

Davis Law Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

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50 Oak Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted July 31, 2015
Tessa Updike, Interviewer

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project

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

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

Davis Law Interview

This interview was conducted in two sessions at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on Thursday, July 31, 2015 by Tessa Updike.

Tessa Updike

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

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UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about where you grew up? Are you from this area?

LAW I was born and raised in San Francisco. I grew up not terribly far from here, I lived maybe ten blocks away, in a not so great neighborhood. Music was the thing that I was able to do, because my sister Mary and I really couldn't go out very much, so we stayed home and we practiced. Not as much as I should, but we practiced.

UPDIKE Were your parents musical?

LAW No, they were not. They're blue collar. We owned the building where we lived, and my parents managed it. That was their life.

UPDIKE And what was the first instrument you played? Did you start with the piano?

LAW No, the violin. That was on the urging of my grandfather. He played violin when he was young. His father died when he was nine, and he had to work, but when he was a teenager someone gave him a violin and a week's worth of lessons. So he couldn't play very well at all, but that was something that he wanted one of his grandchildren to do. I was designated as the one.

UPDIKE How old were you when you started?

LAW I started when I was five. I lasted two weeks, and I started again when I was seven. I guess I started at seven.

UPDIKE And was your grandfather your first teacher?

LAW Yes ... he thought he knew how to play violin, but after a week's worth of lessons, he actually didn't. It was something that throughout my childhood he always thought he knew the right way, even though he didn't really understand the instrument.

UPDIKE And how did your family first hear of the Conservatory? Do you know how they made that connection?

LAW Well, I was taking lessons with somebody at the old Sherman and Clay on Kearny Street, and my grandfather at the time thought, "Oh, this teacher isn't any good," so at

his urging he wanted me to audition for the Conservatory. This was probably back in 1969 or so, because I was about ten years old at the time.

UPDIKE Do you remember anything about that audition?

LAW Yes, I do. I remember her first name was Carol, and I believe she was a violinist. She heard me, and she recommended that Zaven Melikian hear me. At that time he was assistant concertmaster of the Symphony, and he was also assistant concertmaster of the Opera orchestra. So I was very fortunate that she recommended that he hear me.

UPDIKE And what do you remember about Zaven? Your first impressions of him?

LAW He had hairy forearms. He is – but especially for a ten-year-old – he was an imposing figure. He came off to a ten-year-old as very gruff. I realize now that he isn't at all – and he wasn't at all – but he certainly projected that, at least to me. He proceeded to tell me that I did everything wrong (as I found out later, he says that quite a bit to almost everyone). And he really worked very diligently with me, and for that I'm very, very grateful.

UPDIKE If he was a gruff figure, were you nervous to start your lessons with him?

LAW Yes, I was very nervous. Also, at the time he smoked a lot – since then he quit smoking. At one lesson he even smoked a cigar and I remember getting really ill. My mom had to ask him, "Please don't smoke cigars during the lessons." But that didn't stop him from smoking cigarettes, he continued to do that.

UPDIKE And your lessons were in the building on Ortega Street?

LAW Yes, in room 26. It was in the corner of Ortega and 20th, that was where that room was. It was renumbered later on, but I remember that room as number 26.

UPDIKE And you could talk a little bit about your lessons? About Zaven's teaching style?

LAW Yes. He is very confident, and he is very sure of the manner that things should be done – both technically and musically. Again, I'm very blessed that he was that way. Even though I say he was confident – he was always looking for ways to explain things, or maybe things that he could do better or teach better. He was very dedicated not only to teaching me and my peers technically well, but also musically. He had his opinions with that too, but it was something that was very important to him. He was very dedicated. I had two lessons a week from him; my parents – we only paid for one, and actually we didn't even have to do that

because I was on scholarship. So he had a busy schedule, he had a family, and he did the Opera and the Symphony – yet he found time for not only me but also his other students – to see them quite a bit.

UPDIKE Did you play in any ensembles when you were here in Pre-college?

LAW Yes, some of my lasting memories are not only with the pieces that I was able to play, but the people with whom I played. Some really great memories. When you asked me to be a part of this, I started thinking back. I reminisced about some of the really – I don't want to go so far as to say life-changing, but certainly some very important moments – or very dear moments in my life that I recall. Those memories still really stay with me today, and really propel me sometimes.

UPDIKE Are there specific memories of performances or other students who you worked with that you'd like to share?

LAW Well, some of my peers were Krista Bennion, Robert Rinehart, Norbert Banse, Seth Taylor, Wendy and Robin Sharp ... since I lived in San Francisco a couple of the other people who I play chamber music with also lived in San Francisco – Robert, Louis Maunupau – at that time he played viola, I don't think he's any longer in music. I remember since we all were in San Francisco that we would not just rehearse on Saturdays, but we would get together during the week. It was really wonderful, because besides maybe doing whatever piece we had to do, we would sight-read, and those are very dear memories to me.

UPDIKE That's wonderful. How long did you study here in the Preparatory program?

LAW I was here in Prep from the time I started, which was about 1969, until I graduated from high school in 1977. And then I continued for two years for college here.

UPDIKE And what year did you join the Conservatory as a faculty member?

LAW 1988.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about how that happened?

LAW Well, at that time I was taking some auditions. But my problem was always nerves, so those never turned out very well for me. Zaven – I kept in close contact with him after I graduated – I went off to school to the New England Conservatory, but I still kept close ties with him, and certainly when I came back. And he approached me – he wanted to

know if I wanted to teach – that he needed someone to pick up the pieces when he wasn't available. So I jumped at the opportunity, and he brought me in.

UPDIKE How did the school feel different to you coming in as a teacher when you had been there for so long as a student?

LAW Certainly you see different things. From a student perspective here, you're just interested in learning, or being around your friends; but when you're a teacher, you feel responsible. You're not just there for yourself anymore, but you're there for the students. You're there to improve also – but the students come first and foremost.

UPDIKE And what was the atmosphere like at that time at the school? The character of the school – was it comfortable and close and casual, or did it feel a little bit different to you?

LAW As opposed to when I was a student?

UPDIKE Just in general – the atmosphere or the character of the Conservatory at that time.

LAW I think it was pretty familial. We were at the Ortega location, and the building was very small. When I started at the Conservatory as a student, there was only one bathroom – one large bathroom. Of course that all changed when there were renovations and additions, but even the Conservatory at the Ortega Street location in the late '80s, we only had two main bathrooms. So you would run into everybody all the time. I would see all of my peers every week, and say hi and spend a couple minutes chatting. There was also coffee in the reception room, and we would meet there. The Prep office was not in the middle of the building, but certainly in the front end, and people would gravitate there all the time. It was a little different.

UPDIKE Were you teaching mostly private instruction with violin?

LAW Yes, that's all I do – then and now.

UPDIKE Are there any students from the early years that you have fond memories of?

LAW Of, sure. There's Heeguen Song, who did very well. She was from Korea and came here. She was with me for a short time – for a year and a half – before moving to Oberlin. Just a wonderful girl, a wonderful violinist. There's Evin Blomberg, a very talented

violinist. I had a little boy for several years – his name was Byoung Jin Kang. He was very talented, and a little firebrand, who was upset because when he was ten he realized that he wasn't Mozart. January Lim, Theresa Woo, Clint Cancio, Christine Choi, David Lu ... oh, just a whole bunch. There are those that I feel close to because they're talented and did well, and there are others who maybe weren't quite so serious, or quite so talented, who I feel close to too. I've been very blessed in that I've had pretty much all good kids through my career. Then and now.

UPDIKE Let's talk a little bit about some of your former colleagues in the Prep department. Could you start by talking about May Kurka?

LAW I remember her from the time I entered this school. At the time, I believe she was the assistant director – or assistant to the director. The director was Marion Murray, I believe. Even at that time, even though she was the assistant, she was very hard working and diligent. Through the years when I was a student we became close – I felt we were close – but she was probably close to everybody because she was just a very warm person. It was really, though, after I started teaching here, that I realized how diligent she truly was. As we do now, we had juries every year in the Pre-college, and she would compile everything – everyone's comments. At the time, at least in the violin faculty, not all of us got along so well. Sometimes it was reflected in the jury comments. So I think the reason why she compiled everything was to edit things out. But she would be given a stack of maybe ten jury comments per student after the juries, and then three weeks later it would be given to us – all the notes would be compiled in a single sheet, and she would do it by hand. It took quite a bit of effort. She was very caring, she had a passion not only for the music but also for certainly the students – a tremendous passion for the students – for their education here.

UPDIKE Do you have any memories of Marion Murray?

LAW She was very old. Outside of that, no. Even then, I think May was the person who was a little bit more out front. That's my recollection, anyway, I don't know if that's correct.

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

LAW Yes. Really, when you think about the things that he went through in his life – the things that he had to overcome – I have a great deal of respect for him. He was Krista Bennion's and Robert Rinehart's teacher, and they spoke very highly of him. My only experience that I had of him as a teacher, as a coach, was – I think he coached a quartet I was in. But that's about the extent of my exposure to him as a teacher. As a person, he was always very kind. I remember towards the end of his life, really seeing the things that he had to go through,

and really feeling – “Gosh, this guy’s pretty special for what he had to do, and what he had to endure.”

UPDIKE Is there anything you’d like to say about John McCarthy?

LAW A friend. I also knew him when I was a student – in fact, he taught piano. I don’t really know how old he is – I always thought he was much older than me, but I don’t think so. My recollection may not be correct here, but I think he taught a theory class that I was in. We had a close relationship even when I was a student. I wanted to study piano when I was in college, and I asked when I was at the Conservatory here in my first couple of years for lessons, and he agreed and gave me a few lessons, and I didn’t practice because I couldn’t do it all again. It was a little bit late for me, but I love the piano, and I love the piano repertoire, and I want to play the Beethoven sonatas, and the Schubert sonatas. But he had me do the Bartok *Mikrokosmos*, and all the little things – I couldn’t do it! After about a month of lessons he said, “You know, Davis, this maybe isn’t for you.” I said, “OK!” I remember going to his house often, and playing chess with John and his wife Annamarie, and Josefa Heifetz, who was also at that time on faculty – she was Jascha Heifetz’s daughter. We would just play chess. I certainly consider him a friend.

UPDIKE Is there anything you’d like to say about Mack McCray?

LAW Also a friend – someone who I don’t know how I started a relationship with him – it certainly wasn’t at all musical; I never coached with him, I never studied with him, I didn’t have chamber music with him, but we would just joke around a lot. He’s a very charming, very funny man. We would trade insults – of course he got the better of them. But I still smile and think warmly of him – even when I see him in the hall now, which is a little bit less often because of the nature of the building.

UPDIKE I know that you’ve already talked about Zaven. Is there anything else that you’d like to say about him as a person?

LAW He was very influential to me, certainly in my violin, but he was also influential to me as a mentor. I consider him a second father. He has his way. Good, bad, or indifferent, he had his opinions, and for that I’m really a better person. Any time personally when I have a moment or a time when I don’t know what to do, I often think, “What would Zaven do?” I think that way about him, and also my best friend, David Wong, who’s not in music. The two people in my life outside of my wife Nami and the rest of my family – a very, very important person to me.

UPDIKE Is there anything you’d like to say about Yaada Weber?

LAW Yes. I remember her when I was a student, playing in recitals in probably the early '70s, before Hellman Hall was built. At that time, when we had recitals they would be hosted by somebody – a member of the faculty. I remember her hosting a recital that I played on. I knew that she taught flute. I remember really not that long ago – maybe four or five years ago – driving to this Conservatory here at the Oak Street location and arriving at 7 or 8 in the morning – parking in the parking lot here – and arriving at the same time was Yaada. She was very, very dedicated. My understanding was that she stood up through her whole lesson, and I can't imagine that someone of her years was able to do that at that time. Again, very dedicated.

UPDIKE I don't know if there are any other colleagues or faculty from that time who you'd like to say a little bit about? Those were the names that I had, but I'll let you kind of look through there, and if there are specific memories that stick out that you'd like to mention.

LAW Well, certainly my colleagues in the violin world here – I should say the string world. Pat Burnham – we played chamber music when I was in college here and she went on to be faculty. Doris [Fukawa] I've known for years, and not only do we talk about students, but we talk about sports, and it's always fun. We commiserate about things – about the Giants and the Warriors. [*Looking through catalogs*] These are all names, and these are all people I am happy to be colleagues with.

UPDIKE Were you here at the Conservatory when Hellman Hall was built in '76?

LAW Yes, I was.

UPDIKE Do you have memories of suddenly having a performance hall, and how it might have changed the school at that time?

LAW Yes, I was there when it was a hole in the ground – when the old recital venue was torn down. I remember going to – I believe it was a church maybe three blocks away – and having recitals there in the interim – between the time that the old recital hall was torn down and Hellman Hall was usable. Actually, I was privileged to be one of the first people to play in Hellman. Zaven had a very tight class of students, and he snuck us in one time for a workshop. This was before the seats were even put in. So I got to be one of the first people to play in there, even though it's nothing at all official. It was certainly a very important place. I remember going to Chamber Music West concerts there, and I remember Paul Hersh playing all 32 sonatas, and I went to each performance. Like I said, I love the Beethoven *Sonatas*. I remember hearing a lot of chamber music there – I remember the Beethoven Marathon, the orchestra concerts. I remember the recitals that I had.

Another person that I want to mention is Alan Balter. Has anyone spoken of him?

UPDIKE I don't think so, no.

LAW He was the conductor of the collegiate orchestra, in probably the mid '70s to maybe the early '80s. He was a cancer survivor. To me, he was a very talented conductor. Also very committed – I remember when I was a student here, playing in the orchestra for some of the performances that he conducted. He went on to be conductor of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra. I believe he's passed – a long while ago. I'm surprised he hasn't been mentioned. He was really a fine conductor for this program.

UPDIKE Is there anything you can say about your early teaching style? How you developed that – was your experience teaching at the Conservatory the first time you had taught?

LAW No, it wasn't – I taught at the Community Music Center for a couple years, and I actually taught concurrently there and here for a short while. I certainly have received a lot of my cues from Zaven. Some of the material that I use is stuff that he used for me. I guess my main goal and desire is to foster a love of music. That has to be first and foremost. Several of the students who go through here – actually, who go through any music school – don't continue on to music as a career. So I think it's important that whether they continue or not – and certainly, especially if they continue – that they have a love of classical music. It has brought me a lot of joy, it has brought me a lot of solace in my life – and I want the same for them, that they can take that. So, a love of music – the skill and the art of music. The skill definitely, the technical proficiency, that is very important because that is what drives the art. Your art can never be greater than your skill. So to the best of my ability, to enhance that and to promote that in my students. And then, musically, for me to give them a little bit of what I feel – both how I feel about music, and also how I think the piece should be. But also for them to find their own voice with it – what they want to do with the music.

Selfishly, one of the things that I love about teaching is that I get to rediscover the piece each time I teach it. Especially for those who do have that real love of music, and an affinity for playing the instrument, then to rediscover the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto* each time, to see the Brahms *Violin Concerto* through different eyes, and to flash back and think about when I heard those pieces, and when I played those pieces for the first time, and how important it was to me. I vicariously live through my students, because I sense – “They're feeling the same things right now.” One of my current students, she played the Schubert *C Major String Quintet* a few years back, and when I asked her how her first rehearsal went, she said it was magic. I just thought back to how it was magic for me, too, when I played it. That just warms my heart.

UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about the Conservatory's move from Ortega Street to Oak Street? How it was for the teachers who were moving, and also maybe a little bit about how that might have changed the character of the school?

LAW Well, it certainly has changed the character of the school, there's no doubt the move here has changed it – I also think the demographics of the school has changed, certainly in the Pre-college – I don't know so much about the collegiate. As far as the building itself – as I mentioned, in our old building we only had two bathrooms. You really got to know each other when there were only two bathrooms. And here, we have more – we have one on every floor! I would go on Saturdays for 8, 10, 11 hours, and I would often not venture off of the sixth floor. Maybe I would run down to the cafeteria. When a student would play a recital, that would be pretty much it. Otherwise, I'm pretty much holed in my room, and there are a few teachers that I see every week – the ones that are also on the sixth floor. But I would go months without seeing my other colleagues sometimes. So that part of it certainly is different.

The plus is that we have more musical venues – at the old building we had Hellman Hall – besides that we had the upstairs lounge, which was supposed to be a lounge but it became a place where students performed. Because it wasn't designed to be a hall, there were two sets of double doors, and people would be milling in and out and there would have to be monitors at the doors to keep people from coming in. That aspect of it was challenging, so coming here we have many more opportunities, I think, for the students – so that's a plus. Certainly the facilities themselves are much better. I don't have ants walking around the carpet in my studio, like back at Ortega Street. And there's hot chocolate now, there never was hot chocolate before! The library is so much better.

Having said that, we've lost something too. It's a little bit probably because of the way we're vertical instead of horizontal. We've lost some contact. The old building – if I had a student doing a chamber music group and I saw the coach, I could talk to Susan Bates or Richard Rogers – I could talk about my students with them, and they could tell me – “He or she has to work on this,” or “They're great, but could you give some fingerings?” That's a little bit lost here, we don't have that. I don't know what my students do outside of their lessons as far as how they're doing in chamber music, and how they're doing in other things, like I did before. Also, the old building – it wasn't a conservatory, it didn't start off life that way. It was an old building, so there were all of these nooks and crannies. And I was there when I was ten, twelve years old, and I remember exploring the building. There was access to everything – nothing was locked. We would sneak around, and we would crawl through ... and I can't imagine that that's done here. There are the places that the students go, and that's pretty much all they have exposure to in this building, so that's different.

UPDIKE Are there any memories you can share about special events held for the Pre-College department, like Family Day?

LAW Yes, Family Day was great, for a couple different reasons. One was that it was a fundraiser for the Conservatory – the parents would bring food and it would be sold, and the money would go to the scholarship fund – but more importantly, the teachers would get free food! I miss those days. But it was really, really wonderful – all kidding and joking aside. We used to have concerts on Family Day where families would perform. Often it would be brothers and sisters who were students here, but the more endearing ones were the ones where it was parent and child. I mentioned earlier my former student Byoung Jin Kang – his father played guitar, and they played a Paganini duet for violin and guitar, it was wonderful. I mentioned another student, January Lim, and she and her mother (a pianist) rearranged some Korean folk tunes and they played that together, and they also played a ragtime together. So that was all very sweet, and those are my students – there are others, too, who had the same sorts of things. They were just wonderful to see that generational thing with music.

UPDIKE That's great. Could you talk a little bit about the Pre-college division as it is today, and maybe looking forward to the future?

LAW Well, as I mentioned, things have changed since I was a student. When I was a student, I think that my peers were kids who came to music through the public school system, or where music maybe wasn't so much of a family thing. It was something that I think we did because we loved it, and we grew up with it through the public schools or whatever, and somehow we wanted more instruction, or more exposure. We did it through my eyes, because of the love of it. Now it's a little different. It's very unfortunate, but with all the demands on children today – they have so many activities, and even though it is for the enhancement of their lives, there's also a motive beyond that – and that's maybe how it looks on the college transcripts as another extracurricular – and I think that is a big difference in the approach. When I was in Pre-college, or Prep, as it was called back then, I think we were much more naïve. We didn't know things about preparing for college, or what you needed to have, or any of those sorts of things. I think the way of the world now – these kids have to think about that. It's maybe altered the direction a little bit – not in the Conservatory, but I think in the world. I think that the Conservatory reflects that a little bit, in that in the Pre-college we have to deal with that aspect of it, and still keep our core values as far as what we want to do to provide a music education – to really foster a passion for music – to keep the music of two hundred, a hundred years ago alive – not to mention more current. But still, to keep that available and pertinent in this world.

I guess that is the big change, and how we have to juggle those things. At least I can imagine that that is more difficult now than it was forty years ago.

UPDIKE Is there anything you'd like to say about the From the Top taping that was done here?

LAW I was fortunate to be able to attend – Pierce Wang, a student of mine at the time, his parents got me tickets for it. I felt a great deal of pride for the school and for the department – we've come a long way. As I heard all of the performances, the high level – again, flashing back to when I was a student here, we never could have pulled that off. It wasn't at all that sort of school at the time. We have such a pool of talent here in that age range, it's really a testament to this area, and the commitment that the parents and the students take, but it's also I think quite a point of pride for the school that we're able to foster this sort of talent, ability, and this level. I think that to be on a national showcase like From the Top is really wonderful. Those things weren't available to the school forty years ago – but then we wouldn't have been able to take advantage of it, either. Again, tremendous pride for the school.

UPDIKE Is there anything else that you'd like to mention before we finish up?

LAW Because of the direction of my life, I have a deep and abiding love for this place. I haven't always agreed with some of things that have happened. I've often felt hurt, and maybe it was because of me or maybe it was because of something that happened, but the Conservatory has been an important part of my life, and it will always continue to be – I can't imagine it not being an important part of the rest of my life. I believe in this place. I believe in the need for this place to exist. I think that though we are at a real disadvantage because of where we are in San Francisco – San Francisco is a wonderful place to live, it certainly has many wonderful attributes arts arts-wise, lifestyle-wise – but it's not the center of the music world, and I think that is something that's very difficult for us as a school to deal with. But having said that, again, I have a deep and abiding love for this place and how it's been an important part of my life.

UPDIKE Well, thank you so much for doing this.

LAW I'm honored, and I'm very appreciative. But then I realized – I was asked because I'm old! So that took a little of the luster off, but it's OK, I'm still appreciative. I'm just teasing – I'm really honored, and I'm thankful that I was asked to be a part of this.