David Tanenbaum 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 February 2 and 5, 2016
Sam Smith, 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.

David Tanenbaum Interview

This interview was conducted on February 2nd in the Conservatory’s archives and on February 5th in the backyard of David’s house by Sam Smith. Archivist Tessa Updike was present for both interview sessions.

Sam Smith

Sam Smith is a communications and marketing specialist as well as a classical tenor and violist. Currently a publicist with the San Francisco Film Society, he served as director of communications for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music from 2012 to 2015. He appears regularly with many of the region’s leading ensembles, including the San Francisco Symphony, the Grace Cathedral Choir of Men and Boys, American Bach Soloists and Cappella SF, among others. Recording credits include the Delos, Pro Organa and SFS Media labels, with Grammy-Award-winning and nominated releases by the San Francisco Symphony. In his spare time he enjoys playing chamber music with friends and serves as a governor of the San Francisco Chapter of the Recording Academy. An alumnus of the Colburn Community School in Los Angeles, he earned a B.A. from USC and an M. Phil. from King's College, Cambridge University, with further study at Stanford University.

Tessa Updike

Tessa Updike is the archivist for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where she has established the school's historical collections, oral history project, and historical sound preservation project. 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, the GLBT Historical Society, and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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David Tanenbaum

David Tanenbaum and Sam Smith in David's SFCM studio, May 2016

David Tanenbaum has performed in more than 40 countries and has been guest soloist with the San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Minnesota Orchestra and others. He has worked tirelessly to expand the guitar repertoire, and composers such as Hans Werner Henze, Terry Riley, Lou Harrison and Aaron Jay Kernis have dedicated pieces to him. His more than three dozen recordings can be found on EMI, Nonesuch, Rhino, GSP, New Albion, Stradivarius and other labels. Tannenbaum's most recent release is *Awakenings: New American Chamber Music for Guitar* on Naxos, for which he conducts the Conservatory Guitar Ensemble. He has produced many editions of guitar music, including the David Tanenbaum Concert Series for Guitar Solo publications. He has also written a series of three books, *The Essential Studies*, which analyzes the études of Sor, Carcassi and Brouwer and complements his recordings of those works on GSP. His chapter on "The Classical Guitar in the 20th Century" appears in the *Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*. His web site is www.davidtanenbaum.com.

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Tuesday, February 2, 2016
Conservatory archives

SMITH My name is Sam Smith, and I am here with David Tanenbaum, who is the chair of the Conservatory's guitar department. It is Tuesday, February 2nd, 2016, and we are here to do an oral history interview with Mr. Tanenbaum. We would like to start with question number one, which is: could you tell us about your early history – where and when you were born?

TANENBAUM I was born in New York City, and grew up a little bit there. Then at the age of three, my parents bought a house in New Rochelle, New York, which people know from the Dick Van Dyke show. I never actually saw that show, but I was raised there.

SMITH Where in New York City did you grow up for the first three years?

TANENBAUM They had a place in the Bronx.

SMITH Do you want to describe your parents to us, and what their occupations and temperaments/personalities were like?

TANENBAUM My parents were really interesting people. I guess I'll start with my dad. His parents had a grocery store called Tanenbaum's Groceries. My dad was delivering groceries by bicycle starting at age ten, and he played a little trumpet. Then World War II hit, and he lied about his age to go fight. In 1944 in the South of France he was hit in the leg by some shrapnel. It got infected, and he had to have an amputation above the knee. So he was discharged with a Purple Heart. In those days they kept you in rehab for a very long time; he was in a kind of hospital for a year. His brother used to sneak him out in the middle of the night – they had open mic nights in the Savoy when Charlie Parker and Miles Davis were playing, and he got to play his trumpet with them. When he finally got out of the hospital, his parents had set up a chair in the back of the grocery store. They said, "Look, this is where our crippled son is going to stay." They had a place for him to read, and listen to the radio; they planned to organize his life there and let him work a little bit. But instead he went to Juilliard on the G.I. Bill and learned to be a composer, and he met my mom during that time. They got married in 1952 at City Hall, and went directly to a double-header at Ebbets Field right after the ceremony.

SMITH And your father's name is Elias?

TANENBAUM Elias. He was a composer, and he taught some band. He didn't have a full-time job until the Manhattan School of Music hired him when he was fifty. So we didn't have a lot when we were growing up. My mom was a piano teacher, but she was basically raising my brother and I. We went out to eat once a year, and I didn't get on an airplane until I started touring. But my dad taught for twenty-some years at Manhattan School of Music. And you know how the apple doesn't fall that far from the tree? I remember distinctly driving to the Conservatory once and thinking, "OK, I'm commuting about a half an hour right now. What's my dad's commute? It's about a half hour. What days does he teach? Monday, Wednesday, Thursday. That's what days I teach." It was just a different coast. My mom is a WASP from Upstate New York. Her grandfather was kind of a crook who would buy old horses and drug them up to sell at a profit. He did that in Europe, moving from town to town, and then he finally had to flee. So he came to upstate New York, still moving around in the same trade. He finally settled in this obscure little town called Carthage, which is near Watertown, close to the Canadian border. My mom grew up there, played piano and ended up going to Eastman. She told me that one day the Eastman piano teachers were furious because all classes were stopped so that everyone could hear a guitarist named Andrés Segovia. My mom ended up at Columbia doing graduate work, and she met my dad during that time. She had one miscarriage before me, and four after me, so I think I had a little tenacity from early on.

SMITH And your mother's name was?

TANENBAUM Mary. My mom is actually still with us, but she's deep into Alzheimer's.

SMITH I see. So you grew up in a musical household, with both parents whose profession was music.

TANENBAUM Yes.

SMITH Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

TANENBAUM Well, my dad was into the most experimental stuff that was going on. As I was crawling around the living room, very big speakers were playing Stockhausen and music like that. At the same time my mother was practicing Mozart and Beethoven, and teaching some. They report to me that when I was three I was outside on the swings singing Mozart. In fact they found out about that because their neighbor came over and said, "You realize your kid is singing Mozart?" I guess those were the days when a neighbor would recognize Mozart. So my mom started me with tonette and recorder lessons when I was four, and taught me how to read music. I read music before I read English – that was really my first language.

SMITH What's a tonette?

TANENBAUM It’s just a very simple recorder, with fewer notes. I started piano lessons with her when I was five. But studying with a parent is a difficult thing, and by seven we were ready to have me go to somebody else. My next teacher was Michael Pollon at the Westchester Conservatory of Music.

There were just amazing musical influences throughout my childhood. There were New York Philharmonic members coming through the house – my parents had a lot of friends, and my dad knew a lot of people. He went down to see Varése a lot. I never met Varése, but he would tell me, “I saw Varése today”, or, “I saw Stravinsky again today. Such a giant of a musician, and such a small guy.”

When Moog invented the synthesizer I was ten, I think. We went up to rent it right away – my dad wanted to spend the summer with the family in New England and get to know this new synthesizer. One Sunday morning he said, “You’re coming with me to the studio.” Soon the most elegant man arrived, dressed in a three-piece suit with a hat and a beautiful voice, and my father introduced me to Duke Ellington. I watched my dad show him the synthesizer for hours.

SMITH That’s amazing.

TANENBAUM It was amazing. So it was a rich musical life. I started playing cello when I was about eight, and then I remember very specifically that we were driving to play a piano in a concert at the conservatory, and I was thinking, “I’m not ready for this. I don’t want to do this. I don’t think I’m ever going to be on a stage again.”

SMITH How old were you when this happened?

TANENBAUM I was about ten. Part of the reason for that was that the piano was such a loud, sort of centralized instrument. You’re living with two musicians, so they’d be cooking dinner and saying, “David! That s an F-sharp. Mary, pass me the salt!” There was nothing private about it. And even the cello – they’d walk by the room and say, “You’re out of tune! Tune that top string.” I think, looking back, that I wanted something of my own, something that was private.

SMITH The guitar has an intimate voice.

TANENBAUM And you can close the door and not be heard. So given the fact that I entered the same profession as both of my parents, I ended up with a little difference. I’m on the West Coast as a guitarist instead of being on the East Coast with a mainstream instrument like those. At that time I told my parents and my teacher Michael Pollon that I needed a break. He said to them, “Look, this kid’s talented, just let him do what he wants for a year.” That is the time when rock and roll was hitting. I distinctly remember walking out of a record store with a Crosby, Stills & Nash record, and three older kids who were maybe sixteen going, "Dude, look at that little kid with that music. He's never going to understand that!" But I started to explore that music and it led me to the electric guitar. And then my dad said, "Look, if you're playing that stupid guitar, there's someone who can really play the guitar coming to our local town." And that was Andrés Segovia.

That concert was it. I saw that concert, and I knew the whole thing. It was just one of those moments – you hear a lot of guitarists talk in the same way. Segovia himself, when he heard the classical guitar for the first time, just knew. I remember like it was yesterday. It was so dramatic; an old movie theater, a huge stage, a chair, and a footstool. I thought, "How could somebody command this place without a microphone?" And he sat down and did just that. The sound was just overwhelming. I went home the next day and tried to learn some of the pieces he was playing.

SMITH Was there an acoustic guitar in the house?

TANENBAUM There was also an acoustic guitar in the house. That led me to a local teacher, who then recommended me to his teacher. I was started down that path.

SMITH Do you remember what he played?

TANENBAUM I do. It was mostly his classic repertoire – Torroba and Albéniz – but most strong for me was Bach. The piece that I kept trying to work on by myself after the concert was the little *C-minor Prelude*. Well, it's in C-minor on the keyboard, and we transcribe it to D-minor.

SMITH That's a cello suite, right?

TANENBAUM No, it's an independent little keyboard prelude. I wasn't aware that you could change the key, so I was trying to do it in C-minor on the guitar, and realized pretty quickly that I needed help. It's weird to be that age and see your future and know what you're going to do, but I did. I just knew. And I've never been paid a dollar to do anything else. When I started to practice that guitar, I basically had no social life through my teenage years. I just worked eight hours a day.

SMITH Just practicing the guitar?

TANENBAUM I lived close to the high school so I'd run home between periods and practice whenever I had a chance.

SMITH Wow. So did you give up the electric guitar? Did you ever have an electric guitar?

TANENBAUM I did, I had a great SG Special. I sold it to a friend of mine. I don't sell instruments well; I still regret that one, it was just a classic. In fact, I'm playing a David Lang electric guitar piece next month, and now I've got to find an electric guitar.

SMITH Are there any other kinds of music that you listened to when you were growing up that you haven't touched on that were formative to you? You talked about avant-garde, European high art, modernist music. You talked about the Classical canon, folk music and guitar, and Segovia.

TANENBAUM That's a pretty big diet, already.

SMITH It is.

TANENBAUM I got into The Beatles, and The Monkees, Dylan and all that was in the air. A piece that somehow got me through emotionally hard times was Beethoven's *Op. 132 String Quartet,* especially the slow movement.

SMITH The A-minor? That's one of my all-time favorite works.

TANENBAUM That was basically my musical diet. It was fairly broad, and I remember when I first started to play the guitar I was concerned about repertoire, because I had been playing Mozart, Haydn, Bach, on the piano, and all of a sudden there was Fernando Sor, and [Mauro] Giuliani, and I wasn't sure about the contemporary repertoire.

And then two things happened in pretty quick secession. One is that about two weeks after I started to seriously play and get lessons, I got into my room one day and there was a new piece on my music stand by my dad for guitar. So I thought, "Wow. It's not that hard to create repertoire." That was the beginning of my work with composers creating new repertoire.

SMITH How old were you at that time?

TANENBAUM I was around twelve. The other thing that happened was Julian Bream released an LP called *20th Century Guitar*. It had the Britten *Nocturnal*, the Frank Martin piece, a Henze piece – just incredible repertoire. It was a record that RCA argued that he should never put out, because it was all contemporary and they were trying to build his career, and it sold better than anyone had ever dreamed. Julian said that after that recording he had carte-blanche with RCA. That really influenced me – substantial new repertoire by great living composers played by a fearless guitarist.

SMITH This was also around the same time that your father presented his composition for you on guitar? I read something that you wrote talking about that specific recording with Britten's *Nocturnal*. So the implications of that recording were not lost on you, even at that age.

TANENBAUM They were not, and I shared it with my dad, who had concerns also about the rep. He was still there trying to steer my ship, even though I was playing the guitar now. He couldn't hear my playing anymore, because I closed the door, but when I played him that record, he got it. The Britten *Nocturnal* remains for many people, and myself as well, the greatest solo piece we have.

SMITH Britten didn't write many other works for guitar, did he?

TANENBAUM He never wrote another solo. He wrote two sets of songs. One is the sixth book of folk songs, and then there's an independent set called *Songs from the Chinese* – all for Peter Pears and Bream.

SMITH So who was your first guitar teacher, then?

TANENBAUM I started with a local guy named Gus DeGazio. Within six months he said, "You've got to go to my teacher." Not to be presumptuous, but I knew music already. I'd been in the middle of music for almost ten years at that point. I had played cello and other kinds of guitar, and I was practicing like a maniac. So I went down every week by train to a teacher named Rolando Valdes-Blain. He was a Cuban who took only two guitar students at a time. He was also an art dealer, but he was also completely dedicated to those two students. I never brought a guitar, I would borrow one of his guitars. My lessons were 1:00 on Saturday. He would be just waking up with a big Cuban cigar, and a bottle of wine nearby. My lessons would go until 5 or 6 in the afternoon. We spent the whole afternoon working going through pieces in great detail. We did the two main books of studies from the classical period all the way through and then he said, "Now that we've finished them, we're going to go do them again." Which was so great.

SMITH What were those books? Was that Sor?

TANENBAUM Fernando Sor and [Matteo] Carcassi which I recorded later on.

SMITH How long did you work with him?

TANENBAUM I worked with him for about four years, and I made my debut while working with him. I became professional at sixteen, and played my first concert then.

SMITH Let’s talk about that. What was involved in that – how did that come to be?

TANENBAUM It was a solo recital at the College of New Rochelle, my town. I recently found a recording of it, and it’s not bad. It was really interesting to listen to it. But what I remember a lot from that performance was the night before. It was wintertime, and when I went to open a storm window in my bedroom because I wanted a little air, my fingernail got caught. It was really painful and the next morning it was black from internal bleeding. My mom took me to the doctor and he said, “Look, you’ve got two choices: either you cancel the concert and let it heal or I put a needle in there and drain it. That’s going to hurt, but you’ll be able to play the concert.” I took the needle and played the concert. My mom said, “That’s when I knew you were going to be a guitar player.”

I played various concerts in that year. Meanwhile, Rolando had an amazing gig with the Joffrey Ballet, as their *Viva Vivaldi* used a guitarist playing a transcribed violin concerto. We guitarists usually play the lute concertos of Vivaldi, but this was a more elaborate violin concerto, with a recently composed first movement. Rolando was getting tired of the tours and he recommended me. So at seventeen, while I was still in high school, I was touring all around the United States. I played here, at the [San Francisco] Opera House. In those days, the symphonies would be in the pit playing with the ballet, and I had an amazing education playing this piece over and over again.

SMITH This was with the Joffrey Ballet? Wow. What happened after that? Did you start studying with Aaron Shearer?

TANENBAUM It was time to decide on college. There weren't that many options – this was 1974. I auditioned for Shearer and got in there [Peabody]. He was very hardcore from the beginning. He said to me, “Look, you’re doing everything wrong. I need you to cut your fingernails off and just work on technique for a year.” I said, “I’m just eighteen, I’m making $500 a week supporting myself as a musician. I’m touring all over the place. It seems to be working, because I’m getting good reviews. I don’t want to do this.” So we really had a sort of contentious first year, during which I toured the Soviet Union with the Joffrey – an amazing trip there. There was a book written about that trip. In fact, my parents found out that I was smoking cigarettes from reading that book.

After the first year, I did a lot of thinking in the summer and decided that I wanted to understand what Shearer was talking about, so I cancelled the work with Joffrey and gave him a year to work on my technique. That was the only year in my life in which I didn't really make music. In other words, I just did studies, scales and technical things. I was sort of going crazy. I would listen to music with friends endlessly, but I wasn't physically making music. I did smoke a lot of cigarettes and a little dope to get through that. It was a horrendously hard year, but I ended up grateful that I did it. What I saw then as hard-headedness on Shearer's part I see now as compassion. But it didn't read like that to me at all at the time. I saw him as an immoveable brick wall, completely inflexible.

SMITH What habits was he trying to break in your playing?

TANENBAUM He felt my positioning was wrong, that my hands were not set up for the long-term.

SMITH Both right and left hand?

TANENBUAM Yeah. He had set out to be a player, and he had injured himself. He therefore became one of the first guitarists to really investigate the anatomy and how it worked – he talked to a lot of doctors and read about the physiology of the body and applied that to guitar technique.

SMITH So his point was that you might not have a full life/career if you continued playing the way you taught yourself to play. I see.

TANENBAUM Am I sure that he was right? I think he probably was right. I was playing proficiently, but he did change everything. When I look back on it, he did straighten out what I was doing. In other words, I had a bent wrist, which is not the greatest thing. He did position me in the way that the hands and the fingers work best. So I think he ultimately did me quite a favor, but it was not easy. I became very good friends with Manuel Barrueco during that time, because we bonded over the difficulties with our teacher.

SMITH I see, so he had a similar experience. Was there by this time a tradition of pedagogy that he was pointing to that you were not in line with? Or did it come to you out of nowhere that, "What are these rules? My hand position has to be like that?!"

TANENBAUM He was creating a school of pedagogy. There was almost none at that time. There was an isolated case of one in Uruguay, which is where Segovia spent the war years, and there were a few in Europe, but there was nothing widely disseminated. People were playing in all kinds of ways. Now you look at techniques, and they're much more similar. There is now a collected wisdom about how to play the guitar, and how not to play the guitar. But there's still certainly some variety.

SMITH So you were one of the first generation then, to exemplify this correct style that was being developed then?

TANENBAUM I would say yes, at least an anatomically correct way. And I think that the second generation was more flexible about disseminating it. We didn't have to do what Shearer did. He was part of the American maverick school – people who were out on their own, carving a path through granite, in a way. Like the Harry Partches of the world, who had no support, but they stayed with it.

SMITH But with people like you and Barrueco, the product speaks for itself, so he must have become quite a known teacher.

TANENBAUM He's known as America's most influential teacher. He also taught David Starobin, who's a widely recognized guitarist, and many others as well.

SMITH So did Segovia have a funny hand-setup?

TANENBAUM Well, Segovia was kind of an anomaly. He had huge hands. And he wasn't much of a teacher, it was really an old-school thing. He did master classes, and I did take one with him, and studied with him privately some. He didn't really teach technique, and I'm not sure his technique would apply to a normally-framed person with normal hand size. But he did not have a straight wrist, he bent it that way [gestures]. Through the last decades of his life he had a good-sized belly, and he would hold the guitar up like this [gestures], with the bottom part up – it's very difficult to get around the fingerboard with the left hand like that. He did all kinds of things that I wouldn't teach anyone to do.

SMITH So the most iconic player – the one that inspired so many people – did not exemplify these correct habits of hand placement.

TANENBAUM The guitar is a strange instrument in that way. The two most important guitarists of the 20th century are Segovia and Bream, they were both self-taught and neither has real technical followers. They had students, but the students kind of went their own way and figured their own things out. So that's interesting.

SMITH That is very interesting. So you spent how many years with Shearer then?

TANENBAUM I only spent two: one fighting and one listening. And then by March of that second year I decided I couldn't take it anymore, because I really felt he didn't have anything to teach me musically. He would give students a piece of music as systematically prepared as his technical approach was. It would have green markings for the phrasing, red markings for the right hand fingerings, purple markings for the left hand fingers, the dynamics would be in black, and you were supposed to just follow what he had already decided. And I knew that wasn't right.

I was enough of a musician already – I had studied for long enough. Whereas he wanted to eliminate the trial and error in technical playing, you can't eliminate that in interpretive work. You have to just play and try things. So I did not want to take it further with him, and I went into his studio with great trepidation in March of that academic year and told him I had decided to move to the West Coast. I really expected to get creamed, but he said, "You've learned everything I needed to teach you. Just go, and please work on these principles."

SMITH So this was in the middle of the second year, when you were in privation mode, not playing any music?

TANENBAUM Right. And I knew that I couldn't do it much longer; I just took that year and did it. Meanwhile, I had met a young woman who I wanted to be with, and she wanted to move to the West Coast, so I decided to come out here.

SMITH And that brought you to San Francisco. What happened next?

TANENBAUM What happened next was – this school that I've been at basically for my life was kind of an afterthought. My motivation was to get away from Shearer, as far as I could, and to get as close to this woman as I could. Those were basically the two things that I wanted – to work on music and be with her. My dad, who was always back there trying to steer my ship (and I thank him for that) said, "You have to stay in school." So we sent a tape out to the Conservatory. I remember it was one of those reel-to-reels, and on one side was my audition, and on the other side was her audition as a pianist. Somehow in transit hers got erased, and mine didn't. She ended up doing a live audition and not getting in, so she went to Mills, and I came here. And that's how I got here.

SMITH And who did you study with here?

TANENBAUM Well, I started in my junior year here with Michael Lorimer. On staff were George Sakellariou, Michael Lorimer and Phil Rosheger. The department at that time was not rigorously organized – you didn't even get all your lessons. I remember one student who didn't show up for his jury. They asked him why and he said, "Well, my teacher didn't show up for the lessons.” George, who’s a wonderful player and teacher to this day, was starting to do more and more work on cruise ships, so he was here sporadically. Michael himself was here not very much either, because he was touring a lot and he was following Segovia around on tours as well. So my entire junior year I got three guitar lessons. But I did connect with one teacher, and that was Laurette Goldberg. She was the head of the Baroque department, and she founded Philharmonia Baroque, as you well know. I took some of her performance practice classes, and I connected with her because we argued a lot. Especially about Glenn Gould. When the end of the year came I told her that I really wasn’t satisfied with the guitar department and was just going to drop out, because I didn’t feel like I was getting enough from it. She said, “No, you’re not going to leave. The school is small, and that allows us to do a lot of the things we want to do. Here’s what I’m going to offer you: I will become your major teacher in next year. We’re going to work on early music, not technique. I’m going to have you play Vivaldi concertos with my Baroque Ensemble. And you can do an independent project on some kind of early music, you’ll get credit for doing a paper and you can put that music on your senior recital.” She laid all of that out, and that’s what we did. We worked on early music, I played the Vivaldi, and in the spring semester I did an independent project transcribing eight Scarlatti sonatas – that project I think is still in the library.

SMITH You later performed those extensively.

TANENBAUM Yes, and first as the second half of my senior recital. There was another funny thing I did at my senior recital. There was a guitarist named Alexander Bellow, who was a New York teacher, and for some reason they established a fund so that anybody who would play his music would get $250. You just had to play ten minutes of Alexander Bellow music, which wasn't very good. But I decided that since I had already been professional and I wanted to get paid for my senior recital. I’m the only person who ever did that, but I got the money for playing Alexander Bellow.

SMITH That’s very enterprising of you.

TANENBAUM Yes, I think so too!

SMITH Did you study piano with Jean Stark-Lochmans?

TANENBAUM She calls herself now just Jean Stark, and she has been for me one of the best kept musical secrets of the Bay Area. She has been a sort of mentor, someone whose musicianship I cherish. I didn’t formally study with her, but sometimes when I felt stuck I would go over and get a coaching. She gives about one concert a year in the Bay Area, and I go anytime I can. She recently turned 90, and she’s still giving those concerts. Maybe she’s not as fleet as she used to be, but there’s still tremendous depth, and she now has a real following.

SMITH Was she teaching at the Conservatory?

TANENBAUM No, she never has. She just teaches privately – to this day, at 90, she's still teaching.

SMITH So you've had quite a lot of musical mentorship from keyboardists. Could you talk a little bit about the relationship between the guitar and keyboard from a pedagogical standpoint? What is it you were able to get from a piano teacher that you weren't getting from a guitar teacher? Their showing up?

TANENBAUM That's one thing. But I wanted an outsider view. I wanted to work solely on musical issues and I could relate to them because to this day I play the piano; I've got a few pieces in my rep. (It's a great party trick to whip out a piano piece when you're in a room full of guitar players.) I think it was mostly the fact that they could hear this music with fresh ears. I feel the same way about all the great composers that I've worked with, they've been tremendous teachers.

SMITH But is there something about the piano in particular that attracted you to seek out that mentorship? Was it just chance?

TANENBAUM I've always loved piano – it's the most basic Western instrument. Sonically it relates to the guitar, although it's certainly not as colorful to my ears. That and the fact that I actually play, and I know their repertoire, helps me relate to pianists. To this day I go to a lot of piano recitals. I'm a big fan of Andras Schiff – I go every time he comes.

SMITH I've heard him as well. What else would you care to comment on the atmosphere of the Conservatory when you were a student?

TANENBAUM I appreciated many things about it, especially its flexibility. I remember Hermann le Roux conducting Beethoven's *Ninth*. I had to sing in it, and loved being in the middle of that piece. I was on tour sometimes even in those days. I remember not going to chorus one semester pretty much at all and somehow passing the class. Hermann said "Look, you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, you're out there playing music." And there were wonderful people like Nathan Schwartz, who I really revered. I took a Schubert class with him, and I remember the first sentence in that class. He said, "At some point in your life, you're going to have a love affair with Schubert, and I hope it's during this semester." He taught that class beautifully, with a lot of passion. Paul Hersh was teaching an amazingly diverse amount in those days as well – I took a fantastic class in Chinese painting with him. So it was an interesting place. Since I felt like I had the technical foundation that I just needed to build on, I could roam around this place. I didn't need the weekly guitar lessons that I might have needed if I hadn't had Shearer.

SMITH So it almost functioned for you like a kind of graduate experience?

TANENBAUM Yeah.

SMITH That's interesting. You alluded to this master class with Segovia in '81. Do you want to talk about that in more detail?

TANENBAUM Well, Segovia came here every year, and I heard him as much as I could. As he aged it got more difficult to listen, but the willpower with which he fought to make the guitar accepted throughout the classical arena never left him. The guitar is a physically difficult instrument to play – for the most part, it's a young person's sport. By the end, when he was over 90, he couldn't really play well anymore. He would sometimes start, fumble, then just slap the strings and say, "She will not tune up tonight!" and try to tune for a while. It was sometimes painful to watch. But there would be big crowds of largely young people, and at some point he always made some magic, even in those days. What was left still was his urgency to communicate, and he always somehow found a way. I revered what he did.

And I was determined to try to play for him. There was a master class in 1981 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and he was doing auditions with young people as he traveled around the country. I got invited to audition and went over to his hotel, the Huntington. I was so nervous that I sat across the street waiting for about a half an hour in my car before. I watched a valet in front of the hotel who was doing everything for everybody, moving really quickly, and then, when I got out of the car, I locked my keys in the car with the guitar in there. With just minutes to go, I thought: the valet! So he quickly helped me break into my own car just in time to see the maestro. I went up there and he was amazing. First of all, he spoke I think nine languages, and he kept forgetting which language to speak to me in because the phone kept ringing and he conversed in various languages. I played lots of things for him. So much so that I got past the repertoire that I had prepared.

SMITH Did he keep asking you to play more things?

TANENBAUM He kept saying, "Let's do some more, let's do some more." The California Bach Society had asked me do a concert of the four Bach *Lute Suites* in 1982, in Herbst. I was preparing that, so I said, "OK, I'll play you some Bach." I was playing Bach not exactly in the way he did, with a different transcription. And after a few seconds he held his hand up, and he said, "No. That's not the right arrangement. You are using the arrangement from the lute, but the lute was a cold instrument. You need to do what I did, because I took it from the violin, which is warm, like the guitar." So he would make general statements like that, but then he filled in details.

His teaching was old-school – this is done my way. It was as strong willed as his playing was. But to be in his presence and watch him think and explain what he did was invaluable.
One student at that master class took strategic advantage of this teaching style. Every young guitarist at that time was looking for a letter from the great maestro. Segovia would write, "This guy's really good" and you had a career. So this one student learned two versions of his piece for the master class – one the wrong way and one the Segovia way. He initially played it the wrong way, but every time Segovia would ask him to make a change he would do it instantly and perfectly, because he had already learned the Segovia way. So he got the letter. A great business strategy!

SMITH Wow. How did you know that he did this?

TANENBAUM He told me later.

SMITH That's amazing.

TANENBAUM It's amazing. After the class, everyone was there with their pens and pencils and paper trying to get the letter. He wrote that guy a letter, but not too many more. I never got a letter, but after the Met class he came across the room to me in front of everyone, grabbed me and said "It's very important to me that you practice hard." Just like that. When you think back on it, that could be a bad thing, like, "You really need to practice, buddy." But it didn't feel that way. I think he was really encouraging me.

SMITH I've received feedback like that that I've chosen to interpret in the way that you're doing.

TANENBAUM However he meant it, it motivated me quite a lot.

SMITH So did you play Bach for him in the master class?

TANENBAUM I played Villa-Lobos. He was able to say to me, "This is how Heitor wanted it." Which is amazing. I can now tell my students, "Segovia told me that Villa-Lobos said…" You don't forget things like that.

SMITH You never forget things like that. What happened in your career between your arrival at the Conservatory and that master class? I assume that you graduated, but walk us through what else was going on in your career.

TANENBAUM In 1977, after my junior year here, I won what was then the biggest competition for guitar in the country, which was down in Carmel, California. I remember that I had sprained my foot playing basketball, so I crutched out, somebody brought me the guitar, I played, and then I crutched back.

SMITH Your Itzhak Perlman moment.

TANENBAUM Right. In second place, by the way, was my colleague and dear friend Larry Ferrara. He had heard me play with the Joffrey years before, so when I moved out here he knew my playing.

The next year I took second prize in the Toronto '78 International Competition, which was probably the biggest worldwide competition at that point. And three months after that I did a New York debut in Merkin Hall. As a result of winning Carmel I was invited back the next year as a festival artist, and I started to do master classes. I had just graduated about a month before, and I wasn't sure if that suit of clothes was one that fit me, but I felt very comfortable playing an evening concert, and even judging the next competition after the one I had won. I was just 21 at that point, and I thought, "This is something I can do. I fit here." So I started to do more concerts and festivals and to teach privately. Quite a number of the students who were at the Conservatory came over to Berkeley to study with me, actually, because they weren't getting all of their lessons from George or Michael. So I was essentially living the life and supporting myself at that point. I wasn't touring all the time, but I had concerts from the competitions from good reviews after the New York debut.

SMITH So you won the most prestigious American guitar competition just out of college. Or were you a junior?

TANENBAUM I was a junior that year, and just out of college I took second in the international one.

SMITH And those were the two top competitions, and so you basically maxed out, and it was time to start working.

TANENBAUM I only did one other competition. I'm not a big fan of them, to this day, and I didn't even get to the finals of that one, in Geneva. But judging that competition was Alberto Ginastera, so I did got to play his *Sonata* for him. He died in '82, and this was '81. I also was heard by an important Italian guitarist named Angelo Gilardino, who said, "You didn't get to the finals, but you absolutely should have, and I'm going to help you." So he very generously got me some concerts in Europe. Of the three competitions that might have helped me the most directly, because of the European concerts that resulted, and the connection with Ginastera.

SMITH At what point did you come back to teach at the Conservatory?

TANENBAUM Believe it or not, that was 1982. Milton Salkind got word that a lot of the Conservatory students were studying privately with me, so he hired hire me as a part-time teacher right in the middle of the academic year.

SMITH So you came on to teach at the Conservatory in '82, after the competition experiences and appearing in the Segovia master class. Was there anything else about the guitar program that you want to talk about when you joined it?

TANENBAUM Well, I kept my mouth shut, but there was a lot that was lacking. I felt that a curriculum should have been there. There was not much ensemble playing – the department was mostly students working by themselves and getting lessons. They weren't being taught how to play with others, they weren't being taught about the literature that we play. But I taught my lessons and laid low, and knew that if I ever got a chance I would change things.

SMITH And when did that chance come?

TANENBAUM That chance came five years later. I was walking down the hall in the old building on Ortega Street when Milton Salkind pulled me aside and asked me to come into his office. When we got there he said, "I like you. I see what you're doing and I like what you're about, so I made a decision: I'm going to make you chair of the department, and you're now full-time. This will be your new salary." He told me a few other things, and took a few of my questions, but it was less than a five minute meeting. There were no committees, there was no search, there was no consulting with anybody – he just made the decision and did it. From one day to the next I was the chair. And my reaction was: Be careful what you wish for. You've got this thing now, what are you going to do?

I knew a few things right away. I knew that I personally wished I had experienced a liberal arts education. I've always been a really vigorous reader and I've tried to educate myself. I debate with my friends; I was actually in political debates all morning with my friends before this interview. So I've created a kind of liberal arts atmosphere in my life and I wanted to bring some of that to the guitar department. I wanted to broaden the department, and I knew I had to include ensemble because guitarists were embarrassingly behind with ensemble playing.

SMITH As a whole?

TANENBAUM As a species. I also wanted to reach our tentacles out and integrate with other departments, because the guitar does not do well in a ghetto by itself. There is a really strong gravitational pull in the guitar world towards conservative, mostly Spanish repertoire, and isolation. It's just remarkable how strong that pull is. I think health for the guitar is going towards playing with other musicians and broadening the repertoire. So I knew I wanted to do all that within the curriculum. The first thing I did was talk to a lot of people in the field, particularly other department chairs like Jim Smith at U.S.C. who were already doing what I was hoping to do. And little by little I started to implement these things, starting with the ensemble program, which I felt was the biggest need right away.

SMITH Can you talk about that? What was the ensemble program?

TANENBAUM Well, it was basically non-existent. There would be an occasional project but I turned it into a real class. There are basically two components to guitar ensemble playing that we address to this day. One is playing in small ensembles, and I wanted from the beginning to get other instrumentalists playing with guitarists. So for instance, in my ensemble class right now there's a clarinet player, a marimba player and a cellist. We structure it so they form ensembles for a semester. Each ensemble is given a coach for the semester, they rehearse, they get coached, then they play in the class, and finally they perform. So that's one of the components. The other one is larger ensembles that teach them the basics of playing with a conductor, of playing together and coloring sound in a larger group. And more than anything else, listening together. The guitar is a difficult instrument to play, and we get overly involved in the playing of it. We hunch over it and become self-contained. So it was a goal of mine to open the bodies up, to have them connect with other players and listen out to what was around them. That was the first thing I went after.

SMITH This ensemble program survives today.

TANENBAUM It survives today. It happened yesterday.

SMITH How often does a student have to do this as a guitarist? Is it every semester, or once or twice during their degree program?

TANENBAUM At the undergraduate level they have to do four semesters out of their eight. Graduate students have to do two semesters in guitar ensemble and then one other semester of ensemble, but that can be guitar or another ensemble.

SMITH And they have the ability to form an ensemble with mixed instruments if they can, and you encourage that?

TANENBAUM Right. We get other instrumentalists to come into the ensemble class. Those people obviously don't play in the big conducted guitar ensemble, but they have to do more small ensemble playing. We now have this Historical Performance Emphasis, and those guitar students do less Guitar Ensemble and more Baroque Ensemble playing. But we still make sure they do a good amount of ensemble playing.

SMITH They're a part of continuo.

TANENBAUM Right.

SMITH It's interesting that you talk about the inherent insularity of the culture of guitar and yet that privacy is something that drew you to it initially, trying to shut out your mom and dad's musical voices so you could cultivate an inner voice. And yet, having understood that, you're realizing you have to be a foot soldier in continuing the mission of Segovia to integrate and elevate the guitar into the wider classical fabric as a solo instrument on its own that is fully instated in the instrumental panoply.

TANENBAUM And those things can coexist. For me it is still very private, it is still just personal and beautiful. I played the guitar this morning, just to play the guitar. But you can have the privacy and also integrate.

SMITH But you saw that very clearly as a curricular goal, and something that was missing from here, and probably other guitar departments also.

TANENBAUM Yes, I saw it as a fundamental necessity. And things started to happen in the world, also. I became chair in 1987, and that is essentially the year that Steve Reich wrote maybe the most famous guitar ensemble piece that we have, which is called *Electric Counterpoint*. We did the second performance of that ever as a live ensemble. I've done that piece as a player and conductor hundreds of times with many performances here.

SMITH Did you guys do it electric?

TANENBAUM With acoustic instruments. I worked with Steve while he was writing that piece, so I was involved with it from the beginning.

SMITH But you didn't commission it.

TANENBAUM I did not, it was written for Pat Metheny. Metheny premiered it at BAM in New York, and then they recorded it on a famous Nonesuch recording. In fact I was touring with

Steve Reich when it came out, and he told me that the recording sold 50,000 copies in the first week, which is pretty extraordinary. But they spent a week in the recording studio. If you know *Electronic Counterpoint*, there are 15 different guitar parts in a 15 minute piece, and Metheny did all 15 parts down-pick. He said in interviews that he couldn't move his right hand for three weeks after that, so he just stopped playing the piece. He did a revival many years later, but after the recording Steve was looking for a guitar player to do it, and I had been talking to him while he was writing it, so I got to tour it. I premiered it all over Europe because Metheny didn't want to play it anymore.

SMITH After he recorded it. Wow. Was it just a fatigue thing for him?

TANENBAUM It was a total fatigue thing.

SMITH It's a wonder he didn't develop tendonitis.

TANENBAUM He just rested for three weeks, and apparently he was better.

SMITH So that's when you toured with Steve Reich, was in the tour for that work.

TANENBAUM Right. And talking about an isolated guitarist – I toured with the group, but all I was doing was playing with the pre-recorded tape of Metheny. I never actually played with his musicians, though I always wanted to.

SMITH So what's the tape? Was that Pat Metheny playing?

TANENBAUM That was Pat Metheny playing.

SMITH So you played with Pat Metheny. Except that he wasn't there.

TANENBAUM Sort of, with a time warp. But then eventually I made my own background tape. When I first started playing with my own tape there were some people who weren't really convinced that I was playing separate from the tape, because it was essentially the same sound. Whereas when I played with Metheny's electric on tape, it was very clear who the soloist was.

SMITH There was a funny anecdote that you shared in some interview, and I'll ask you to repeat it here, where you said there was a very tense moment in one of the performances when the tape stopped.

TANENBAUM That was actually the second performance of the whole tour. It was in Stuttgart, and Steve had a big piece that was going to be premiered there two years later, so he was eager to impress the Stuttgart people. There was a sound guy who he was at odds with from the beginning – they really didn't get along. I practiced that piece to the point that I could play it in my sleep – I had practiced it with a metronome hour after hour. Basically, it's classic Steve Reich; one beat continues for fifteen minutes. In Stuttgart, I would say maybe three minutes in, the tape stopped. I thought, "What the heck am I supposed to do here?" So I just kept playing. I played I think by myself for less than a minute, I just kept going, and I could hear Steve and the guy yelling, because they were in the audience with the mixing board. But after a while the tape came back, and I was right with it. I think that earned me a lot of tours with Steve Reich, the fact that I was able to hold it that steady.

SMITH Did he congratulate you afterwards?

TANENBAUM He was effusive. As mad as he was at that guy was as happy as he was with me. But he was still upset at intermission. The Steve Reich Ensemble guys, Bob Becker and Russell Hartenberger – who are brilliant percussionists – said, "OK Steve, come out and play *Drumming* with us." So he went out and banged the drums for an hour, and he was fine after.

SMITH That's a great story.

TANENBAUM The stories of touring.

SMITH You've talked about your pedagogical challenges – the need to create a proper curriculum for the guitar. What other steps were there?

TANENBAUM I felt that guitarists need to know more about what they were playing. We had to create some context, like the liberal arts mold does. So we developed a History of Guitar Literature cycle. This wasn't just me, of course, I was working with colleagues. Larry's [Ferrara] been here for a long time, and I had other colleagues debating and talking about this. Rich Savino brilliantly covers early music plucked strings. So the lit cycle beings with his Renaissance lit class, and we have so many instruments around that the students actually learn how to read lute tablature, and put their hands on lutes of the time. We continue the next semester with Baroque literature, in which students experience some of those instruments. Then Rich does one semester of Classic/Romantic, which we group together because that includes one of the lowest ebbs in the guitar's history, the latter part of the nineteenth century, when music just got too big for the guitar in a lot of ways. I do the Modern Lit class, which I'm doing right now. And of course now with the Harris collection, we have historical instruments from throughout the 20th century as well.

SMITH So in a sense you have instruments to match the literary context of the music being created.

TANENBAUM And we do include those in the curriculum. For instance, Segovia was given his first guitar, a 1913 Manuel Ramirez, and we have one from the year before downstairs. Segovia played a Hauser guitar as well as a Fleta and we have those makers downstairs. At 2pm today Marc Teicholz and John Harris will talk about Segovia's Ramirez guitars, and they're going to have five Ramirez guitars down there. We're tying that in with the class I taught last Thursday about Segovia. So it's one thing to talk about these things, but the guitar is a very tactile instrument, and it's invaluable when students can touch an instrument and feel what it felt like when Segovia was playing it.

SMITH I understand. I didn't realize that the Conservatory has historical lutes in its collection. These are not original.

TANENBAUM They are copies, not original. About 43 guitars and other stringed instruments have been donated. When you build it, they will come. A lot of guitars live in my studio, but we also have an early music collection; a few of those were donated, but most we commissioned in various ways.

For instance, very unfortunately two very nice guitars were stolen last year, and when we couldn't recover them we got an insurance payment. From that we're getting a brand new theorbo, our second theorbo, and a Terz guitar, which is tuned a third higher, that's coming next month. So we're using some of that money to buy some more historical instruments as well. We have a Baroque lute, a Renaissance lute, a Baroque guitar and a vihuela from the Renaissance period. We have a class called Historical Plucked Strings in which students get lessons with Rich on an early instrument of their choice. And that feeds into the Baroque Ensemble. They learn their fundamentals, they study continuo, and then they can play in the ensemble on original instruments.

SMITH How is lute tablature different from the guitar?

TANENBAUM Guitar in the very early days had a kind of tablature, but classical guitar now uses straight-up notation. We sound an octave down and read all in treble-clef. I've long thought it should have been two staffs and two clefs, but that's not about to happen. Tablature is used in popular guitar styles, and it's basically a diagram – the six lines represent the six strings. There are different kinds of tablature. In Italian tab the frets are represented by numbers and zero is an open string. In French it's letters A, B, C, D, E, F. In a way tab is fantastic, because you see how this music was fingered, but it's also limited because rhythmically you can only show the fastest moving value. So you have to guess the values of slower moving voices. It gives you a little bit of freedom in a sense because they don't dictate values and you can decide, but sometimes it's a little frustrating because you want to know what the composer was thinking.

SMITH There's guesswork involved. I see, interesting. Other aspects of the curriculum that you kind of had to create from scratch? We were talking about literature, context, and ensemble playing.

TANENBAUM The curriculum is pretty broad, and it was certainly not all me creating this from scratch. We have an ongoing Performance class, and we have some elective classes like Transcription and Arrangement. We have a Technique class and a Pedagogy class, which is required. We feel that it's irresponsible not to teach them to teach, because they're going to teach if they stay in this field. Larry is the perfect person for that class because he teaches so much – at one point I think he was teaching in four different colleges. He's presently teaching here, City College and SF State. He can bring less advanced students from other schools for our students to teach in front of the class. Our students first learn the principles and ideas of pedagogy and then they are observed teaching. That's very valuable.

SMITH In an interview you said, "We owe it to students to be very conscious of the world they're going to face when they get out of school. It's no longer a world of the superstar soloist; working musicians now have diverse musical lives. They do some teaching, they play chamber music, solo repertoire, concertos, all of that. I want to train them in all the skills they're going to need besides making them good guitar players." So that says it. Is that what you realized when you were made chair of the department and realized that you had to build these things from scratch in many cases?

TANENBAUM Well that came from my initial interviews with colleagues, and from looking at the world. What is the world out there? What are these students going to face? This is a training school, and yes, the ideas came from that research. And it's ongoing. We change the curriculum to reflect what's going on. But things like pedagogy and ensemble were clearly necessary from the beginning.

SMITH It seems striking to me that this was happening in the guitar relatively late, which matches its late emergence as a major instrument. Are there other instruments that you can think of that are analogous, or is the guitar an exceptional case where the curriculum and the philosophy of study catches up later, because it's also coming in late? I ask this as a violist, because the viola is in a certain way analogous to the guitar because it wasn't until the 20th century that the viola had its own repertoire, and it was also considered a less serious instrument partly for the same projection issues that plague the guitar.

TANENBAUM I can think of some. The sax is a relatively recent instrument, and it's sort of an outlier as well. And the accordion too. There are pretty good schools of mandolin and ukulele now. I'm just going off the top here, but I would point to percussion. The percussion repertoire has been created in the last 50 or 60 years. I can't speak to their pedagogy very much but I have read *The Percussionist's Art* by my contemporary music player colleague Steve Schick, which is a fascinating book. None of these instruments I mentioned has a pedagogy that is as established as the big standard instruments have.

SMITH Does that require and create an inspiration in the generation of teachers? You say the two most important guitarists in the 20th century were Segovia and Bream. They're both performers who had impact on students but they were not primarily teachers. So are you in the vanguard of that early generation? Or the second generation of teachers who are really creating a conservatory curriculum about the guitar?

TANENBAUM There were a few pioneers like Shearer and Carlevaro in Uruguay from the previous generation, but mine is the first generation that almost universally taught. Before us, even the other most important player besides Bream, John Williams, didn't teach. In fact the entire Bream/Williams generation mostly just played.

My generation was huge because I think the thing that really propelled Segovia over the top was the Beatles coming to America. That's when everyone wanted to learn the guitar, including me. And a lot of people wanted to get more than rock or folk music out of it. So we had to figure this stuff out. There were some pedagogues before us, but I would say the technique became standardized in our generation.

SMITH Somewhere I read that the Conservatory's guitar program was born in '64. Is that true?

TANENBAUM We thought that. The fiftieth anniversary was in 2014, so we decided to celebrate. Actually, Hart College of Music in Hartford did a fiftieth anniversary concert in the spring of 2014, and I heard about it through Facebook and thought we should do one. So we booked this big party of a concert, with alumni, George Sakellariou from our beginnings, we invited Michael Lorimer, everybody. And as we were preparing that concert, Tessa [Updike] was deep into her research, and she found a gentleman named Robert Symmonds, who walked into the Conservatory in 1948 and demanded guitar lessons. It seems that we did have guitarists taking lessons here for about a decade and a half, but no one got a degree. I think you could say that '64 was the most important year because George Sakellariou and Michael Lorimer got hired. After that the first real degree-seeking guitarists came here.

SMITH I see. So you could earn a degree beginning in '64.

TANENBAUM You could have earned a degree earlier, but nobody stuck with it for four years.

SMITH So the first degree earned was in ‘64.

TANENBAUM ‘68, I think. Four years later.

SMITH The program started the same year the Beatles came to America, ‘64.

TANENBAUM Right. And the same year that that *Nocturnal* piece by Britten was written, and the same year that Terry Riley wrote *In C* and began minimalism, which I think affected the guitar as well because it brought tonality and pulse back to Western music.

SMITH That’s interesting. Have you or others thought about the year ‘64 as a guitar year? Is that just occurring to you now, or is that a well-known meme among guitarists that ‘64 was a magic year in some way? A galvanizing year.

TANENBAUM It has been for me, and I taught last week in my Modern lit class that it’s probably the single most important year, if you had to point to one in the 20th century. I’ve had discussions about this with guitarists, but it’s not a meme at this point.

SMITH Tick through them once again, just so I can be clear. What are the strands?

TANENBAUM The Beatles, which probably was the biggest one. Segovia was perfectly positioned at that point, but he wasn’t as big a legend as he would become. He was already 71, but that year he took 125 plane flights. His career just went nuts. So, the Beatles; Terry Riley writes *In C*, which I think affected us. You have the *Nocturnal* by Benjamin Britten, a really, really important piece. Those are the three biggies.

SMITH I think I was just linking that incidentally to the creation of the guitar program here.

TANENBAUM I think that’s important actually, because Hart School started and we upped our guitar department that year. That was one of the missions of Segovia’s life. When he was accepting a doctoral degree late in his career he outlined the five purposes of his professional life, and one of them was to get the guitar in all of the major conservatories in the world, which he did do.

[Break]

SMITH You published several study books and recordings to go along with them. These were some of the same studies that you accomplished with your first teacher, Rolando, right?

TANENBAUM Yes.

SMITH And now you're in a completely new position. You're in the position to offer them up to a new generation of young guitarists. Was this project connected with your larger goal of creating a serious guitar curriculum? What was the motivation for those projects, and what do you think was important about them?

TANENBAUM I wish I could say it was a grand scheme. This was a phone call, and it came from a guy named Dean Kamei, who has been a producer of guitar related things in San Francisco for many years, almost 40. He's got a store over near the ballpark called Guitar Solo. It used to be by our other school, on Clement Street. He sells guitar sheet music and guitars, and he decided back then to start a record company. He wanted the first recording to be these studies, because generations of students would want to listen. He said it would be a recording that would last, and that has proven to be true.

So he just called me out of the blue one day, and said, "I'm thinking about doing this. Do you know the Carcassi and Sor studies well?" And I was able to answer yes to that. I made one addition to the project, which was the more contemporary Leo Brouwer studies, which are just fantastic pieces. It turned into a two CD project because of that.

We were recording at this little studio on the corner of Irving and 20th, and I remember well that we were in the middle of the recording and Chris Isaak came in. I didn't actually meet him as he came in when I wasn't there. He had been given a very big budget, I think by Warner Brothers, and they were taking one more chance with him. He had had a number of recordings and although everybody thought he could be a star, but he hadn't broken through yet. So he was looking for the perfect sound for this sort of last chance recording, and he came in and somehow loved the sound, not in the studio but in the control room. He immediately booked the thing out for six months straight. So we had to stop right in the middle of our project for him to finish. That became his breakthrough recording.

SMITH So it was for a good cause.

TANENBAUM That's right, it was a musical cause. The books actually came also as Dean's idea. He said, "Let's put out some books where you're analyzing and talking about the studies." And I really felt I could do that, because I had worked on them so hard with Rolando. So I wrote those books in spiral notebooks on airplanes over the next two years while I was touring. This was Dean's first recording, and it remains the best-selling recording on his label because of all the generations of students who want to hear those studies.

SMITH Was there another set of editions, or other teaching books that you were involved in writing? Am I mistaken about that?

TANENBAUM I think so. The only real pedagogical work I've done in print is that.

SMITH Talk about your teaching style when you began, and think about how it is now and what the shift has been.

TANENBAUM I will start by saying that the guitar repertoire is extremely broad, though it's not deep in all areas. Like other outlier instruments, that gives us a certain amount of freedom to roam around the 20th and the 21st centuries. We're not anchored by Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven, but we do have a broad repertoire that goes back 500 years. When I started teaching I didn't know enough of the repertoire, and I wasn't good at judging the level of repertoire. I think that is partly because I jumped over some very easy pieces right into those Sor and Carcassi studies. Assessing level correctly is one of the most important things a teacher does, because you don't want students over their heads, but you also don't want them bored with music that's too easy for them. I've had to learn that along the way.

In my studio, and in the department, students need to understand the breadth of the repertoire, so they're required in the first two undergraduate years to play from each of the periods: Renaissance, Baroque, Classic, Romantic, and Modern. We don't want to send them out of here without really knowing how to handle all those styles.

I would also say that I've learned to listen to people better, to hear who they are. Each student is an absolute individual with a unique history. Each mind is different, and people learn in different ways. I've experienced enough of that now that when I develop a plan for each student, part of that plan is figuring out how to best get the plan across. So first, I need to learn from these students how they learn. I begin with each new student (I have two that just started last week) doing a long interview session in which I ask them many things about them and their guitar histories. I get a list of every piece they've ever studied; all the periods, all the studies, all the chamber music. I want to know how they think they learn, whether it's Socratic, or if they respond to a teacher dictating more. I'm not necessarily going to go with their view, but I want to know what they think about this. I ask for a guitaristic self-assessment; I have them speak to their strengths and weaknesses. I ask them to imagine a world in ten years with no obstacles in it, which is of course not our world, but to tell me what they would be doing in that world. I take a lot of notes in a notebook with a tab for each of my students. Eventually, through that and through working with them in the first month or so I develop a plan for how I'm going to get them where they want to go, and where I think they should go.

SMITH How long did it take you to evolve this comprehensive system of intake interviews, and assessment and planning?

TANENBAUM I would say that it developed probably over the first fifteen years of teaching but I've refined it more and more. Both the challenge and the interesting thing about teaching is how different every student is. We all have our damage and we all have our strengths. You've got to understand those, and that's the same with managing people.

SMITH I read that you won an outstanding professor award at the Conservatory in 1995. Is that the Sarlo?

TANENBAUM That is the Sarlo. That's the second one they gave. Dorothy Steinmetz got the first one in '94.

SMITH What was she teaching?

TANENBAUM She was a general education person.

SMITH That's an institutional award, but did that award speak to the success of what you and others were trying to build for the guitar curriculum? Did you feel that to not be an award just for you, with your individual students, but that you were trying to build a program, a way of teaching, and a way of learning the guitar?

TANENBAUM The award was given to me, but I would like to think that it was more broad.

SMITH Would you say that your style of teaching hasn't changed much; it has just evolved into this finely calibrated individualized approach, with this caveat that you have to take a firm hand because you're the teacher? Has that just been an evolutionary thing? There wasn't a moment where it radically shifted?

TANENBAUM When I first started teaching I was more dictatorial about the Shearer method. I still use his ideas with memorization and a number of other things. But now, if hands are really working and I don't see anything that's going to lead to problems, I will let students go their own way. I used to try to correct for differences more than I do now.

SMITH Was there ever a time when you pulled a Shearer on one of your students? "You can't play anything except for etudes for a year. I need to break down your hands and fix them." Did you ever do that to any of your students?

TANENABUM I never went that far, and I never made a student cut their nails off, but I have in any number of cases greatly reduced what they were playing, and made them primarily work on technique, especially with freshmen. If I think someone is really going in the wrong direction I will break it down, but not to the degree that he did. Because I think you can find very easy pieces where students can have some musical nutrition while restructuring technique.

SMITH Did you tell these students that you yourself had to do the same thing? Did that help them get through it?

TANENBAUM Yeah I did, but you can get real resistance. There are some students where you do have to put up a wall and say, "Look, this is right. The fact that you came here to my studio is an act of trust, and I need you to trust me on this." I have done that. And tried to bond with them, saying that I suffered in the same way.

SMITH It can be very powerful, I think.

TANENBAUM Solidarity.

SMITH Let's come back to the guitar department, and the evolution of that a little bit. I believe that you've cultivated and nurtured other faculty members here to help you flesh out and support this vision for curriculum. Who have you recruited to the department, and what have they brought over time?

TANENBAUM Larry [Ferrara] was hired when I was hired, so he has been in the middle of all the discussions, and he has just been a wonderful teacher. He is particularly great with people who maybe have lost their way a little bit. He's also produced, quite selflessly and with little fanfare, some of our best players.

Marc Teicholz was a private student of mine when I was 21 and he was 14. Then he went on to get a guitar degree at Yale, and a law degree at Boalt, at U.C. Berkeley. He's kind of opposite man; he does pro-bono legal work and makes his money with the guitar. He is a wonderful player. And he's one of the quickest people on his feet I have ever seen in reacting to student's playing. He has for a long time taught the Performance class, which is a class about aspects of performance, sort of like a master class with about three students a week playing. You want people doing what they're best at, and he is great at helping students get better on the spot.

Marc has connected very strongly with Sérgio [Assad], he has played a lot of Sérgio's music, and other Brazilian music now, and he has recently wanted to investigate fretboard harmony more. So we have him scheduled to do a fretboard harmony class next spring, and he's already taking a Brazilian guitar class in Berkeley on Sundays. He's also going to be working with Sérgio, who's just a supreme master of that style, developing his fretboard harmony chops to the point where he's going to teach that class.

SMITH For the benefit of readers of this history who do not understand that term, could you explain what fretboard harmony refers to?

TANENBAUM It's basically harmony on the guitar fretboard.

SMITH Which is distinct and different from what you might do at a piano, right?

TANENBAUM Well, the piano is symmetrical and there's one middle C. The guitar is asymmetrical; it's tuned mostly in fourths, but there's a third in the middle of it, so that's an anomaly in Western music also, which has stringed instruments tuned in fifths. If you take the open first string, E, there are four, sometimes five different places where you can play that note. So we have many options for playing different chords and harmony. It's an endless study that is core work for jazz guitarists, and classical guitarist students are often clamoring for more of it. When we ask our students what they want, the answer is often "More fretboard harmony! "We do address sight-reading, and we have a technique class that covers some chording, but this will be just a class on that topic.

SMITH Wow. There are other faculty members?

TANENBAUM Well, Dušan Bogdanovic was here for 17 years. He's a brilliant guitarist/composer; one of the best in the world. He taught very well here, and he was I think best with the most sophisticated students because he insisted on a very high intellectual level with music. Some of the best students we've had, like Gyan Riley, who's Terry Riley s son, got the most from Dušan. In fact, Gyan is composing quite a bit now, and you'd think his initial inspiration was his dad, but he actually started in a Composing for Guitar class that Dušan taught. In Dušan's 17th year two things happened. I think he made this decision too quickly, but he just didn't like the new building that much, he didn't feel very comfortable here. In that year, the students all went to his house for their lessons. I kept telling him to give it some time, to grow into the building. But then he also had the opportunity to go to Europe, because his former teacher in Geneva was retiring. He applied and beat out a hundred other people. This was during the Bush years, and Dušan felt very uncomfortable politically here, so with all of those factors he made the decision to go.

It was rather sudden, but then we did a search and found Sérgio Assad, who has just been so fantastic to have. He's one of the most famous classical guitarists in the world. His duo, with his brother, which has been going for more than fifty years now – they just did their fiftieth anniversary tour – is widely regarded as the greatest duo in the history of the instrument, and I think that's right. Sérgio also composes a lot, he arranges brilliantly, and it's just been a great pleasure to have him here.

SMITH What does Sérgio contribute to the department? What is his specialty?

TANENBAUM Sérgio is not interested in the classroom, so he has not taught classes, but he recruits and teaches high level students fantastically. He does ensemble coaching and he does a lot of freewheeling, like just showing up unannounced at rehearsals, or giving a spontaneous coaching. Somebody will go up to him and say, "I'm working on this Brazilian piece for guitar and voice. Can we play it for you?" He does off the book stuff; the beautiful little things that happen in the department, the education that's not part of the official curriculum.

SMITH There's a quote here that I thought might trigger a response from you. You wrote in this essay, "Guitar faculties at conservatories and universities have evolved into two different and successful patterns. Perhaps the most common has a primary professor aided by other teaching assistants or graduate assistants who primarily teach the professor's way. Another model has several peers, usually directed by a chairperson, who teach in quite different ways from each other so that students contact diverse approaches." Which do you think the Conservatory falls into?

TANENBAUM By far the latter, and that's what I prefer.

SMITH Is that what you had in mind when you wrote this?

TANENBAUM I did, but I am reflecting what I see out there. Our model is the minority one but I really wanted to have different people with different strengths. There's a great balance in this faculty, because although we all teach it all, Larry and Marc play the classic romantic repertoire more than Sérgio and I do. I tend to play more new music, but I love and play early music as well, while Sérgio is one of the great stars and experts in Latin American music. He plays Baroque music beautifully as well, and he travels to non-classical worlds more than any of us. And then we have Rich, who is a Grammy-nominated, well known early music person, a true spark plug in the department. Different people have different strengths, and so that students can fully benefit, we have it set up where they can have at least one switch of studios per semester.

SMITH Really? They can change their private teacher?

TANENBAUM We want to do that. They can change their private teachers from semester to semester as well. Most don’t, and I think stability is a good thing, but if Sérgio’s student wants to work on the Britten with me, and my student wants to work on some Villa-Lobos with him, they just organize it and switch, and we want that to happen.

SMITH You find that students respond to that level of responsibility?

TANENBAUM I think they do. It becomes self-selecting – you end up getting the kind of student that you would want to get. Our students relish this kind of openness, and the different points of view.

SMITH Which is kind of what you did when you came here, right? Because you weren’t finding what you needed, so you went to people who could give you what you needed, and had the freedom to move and do that.

TANENBAUM Right, and that goes back to the liberal arts idea I think as well. You go to different professors to discuss. I’m not happy when some students want to sit in their room and practice only, and not participate. That’s not the best kind of student to me. I want them to enter the community and learn by watching and interacting with other students. And going to events. My dad, with that one leg, went to two, three, four concerts each week. He led a vigorous life. And again, with that apple not falling far from the tree, I do the same thing. I went to two concerts last week, I’ll be at three this week. I do that because I’m still interested and I want to hear it all, but I also want to model to the students an active concert going life.

One more thing about the guitar faulty: we really like each other. We’re all friends, and we spend a lot of time together away from the school. I think the students know that and benefit from it.

Friday, February 5, 2016
David s backyard

SMITH Describe your role in facilitating the Conservatory's partnership with the Harris Guitar Foundation, to bring its collection of rare and historic instruments to the Conservatory.

TANENBAUM Well, the collection is one of a kind. No other school in the world has anything like it. John [Harris] had been collecting these guitars for years, and had done so quietly. I've been in the middle of the Bay Area guitar scene for years, and I had never heard of this. He had been in touch with guitar repair and maintenance people, and a few others, but he eventually decided he wanted to be more open about what he had. He invited me over, and then I connected him with Marc, and we both started to go over and regularly play the guitars. They were magnificent. They're not just historic treasures, but they are all in playable condition. So we played them for a period of years.

I can't remember exactly when the idea of getting the guitars actually here started, but there were countless conversations. We also began to do Guitarradas with Pepe Romero, which became very popular. Guitarrada is a word that the Romeros invented, which basically reflects what they do all the time: a group of fine guitarists makes their way through a guitar collection, discussing it, playing the guitars.

SMITH This is something that they did back in their house in Southern California together?

TANENBAUM Yeah, that family stays together and makes music together. They have a series of houses there, and they do this all the time. They decided to make them public events, and we jumped on that. We started doing them at Ortega Street, we would fill Hellman Hall with them. We've done eight now, and somewhere along the way we came up with the idea of housing the guitars at the school. John was looking for a way for these guitars to get used, because he's not really a player. It was about a five-year process. We had to meet with the school's lawyers, and John's lawyers, and we set up the Harris Guitar Foundation, which has board members from the school, John's family, and the Omni Foundation, which produces guitar concerts here. The foundation owns the guitars, but we are also producing things. We commissioned the Clarice Assad Concerto as a first project.

So this took a really long time, and it took some real gumption from the administration of the school because there was no precedent anywhere. Mary Ellen Poole stepped up large, as did Colin Murdoch. John now shows up every Wednesday for playing sessions with the students.

SMITH What happens on those Wednesday sessions?

TANENBAUM John does them thematically; such as a day on Spanish guitars from the early 20th century. He talks to students about the history, about luthiery and how the guitar evolved in Spain. And then he brings one guitar at a time out of the case, and the students play them. Like anything else there are the regulars who are just in love with those guitars.

Now it's a bit of a 'build it and they will come' scenario. We're getting all kinds of interest from many places. There's a Mexican luthier who's trying to get a grant to come study the guitars, and numerous luthiers come by to study them. Many of the fine players who are passing through want to play these guitars. In December we had a kind of summit in there with Andy Summers of the Police, John Dearman from the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, Ben Verdery from Yale and others.

SMITH That's great. Are there former students that you would like to talk about? You mentioned you had a student who won a lot of competitions.

TANENBAUM I do try to stay in touch with former students. They are all over the place. Many of the state universities in California have our alums teaching, like Sonoma State, Humboldt State, Chico State, places like that and they are teaching internationally as well. Alieksey Vianna from Brazil was really one of the best students I've had in terms of facility, and he's one of the rare people who can play jazz and classical at a high level. He decided to make a living just winning competition prizes for a while. If you go on his website, there's a long list of first and second prizes he won – many of these first prizes were $10,000. He's now living in Basel, making a good living teaching and finishing a doctorate in jazz.

What I like is when they become interesting. Travis Andrews has formed an electric guitar, percussion duo with Andy Myers called The Living Earth Show. Arguably the most complex living composer is Brian Ferneyhough, who's down at Stanford. Travis and Andy have a piece of his for electric guitar and marimba in which the vibraphone is tuned a half-step lower. They did a Kickstarter to buy a vibraphone just for this ten minute piece, and they rehearsed it for 1,200 hours over a period of a year.

SMITH 1,200 hours?

TANENBAUM 1,200 hours. And they use this new memorization book that came out, *Moonwalking with Einstein* by Joshua Foer, which suggests that you memorize by putting things mentally into the rooms of a building. So they memorized the Ferneyhough according to the new building of the Conservatory. I went to coach them, and I would say, "OK, I'd like to start at bar 33," and they'd look at the score and go, "OK, that's Paul Hersh's studio. We'll start there."

SMITH Was this a commission?

TANENBAUM No, it was existing already. They're doing such interesting things. I got to play – I have to say it was exhilarating – the National Anthem at the Giants Stadium with those guys and a bass player.

SMITH That's great, when was that?

TANENBAUM It was April of 2014, a world championship year. I'm a baseball guy, so it was just a thrill. It's actually quite an experience to finish playing and hear the roar of 40,000 people. There are other very interesting alumni. Gyan Riley, who's the son of Terry. He is living in New York now, and he has a multi-faceted career, playing with all kinds of different musicians. He's writing music – he wrote a piece for Kronos, himself and his dad – and he did an arrangement recently for Yo-Yo Ma.

SMITH Did you also not record Terry Riley's CD with his son playing guitar?

TANENBAUM I did. There's one piece for two guitars which we recorded that. We've played together many times in different groups. In fact, Terry wrote a concerto for violin and two guitars, and we premiered that in Philadelphia.

SMITH Was it he who you said earlier, on Tuesday, that was actually inspired to composer not by his father, but by Sérgio?

TANENBAUM By Dušan. There was a Composing for Guitar class that Dušan taught. I'm sure the fire was there, waiting to be lit. But it got lit in that class.

SMITH On the subject of students, talk about students today, as opposed to students when you first started teaching. What are some of the major differences in how they approach their work, and the way they view their upcoming professional careers?

TANENBAUM That's a big one. First of all, some context. While I've been at it, the world has changed a lot. When I started teaching, solo recitals were everywhere, but there are fewer now. World music has become a bigger percentage of what everybody is listening to, it seems. And more recently music has basically become an art form that's free. People have just stopped expecting to pay for music. When s the last time you bought a CD?

SMITH I'm one of the outliers.

TANENBAUM Well, me too, but most people don't. When you have everything on YouTube for free, it's tough. Students often don't even really expect to pay for live concerts. This is not a phenomenon that is unique to us. My colleagues internationally report that students are going to concerts less. It's a frustrating thing to me. I don't get how you can spend this kind of money and make the really courageous decision to come study music, and then you don't show up when I got you a free ticket to hear a great guitarist. It's not a battle I'm going to give up on. This is something that Glenn Gould predicted in the 60's, by the way, that people would go to fewer concerts and they would compile their own recordings. I find honestly that, in general, students are less educated than they used to be. We make them write program notes from the freshman level. It's a college, so they should be able to write two pages of program notes. We do guide them, but in general they don't write very well. And they have less of a sense of historical context than students used to have.

What they do have is a lot of information, it's just not necessarily integrated. In other words, if I say something about an interpretation, a student might say, "It's interesting that you would want to do that, but there are five people on YouTube who do it a different way." As if that's a full argument. So it's just a very different world than it used to be, and I find it harder to surprise students. This young generation is the first that doesn't believe they're going to do better than their parents' generation. They come in cynical about guitar careers already.

But given all of that, they still come in big numbers, they're still paying a lot of money to do this. I think that speaks to the power of music, first of all. It makes less financial sense than it ever did, because the field is more crowded and the level has gone way up in the guitar world. My generation has done its job, because these young players are better than us as a whole. You can see YouTubes of ten year old kids playing incredibly. When I was just in China, I met a legendary teacher named Chen Zhi. He's focusing mostly on the nine to fifteen year olds now and they're playing as well as the collegiate students. He just weaves his magic with the young ones. So the level of education for earlier levels is better as well. Now, do I think it's impossible to make a guitar career? I don't. I still think there is room for creativity, but students have to be savvy, and they have to build careers from the inside out.

SMITH Is that what you mean by inside out? Work from what you have.

TANENBAUM Yeah, we have to make sure we teach them the breadth of the repertoire, and they've got to become excellent on their instruments. That's first. But in that process, natural inclinations and open channels emerge.

SMITH What has the response of you and your fellow faculty members been to this shift over time with students as you've noticed? Has it dramatically changed the core principles that you set out to build the curriculum? Has it intensified it, or has it shifted?

TANENBAUM I think it has shifted, and I think part of that is the influence of Sérgio, who really wants the students to go to where their strengths are.

SMITH Interesting. Let's shift gears now, and have you share some memories of Conservatory colleagues.

TANENBAUM Well, I would start with Laurette Goldberg, the teacher who influenced me the most. She was just a ball of energy. It's hard to imagine now, but forming Philharmonia Baroque was a huge task, and she had to really convince a lot of people. She also produced concerts at her home.

SMITH Really? Where was this house?

TANENBAUM It's on the Alameda, in Albany. I played there many times.

SMITH An early music salon.

TANENBAUM Basically that. But she'd get major people coming through, like Hopkinson Smith – arguably the greatest lute player on the planet. I went to many concerts there.

SMITH In your opinion, when the Conservatory moved from the Sunset to the Civic Center, did the character of the school change? If so, in what ways?

TANENBAUM I think it was a big change. The Sunset building was almost like an extended house. It was so horizontal and wide, but there was a focal point near the front door. If you needed to find somebody you just stood there, and it wouldn't take them that long to show up. It was a community, and I think the initial experience at the Civic Center was a building that was much more vertical and compartmentalized.

But I think the school kind of grew up there, it became a big boy school. The natural place for a conservatory is at a Civic Center, where you can see the opera house out the window. It was a place that we had to grow into, but the facilities are fantastic – especially now with TAC and the recording studios. The concert halls all work wonderfully for the guitar, and we have a regular audience now. In the Sunset, there were a few intrepid neighbors who would come and hear us, but we have a following now. The word is out that you can hear great guitar music at our department recitals for free. We have people who come to everything we do now, and I think that's partly because of the location and the public transportation. I love the fact that we can all take Bart there.

SMITH I'm interested in this visual metaphor that you used – the horizontality of the old building, and the verticality of the new building. I remember constantly going up and down the stairs a lot, and it does feel like a weird house still. It still feels like it's all contained in one spot, but it is a different space. I myself was in Hellman Hall for a competition when I was in high school, so I know the space that you're talking about.

TANENBAUM Something about the old building just felt more integrated. But it was funky, let's be honest. It was in a neighborhood, it wasn't the best place to produce concerts, but it had character. You move on, you lose some things and gain others. But I think the public transportation and being in the Civic Center is just huge for this school.

SMITH Let's talk about your collaborations with some composers over the years.

TANENBAUM Speaking generally, I've been privileged to work with widely recognized great composers, and they have been my most important teachers, really. Although none of them play the instrument, I would say in pretty much every case, they have revealed things about an instrument that I've spent my life with that I hadn't heard before. And this is one of the greatest things about spending a life with the guitar. It's finite, it has six strings and a fretboard, and you would think you'd come to the end of its possibilities, but it just keeps revealing new things. For instance, in 2008 Sofia Gubaidulina did a residency with the Symphony at which I did the world premiere of her piece called *Repentance* for three guitars, cello, and bass. It's a twenty-five minute piece. It's so well written that we never used amplification, even in Davies Hall. At one point in the score she asks for a thick wire like a piano string to be inserted in a solid rubber ball, and for that to be bounced on the strings. I went all over the place looking for a wire that was flexible enough to hold a heavy rubber ball. She brought with her what she wanted. It made a sound unlike anything I had heard on the guitar. It made just a phenomenal sound.

SMITH She conceived that in her own head?

TANENBAUM I don't know if she invented it or if somebody showed it to her, but it's just magical, and anything that I had tried to approximate the sound was inferior to it. I can tell you another story of Lou Harrison. I played and recorded his music for many years, and he always said he enjoyed my performances. His relationship with the guitar was sort of a fractured one. He started in 1952, when he wrote a little tiny serenade as part of a letter to his friend. All guitarists did for forty years was get copies of that letter, and play from the manuscript.

I finally published it in '92. So that was the first piece he wrote, and then in 1978 he set out to write a set of six sonatas with the guitar, with optional percussion. He wrote one of them, started a second, abandoned it, used those as part of a string quartet for Kronos, and never looked at the guitar again.

But a small army of us kept trying get another piece from Lou. I would tug at his sleeve, and over the years he got kind of crankier and crankier with the question. “Will you stop asking me for that piece?! I’m so tired of it! I’m not writing you a piece! “And so, when he turned 80 in 1997 I ran a festival at the school – five days of Lou’s music, his poetry, art hanging that he had curated. It was quite popular, the whole thing was sold out. Michael Tilson Thomas came and read Lou’s poetry. Before that was going to happen I said, “Lou, I’m putting together this huge thing. What do you think? Maybe a small, little, tiny piece for this festival?” “Stop asking me for music!” So there was a piano piece called *Tandy’s Tango,* that I transcribed for the festival and Tandy Beale, the dancer and dedicatee, choreographed it.

After that I gave up getting a new guitar piece from Lou. I thought, “OK, the guy’s 80, he’s said no enough times, he doesn’t want to do this, so let’s just forget about it.” Then I’m just going about my business a few years later and the phone rings, and it’s Charles Amirkhanian from Other Minds. He said, “Hey, I just got off the phone with Lou. He’s going to write you a piece for my festival.” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding me. You did not just get off the phone with Lou, and he did not say that.” And so I called Lou, and he said, “Well, I started thinking about it, and I realized that the problem all along was your guitar. Not the guitar, but your guitar. The classical guitar. I don t think it sustains enough, and I don’t think it’s loud enough. So actually I do have a guitar sound in mind, but I got stuck on this classical thing. It’s something else I want.” I said, “OK, what do you have in mind?” He said, “I’m not sure, but you’re going to have to help me find it.”

I have a friend who’s a guitar maker down in that area, Kenny Hill, and he’s got a guitar shop with all different kinds of guitars. So we filled up his station wagon with all of the guitars you can imagine. We started with the most beautiful of my classical guitars. I thought that maybe I could still get him to write for that, so I did my nails perfectly, I did everything I could to make it sound great. But Lou said, “Wow, that s beautiful, but that’s not it. Put that away.” Not everybody tells me to put it away – my kid certainly does – but he told me to put it away. So, then we started going through these guitars. I tried a steel string, a Dobro, a twelve-string. Kenny just kept handing me guitars, and Lou said, “Well, we might be getting a little closer, but we’re not there.” We went through the whole station wagon of guitars, and didn’t find it. Then Kenny said, “I have an idea. There’s a guy who plays on the street with a National Steel. Let’s go give him twenty bucks, and tell him to get some lunch, and take his guitar for an hour to Lou.” We did, and within seconds of hearing it Lou said, “That’s it!” The first thing I thought was, “OK, I’ve got a disaster on my hands. National Steel players don t read music and classical players are not going to go play a National Steel. So I might get this piece, maybe I’ll play it a few times, and then it’s going to die.” I’m trying to get pieces that will enter the world and really get played a lot. So I said, “Look, this is not practical. I really think you should reconsider this.” He said, “I just want you to play it once beautifully the way I want to hear it.” That’s a statement of artistic integrity that was so moving. So he wrote the piece, and afterward he told me that he wasn't finished, that he wanted to find a way to get the tunings he preferred. So he worked with a student of his to modify the fretboard into the tuning that he wanted to get. I thought "I am so far out now, maybe I'm not even going to play the piece." But I then went through a process: I took lessons from Bob Brozman, who's the best National Steel player, and I had to figure out how to play at a pretty good level with the pick and with the slide. [A bird sings nearby.] That's probably Lou in that bird, talking to us right now.

SMITH Can you back up and explain to the people who will be reading this transcript what is the divide between the National Steel guitar and the classical guitar that is so hard for you to contemplate other people performing it? You're talking about physical challenges, could you make that a little bit more explicit?

TANENBAUM Well, first of all, let me talk about National Steel guitars, which I knew nothing about before this whole thing. National Steel guitars were invented in the 1920s, when jazz guitarists in jazz bands didn't have electric guitars yet, and they weren't loud enough. So this guitar was invented with a steel body and a resonator inside it that naturally amplifies the sound. Lou, who was born in 1917, heard these as a kid, and that sound stayed in his ear until his 80s. The classical guitar uses nylon strings in the treble and nylon wound with steel in the bass. It's a 200-plus-year-old instrument that basically comes from Spain, with ancestors stretching back 500 years. The National Steel is American. It has steel strings, it's mostly played with a pick. I'm not aware of a classical composer having even thought of writing for a National Steel guitar before Lou.

SMITH So a classical guitarist would have to learn to play with a pick sufficiently well to handle whatever technical difficulties an art composer would write for.

TANENBAUM Right. Not only a pick, but also a slide, and different placing of the frets on an instrument that he's spent his lifetime with. This is a ten minute piece, and it took me six months to just make the mental and physical adjustments to be able to do it.

SMITH And you had to take special lessons.

TANENBAUM I took lessons with Brozman and I played the piece, *Scenes from Nek Chand* for Lou many times. I also made some changes. I thought he hadn't written enough notes. Usually I'm in the process of taking notes away in a piece, but in this case I got some pedal tones in there. I premiered it at the Palace of Fine Arts and I've played it now a dozen countries. I toured with two guitars, which is just not fun as this thing weighs a ton. My touring is usually with a backpack, a small suitcase, and a guitar, and I can just go anywhere. But now all of a sudden I have two guitars, I've got to get luggage carts, it's really a logistical pain. But it was worth it, as I love this piece. I thought, “OK, I got something really special but no one else is going to play it.” And then the same week that my recording came out, someone else recorded it. And then Terry Riley heard it, and he wrote a twenty-minute anti-Iraq war piece for the instrument. Lou’s piece was finished in 2002, and Terry’s was at the end of 2003. Since that time, more than twenty pieces have been written for the instrument. A doctoral thesis has been done on it. There are multiple CDs of entire repertoire for Lou’s specially tuned National guitar. And this is the instrument that I argued against. It all started with Lou’s act of integrity – “Just play it for me once the way I want to hear it.” He had a vision, and it was one with such force that you couldn’t help but to say OK. He was also 84 when he started writing that piece, so what did he care?

SMITH So the moral is, you had to produce a big birthday party festival to get this piece written.

TANENBAUM I will give myself some credit for perseverance, but the story is about Lou. He was part of that whole American maverick tradition where people created something out of nothing. It took a kind of rugged individualism to do it. But that piece is an example of the journey you can go on with these composers. I can tell a few more – I won’t go too long.

Hans Werner Henze, one of the great European composers of the second part of the 20th century, wrote a marvelous piece called *El Cimarrón*, which is the story of a Cuban slave. An anthropologist named Miguel Barnet found a bitter old man named Estaben Montejo in the Cuban hills when he was 102. He took his story down, and it was published as a book. Cuban history is just dark and horrible; the Spanish, American’s coming, revolution, it’s just one thing after the other. And Esteban tells how he survived the whole thing with just his machete. He escaped from slavery, he lived in the woods by himself for five years, he fought in the revolution. Henze set this story for guitar, flute, percussion, and voice. I was part of the first English language production, and had to spend three months studying percussion in order to do it, as the guitarist plays ten percussion instruments in that piece. We did a tour of it around 1980, and Andrew Porter of the New Yorker came. He was very complimentary about my work. He said, “I’m doing a six month sabbatical studying the West Coast music scene, and this will be in the New Yorker.” Which is amazing for a young player. So I waited for a review and it never showed up. Finally I wrote him and said, “I waited for your review, can you tell me what happened? It seemed like you liked my work, and it would really help me to get a review from you.” He wrote me a beautiful letter back and let me use it in my publicity. But more importantly, he said that he told his friend Henze about me. Henze had just written a very big solo guitar piece – one of the biggest ever written, it’s an hour on Shakespeare called *Royal Winter Music*. I was studying that very hard, and I wanted to play it for him. So he came to Cabrillo [Festival of Contemporary Music], and I waited around for a whole week to try and have an opportunity to play for him. Finally, on Sunday morning he got in touch and I went there. He was drinking his coffee, and I started playing for him. He said, “Wow, you understand this music perfectly.” After the second movement (there were nine of them) he said, “I have an idea. I’m going to write you a concerto.” Pretty hard to finish the piece after that, and all I had wanted was to discuss the edition. A master composer like that can certainly promise something like that, and then forget about it, but he actually arranged the commission, organized the tour and got me connected with the great Ensemble Modern in Germany. And he conducted it. Not the premiere, but we did a lot of performances where he conducted it. It was just an amazing gift. He heard something, he wanted to do it, and he did it.

SMITH What was the name of the concerto?

TANENBAUM It’s called *An Eine Äolsharfe*, Ode to an Aeolian Harp. It’s based on poetry by the great 19th century poet Eduard Morike, from Germany. What was so interesting in working on that concerto is that Henze wanted a very active interpreter who would be engaged in the compositional process. For instance, in the 4th movement he wrote many large chords that he knew couldn’t fit on the guitar, and he told me he liked all the notes and expected me to choose the chords. I wasn’t yet 30 and Henze was asking me to help him write a guitar concerto. This is the kind of journey that you can go on with these composers. You just never know where it’s going to take you. May I tell one more?

SMITH Go on.

TANENBAUM I’d like to talk about Terry Riley, because he’s another composer whose music I just love. I used to go see him play long organ improvisation concerts at Mills College. I eventually became friendly with him, and asked him for a piece. That also went on, like with Lou, and I got nowhere. I kept asking, and then a funny thing happened, which was that Gyan, his son who we talked about, won a guitar in a raffle. With the guitar came four lessons. I remember Gyan telling me that by the fourth lesson he decided he didn’t like the guitar. So the guitarist, Jimmy Bellizi, said “OK. You don’t want to take lessons anymore. I’m going to spend the next hour playing for you my favorite pieces.” And that hour turned Gyan around, and he decided to be a guitarist. All of a sudden, the classical guitar was in the Riley home. Gyan was practicing all the time, he was playing recordings, and Terry would wander in and get interested. And then he called me and said, “You know, I’m getting the sense I could write something.” Ultimately, that has led to a project called *The Book of Abbeyozzud*. Abbeyozzud, if you’re searching your mental dictionary, is a word that he made up, because he does that a lot. It’s a set of guitar pieces – one for each letter of the Spanish alphabet – that’s an homage to Spain and the heritage of the guitar. There are three solos, and the guitar is set in all kinds of situations. There’s a concerto, there are many chamber pieces – it’s just a huge project for the guitar, and it’s ongoing.

SMITH You recorded a CD called *The Book of Abbeyozzud*.

TANENBAUM I recorded the first bunch of them. He wrote that first piece in 1993, we edited it, I was playing it, and then he called again and said, “I just realized I’m not done. I’ve got a lot more guitar in me.” So it turned into this. I guess the story I’m telling is one of the unexpected. You just never know where it’s going to take you. And I love that, and I love the ears that these composers have.

SMITH Is that what you meant by having said that your greatest teachers were these composers, because they taught you the sounds that you didn’t know you could make on the instrument you spent your life mastering?

TANENBAUM Yes, and they heard things in my playing that was just so valuable to get feedback on.

John Adams. OK, that’s the last one. John wrote a piece called *Naive and Sentimental Music*, which has a big guitar solo in the second movement. He asked for me to play it on the recording with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Esa-Pekka Salonen. I was on tour, John was away and I didn’t get to play it for him until four days before the recording, which is a little scary. So I did, and he said, “Wow. Great playing, wrong instrument.” Maybe you recognize that from the Lou statement. He said that it had to be a steel string guitar because it will project over the orchestra better. Now, John has an impeccable ear for orchestration, he’s one of the great living orchestrators without any doubt. But I had to figure out what to do. So I called my dear friend Peppino D’Agostino, who’s a steel string player. He was on tour, but I raced out and his wife lent me one of his guitars. I basically had to figure out how to play the steel string guitar in about four days.

Not long after that I was playing in a symphony production of *El Niño*, which calls for two steel string guitars. I asked John if I could play classical on this and he said no, this should also be steel. So I said, “Well, how about this? Let’s do an experiment.” I was doing the Rodrigo *Concerto* with the Santa Cruz Symphony the night of the first rehearsal, and I didn’t want to use fingernails on steel strings. So I suggested that we do the first rehearsal with classical guitars, and the second rehearsal with steels. And he was so right. Even though it’s not my main instrument, the steel string did just cut right through the texture, and the nylon kind of blended into it more.

SMITH Wow. We are keen to get your impressions of more of these composers, if you don’t mind sharing them.

TANENBAUM Takemitsu was just a fascinating person to me. In 1977 I was newly out here and I met him. I just went up to him and said, "I want to play your piece for you." And he responded. Eventually I got to play for him a lot and I have a lot of letters we sent back and forth. Probably his most famous solo guitar piece is called *All in Twilight* and I did the first recording of it, and a premiere of his guitar and oboe d'amore concerto.

He was, in my opinion, a different person in the West than he was in the East. When he was here he would be very aesthetic and quiet – you felt like if you touched him he would fall over. When I saw him in Japan he seemed very Western and much louder. He invited me to a guitar festival that he put together in Japan, and it remains to this day the most interesting guitar festival that I ever was part of. It had all kinds of different styles – jazz, blues, the whole thing. He was involved with the guitar repertoire, and talked about it a lot. I remember that all of us at the festival wanted to get Toru to play the guitar. We just were like, "Come on, we know you love the guitar. We know you own two guitars, you talk about it, you're involved with it, you've written for it your whole career, you've made this festival. Play for us." The final night was a festival jam session that went on for hours. Everybody was on stage playing and drinking, it was just great. We just kept asking Toru to come on stage. So finally, around midnight, he's been drinking sake and he goes up on stage. We thought we were finally going to get to hear him play the guitar. But he grabs the microphone, and he sings some blues. He sings it. He was very honest, and I think very self-critical in a way as well. Here's an example: he wrote a piece for viola and orchestra for the San Francisco Symphony, and I sat with him in the composer's box. As it was ending, he was standing up before running down to bow. I said, "Beautiful piece, Toru." He said, 'You're my friend. Don't you lie to me. This piece has many problems, and you know it." And then he raced off, and two minutes later he's bowing on stage. On the other hand, when he gave me the score for that guitar and oboe d'amore concerto, he said, "This is the best thing I've done in five years, no question." He was very direct in that way.

SMITH I see. Did you agree with his assessment of that piece?

TANENBAUM Actually, yes. I was being diplomatic, and he was mad about that. He didn't want to hear that, he wanted the truth. So I learned – just tell him directly.

SMITH Could you talk a little about Steve Reich? Or do you have more to say about Takemitsu?

TANENBAUM I have a lot more to say, but we should move on.

SMITH Well, if there's something you want to share, we're happy to hear it.

TANENBAUM I think that's maybe something of a portrait. I just loved him. I thought he was an amazing person, and I loved the way that he had nothing to do with academics on any side. He was self-taught as a composer, and he never taught. He just lived in a different world. I never really worked with anyone who had better ears than he did, he just heard everything.

I feel like I want to talk about one more Takemitsu story. Takemitsu wrote a lot of pieces in the last ten years of his life for orchestra with a solo instrument. He told me that he decided to do that because he didn't feel like orchestras had enough rehearsal time for his music, but he knew that if he gave a soloist a part they would work on it for a year. So he decided for economic reasons that he would give the sophisticated music to the soloist, and keep the orchestra parts simple, and he would get better performances by doing that. That became very successful – he really got commissioned a lot by orchestras in the last ten years. His last piece for orchestra was a piece for guitar, violin, and orchestra.

Takemitsu was ill in 1995. He was only 65, but he was in the hospital most of the year. He was thinking about the guitar a lot in that last year, and in November he got out of the hospital pretty much knowing that he was on the way out. He had the energy to write a couple more pieces, maybe, and he at that point wrote the longest guitar piece that he ever gave us. It's called *In the Woods*. The last movement of that is called Muir Woods. The reason that happened is because he was featured at the Mill Valley Film Festival, and someone took him to Muir Woods at that time. I remember my wife at the time and I were there, and he wouldn't let us leave. We had a young child who was two, and we kept wanting to go home and bail the babysitter out, and he just wouldn't let us leave. I found out later that on that tour he did that with many of his other friends. He knew he was dying, but at that point he hadn't told anybody that he was ill. It was the last time I saw him.

I remember getting *In the Woods* and going immediately to Muir Woods to think about that piece, and him, and then playing a concert in Japan at the one year anniversary of the death, where I got to talk to his widow and daughter quite a bit. Those are very moving memories of him.

SMITH That's incredible. He didn't dedicate that piece to any particular performer?

TANENBAUM That's not true, actually, there are three movements in it and he dedicated each one to a guitar friend of his. The first one is John Williams, the second is probably his closest Japanese guitarist friend, Kyoshi Shomura, and the third, Julian Bream. It was premiered at his funeral.

SMITH You did also perform the piece for guitar, violin, and orchestra?

TANENBAUM Not that but the one for guitar, oboe d'amore, and orchestra. I did the U.S. premiere of that with the great oboist Bill Banovetz, in Herbst.

SMITH Wasn't it a Conservatory ensemble that did that?

TANENBAUM It was the school orchestra.

OK, so Steve Reich. It was just incredible to tour with him, because minimalist composers became kind of rock stars in the classical world. I'd walk on stage – nobody knew me in these European cities but I'd get a huge ovation before I played a note. It was just amazing to see how many young people there were, what the buzz was like.

SMITH I had a college buddy, my closest friend, who saw Steve Reich performing on tour at Berkeley when he was a student. And he talks about it just exactly the way that you describe, and it was exactly that time frame.

TANENBAUM Well, Steve actually did his Master's work at Mills. You can still see his Master's composition at the library there. So he was a Bay Area guy, and you may not know this, but he was in the first performance of *In C*. In fact, it was his idea to do the high C's on the piano, and his girlfriend at the time did those in the premiere.

SMITH I think you've written elsewhere that he, like so many other composers, was incredibly specific and that his notational marks are exactly what he wants. If he indicates a crescendo that begins on the second eighth note in a hundred eighth notes, that's exactly where he wants it, and he will hear if it's not there.

TANENBAUM That is true. That's the only time I remember him correcting me was when he said, "You know the crescendo starts on beat three, not beat two!" I did two years of tours, and various performances in other years. A few years later I got a call from Aaron Jay Kernis, who's really my best friend. He lives in New York, and he said, "I heard a piece last night that I think is a guitar piece." It was the New York premiere of *Nagoya Marimbas*, which is a five minute piece that Steve wrote for the Nagoya School of Music in Japan in 1994. So I called Steve, and he sent me the score. He said, "Listen: everybody tries to make this work on their instruments. My pianists tried to make it a piano piece, it didn't work. Cellists have tried to make it, it doesn't work. So I don't think it's going to work, but you can try." Marc Teicholz and I basically sight-read it and sent it to him on a cassette tape. I was just thrilled that we immediately had this new guitar piece. But when I talked to Steve he told me it didn't work. I just was stunned, as I just thought I really had something there. I was kind of in a spin for a couple of days, and then I thought, "There's got to be a way to make this work." We discussed what he didn't like, and I decided to turn it into more of a guitar piece. I transposed it a fifth, I used guitar effects like harmonics and things like that. That started an exchange with Steve that ultimately resulted in the piece being now published as *Nagoya Guitars* as well, and it's been recorded and played all over the world. The transcription rightly says that it's by the two of us, because it really was a back and forth. Another example of his exacting nature is the recording I made of *Electric Counterpoint*.

SMITH You made two recordings, or just one?

TANENBAUM I made three, actually, but only one where I played all the parts. The others in Europe where I played the solo with an ensemble. But in my first one, which was the first classical one (we called it *Acoustic Counterpoint*) I called him and I said, "Did you have a chance to listen?" And he said, "Yeah, do you have a pencil and paper?" He's so sharp, and he's so fast. All of Steve's comments were about the mix, just really small details about the blend of the instruments. The concept of that piece is that you have the fourteen guitars, the counterpoint, while the narrator, the live guitar, has to be prominent enough to be distinct, but also part of the blend. So it's really a delicate balance. Steve took what Terry Riley started with minimalism and he made it very exacting. That clarity of thought is there throughout the process of working with him.

SMITH Rigorous.

TANENBAUM Rigorous.

SMITH You haven't talked about Aaron Jay Kernis, your best friend. Is this an OK time?

TANENBAUM Aaron and I met at the Conservatory. I transferred out here as a junior, as we talked about, and Aaron was a freshman at that time. We met and connected, and I was a little bit on the hunt for interesting composers. I already was thinking about getting pieces that were more interesting than some of the other things out there. Aaron and I connected right away, but he decided he really didn't want to be on the West Coast, so after his first year he moved to New York. Funny enough, he studied with my dad at the Manhattan School of Music. While he was studying with my dad, he wrote me a solo guitar piece called *Partita*. He was just twenty when he wrote that piece, and it's a fantastic piece. But we proceeded to argue about it for the next seventeen years, because I thought it needed one more movement. There were two slow movements; it started out with a chaconne and then a passacaglia. I felt they were too close in character and key, and they needed something fast in between. I eventually won the argument, and he brilliantly fit himself back into that style and wrote a movement that really works. He's written five pieces for me over the years, one of which he withdrew, but I still actually love that piece too. It was for guitar and viola, for a duo I had with Geraldine Walther.

The piece that I've helped create that has entered the repertoire most is one Aaron wrote for guitar and string quartet in 1993 called *100 Greatest Dance Hits*. Aaron's career was really skyrocketing at that point. He had had this kind of confrontation on stage with Zubin Mehta that led to a lot of press. It was a reading for student composers, where the conductor gives advice to young composers. But in response to Mehta's criticism Aaron said, "Well, your tempo was all wrong." He stood up to the maestro, the press rode with that, and all of a sudden everybody was talking about Aaron. He suddenly had all these orchestral commissions, and he was thinking a lot about the fact that he was living uptown in New York – in Washington Heights, which is a very Latino area – writing symphonic music during the day and then going out at night and hearing very different music on the street. He wondered why these worlds were so separate and contemplated trying to join them, or get them closer. So when this commission came, he decided to write for guitar and string quartet – merging the ultimate crossover instrument with the quintessential classical group. And he used the language of pop within the structure of a classical composition. So there's a movement called *Salsa Pasada* – stale salsa – and in another movement the string players have to play percussion instruments and even mouth percussion. It's a crazy piece that is immensely popular. The premiere was in Angel Fire, New Mexico with the Kavafian Sisters, Chris Costanza, who's with the St. Lawrence String Quartet and Scott St. John. Ani Kavafian scratched her Guarneri during some of the crazy effects. But it got a standing ovation at the premiere, and pretty much every time I've done it since, more than 50 times, it's gotten a similar response. I've recorded it twice, and it now has two other recordings – for a new piece, four recordings is a lot. It's really become a repertoire piece. He later wrote a concerto for me that used some movements from that for strings which we did with New Century [Chamber Orchestra].

SMITH What's the name of that concerto?

TANENBAUM He calls it *Concierto de Dance Hits* but I don't like that title. I think it should be *Concierto de Aaron Jay*, because we have the *Aranjuez*, and he's Aaron Jay Kernis. He thinks that's too cheesy, but I think it's good. What are you going to do? I lost that argument.

SMITH The *Partita* is a beautiful piece, I listened to it earlier this week and I hadn't known it before, it's really gorgeous. The Gubaidulina is a relatively recent recording project you did; we could talk a little bit about it here.

TANENBAUM That actually just came out a few months ago, in the summer, but it took about five years to do. It has two little solos that she wrote in the '60s. She used to write pieces for Soviet publications, just kind of toss them off for a little money. One of those pieces she didn't even remember writing. But I did some research with her biographer, and one of the main Gubaidulina scholars, and it is her piece. I'm going to do a new edition of that soon. She more recently wrote that *Repentance* piece that I mentioned, and then she got more into the guitar. The next piece came in 2010, called *Sotto Voce*, for two guitars, viola, and bass. And so I thought, "Perfect! I'll do the four pieces as a CD." I was in touch with her manager and her publisher, and they kept telling me that she wanted to revise *Sotto Voce*. Then she turned 80, and then she got pneumonia. She didn't finish *Sotto Voce* until 2013, after which I was able to finally record it. These are just wonderful pieces with lots of improvisation in them. I did the improvisations deliberately really as improvisations. I went into the studio literally with no idea of what I was going to do, and used the first takes on all of them.

SMITH Really? I always have this impression with improvisations that you have some sort of road map of what you might be likely to do.

TANENBAUM Well normally you do, especially when you're in an ensemble. These are not huge improvs – they're maybe a minute long – and she's drawing kind of a graph that looks like a random drawing. I didn't even follow that, I just did what I wanted.

SMITH Was she at the recording session, so she could hear it?

TANENBAUM She was not. We worked quite a bit on the piece for the premiere, and we don't have a language in common. She basically just tells you what she wants through singing and gestures, and a little bit of translation. But she kept pushing all of us to be edgier, to push expressive boundaries, and I kept that in mind in the recording.

SMITH So your interaction with her is not nearly as personal as it has been with some of the other composers we were talking about today.

TANENBAUM It certainly is not as continuous. It was really wonderful and intense for a three or four day period, but that was the only time I ever saw her.

SMITH We've talked a lot about composers. What are some of your more meaningful collaborations with other instrumentalists, or ensembles? You've worked with Kronos, Shanghai String Quartet, the Alexander String Quartet. And you've also worked a lot with your fellow Manhattan School of Music alum Manuel Barrueco.

TANENBAUM Well, Manuel and I have been friends since college, and I just I love the guy. He called me up one time and said "I want you to do a duo project with me, but it's lower level than you think." I said, "What do you mean, lower level? Is it Fernando Sor?" He goes, "No, lower." This was a great conversation. We kept going supposedly down … I said, "Elvis?"

He said, “Maybe a little higher.” “The Monkees?” I had no idea. Finally he said, “No, I’m doing a Beatles project.” To me, that’s pretty high. What was so great about that recording was that we did it in Abbey Road, and we did it in the room where they did the original. We recorded three duos arranged by Leo Brouwer, and I remember this one moment where the producer, Simon Woods – who’s really a great producer – didn’t like the ending that Brouwer had come up with. He said, “If this ending’s on this, I’m off the project. I hate this ending, it’s corny and I don’t like it. We have to fix it.” We were kind of stopped cold, as he came on really strong. So he said, “Look, I’ve got the CD in my car, I’m going to go get it.” So we listened to the original, in the very spot where it was made. It was just one of those unforgettable moments; I think it took everyone’s breath away. It’s just fantastic to play with Manuel. We played in Bath, England at a hall where Fernando Sor had played and there was a special quality in that place.

I’ve had really nice times playing with friends. I was part of the World Guitar Ensemble, and now I’m part of the Pacific Guitar Ensemble – these are guitar collaborations that are fun to do. I’ve toured quite a bit with my friend Peppino D’Agostino – we do a nylon steel collaboration in which both worlds co-exist. We play a Vivaldi concerto in which I do the solo lute part and he does the continuo, sounding like a harpsichord on the steel strings. We’ve done *Nagoya Guitars* on nylon and steel where you can distinctly hear the two different parts.

Even the tours are a combination of the worlds. We’ll play in a concert hall one night, and maybe a club the next night. I remember one tour that was three weeks, and we put 5,000 kilometers on a van in Europe. We went from very far west in Osnabruch, Germany to Zagreb, the length of Europe.

I also had a long collaboration with the Ensemble Modern of Frankfurt, Germany. I did that *El Cimmarón* piece with its original singer William Pearson who was in his middle 60s at that point, but he was dying of HIV so he kind of looked like the 102 year old Cuban slave, unfortunately. It was the last project he ever did.

We did Boulez’s classic *Le Marteau sans maître*. The ensemble players are salaried, city state employees so they go to work with their briefcases and their instruments at nine on a Monday morning, and they rehearse all day. They can play anything, but we rehearsed that piece for a two-week period with Boulez’s assistant Peter Eötvös, who is just a remarkable musician. I remember playing the first Boulez concert at a midnight concert at the Frankfurt Alte Oper to a sold out young crowd.

I remember touring with them in Naples with Henze. There’s a famous piece called *Kammermusik*, which has the solo guitar pieces *Drei Tentos* in it and Henze took me on a walk around Naples the day of the concert to show me where he lived when he wrote the piece in

1958. I am excited now about collaborating with Steve Schick, the director of the Contemporary Music Players.

SMITH And you're a member of that ensemble.

TANENBAUM I am. And I've played a lot of duos with Willie Winant, the percussionist here. I always love playing with Willie.

SMITH Are there collaborations with conductors that have been meaningful to you?

TANENBAUM Kent Nagano – we were friends when we were both just starting out, when he was living essentially under the highway in the Hayes Valley. His whole life seemed to be about preparing for the international career that he seemed sure that he was going to have, and that he ended up having. He was learning languages and studying music all the time. We played the Rodrigo concerto in the Concord Pavilion for 4 or 5,000 people in a summer concert. His memory is ridiculous, it's just astounding. He can tell you what month we did that in 1984 – I couldn't even begin to tell you when that was. But he remembers all his concerts. We've done various collaborations over the years.

I was thrilled to work with Esa-Pekka Salonen, whose mastery of gesture, and whose ears were just astounding. He took control of the really large forces in *Naïve and Sentimental Music* with a relaxed assurance. I also did that piece with Alan Gilbert and the San Francisco Symphony, and he was very nice to work with as well.

SMITH Has your performance style changed over the years? If so, how?

TANENBAUM It's probably best for others to say that than me but I can tell you a few things from the inside. As a younger player, I would listen to my performances and always feel like I could have taken more time. I didn't necessarily feel like I wasn't rushing, but that there was just more space I could have used. Over the years, I feel like I'm really better at that – that my sense of time is more accurate. In other words, I'm taking the amount of time I think I'm taking. Just this morning MaryClare Brzytwa sent me videos of our concerts in Shanghai, and I was listening to them and thinking, "It is what you think it is now. There's not a discrepancy between what you think you're doing and what you're doing." It doesn't mean that I think everything is great, but I am accurately doing what I want to do now, in terms of time.

SMITH So you hear how you're sounding more.

TANENBAUM Yes, and I can also say that when I started to perform, the ‘five minutes to eight syndrome’ felt like the end of the world. I felt not prepared; I couldn’t believe people were going to give up their money and their time to hear me. By the time I got on stage I felt like I had lost 50 percent of my energy from anticipation and nerves. I’ve now made more peace with that feeling. Maybe your career gets bigger and there’s more expectation so the nerves don’t go away, but now it’s sort of like, “Hello darkness my old friend. I know you. I’ve spent a lifetime around you, and I know you feel terrible, but I know I’m going to walk out there and it will feel different.” It just doesn’t disarm me like it used to.

SMITH I think I have a sense of how you’ll answer this question, but – your preference for the types of music you play – has that changed over the years?

TANENBAUM I’m still on this journey with new music. My taste has even broadened some as I’ve gotten older. But as I’ve said before, I feel less compelled to play things I don’t want to play. I love a lot of the romantic guitar music, but there are so many people out there playing it so well, and life is short, and I am busy, that I’m not playing as much of that stuff as I used to. It’s as simple as that. Do I play it privately? Yeah. I play it for myself, for my friends, but not as much in public.

SMITH Elsewhere I’ve read that you say it’s particularly important to you to get composers that you think, and that others think, are important creators to confront the guitar – who didn’t automatically come to it of their own accord. To kind of expand the guitar’s repertoire so it’s not pigeonholed in some back water of guitar composers. You want composer composers to be writing great guitar music. How does that inform your persistence with say, Lou Harrison, or Terry Riley? How has that motivated you?

TANENABUM What’s interesting is I feel like I’m fighting the same battle that Segovia was fighting a hundred years ago, where he said, “My kingdom for a repertoire,” and he fought to expand our repertoire beyond just music written by guitarist composers. Now, there’s some wonderful music written by guitarist composers. Sérgio is one fine composer, Dušan is another, there’s no question this music is so well worked out, and so intricate. But there’s something that these great composers with such fine ears and experience can bring that’s new to the guitar, a kind of informed outsider’s view. I even like their mistakes. Julian Bream said, “You always want to get the second guitar piece from every composer.” A composer whom I worked with a lot was Michael Tippet. He wrote a piece called *The Blue Guitar* that creates a sound with a glow to it. This is in his piano works as well.

SMITH Has that piece enriched the sonority of the guitar?

TANENBAUM It creates a rich sonority, but a different one from the norm. There are the

Phrygian Spanish sounds that we've all heard, but he was able to find a particular sequence of harmonies. The Tippet piece is nonlinear, he was very Jungian, and he wanted to show everything in its opposite, so he sequences everything. That piece drives a lot of people crazy, but I love it for its sound. Bream called *The Blue Guitar* a masterpiece, which is a term he rarely used.

SMITH But has the result of all of this work that you and others of your generation have done to knock on doors of people who don't already have a guitar, has that been to expand dramatically the sonic pallet of the guitar – what people thought was possible? There are these steel guitar sounds now that hadn't been written for in that way before. Has it changed the sound of the guitar that we hear today?

TANENBAUM I think you could say possibly yes, in the sense that guitarists, in looking to play those pieces, have demanded different things from luthiers. There are people who are not open to any of this music in the guitar world. They want to play the standard things, they want to play the Spanish things. But in a kind of roundabout way like I just described, that may be true.

SMITH It does have a unique sound.

TANENBAUM I'll tell you one relatively short Tippet story. I met him in various places – here, I did a festival with him in Albany, New York, and then there was a Tippet Festival at the Tippet Center in Bath, England, at which he asked me to play. It was on BBC radio live. I worked my butt off for that. The first movement of that piece is ten minutes long, and as I'm playing, someone is chewing gum in the front row. The microphones are right there, and I'm thinking, "That's got to be on the radio." And it was rhythmic. There are these beautiful sounds, and I'm in my own rhythms, and it's just [makes a repeated smacking sound]. I've seen Segovia yell at audience members, and I've never done that, but I figure I've got to look up after this movement and maybe at least mimic to this person to take their gum out or something. I focus and I get through the first movement, and I look up, and it's Tippet himself. What are you going to do? I let him smack away.

SMITH Wow. Did it inhibit your performance?

TANENBAUM I found a way. I had to just block it – it wasn't the sound so much, it was the rhythm of it. I just focused in harder.

SMITH Talk about your work conducting, and working with guitar ensembles. What is it like to be part of a guitar ensemble and how is it different than playing with or conducting a chamber ensemble of mixed instruments?

TANENBAUM Guitar ensembles are challenging first of all, because it's the same sound in the same middle range. Even coordinating the attack is a lot of work, because it's just a pluck. You have more leeway when you're blowing or bowing a note. So you work to try to match colors in a guitar ensemble, and you learn to play lighter. Guitar ensembles generally don't sound as good when people are forcing.

SMITH It sounds messy, not tidy.

TANENBAUM And the best guitar ensembles, like the Assads, who have been playing for a lifetime, or the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, rehearse a lot. The World Guitar Ensemble that I toured with was basically comprised of soloists. We would get together for two-week rehearsal sessions before each tour or recording. We spent full days trying to coordinate the sound. It's hard work, but there's wonderful repertoire for it. Terry Riley has pieces written for guitar ensemble and many people are writing fine pieces. We commissioned a piece by Steve Mackey for the opening concert in the new Concert Hall. That's a fantastic piece with mostly classical guitars and two electric guitars as well.

SMITH Is it called something about turbulence?

TANENBAUM *Measures of Turbulence*.

SMITH That's a CD that released on Naxos, right? In conjunction with the opening of the Conservatory and the Caroline Hume Concert Hall.

TANENBAUM Right. The CD was not of the live performance, we did a studio recording. As we did two weeks ago at the Biasini Festival, where we opened with a wonderful new piece by a Chilean composer named Javier Farias, and the day after the festival spent a day in the studio because the composer was still in town. A little bit exhausting, but the piece was ready.

SMITH What are some of the guitar organizations, and maybe boards, that you've been involved in over the years, other than Harris?

TANENBAUM Well, the Omni Foundation for the Performing Arts is the longest running and the biggest guitar series in America. I'm on their advisory board, so basically Richard Patterson, the director, tells me, "If you see somebody on your travels, I want to know about it." And that's fun. Every fall we confer about who he's going to have the following season and it's a running conversation. I'm on the board of the Guitar Foundation of America. I'm on the competition committee for GFA as well.

SMITH But you don't adjudicate that competition.

TANENBAUM I do once in a while. I did it last I think two years ago, but they rotate people. I would say one of my favorite committees to be on is the artistic committee of the Contemporary Music Players. It's not a guitar committee, but I work with Steve and a few other people to program that group.

SMITH How long have you been doing that?

TANENBAUM Four years, maybe five. We are right now in the midst of programming a Lou Harrison Day celebration, because his hundredth birthday is coming up. On April 22 '17 we're going to have a fantastic day of Lou's works performed, and the film that Eva Soltes has been making – it's going to be a great celebration of Lou.

SMITH We've talked about this, or I've inserted it at various points, but you've done a lot of recordings. Do you want to talk about some of the more memorable projects that we haven't already covered? Or you could go back to different aspects of ones that didn't make it into the discussion.

TANENBAUM It's hard to say. I did a recording in the '80s of five great pieces for guitar from that decade. *All in Twilight* of Takemitsu, a string quartet and guitar piece with the Shanghai Quartet of Roberto Sierra, *Acoustic Counterpoint* by Steve Reich, the Tippet piece and a Peter Maxwell Davies sonata. One thing that's memorable in that recording process was that Foster Reed, the head of New Albion Records, told me that we had the machine to do the Steve Reich piece for one day and he also said, "You can't edit." It's fifteen minutes, and it's fifteen parts. If I got thirteen minutes in and I made a mistake I had to go back to the beginning. So that was a day that will live in infamy in my mind.

SMITH It was your Pat Metheny day.

TANENBAUM Basically. I have some personal favorites. I made a recording of the music of Sylvius Leopold Weiss in Germany, in Osnabrück. I decided in that recording to put the microphones far away, and to do a lot of details in the editing and the performance that were stylistic and early music like. It's just a personal favorite. A lot of us don't go back and listen to our recordings, but that's one that I enjoy listening to. Recordings become somehow too close; you're so involved in every detail and it usually takes me at least a few years to listen to them once they're out.

SMITH That's interesting. You recorded quite a lot with New Albion.

TANENBAUM I think I made six solo CDs with them. Foster basically let me do what I wanted to do, so I just kept doing it.

SMITH Are they still around?

TANENBAUM They are. He's given us many of the physical copies, but they sell them online.

SMITH Are they in Albany, or in Berkeley?

TANENBAUM Foster was out here for a long time, but he now lives in Upstate New York near Bard College.

SMITH The recording industry has changed a lot since you entered the field. Do you have any particular comments about how it's affected guitar? What is your reaction to that trend that's happening that – as you were saying, that fewer and fewer people are willing to buy recordings, which is a very detrimental thing for the recording industry?

TANENBAUM Let me talk about the positive side. There's no middle man, or middle woman, in most cases. People can make a recording much cheaper than they used to. The technology has improved to the point that a player can get a microphone and record on their own computers. Now the thing is video. But if you dismiss the idea of trying to make money from recorded music, then you can really disseminate your music a lot easier than you ever could before. The sort of received wisdom is that touring pays for them – in other words, you make your money from the live concerts, but you'll never make it on the recordings. But I question that, because people are attending live concerts less. You certainly can sell more recordings if you tour than if you don't. People do seem to want to buy music that they've just heard.

SMITH I think you're right, and you're saying very specifically if out in the lobby you're selling your CDs at intermission or after your show, you will sell some copies, and if you don't tour that might not happen.

TANENBAUM Right, I have found that to be true. In fact, D'Agostino and I made a CD together. It's the only one that I've ever done where I own the rights – we just produced it ourselves. We split the print, we each got half. He does some of this repertoire on his own, so he's playing it on his solo concerts and he sold out of his quickly. But when I tried to sell mine after the concerts, and I was playing very different things than that were on the CD, it didn't work as well and I still have some left. That tells me that people really do want to buy what they had just heard.

SMITH Do you have stories about touring that we haven't talked about?

TANENBAUM I'll tell you a couple stories – things just happen if you tour enough. Many of us who perform have a common anxiety dream, which is that you're trying to get to the concert and you can't get there. The public is waiting, you just can't get there, and it's horrible. Well that happened to me in real life. I was in Graz, Austria, and the hotel was two or three blocks from the concert hall, I had gone there for a rehearsal in the afternoon. The sponsors asked me if I wanted a ride that night and I said, "No, I'll just walk. I like the fresh air." It was winter time. I had the curtains drawn in my room, I was napping and I had something to eat. Then I got dressed and I went outside, and it was a blizzard, it was snowing everywhere. This was in the days before cellphones. So I set out. My German is not great, and I got lost. It's snowing, and the clock is ticking, and I'm freezing and wandering around and I can't find the concert hall. It's 8:00 for an 8:00 concert. Finally, somehow, miraculously, by 8:15 I found it. I go in, and the presenter's hysterical. I can hear in the background the rhythmic [claps hands] clapping that Europeans do when they want something to happen. So I quickly took my coat off, tried to tune my guitar, which was freezing also. I got on stage, blowing into my hands.

SMITH How can you play if your hands are so cold?

TANENBAUM I had gloves on outside, but I was still cold. However the people were going nuts, so I just went out there and tried to tune for a little bit and kill a little time. I played the first piece, and the guitar's going out of tune as I'm playing – it's kind of in shock. I finished the piece and in the moment before the people clap somebody yells out from the balcony, "Hey buddy! Tune your guitar!" A moment that I will remember forever. And he was right. So I bowed, and tuned, and moved on.

I remember a tour I did with Terry Riley, which was so great, in Japan. It was his 70th birthday – about ten years ago now. It was just me and him with his wife along as well. We arrived, and we went right to a rehearsal with some Japanese musicians who we were playing with in the first concert. After the rehearsal we were pretty exhausted, and we were walking back to the hotel with the presenter when this Japanese gentleman runs across the street and says, "Oh! Terry Riley and David Tanenbaum!" And starts to talk to us. "I've been waiting for you to come to Japan, I'm so happy you're here!" So we shook his hand, and then the presenter and he just started to really kind of go back and forth at it in Japanese. We didn't know what was happening, so we just went to the hotel, got some food, and went to our respective rooms. I went right to sleep. 6:00 the next morning I get a phone call. I'm just dead asleep. A guy says, "David Tanenbaum!" I said, "Yes?" He said, "I'm calling from the American embassy. I need some information about you." I said, "What do you need?" He said, "What's your hotel room number?" I started to wake up, and I'm thinking, why do they need to know that? I woke up enough to hang up on the guy. I called the presenter at a reasonable hour and I told him about it.

He said, “OK. We have a stalker. This guy is not OK. We’re going to give each of you bodyguards.” And so we did the tour all over Japan, and we had bodyguards the whole time. Mine was a five foot ten inch woman whose mother was Japanese and father was German. I was instructed not to leave the hotel without her by my side. We couldn’t even leave through the lobby – we had to use the garage. This guy was some deranged weirdo. He hadn’t done anything so they couldn’t arrest him, but we had to protect ourselves.

SMITH That’s absolutely a story. When I was preparing for the interview I asked Tessa to provide me with some materials that would help me prepare. Among them were clippings of reviews of performances. It struck me, as it has previously, that there used to be so much greater volume of music criticism and reviews being produced of concerts, and I don’t think there are fewer concerts. However, there are far fewer people writing and talking about them in a critical way, which also sort of tracks with the decline of revenue from recordings as well as the culture’s changing. So the question is – have reviews played any role in your own evaluation of your work, and have you noticed any effect of the lack of critical discussion in print or online changing what you do?

TANENBAUM That’s a good question. I don’t feel above reviews and I do read them. I try to learn from them, if there are things to learn. I think of these as experienced listeners. I admire Josh Kosman, I think he’s a good listener and a good writer. It’s hard to answer the second part of that. I wonder about it for young players who are growing up. The first time you get a bad review it really stinks, and you don’t forget it. At least in my case I wanted to learn from it. Without that – I guess now they do blogs, and they get comments on YouTube and things like that. But that’s in a way more dangerous, because it’s uninformed.

SMITH Well that’s kind of my question. It’s not completely without perspective, it’s not an impartial question, but there is a lot of discussion going on online, but it’s not in the genre of formal music criticism. There are certain rules in the game. You have to have a certain amount of knowledge and expertise, and as you’ve commented elsewhere, if you actually come prepared for what you’re listening to, your perspective can be valuable to the community. If you actually listen to the score and know what you’re supposed to be hearing, you have a perspective on what it is …

TANANBAUM That’s true. I pay very little attention to blogging. There are these endless discussions that go on, but I really don’t find them that interesting. If it’s a critic who has been hired by a newspaper, there’s some kind of filter, at least. But it is somehow of our time. The internet is the great equalizer, so you have this voice from someone who might really not know what they’re talking about. And I’m certainly not going to take the time to correct all that, or to talk about it.

SMITH Think about someone like the Living Earth Show, who spent a thousand hours rehearsing a ten minute piece by one of the most abstract, formidable composers. That's a heavy investment just to get the thing out there, let alone the investment it would take to actually absorb that and give it its fair consideration – if it's fair to give it consideration.

TANENBAUM Yeah, but think about it this way: there are a lot of us out there who are paying attention, and will look at that kind of dedication, and really admire it and recommend them to other people. A lot of composers have taken notice of them. That kind of dedication, that level of performance, still has a place in the world, despite all the noise that's out there.

SMITH So smart people still talk.

TANENBAUM It still matters, even though it doesn't seem to, and it's such a results oriented culture. The process does matter, and the quality does still. I don't think you can replace it. You can't replace the twelve hundred hours.

SMITH That's interesting. You said in your interview with Manuel Barrueco about balancing teaching and playing, "I love the balance between the two, it makes me articulate my understandings more than anything else, and it tells you what you know. If you can't say it clearly, you don't understand it so clearly." How have you juggled these two roles over the years – teacher and performer?

TANENBAUM Well, the how is mostly through a lot of work. You can teach a full day, and the last thing you want to do is go practice. When I'm under the gun, I still have to do it. I tend to practice early in the day. In a way you can think of it as having two jobs, but I do like the balance. The teaching is kind of grounding. I like being able to talk about it and do the same thing each week. But the performing for me is irreplaceable as well. Sort of putting your neck on the line, the fear, the risk, and being deeply involved making the music. That's for me irreplaceable, it's kind of an addiction.

SMITH I have here another quote from you from a long time ago. I think this is a Conservatory publication from September, '87, where you say, "I know that performing is in my blood. I live music all the time. Even if I were on a long vacation I'd spend a large part of the day playing. I get unhappy if a day goes by and I can't play." Is that still true? Do you still feel that way?

TANENBAUM Almost. I love the feeling of doing it still. But I can walk away from it more now. I can do full days – I had just big teaching and conducting days yesterday and the day before, and I didn't practice. I have some concerts, but they are two or three weeks away, so I'm

OK. I can go away for a weekend or for a period and not touch it, and be fine. So that has changed. I like to get away from it, I've always liked getting away from it. I like to balance the work with – first of all, being outside, like we are now, but also physical activity. It's very much of a sitting down profession, so I like to hike, to bike, I like being in California. Everybody told me that I would stop getting work done and smoke a lot of dope and vegetate when I moved out here, and basically the opposite happened because I liked being here. My spirit felt refreshed, and I worked more. So I like the balance of hard work and then just dropping it and doing other things. I think it's really important to get away from it.

Guitarists can be really nerdy. You can't imagine. You do a day like the Biasini Festival, and everybody goes out and has a drink and a meal afterwards, and they're talking about the guitar. It's the last thing I want to talk about. But Sérgio and I rarely talk about the guitar when we go out. We just talk about life, and whatever else. So that has changed, I would say.

SMITH How often do you practice these days?

TANENBAUM I try to get in two hours every day, but again, there are days that I miss.

SMITH And is that fewer than it used to be when you were younger?

TANENBAUM When I was a teenager I did eight every day, and I think I needed to do that. I'm a better practicer now than I was. I'm very goal-oriented, I know exactly what I'm working on, and working for. I work from a plan, I know exactly what I'm trying to accomplish, and I'm way more efficient. You learn things from a lifetime of it.

SMITH How is the Conservatory different today from when you first joined?

TANENBAUM It's a little more institutional. When I first joined, as I mentioned, Laurette could just do what she wanted, and Milton hired me just because he felt like it. Now you have committees, and you have oversight. It feels far more professional than it did. There's more turnover than there used to be, especially in the staff. I would say the staff is more professional than it used to be. It's a different place, in those ways.

SMITH We've covered some of this, but not from this specific lens: the special programs and festivals at the Conservatory that you participated in and helped shape over the years. There's the Guitarradas, the Lou Harrison Festival, the Biasini that we've been alluding to but maybe haven't fully put out on the record. And then there was a 60th birthday party for Takemitsu, which we didn't quite discuss, particularly. Do you want to take on a couple of those?

TANANBEUM I would start by saying that I think these festivals are essential in the life of a school like this. They are sort of like ritual – they mark the moments. They are times that you remember along the way. They also provide ways for diverse communities in the school to come together. And they're also always a lot of work.

Biasini was booked two and a half years ago, and took a solid year of work. Gloria Kim was a great collaborator – she was the best person in that position that I've ever worked with. In a festival like Biasini the world comes to these students, and to this community. They get to hear really fine young players from around the world, and it's an opportunity for our students and faculty to be heard by an international audience. So we had four world premieres – in one our ensemble played and we had it streamed on the web. These are all wins, as far as I'm concerned. It's just really good for music and the guitar, it's good for the community.

SMITH How has music culture in the Bay Area changed since you became involved? We talked about different strands of it – do you have any big thoughts?

TANENBAUM I would say the early music scene has grown. The world music scene has grown, it has become more diverse. Everybody talks about the disappearance of the middle class, and I worry about the middle class of classical musicians. You always have your activity that's low key and creative, but with very little money involved. And you'll always have your stars – your Yo-Yo Ma's. But it's the middle class I worry about being sustainable, economically. Attendance at OMNI guitar concerts this year especially has been smaller. I hope that live music continues to be a big part of this culture, and of people's experience.

SMITH Because at a certain level you have to earn some money to make the sacrifices that are involved in going on tour.

TANENBAUM And to get presenters willing to give the kind of time and energy it takes to put a concert on. You don't want them to say, "This is not worth it anymore." Richard Patterson is in his late 60s, and he's thinking that. He doesn't know when that time might come, but he's thinking about it.

SMITH I think that's an interesting point. The threat to middle class musicians is something that the Recording Academy is talking about a lot right now. That's what most musicians are, it's not Beyoncé, these are most of us. Even someone like you.

TANENBAUM It's pretty much everybody you know at the Conservatory.

SMITH We're middle class musicians.

TANENBAUM That's what we are.

SMITH Looking back on your life and career – up to now, because there's still a lot that you're doing –

TANENBAUM Is this my obituary?

SMITH No, no, no. What are some of the key themes right up to now that stand out to you? And I have a follow-up – do you believe that commissions of new music for your instrument will make a lasting contribution to the field? We've talked a little bit about that.

TANENBAUM I hope so. That's all I can say. The Riley pieces are getting played a lot. The Harrison I mentioned to you has really grown into something. The Kernis is, I think you can say, a repertoire piece – it's pretty much the best piece we have for guitar and string quartet. I hope I've built something at the Conservatory. It's for others to fully say, but I've certainly put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into that department, and I think created a real community there for guitar – a destination, I hope.

In terms of my contributions, I think you could probably put your finger on the new music more, but as I said, in terms of my own enjoyment, I particularly like that Weiss recording, and I've had a lot of fun with projects I've done with other guitar players. It's funny, you know, I got a reputation for being a new music guy, someone who was really working outside the regular guitar repertoire. When I started to do these guitar projects, a number of my composer friends said, "You're going backwards. This is against everything you've built. You're turning into a guitar nerd, like everybody else, and you've got to stand outside that world." I didn't really care, I just felt like doing the guitar stuff when I did it. Basically the motivator has been what I was particularly excited by. But I did set out to expand the repertoire, and I have done that to some degree.

SMITH There's a commission that you were involved in that we haven't talked about that I wanted to bring up, because it was so interesting. It's the Henry Brant piece for one hundred guitars which you commissioned on behalf of some guitar agency or foundation, or something like that.

TANENBAUM Actually there was a festival going on called the American Guitar Congress, and I think you're getting the point now – I don't do these things unless I can create something new for them. My first two conditions with Biasini were – the guitar students at the Conservatory have to go free, and I need to commission some new music. The same thing happened with that festival, I commissioned about four or five new pieces for that as well. I was artistic director in1989 at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Henry is not with us anymore, but I just loved what he was about, which was partly to expand the space where music is heard. My dad was friends with him, and he used to talk about always seeing Henry composing on park benches on Broadway amidst all the commotion. I thought that his music, where he distributed instruments around concert halls, could be interesting for multiple guitars.

So I commissioned him through the festival, and in the first conversation we had he wanted a copy of the architectural drawings of the concert hall. He wanted to design the piece for the space from the very beginning and he came to the premiere to get it right. The piece has three groups of guitars on the stage, two on either side of the orchestra part of the hall, and three in the balcony. It is called *Rosewood*, and it's basically a requiem for the disappearance of the rain forest, and how that has changed guitar making. He did a lot of research into that, and he was totally right. For instance, starting three years after that piece, July 1992, was the Rio Treaty, after which you can't cut down Brazilian rosewood for commercial purposes. So we have many guitars made of Brazilian rosewood, and now you have to be able to prove that the wood was cut down before 1992. Customs can actually take your guitar away if you can't prove that. There are sounds of trees being cut down in the piece. Then he'll have a whole section play some sentimental slow guitar piece in E major, all playing chaotically at the same time. Sort of a memory of and a cry from the guitar repertoire. And then simultaneously in the balcony you're hearing the sounds of wood being cut down.

SMITH Were these pre-recorded sounds?

TANENBAUM No, this was all happening at the spot. I did that piece in many countries, and it often became a community event. I would write in advance, and teachers would organize students from one school on one balcony part, and another school would play another part. I did it in Australia in an outdoor concert one time and John Williams played one of the guitar parts in one of the groups. I did it in Germany with a whole ensemble of children, and one time in the Frankfurt Alte Oper with one hundred and thirty-two guitar players.

SMITH Did he specify one hundred guitars?

TANENBAUM He specified fifty at least, and preferably many more. Right at the end of his life he kept calling me, because he had the idea to write a guitar quartet with the four guitars amplified in the different parts of the hall. He really wanted me to commission that piece, but he wanted a lot of money and I couldn't quite raise enough money, and then we lost him not long after that. But I was so happy that he won the Pulitzer Prize at the end of his life. I thought that was just divine justice somehow.

SMITH What are some future projects or goals that you are excited about?

TANENBAUM Well, there are always commissions and new projects. The Canadian composer Ronald Bruce Smith wrote me a piece for guitar and interactive electronics, so I have a Motu audio interface, and I've learned to play with a pedal and the technology. I have a Max MSP patch on my computer, so basically I've learned how to interact back and forth with the computer for this piece. I've played that in many places, and finally I'm going to record it this summer. I'm also doing a new piece that he's writing for me with the Del Sol String Quartet. We'll premiere that in June. I'm also very excited by some etudes that Don Byron's going to write me.

SMITH He's a clarinet jazz composer.

TANENBAUM We met at the Other Minds Festival retreat last March, and totally connected, so I've already commissioned him to write the etudes. I think that will be really fun.

SMITH You're going to record those, or perform them?

TANENBAUM I'm going to record the Ron Smith pieces and I hope to premiere the Byron pieces on Omni in November.

SMITH That's great. You said, "I remember playing an artistic retreat for the California State University system a few years back. All the artists said they found their direction because a strong teacher influenced them, sometimes directly and sometimes they rebelled against the teacher." Why did that statement ring powerfully true for you at that time, and what does that say about your career as a performer, and also as a teacher?

TANENBAUM Well, I mentioned my teacher Aaron Shearer, who put up a wall. You have to react to that wall. You can push against it, but you have to look inside and deal with that wall somehow. It makes you ask a lot of questions, and it helped me find something of a path. I think in some ways, besides the woman I was chasing out here, Shearer was one of the reasons I ended up on the West Coast. I wanted to get as far away from the New York music scene and from him as I could, and just create something new, though I was going in the exact same field and direction as my parents made a living in.

I just read the Philip Glass memoir, and he talked about studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris and how she taught through fear and intimidation. He said that he got one compliment from her during the first lesson he had, and he stayed with her for three years and never got another one. At the same time he was hanging out a lot with Ravi Shankar, and he called that, "The most blissful experience that you can imagine." It was so joyful; they just made music together and talked about music. Finally he wrote that when he looks back on it, and thinks about having been taught through fear and through love at the same time, the results were about the same.

SMITH Wow, that's a great answer. Knowing that, and going back to Shearer, you said you had to break down some of your students but never to that same extreme. Knowing though that teachers can have that boomerang effect of inspiring the exact opposite in a certain way of what they are trying to instill, how does that knowledge affect your teaching? And your mentorship of the teaching of the other members of the department, because you're the chair.

TANENBAUM Well, I do think teaching is an immense responsibility. You have young people who have made this courageous decision; they're giving four really important years of their lives – or two – and really trying to get somewhere with something that they love. But I'm not made where I can do the Shearer thing. I hold the faith that you can give the information that you need to give without hurting feelings, and without getting personal. I still believe that. I might be a minority, but I think it can be done. So I never get personal, and I never intentionally hurt. But it is my job as a teacher to tell the truth. I try to do that in a respectful way, but I certainly say what I have to say. Sometimes you have to go stronger with some than others, but that's basically my philosophy.

SMITH What advice would you give to music students who are about to start on careers of their own? And do guitars bring a particular perspective to the challenges and opportunities that confront young artists today?

TANENBAUM Well, to the first part of that, I would say to make sure that it is really what you want to do. In other words, if you could really feel that you could be happy doing something else, you probably should. It's a hard road economically. I have a good friend, one of my first students at the Conservatory, who's nearing fifty now, and his wife just left him because he's a guitarist. She said, "You just don't make enough money, I can't do it anymore." That's an extreme and sad situation.

There's an old story of someone coming up to Rubenstein after a concert and saying, "I'm twenty-seven, maestro, and I have a question for you. All my life I've studied the piano very hard, and I've also not been sure, so I've gotten a medical degree and I could become a doctor. What should I do?" And Rubenstein said, "If you have to ask, be a doctor."

So I think the first part is to make sure you want to do it. And the second part is, the guitar is in a different world than all the others. There obviously is no orchestra work, but the guitar now is the most popular instrument in the world. It's played by more people than any other instrument, and it crosses over styles better than any other instrument can. There are more styles around us all now than there have ever been before. Bach, remember, walked two hundred miles to see Buxtehude play, and now you click a mouse and you can see anything.

I think that if students can learn diversity and different skills without diluting the main focus there are possibilities out there. We have an alum named Paul Psarras who's a wonderful guitar player, but he's an excellent oud player as well. In some Pacific Guitar Ensemble programs he played five different plucked stringed instruments. That diversity really helps him.

When I ask the students that come to me to imagine a world in ten years with no obstacles in it, most of them describe my life, essentially – teaching at a conservatory and playing concerts. But some don't. Gyan Riley said, "I don't want your life, you teach too much." And that's the life he made. He hardly teaches, he just tours. What I like about that story is that Gyan had a vision. So you've got to have that, and you've got to try to make it work. It shouldn't be anybody else's, it should be yours. As they say; be yourself, everybody else is taken.