers of the different conservatories, and some good amateur players who could fill up. So it was about an orchestra of sixty, sixty-five member size, and it had something like four or five concerts in a year, and the conductor, who had been engaged during my time, was Ferenc Fricsay, who then later on become the conductor of RIAS Berlin and has quite a number of recordings. Probably we have in our own library also a number of his recordings.

Was a very, very fine man, came from a long row of military conductors from the Habsburg dynasty. His father was a military conductor, and all his brothers were military conductors, but he had a solo training in Budapest and was a very, very gifted young man. He also was my very first teacher for composition, harmony and composition. And then because my father, who was a physician, had treated him and never accepted any remuneration, he decided to teach me as sort of—to pay back the services.

LARSON: So that's how you got started.

ERDELY: And as a matter of fact, even the old Fricsay who came and visited decided that he wants to come and teach me. Now the old man was a typical military man, you know? He was on discipline. And I never will forget that during the summer months when he came and visited his son, he came over three times a week in order to instruct me in technique. And instead of going to the river and enjoy the summer, I had to stay home and play technique with him for three hours. I hated every minute of it [both laugh], but he was standing there, and like a strict military conductor, I had to follow the discipline.

Lately, I look back at that and I think it was useful, whatever he has been doing. But the young Fricsay was not at all a military, he was indeed a good humanist, and he had introduced great things with that orchestra. And as a matter of fact, as a young kid, I played the last end of the second violin with him, and we had people like Bartók who came and performed for the first time his second piano concerto [Piano Concerto No. 2 in G major, Sz. 95, BB 101], and many other people who came. We had also internationally-known guest conductors who came and played the orchestra, [Issay] Dobrowen, and [Desiré] Defaux, who has been then later on, after World War II, conductor for a short while of the Chicago Symphony. He was a guest conductor.

Then we had during the summer, summer festivals, which my mother [Vilma Lengyel] was instrumental of arranging. After visiting Salzburg and seeing how the Salzburg Festivals have been placed in front of the dome and in a square which was surrounded by buildings, we had a similar situation with a huge, big dome, and with a bishop's palace, which sort of formed a natural closed-in circle, but it was about six times as big as the Salzburg Festival. And from the early 1930s, there were important summer festivals for several weeks.

And during the summer festival, the Budapest Opera came with the Budapest Philharmonia to play operatic performances. The Milano [La] Scala, came twice with *Turandot* [opera by Giacomo Puccini], and [Pietro] Mascagni came to conduct the *Cavalleria Rusticana*. And I remember still playing under Mascagni, which dates me, and I can tell you that he didn't hear a single sound that the orchestra was playing. He was by the time that deaf. And Fricsay was conducting in the back in order to keep the orchestra together.

And then of course, great performances were during the summer festivals organized. My mother became, actually, a journalist, and quite a celebrated journalist because she wrote in the early 1920s already the first great praising articles of Bartók and Kodály at the time when Bartók and Kodály were still fighting for recognition. Her articles are today reprinted in important books which show the history of Bartók and Kodály and the first appreciation of their music. [Ed. Note: Vilma Lengyel wrote for *Délmagyarország*, the newspaper of a southern Hungarian county.]

LARSON: Are any of those translated in English?

ERDELY: They are not translated in English, and I didn't translate them, but I should, actually, because they are very beautifully written and very interesting. But I have the publications which preserve these articles. Her entire row of articles, which represents something like twenty years of music in hometown, is now preserved in the Museum of Szeged, which was a very good little museum.

So I probably inherited my musical inclinations from my mother because my father is a physician, could only handle the radio, and nothing else.

LARSON: [laughs] So what instrument did your mother play?

ERDELY: She was a pianist, and she studied with one of [Ernő Dohnányi, a.k.a. Ernst von] Dohnányi's students, who became an organist in my hometown. And of course in our house, we had always musical guests. Whoever came to town from the outside was invited at least for dinner or something like that, and I was always around and I met many, many, people. Then we had guest—a guest artist series of ten concerts in a year in one of the halls. And among these artists were, again, the top performers. So I heard at the time young [Jascha] Heifetz [violinist] and [Gregor] Piatigorsky [cellist] and [Nathan] Milstein [violinist] coming to town, [Alfred] Cortot [pianist], [Wilhelm] Backhaus, and the great pianists, you know, and the great singers of the time. They were all appearing in one of these concerts. So when we compare the musical life in that little town, and many times, I'm comparing the musical life with my wife [Beatrice Erdely], who was brought up in Chicago, there was practically no difference. As a matter of fact, I heard more frequently Cortot performing in recitals

in my hometown than she did hear it in Chicago. So we had a very, very lively music at the time in the 1930s.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: And then in addition, of course, there were all these amateur musicians who were in business but played the cello or the violin and whatnot, and from early age on, I was called in to play with them chamber music: string quartets, first, second violin, then eventually, I graduated to play first violin, it was permitted. And so over the years, every summer, we had one evening where we played chamber music on a set date. Over the years, I learned all the Beethoven quartets, a great number of the Haydn quartets, Mozart quartets, Brahms and Schumann quartets, just by reading. So before I even came to Budapest to get my professional training, I had sort of a very nice, rounded musical background.

LARSON: Had you played the Bartók quartets before then?

ERDELY: No, the Bartók quartets were not completely written yet at the time.

LARSON: Yeah. But had you done—there were some that had been composed by that time.

ERDELY: Yeah, but these amateur players could not actually do the Bartók quartets, so we stuck to the classics, which was perfectly fine, because there was lots to play. And of course, this background was considerably important. So actually, I finished two years of my academic training while still in high school. I went up to Budapest to pass the examinations, and when I came then to the Academy in Budapest in '39, I already came into the third class.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: But that was one of the reasons why it was important also for me, and my father insisted, being a physician, he thought that anything happens to my hand, my career would be ruined, so I should actually get some university training, too. And the only place where I could actually enter the university was the law school, which permitted me to pass the examination, but not necessarily go to the lectures.

LARSON: That's a traditional thing for musicians to get a law degree. That goes way back.

ERDELY: Yeah. So actually, I was—and then, of course the war, Second World War broke out, and it looked that if I'm starting with the third year of academic training, I will finish my academic training sooner than the war will be over. So the university provided me the possibility of getting a furlough from military service at the time. It lasted until '44, but then after '44, when the Germans occupied Hungary, nothing happened. Nothing, nothing happened anymore. But up till that point, I was both at the Academy and both passing examinations in the law school. And as a matter of fact, I got my absolutorium at the University Law School, which started out in Szeged and then moved on.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: So of course, the academic training was then on international level, and the teachers in Budapest at the time, that Academy was probably at the time surpassing many of the academies in Europe because it had on the faculty Dohnányi, who was

the director and the teacher for piano, and some of his colleagues, who were all outstanding pianists and teachers, and some of his younger disciples, like Béla Böszörményi-Nagy, who have been here at Boston University, Dohnányi student. And in the violin, we had an outstanding school established by Eugen Hubai and his disciples, who followed, my teacher was [Ede] Zathureczki And for chamber music, my teacher was Imre Waldbauer [violinist], to whom the first quartet of Béla Bartók was dedicated [could be mistaken, as this piece is noted to be dedicated to violinist Stefi Geyer, but premiered by Waldbauer], and who played such a very, very important role in Bartók 's career, early career, both as a performer of his works as well as a chamber music player with whom Bartók played many, many times.

And then the greatest of all, Leo Weiner, who has been teaching chamber music with piano, with whom we all studied and whom we admired because he was just an absolutely fantastic musician. And among, then, the other people, the musicologists, and the theory and history teachers were all very, very—on a very high caliber and graduates usually of German universities because in Hungary, there was not yet musicology taught at the universities. So the Academy was really a very fine institute with very high demands and we were working very hard, and we learned a great deal, and I'm grateful for that.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: Of course, there was Bartók and Kodály teaching also at the university, but Kodály was—I took courses with Kodály, but he was not my main teacher. Violin was my main instrument at the time, but I took with him a course in Palestrina counterpoint, which was one of his very strong fields.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: Oh, he was a great [Giovanni] Palestrina [Renaissance composer] scholar. He admired Palestrina. He was reading Palestrina scores in all his free minutes because he was a choral composer, mainly. Kodály 's works are either—Kodály works with orchestra, or numerous choir works for women's mixed choirs and children's choirs, and then a very, very large percentage of his later works were devoted to educational programs.

LARSON: Right.

ERDELY: So. So that was the Academy and the atmosphere in the Academy. And that was, as I said, the second level of my education after I left my hometown.

LARSON: Did Kodály or Bartók have any direct influence—I mean, when you were at the school there, on your interest in ethnomusicology?

ERDELY: Of course, yes, very strong. Well, their influence was already clearly sensible when I was a high school student because my first theory teacher [Szögi Endre], who was a Kodály student, was also a folklorist, a musical folklorist, and I learned from him—not only did transcription, the fieldwork which we started on, but also the analysis and classification of folk songs, and many other questions pertaining to folk songs. And then of course, when we got to the Academy, by that time, we studied one course in folk music research with Kodály, which was a rather difficult subject

because I was taught in the spring and fall semester and between the two, during the summer, we had to collect hundred songs which he or Bartók did not yet collect.

LARSON: Oh. Wow. [both laugh]

ERDELY: By that time, the collection was something like 50,000 types of songs in the archives.

LARSON: Wow.

ERDELY: And then we had to memorize those songs and sing it for him in the course. And he was—he was rather sarcastic about our singing.

LARSON: [laughs] Wow. Wow. Well, one question to tie up today's session. I was wondering about—did you have any brothers or sisters who were musicians? Your family seemed pretty musical, at least your mother.

ERDELY: Yeah.

LARSON: Do you have other brothers and sisters?

ERDELY: Well, my sister has become a singer, and before she got married, she was actually taking role in my hometown opera and had several roles on stage.

LARSON: What was her name?

ERDELY: The same as mine, except [? Kato ?], Kate.

LARSON: Yeah. Wow. Did you have other siblings?

ERDELY: No, she's my only sister.

LARSON: Yeah.

ERDELY: She was my only sister.

LARSON: Yeah. Wow. Wow. Well, this has been quite a session. I don't want to wear both of us out, and I want to thank you very, very much for your generosity.

ERDELY: Right, it's a pleasure.

LARSON: And I look forward to our subsequent session. So we'll close for now.

ERDELY: Okay.

[End of Interview]