

John McCarthy Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives
50 Oak Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted August 28, 2015
Tessa Updike, Interviewer

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project

The Conservatory's Oral History Project has the goal of seeking out and collecting memories of historical significance to the Conservatory through recorded interviews with members of the Conservatory's community, which will then be preserved, transcribed, and made available to the public.

Among the narrators will be former administrators, faculty members, trustees, alumni, and family of former Conservatory luminaries. Through this diverse group, we will explore the growth and expansion of the Conservatory, including its departments, organization, finances and curriculum. We will capture personal memories before they are lost, fill in gaps in our understanding of the Conservatory's history, and will uncover how the Conservatory helped to shape San Francisco's musical culture through the past century.

John McCarthy Interview

This interview was conducted at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on Friday, August 28, 2015 by Tessa Updike.

Tessa Updike

Tessa Updike is the archivist for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Tessa holds a B.A. in visual arts and has her Masters in Library and Information Science with a concentration in Archives Management from Simmons College in Boston. Previously she has worked for the Harvard University Botany Libraries and Archives and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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John McCarthy



John McCarthy's life in music includes that of pianist, distinguished pedagogue, arts administrator and educational consultant.

As a performer, McCarthy has appeared with the San Francisco Symphony in Davies Symphony Hall and at the Ojai Festival with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. The John and Annamarie McCarthy Piano Duo has presented numerous performances at Stanford University, the Bracebridge Concerts at Yosemite National Park, and at CAMI (Columbia Artist Management Hall) in New York City. McCarthy's many involvements in contemporary music include first performances of works by Gerard Grisey, Frederic Rzewski and Elaine Bearer, as well as recording for Composer Recording Society.

John McCarthy is widely recognized as one of today's leading pedagogues. In 2006, he was one of three teachers of classical music in the nation to receive a Distinguished Teacher Award from the Department of Education and the White House Committee on Presidential Scholars in the Arts, at a ceremony in Washington D.C. This honor was awarded to him again in 2013, acknowledging his "substantial contributions to the development of our nation's young people." His students have appeared as concerto soloists with the Philharmonia Baroque, Royal Scottish National Symphony, San Francisco Symphony, Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, California Symphony, and with several youth orchestras, including San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra and California Youth Symphony. They have performed at the

Gewandhaus in Germany, the Verbier Festival in Switzerland, the Kennedy Center, in San Francisco's Davies Symphony Hall, at Disney Hall in Los Angeles, and on the nationally televised "From the Top at Carnegie Hall."

In 2011, McCarthy was bestowed the title of "Director Emeritus" by the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in a ceremony marking his retirement after 16 years as director of Preparatory and Extension Divisions. During his tenure, McCarthy represented the Conservatory on the Education Committee of the San Francisco Symphony and brought the Preparatory Division to a place of international prominence.

August 28, 2015

UPDIKE If it's OK with you, we'll just start at the beginning. Could you tell me where you grew up?

McCARTHY I grew up in New York. I was born in the Bronx, in the same neighborhood as Richard Goode and Murray Perahia. And Miles Graber too, who's on our faculty – we joke about that. My family relocated to Long Island, and I lived about forty-five minutes away from New York City. I had access to all of those resources, with no appreciation of what I actually had. Oh, the Met ... sure. So I spent all of my Saturdays in New York City and had access to concerts and schooling and things like that.

UPDIKE Were your parents musical?

McCARTHY Not even a little bit. They were supportive; I am very fortunate that I have a very uncluttered psyche when it comes to all of that, because they didn't have any expectations of me. I was drawn to music because of a neighbor playing the accordion on her porch. I would sit transfixed, it was so beautiful. Then in my wonderful high school there was a concert series. I think it was Tamás Vásáry who came through and played a recital – a very distinguished pianist who was very young at the time. It was one of these community extensions of Columbia Artists Management, and that did it for me. And who else played...? Leonard Rose with Samuel Sanders accompanying, I remember that vividly – it was in the early to mid '60s.

UPDIKE Did you play the accordion?

McCARTHY I played the accordion.

UPDIKE Was that your first instrument?

McCARTHY That was my first instrument, and I still have it. I eventually stopped playing the accordion and entirely focused on the piano, but somehow word was out that I did this, so I had opportunities to play with the San Francisco Symphony. Joan Gallegos hooked me in for some new music things. There's a whole accordion culture in Europe that's very serious. In America it's a kind of a polka band association. I was involved with avant-garde accordion music ... yes, very out there. Right now it's kind of cool, there's a whole punk rock accordion scene – of which I'm not a part. So I had some very nice experiences playing the accordion, actually. I was into avant-garde accordion music, very out there.

UPDIKE Was it your neighbor who taught you?

McCARTHY No, no. She was a nice little Italian girl. There was somebody in the community who was very developed – he was my teacher. And then I switched to the piano. The repertoire for accordion was very limited, and I was from the very beginning rather high-brow – I wanted to play Bach and Mendelssohn. I liked having the money from playing in bars or bar mitzvahs – but that got old, so I went to an extremely demanding piano teacher.

UPDIKE What age were you?

McCARTHY I was probably 15 or so. She was “not nice”, and for a good reason. My mother would want to pick me up to drive me home in the snow, and I said, “No, I need to walk home – I need to walk this off.” I walked into the first lesson unable to play anything and said I wanted to be a pianist to somebody who had gone to Curtis and studied with Isabelle Vengerova! It was a wonderful relationship – we’re still in touch believe it or not. I’m grateful to her. And I also got the message that I didn’t have time to waste. I think had I had the typical early start with the highly expectant parents, that trajectory wouldn’t have gone very far. I have so many friends who just stopped. You know. So I still practice a lot!

UPDIKE How long did you study with that teacher?

McCARTHY It was only two years. And then I was accepted into the class of Katya Andy at the Boston Conservatory. I fell into an amazing circle with a great pedagogue who had associations with Europe and Edwin Fisher’s circle – Brendel especially. So I didn’t have a drill sergeant in her. She related to me as if I were already a pianist, which was a stroke genius on her part, because it left the responsibility for my development with me. Katya would say, “Oh, Alfred Brendel just came over last night.” She’d talk to me like we were all buddies. I’d reflect: “I’m a pianist – why don’t I play better?” And then that would trigger ownership of my own development. I was then offered a full scholarship to come to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

UPDIKE What year was that?

McCARTHY 1967.

UPDIKE And did you audition in person?

McCARTHY I didn’t actually audition. I studied at a music camp at Sun Valley with the Conservatory’s new president, Milton Salkind. We hit it off, and he offered me a full scholarship. I was sort of incredulous. I said, “Mr. Salkind, why would anybody move to San Francisco to study music?” Goodness gracious! I didn’t realize how outrageous a statement that was at the time. I actually didn’t come the first year. I said “no thank you” and declined his

scholarship offer. But then we stayed in touch and I came the following year. I became something of a fixture, I was in his office daily and at his home every weekend. We had extended discussions about the school; what's working, what's not working. I became friendly with the family, of course. At some point I returned to New York – my teacher here was returning to New York so I went with him, happily. But New York had lost its luster for me, and I was happy to come back to San Francisco. But then I was offered a job here in one of the local colleges and at the Conservatory. And I met my wife! I said, "There's a message here." So I stayed.

UPDIKE Did you study with Milton?

McCARTHY No, actually I studied with Robert Helps, who had also just come out from New York. He was a preeminent player of modern music and he had a very rarified technical approach that I found intriguing, so I was very committed to him. He was somebody who was as much a composer as a pianist. A real intellect, he was different than most pianists and most piano teachers that I know. He actually lived next door to Roger Sessions when he was eighteen. So studying with Bob was quite an experience, and definitely not mainstream. I eventually felt that I wanted to return to the mainstream after a while, for a lot of different reasons. Our relationship got better after I left him – I became better friends with him. And I became better friends with Katja Andy, my Boston teacher, after I left her – I stayed in touch with her until she was 109, which is when she died. That strikes me as kind of curious, it didn't get in the way of anything at all.

After that I studied with Bernhard Abramowitsch for ten years, who was a truly great musician.

UPDIKE What was the atmosphere like at the Conservatory when you joined in the late '60s?

McCARTHY The easy word would be "colorful". There were certain anchors that I needed, that my psyche required. There was a great theory teacher named Sol Joseph who wore a gray suit. He had no interest in anything past Brahms. Mr. Joseph and other people like him were the balance to the post-beatnik, highly creative but unpredictable group of teachers. So there was an old guard, and an avant-garde. Milton's task was to somehow homogenize it all, to mediate these oppositions. He was the one who moved towards making it a more mainstream kind of school. The person preceding him, who I did not know but have heard wonderful things about, is Robin Laufer. He was a Viennese man, and he certainly had his hands full. Milton gradually brought the school into the circle of conservatories. Milton wasn't the most adroit from an administrative point of view, but was incredibly sincere. He was a real musician, a real teacher, and truly cared about young people and music. So he was very attractive. I think he was the president for twenty-five years. I studied with Peggy for some period of time when I returned.

My student days were a destabilizing time for me. The atmosphere was not comfortable, it was not conducive to doing good work. So I had to hang on. I also had a wonderful harpsichord teacher named Margaret Fabrizio, who was an inspiration. I have mixed feelings about my student days at the Conservatory. I was happy to leave, I needed to get back to a ground. The Conservatory was all that the '60s were, some of us survived and lived happily ever after.

UPDIKE Did you participate in the New Music Ensemble at the Conservatory?

McCARTHY Yes, I did.

UPDIKE Do you remember some of the performances that you did at that time?

McCARTHY There was a piece by Loren Rush named *Dans le Sable*. I remember it was a Mozart aria surrounded with aleatoric effects. It was gorgeous. Another piece that has stayed with me was called *Popcorn Music*, it was hilarious! Margaret Fabrizio and Robert Hughes, the bassoonist, played aleatoric sounds as the popcorn popped. I loved all of that fantasy and humor.

There were concerts at the de Young where people would line up to be there. We would all go over to hear Gerhard Samuel conduct the Oakland Symphony, there was a sense of history being made. And there was this wonderful old guard of European musicians – Adolph Baller and Bernhard Abramowitsch. And then a more quiet circle who were remarkable but not interested in self-promotion – Tom La Ratta, Claire James, Robert Sheldon and Bea Beauregard. They were very strong teachers. Prior to them the great pianist Egon Petri taught at SFCM. We all know who Abraham Lincoln was – Petri was a pianist of that stature. It is interesting how the Bay Area was filled with important artists, post-World War II.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little about Robert Helps? Is there anything that you'd like to say about him as a person or as a musician?

McCARTHY Well, we were very good friends. He was remarkably funny and subtle. He was well known for the list of names that he collected – these were real names of real people that he published as a Christmas present every year. They were simply hilarious – I kept them, I still have them. I kept one on my desk when I was the Prep director, which I would read daily. Bob was a very complicated, curious combination of forces I think. I believe his father was a distinguished doctor from Princeton, and his mother was a Christian Scientist. He studied the piano with a renowned pedagogue named Abby Whiteside. He was remarkable when playing French music. But he also studied composition with Roger Sessions, which was very craggy and “content” oriented. It was Bob's good fortune that Roger Sessions was a great teacher, and he encouraged his students to trust their own ears and their own voices. So Bob's music wasn't at all like Roger Sessions. I found that always to be fascinating and kind of unique about him. And

he was very kind, he was a good soul. Outrageously irreverent, I would say. So we stayed friendly until the day he died. He had friends everywhere, he ended up at the University of South Florida. There's a Robert Helps festival and competition, and I serve on their board. He was not inclined toward self-promotion, he simply was interested in music. And his approach was so controversial that other faculty members just could not come to terms with it because it was almost a contradiction of everything they believed. And it caused difficulty for the students, who had to take juries. I think he had gone too far; he took his principles and extended the logic of it to the point where it wasn't functioning, so I was critical of his approach, and he knew that. We had very good talks about teaching – friendly. It was time well spent.

UPDIKE And could you talk a little about Bernhard Abramowitsch?

McCARTHY Bernhard and Bob Helps were very good friends. Bernhard came here after the war, he ... what can I say? Bob Helps was a forward-looking character, and Bernhard was a very deep, looking-back person, but with profound insights into everything he did. He gave first performances of works by Roger Sessions and Béla Bartók in the Bay Area, believe it or not. He had a way of saying one thing at the end of a lesson which would set your head spinning – that kind of a teacher. Extraordinarily insightful. To this day, I don't know how self-aware he was of the kind of impact he was having. But I've come to believe that he was totally self-aware. For example, my wife Annamarie and I were about to play a live performance being broadcast over the radio. The announcer was introducing us, there was an audience. Mr. Abramowitsch came up to me with great sincerity and told me about having seen an autographed copy of a Mozart piece where the phrasing was different than in any printed edition – and he got absorbed in talking about this manuscript. I finally had to say, "I have to go now – I have to go play!" Was that done because he was just naively engrossed in this thing and fascinated by it, or was he trying to cool me down and distract me? I'll never know that. But that's the kind of person he was, and the kind of teacher he was. He too, like Bob, was otherworldly; an entire focus on music and musical values, and human values. He was somebody with a very small career, his students would find themselves in positions of power and try to arrange concerts in the East Coast and various Ivy League schools, and he'd get enthused and somehow it never quite happened. He just wasn't driven to do that. He would play the Schubert *B-flat major Sonata* so beautifully that nobody would clap – people would just sit there balling. He lived to be eighty, and I don't know when Bob died, but both of them died a little too young, I think. They were fully involved in their lives. There is still a circle of people who talk about him, meet together and listen to recordings; it's quite a nice little cult.

UPDIKE What year did you start teaching at the Conservatory?

McCARTHY I began teaching here before I graduated. I was doing everything from erasing blackboards to conducting the orchestra, all on the same Saturday. After I graduated I

was offered a teaching position, and it was approximately early '70s. That was the reason I did not go back to New York. I have taught here ever since. I was offered a contract by a blood relative of a founder of the Conservatory Ada Clement, Marion Murray. I was asked to teach musicianship, which I enjoyed tremendously. And so I had a very full Saturday, and then I became co-chair of the musicianship program, which I also enjoyed. I was able to shape the way in which that was taught. There was also somebody who joined the faculty named James Wimer. Jim was on the faculty at Juilliard in the pre-college for twenty-five years, and assistant to Renée Longy, who brought solfège to America. Again, a very esoteric approach, I would say, and remarkable. Among her students were Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein. So it was a very orally focused approach that could do profound things to people, and I wound up studying with him for six years. Our lessons would be six hours long, I'd finally have to stand up and say "Bye! I can't do this any longer." He was remarkable ... difficult. There was a lot of very remarkable, out of the box teaching that was going on at the Conservatory.

UPDIKE Let's go through a few more people from the early days when you were here, in the early '70s, and then we'll go into some of your classes and teaching style.

McCARTHY OK.

UPDIKE Could you start just by talking a little bit more about Milton Salkind?

McCARTHY Milton was urbane. He was essentially a teacher. He had no prior experience or interest in being an administrator at the school. I think that Jimmy Schwabacher and Agnes Albert were advocates for him. They tried to do a search, I believe, and weren't able to identify anybody, and so I think Jimmy recommended that Milton do it. I don't think he had expectations of that. As a teacher he was very focused on the needs of the student, whatever it might be. He had technical things to offer that were new to me, and had a very high-end circle of students. I think students were drawn to him – I remember Milton as somebody who would pick up hitchhikers on 19th Avenue. He would recognize students and take them to school. That was Milton.

Milton seemed to know everybody. He was very worldly. Milton introduced me to Aaron Copland in the hallway at the old Ortega Street school. He very kindly told Mr. Copland that I played his *Piano Fantasy*, which is a difficult piece. And Copland was quite taken with that because it's not a piece that anyone really plays – it's 40 minutes of twelve-tone music. So he was very eager to hear me play it, but he said that he couldn't because he had to go see the mayor. I said "OK" – I was relieved. Then I got the nicest letter from him, unsolicited, three weeks later. So Milton was somebody who liked to do that. He would leave a student with a sense that they were a part of the real music world. He was very much a realist though, he was not one to leave one with unchallenged fantasies. So he did remarkable things for the

Conservatory. He had a knack for recruiting strong young musicians. I don't think he knew or cared at all about academic process or committees or anything like that. So he was clearly the right guy at that time.

UPDIKE Is there anything you can say about Marion Clement Murray?

McCARTHY Oh, you know the middle name! Well, she was a very unassuming, quiet piano teacher. I don't think she had any particular entrepreneurial interests, she just was a very sincere lady who cared about students and had this legacy to attend to. I think that when Milton came in and May Kurka became Marion's assistant, Marion was relieved but you could see a shift in the kind of expectations. I think they were not professional expectations emanating from Marion, but they were nurturing. She was a wonderful person.

UPDIKE And could you talk about May Kurka?

McCARTHY May was my predecessor as director of the Prep. May had remarkable sense of young people, especially pre-teens, I thought she had a remarkable sense of how to work with them. A real ear, and really deep musical values, and no ego whatsoever – it was not about her. She also created a very remarkable faculty with Milton's support – both Milton and May saw the profound importance in having a Prep Division, so they were rather uncompromising about preserving and growing that, and were more successful I think with that than the college. I think there were different issues for the college. So May was very good at creating a community of parents and students – there were all sorts of obstacles with finances and so forth, but they never seemed to bother her. She and I became very close. She was very forward looking. May was very committed to the music of her deceased husband Robert.

UPDIKE Is there anything that you'd like to say about Isadore Tinkleman?

McCARTHY Oh, dear. Well Izzy and I were very good friends. Izzy was incredibly supportive of me. He was a great violin teacher, very tough in an old New York kind of way. Very devoted to his students. He and Zaven Melikian would practically be in fist fights over one thing or another, but they were very respectful of one another at the same time. In terms of music, he was really on my case because he had ambitions for me that I didn't have for myself. He wanted me to learn all the Beethoven violin sonatas because his friend Bobby Mann – the great violinist – wanted to record them. Izzy wanted to recommend me for this project. Robert Mann wanted a young person who would be malleable, he didn't want to collaborate with a colleague. I didn't do it – my interest at that time was mainly playing four-hand music with Annamarie. He was a good ol' boy, I'll tell you that – much more than me!

UPDIKE Is there anything that you'd like to say about Zaven Melikian?

McCARTHY I loved Zaven. Also very colorful, I used to roll my eyes when he would come into my office in the Prep Division because I knew it would mean an extended conversation and I had things to do. Again, an extraordinary violin teacher, the likes of which I'd never seen before. He was totally devoted to his students, and warmhearted, and very difficult. He always wanted something his way. Very, very artistic. When I say difficult it's in quotes. I deeply appreciated Zaven.

UPDIKE Would you like to talk at all about Margaret Rowell? Did you know Margaret?

McCARTHY I didn't know her well, but she was obviously the Saint of the Conservatory. A bust of Margaret Rowell that was commissioned by the Conservatory was on display in my office here at Oak Street.

UPDIKE Did you know Bonnie Hampton?

McCARTHY I know Bonnie better, but not that well. Bonnie was always, again, very appreciative and nice, but we never played together. I regret that, of course.

UPDIKE Beulah Forbes?

McCARTHY I knew Beulah quite well. Of course she was a character. An incredibly effective, wonderful teacher. She was totally devoted to her students, very warm, and obviously a great jazz player. She was beloved.

UPDIKE Laurette Goldberg?

McCARTHY I got to know Laurette quite well. Laurette was a bit of a thorny person when I first met her because she was so militant about historically informed performance practice. But gradually I was won over, and I just loved her and the work that she was doing. We were never student/teacher, we were more colleagues. I had studied with her predecessor, so there was that element of a different approach to the harpsichord. She was a major contributor to the conversation about how to play Bach. What would it be like without her having been here? It's hard to say, I mean there's obviously early music everywhere in the Bay Area, but she was sort of the personality – she was the force behind it. She was the person who had the ideas, she created Music Sources – she created Philharmonia Baroque. And was absolutely right about a lot of things.

UPDIKE John Adams?

McCARTHY I don't know John very well. I think he is a nice guy, and a very good dad. We tell jokes to one another but we aren't very close.

UPDIKE Joan Gallegos?

McCARTHY Joan was Joan. Joan had very high musical values. She too had no particular patience with academic niceties. She was very fair-minded, obviously very tough and very effective. I never actually had her as a teacher, but I worked with her in the New Music Ensemble quite a bit. We went out to hear Oscar Peterson a few times. We never got to know each other as well as I would have liked.

UPDIKE Yaada Weber?

McCARTHY Yaada Weber is one of those Saints, like Margaret Rowell. She was extraordinarily healthy and very committed to a very specific approach to playing the flute. Totally devoted to her students – not self-interested at all. The last time I saw her for lunch she was still talking about her approach to the instrument with great fervor. I think she had generations upon generations of students were affected by her. She and I were very close – my daughter studied with her.

UPDIKE Is there anybody else from the faculty or staff from the early years that you can think of?

McCARTHY There was a circle of piano faculty when I was a student who I fear will be lost in the annals of footnotes somewhere. There was Robert Sheldon, Tom La Ratta and Beatrice Beauregard. Robert Sheldon had a heart of gold. He was a student of Egon Petri. Tom La Ratta was a great piano teacher – still alive. He was a student of Rudolph Ganz – very similar to Robert Sheldon, who simply was interested in teaching and not self-promotion. And Bea Beauregard also, very committed. I think they were a little bit taken aback with the shifts of the school. I don't know how they came to the school, although Tom I think spoke with Robin Laufer and I think told him that he didn't want students – he wanted to bring students in because he had so many success stories. They all had very developed students, in particular Tom La Ratta.

UPDIKE So when you started teaching at the Conservatory, your first classes were in musicianship?

McCARTHY Well, there was piano. I would have piano students, and before I graduated I was asked to substitute by May Kurka. It was apparent even then that I am very teacherly. I

took on a young boy who was not of interest to the rest of the faculty. But as it turned out he was very charismatic and incredibly gifted, and he turned into a big player. Right at that time I had two other very gifted kids – one of whom practiced incessantly, and the other who could sight-read anything. The three of them were very different, but all of a sudden I became visible because of them, and one thing led to another, so I ended up with a very high-end group of students without any particular system in place to attract good students; it just sort of evolved. It was meant to be.

UPDIKE This was your first time teaching?

McCARTHY I had taught in New York at a little school on Long Island that had a Steinway in every room and flowers on the concert hall piano. It was a group of little old ladies who were remarkable. One of them had made her Carnegie Hall debut – but on the first day of the Depression. Bad timing! So her career ended right then. It was a wonderful experience, and kind of cemented my interest in teaching.

UPDIKE Could you talk about some of the other classes you taught, including your four-hand piano class?

McCARTHY Let's see ... I taught musicianship of course, and chamber music a bit. Annamarie and I would teach a four-hand class in the Adult Extension division for several years. That turned out to be quite wonderful. We were doing it just because we liked it. The way we organized the classes was to have assigned groups. I also had four-hand groups in the Prep. That continued until it was decided it was taking up too much space, and costing the school money, they felt. The way we did it was to have our groups assigned, and committed to one another, and they would come and play in different rooms and we would travel from classroom to classroom and coach them, then we'd come together at the end for the last hour or so and there would be little performances. It was a wonderful little community.

UPDIKE I know that you've had many, many students over the years. Are there any students from the Conservatory who come to mind who you'd like to talk about a little bit?

McCARTHY They are all so remarkable. I think the first person I'd like to talk about is Jeremie Pigman. Jeremie auditioned and played the *F major Invention* without the B-flat. I nodded and said, "Uh oh!" May Kurka asked me to take him. Jeremie Pigman's family relocated from rural Kentucky to attend the Prep. He went from playing the *F major Invention* without the B-flat to playing with the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas – not the Youth Orchestra, the Symphony – all within three or four years. He was enormously talented and fast, and really was a standout in that respect. Then he studied with Milton briefly, and attended The Juilliard School at the age of sixteen.

Then there were Tanya Gabrielin, Mayumi, Rieko Tsuchida, Christine Kim and Agata Sorotokin ... all wonderful. Hilda Huang's playing of Bach is quite irresistible. When I select students it isn't so much about what they can do, it's more that I want to see what I can do.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about your teaching style when you first started, and maybe how it has evolved over the years?

McCARTHY Oh, that's a very interesting question. It's completely transformed from when I first got started. The first student I had was a child of my teacher. Bad decision! Christine Kim, when asked about my teaching style said it best. She said that I had extraordinarily high expectations and standards. And then she said that I don't do very much! I said, "Christine! How dare you? That's not true." I do what I need to do to lead the student to the next step. I'll set them up but I will not spoon-feed things. I allow the student to take whatever steps are needed to figure things out and find their own voice. So my students all play very differently from me, and from one another. I'm very proud when I have Christine playing Chopin so beautifully, and Hilda playing Bach so beautifully, and Agata playing 20th century Russian music so wonderfully. I allow them and encourage them to find their genuine point of interest on this journey – we're all on our own journey.

UPDIKE I'd like to talk some about the Preparatory and Extension Divisions, but before we get there I like to ask this question of people who were at the school in the early '70s about Hellman Hall – and about how having, finally, a performance venue at the school might have changed the character of the school?

McCARTHY That's a wonderful question, and right on the money. The shift in the self-identity of the school was rather profound. The previous hall (it's almost an overstatement to call it a hall) – all of a sudden we had a state of the art facility. It was not ideal for everything, but wonderful for most things – wonderful for chamber music. I think that was a step towards the Conservatory being seen as a serious destination. I think Milton would have had a dreadful time building the school without having that hall. He would have had a terrible time recruiting top-end faculty without Hellman hall.

UPDIKE Were you at the first Family Day in 1975?

McCARTHY Yes.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about that?

McCARTHY It was wonderful, Family Days were wonderful. It was entirely May Kurka's doing – it happened in the most kind of casual way. Families simply decided they wanted to have lunch together, and have time to socialize and chat, and have little student performances, and it quickly became institutionalized in a very organic, wonderful way. Recitals were designed to have people bring their lives other than the lives we knew as classical musicians – so there were spirituals being played by an African American string quartet, there was Peruvian dancing – all sorts of pop music things were happening, and it continued to expand and became a very real fixture in the Prep. And it continued – I was very happy to continue that until I retired.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about enrollment in Prep and Extension over the years? Whether there were periods maybe of struggle to overcome?

McCARTHY I don't remember any difficulties whatsoever, in terms of the program being attractive to potential students in the Bay Area. Challenges had to do with space – we couldn't expand past where we were. Saturdays were always filled – weekday evenings were always filled with Extension things. We never had even a hint of difficulty with students. And we had standards, there were auditions. There were risks taken – if clearly there was training that wasn't appropriate but we saw there was potential. I think enrollment in the Sing-It-Yourself *Messiah* started to decline when the decision was made to do away with Lou Magor's Sing-It-Yourself boot-camp.

UPDIKE Learn It with Lou?

McCARTHY Learn It with Lou. When that stopped, there was less of a community of people who would do that. And then, there was a decision made to stop the Sing-It-Yourself *Messiah* at Davies Symphony Hall. That had profoundly negative impact on the Adult Extension, as I foresaw and told them would happen. That was a glue for the Adult Extension Division, and when those students stopped coming for the Adult Extension Division, they also stopped coming for various classes. So there was a decline at that point. It was complicated at Oak Street – reinventing the program to keep it fresh – where there was concern about the new neighborhood.

UPDIKE What were some of the other popular classes for Adult Extension over the years?

McCARTHY Charles Barber was a very gifted teacher and musicologist. He had a following – whatever he taught would be filled. He was a scholar and a conductor, and has written a book on [Alexander] Siloti. He could construct very compelling classes. And my four-hand class was popular.

UPDIKE When was Robert Greenberg here?

McCARTHY Oh Bob, of course was a big attraction. That was about twenty years ago, I would say. He and I were co-directors of the Adult Extension Division when I became director of the Prep. He was the entrepreneur – Bob could drum up business and get on the radio – he liked all of that. I would take care of the behind-the-scenes things. And then he left, very upset, over something, and rightly so. So when he left, I think we lost a certain level of enthusiasm.

UPDIKE Is there anything that you'd like to say about the beginnings of Summer Music West?

McCARTHY There was an obvious need and interest for some kind of summer program that was close to home. Those of us who taught musicianship welcomed an opportunity to continue through the summer. There was a vibrant chamber music program and opera program, and the thought was that we should be a little broader in our reach, and have a little bit more of a community program. So we would put on operas that were glued together with scotch tape. Kids would get very excited about that. Hermann le Roux was the force behind that, and Doris Fukawa and Susan Bates were the chamber music chairs at that time. Chamber music was a special part of the Prep Department in particular. So Summer Music West became a big part of Conservatory life. It was a nice point of entry for some kids into the school. So it certainly helped with enrollment.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little about how you came to be director of Prep – was it in 1995?

McCARTHY 1995. Well, my emotional investment and professional life was here at the Conservatory. I had no interest in administration, I had interest in teaching and carrying the torch. I was asked to be on a search committee to find a new director, and I was very happy to be a part of that. The tenor of the conversation – the thrust of this – was alarming to me. The tone was that the person to replace May Kurka should be very oriented towards an inclusive community program. Well, May had done everything in her power to have a school where there was a real notion of what it meant and what it took to be a musician and to do the best we could for those kids. I really remember making a decision that this needs to be challenged, and so I withdrew from the committee and I decided to apply for the position.

UPDIKE And you were hired.

McCARTHY Well, it was interesting. Colin Murdoch told me he did not want an inside candidate. I said, "That's OK that you don't want that, but I'm going to apply. You can decline." And I was hired, and did everything in my power to resist that idea of having a program that was

open to anyone who would happen to want lessons. It isn't that I'm opposed to community music making, or community music programs, in fact I was a force in having the Prep join the National Guild of Community Music Schools, which I think was a good move at the time. We expanded what we did in the Prep to include community outreach in various forms. I am very proud that the Preparatory Division became highly respected and visible in the international music scene.

UPDIKE Are there accomplishments that you've made over the years you would like to highlight?

McCARTHY Thank you for asking. I obviously was building on a strong program. May Kurka had created a wonderfully healthy environment with parents and children and teachers – good relationships and excellence and value. I think I augmented each aspect of that – I think the level of excellence at the high end had no precedent. The relationships with the parents and teachers I think became ever more friendly. I had been approached by the Pre-college director of the Juilliard School, who had taught here one summer, and he told me that he wanted to use this as a model for his program. We had a very active chamber music program. It was finite because of space issues, but there was a way in which we interacted with the community and could pull in students who were not enrolled here – like find a need for a strong cellist and get on the phone and call somebody. I think if there's anything distinctively unique, it would be that the relationship with the larger community shifted to the degree where independent teachers who were very successful would call and ask me if I'd be willing to take some of their top students into the program. So the conscientiousness and the fear and all of that was greatly lessened. And I was very proud of that, and was very respectful of them, too. Our relationship to the community as a whole shifted.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about the move from Ortega Street to Oak Street, and how that might have changed the school?

McCARTHY Obviously being at Oak Street leaves us with a high visibility – access to teachers and events at other major venues. The concerts are well attended – people will tell me they used to drive by the Conservatory – they knew where it was, but very few people said, “I go there for concerts.” That's changed, and that's all very positive. For the Prep, there were problems. Even getting into the building became onerous, there were horrible stories to be told about parents not being let in the building even though their kids were in the building. We had never had anything quite like that before – lots of learning, and I think it's largely improvement, but there was a slow adjustment. There was very little interest in resolving that type of a problem from other forces at the school. The neighborhood itself is dicey, it is not as nice as Ortega Street for a warm and welcoming Prep. Obviously playing in these great halls is a big plus, so there are pluses and minuses to the move for the Prep. I remember there was a faction – Bonnie Hampton included – that wanted to keep the old building and make that a Prep school. But you know, she

wasn't thinking in terms of the costs involved in doing that, so it was an impossible thing. There were also serious factions that wanted to have the Conservatory not relocate downtown, but to be in the Presidio, and then there was interest in the Shriner's hospital, all of which was interesting. But on balance, certainly for the college, this is the place for us to be. But in this location, inevitably the character of the Prep would need to shift, and it has.

UPDIKE This is kind of a similar question, but could you talk about how the Conservatory is different today than it was maybe when you were here as a student, in the early years?

McCARTHY When I was a student, it was creative anarchy! There was such passion about making music, and remarkably gifted teachers. But they didn't see themselves as employees. There was a golden age – I have no regrets about that whatsoever. There were stellar students – the range of students was extremely wide, from not very developed to phenomenal – and they were drawn entirely by the faculty. I think as Milton had success and sorted all of this out it became a little bit more attractive in the catalog and so forth – some of that flavor has been lost.

UPDIKE Do you think that was a cultural shift?

McCARTHY Oh, you mean a larger cultural shift? That's a good question. Partially, yes, I think that's interesting. But I think it's largely the lack of a sense of importance within the school, not within the culture – it became just a class. There's something about certain teaching personalities who are very adept at job interviews and having attractive resumes and hopping around, that clouds the question of their real talent as teachers. I think that the Conservatory was not a destination for a lot of those types of people, because there wasn't money to pay them. I have to say, the level of the students at that period was astounding. Adolph Baller would attract people from all over the world. So it's a tradeoff. But nothing stands still. If you had seen the library at Ortega Street....

UPDIKE I've seen some photos of it.

McCARTHY I kid you not – I would have to charm the librarian because the card catalog was in complete disarray, and we'd talk about his playing tennis with Bob Helps for ten minutes and then I'd say, "I need such and such a book," and he'd say, "Oh yeah, it's right here," and pull it down – but no one else would know where it was.

UPDIKE Oh, my goodness.

McCARTHY And then the next person was a real librarian, and she did a wonderful job. But that says a lot. That's the kind of absurdist side to it all – there was a sort of surreal component to the Conservatory, but the positive were very present as well.

UPDIKE And could you talk a little about the importance of music education – both for Prep students and the importance of Adult Extension in a city like San Francisco at the school?

McCARTHY Obviously I'm a zealot, and I think mainly because I've seen the outcome of music study. I think it's a wonderful message to young people that the students who excel musically and become engaged musically also excel academically. I think it's a myth that one has to choose, I think what it does is it elevates and shifts the consciousness and takes people outside their local definition of themselves and their culture. It's extraordinarily powerful stuff for a kid to experience. San Francisco is rich with opportunities culturally for adults, but it's a bit of a smorgasbord and I think an Adult Extension Division can become a destination where unresolved, incomplete aspirations can be realized and people can come to music late in life. For some people it's just a hobby, and then for others, they're the musician's musician – they have no real interest in being celebrities, but they take themselves seriously. They take their talent seriously. An extension division or an adult division of some type seems to be the right environment for people like that. There are many individual piano teachers who do very good work with private students, but they're not in the position to offer theoretical training, or historical training, and there's an appetite for that.

UPDIKE Thank you so much for doing this, I really appreciate it.

McCARTHY You brought me down memory lane, Tessa! I wasn't expecting all of this. And I was feeling sentiment about a lot of this. I've been at this school for a very long time. It's interesting, I used to be in Milton's office complaining all the time, and he would just laugh. I felt very fervent about how things could and should be educationally, and he loved it.