

**San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives
Oral History Project**

The _____ has the goal of seeking out and collecting memories of historical significance to the Conservatory through recorded interviews with members of the Conservatory's

LAURANCE This is Emily Laurance interviewing Elinor Armer at the Conservatory of Music on July 8th by asking a few general questions about your background. So good morning.

ARMER Good morning.

LAURANCE The first question would you tell us about your early history a little bit? where and when you were born.

ARMER I was born in 1939 in Oakland, California. But at the age of two months I was taken by my family up to Davis, California, where we lived in a little old house in the middle of town while our future house was being built. We moved into that house when I was about two. So all my growing up years were spent in Davis.

LAURANCE What was Davis like then?

ARMER Very, very small. It was very much like being out in the country. Our house on Oak Avenue was at the very edge of town, and behind us were fields. Now of course the same house is in the middle of town, and Davis has grown to abut Sacramento on one side -Davis in that whole big area.

LAURANCE What took your family to Davis?

ARMER My father was an engineer. Initially he was hired by the Agricultural Engineering Department there. He eventually was not happy there because he did not like university life, or the hierarchy of the department did not work well and felt a little stifled. This is a theme that has run throughout our family, because we are all originals and somewhat anti-establishment in many ways. So the University rubbed him the wrong way and he stopped working for them and went to work for Spreckels Sugar, which was a sugar company in California. He designed a lot of machinery for that particular industry.

LAURANCE If your father was an engineer for Davis, and at Spreckels, then that was after he was an acoustical engineer.

ARMER
fact had

enjoying four-part harmony. There were musicians in her family, and she liked to sit with me when I was very, very young either on her lap or next to her on the piano bench, and she would play and sing. W

happy part of my childhood. And then when I was becoming a pianist she wanted to take up piano again, and so very often she would be playing some of the same pieces I was playing. It was a thing that we shared, and I enjoyed it very much.

LAURANCE How old were you when you started piano?

ARMER Eight. Relatively ancient. [laughter]

LAURANCE I know what you mean, yes. [laughter] Did you have any other instruments you played?

ARMER No, not at the time. I started piano just sort of accidentally. That too, had to do with being in Davis. There was a couple the husband was Norwegian, and he was hired by one of the departments on campus agronomy, or something. His wife was British, and happened to be a piano teacher. They bought a house in fact I think they built it on the same street. And so we became acquainted with them, and it turned out that she wanted to start having a piano studio in town, and it was just extremely good fortune that I started piano with her. She was trained at Eastman, and in those days even that long ago, Eastman was training future music teachers and piano teachers to give lots of ear training to their students. So fifteen minutes of every lesson were spent from the get-go with ear training and dictation. I was doing four-part dictation on her little blackboard with staves on it by the time I was nine. I loved it! It literally things that I ended up teaching years later that college students considered very difficult and an obnoxious obligation in required courses, were simply fun. I think the older you get, the more of a chore those things become but if you start kids out with composer as anything.

LAURANCE

ARMER Well no, but I started playing by ear. She used to tell me that when I was aaahhhhhh. [laughter]
to teach me anything. But I loved to fiddle around.

LAURANCE It was the availability of it.

ARMER

LAURANCE And your father, was he musical also?

ARMER He played the flute rather well, but not professionally and not a whole lot by the time I was born. He had been more of a student flutist in his UC Berkeley days with the orchestra there. But he had a wonderful flute. It was a Haynes flute with a Powell mouthpiece. It was a beautiful flute. And in spite of that our dog would howl every time he would play it. But I
relationship. I think it was the overtones. [laughter]

LAURANCE

ARMER I think it is a fellow dog howling, which causes them to howl.

LAURANCE Is there anything else you would like to add about Davis as a place to grow up? Musical experiences, or the kind of community it was.

ARMER In those days Davis was so small and also it is important to remember that I grew up in the so that when I was very small World War II was in progress, shall we say? And there was a fear on the West Coast. There was concern that we would be attacked by Japan. So we had all of the activities that countries in Europe had to go through except for actually being bombed. But we had black outs. My mother worked down at the train station as a look-out for enemy planes. I had nightmares about bombs and dreams of glory of capturing Hitler. My sister and I shared a cabin up at Fallen Leaf Lake one summer. And there was a Navajo rug on the floor with swastikas on it, which is a very ancient symbol, but I
ly. I was just aware of it. I was also aware because my father was half Jewish later I became aware of the concentration camps and the Ho, the Cold War, the McCarthy era, it was a very, very conformist peris8dETpL

ARMER We sang. I do remember in my kindergarten being a part of a rhythm band. That had a major influence on my life. The major influences from my early life were my kindergarten rhythm bands, radio, and Spike Jones. [laughter]

I have an older brother and I had an older sister growing up, and they were ten and eight years older than I was. So I heard a lot of 78 records, the things that they liked. But my parents also played records all the time. My father had even been involved once in helping to invent the records changer on jukeboxes. So the whole 78 syndrome was very familiar to me. I loved records and I loved cowboy songs and I loved polkas and there was music going all the time. I must say I look back now and appreciate that my parents, especially my mother, really prided herself on being sort of up to date with things in the arts. They had a lot of impressionist prints around, plus paintings by my grandfather. And they played records. I remember from the earliest

around 78s. We had an old 78 that my grandmother
had her recorded on this, she was singing *Oh*

had made. They had

Sacramento and we saw how they made the sound of explosions they would put BBs in a
balloon and shake buurrrhhhhhssss

back to radio and to Spike Jones and his band. And I mention Spike Jones nobody now knows
talking about the film director you do! [laughter]

LAURANCE I was actually going to suggest that myself. All this interest in sound

LAURANCE then to your mother again. Where was she in all of this? And also, her work as a writer, her work as an author did that have an effect on you to see sort of what you could be?

ARMER Yes it did. And her enjoyment of slightly more oddball company from the University. But she was not as free with this inventive side of her nature. Because, I think, of the very repressive background that she had come from. She always felt a conflict, especially in the old days of Davis, with its conformist society. It was a time when you were supposed to sort of keep down with the Joneses. And not do anything uppity or show off-y. I think she really thought that she probably should look after her family first and do her writing on the side. Which was good and bad. Because I know she had a secret drawer in a little room part of her and my space there where she had her Underwood typewriter. And she would frequently be typing there. But she kept all of those manuscripts secret. This was often fiction and often sort of auto-biographical fiction. She would say, This was . This was what Virginia Woolf was talking about. But it was a very small room and very seriously gu a Woolf imagined it. I think it would

would have been a happier person. But she did, after my brother and sister grew up, and I was in some of them really excellent. And she was profoundly encouraging. She was very responsive and excited, whenever I would do well. But I think a part of it w kind of pride and excitement. Which parents are entitled to and mothers, especially. You know schepping nachus you know, parents, Jewish parents, schep nachus, it means they achieve pride and glory from the achievements of their children.

LAURANCE Reflected glory.

ARMER look back and honestly say there was a slight aspect of envy in my mother sometimes when I would get really noticed. She would be very proud and excited on the one hand, but then I think that she was also envious. And I understand why now, because she never let herself go for things the way she let me do. So that would kind of explain that. We, on the other hand, were very close and did share an understanding of what it meant to create something and we talked about it a lot.

LAURANCE I was just also wondering if you what kinds of things did you take from your parents encouragement of your own creativity with your own child rearing, encouraging creativity in your own children.

ARMER My two darling adopted kids. Of course I was wildly excited when my kids would do anything creative. I'm very happy that my daughter, who is now eighteen, is intending to major in music. And plays the viola and has played a musical instrument from early childhood. Well no, she was eight too when she started from Africa. She is so naturally gifted musically and has an ear to die for. And now she has taken up voice, appropriately waiting not terribly good for kids to start singing in their early teens. I mean, you know, in a trained way. But she is very, very excited about it now. And she has an exquisite voice. I think she wants to be a voice major at some liberal arts school. I'm very excited about that. I also give her occasional piano lessons. But only when she asks, and I have never pushed her. I have only applauded. I have to congratulate myself for that! [laughter] Because it allowed her to find her own way and not feel as if I was looking over her shoulder all the time. I think this is important I do think that there is a kind of privacy that people need, children need, all people but children certainly, being people. They need a kind of space around them to explore whatever it is that has caused her to be that way that all the time, and she was a her [laughter] Anyway, kids need to find stuff out on their own but it's very great for them or need some feedback. My son was very musical, as a child, but did not choose to pursue that for a variety of reasons. Just like he was very artistic. Children,

ARMER

No, no, no! I did that to be silly, because the whole I know

Even when I went to Mills College, at first I toyed with, as I said, majoring in this, that, or the other, but the very people around me and the teachers in my music classes and so on virtually insisted that I was one of them. This capacity for making up stuff and playing by ear continued to serve me socially when I went to Mills College. I remember as a freshman, there was one night every fall where all the dormitories would put on major, major skits in the gymnasium which was like an auditorium for that. And our hall, Orchard Meadow Hall, was the closest to the music building. It had most of the music majors, and so we would do these extravaganzas. Well when I was a freshman I was new to all of this and these other people, older girls, were putting together our h
hey were doing this skit about David and Goliath. All the short

her husband but Cheryl Seltzer. New York with my old buddy Lois, and we are going to have such fun. This is one of those lifelong things and the thing that I always tell my students about these years in their lives is that this is where the rest of their lives friends are going to come from. Right here and now and to remember that, and also their professional colleagues. They will know other people and marry other people and do things with other people but it starts here. And that has certainly been true for my life. Between my freshman and sophomore years of college I went to Aspen with a friend of mine, who was a violinist and had

Fritz Berens just for that wonderful experience of being around an orchestra a lot and learning some things from a very fine classical musician about style. What makes Schumann different than Schubert. What makes Brahms sound like Brahms. What makes, you know I learned a huge amount and I became very good in high school, but then when I worked with Libermann and had all of these older pianists also shining, I was determined to rise to that level as much as I could. Then after I graduated from Mills I was one of Libermann destined for teaching more than a concert career. I did some concertizing, which I can talk about later. He was the one that first got me started in my career as a piano teacher. And he also gave a series of lectures on how to play, practice and teach piano, which were legendary. He had given this series several times and people flocked to hear them. I, however, had been given a good old Wollensak reel-to-reel tape recorder for graduation from college. And I taped all of these lectures and then I transcribed them much as this is all going to be transcribed. And then I put them in good English and edited them. When Libermann died, several of us got together and funded a fine printed, limited edition of *A Comprehensive Approach to the Piano*. I believe the library has a couple of copies of that. I still have a lot of, very wonderful book for teachers of any musical instrument. I mean Margaret Rowell used to swear by it, the great cello teacher.

LAURANCE Do you still have the tapes?

ARMER that was chosen to be the executor of Libermann's estate. He was very inquisitive and wanted to get his hands on anything he felt like taking. So he took them all. I think I still have the tapes. I ran with the ball. again I took

LAURANCE No, no, . As you should. As you should feel free to. I was you had started talking about Alexander Libermann

ARMER Well t

LAURANCE Maybe we should talk a little bit about Milhaud and your studies with him.

ARMER Oh, absolutely. Because both Milhaud and his wife, Madeline, were friends of mine for years after graduation. He brought to Mills well, the whole

ARMER But I think I knew even at the time, you know, in reflection, I realized, he was talking about a kind of purity and directness and simplicity. There was no reason to be wildly complicated or to be wildly dissonant and what I learned was that I come from a line of succession, compositionally, that is French. Some people come from a line of succession that is German. And then there are a few other possibilities.

LAURANCE Russian, yes.

ARMER

But just in musical training of those times you could see the parallel paths. And I learned, over the many years what I consider to be the French approach, which is a kind of sensual enjoyment of sounds and chord progressions and timbres and melodies, just for their own sake in the moment rather than as they relate to some kind of a system. So you can have chord streams and

tension and resolution,

important for me, just simply to have that association and in many ways I had more to do with Madame than I did with him. I took a lot of her French courses and conversational French, and so on. And then after I was an adult, when I would go to Paris after Milhaud had died I would visit her at every opportunity.

LAURANCE Was she there every year or was she also just there every other year?

ARMER No, she was there every other year too. He was quite dependent on her for his mobility, they were like that. And also they were first cousins, very few people know that. So own each other as children too.

LAURANCE

generally do.

ARMER

LAURANCE Did [Edgard] Varese have any influence on your inter

ARMER I did a little concertizing. I did some concertizing on a local level. I took jobs at places like Dominican College when they had a lower school and I was teaching young kids piano there. And I became friends with one of the nuns who had been a concert pianist before she took the veil. We started doing four-hand and two-piano music together and she got some sort of special dispensation to perform. We concertized as a duo team for several years, up and down the Catholic school circuit in northern California locally and had a wonderful time. I learned a whole lot by doing that too.

LAURANCE What was your repertoire?

ARMER Well, at that time it was like when the Salkinds were duo pianists. They had to commission stuff because there were only a few things in the standard repertoire and you mean that sort of *de rigueur* but, we found
F Minor Fantasy. Of course we did it, but I
me things do.

LAURANCE You must have done *Scaramouche*.

ARMER You know, I did *Scaramouche* with Laurette of the Laurette Goldberg story. We did the Brahms Haydn Variations, which I loved, that was my favorite of all the pieces we did. We did Mozart, we did all kinds of stuff. And she had done some very, very sexy arrangements of the *Rosenkavalier* waltzes for two pianos. I told her that she should be excommunicated for that. I mean we did them very, very well, and I very much enjoyed those years in doing that.

was going to give a memorial concert, and she asked me to write a little piece in memory of him. I was puzzling over this and I said to John Swackhamer, approach this. Should I write a piece that Libermann would have liked? Should I write a piece about how I feel about his dying? Should I write a piece that will make other people feel some , as lo

I sort of had to think about that, but then of course for the rest of my life I have understood what he was talking about. If a piece of music again, as Milhaud said if a piece of

ARMER

LAURANCE

ARMER That gave me such pleasure.

LAURANCE Well, do you're ready to turn to the Conservatory now?

ARMER I think so! Absolutely.

LAURANCE So, when and how did you become associated with the Conservatory?

ARMER I had a school stint, for a while I thought, but I didn't. I had a job working for Walter Landor and Associates, I was a student at that time, but they specialized in what they called environmental design, basically advertising logos and things of that kind. Curious coincidence, because my grandfather had done that too. Their offices were on a ferry boat in Pier Five. So it was a very chichi and tony kind of a thing. I worked there as a writer and I wrote educational filmstrip scripts. But they also found out that I was a composer and I did a fair bit of composing for commercial purposes too. But I was basically very unhappy in it. It was a bad year in my life. My sister had just died and I was having a hard time going to go this way or that way. I was writing a lot of music much. But it was an interesting year. I got a lot of gigs writing film scores for educational films after that, for years after. I was actually fired from that job. The only time in my life I was fired was a damn and that

own college Juilliard years with the Salkinds as well. I forget how it came about but she took me on to teach in the Prep Department with great enthusiasm. And said, right away, in about .

LAURANCE Teaching in the prep division?

ARMER Teaching in the Prep Department, teaching piano. Then, almost immediately, also summer classes and Saturday classes in musicianship and ear training and composing even. Anything I wanted to teach. And adult extension. Milton Salkind was all behind this. Milton did more than any other administrator in my life to make a teacher out of me. He could spot teaching ability but he also loved to one of the major things he did for the Conservatory was to maintain his relationships with important high profile people in the community who would become board members and who dream and he frequently told May to send me celebrity students and I taught I was supposed to teach Janis Joplin. She wanted to come improve her ear training. She kept not showing up, so I called her on her boat in Sausalito offered herself. And that was the end of that. I was very

had a ball. I was writing something at that time for a friend, a singer a kind of cabaret singer in London and we thought she was going to premiere

enough of a course load to be employed full time. W
composition students. John Adams had had some composition students, and they had not been
happy with him and they were also taking piano from Milton Salkind. So Milton Salkind sent

better go with these kids and Dick said, I, of course if composition were a department and
you were a department chair ,

ARMER

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Except home. [laughter] I do teach privately too, and always have given lessons at home, either piano or composition.

LAURANCE Do you still teach piano now?

ARMER Yep. I have some pian I have one
I have one
tune to the
stick around. [laughter] We will remain

LAURANCE
break, if you do
you. [laughter]

ARMER
energy, too.

LAURANCE Do you want to tackle this last one, which is kind of a doozy? Are there special challenges faced by composers who work within an academic setting?

ARMER Well, yes, is the short answer. It certainly depends on the academic
that as an
insult, but that is not it

think this is one of the best places you could do it. By the same token, there are some people who

conducive. Juilliard is not. Y
schools, between ones that are performer mills, or those more universal in their approach and
offerings. Some liberal arts colleges have good music departments. My daughter wants as I
said

referred yesterday were both sort of my big sisters in helping me get into the musical world. I was teaching piano at Dominican Lower School and at home, and I was doing some composing, but I had not established myself as a composer by any means. They were both very active musicians in the community. Laurette was in her pre-ha Before Harpsichord which is very long ago. Laurette was actually the pianist for the Oakland Symphony, under Gerhard Samuel. I do believe that at that time this would have been in the

could teach prep-age students for the Conservatory in the East Bay. I do believe that Laurette was doing that at that time. We were just friends, and enjoyed each other very much, and would play we did some four-hand stuff. We played several programs for children and young people, *Scaramouche*. Then Laurette discovered the harpsichord. She began by playing a little harpsichord in the window of a little café called Vin et Fromage. In the front window. She did that for a couple of restaurants. It became a sort of thing of the day, that musicians could appear in the window, playing, inviting people in.

LAURANCE Sort of like a silent movie.

ARMER Very much. Well, Laurette was anything but silent. [laughter] At any rate, everything that Laurette touched Ultimately, as the world knows, she really established a beachhead for early music in the Bay Area, starting with harpsichord. She developed an unbridled passion for it for harpsichord and of course became the principal harpsichord teacher and the only harpsichord teacher, for a while, and spread the gospel of harpsichord. I even took a few lessons from her about how to play Bach on the piano in an manner. She was so intense with me that I found it overwhelming lessons with her. Nevertheless, our friendship remained intact. I remember Laurette saying a

keep you from earer for that belief, and went on to start the Philharmonia Baroque and whatnot. She also managed to convert Israel to harpsichords. She brought the first harpsichords to Israel, which is an interesting note.

Laurette was such an original, and so driven by her passions for Bach and early music and harpsichord, and so on she was just a very compelling person to know, and very inspiring. I tried to model myself after her a little bit in those respects. She actually gave me my first commission. It was unofficial, but this was I think when I had just turned thirty, I had gone back to San Francisco State and had just gotten my Masters. I was living in San Francisco at the time. That was when she had the idea of asking me to write variations on a theme that Sweelink had also written variations on. She gave me two tunes that he had written variations on, and let me choose. So I chose one called *Mein junges Leben hat ein End* not because of its title, which was a little grim, but because the melody for me lent itself to playing with, and varying. It had a

very, very clear structure and a lot of scale passages, and a lot of very distinctive motives and so on that could be done things with. And she sat me down and showed me all the kinds of sounds that a harpsichord could make. You know how I love that kind of a thing there again, it was an ear-opener for me, because one thinks of it as rather limited, but it is not, especially as a solo instrument. I later wrote a piece for her and what was then the New Music Ensemble, I believe, under John Adams, though Joan Gallegos conducted it. It was sort of a mini-concerto. That was less successful, partly because I was green for writing for larger ensembles, and partly because one could not overcome the inaudibility of the instrument in that setting. But *Mein junges Leben* variations by me have really been a sort of main-stay of the modern repertoire for harpsichord, and numerous other harpsichordists have played it. In fact just this summer, one of her students from years and years and years ago, Yonit,

aching at the Conservatory.

People are playing my things all over the world who knew me here. They sometimes ask me, -and-such? I have a small orchestra or I play in a string quartet or I have an ensemble at such-and-one who encouraged me to take an unpaid leave of absence at one point. She always showed me by example and by her encouragement, how to dare to do things.

LAURANCE May I just ask you may have mentioned this but how did you meet Laurette Goldberg?

ARMER Through Lois. I think they went to the same synagogue.

LAURANCE So she was not at Mills?

ARMER No, no, no. Lois married fairly soon out of college, and established herself in Berkeley at that house where she still lives, which is about a mile from where I live now. And plied her piano career. Anyway, I have many, many, many anecdotes about Laurette. And I miss her, to this day.

And then of course, as I mentioned, I met Alden Jenks when we were both about eighteen, at Aspen. I also met Paul Hersh there. We would go trout fishing together. That happened several times in years following, even after he was married we would go fishing together. Let me see who else whom I mentioned yesterday. The rest were all befriended from within my Conservatory career.

Bonnie Hampton: for all the years that I lived in my present house, which is almost forty, she and Nate Schwartz lived very nearby, down the hill on Spruce Street. I live up in the Berkeley hills at the top of the crest. I knew Nathan before I taught at the Conservatory because he taught at Dominican, but in the college, proper

Mondays. The nuns I like to think thought we were having an affair, because we would often meet for breakfast and show up together. Of course they had nothing to entertain them very much in the wa

way. I knew Bonnie when she was married to Colin Hampton, and she had taught actually, I knew her in my college days. To be accurate, I knew her before I knew Laurette. She was a very young faculty member at Mills when I was there. I often turned pages for her and for violinist Nate Rubin. In fact I turned pages so often that peo

Rubin, and some of the players Jean Louis Leroux and Peggy Cunningham performers, singers Edgar Jones all of the performing professionals that I knew at Mills really set the standard for professionalism and musicality, and remained sort of icons for me to this day; and Bonnie was one of those. Even as we have become friends, she still to me is an icon. I aspire to that same kind of dedication and total absorpt have achieved it to the extent that she has. But people like that remain inspirations to me even as we become friends and get older, and as age in some sense makes us more equal. [laughter] The great leveler before death.

I knew Andy Imbrie because he lived next door to Lois. For the two years that I taught at UC Berkeley, of course he was on leave at that time, and a couple of other teachers, which was the reason, I believe, Sonja Neblett and I were called in as substitutes for some courses. But it was Andy who gave me his personally annotated in pencil copy of *Harmonic Practice* by Sessions, which to me was the bible for teaching harmony. Well, no, the Bach chorales are the Bible, but this was like something that explained that bible. But Andy had taught out of it for so long, and of course studied with Sessions, that he had found all of the exercises which if you did them would result in parallel fifths, through and clarified and crossed out a few things. been a long time since I used that to teach harmony, but it always remained the foundation of my teaching harmony. Later in my life, I went over at and played him some tapes of my compositions, and he was suitably impressed, and sort of unofficially welcomed me into the family, as it were.

course I knew of Milton and Peggy Salkind, as I mentioned yesterday, before I became friends with them or before I worked at the Conservatory. In fact it was when I was still teaching piano in Berkeley recently out of college and May Kurka was teaching piano around the corner, I was practicing piano in my front window one morning on Cedar Street in Berkeley, in a little duplex that I lived in at that time I think the rent was seventy-five dollars a month I was practicing at the piano and at some point I looked out, and who should be walking by just out on a walk, but May Kurka and the Salkinds. So I ran out, and greeted them and we talked for a while. And then I remember in later years, not very long after

that, through Laurette I also knew Gary Samuel, and people who played in the Oakland Symphony at that time. They had every year a benefit gala. For some reason I ended up triple dating I went with _____ nd
he was a friend of Gary Samuels, and May went as Gary Samue

Berkeley as well, so for many years we commuted together. Sometimes Sonja Neblett would join us, when she lived in Berkeley. I am grateful to Joan because she went out of her way to find composing opportunities for me within the Conservatory. She would be on the program committee for Chamber Music West, the summer programs. She would cause them to ask me to write them a piece. She also directed the New Music Ensemble early on. And then, as I said

ARMER Exactly. And as far as tenure is concerned, look what happened. I came

LAURANCE Maybe you would like to say when you met Colin [Murdoch]?

ARMER Oh, Colin! For goodness sake, yes. That was kind of a watershed change, when he became President. He had been Dean before, and then we had one disastrous year when he was Dean that the Board made a terrible mistake and hired somebody who shall remain nameless, who was just a complete flop. Had no idea what he was doing. So after that, Colin

[laughter]

LAURANCE What an odd thing to say on his part.

ARMER Conrad is a friend that I talk to outside of school a lot, and not just about wonderful friend.

LAURANCE

ARMER Dick Howe was a wonderful character. Very warm and extremely

elude me, but he was another person who was not an administrator per se. He was a human being. He was perfect for Dean at the time that he was Dean because he fit right into that sort of un-doctrinaire, creative atmosphere that prevailed at the Conservatory then. He also was such a decent, good hearted human being, that he could handle some of the squabbles and misunderstandings and personal misfortunes and so on that always come up in a school and with a faculty.

LAURANCE Let me actually skip a little bit, because you just brought up Vivian Fine, and I wanted to hear about that. composers that most influenced [you], and how your compositional style developed, or changed what is the genesis of what you consider your style, or styles?

ARMER this sounds haughty in a way anybody whose m

her at a relatively young age. Even when I was thirty, I was still pretty green professionally, with regard to composing. I had not learned to take myself really seriously, and I only reluctantly put myself

of the Conservatory. It was partly because of the times, and partly because of my own personality. Vivian was a role model, because she had never let anything stop her. She was also a very funny, bright woman, and she to remember oh, we met in Berkeley, through some mutual friends. I think Stephanie Friedman, the singer, her parents were good friends of Vivian and her husband, Ben Karp, who was a sculptor and artist a painter. She came to hear something of mine, and she was struck. When I went to New York I visited with her, and I shared some of my music with her and heard a performance of hers a piece of hers out at Hunter College. I believe it was the premiere of her *Brass Quartet*, which remains an important

LAURANCE Would you talk a little bit about Composers,
touched on?

ARMER

was a group of people men

seriously in that regard, but I enjoy the respect, if not deference, and I enjoy the camaraderie, and the acceptance and belonging. I enjoy the Conservatory.

LAURANCE You discussed, a bit, the nature of being a woman composer, specifically it relationship started?

ARMER Oh, right! Yes, I can tell you how that started. When I was just out of graduate school, Roger Nixon, my teacher, had given me several names of publishers to approach in New York that being where publishers were. [laughter] He had even written them unheard of nobody. One of the places I went was Broude Brothers Broude Brothers, I'd Broude, there were two different ones. At that time, Jonathan Elkus was living in the East with his wife and son, and working for Broude. I met him there, and he was so kind and gentlemanly to me been Albert Elkus, who had chosen the building on 19th Avenue when he was President of the Conservatory, I at the Conservatory at that time. At any rate, I had a really modest success, trotting off to New York with my scores under my arms. I learned a lot, and I established some I did get one bite,

computers, in those days. So we would write letters back and forth with these outrageous notions, and came up with the idea of

she would come back with a whole poem, or a whole little drama written out. She invented this herd of animals called lyrovus. Instead of giving milk, they gave music. Instead of cowboys, these conductors would lash the herds of lyrovus through the streets of the village, and the villagers would sit on walls and by the side of the road and listen to them sing three times a day,

series, but the premise of every one of them was that ridiculous. The extent to which we could be ridiculous, or wacky, or imaginative to an almost grotesque degree was part of the fun. It was the

the two of us could have done that, or been that way.

Then of course I would get commissions, or have reasons to write other pieces for other forces, so I would think of something that music could be to make each of those pieces about, and propose it to her. Over the course of about ten years we formed an archipelago of islands, each of which had a society that used music in a different way. Ursula is very fond of archipelagos. You look at the fantasy and sci-fi books that she has written, and she has often illustrated them with her own maps, including archipelagos and islands. So she ended up making a map of this particular archipelago, which was called Uttermost Parts. It was a true collaboration—sometimes I would think of things to do with the words, and sometimes she would think of things to do with the music. We tried to use every combination of words and music that we could think of, including one without words, and another without music, so we really covered all bases. [laughter] This ultimately was recorded on the Koch International label. Jon Elkus was particularly instrumental in forming a group of us that were like a little company that saw to this production. Jonathan was part of it, and Ursula was part of it—and Don Ehrlich—the violist was part of it. He had played in one of the pieces and had adored Ursula. L just wanted to be part of this. We were headed up by an advisor whom we paid well to help in the production of this, Miriam Abrams Philharmonic. The orchestral piece that was in this series actually starts it on the double CD

or it will sink. This was all ordained by the god Gegg, a deity who was very fond of music. But as with all of the other pieces, this one was sort of a metaphor for reality in our lives. You have to keep playing an orchestra or it sense. But there again, the opportunities to be imaginative were so great that the whole experience of doing this ten-year project with Ursula really, greatly, added to my composing chops. Because she taught me this association taught me to do what she does, a lot of her science fiction books are about entire societies that she writes about almost in the manner of her father, who was an anthropologist. She studies these people on other planets, or in other times, in imaginary places, and she goes to these places like an anthropologist going out in the field. She interviews mind in a sense you go into one of these things totally passive, and totally curious. That allows you are simply allowing it. That is such a wonderful way to be an artist. I now try to get my students to do the same thing, and some of them are so relieved to be allowed to do that.

only thing that can tell you what to compose is yourself: your own musical impulses, and your own imagination. How to do it, of course, you can get a little help. But it was really literally mind blowing. It gave me great joy, and great expansion as a composer. Jonathan [Elkus], yes, was a part of that, and of course published all of the pieces. I believe some of them can be heard

Also, *Lockerbones/Airbones*, is on another link interview of Ursula and me by Persimmon Magazine in the fall of 2010. But all you have to do is Google *Lockerbones/Airbones*, and you can hear that cycle too, with the words just scrolling

LAURANCE How many pieces are there total in *Uses of Music in Uttermost Parts*?

ARMER Eight.

LAURANCE our collaboration with Ursula Le Guin, any other pieces that you want to discuss?

ARMER n awful lot for voice and piano; a number of cycles. Because I love words, and I feel a kind of special attraction to try to augment them and surpass them, if you will, with music. Sometimes in my earlier work I wrote things that were quite difficult for the voice, and not much more doable in the piano part. But I have learned a lot over the years to write more for the voice. Part of my skill in that now comes from having been part of a Composition Department where we have regular art-song contests and choral music contests, where I work with people who are setting words. Also I learn from them what

they have learned from other teachers here David Conte and Conrad Susa in particular so
ching here has taught me. Just less than a year ago I completed a

LAURANCE

John Cage like, actually.

ARMER

LAURANCE As a human being. I think that is up to you to interpret.

ARMER Well, it comes down always to the people that I gained, and the people that I lost. It always comes down to people. The death of my sister, when I was only thirty, and she was thirty-eight, had a profound influence. The birth and raising of my children. All of the

