Conrad Susa 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 July 22, 23, 24 and 29, 2013
John Bischoff, 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.

Conrad Susa Interview
This interview was conducted in four sessions at Conrad Susa's home on Eureka Street in San Francisco on Monday, July 22, Tuesday, July 23, Wednesday, July 24 and Monday, July 29 by Conservatory marketing manager John Bischoff. Archivist Tessa Updike was present at all interview sessions to assist.

John Bischoff
John Bischoff is marketing manager for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He has been a news producer, reporter and host for Minnesota Public Radio, a member of the renowned vocal ensemble Chanticleer, and an educator with the San Francisco Opera and the Athenian School. Bischoff continues to perform as a soloist with opera companies and ensembles around the Bay Area and with choral groups including the Philharmonia Baroque Chorale, the San Francisco Symphony Chorus and the vocal group Clerestory. He received an M.M. in voice from the Manhattan School of Music and graduated with honors from Princeton University with a B.A. in English and American Studies.

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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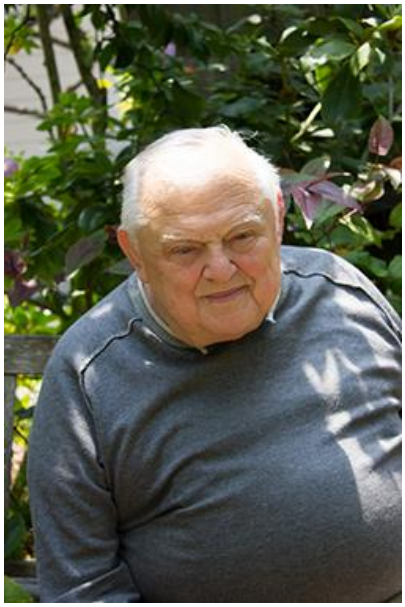
Conrad Stephen Susa (April 26, 1935 – November 21, 2013)



Conrad in his garden, September 2013

Conrad Stephen Susa was born in Springdale, Pennsylvania in 1935. Some of his earliest musical memories include the performance of Latin chants as an altar boy, learning to play the piano and organ, and listening to dramas on the radio.

Conrad studied with Nikolai Lopatnikoff, William Bergsma and Vincent Persichetti. During his extensive career Conrad was pianist for the Pittsburgh Symphony, taught music at Lincoln Center in New York City, was the resident composer for the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, and, since 1988, taught composition at the Conservatory. Conrad's works include numerous choral and instrumental works and the operas *Transformations* and *Dangerous Liaisons*.

Conrad's oral history interview took place in July of 2013. Conservatory archivist Tessa Updike and marketing manager John Bischoff visited Conrad at his home on Eureka Street for four days, each day conducting and recording approximately two-hour interview sessions. Conrad lived in a bright, welcoming house at the top of a hill in San Francisco's Castro neighborhood. The interview was transcribed by Tessa Updike and her student assistants in the Conservatory's archives. Conrad began the editing process, but upon his death on November 21, 2013, Tessa worked with composition faculty member Elinor Armer to complete the editing.

We at the Conservatory are grateful for the time we had with Conrad. He was an engaging and inspiring teacher, and a witty and charismatic friend and colleague. His presence is missed in our halls. We are pleased to share his stories and memories here.

Interview Sessions

July 22, 2013

BISCHOFF My name is John Bischoff. I am here speaking with Conrad Susa, at home on Eureka Street in San Francisco.

SUSA Eureka meaning, "I have found it." And I have found that to be true.

BISCHOFF It's your home of … how many years?

SUSA Let's see, it would have been in 1973 … driving down the street I saw a man tapping the signage into the ground, and it said, "For sale." And I bought it. The price was ridiculously low. But that was before President Reagan, or Governor Reagan, and all those for Prop 13 and all that stuff. When you could still afford a house. It required a lot of changes – basically what I did was live in an empty house. My partner and I bought it together with a carpenter, who we then bought out. I discovered he was removing sustaining walls and important things like that. Over the years it's gradually accumulated all the stuff that you see. My favorite painter, Ronald Chase, has pride of place in this house. His works are oddly symbolic of my music. They're formations of memories, fixed in patterns that are pleasing and memorable. Thinking about my life here has been a desperate attempt to weave all the strands of what I could possibly be into one strand which is what I am. I've not always succeeded. Sometimes other things come in. I have setbacks too, the most serious one being just two years ago where I broke both my ankles, and lay in bed for almost a year waiting to recover. It was a very painful accident. I'm healed now but I still have difficulty. It gives me plenty of time to plunk around here thinking. And not teach, having taught for twenty-something years now at the school.

Thinking about coming back and preparing my classes, I have some of the dread and concern that I never had when I started. I think that when one gets older one knows more and one knows what's involved. And so as a teacher I feel increasingly responsible for the students. At the same time they are changing and the students we teach now are not the kinds of students we taught when I came here. There are changes going on in the world, I'm told. I find that I never feel old but I know I must seem so from the reactions sometimes. I've discovered that my vocabulary is antique and many of the things, I expect, are prewar. I came from a town of immigrants. My grandparents came from Czechoslovakia and that was the language spoken at my home, Slovak. Those people came from a mass migration and they never talked about it. I knew nothing about their pasts. I couldn't get anything out of them and it was the only language I spoke until I went to school because my grandmother was home and my grandfather was working, so I didn't see him. But my grandmother was a very potent influence from the point of view of my standards, how I kept myself, and thought about myself.

So when I went to Catholic school, which was only a block away across the garden, our teachers were German and frequently spoke German to each other. Those of us who spoke Slovak didn't want the nuns to know we spoke Slovak. They didn't know what we were saying and I said to her, finally, "I don't know what you are saying either, Sister." Well, that got a good slap in the face, needless to say, for insurrections in one so young. We were driven very hard to study and when we worked they worked very hard with us. When we slopped around they were angry. I loved to work, I had the energy, and I loved to study, and I loved learning. Somewhere in there I realized, very early, that it was good for me to know these things that were being taught and I believed them all. It was marvelous that creation took place so quickly and that prayers were answered. I became an altar boy, and I have to say, as far as my musical life goes it really began with the performing of chant and the Latin language that I had for ten years. My brothers and I, when we meet at holiday, still go over the prayers we said as altar boys when we were young. The joke is who drops out first, who could keep it going. There is always one prayer that only I always won by, Suscípiat…. It has some almost unpronounceable words, totiúsque … those kinds of things. I loved being a choirboy, as well, when I wasn't serving at the altar.

Later, when I got older, I played organ which I was always standing next to, watching the sister glide her hands over the keys – this was wonderful to me to see how the music was made by her motions – she was so much better than my aunt who played the piano and let me sit next to her and slop away on the keys (my mother's older sister). But my aunt was also very supportive of me and felt that I should be studying music. Well there was no money in the family at the time – these were the war years. My father worked for the defensive plant – I didn't see him for three years because of that. He was very important. So I took a paper route and delivered newspapers to raise money for my piano lessons. My mother was very moved that I did this, because the sight of me and a paper bag – it was bigger than I was. I dragged it along for two miles, delivering to sixty customers. The Sunday paper was dismal, I had to do it in two rounds it was so heavy. But I felt I was doing my part, just as the war effort was asking us on various signs around the place – "Do your part." I was a very difficult example for my brothers, who grew up at five year intervals after me – we had five years between us, and they always had me as the hard-working older brother … made their life hell, when they went to school.

BISCHOFF How many brothers did you have?

SUSA Well, two – I have two brothers. Dennis and Lawrence. They are old now, and they have families. But when we get together, as I said, we still do those altar boy prayers. The pressure to become a priest came from my grandmother. She and grandpa built me an altar in the basement, where when I came home from Sunday mass, I served another Sunday mass. My poor cousin Regis had to sit there as an altar boy and hand me cruets of water that I was turning into wine. This lasted for quite a while, several years, until I went to grade school. I loved it because I loved repeating the Latin and the Latin words. Teaching counterpoint at the

school, the one thing my students don't have is that early knowledge of Latin so that it's ordinary to them, more ingrained. Nor have they heard as much chant as I have done, and they don't hear the mellifluous nature of that art. One has to, in a very short time, squeeze that into them. And then rub it out, because it's moving toward atonal music, which is vastly overrated. They think the world is atonal. Actually I've discovered that music for me, as I see it, is one very large tonal line of which classicism – Mozart and so forth and Beethoven – is one bump on it … it flowed past them, and the other composers began incorporating it again, and Schoenberg – but he missed – he's another story, it makes me very sad. But when I was very young, it looked like music was going that way, into twelve-tone music, and it made me very sad. I thought, "We're throwing so much out." This was before I encountered any teachers who were putting this in my ear, I just felt that modern music – not only was it ugly – and I didn't even mind the ugliness, sometimes music needs to be ugly. But I was just sad that they would be throwing things out like that.

BISCHOFF Where did you come across modern music when you were a child?

SUSA Well, this is the wonderful thing – I grew up in the age of radio. Radio was the most magical of all carpets. You came in in the afternoon and turned on the classical music station, it was playing something. And I would lie there on the carpet imaging what was taking place during this beautiful music. And it went on to the afternoon crime shows and detective stories, and I liked those too because the sound effects were so precise. You could tell whether a good man or a villain was walking on the snow. The good man, his step on the snow, there was a light crackle almost with a sparkle in it. But the villain had a kind of crunch. There was instruction, and you felt the agony of the ice as it received the imprint of his foot. That made me very sad, it always has – what a sad sound, the sound of a villain walking in the ice. This gave me a very fine ear for imagining things that I was hearing immediately turn into visuals. So that when I was working on theater music, when I was imagining what it would be visually, I could hear what it was as well. I could hear the sound of a balmy night. I could hear the sound of a young man in turmoil. Of imminent victory … and so on, so that one's imagination was wonderfully stimulated by radio. Then there were all the wonderful characters too. I remember in particular Tallulah Bankhead, and the wonderful thing where they always addressed her as, "Thank you sir/ma'am" – she received two genders. That was terrific. I remember listening to the premiere of Bartok's *Music for Orchestra* over the radio with Reiner conducting. And one afternoon the extraordinary experience of Randall Thompson's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that was done for the University of Virginia. It was their holiday, I don't know what day that was or what year. And looking forward to the performance from the Netherlands of Mahler's *Eighth Symphony*. So I was very aware – and I was still in high school. I was listening – and the radio was this conduit of music from the outside of town.

Springdale itself was intensely musical, however. And my family was musical up to a point. My father could play the harmonica in any key. I listened to him following my drunken grandfather around the house, trying to locate the key that he was singing in, and then he would accompany him on his harmonica. He was good, Dad was really good. He was also an expert whistler. The warblings, later on, when I got to know Joan Sutherland, and her cadenzas, my father's were far more imaginative. The problem with him was that he stimulated the other workmen to whistle with him also, and came home laughing one day when he got a letter from Gulf Oil, where he worked, that, "A ban has been put on whistling" – except for him, because he's so good. But, "No one else is really allowed to whistle, except Steve" – his name was Stephen. My father's name was the cause of a touching family ritual. I'm not named Stephen because he didn't want a junior. But mother gave me Stephen as my second name – Conrad Stephen – and my grandfather was Stephen, or Stephen [pronounced Stefen]. We would go to church on St. Stephen's day, December 26th I think it was. And when we came home grandma would give us all a shot of whiskey. The guys would go off to work, or whatever they had to do. I had breakfast and then promptly fell asleep, because I got drunk on [Hafjorg].

BISCHOFF And this is also when you were in … high school? Elementary school?

SUSA In grade school. It was just very touching to share that feast with them. My grandfather was very religious, my father mysteriously so. I don't know what he felt. But I don't know actually, because it had a … it fixed things, it fixed relationships … tasted good. [laughter]

BISCHOFF Did you have a large extended family while living in Springdale?

SUSA Yes. When my father went to work for the Defense Department, we moved in with my grandparents. He dreaded this. They did not think much of him, poor man. He was Slovak also, but his people came from the wrong end of Slovakia. They came from the eastern, or Prešov, end.

BISCHOFF Your father's family?

SUSA My father's family. They were very snotty about this, because they came from the western, or Moravian, end. We were more, in some ways, more Moravian than Slovak. Or equally as much. It was only years later that I discovered that one of the unfortunate edicts of Franz Josef, the emperor under whom they had lived – they actually had lived in the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the name Slovak, Slovakia were later things. When the Hungarians gained primacy in their area, the Slovaks had a vast migration because they refused to learn Hungarian and give up their ways. That's why we had so many relatives around Pittsburgh. My grandfather was instrumental in starting an insurance company of some sort. He was also secretary for a magazine – [Jednota] Mother was a secretary to [Jednota], and she was a typist

and knew that language well. She never taught me to read it, however. So it was a great surprise when I was reading Czech recently, words that were familiar suddenly looked very strange. "You mean that is …?" – you know? But I loved the language. When I was very little grandma had a boarding house. I seem to remember very dimly three or four gentlemen with big mustaches, who gradually disappear from my memory, I don't know how, I don't know why. They were boarders in that house. And then we moved in. There was grandma and grandpa, and their daughter – my mother. And my mother's older sister, Ann. She was the musical one. And her kids – she had a son and a daughter. But I had my two brothers. By the time they came into the world, however, I was already moving on to college. And I did not spend time with them until I was much older, and we discovered we were great friends and we enjoy each other now and call each other brother. I got a great kick out of them.

BISCHOFF Did they have a somewhat similar upbringing as yours, or was it quite different?

SUSA Well, things were changing. By the time I was in school grandma was understanding English, so Slovak was not stressed so much. My youngest brother doesn't know it at all. Or remembers it very imperfectly when he's trying to teach his grandchildren some Slovak, it's some horrible corruption of what it originally was. You asked me whether there was a large family – my father had six brothers and a sister, and they all had family – I had tons of cousins. When his mother and dad had parties and I went to them – that's where Dad would be accompanied on his harmonica – you could just lose yourself in the jungle, because everybody had lots of kids. And they were nice, I enjoyed my cousins. I did not have a good time with the children in my neighborhood, however, because my English was so fractured when I was young. I could not talk to my contemporaries, it was very embarrassing.

BISCHOFF How about when you began school?

SUSA I cut my playtime to zero, because I would study – or when I began piano, I would practice until it was time to go to bed. I had almost no friends except a few from school. When I got to junior high things changed. In the secular school there was time for a very different sort of organization and it was a lot looser. The study wasn't stressed quite so much. I think if I didn't have that background, I don't know what my grades would be. But I started to goof off a little bit. But we had this brilliant choral teacher, Ruth Johnson, who got her high school choir together with sufficient verve to win state contests. They were the pride of the town. So was our band, the high school band, run by Dwayne Wareham, was very, very good. I was in the band, I played oboe. I never did really learn to play it because I never practiced. There were no oboe teachers to send me to except what he could show me. But I did manage to play in the concerts, and went to All State, and all those things. But when I left school I dropped the oboe entirely, and thought about it never again. What I did with him, however, was arrangements for

the band, I arranged various works from the choral catalog. We had a choral library that was gigantic, it had transcriptions of vocal works by Tchaikovsky, it had a lot of choral music that was beyond us. But I became aware of these composers suddenly, and this writing. There were three of us – four, really. Sally Fold, who had a wonderful soprano voice, and the alto whose name escapes me at the moment, and a very good tenor, Charles Shoup, from an old family of the town who had been in school and knew Sally. And we would meet at one of our houses, and sing, or play duets.

BISCHOFF Were you singing yourself?

SUSA Oh, I generally played the piano. I was doing the accompaniments. But I sang baritone, I sang, yeah, the baritone parts. This was truly wonderful. Sally was quite accomplished, she became a voice teacher. It was the first time I heard Puccini, and other composers I had never heard. All that opera stuff. And so we began going to opera, and to various musicals that were in Pittsburgh. A lot of music in the neighborhood.

BISCHOFF As a group of friends you would organize outings?

SUSA I didn't organize them, I would tell the teacher about it and she would get us tickets or something. I don't remember all the details of that but the very first thing I saw was an operetta by Schubert, called *Rosamunde*. And, I've just recovered from a winter of absorption in Schubert and his music and I'm not totally out of it yet. I find it uncanny that Schubert would have been one of the very first composers whose musical works I heard that were unknown in his own lifetime and here I know them. I loved it and thought it was charming. So we had a lot of music off to the side of the choral stuff that we did in school, and the band stuff too. Ruth Johnson kept me very busy learning accompaniments. She liked me because I could play all the difficult stuff, and Duke loved me, Dwayne (we called him Duke) Wareham gave me a chance to conduct my own arrangements. So I ended up never going to gyms and at dances I never danced because I was always in the band.

BISCHOFF Were you playing dance music?

SUSA I was playing dance music. And Duke showed me how to fill in and work out the chords and about the richness of tenths. Very useful, practical things that always stayed with me. We would go and stand at the doors of various big bands that came, this was the era of big band music – and, who had the biggest band of all … the name is right out of my brain – Stan Kenton was in town and we went down and listened to him. I was just staggered by that music. Popular music but just taken to a level that … I think that it exceeded any classical music that I was hearing. Why are you listening to music from *Peer Gynt* when there is Stan Kenton?

BISCHOFF Was there a difference in what you would hear at home where you would hear the radio? Were the radios always tuned to classical music or would you listen to jazz or other big band music?

SUSA A lot of it was not broadcast that I am aware of, or I was at school. And in the evenings I would listen to classical music when I could or on Saturdays. And then there was the Metropolitan Opera, of course, or the Mormon Tabernacle Choir that broadcast. I remember staying up and Mother said, "We're all going to bed now, Conrad, is that thing still playing?" This was the *Messiah* and it was broadcast from Utah, I guess, so the time difference made it very nice and I stayed up to listen to it. I did not mind those long compositions when I was young. I was amazed that they had to be so long, that there would be so much for a composer to say, but there was. My playing was not good and I secretly feared this. My teaching under the Sisters was only in the school months and during the summer people would go away. Even when I studied privately out of the school, people took vacations, and they weren't always there. And this glorious choir director, Ruth Johnson, left us in the 11th year of my schooling and it was announced that a new woman, Ramona Matthews, would be coming in. No one knew anything about Ramona. They said, "We hear she's Greek." That in itself struck me as so improbable that I couldn't wait to see her. What does a Greek look like? Well, she looked like a Greek. She had her hair pulled back, and she had eyebrows … she was very dramatic looking. But as a person, actually, she was very simple and sweet. They said, "Conrad, play for Ramona," and I thought, "Oh no." So I played and there was a pause and she said, "Kid, you stink. That's just about the worst piano playing I've ever heard." I thought, "At last, at last." Dwayne Wareham was very put out and Ruth Johnson thought that was very rude of her but she said, "We've gotta find you a teacher." She found me Natalie Barnet Phillips in Pittsburgh, a woman whom I began to study with. Who totally turned me around, gave me some fingers, who taught me how to practice. I didn't know how to practice.

BISCHOFF What changed when you started studying with her?

SUSA She said, "Practice for me." I said, "Well, I do this and this and this," and she said, "No, what do you do? You're not going to learn anything that way. What you have to do is this. You do this slow, you do this in three…." She took me through a whole course of practice. That was like water to a thirsty man. I couldn't believe that it was so simple and right there to do and I began really practicing because I was in my 11th year of school. There was only one more year, and then what? College. I wanted to be a musician but I couldn't really play very well. And, I worked with her and got good enough to go to the Pittsburgh Symphony where I was called back from the Connecticut Dance Festival to audition for him and I did and got this job. What happened was he put up the score to *[Der] Rosenkavalier*, the last couple of pages, and he said, "Play this for me." I played it and waited for somebody else. I had learned to read scores by being a chorus accompanist in college at Carnegie Tech where we had a not very good

chorus but we did big things like the Brahms' *Requiem* and [Orff's] *Carmina Burana* of all things in one of its very early performances in this country. This would have been about 1950s, or something. I had learned to read scores extremely well, I could transpose. I had done that partly because I was fond of making two piano arrangements of things, and I made one of Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration,* I did *Scheherazade* of Rimsky-Korsakov … we just did it up in my room, upstairs with the score in front of me and I would work out. My friend Sally and I would play these duets. It was really just for our own enjoyment, but meanwhile I was learning orchestration. I learned what Strauss was doing with the bass clarinet – I'd never even heard of one until I saw it in the score. So reading score was nothing to me, he put up the score of *Carmina Burana* and I read it, and later on he asked if I wanted the job with the Symphony. When he put up the score of *Der Rosenkavalier,* well the thing about *Der Rosenkavalier* was, what he had intended was for me to play the Celeste part, but I added everything….

BISCHOFF The whole score. [laughter]

SUSA That was a wonderful experience but I learned how unhappy orchestra musicians are. I was also unhappy because they had an endless need to complain. They're always put upon, they're always…. I was making a lot of money with the Symphony and sometimes would have recording sessions, but still they were unhappy. I didn't want to be in that atmosphere. So I had a meeting with Steinberg, and I said I intended to continue my studies. He said, "My boy, I could tell you were not happy." But I'm actually quite lucky I got out of there, because if they had done *Petrushka* or something like that, I don't think I could have played it. I wasn't that good – I could play pretty good but I'm not concert material. So that got rid of one of my careers, in a way. I went as far as I could with it. I thought, "Well for somebody who couldn't even play the piano three years ago, here you are in the Pittsburgh Symphony. It's nothing to be ashamed of." I wanted to leave it – composing was becoming more interesting to me, and conducting. So I just quietly shifted on to go to Juilliard at Natalie's suggestion. She felt I was good enough as a pianist to pass the entrance exam, and I was, at Juilliard. That's where I wanted to go. I went and auditioned. Later on I found out I got the job.

BISCHOFF Can you clarify the timeline of some things? You said you began studying piano in your eleventh year.

SUSA Seriously.

BISCHOFF Seriously.

SUSA Not my eleventh year, my eleventh year at school.

BISCHOFF At school. Eleventh grade?

SUSA Eleventh grade, yes.

BISCHOFF After you graduated high school, was there a period of time you were doing other things before you went back and auditioned at the Symphony?

SUSA No. I wasn't doing – I was wondering what I was going to do. After high school I went to Carnegie Tech. That's where I ran into Steinberg, and my teacher, Lopatnikoff. The teaching there was … I was working off campus with Natalie at piano, so I didn't take my college education very seriously. I made excellent grades and I got scholarships, but I was still an offstage pianist, and it was quite galling to the piano department when I, who was a composition major, got the Symphony job. I didn't know about all that kind of rivalry, and who was talking about whom, and so forth. Does that clear up what you asked?

BISCHOFF Yes, it does. And you entered Carnegie Tech as a composition major?

SUSA Yes, I entered as a composition major – No! I entered as an organ major, because it had the least – its requirements were the simplest. I already knew how to play the keyboard. All I had to learn were the pedals. I tell you the pedal is not a simple thing at all. But I did, I remember my final graduation piece was one of the Bach sonatas, the trio sonatas. So I got that good. I like the organ, and I never lost my love for it. I've written quite a bit of music for it. But after two years I switched to composition, because that was even easier than studying organ. All you had to do was write a sonata. Natalie said, "Well you can write a sonata, can't you?" It turned out I could, so I wrote some songs, and a sonata. I had a lot of difficulty with my teacher Lopatnikoff, who was born in Russia, but he had a very German temperament. Music with him was a very spiky affair, I guess I sounded like Prokofiev or Shostakovich or somebody. I wanted to be an American composer, in my heart of hearts. The question of what is an American composer is something that interests me now because the ACDA declared me the Dean of American Choral Music, and they wanted an essay from me about the American style. The longer I thought about it the more complicated it got. I still have not written it, but every day I work on it for about two hours, at least in my mind. I have come part way to try to explain it, and that is the difficulty with talking about my life, because I was surrounded in a polyglot town – there were Germans, Italians, Slovaks, Czechs – I heard these languages constantly. I learned Latin … later on we had Greek in high school, I had a semester of Greek. And I discovered how important languages are, even though I can't converse in any – all the languages I know are dead languages. But language is very important to a composer. While you're writing motets or whatever you're writing, you have to deal with the language, sometimes with a foreign language. English is not easy, and a lot of my students are not English [speaking], so it makes it very difficult when they want to write choral music at the school. I think there's only a certain amount

I can teach them and I feel very sad that there's no time growing up doing that – teaching them languages – they all should ideally be speaking Latin right now.

BISCHOFF Why do you think that was such an important foundation for you?

SUSA Well, because it was there first. The other thing is, everything else actually flows from it. English, the other languages … French … not German, not Slovak … but I like the idea of something being rooted and stretching into the past so that I imagine my plants in my garden growing down to the Pliocene age. I like rootedness, it's very important. To a composer, you always have to think from the bottom up in that respect. I remember my surprise when I read the program notes to Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms,* which I was able to hear – when we were at Tech, we heard the Pittsburgh Symphony all the time. They were a wonderful orchestra, and they did the *Symphony of Psalms*. In that performance in the program notes Stravinsky wrote about the basis of the word "symphony." And I thought, "Now that is extraordinary as a composer who's very concerned about what his words mean." And so they mean exactly what you're getting from him. A symphony, meaning basically a collection of sounds, enables him to recombine the ordinary set – he could have turnips and violins if he wants to. So these ways were always circumventing what seemed to me that impregnable nineteenth century of music and classicism and romanticism – although I must say, some composers – bear constant thinking and Brahms, I never run out of admiration for him. I guess I'm over my Mahler phase. Not being Jewish, I don't find enough of anything else in there to really get excited about. I like all that suffering, and all that complaining and that breast-beating, and I do a certain amount of it, but … you have to leave room to be happy.

I've been a very happy person teaching. Teaching came into my life when I was at Juilliard. Lincoln Center was setting up a program to bring music into the outlying school districts and to explain it – to explain plays and…. This was just before the founding of the education department at Juilliard, so I was in on all the pre-planning for that and did a lot of work in the city schools of New York. For seven years, in fact. I was running back and forth to San Diego to do the music there, and then I was also teaching in the winter in what one considered remote schools – Harlem. Where in the world is that … what planet is that on? It was so foreign to me. I think teaching teaches one about being human, and about the price of mortality. It's a lesson I'm still learning of course. Because it's always different from the way one grew up, and what one learned then isn't always relevant now. One has to learn new things. And you have to keep some kind of morality in it. Some kind of justice, or rightness, or something so you're not just constantly caving in to what's fashionable. Teaching school is like that – the winds of fashion blow in and out of education all the time. Look at "Let No Child Be Left Behind." What? Was anybody leaving them behind? Politicians and leaders – I suppose even school principals and presidents – always want to be relevant, and if possible anticipate the future. I think – what about being in the present? What about the pride of achievement? The San Francisco Conservatory is a

remarkable school. It has brilliant people teaching, and it's turned out brilliant students who are unhappy with one thing or another, just as you're supposed to be. And one hopes they grow up and look back and say, "I was taught to be unhappy so that I improve myself."

We were founded by a remarkable man, and maybe it's time to mention Ernest Bloch. Ramona Matthews, in addition to finding me a good piano teacher when I was in high school, had a wonderful collection that included Ernest Bloch. I heard in her car – no, it must have been in her living room – the *Concerto Grosso*, which I'd never heard. And the *Sacred Service*, which her choir was learning, and they were going to do a performance of it somewhere. I was smashed. The power of that music transcended everything I had ever heard. The openness of it was more like the music I should have been listening to as a child. But to some extent also it was, because he was as middle European as he was Jewish. A lot of his music has – well, let's face it, a lot of sauerkraut on the plate, in addition to the egg bread on the other side. The beauty and power and splendor of the music was a deeply moving thing, but I never thought to imitate it. I thought, "That is Bloch. That is him." But when the time came for us to think about this anniversary coming up, I thought, "We're going to have a new building, just like the one he's always wanted. We're laying down the principles that Bloch has always espoused. What can you do to enhance this?" So I got hold of a copy of his music – *Enfantines*, the piano pieces, and I decided I would add a work of my own *Carols and Lullabies*, and a work of Elly's – because Elly Armer founded the department. But she didn't have any music with her the day I had to do this, so I took a copy of a speech she wrote about being female, or something of the kind, something that is as much Elly as her music – she's a complex and full individual, so anything is an example of her. Took them and made sure that they were buried in the foundations of the school when they were going to lay the cement. So they put them down in this structure that they had ready to receive the cement, and then the pouring began. So we were all joking that if a crack appears in the walls, we might be responsible for it. But I wanted – I was not content with that – I wanted us to arrange a concert for Bloch, welcoming him into the new school. I felt that hadn't been done.

A great school like ours always has a great founder, and we had one. And he deserves some kind of eminence. There are no pictures of him around – a lot of our students don't know him. I wanted to get something or other in the lobby, but it was thousands of dollars to do it. That will still go up someday. But the music gave me a particular kind of dedication to myself to be honest in my music as he was. I don't think he always tried to write merely great music, but I think he wanted it to be complete. I think he wanted as much as you could pack into it that he was about. Quite frankly I didn't know a lot of Bloch, I'm surprised at some clunkers which are in there, I think. But anyway it turned out when we were planning the concert at school, his grandson lived right up the street – great, great grandson. And he came down one day after I called him, and he brought me a baton. I said, "We have to give this to the school somehow." They wanted to give it to me! But I felt it would have no value if I had it, whereas if it were given to the school by a Bloch it would have more value. The provenance would be more firmly established. So that

happened in the ceremony of the concert, where we did the *Sacred Service*. Which we were not really prepared to do, we don't have a big enough chorus, and if we had a big enough chorus we don't have a big enough stage to put it on. And it requires more mature voices than we have at the school, it requires opera voices. But it was being done there in Pittsburgh, and I saw it, and carried this work around in my heart for all those years before I went to Juilliard. His speaking of a teacher as what he wants his students to be. That would surface periodically in times I was teaching, like out there in the hinterlands of New York, or wherever I was, Ernest Bloch remained a shining example of good things to be for people.

BISCHOFF After you first heard the *Sacred Service*, did you discover more of his music, or did you read his writings? How did you get to know him?

SUSA No. I knew the *Concerto Grosso* and the *Sacred Service*. I knew *Baal Shem* and some of those works when I performed them at Carnegie Tech with my friend Rennie Sharp, who when I came to the Conservatory turned out to be on the faculty. This girl I knew in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh is such a strange place, and I just want to say this little story because it shows the perils of being from Pittsburgh. I was very close to Rennie and I always liked her, and discovered she was not a very popular person at the school. When I'd bring her name up, eyes would roll and say, "There's nothing to talk to her about, she's always so depressed." Well, what they didn't know was that being from Pittsburgh, all of her sentences drop. [speaks in a monotone] "Are you going downtown tonight. It's a nice day isn't it. Well how are you." [laughter] That's actually a high degree of enthusiasm. Clunk. Like a manhole dropping at the end of each sentence. That's available only in people who have spent a long time in Pittsburgh. She had it in spades. So they thought she was depressed, but actually it's just a mode of speech she had. I talked to her about this, she said, [unenthusiastically] "Yeah." End of conversation.

I had a cello player who wrote a tremendous passacaglia, she was a cellist … a lot of our students are conflicted because they can play very well, and want to keep playing, and have a lot of composition juice and want to be encouraged as composers. I supposed Mendelssohn could do it, I suppose Leonard Bernstein could do it, but the kind of energy that a person has to have to have two careers is special. I may have run into it and not recognized it, but I don't think so. On the other hand, I've run into a lot of high-powered students. One encourages it because it is a very difficult gap between telling the truth and being discouraging. Can you carry on in spite of what you know? Well, no one warns you that when you turn older that's going to happen anyway. So is it better to turn old at the age of twenty-five, or is it better to just let it happen when it's going to happen? The life of a musician realizing that he's musical is difficult. People that are talented in one area, in some ways have it a lot easier. We've had many cases of students who are too talented. They're talented in so many areas that it's a question of getting them to schedule their talent. This is when I will be a composer, this is when I will be a conductor. The present day life doesn't make it any easier, there are so many distractions – many more distractions than when I

was in school. More than that, I'm alarmed that I don't detect – we only have very few students – a line that goes beyond them into their past and through their generations, through their family. They seem to be so utterly contemporary that they have no shadow. I cannot judge that actually, except I have my opinions, and I want it to be the best for all of them. But I'm very sad also to know there's going to be a lot of disappointment. We don't teach how to deal with disappointment here. I wonder if we shouldn't do so.

BISCHOFF Let me ask, because you've raised a couple of things here – you were talking before about how you had changed careers too – you had been a pianist with the Symphony and then you went to school and decided to take up composition – and to be an American composer.

SUSA Oh, that's another thing. I'll have to save that. Becoming an American composer requires deciding what American is. Virgil Thompson was asked how you become an American composer. He said, "Well, first you're born in the United States, and then you compose something." Dead on. Because no matter what you write, whether it sounds "American" or something else, it's got to be American. How can you not be an American – maybe that would be a harder question to try and answer. When I went on – I mentioned – I don't know whether I mentioned before I went to Juilliard that I hitchhiked through Mexico.

BISCHOFF No.

SUSA Okay, well I'll save that too, because it was during that time that I began to think about being an American composer here while I was going to Juilliard. In those fanatical days, Copland was still alive, Barber was still alive – the big powers in American composition were still alive – Bernstein. And they surrounded us. How do you write music for somebody as great as that, when they are so conflicted themselves, usually? And not sure what to do, or who they have to please. They barely know what to do except shut up and compose. Most people have the sense to know when they talk – and that worries me here – you just sound like a jerk because it's all been said before by somebody somewhere. It sounds trite to say this – nobody is original – it all comes from something. Find something original! Because America's changing, the America I grew up in doesn't exist. So what America do I compose for? In my age I have to preserve – the only one I know is far away and long ago. I cannot make a modern audience happy. They don't know who Carmen Miranda is! They don't know who Randall Thompson is. The composers. They haven't seen a bunch of movies that I know very well – I worked in a movie theater for four years.

BISCHOFF When was that?

SUSA This was beginning in eighth grade, though high school. I learned how theater music is written, I listened to all these great shows – *The Red Shoes* – thirty-five times, because it was playing – what an incredible production that was! And there were others with beautiful, beautiful music. As fine as anything being written. My students don't know who *The Red Shoes* are, or was, or will be. Should I make them listen to it? Do they need to know the Bible, do they need to know mythology? Yes. Nothing is truly lost if it is once known. And we have a responsibility to preserve the past. Because it's present, and it points to the future. And the future and the past are what the present is. One is always thinking ahead, one is always thinking behind. And that's now.

BISCHOFF You had some very distinct experiences as a child growing up. You were saying when studying with Lopatnikoff, it sounds like – you didn't say this, you might have had disagreements over what it meant to compose, or what influences to bear while you were composing?

SUSA Yes, that's because I was just so ignorant. I didn't know enough about teaching or about composition to know that he could only show me what he knew, and I could adapt this. I never held it against him, mind you. But he was always feeling that he didn't get from me the kind of love he should have. When I heard the music and the strictness and the spikiness, then there was a second theme that was always so mushy I was embarrassed. He had polarized things so much that it lost the emotional balance it needed to live in that time. It does not pay to have a loud voice, it does no good to have a loud voice that shrieks and hollers. But to say something emphatically and with purpose and with deep meaning, it does require a kind of strength. But it's not aggressive. I was just getting all of this aggression from him. Now I realize he was a product of his age, just as I am, I suppose. I made sure that I cleaned out any sound of his out of my music. I don't think he ever understood whether I was composing at all. There was one lesson where I brought in something that was "B." He was astonished. He was not stupid by any means, a very bright and intellectual man. His wife, Sally, wrote poetry. And it was at their house when they called me over for a lesson one day that I met Robert Frost, who was sitting in their living room talking about poetry to Sally. I met Robert Frost … I'd much rather have met Yeats … but Frost will do. It's exciting to me about school – when you enter school, you start meeting famous people. When I did my theater scores, I met scads of them all the time. So I've had an extremely good and pleasant life being a composer. No matter how unhappy I am from time to time, when I think of now and the fact that my energy has weakened considerably, and it's taken so much to get walking again … but I don't intend to die in the next two days either, and if I can I'll get it all revved up. By fall.

BISCHOFF When you worked at the Pittsburgh Symphony, and you had suspicions that maybe your piano wasn't up to snuff, as high as it should be – you turned to composition. I'm wondering if you felt at that point through your schooling – you had to deal with these very

strict Sisters even as an elementary school student – did you feel that these were challenges, that you were facing headwinds, or did you always feel like you could step in whatever direction you wanted to step?

SUSA I was always motivated to do something. Composition always came in there when everything else … it was a room to run to. Being a pianist, you have to be honest about your fingers. There was a wonderful story about Horowitz, he was just so sick and tired of them, always accusing he was a trite musician, and all he was playing was Schumann and Schubert … Lehar … and he said, "Well what do you mean, great music?" And his agent gave him the Beethoven sonatas and said, "Here. Learn this." Horowitz comes back two weeks later, flings the volumes on the desk, opens the second volume to a certain page, in the *Hammerklavier Sonata*, and says, "I can play everything, except that!" Imagine. Imagine being able to do that. That is concert material. That I did not have. All those stories are designed to prevent us from getting too bruised. I never suffered over that. I did not feel I failed. I just thought, "Well, I can't do that, can I? I can do something else, and I can use it in another way." I didn't feel that anything I learned was lost. I think my theater music is worth talking about because that's when I discovered how little I knew.

BISCHOFF Can I ask you though, you mentioned having hitchhiked through Mexico? I would love to hear a little about that, and when that happened.

SUSA You want to hear about that now? Well, when I was at Carnegie Tech, I met a young dancer in the drama department, whom I followed to this festival at the … no, that wasn't quite that … I followed him in my heart, I suppose. But I found they had the job of an accompanist open. Playing for Jose Limon's dance classes. So I said, "I'm coming to New London." And he said, "Oh, I'm sick with the flu." And when I arrived he got sicker and sicker and sicker, and left, and so the only reason I had come to the New London festival was for him, but now he was sick and left. Well, I began to meet other people, dancers and so forth. And because I had this position they asked me to give a speech on the Bach *Passacaglia*. There were all these other great monuments of American dance up there, and a lot of them came from Europe as well. Among the composers who were writing for the dance classes … they would give us a dance class, and they would dance to the music we wrote … they were nice about it, they were very free. I wrote a pavane of some sort.

The dance I played for Jose Limon was a new piece by Paul Bowles. I don't know if you know that name, he lived in Morocco or something like that. But Paul never came around that summer, as far as I know, and his dance was not very exciting. It was based on a play called *Blue Roses* – or that was the original sketch of a play by Tennessee Williams. Well what had been – *The Glass Menagerie*. Blue Roses, blue roses … I was learning this music and gave a lecture, and I noticed when people were going out, they'd say, "Martha's classes begin at ten o'clock, Jose's classes

begin at nine, Wilma's classes begin … everybody was on a first name basis. So I went out and said, "I play for Doris Humphrey, and Doris always does this and this and this…." After that the speech guy comes over to me and says, "Conrad, that was a very good speech. But you can call Jose Limon 'Jose' – and you can call Martha Graham 'Martha,' but nobody calls Doris Humphrey 'Doris.' You should have said 'Miss Humphrey.'" Well, I didn't know that, and had rehearsal with her that afternoon. She was dressed in this venomous green dress, and she had a kind of reddish hair. I'll never forget how the lights were flashing in her eyes. Maybe I made that up … so I passed her and sort of nodded because she was talking to some other students and didn't want to interrupt them. So I went over to the piano and sat down. She didn't walk much because she was crippled, she walked with a cane. "Class, Mr. Susa will be accompanying us today." She didn't mention my first name. I thought, "Well I have just been slapped on the wrist in front of everybody." Or at least so I imagined. But it was very tactful of her, nevertheless, and afterward I went up to her and said, "It was a pleasure to be here, Miss Humphrey." And she said, "Good, I enjoyed your playing." Very nice lady. But the composers up there were always – every break, every interval, every time we sat down – talking about the future of American music and what it should be and what it shouldn't be and whether twelve-tone music is admissible…. I thought, "Oh, I can't stand this. I can't stand this, I don't want to be a composer. The world is full of these people."

After Juilliard I got a scholarship to go to Tennessee. One spring we drove through the Shenandoah Valley. I swore my heart was torn out of my body. The American land grabs you like a lover. It's very strong, it's very intense, binding, to the earth and to the smells of nature. It's a sudden mystical union that you have with everything. I thought to myself, "I am an American composer. I don't have to worry about whether I do anything correctly." I hadn't thought about Virgil … whatever will come out will be mine. And I will begin by arranging folk tunes. This was the time that Peter, Paul and Mary and all those – Pete Seeger – were coming out of the woodwork and that whole Tennessee Valley business. The rise of Grand Old Opry was happening. I identified with that very much. Nowadays when I see Pete Seeger I think he's just one of the greatest (I think that poor Walt Whitman must have had that kind of energy, transformative energy). I saw Seeger on television come into a room and they immediately started singing. He didn't even have to do anything, he twanged a few notes on his guitar, he began hearing humming, and said, "Okay! *On Top of Old Smoky*," or wherever it was. And suddenly there's this room of people singing so beautifully with that twangy mountain voice. I was devastated by that sound, I still am. I can barely recover from it if I put on a record. Nobody knows Pete Seeger. He's not written up anywhere, but we're learning about Gemelli, or somebody or the rise of the sonata. What? What? What?! Why?! We need to learn about our heritage. It shouldn't be passé to know that stuff. And it is so beautiful, the sweetness of the songs. *Pastures Aplenty*. When the Weavers sang that, I don't know if there's a shift they do in tempo, I'll be darned if I can ever find it myself, they're going along [hums] … they slow down

into this low gear, this soulful power and sadness. American music is so sad, there's so much pain in it. It's all disguised under civility and almost courtly delicacy of some sort.

So the arrangements I did, one of them became a very well-selling song, the *Shenandoah*. But I think I have other things in there … I just decided that I would start my career with American music and humble myself and make folk song arrangements, or recompose them in a way. Well that might have been possible in those days, but not very many people were interested. The country's become something else. The Mideast wars, all those things have changed us so that the kind of American I want to be is hopelessly out of step in a way. I feel like an antique rather than a resource. I don't think it helps any if you're going to make your school spout something new and relevant because the word Conservatory means to preserve. And in fact the preservation that we're doing, and the school does, is much more valuable. There are a lot of other jerks who are supplying music for the future. It perforce must fail. We're doing the right thing at the school, and it's being done with so much understanding. My fellow composition teachers, Elly and … they're so deeply aware of this. I think other people are too. They seek to draw in the best of what we've got. Some of the composers are always complaining about other composers, there's music being played … well, we don't know what a good composer is any more than they do. But they're at least taking advantage of what is being produced now. The best of now. Keep the eyes off the future, it will take care of itself. All of those composers who write music for the future have never had a present. They can have no past. You have to be here now, and write, and be of your time.

BISCHOFF We really haven't talked too much at all about your education at Juilliard. What was the atmosphere there compared to what you've just been saying?

SUSA Juilliard is the school for scandal. It thrives on them, creates them – it animates the study. My teachers were all caught up in being American because of Bill Schuman. But they were very good men. William Bergsma, now dead. Vincent Persichetti, now dead. Vincent Persichetti – I knew his music in high school, it had a very big effect on me when I first heard it. It was very odd, I remember that piece from the *Divertimento for Band*, the trumpet part. It sounded to me what I thought American music should sound like. There was one evening, I had invited Persichetti and Philip Glass over to my apartment in New York and we're all having dinner. Philip studied with Persichetti, his lesson was just before mine. I remember very well that I made roast duck, with peas, and I made a chocolate mousse. Persichetti was very pleased with the dinner, he ate quite a bit. And so did Philip, even though he was on the verge of becoming a vegetarian, I think. Persichetti asked the question, "What made you become a composer, Susa?" I said, "Why, it was you. It was your music. Your music did it." He was … he had a moment of some sort and said, "Ah! That's nice to hear. How 'bout you, Philip?" I don't remember what Philip said, because I was still watching that odd expression. I thought later – oh, it was Philip, yes! He said, "Isn't it nice that you'd be in the room with someone you influenced

like this?" He said to Persichetti. I was dumbfounded that something had come full circle like that.

BISCHOFF Did you go there to study specifically with him?

SUSA No, I went to study … I was still in my futurist kick. I went to study with Dallapiccola. But it turns out that he suddenly had to leave, and left before I got there. But he was my teacher of choice, then Persichetti. But I hadn't thought about that experience of the *Divertimento*, and recalling that trumpet music and thinking, our town, Springdale, was built on the bend of the Allegheny River. It looks like it's in Germany, actually, because the hills come down to the water, but the town is built on a slope. And it's cold out because there are so many springs. The high school was on the peak of this hill, and I would go up the slopes in the evenings and smoke a pipe. A pipe! I liked the smell of that kind of raw tobacco … I don't know what it was, a tobacco that had a very spicy, kind of a fruitcake kind of smell. I would think about my future and about what's going to happen to me, and I would see this moon sinking down into the sky, and be electrified by the sight of … one evening there was this formation of clouds, it looked like the moon was going down into this pocket. Sometime later I came upon the Longfellow serenade,"Down yon western steeps, sink, sink." He's talking to the moon. "Western steeps." I was up there in this romantic mood, and I would recall this trumpet music I heard from the All State band that I had just played in. And that moved me tremendously. I didn't think about Persichetti's name so much at that time, I thought about it more in terms of just that piece. But then I realized with him sitting there that he was the composer. That was a beautiful moment for me. But you know, life is full of those. Some western B movie you find yourself in. Life is a poem of some kind, and I seem to be floundering around in the footnotes of it. "Down yon western steeps, she sleeps, my lady sleeps." She's dead. I set that poem finally, <u>finally</u> … sixty years later. It takes that long for things to cook around sometimes.

I know a lot of people are able to have instant reactions and turn them into … and we're always being asked to do that. "It's going to be the Fourth of July, can you write something?" "Yes, I can write something <u>loud</u>. But what are the fireworks really like?" Nobody's written anything better than Handel's fireworks music. Oh man, I just love him. That's his last orchestra piece. The first one was the water music, and that was his last piece and it's just … a lot of horseradish and mustard, you know? It continued my fascination with the past, and particularly with England. Because in the summers I had been doing so much Shakespeare music, and I worked at the Globe for forty years. I've done two hundred some plays – productions. The difference being that sometimes I did twelve *Hamlets* and thirteen or fourteen *Twelfth Nights*. I always found something new, and because you want to do your play better and better, when I came up to do the histories I began reading English history. The making of England, and the making of the English language really interests me a great deal. How it eventually became the American language – the American English which we speak. But English English is a language that they've

even forgotten. I hear them on the TV and I don't know what the hell they're saying. That can't be English. They sound like a [makes a squawking noise] they sound like computers talking. But … why did I bring up San Diego? You brought up San Diego.

BISCHOFF You were talking about Handel and fireworks.

SUSA Oh, Handel. Of course when one teaches counterpoint you have to investigate the history of counterpoint. And that leads to Gregorian Chant. That's where I started my life. I never thought that I would be studying about countersubjects when all I was doing was learning difficult Latin prayers, or singing beautiful Latin chant. But you could tell from the way Handel manipulates his chant that he's very respectful of it. And he uses it to ennoble – *Israel in Egypt* opens with *Victimae paschali laudes* turned into this vast choral drama … the children of Israel weep … weep … sigh. Echo effects the whole double chorus. God almighty! So much more to teach than Bach, who's such a cranky bastard. I don't think I would have wanted him as my father. No, no, those poor boys.

BISCHOFF Was there some aspect of Bloch's music – were you attracted to it because of its – specifically the *Sacred Service*, because of it being liturgical music?

SUSA I liked it because it was Jewish. There's a part of me that feels Jewish, or at least mid-European. That's very close to me – it's home. It's home. The fact that you can also hear camels and sand and dates and oasis in that music. I know we learned about in geography, so it just all plays right in. I think the feeling about Bloch's music was a feeling of rival rather than discovery. I came home to Bloch, not having known him. I didn't know he was my father.

BISCHOFF So there was something about that music that had surrounded you from an early age.

SUSA Still does. It still does. And it makes it very difficult to listen to as a result. Because I listen past that effect now, and I listen to a lot of sloppy composing. Why isn't he better known? Because a lot of the pieces are really … doubtful. They're not as great as their conception. But it's the real thing. And he was generally interested in education. It's right that he's the patron saint of our house.

BISCHOFF I think we'll talk about Juilliard – maybe we could pick up with that next time. Since just now we've talked a little bit more about your early life, I have maybe one more question about your growing up. You mentioned that your father was gone for years at a time. Do you feel that you were raised mostly by women? By your mother, grandmother, aunt?

SUSA Yes, I'm a product of women.

BISCHOFF It sounds like your teachers, also, through high school – you mentioned your choir teacher, and Ramona.

SUSA Women. My big piano teacher, woman. They were no ordinary women. They had a good dash of masculinity about them, which made them kind of interesting. My mother never achieved her ends by the direct assault. She'd get a migraine first, then she got what she wanted. The women we're talking about, Natalie, and so forth – "What's wrong with you, kid?!" It was right up there – very much up front. A great relief. And then there's Elly. Dot, dot, dot. Who is a complexity of a different kind. I love her very much and she's so supportive. She brought me to the department. For which I'm always grateful. But we've always also been very truthful with one another, so we enjoy our friendship. It extends beyond the class. Everybody's so busy at school, you know. Our teachers are hard to get friendly with. They have to practice, or teach, or are going someplace.

BISCHOFF If you had to say, was there – it sounds like you've learned throughout and you've found the lessons that were there to learn – but the whole beginning of your life, when you were taught by women and then you went on to school it sounds like most of your composition teachers were men. Was there one point in your education that was the most formative, do you think?

SUSA No, I think that every moment has been formative, quite frankly. You have breakthroughs, and you say, "Oh, I understand this." What happens from then on is different, but you still have to work. You have to get up in the morning, you have to brush your teeth.

BISCHOFF If you have to look at your education through school – say through high school – compared to when you began studying composition as a profession, a career – would you say there's one point – any teacher, any period, that was most formative for you?

SUSA Well, it starts and stops. My life, my last years, the years in high school where Ramona pushed me into new training, intellectually gave me a new outlook on life. Being with Natalie, it gave me a sense of what it is to be cultured. She gave me books to read. "Where do I start, Natalie? I don't know anything about books." She said, "Well here, start with the Russians." I remember very well that I read *Dead Souls*, I guess that's Gogol or somebody like that. That was the very first novel I ever read. Which isn't literally true, I read lots of books from our library in Springdale, but it was not – for me, growth really had to do when it touched upon things that were outside my knowledge until then. Moving into literature, reading Gogol, T.S. Eliot, that stuff … instantly found me eager. Eager to do it. Why was I so eager? Well, because I had been a thirsting rabbit all those years without knowing that stuff. I didn't know I was dying. Ramona pushed me, Natalie – that was eye-opening. Natalie – preparing me to leave her on the

very onset I would go to Juilliard. That's really what I was studying with her for. So I could get good enough for Juilliard after I left Tech. Instead I went a year with the Symphony, for which that was really long enough. At Juilliard I met geniuses all over the place. And it took me quite a bit of work to feel that I was holding my own among them. But I graduated with very good grades, and a composing scholarship that sent me out for two years work in Tennessee. When I was in Tennessee, I met people who gave me commissions for choral music, continuing when I went back to New York. When I was in New York I got into theater because I was already working in theaters in the summers during this whole thing. So I never ran out of things to do. Back in those days, for me to distinguish the years was, did I have a good tan?

BISCHOFF Did you have a good…?

SUSA Tan. [laughter] I developed what must have seemed like a very superficial personality. But it was very important for me to be sufficiently superficial, to deal with the immense pressure I was under. But it made a bad impression, nevertheless. I know – I'm aware of that.

BISCHOFF Well, what if we call this a day for now, and then tomorrow we can pick up with that – with some of the pressures of studying and what you did following Juilliard.

SUSA Juilliard was definitely a … a lot of things in my life would have been different if I had gone for example to Salt Lake City instead of Nashville. I had the luck to run into these choir directors all the time, who began pushing me toward choral music, which had not been a big concern for me, and that became an obsession later on.

BISCHOFF I was thinking we could pick up from where we stopped yesterday, and maybe even go back a bit. We can definitely talk about your experiences at the Globe, and with the Ford Foundation after that. But to start with …

SUSA Juilliard.

BISCHOFF Yes. In fact, you were just showing us pictures of the theater productions you did at Carnegie Tech and said that you had all these resources available to you for that kind of writing. What was the transformation like when you went to Juilliard?

SUSA It's the difference between Pittsburgh and New York. New York turned out to be what Juilliard is about at first, and then you become somehow global, or national, because everybody's traveling, everybody's thinking about worldwide careers. They're meeting artists from all over the world. We had people from all over. The atmosphere of Juilliard is amazing. I felt very intimidated at first, because I was from … Pittsburgh seemed to be a very small town. All the cities of the east suffer from this in comparison with New York. Philadelphia does. Everyone from those cities is aiming toward New York, rather than someplace else. I don't know anybody that I've ever met who was living in one of those cities and was planning to move to Minneapolis. I'm sure there are some, but not for career. The life of New York is so free and so colorful. I was thrilled to be on my own in New York. Couldn't wait 'til I got my hands dirty somehow. I was very, very disciplined when it came to work but that didn't permit me from sort of peeking over the plate to see what was going on. I did not work as hard at Juilliard as I'd hoped I would because the pressure of everything was probably too great for me at first. I suddenly lost my identity. What I had been didn't count for anything in New York. I had nobody who I was proud of. I had not done anything on that scale that I was there to exemplify. Fortunately, Philip Glass, who became a very good friend, was a sweet guy. Although we didn't hang out, we spent time chatting, and he had his lesson just before me. And he was a mystery. But I liked that mystery.

One day I came into my studio and Persichetti was standing at the window looking out at the Hudson, greeted me when I came in, and said, "Susa!" He said, "Tell me about G." I said, "What?" He said, "Tell me about G. Philip Glass asked me that question, and I'm standing here trying to think, "What is there about G besides what I showed him? It can be here, and here, and here, and here, and here. It can be loud, it can be soft, it can be long, it can be short. It can be in combination with other notes, on either side of it." I went on this way for fifteen minutes, and stopped because there was no more to say. And he said, "No! I mean … tell me about G." [laughter] I thought, "What the hell does that mean? You'll have to find out for yourself." So I said to Persichetti, "I promise never to ask a question like that." But I probably should have.

Because it would have showed that my mind was working a little more abstractly than it was. And I discovered I was not as successful in instrumental music as I had hoped. But I wrote a choral cycle based on the poems of James Joyce, whose poetry I had received at Tech. This was sung, and received great acclaim, and it was the first piece where I detected that Conrad Susa had something to do with it. I think that's because there was so much Schubert in it. Schubert was a great influence on my choral writing when I was very young, I loved Schubert. The music for the Vienna boy's choir. The choral music also had many themes mystical and fantastical that appealed to me.

So I wrote that, and then, lo and behold, it was time to graduate. I had listened in the three years preceding the graduation to people bragging and barking and bellowing and talking assertively about their belief in this and this and this and I thought, "Wait a minute, how do they know?" And so I ended up feeling very deflated. But on guard. I thought, "I have to start all over again with my life." Mark Schubart called me into his office and said I could have a scholarship – a grant to compose music for a city. What city would I like? I had a choice of Salt Lake City and Nashville. He said, "Let me just tell you that for your temperament, I would choose Nashville." I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that, but I said, "Okay." It was a place I loved. When I got there and started my work I thought, "I'm going to begin at the beginning. I'm going to arrange folk songs." I think I mentioned to you that around this time Peter, Paul and Mary and all those people were coming out with folk songs. And I thought, "I'll start at the beginning of American song and develop it the way I want to." I didn't feel that Copland covered the kind of American childhood that I had. I didn't have a horse that went clippity-clop. I didn't have an Appalachian spring either. Although it sounds like a nice thing. I had a Pittsburgh summer. [laughter] I had a different experience of America. I had a very communistic experience, because the town of Springdale had so many Europeans in it. There were so many people knocking at your back door giving you a loaf of bread, and wanting to borrow your scissors.

BISCHOFF Right. You're not talking about the political ideology, you're talking about social….

SUSA No, I'm just talking about appearance. There was a great tendency toward village life or something. Everybody helps everybody. But before I went to Juilliard I also had an earth-shaking experience, which was my trip to Mexico. And I'd like to just mention a few things about that. I didn't have any real money, so when Ronald Chase said, "Let's go to Mexico." I said, "No, I don't have any money." He said, "Oh, well, we'll hitchhike."

BISCHOFF Who was this, who you went with?

SUSA Ronald, the painter. I had met him – I had just come back from the dance festival in New London, Connecticut. It turned out to be a great experience. I did not complain, I

did not act uppity in any way. I felt, "I'm just going to take this as it comes." And was surprised by – number one – the smell of Mexico, which is that burning mesquite. We took a little bus, we were going to go to Mexico City and then somehow get down to the Panama Canal. Going through the mountains was unbelievable. I swear we knocked a man off the road, but the bus didn't stop for him. Very precipitous cliffs, beautiful birds, and this wonderful smell. But the food shocked me. I was not prepared for beans – I'm sorry, it was just totally an experience both ways. Gradually I liked it, and now I crave it, but we got to Mexico City and discovered it was too expensive. Ronald suggested we hitchhike further south and go to Tampico, or someplace like that. We met a young man in the bus station while we were trying to figure out what to do. We met a man who had a car who said, "I can take you down to Acapulco, and then I have to go to Puebla. My mother recently widowed is there, and she's waiting for me. If you guys want to come to Puebla for a while, that'll be fine." So we did, we stayed a month. The lady was so nice, she was very wealthy and she fed us and took care of us. She had our clothes washed, and gave us a car. We went to Monte Alban and saw the ruins and artifacts up there. She arranged that I give the daughter of the mayor of the town piano lessons. And then I took lots of walks around the town, wherever we went.

After a month we went up the West Coast to San Diego. That was my first trip to San Diego. I had a friend there at the Globe and I had already met Craig Noel, he had come to Carnegie Tech, he was the director of the place. He told me to wait for Noel, and we were nearly picked up by the police because we were sitting at the end of the park. It turns out that the soldiers come there, and they all sleep and get drunk, or they beat somebody up or they rob somebody. The real problem was the armed forces. But when they saw that it was somebody just waiting, they didn't bother us at all. It happened a lot, however. I was always being pulled over by the police, even just walking across the bridge on an empty day.

BISCHOFF In San Diego?

SUSA Yeah, they're overly zealous down there. They mean well, but they don't mean well. But walking around Mexico, I mentioned that I became aware of death. Why would that concern me, I don't know. I just felt that my own life had been so white and pale and without incident. I had experienced no great insights, I had no vast suffering on the level of the myths that I had read as a child. I thought well, "Everybody is saying, life is big, life is dramatic – life is this … and I don't see any of this." But in Mexico … I don't know why, it is covered in blood. And the people have a look of long-suffering patience about them. I saw a man sleeping with his hat down and I thought, "That is Mexico because it has outlasted the Spanish. It will outlast the English. It will outlast the Americans. It will just go on and be." Now they all want to come here. I bet we're going to see a lot more refried beans, and then they're going to be eating … because they're culturally so well made. Everything – their language, their food – all works together, just so beautifully. I certainly pondered that experience, and when the question came,

which I'd heard many times about being an American – "Well, that's South American, it isn't American." I felt very drawn to the south, and in a lot of my own music I'd written Spanish and Mexican type music. I don't know why, but it comes out. One of my biggest selling pieces, *Carols and Lullabies,* were set as Spanish melodies, as sung in the southwest. I felt very at home with those tunes, as if I had known them as a child. I can't explain this. I think maybe part of this is that in the '40s, Latin American music was very popular in this country – *Besame Mucho* and all those wonderful things, played by Enric Madriguera, who wrote a lot of those things – *Malaguena* – big hits that were south of the border. They had infectious rhythm and power and darkness.

BISCHOFF Did you hear a lot of that music when you were down there? Did it strike you as new or different when you were down there?

SUSA Yes. Because I didn't expect that they would be played on little flutes. Cheerfully. It was just as cheerful as you could possibly think. Why were they trying to be so cheerful? Except that the city had this great shadow. But that was just a supposition. I had no proof of it. When I came to Juilliard I was different than when I was at Tech. I had this experience behind me.

BISCHOFF Did it happen between Tech and Juilliard?

SUSA While I was in Mexico I got a telegram saying that I had received a scholarship to Juilliard. So that was lovely. Something to come back to, that I was going to be able to continue my education at this wonderful school. You can say a lot of things about Juilliard, but it is a wonderful school. We had very high powered teachers – composers – who were always pushing. I think I heard William Shuman's *Classic Symphony* fifteen times. So I'm saying now that when I went to Nashville – those experiences had become part of me. I was a different person. And I was writing my music from that standpoint – whatever it was. But I had the great luck to have my string piece that won a prize at Juilliard – it was for three string orchestras – I got to conduct it. You saw the picture there. After the performance some people came back and invited me to their homes, and I was friends with them from then on. That was Greg Colson, and his wife, and Doug Williams. They moved in a very different sort of society than I had ever seen. He was a choir director.

BISCHOFF At which church? A church in Nashville?

SUSA An Episcopal church called All Saints. I forget what the name for All Saints was. I know the Episcopal church that was in the country club was called Our Lady of the Cadillacs. [laugher] But I can't remember what his All Saints was called – it had some funny name. And Greg – in many ways an imperfect musician but was totally devoted to doing all the

music that he did passionately. Even the *B Minor Mass* when they did it – they did a series – they did the *B Minor Mass* one week – it was always something or other. The choir learned all this music, they were quite facile at learning new music. So he asked me to write something for him. I don't remember exactly the first – do you mind if I look in here? [opens journal]

BISCHOFF Of course.

SUSA The first music … did I go back that far, or not? [looking through journal]

BISCHOFF This would have been the early '60s when you were down there?

SUSA The '60s. Let's see. I had written here, the first thing was … *Three Mystical Carols*. They had fancy organ parts because we had this great organist. But they were written to very old texts, because I like old literature – fifteenth, sixteenth century – and had read quite a bit of it. Then he commissioned me to do this piece – *Discovery and Praises*, which – I don't have a copy of it here, but it's the one piece I rewrote every four years because I was trying to do something so big, and incorporated so many composers into it. Mahler, Stravinsky … all show their contribution was not perfectly assimilated. But it showed how I was reaching in myself. They performed that….

BISCHOFF These were pieces not only for choir, but for choir and orchestra?

SUSA Choir and orchestra. Choir and organ. I've not written very much a cappella music; it's very difficult. So I was in Nashville two years. These people were also very drawn to South America. So a lot of the experiences I had had in Mexico were reinforced there by them. I was thinking over the fact that … when I went to Juilliard I didn't know what was going to happen to me. When I left home I didn't know what was going to happen to me. When I went to school I didn't know what was going to … I always had this feeling of being kind of a bobbing cork. That experience in Mexico was somehow my attempt to try to put down roots in myself. And coming to terms with death and dying, and feelings toward it, was reinforced when we went to Europe a short time later. We went to Greece, and in Greece you feel that behind that bush over there some god is sleeping. The place is populated with deities. It's not at all threatening, but also because it's so ancient and you know what everything cost – how many lives. There's also the feeling of death, but the attitude is so different. It has a cleansing quality. So I've just been obsessed with death, I think, all my life. I find a great deal of stimulus from it.

BISCHOFF Artistic, or….?

SUSA Yes. Artistic, yes. As a person – I don't as a person normally sit around talking about death, but in my music, there is somehow always a shadow that moves over the

piece, and I know who that is. While I was in Nashville, one of the people I had known in San Diego, Alice Ram, formed a theater group in New York called The Association of Producing Artists.

BISCHOFF The Association of … Producing Artists?

SUSA Producing Artists. We produced our own shows. We had no producer. I created lots of problems, but at the same time … we weren't owing to anybody. We didn't have to change that sofa because it wasn't funny enough. I actually heard that when I was in Los Angeles. My friend Doug Schmidt, who lives just down here, was directing some show, and he said, "You know, all they have to do is change the sofa because it's not funny enough." Sort of a running theater joke. But today, "Change the sofa! It's not funny enough." I thought, "Oh, yes, that's theater." You learn how to detach yourself from your work. You learn a kind of objectivity. Whereas schools teach you just the opposite – how to attach yourself so you can tap into some deep part of yourself. As part of that same program, when the Ford Foundation set up the regional theater thing – I don't know whether we talked about this or not….

BISCHOFF No, not yesterday.

SUSA Well, the regional theater had lots of people in it we knew from San Diego. So when you went to Minneapolis, or Seattle, or wherever, there was always somebody you had already worked with. And that gave me a very nice feeling about life in general, and working as a composer. You meet an old friend, you have a chit chat, you do your work, you go someplace else … home is your suitcase. And there is a story too … the minute you move to New York you get jobs out of town, but you never work in New York. The only way you can work in New York is to move to another town because you immediately get a phone call saying, "We need you but it's in New York." So I worked at San Diego, and the Mark Taper in LA, Seattle, Portland, various places in New York … it seems to me I'm missing about two or three. But it was a great experiment, and it only lasted I think five years. I was the second generation of composers that went out. I haven't heard what the overall results of it were. But the theater thing, which was the same version of it, resulted in theaters being built in all these towns, and providing permanent places for directors to go. They didn't have to be waiters in Joe's restaurant in New York. You didn't have to give your order of sandwiches to somebody who really should be playing *Hamlet*. They were playing *Hamlet* in regional theaters – brilliant productions. Particularly in Minneapolis I think. I don't know what it is about Minneapolis, but musically it excels there. I came to love even their orchestra in various groups that I could hear. It was just a very – is it the wind that does this to people? [laughter] Is it the fact that there are so many Norwegians there?

BISCHOFF The long, dark winters, where you have to stay inside and sing.

SUSA The long, dark winters, and the white, white food. But I love the way the world works in Minneapolis. The place where I stayed – the man had a very large telescope and was always out looking at the sky. I went out one evening, but the problem with it was we had to lie on the ground and clutch a ladder to stabilize the telescope and straddle it with our legs and look at the stars. But I looked at the Milky Way, which I hadn't really seen since a child. At that time I was working on my opera, and the Milky Way does that turn, and suddenly there was this brilliant white river through the sky. It was just so stunning. There's something different about the closeness of the sky, which I can't explain. Are the clouds lower in Minneapolis? I don't know.

BISCHOFF Was it … when you left New York and began living in these other towns, did your sense of the country – of being an American composer – I know you were writing for schools – did all that help you hone your idea of being an American composer?

SUSA I have to say that being an American composer is not a constant theme in my life, in a sense of something I consciously worked on. I spent a lot of time trying to write the score I needed to write, and it was what it was. I didn't care what I sounded like, in fact I wasn't sure if I had a style at all. I'd written so many kinds of music that when the Minnesota opera commissioned me for *Transformations*, I thought, "Oh my God, what am I going to write?" Because I didn't have any music. I did a thing – a kind of Philip Glass thing – when he was talking about common practice. [Nadia] Boulanger was saying, "Oh you can't do that, it was common practice for Mozart at the time." Philip said, "It was common practice because everybody did it." And I thought to myself – common practice … what are they doing the same, all these songs? My common practice would be whatever comes into my mind. That would be common practice. [laughter] And since I had four months to write the opera, I just wrote – wrote, wrote, wrote, wrote, wrote. This is going to sound … right now it has twenty styles. But in twenty years it won't. The older it gets the more unified the style is. Because people are further away from hearing in it what they know from elsewhere. Because they don't hear that elsewhere anymore. I've come now to see that what you have to do is write quickly without fear. Now you see, the bad thing about Juilliard was they would say, "Mmmm, that sounds too much like Bruchner's *Seventh*," or, "Mmmm, that sounds too much like Copland's *Septet*," or "That sounds too much like Bernstein," … all the reasons that you couldn't do it. So many students would come back all screwed up from working in New York schools. Henry Mollicone called me one day, he said, "Susa, I have to tell you, I just can't continue with that school." He said, "My teacher said – 'Henry, nobody writes triads anymore.'" He said, "It upset me so much I just had to leave. Was I wrong?" I said, "Oh Henry, why did you take that idiot seriously? Of course he's wrong. You just laugh at him." But people talk in that dogmatic way, that was the Juilliard….

BISCHOFF Were you pressured to try to write in an atonal vein?

SUSA No. No, because I wasn't trying to do that. I was so old-fashioned, no one was interested in me. A kind of protective coloring. I wanted my music to be used, not admired. I wanted to provide people with music they would like to sing. They would like to go back to. They'd say, "Let's do that … let's do that again … let's do it next year." I did not crave fame. Money is nice, and when I made money I loved it, but it wasn't my goal. My goal was to write music that people would like to sing. And that first opera was … it started … the parts were all so whimsical and bizarre that the singers couldn't believe they had the freedom to sing that. I said, "Well, if you don't know what to do, you shouldn't be in this opera."

BISCHOFF This is the Anne Sexton libretto and fairy tales?

SUSA Yes. Everybody says, "Did you have her 'ok'?" And I said, "I had more than her 'ok.' I went out and had lunch with her." We kept up a kind of correspondence. There's a big chapter about *Transformations* in her biography by Diane Middlebrook. An extensive chapter, but she had to cut part of it out. I hope I saved that, because there's really a lot about the opera. Anne came out to hear *Transformations* in Minneapolis. She was very moved by it. It dealt with love – of women for women. They don't have very many of those operas around. I wrote the first lesbian love scene in opera. There is a lesbian that loves Lulu, but they have no love scene, not really. I did that. I just think it's kind of goofy that I would. The opera affected me very much. I was convinced that anybody that was that frank in confessional was somehow curing themselves, or being cured, by unloading all this stuff … at least that was the going theory.

BISCHOFF You mean in the frankness of the text?

SUSA Yeah, that … and having written that way with herself coming out of these complications. Well, the phone rings here one day, and it's the Minnesota Opera. They're down here in Kansas City doing a production, and the news is Anne Sexton committed suicide. So they're dedicating the production to her, but the singers are devastated. I talked to Barbara about it, and they got through it alright, but it was more intense than it usually is. It's a very intense work. Then I got a letter saying the Kansas City board is very insulted by the lesbian elements of the thing and they didn't want the Minnesota Opera to ever appear there again. So I was very shortly later at a convention and a woman came up and said, "Hi, I'm…" and I saw her badge, it was Kansas City. I said, "Oh, you'll have to excuse me…." And she said, "Oh no, I know who you are. You see, I'm from Kansas City and you probably heard terrible stories about us." I said, "Well quite frankly…." And she said, "No, I've got to tell you this." She had a niece who had a child receiving psychiatric treatment in a home somewhere for deeply disturbed children. This woman said, "I have tickets for *Transformations*, won't you come and see it?" Oh, God. So the mother and the friend and the child go to the theater. *Transformations* has a lot of scenes of

torture in it. Snow White and…. I thought, "Oh, this is going to be the most horrible story in the world." I was very upset. And she said, "And guess what? She fainted." I said, "Oh … I guess I'm surprised…." And they took her to the hospital. And the woman said, "No, no, no, no, no." She got better. But more than that, the parents underwent a transformation. In which instead of feeling put upon and shit on by God for the situation with their daughter, they became generous and loving. They gave money, and more than anything they loved this little girl. And she responded by becoming better. And I think it resulted in some kind of cure. And the music did that. I thought, "Well, that's why Anne committed suicide. It brings somebody in to cure somebody … her suicide affected the actors so much that they gave a super hot performance that tipped this little girl into a healing…."

BISCHOFF Were you surprised at the response that this opera got? The fact that it became popular, the fact that it created some controversy?

SUSA No, I knew it would. I thought it would get a lot more performances than it does. But all the ones I've seen have had an effect on the people that did it, and perhaps some came. I find it interesting that they started putting Anne Sexton in the bookstores when the opera was going to get done. And I'd always go in and buy up a bunch and give them to people in the company who were new just so they'd know her poetry. But the truth is that instead of Anne Sexton keeping the opera alive, it's the other way around. I wouldn't have expected that.

BISCHOFF That people know about her through the opera.

SUSA A lot of people know about her and then they learn about the opera, but even more – there are many people who want to go see this opera because they're fascinated by it, and discover it's about her. They read her other poetry and don't like it. They read the wrong poetry because there's a lot of unlikeable Anne Sexton poetry. But stories of healing, stories of people freaking out, are not rare. It makes me feel like I have a slight curse there in the work. It has this curse of people overreacting.

BISCHOFF Was this your very first opera commission?

SUSA Yeah.

BISCHOFF How did it come about? How did Minnesota Opera end up getting in touch with you?

SUSA Well, they called and said, could I meet them? They wanted to commission me to do something. This was Philip Brunelle, who wanted me to do some choral music. He knew my choral music, even though there wasn't much of it, there was just the

Christmas Carols – the three carols were out, the *Mystical Carols*. But he brought along his director at the theater – Wesley Balk. When he realized who I was and that he had seen some shows and liked the incidental music he said, "Would you like to work on a project with us?" I said I would. So then I got *Transformations* in the mail a short time later, and I set the first song I was going to do right away. I'm trying to think how that all….

BISCHOFF Did you choose the material, or did they suggest it?

SUSA They suggested it, and the minute I saw it I started writing. I wrote her opening recitative just like that. When I wrote, I wrote very quickly and I was … it tired me out. So I would write for two weeks and take three or four days off, and then keep going like that. So it was all finished between early December and late April.

BISCHOFF And you were living in Minneapolis at the time?

SUSA Yes, that's right, I was. I remember bringing the parts to New York though, to Arnie Arnstein, because I wanted to have them done by hand. I went back to Minneapolis in time for my birthday, on April 26th. They did a performance of the piece for me, the first time I heard it. And I was … they did it so beautifully. The director said, "I bet you like it, don't you?" "Forgive me, but I do." He said, "We have to work on this." I said, "I know, but I don't." [laughter] Actually, the opera was too long and I suggested cutting a scene; they were very surprised. Then there was this big deal … I said, "Look, do it complete the first night, but after that drop the scene."

BISCHOFF Did they follow your advice?

SUSA Yes, that's what we did.

BISCHOFF I'd like to color in a little of what happened before that.

SUSA There was no before that.

BISCHOFF Well, with the Ford Foundation.

SUSA The Ford Foundation was the Nashville trip.

BISCHOFF Beyond that, was it also writing for theater companies around the country?

SUSA That was not anything to do with the Ford. That was all freelance. I had time to do a Ford project in New York with Lincoln Center where we went and established an

education department at Lincoln Center. But Mark Schubart at Juilliard was the head of it, and he transferred over to Lincoln Center. I was one of the people hired to bring music into the New York City schools. My area was Harlem. I worked with them for seven years.

BISCHOFF Were you actually in schools yourself? In classrooms? What did it entail?

SUSA It entailed talking to them about music and getting them interested in music. I said, "Well, you don't have to like it, but … I want you to love it, and I'll play it again." I said, "Listen, you're going to hear some things you didn't hear the first time, and I'm going to ask you some questions." "What kind of questions?" "Well, what kind of drums they're using…." "Oh, shit, that's easy." But at least there was dialogue. I was full of shit, I suppose. But I liked them. I was sorry for their ignorance, which was profound. Profound. Their minds weren't working. They were imagining everything, life was … they could not describe anything. It was … except every now and then, so you know it's not a racial thing, it's a cultural thing. In my heart of hearts I had to wonder what the hell Lincoln Center was doing. What is going to come from this? It's like washing dirty feet and then sending them out to the fields. Our program could have very little impact on them. But it was a try. It was a try to shake up the rigidity of the schools systems. Partly to get the principal thinking differently about the kids. He had been mostly in a kind of disciplinary mode … as long as they're not shooting the place down, or bombing the place, or whatever. I was very struck by how forward the kids are. I'd been getting notes from the girls asking me to meet them in the girl's john. [laughter]

BISCHOFF Did you hear, or have anything to do with the girls' or boys' choirs of Harlem? There's a big choir tradition there.

SUSA Those are managed by the people who got them together. They're very jealous of them, they don't have a lot of elasticity to do anything with them. And that's fine with me. But we did go out to some of the cities in eastern Pennsylvania and that was also like a trip to nowhere. You could have been in Pomerania or something. It seemed so remote from the United States out there. I didn't know Pennsylvania was so behind. And that the country was so without any kind of unity or culture. There was not even their own culture. This was that period … it was before a lot of dramatic things happened socially that makes them different now, I'm sure. But in those days it was a glacial interaction. None. I'm not … I'm so shy myself when it comes to people, that it was torture for me to extend myself to them.

BISCHOFF In a classroom? To lead a classroom?

SUSA Just in general. I had to fight myself a lot. I came to say to myself, "You have a lot of problems." That's where I learned it. When I went back to San Diego I started meditating. That was one of the most profound things I ever did for myself. Jack O'Brien got me

meditating. Jack, who was managing at the Globe Theater, and Greg Nolan was the producer and I had a triple … we were going to meditate together, the three of us. Which was a fine way to start, with these extraordinary men. I had an absolute out-of-body experience where I was swimming along the floor, under myself, I could see myself. I thought, "Well, I'd better get back there." So I turned around, swam through this yellowish water underneath a canoe, and somehow I was back in my body. That was the start … of how I began.

BISCHOFF Have you continued that throughout your life?

SUSA I meditated for the next twenty-five years. Then I ceased meditating when I began working on the opera because there was no time. On *Dangerous Liaisons*. But I felt like if I wanted to I could just stop, and be there instantly. In fact that's how I refresh myself so I can keep going. I think meditation was the most profound thing that ever happened to me. I had already read a great deal about it, but the experience is so simple. And it's so helpful that I wish our people at the school [San Francisco Conservatory] could do it. I wish there was a room in which one could meditate. I think there should be. I asked Mary Ellen [Poole] about that, but there's hardly any room at all, to do anything. But that's because it was planned so badly, there's not enough room to even be a school in there. That meticulous cavity when you walk in the door. It could hold six more rooms, and it's not that beautiful. It's not like saying, "Oh, well they put up this masterpiece instead." I'm sorry. But meditation would help our students in many respects. That's what our students need. They need to get in touch with their deep self. They're always pushing with their mind … pushing with their brain. They're always driving somewhere instead of letting the ideas come in. They say, "I have no notion … I just wrote this really quick." I say, "Well, you just did some of your best work. Go out and do it again. Stay out of the way, if you can."

BISCHOFF Is that something you learned … you started meditating when you were in San Diego. But you had been working at the Globe before that, right? You mentioned the first time you were there was after Mexico. When was it you started working there?

SUSA 1959. Right after Carnegie Tech.

BISCHOFF And before Juilliard.

SUSA Right. And before Juilliard. We had faculty at the school who worked in San Diego. Craig came out and asked them to come out and form a professional company. So Allan Fletcher, Bill Ball, whose picture you saw, and another actor, Ellis Rabb – Allan is dead, Bill is dead – but those were three guiding geniuses at the school. In a kind of brilliant way, it was just wonderful for students to see the older people be that bright and full of hope and promise. They were going to make things, and our lives were going to be funneled into that.

There was an immediate direction opened up in the future. I wish I could do that for our students. The nearest thing that comes to mind is that school in Paris that David Conte has been so good to encourage the students to go to. Some of my students have gone there. Vincent [Peterson] has gone there, and they've gotten a great deal … plus they're in Paris, and there's a lot to say for being in Paris.

The only person who came out from Juilliard was Phil. He came out one summer to do some composing down in Imperial Beach. He rented a little cottage. He called me, saying he was in town. I said, "Oh Philip, why don't you do a show at the Globe?" So he did a show at the Globe, and it was very nice and very good, and I was very happy to give it to him. I loved him, and he was very generous just in general with his time. We've not kept up a correspondence or anything like that. I think that I'm not in his league. I don't know of anybody who is. He's come over for dinner a couple of times, things like that.

BISCHOFF Who else also did you either study with, or did you work with any other composers while you were traveling around, working in theater?

SUSA No, I met many. But I never worked with … everybody was doing something back then. When you're writing *Dangerous Liaisons*, you don't even go out the door. There was one point I remember thinking, "I haven't been to the toilet today, I'd better go and see if anything's happening." I went into the bathroom right there…. Times passes, it's just very demanding. It takes stamina. I was fine, but the cancer really put me under when it was over.

BISCHOFF Was that a very different experience than writing for theater? What was it like to write for theater?

SUSA No, in fact in some ways it's more fun. Because you don't have anybody barking at you, and you can have everything be as long or short as you wish, you don't have timing problems. But of course you have to understand how it works in the opera too, you have to take into account the qualities of the San Francisco house. But they were very generous, I could have any orchestra I wanted. For the first time I wrote an orchestra in threes, and how much easier that is than to write for an orchestra with only two on a part, because you have pure colors all the time, you're not having to work up … I have an oboe missing, but I have three notes in that chord, what will I substitute? You just put in three oboes. Or three flutes, or four flutes.

BISCHOFF This is the Minnesota orchestra … I mean, the San Francisco Opera orchestra?

SUSA San Francisco. They were just superb. And then Frederica [von Stade] was so lovely. There's a little movie of her here, it was on one of the Charles [Kuralt] … we have a copy of it at the school I believe. I'll find that for you tomorrow, some photos from then, when the whole crew was here. Frederica … some people called her Flicka, I did that only a couple of a times I think. I couldn't bring myself to. I did discover something very interesting. She was having quite a time learning the music. And I thought, "Well, now what has she done before, really?" And I looked at her repertoire – she had never learned a new opera. She had listened to everything on records. She had learned how it had been done and how it needs to go and how it was. She has such a beautiful voice and was a brilliant musician, but she was having some problems with it. Where she was having serious problems I tried to eliminate them. I was on her side, I feel if the singer is having trouble it's going to show and no one's going to like it. That shouldn't be the way, it should sound like they're having fun. But I was running late with the orchestrations, and I still had the prologue to do, of all things. Oh no, it was the epilogue. She had sung while the piano was playing, but she had never heard the orchestration. So they arranged for her to sit down in front of the stage before the dress rehearsal. The orchestra would play, and she would rehearse. I came in and there were several people listening to her sing and listening to the orchestra. I thought, "Oh my God, she's…." And another person came in and sat down and said, "Hello, Conrad." "Hello, Renee." She said, "She's not able to sing it, is she?" "No, she'll be just fine. She's listening to the orchestra. She's heard the orchestra only for the first time." "Oh. Well, she's missing a lot of notes." I said, "It's all right, Renee. It's all right." "That piece is in my range." "Yes it is, actually." "You know, I think I could sing that a lot better than she can." I said, "Renee, leave this theater or I'm going to have you thrown out!" Can you imagine?

BISCHOFF So that cast was Renee Fleming, and Thomas Hampson as well?

SUSA Yes, Thomas Hampson. He didn't like it, he didn't like the piece. I think he saw to it that it was never performed in Europe. But it got four or five performances around the country. It wasn't a disaster, or a failure, or anything. It was the kind of opera I think that, you needed to do it again. It just wasn't easy for the audience. I did my best with that, maybe that's not enough, I don't know.

BISCHOFF How did the commission come about?

SUSA I was at a cocktail party and somebody said, "Conrad, did you know they're planning *Dangerous Liaisons* and *A Street Car Named Desire*? You'd better get down and talk to Lotfi." I thought, well, that's good advice. And I knew Lotfi [Mansouri] well enough, we'd been on board a ship in Miami laughing hilariously about something in the waves. So I arranged to see him and he said, "Well, which would you prefer?" I said, "*Dangerous Liaisons*." He said, "Oh! I was sure you would like to do *Streetcar*." I said, "I cannot imagine any American

singer calling 'Stella!'" So he let me have it. He said, "Here's the thing. The cast is …" and then he read off the cast. I said, "We have a lot of mezzos in there!" He said, "Oh, well we're trying to get a third. Don't you like mezzos?" I said, "I love mezzos, but I tell you … you can only really have one if she's the star but you can't have a bunch of them around her because the opera can't go up. It's always going to be stuck at certain level. The problem with a mezzo is she can't hit high C's. The audience doesn't know when the climax comes because the mezzo isn't getting high enough." He said, "Is that true?" Of course it's true. Frederica was reluctant, I was thrilled. I know that Marilyn Horne wanted to be in it too, she wanted to have Flicka's part. I said, "No, Marilyn." You know, they're all pussycats when you're backstage and working on something like that. But they're absolute demons when they work. You have to be ready for anything, quite frankly. They're like my coon cat. [laughter]

BISCHOFF Was that the first time that you wrote an opera that had already been cast? With voices in mind? What was that like?

SUSA Yes. Well, *Transformations* to some extent had already been cast. Because the director had … by the time I got there and started working on it … it was his conception really, not mine. I was enough of a theater man that I went with it. My training in theater was very useful in writing the operas. I knew how to read the text, I knew what happened, if something was a pause or not. I think I could even have had a fifth opera in there if I hadn't got the cancer.

BISCHOFF With opera, you need to write to … if not specific voices, as in this case … specific voice types. Was that a … was there a learning curve for you?

SUSA *Transformations* requires every kind of singer there is. You hope you get better, but I had done what I intended to do. I know … I think the writing has gotten better. I think that just happens. Although I've seen some early things I've done, and it's technically just as good as what I can do now, knowing what I know. And so the question is, when did we acquire all this stuff? I don't know. I think while working.

BISCHOFF You mean, when did you acquire the ability, or the knowledge to do that?

SUSA Yeah, I think you do that while working. And looking at a lot of scores. And listening … you draw upon all of that, so that your imagination is rooted in reality, but the mind is free.

BISCHOFF You talked about going through a Schubert phase, and of course Bloch, and maybe even Mahler. When it comes to opera, did you look to any composers in particular?

SUSA Yes, Handel. Love Handel, in particular his operas which I had gotten to know very early. A friend of mine worked in a publishing company and I bought all the opera scores for pennies. I didn't even know there were all those operas. I have them upstairs, I have almost the complete Handel works. I just like George. I like his spirit, I like his boldness, I like his imagination. He's nice to be around. In addition, he has a way of writing a soprano solo … one group of violins against it. They're not worked out in the counterpoint, they're just shaded throughout. It glamorizes the subject. Whoever singing it is so well bedecked. He has a wonderful way of making people handsome through his music. It's full of glory and grandeur. I think he's just the tops. I like Monteverdi a lot. I like Mozart.

As for Schubert … I hear in his music the inability to write the piece he's trying to write. He's all so fragile, and beautiful, and transformative. When you listen to a Schubert piece … I used to think for a long time, what is it with Schubert and the composers such as Janacek and Smetana and so forth? And lo and behold I discovered that he was Moravian. His parents were Moravians. They came down to Vienna. He is in fact the only composer born in Vienna. It's a technical thing about the way he treats the median. He avoids all those Beethoven – five one, five one – that you find surprising in Handel. But I always feel in those composers the way they're shaping … I feel the effort with them. And Wagner. So I guess I'm drawn to the German school somewhat. I belong to the Wagner Society. I've been to Bayreuth too, and I have this Wagner course coming up too.

BISCHOFF This course that you're teaching.

SUSA This Wagner course, yes. I'm not worried about it, I've investigated Wagner over the years. I find him one of the most touching composers, surrounded by these harpy-like women.

BISCHOFF When you were saying before that your goal was to write music that people would really sing, it sounds like there's a certain populist approach to that. And opera has the opposite reputation. You're writing for marathon athletes who are going to be singing and performing this music. Was that a big stylistic change for you?

SUSA It's a change from what I said earlier about writing music for people because I think I've achieved that in my choral music. Having to write music for Philip Brunelle and those places. They played them on the Garrison Keillor show. And my Christmas music, *Carols and Lullabies*, was the most played Christmas music of its kind. So I think I've achieved that particular goal. But I'm not writing anymore, so it's all moot.

BISCHOFF When you were faced with writing music for opera singers, and things that would be technically more demanding, was it … did you have to use a different sensibility? Different ways that you would express ideas or emotions through music?

SUSA Well you always had to arrange the world with the opera. *Transformations* was a lucky first opera because it enabled me to be here, now, and write music for anybody who would listen. So I was not worried about popularity so much as I was confident that I was in tune with my time. And I let come out what would come out. I did not have to strain after anything, I just felt perfectly at ease with my age, the subject matter. And popularity would follow. Now it does turn out to be popular within a certain small … but it was never meant to be a blockbuster. You can only do that with musicals these days. And you have to be somebody … who's that great lyricist on Broadway?

BISCHOFF Stephen Sondheim?

SUSA Sondheim. But again, that's the New York sensibility.

BISCHOFF You wrote your operas over the span of twenty years. If you say you felt like when you were writing *Transformations* you were of that time, did it feel different when you were writing *The Love of Don Perlimplin*, or *Dangerous Liaisons*?

SUSA The next opera was *Black River*, which was to some extent kicked off by a book about people living in Minnesota (what was the name of that book?) living in Minnesota who had gone through a horrible series of suicides. This brings my concern with death into focus. And I wanted to find a way of facing suicide so it was not reprehensible. So it was maybe even desirable under certain conditions, and I had to bring myself around to what that would be. What would it be like to do that? It just happened to be a period in American history that was full of death. People were failing, there were immense stock market crashes. It was the worst depression the country had ever experienced, between about 1890 and 1910. They chopped all the trees down, it's another one of those stories, they lost the topsoil … what were they going to do then? It was before dairy farming. So we wrote our own libretto, Richard [Street] and I. I would say that that was the most personal work I've done. And if I was of my time – I was of my time, but I was allowing myself to float back to their time in America – I was an American of eighty years ago. It was another experiment in – it was the first deep application of all the things I'd come to think about death. I wrote I think some of my most beautiful music for this work. But it is so big, it takes so many people, that no one can do it.

BISCHOFF Who did you write it for?

SUSA The Minnesota Opera. They did it twice. They let me revise the whole thing, which I did. They were very good to me. We worked on that for two years, as compared to four months for *Transformation*s. Then I revised the whole thing. That took six years. I started … and I think I came up with a work that began … it was talked about in the trade as a great American opera. And people who have seen it all say so. But nobody wants to produce it now … in another hundred years they'll do it.

BISCHOFF How big is the cast?

SUSA Well, it's long, it's three acts. It has about thirty parts. A lot of the chorus parts, that's expensive. But they did that in Minnesota.

BISCHOFF I sang with the Minnesota opera chorus for a few years while I was there. I guess I didn't know … were they particularly known for mounting new works and commissioning new works?

SUSA In their early days they were. The one real disaster they had was *Claudia Legare*. Written by the guy … my brain has gone … he did have one really good opera about the witches in Salem.

BISCHOFF Oh, right, *The Crucible*.

SUSA *The Crucible*, he wrote *The Crucible*. Wonderful man. Nice works, too. I listened, as we were working on *Black River*, to all the American operas there were, because I wanted to do one on Lizzie Borden. I came upon an article in the papers of an exhumation of their bodies. They discovered they were all poisoned that day before they were stabbed, unintentionally poisoned by the lamb soup that had turned on the stove, they hadn't bothered to put it on the ice in the hot weather. And about Lizzie's later life. She came out a screaming lesbian, admitted she had murdered them, and laughed that the jury wouldn't commit her because she was a woman. They refused to believe that she could do such a thing. I could hear us closing to her outgoing laughter, that would be a good finale.

BISCHOFF So that was a subject that you wanted to write an opera about?

SUSA No, but my librettist did. So I thought, well, I'll entertain this. But *Black River* was not a great success.

BISCHOFF Could you remind me, your librettist was Richard …?

SUSA Richard Street.

BISCHOFF Obviously when you wrote *Transformations*, you were working with Anne Sexton's material.

SUSA I did that organization as well.

BISCHOFF So how did you meet Richard, and what was it like to work with a librettist?

SUSA In a bookstore. In San Francisco, people who read books are to be noted. Plus he was gorgeous, so we got to know each other pretty quick. I just asked if he would like to try. So we submitted some of his text. But I had a hand in it, what the text would be. It was a kind of take off on a passion play. When I first came to San Francisco, the first thing I saw at the opera house was a staging of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*. Think of that. It was wonderful. It was absolutely wonderful. That had a big effect on me, and I wanted to create another work, something that moved on several levels. So in our opera, we had dead people singing with the live people. We had dead people who had turned into trees singing about the coming of spring. They looked like trees but they weren't – but they were. They looked like people but they were trees. Nature had a big hand in it. And the river … it made a difference whether you were going upstream or downstream. Upstream was to fight and care and struggle, and going downstream was to float to the great grey sea. And so when Clara dies at the end she allows herself to go downstream into the river and the voices rise and the sun comes up and color starts to come into the opera, which until then had been in liturgical black and white or purple with a dot of red or something. The summer night was all in white suits, it made a big difference. But then, color somehow began to flow into the work as the curtain was coming down. It was spring. Her death enabled spring to happen. That made a lot of sense to me on a mythological level, fertility goddesses and all that stuff.

I was very interested in Joseph Campbell through that period because of *Transformations*, about how many parts somebody was, the mystical under-painting of *Black River* is I think very passé these days. I think that would just go over like cold mashed potatoes. But maybe things will be different someday. As for *Dangerous Liaisons*, I think it's an expensive opera to produce, although less so than … because it has fewer singers, and I did a reduced orchestration. In between the operas, *Black River* I had a hard time writing it - I worked on it for six years. It's a long time. Then you finish it, and then we did *Don Perlimplin*, which was a commission from the opera … they have that department, what's it called? The spring opera, I guess. It was done together with Pepsicola Summer Fair. The University of New York.

BISCHOFF But also with the Conservatory Opera Department?

SUSA No, not the Conservatory. The opera.

BISCHOFF Oh, right, their spring season.

SUSA Ruth Ann Swenson was the lead. It was a glorious production, marred by one interesting event … it was curtain time and the soprano had not received her check. Her payment. And she says, "He guaranteed me that I would get my check before I went on stage, I demanded it and it's not here. I'm not going on until I get it." They could not find the producer; they could not find the man who knew where the checks were. I do not know how they got it to her, but an hour later Ruth Swenson agreed to go on. She had delayed the performance for an hour. I thought, "That's power." I thought it was also very rude. I mean, it's her problem, why did she make it everybody else's? But why did Brooks Jones, who knew very well that he was dealing with an opera – that you don't fool around with things like that? You make an agreement and you honor it. I think actually Brooks wrote her a check, because he was a fairly rich man. He just wrote a check for her.

BISCHOFF To move things along…. I'd like to find out more details about that opera, and still maybe more we could talk about your writing for theater, because I know that was all the pictures that you showed me, and a very rich, interesting part of your life. But why don't we start with that tomorrow?

SUSA Okay.

BISCHOFF Is there anything else that you're thinking of right now about any of these operas that you want to mention before we break?

SUSA No, when I think back on all these works, and how hard we worked, and the intensity and concentration … and the amount of research, now I feel quite drained, in many ways, here I am, hopelessly old, and yet I don't know how I did it. I really don't. Part of me is very tough. So it was only after that that I began teaching and I had this mistaken notion that in teaching – because it worked that way in high school – that you taught because you had something to give of your life to your students. I don't like this idea, when I hear our students applying, and I say, "What do you want to do?" "Oh, I'm going to teach." "What are you going to teach? All you know is what you've been taught in this place. What? You're going to teach that?" They don't know anything about life. They don't know what art really is. They have all their notes, and that's not teaching. Not teaching in composition, anyway. Teaching in composition means awakening … teaching them how to open the creative sap and trusting it. That's why they should be starting meditation. They need to see what they are, that these ideas come into. They don't know themselves. All they know is whether they're happy or unhappy, or poor or poorer. But they don't know how they've been viewed by Aristotle. They need to float

along with those other great minds. They need to discover and become friends with Leonardo. They think that they're what they see when they look in the mirror. They don't know they're not really looking. Cocteau said that mirrors are the gates to eternity. Did you see that wonderful movie of Orpheé walking through the mirrors? You have to walk through the mirror. You have to have transformative experiences. You can't come out of the safety of what you know, you have to encounter what you don't know and it will teach you something. Knowledge begins somewhere, there should be some fear attached to it. In my opinion, they don't know fear. And so they have no shadow. It's not their fault, but it is. No one's stopping them.

BISCHOFF I know that will be another interesting area. I know we've talked about your piano performing, not so much about conducting – your composition and the teaching is the other part of it too. So we'll find out how you frighten your students. [laughter]

SUSA Well, I frighten them … I can tell you right now … I say, "I want to be really clear, but I do not give grades. You do. I'm here to record it. But you made that grade, not me. I'm just your messenger. So if you tell me a good grade, I'll put it down. And the way you tell me that is by good work." That scares them. Perfect, perfect. They should be a little scared. Take a shower every now and then.

SUSA The Julia Child book came out. And I bought it, and that was a revelation of course, her chatty tone and her friendliness – you just fell in love with her and her book. I was determined to cook as much of it as I could. I suddenly had money in a regular flow for the first time in my life. I invited, once or twice a week, somebody over that I was meeting in Nashville and cooked dinner. I cooked myself through almost the whole book. There were too many things I didn't do – some of the aspects I didn't do, they were lots of trouble. I didn't do a lot of the pastries, I didn't do molded things. But the cookery I did, and it was because it's so scientifically laid out. You acquire a technique in cookery. Have you done that yourself?

BISCHOFF A little bit, not that methodically, but a little bit.

SUSA She's a very instructive teacher, and lots of fun to read. When those movies came out, I just loved them. She was the aunt of my publisher at the time. And I wanted to meet her, and he said, "Oh you'll have to meet Julia Child." But I never did, it never worked out that way. The closest I came was when I made an Apple Charlotte that she had cooked on her television series at the time. And I'd cooked it once before on my own, and it was very successful. I had some friends over and I was going to make it again. I had it ready in the kitchen and she unmolded her Apple Charlotte and it slowly collapsed … [in Julia's voice] "Well! This doesn't always work!" [laughter] And I unmolded mine, and it slid also. But it tasted good, and that was…. I was very interested in the cooking of the Shakespeare plays.

BISCHOFF The ones written into the plays? The feasts?

SUSA Not quite. There are no recipes in the plays. They mention things like sack and all that stuff. But I devised this system where I could put together a menu based on lines or phrases from the play. The king says, "Who is this?" Well, duck with French nods – bowing the French banner. So one of the dishes was duck with French nods. Whatever French nods were. [laughter] And so on … it was pretty hilarious … I thought. It was lots of fun.

BISCHOFF Did you entertain a lot? It sounds like you moved around various times.

SUSA When you move around … in San Diego I generally had roommates so we could afford a place. The actors had very strict schedules. I only had to work when I worked on a play. But quite frankly, when I was in San Diego I wanted to eat Mexican food, which I learned to like after my Mexican experience. So I didn't do a vast amount of cooking down there. But there were a couple of winters I lived there too, when I worked on things at the Globe that required being there in the winters – such as helping them put together a production of the *Three Penny Opera*. There were a couple of other things. After the Globe burned down it reopened

with a production of *As You Like It*. That was in January, so I was down there during the Christmas holiday. It was lovely. I began living at Craig's house down there, on Jackdaw Street. He had a little pool-house that I converted into my apartment. They kept that for me year-round, anytime I wanted to and so I referred to it as mine, and my house in San Diego. But actually it was Craig's. And then when he died at the age of 94, his partner happened to go bankrupt in his antique business because of the recession. He moved a lot of his antiques in there and it was not available to me anymore. But I couldn't go down anyway because of my cancer at the time. So I haven't lived in San Diego since ten or fifteen years.

BISCHOFF You said your first visit to San Diego was after your trip to Mexico, when you were still at Carnegie Tech. What was the length of time that you worked for the Globe Theater?

SUSA Well from 1956 to … [looking in journal] … I've got the dates here somewhere … around 1991 or so.

BISCHOFF What was the rhythm of your work? What would you do?

SUSA Well, the shows always went into rehearsal in June. They all opened by the end of July – three plays. Then the rest of the summer was just free summer – there were no rehearsals for me. They were just starting their fall season, but I never had a part of that – or rarely. A show went up, it rehearsed for four weeks. At the end of the fourth week it went into production. I had about four days to write the music, from the time the final timings were taken. I could work on getting it ready that whole previous time. In fact if there were songs in the play they had to be written from day one, when the actors appeared. That meant there were prior meetings with the director, and some of the directors I had a very easy working relationship with. I knew how to do it … I gradually learned how to write for the actors. I had a phone call here once, a familiar voice said, "Hi Conrad, I'm going to be in your *Twelfth Night*." I thought, "Who's this?" She was a little put out, she said, "Don't you recognize me? It's Marsha Mason." The actress. Well, I didn't. She was playing the lead and was going to sing one of the songs, which was sometimes given to a clown to sing. My heart sank because she had only one note in her voice. A low G. I found an Elizabethan piece called *My Lady Carey's Dompe*, that is with a G drone (major, minor, major) with a little melody above it. So she sang that, all on the note G. It worked just fine, she brought it off. Sometimes you get very good singers – and I warn them! I say, "If you're going to do *Tempest* you have to have an Ariel who can sing. It has five songs, for God's sake. You can't hire an actor just because he has good legs. One of the most interesting actors we had, who turned out to be an excellent singer was Jon Voight. He was in *Tempest*. He gave the spookiest Ariel I ever heard. He had a wonderful falsetto, and also a very good singing voice. I wrote some of my best songs for Jon. I had also known him in New York, we worked together on something, I can't remember what it was. I had knowledge of his personality when

we moved down there. So that was set out at the beginning of a rehearsal period, and I would go in and watch the actors working for a week or two, and then I got into serious work preparing my score. That was done, the weekend went by, recorded. Monday, which was their day off, the sound man always put the score together. Taping, re-taping. Getting the cues going. We had a number of machines going, so that we had great flexibility moving from cue to cue. We could blend and have a seamless show.

BISCHOFF What would the performing ensemble be? Who were you scoring this for?

SUSA It varied depending on the budget. Usually the first show was the director of the festival's show. It was the splashiest show; they always started with a zing. Or the last one was like that. So I saved enough money to have most of my ensemble play in that show. The other shows were orchestrated less. The histories were generally the middle show, and required less music. If they had a ghost scene or a dream scene or something like that I would do it with keyboards. I'd do all that myself, and then we just overlaid the music, and I could keep the budget small. I had only certain amounts of money to spend, and I could tell by the costumes where the expensive show was going to be, quite frankly. Or they knew a show was going to be expensive. The first one to open the Globe when it reopened, *As You Like It*, was bound to be a comic extravaganza, with lots of clothes and mustaches and shining swords and all that. And that all costs a lot of money. We never had actors that were … well, we had very first rate actors but we never had movie stars. Some of them became movie stars later. Victor Buono did … oh, he had a tragically early death. Tony Zerbe, Bill … that evil man. He always played evil parts, but he was a nice man. It was nice because we had the Hollywood people come down to see the shows. That's where I met Andre Previn and his wife. Roddy MacDowell and Eartha Kitt, their crowd. They entertained us when we came up to Hollywood to open one of the theaters there. The Globe was a thing of itself, and that was one strand of my theater composing. The other theaters around the country happened because some of the directors had either worked at the Globe or knew me for having worked at the Globe. I got jobs outside – like the regional theater. There was a third strand which was this company called The Association of Producing Artists, APA. That was founded by Ellis Rabb, he was a Carnegie Tech student. He formed a company where the actors were their own producers. We opened in Bermuda. This was when I was still at Juilliard. I went down there the last month of school, and opened with composing music for Chekhov and Andreyev and Shakespeare, because they knew me from Carnegie Tech, you see. Just as Craig did, then they began working at the Globe. So sometimes APA would be at the Globe, or I'd be working in APA which would be Globe people but producing on their own and traveling elsewhere. APA did about five shows a year, someplace.

Later we went to Broadway, and those were my most spectacular years, where we did first rate productions on Broadway. Coming backstage to visit people were Sir Laurence Olivier, and Basil Rathbone, and I met all of them back there. Also coming from Carnegie Tech was an actor

named William Ball, who had worked at the Globe Theater and had done a spectacular *Hamlet*. He formed his own company called ACT. That was formed in Pittsburgh, and then it moved to San Francisco. After he got here … he and I had had a falling out. I was just very uppity. He had opened a show – a couple of shows – in Pittsburgh. I got a letter from him, I thought he was going to invite me out to do a show. No, he hired Lee Hoiby from New York, and what he wanted from me was to tell him the record that the curtain call was from – I had to use an Elizabethan curtain call. I basically said, "Go fuck yourself." If you're calling an old friend to help another composer – well, let him do the work that I did. Let him find it himself. So I didn't have to be that way, really, but I was. Bill is a frightening individual, and how I stood up to him I don't fully understand. But he was very fond of me, and we actually had a very good relationship, so when he came here we did a number of shows for him down there at ACT. He was the one that I mentioned, later on, he became so spooky. He gave up his company – turned it over to somebody else – to Ann [Brebner]. And began acting. He was in La Jolla, acting at the theater there, and I threw a party for him at Craig's. And Lynn Redgrave and some other people came with him, and then a couple of days later he committed suicide. I took a lot of pictures of him at the party, a thing I rarely do. And I never found those films … I put them somewhere. It's really too bad because they were the last films of him. And some pictures of me and Lynn, and that would have been kind of nice to have.

The other strand also connected with the Globe Theater was through its director Alan Fletcher, who brought me to Stratford to do plays for the summer season. That was the festival that was already established before the regional festivals. It was there quite a few years. I was music director of that festival. It was scheduled in such a way that I could do my San Diego work and then go to Stratford. Go to Stratford, and then take a couple of weeks off and go to San Diego, and live in Connecticut. I loved Stratford, and I had a lot of very good players from Bridgeport and other places. We had, because of the nature of Stratford being next to Greenwich, there were a lot of famous people who lived down there. I was in the theater one day and I looked down and there was a cute little old lady in a babushka and sunglasses and a fur coat … that was Bette Davis. She had wandered over to the theater to see how rehearsals were going on. There were other actors like that who came. I can't remember them all. The actors at Stratford were a different group; they were the New York people. They did a lot of Shakespeare in the Park with the man who did … Shakespeare in the Park … whose name also went out of my mind just now. All these things are connected at the root by San Diego. And yet their schedules were free from one another. I was able to work them all. The mood … the working pattern in each of those series was quite different depending … there was the regional theater, which mostly came out of my friends in New York, some of whom had been at the Globe, some of whom hadn't. But I was known in the trade, so they said, "Oh Conrad can do it." Or, "He already did one of those scores." I kept studying a great deal about Shakespeare and his time, and English literature, English history, English food. I just came to love England. It's mood … when the queen … I don't know if I mentioned this story, but the Handel, Haydn Society in this country

commissioned me to do an *Ode to Reconciliation* when the queen came in the bicentennial year. Did I mention this story?

BISCHOFF I'm not sure if you mentioned this specific one, no.

SUSA Well, she was going to come here and unveil this plaque at Bunker Hill. I was going to write music, an *Ode to Reconciliation*, which I did. It was sung by the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston. What I found out later was it was accompanied by four overhead helicopters, which just totally wiped out the sound and the singing. But the queen came to the Globe in the early '80s to unveil this bust of Shakespeare after our fire. The theater had been rebuilt, and it was a new wall-sized plaque in the lobby of Shakespeare. She came to unveil it and I got myself to be presented to her, so I was. Senator Wilson had told her that I had written music for her before – this was the second time. The queen turns to me and – she had been listening, and staring at me, and I found myself mesmerized by her. She wanted to know where the other time was that I'd written music for her. I said, "Well, it was in your majesty's former colony of Massachusetts." [laughter] She went blank, didn't know what I was talking about, of course! Why didn't I know that she had no sense of humor, or she's only spoken to more simply than that. I said, "It was in Boston, Ma'am." She said, "Boston!" Then moved on to talk to the other members of the group. I heard that she had liked the music and they spoke some sonnets by an actor that she recognized from M.A.S.H., and she said, "Oh yes, we watch M.A.S.H.!" I got this image of her with a little gin glass in her hand, and her little booties in her purse next to the chair. She later thanked the Globe in a letter, had her secretary write a letter expressing her thanks and her appreciation. And the music written by Mr. Susa – an old acquaintance. I thought that was very funny. I wanted to have a t-shirt made with the queen's picture in the middle and Bette Davis on one side and me on the other. Bette Davis was in an old movie called *Old Acquaintance*. On the bottom of it would be "An old acquaintance."

BISCHOFF Let me ask you … with your work … over such a chunk of your career in the theater … do you feel that's where you developed a compositional style?

SUSA I developed many styles. That was the problem, I didn't know if there was a Conrad Susa in there because there had been so many of them. When I came to do *Transformations* in 1972 I had already written twenty or twenty-five scores. But I needed them all, because *Transformations* was a work that embodies and required so many styles. I didn't know whether there was a Conrad Susa musically speaking or not. I thought, "Well, the only way to find out is to write what the work needs, and if there's a Conrad Susa it will eventually sound like that because it's written so quickly that that is the way I'm speaking, with all those tongues and styles. I also had the idea that the older the work would be the more it would sound like itself, as a result. Right now it would sound a bit eclectic, but later on there's nothing that's as eclectic as that and therefore it's that. Philip Glass and I talked about this, and about common

practice. He had a similar episode with Madame … who's the lady in France that he studied with?

BISCHOFF Did he study with Boulanger?

SUSA Boulanger! Madame Boulanger, yes. Where she was talking about common practice, and said he couldn't do something because it was Mozart's common practice. He said, "Well, if it's Mozart's common practice, it can also be mine." And she said, "Well it can't be common practice for you because history has passed." And he said, "But history is now. I'm making history too." So he sort of prevailed against her, although she didn't like the idea of being that contemporary. She wanted to be more of the future, like everybody else did in those days. The only way you can be of the future is to be of the present. There were so many composers who were writing for the future. Schoenberg was writing for the future … and many of my contemporaries were saying, "Someday people will like it." Well, they've got to like it now, quite frankly. You've got to have a present or you have no future. You have a kind of past by being in the history of the books. But that's only a record of your existence, that's not exactly … you haven't bequeathed anything. What do you have to bequeath? If I'd just left one egg called *Transformations*, that's enough for me. That's still more than most people. But I did other operas too, and a lot of choral music, which is of quality. I saw that I could do some good in choral music as well. That was something I always liked.

BISCHOFF When you wrote *Transformations* – correct me if I'm wrong – was that 1972 when it was performed for the first time?

SUSA It was performed in spring of '73.

BISCHOFF That was also around the same time that you moved to San Francisco?

SUSA I moved to San Francisco to do *Transformations*. In New York we had a very small apartment, Nikos and I. We had very different schedules. I realized that I needed round the clock work, that it would be impossible for me to do the opera in New York and so I came out here and got an apartment up on Corbett Street. It was a wonderful five room apartment. I had a desk in one room and a fireplace overlooking the city. It had this great view. Another room was a bedroom. I had a Christmas tree in every room. They all eventually lost their needles, but I let them just fall to the carpet. It was a beautiful sight, those needles under the trees. I just devoted myself to very heavy work, and after I'd finished a scene I would take three or four days off, and then I'd begin the next scene. After I finished the first half of the show the Minnesota opera people, for whom I was writing the work, came out to perform in spring opera. They were in Dominick Argento's *Postcard from Morocco*. I had worked with this company – on my way out here I had stopped there to work with them on *Transformations*. We were

improvising in workshop how to do this, how to do that. But I'd never actually heard them sing, I'd only seen them work, and they were fascinating. Suddenly they had these glorious voices, and I looked at my score, and I thought, "Well Susa, for God's sake, you didn't give them anything to sing! All you have them doing is talking all the time." So the second half of the opera begins to take off, and it's probably fortunate it was built that way, because it saved the piece. It is fascinating when you first hear it, but you think, "Where's this going?" And the second half is the slow lift to the end. It's impressive in itself, I must say. I could tell that's what I was doing. It contained a lesbian love scene. Now there is an earlier lesbian scene done by Berg for *Lulu*, but there's no lesbian love scene where they actually make love on stage. That was mine, that historically is my contribution.

Anne Sexton came out to see it, and we were talking in my hotel room about it. She said, "What have you done with Rapunzel?" I said, "Why, it's you and your aunt in the library, just as you have in the book." She said, "Oh, I knew I shouldn't have done that!" [laughter] She was very worried. During the performance, when they were singing, she had a seat behind me. She was holding onto my shoulder, and her fingernails were going into my bones. She was so tense and so excited. She was wonderful. She jumped up and called me a genius and gave me a big wet kiss right there in front of everybody. That was a major experience, and that drew together all of my theater styles up until then. They were all pulled together into a new kind of blend. I never did anything quite like that. I did blends of other things in other works, and I realized that if I visited the United States historically I could put together a blend of Americana the same way, and so during the bicentennial I was commissioned to do *Black River* and we did an opera about the depression in Wisconsin with a resurrection where the people rose from this misery. It's quite a fascinating story, I think. But my work on that was not as entertaining as *Transformations* and I decided to write the opera all over again. The first time I wrote it, it took five months. When I rewrote it, it took four years. So I was doing much more careful work, and it was also teaching me how to compose. Because what I needed – what the opera needed – I had to learn how to do.

The earlier operas were … they got what I knew. But *Black River* changed me into a Wagnerian composer, as it turned out. Because I became aware of Wagner, for the simple reason that in *Black River* there was a river and in Wagner there's the Rhine. I followed certain mythological elements in my opera based on his. I became for the first time to like Wagner, because he had solved a lot of the problems I was dealing with. In my opera, however, there are people who die that are in the scene. The dead boyfriend has a duet with his girl, and he tells the audience, "I was so in love with her." And she keeps talking about how inadequate he was, I suppose, but he doesn't hear that because he was left feeling this ideal kind of love. And so that was something, I think. You don't see that in theater. There was a careful color control; black and white had liturgical value. In spring it was green, in Lent it was purple. In the end it was all in white. And then in Technicolor, flooding the stage just as the curtain was coming down. It's a tremendous work in my opinion, and it got some good productions. But it's a big piece and also it's a vision

of America that's not current at the moment. In fact, as an American composer I'm becoming aware that America is changing in a direction that I haven't been following carefully enough. When I do look at it more carefully, I discover it's entered something that's very depressing to me. I discovered something dark and dangerous about America that doesn't make me like it any less for knowing that but I've stopped idealizing it. I'm currently in this mood – if somebody would say write a patriotic work I don't think I could do it. I just don't see America that way anymore. However, I've expanded my view of literature in general, particularly with love of [Federico Garcia] Lorca, who I feel very close to, and to his particular problems. Even though he didn't like the United States, I've come to love … I've always loved Cuba, and he loved Cuba. So I feel very close to him in that end.

When I was going to do *Don Perlimplin*, there were many things about it I didn't understand. My friend Jean Pierre Marty said, "Oh, we have a teacher out here in Berkeley, Joaquin Nin-Culmell, who studied with [Manuel] de Falla, who knew Lorca. Why don't you meet?" So he brought us together, and he told me – oh, wonderful! A story about de Falla where [Federico Garcia] Lorca called him and Salvador Dali in for lunch and said, "I've written a new play and I want you guys to write the music and design the scenery, and we'll take it on a bus and truck tour." I thought that was interesting. *Don Perlimplin* is a poem and it's written like a Valentine. It's basically about a widower who meets the girl next door, falls in love with her, but she couldn't care less, and kills himself trying to attract her attention. She finally notices, and in the course of the opera she gets to know him, and so she suddenly, when he's dead, loves him – but of course it's too late. Through this love for him, even though he has died, she is redeemed by his blood. His own personal life, in which he sacrifices his love gift for her, and it changes her from being this kind of common slut to being a real Spanish widow, closes the blinds and puts on her black mantilla, assumes the running of the estate and becomes a real woman. I loved that story, it was quite wonderful. It opens with a dialogue between Don Perlimplin and his housekeeper. She says, "Si!" and he says, "No!" and she says "Si!" "No" "Si!" "No!" … it's back and forth. After the fourth one – there are six of them – Salvador Dali slammed his cane on the table and said, "This is a pile of shit!" And leaves the lunch. He's not going to read the score; he's not going to do the set. Lorca was so upset that he said, "I guess the production's off," because they wanted to have Salvador Dali, and de Falla says, "Good, I have something to do anyway." So Lorca wrote some songs in there, but they're not terribly good. He's a haunting personality. I went to meet Joaquin, who told me this story, and he told me a story about working with de Falla. He used to appear with his music on a Saturday morning, and he rang the doorbell and the housekeeper answered, she says, "The maestro is in the kitchen this morning, go around back." So he goes back there, and the sight he sees is that de Falla is on his hands and knees with a slipper in his hand swatting … those bugs are so … he sang to them, "I know that you were made by God and are my brother and have a right upon this earth, but this is ridiculous!" Swat! "I know that you are a son of God and have as much a right to be on this earth as I do!" Swat! One after another. He begged their forgiveness, and then killed them. [laughter] So he said, "That was my teacher." Lorca, as you

know, was assassinated. For various reasons – the family was under suspicion of being communists. But they weren't communists in a way that is hard for us to understand. They were more philosophically inclined than in any way involved in Russia in any kind to be a threat to Franco. But he designed his rise to power so it would be done on the backs of generals. They had local grudges and he would let them satisfy that if they gave him allegiance. So that's how his rise to power was orchestrated. So in that the general killed Lorca without having any idea he was a world famous poet, who had already been to the United States, and to Cuba, and had attracted attention. And so Hitler said … that's one of the reasons there weren't more murders under Hitler, because the assassination of Lorca was such a scandal. Franco's reputation never recovered from it. Not that anybody cared about Franco, but they did care a lot about Lorca. Even Hitler had the sense to know this was a great poet. We can't do that – if we're going to kill people, we can't kill them when they're that important. We have to deport them someplace. Move them out – send them to the United States, let them be trouble over there.

BISCHOFF You mentioned you felt an affinity to Lorca, and I'm wondering of your operas – did any of the subjects resonate more with you personally, than the others?

SUSA Well I did set that one, that I'm just talking about – *The Love of Don Perimplin and Belisa in the Garden*. Because it was short, all of the themes of all his operas resonate very strongly with me, but they're not all suitable as opera. They make very good movies, they're wonderful plays. They don't need me … but some of the smaller pieces – like that one – which is a longish poem, are manageable. It's been done a couple of times, it's always very successful. I think I did my most meticulous work trying to perfect a style apart from my theater work that was of the theater without actually sounding like anything I'd ever done before.

BISCHOFF With this particular opera? *Don Perlimplin*?

SUSA Yes, I worked very hard on that. Again, there was this hiatus in which I wrote a lot of choral music. And then the commission for *Dangerous Liaisons*.

BISCHOFF You mentioned you came to San Francisco to write *Transformations*, which you said you wrote in a short period of time. But you said you decided to stay?

SUSA I liked the city, which is a magnificent city filled with beautiful people who love the city. Where there is a consciousness of where they are, and how they're living that's impressive – this was all before the AIDS disaster – who were living the right kind of wildness, as far as I was concerned. It was just a side of me that I needed to see how far I could go. I changed myself quite a bit, quite deliberately, and got to know people then that simply aren't around anymore … all of my friends are dead. All. There's no one alive that I knew from those days. Except my friend Ronald Chase, who's that painter right there. I dug up an old friend

who had been hiding – Harriet was a friend of mine from Carnegie Tech. But she did not participate in the drug nonsense of the '70s that I did. I stayed here because I felt totally free and open. Like I had found myself. I guess my life had been a kind of free fall up until then. And suddenly I landed very safely on a soft bush of some sort. Met wonderful, wonderful people, and went around seeing a lot of – there was a lot of art in those days too. Happenings were taking place. A part of it had already started when I was in New York, that's when I got to meet Andy Warhol and that whole group. Susan Sontag, Peter Hujar. I immediately found myself always in the new group, I don't know how that happened. I just automatically gravitated towards those people. When I was told who they were I was astounded – I didn't know who Andy Warhol was! Peter Hujar, the photographer, said that I must be the only person in all of New York who didn't know who that was. I didn't. Andy never said that much, and certainly not to me. He was quiet in a way that was … they were all manipulative that way about what you were going to think about them. They wanted you to think, "Why does he want me to think about him?" You know? It couldn't be just a simple interaction. So I left New York to compose *Transformations*, but the change was already beginning in me, and *Transformations* was a product of it. Susa becoming somebody else. It continued, these percolations in my soul, for the next ten years or so.

BISCHOFF You showed us pictures yesterday, and you mentioned before, being in New York with … Nikos? Would you like to say … in general, I'm interested about people who have been important to you, and maybe inspiring to you. Would you care to say how you met him, or he came out here with you?

SUSA Nikos was the stage manager at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. He always drove up his car, he was living in New York, so I always had a ride. We got to know each other, and he eventually moved in, and he stayed eleven years. When I came out here, I came out here alone because he was very busy and our schedules were colliding and I felt we needed a house to be in. And so he came out and changed his life and brought it out here. We immediately broke up, and he bought the house next door. I was changing in a manner that didn't please him. I wasn't the person that he had first met. So I eventually met Richard Street, with whom I edited *Don Perlimplin* and *Transformations*. He wrote the libretto for *Black River*. He was a literature person, he loved books. We would read Jane Austen to each other, can you imagine? On a Saturday night in San Francisco – just to show that we didn't need all that nonsense. He was lots of fun, we're still very good friends. We survived those years.

Nikos was a very powerful person. I had wanted to go to Greece, and I went to Greece when I first met him, but I didn't know him well enough to say, "You want to go to Greece?" We hadn't talked about that. But I brought him a little cup of Greek earth, and said, "This is either for you or for your grandmother." He gave it to his grandmother, buried it with her. I liked the fact that he was a sort of orphan, abandoned by his mother, his father died. It made me very protective of him. I protected him from a lot. But he was truly delightful. I called him the goat, because he was

always leaping and singing. He had a goat-like way, if you know what I mean. Everybody liked him, he was able to get us to meet all of the Hollywood people, because they all wanted to meet him. I never had that attractive power, so I met them because of him really. But not people that were already coming to San Diego, such as Christopher Isherwood, who used to come on many Saturday afternoons to sit in our living room and chat about God knows what. I was trying Isherwood in those days, and didn't connect with it too well. Although Colin Firth did it … that movie he did recently … *A Single Man*. He had that nice kind of quietness that Isherwood had. The whole British colony was floating around San Diego. All these refugees, really, they were kind of at the very tail end of the influx from England occasioned by the first World War. I didn't realize how much of a historical flux this was. Ann Guthrie and all those people were really people who came here because England just really didn't have room for them. They didn't want to be with England, they had lost an entire generation. All their friends were dead. All my friends are dead. It makes life very heavy in the present.

BISCHOFF When you talk about composing, you mention working sixteen-hour days over the course of years. Some days when you don't even get up, or go out. In talking about your work in the theater, it's populated by people. All different people are coming through. Is that the right impression that I'm getting – that they were very different experiences – writing for opera versus the other work you did?

SUSA Oh, yes. Usually they're very narrow. They have very little culture. They have a lot of experience, but very little culture. A lot happens to them that's interesting, but none of it is a very cultured kind. They play some gorgeous performance of a true Schubert trio or whatever, and it makes history. But to me, they don't know anything about Schubert and they never discuss him. Or they never really check up on it, it's not even formed. It's not like what the Brits do. Look how well Handel has been restored. They bring him out – the latest exciting operas that are absolutely sold out the minute they are announced – they're by Handel! They're not the works of Schoenberg. They're not even Shostakovich. Those should be done too, because they're wonderful. We don't see enough of it here, except fortunately at the school. We're lucky to have that department now, I think that has broadened the tastes of the school somewhat.

BISCHOFF The Historical Performance Program?

SUSA Yeah, the school had been for my taste much too rooted in classical harmony, and that's what resulted in the strange way in which subjects were being taught, as if that was the high point of music. Those thirty years. I think that the history of Mexico is a better example for us, where the sleeping man in the sombrero used the Spanish conquest, and the Napoleonic invasion as just little bumps on a long, long log. They're not main events at all – we have these short bursts of things we call the future that overdo everything. And it mostly comes from journalistic pressure of the New York Times.

BISCHOFF How so?

SUSA Read their headlines on any Sunday, and you'll laugh if you read what they think they're giving you. And yet people believe that, because that's publicity … "I've made it to the New York Times!" Oh yes, but like with Ned Rorem's diaries it takes much more skill to remove that doubt and still do good. I told David Conte our friend Jean Pierre Marty, who introduced me to Joaquin Nin-Culmell, said to me – he was complaining about Ned's diaries. In Ned [Rorem's] diary they were good friends – he said, "Everything he says is lies, lies, lies, and the article was so short!" Lies, lies, lies, and it was short. [laughter]

BISCHOFF So, how about talking a bit about the Conservatory? How did you begin working there?

[Brief break] So you began in 1988, is that when you joined the faculty?

SUSA I did. Let me check something here. [looking in journal] Elly had come down to San Diego. *Coriolanus … Love's Labour's Lost …* I was working on those two shows in San Diego when Elly came down to my dressing room where I was working and introduced herself. Talked about the Conservatory, saying that she was planning to go on a sabbatical, and could I take over for a semester? David Conte had heard that she was going to do this, and had warned me that she would be coming down. I already knew David. I thought back to my first encounter with the Conservatory, which is when I moved here. They had a wonderful Saturday afternoon marathon on the radio. All these kids playing the piano all day long and other instruments. I was working on – I don't know what – so I was at my desk and just listening to this endless stream of music, all from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. That passed, then some years later there was the *Sing Along Messiah*. We were listening to it, and I discovered that they were listening to it across the street and had their window open, so I turned on my volume and opened up my windows, and the neighbors turned up [their volume] and opened their windows, so the street was full of *Messiah* and we were all singing. It was glorious, I had never come into a town where the populous was singing Handel's *Messiah*. I thought, "How great, that a stupendous masterpiece of that kind would also prove to be that popular."

Somewhere around that time I got a phone call – actually, I had already met Milton Salkind, five years before that business that I just mentioned. It was some early year, it may have been when I came out in '72. They heard I was in town, and took me to the Bohemian Club for lunch. We were talking about the Conservatory, but I couldn't be associated with it because I was working on *Transformations*. So it just all fell through, no negotiations took place. Years later then Elly comes and says, could I come up and take a semester? And I did. I didn't really have any particular thing I could teach, not being a teacher ever of that kind – not since we had done it at

Lincoln Center, which was a very different thing. I agreed that I would give a course in Shakespeare and opera, and music in Shakespeare … something that was rooted in what I was doing now. That was quite satisfactory, for a couple of years. Because I stayed on even after her sabbatical was up.

There's that famous story about Giotto, where the Pope wanted an example of his work before he commissioned him to do something. Giotto took a piece of paper and freehandedly drew a perfect circle. "Okay Pope, I can do that. Now what do you want me to do? The rest is easy. I've just done something you can't do. I've drawn a perfect circle freehand." That kind of love of technique is more prevalent in Europe, and learning itself is divided into the trivium and the quadrivium, and when I look at our composers what's severely lacking is rhetoric. They don't know how long anything should be, and that's because they don't have any sense of what kind of impact they want it to have. So when you ask yourself why Bach's fugues are so long … well, they suffer from rhetoric! If he's done this on the left, he balances it on the right, so they grow to this enormous size. But it's because of that – however, the part that he adds is terrifyingly inventive, where only somebody with a colossal technique could carry invention that far. It's the reason that I always become frightened at the end of a Bach fugue, it's because it shouldn't be possible. But he's doing it. And what drives him to do it? Well, rhetoric. Balance. And how to present an argument forcefully. Even the concept is foreign to Americans.

But as I was at the school I came to see that this could be corrected to some extent by a well-designed curriculum. And so it was my luck to be able to talk up and down ceaselessly with David Conte, who had wonderful training with Madame Boulanger, stricter than I approve of, with that kind of French "no-nonsense, that's how it goes" thing. But citing the need for strictness, he and I talked about the way courses should go. I had been at the school after Elly decided she didn't want to be president of the department she had founded. I immediately set about work revising the curriculum. One of the things I put in the core was that the composers had to perform. I felt without actual performance they were just blowing hot air. They had to have some kind of root in reality. This came at a time when the composition schools in this country were dropping that. I thought, "Well there they go – let them!"

There's a great course called The Composer and the Piano. It has not only to do with learning the piano, but learning how to live at the piano and use it. My own personal image with them is that they should all be like Leonard Bernstein. [laughter] They should all be able to play anything. And some of our students are so good that they accompany the students in other classes on the piano – some of the composers. This has never happened at the school! That we have a group of composers that can play so well. That's because we want them to, and the ones that want to play come to our school because we're asking them for more of it and we're incorporating it into our system of teaching. Those students will go where the piano that they've spent the last twelve years at is still respected. They don't feel as comfortable in a school that doesn't care about

piano, or that relegates it to the past, or something of that kind. I think that has restored an element in the school. It's restored maybe something it never had. But which belonged there because it used to be so. We can't solve any more of the problems of the art of music without having a working technique of some kind. You can't possibly know everything all the time. But they have to have some notion of something of a technique that they can work at. Not just wait for God to sing in their ear so they can copy it down.

BISCHOFF When you started teaching at the Conservatory, as you said, you hadn't taught that kind of class – college level – maybe even these subjects before. How did you approach teaching? Did you have to learn how to teach? You have these definite ideas about education, where do they come from?

SUSA I felt that I had better training than they did, I wanted to pass that on to them. I said to Elly, "Elly, we sit here listening to them, and they didn't have the training that we had. Why don't we give it to them? What are we waiting for?" She said, "That's right! That's right." And we shook hands right there at the end of somebody's concert. I was just so tired of them coming up and schloping around at the piano. To get the best ones you need money, you have to be able to give them scholarships. There's a great problem with that because we don't have that much money and we don't have enough to give some of the best – the ones who want to study at our school, the money to come here. There's nothing wrong with the teaching. I think it would behoove us all to work a little harder if we got more of those kinds of students.

BISCHOFF How about the cost of education from a student's perspective, compared to when you first started. Have you noticed the kind of students you get for those reasons?

SUSA Well they're more aware of themselves, as I said, because they're on a higher level of achievement already. They seem to be a little more intelligent and self-aware. A little more mature.

BISCHOFF But the cost of going to the school, of going to college in general, is rising.

SUSA Well, it's … their job is to raise money, not to complain about. We don't complain about our teaching to them.

BISCHOFF Let me ask you about a couple of people at the school, who you already mentioned, but … did you know David Conte first?

SUSA I knew David Conte somewhat, yes. I don't even know how we met … oh, we met through his having heard a piece of mine at the first GALA convention. The Gay Men's Choruses had a convention and I wrote a work for that called *The Cricket Sings*, based on some

Lorca things. And when David got back to town he discovered we were neighbors. He sent me a letter saying, "Let's meet." And then we met together with our friend from France, Jean Pierre, who I had known at Juilliard and David had known at Fountainbleau. So we had this mutual French friend, and we all had lunch someplace. I remember the main thing from that was how charming David was, and Jean Pierre's halitosis was so overpowering that I came out with a migraine.

BISCHOFF A strong impression.

SUSA Jean Pierre later became mayor of a French town. He was also a very good pianist, and wrote a book about Mozart's tempos which was published by Yale University and won some sort of an award. I carried that manuscript over in my lap from Paris and got it to the Yale people. I always felt very pleased to be the … what do you call it? The midwife, or something? He also did one later on with Chopin, which was a great disaster. And I'd warned him about it, because he was giving lessons on Chopin's etudes in the form of dialogues. The student and him, without a recording. I said, "Jean Pierre, if you don't have a recording, how can what you say have any validity at all? You don't even have to demonstrate what you're talking about." Are you forbidding, or saying this, you know … [imitates a stammering Frenchman] It took a while for him to come back after that.

BISCHOFF You admired David Conte's training.

SUSA I did. David was very sincere. I feel he's a bit hung up about his training, almost, but it would be natural if you studied with someone as prominent as that, that you would want to … I don't know … I had good teachers too but I don't say that I am here because of them, even though that's true. I just find that he's minimized himself in how grateful he's been to his past.

BISCHOFF You also talked about Elinor Armer of course, who invited you….

SUSA I fell in love with Elly Amer. She's very charming and accomplished and we have very many attitudes in common. I admired her a great deal when she married the woman of her life, I thought that was a brave thing. And when they were going to have a baby, I thought that was even more wonderful. I gave it as a birth gift all of the silver dollars that I was given when I was born. These were silver dollars from 1850 and they were antiques. I gave her fifty or a hundred of those. I don't know how many thousands that's worth. That made me feel very good to be able to do that. She has surprisingly many of the same ideas – we're compatible on our views about music and learning and so forth, and students. There's one thing she does that I find very baffling but she claims she's able to help people with problems. I just find that such a dangerous thing to say, "I can really help you." But she believes she can, and perhaps in her way

she can, too. But I just find that there's no virtue in asking for pride to punished, Hubris, you know.

BISCHOFF How is your formulation of your work as a teacher different from that?

SUSA Be circumspect. Don't tempt the gods. Don't make promises to the students, just help them how you can. I don't feel I owe them anything beyond that. Beyond what we do in our teaching relationship. I don't owe them anything about my life or about myself. That's covered by my salary. So what else do we have to do here?

BISCHOFF A few other people too, that you might have encountered in the department. Andrew Imbrie?

SUSA Oh, Andrew. A sweet pickle of a person. Didn't know him very well, he wasn't at school very often. But I enjoyed Andrew, he'd always say, "You've turned out to be a real nice guy Susa, we ought to talk more often." And we never did. He wrote some of the ugliest music I've ever heard in my life, I swear. But I guess somebody had to do it, so it's none of my business. Just don't ask me to love it, or talk about it … and he never did. Beyond that he came to the school silver tower, I thought, well we don't know Andrew any more than that, but he did do some teaching at the school … but that was largely before my time, and it diminished without Elly saying, "you must stay here!" He wanted to go, it was time for him to go.

BISCHOFF You said David Conte was the first person at the Conservatory who you met. Can you say – how did you meet?

SUSA I wrote a composition for the GALA choruses at their first meeting in … I don't know where it was, it may have been in Seattle or someplace like that. They combined the gay men's choruses, and it was setting of three Lorca pieces of all the choirs – the gay men's choirs, and brass and percussion, it was very splashy. Red bone – meat still on the bone kind of piece. It ended with a great surprise – the chorus starts clapping as they do in a Spanish thing, and apparently the effect was electrifying, 'cause they'd been hearing singing, but clapping is a brand new thing. I got a letter from David – a fan letter – saying how much he liked the piece and that he was a neighbor of mine. He was – he lived just up there. And since a friend of ours – he knew somebody who said they were coming to San Francisco who knew me – Jean Pierre Marty – Jean Pierre was somebody I knew at Juilliard – brilliant pianist – we knew all the same people, so I saw him quite a bit. And he was coming out – so why don't we all have breakfast together? Well, this would have been wonderful, it was very nice to meet David, he's very likeable, and Jean Pierre is a real performer when he's on. And he was really on, except he was in one of his shrill phases, where he was talking about some problem he was having in his life. And I must say, other people's problems are not very interesting – ever. I think that even his best friends say, "Oh God, he's going to talk about that again??" Very much overestimate the need to discuss this – but anyway, he went on and on and on and on, but we hadn't seen him … there was so much more to talk about. He had become the mayor of some little town, and there were some interesting things. And in addition he brought to mind the famous halitosis of Benjamin Britten, that apparently defied any other foul mouth in all of England. Apparently it was of historic proportions and was just … I don't know what the problem was with that, but that day Jean Pierre, voluble and rapid-fire talk, sometimes with a lot of French in it, endless breath, and I was in the backseat starving to death, couldn't wait 'til we got to breakfast. No restaurant pleased him, we went around and around and around, and ended up somewhere – had breakfast. By the time I got home two and a half hours later, I had a flaming migraine. I don't know the precise reason, but I never got to talk to David, who was somebody that I originally started this breakfast to meet. But David is very proud of – he has French leanings, and spoke a great deal with Jean Pierre in French – I don't understand French, I'm not even sure about the word guillotine. But I thought a lot about it. I was frankly pissed.

It turned out he worked for the Conservatory, and so we had a chat about that and I found out from him that Elly was going to be taking a little sabbatical of some sort and they were looking for someone to take over her classes for a semester. But the classes were lecture classes, and then as now, they had no precise program for what those classes should be. She came down to San Diego, and met me in my room down there while I was working on some show. I loved her

immediately and said I would do it, and came up and interviewed with the dean. The classes would somehow be about Shakespeare and music, Shakespeare and opera – I gave them a couple of titles and they picked one. I felt I knew a lot about that, it was a subject I had done at the Lincoln Center. I certainly knew my Shakespeare – I was a scholar on Shakespeare. I knew and loved all that music, and even the music in the style of the music in the life of the play, so that if a play took place in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, I made some point of studying that style also. I acquired a kind of – I called it my little laboratory, where I was writing in all these styles very freely, it satisfied my archaeological bent, you might say. My pleasure in doing the scores, and listening to those texts.

So Elly came down to my dressing room and we had a chat, and I agreed and went up. Elly and I had a talk with the dean, Richard Howe. Anyway, he brought me on, and it turned out they needed somebody in those classes anyway, because Elly now wanted to do something else. It was considered her department, she started it. So whatever she wanted to do, that was fine with everybody. And she made intelligent choices, and was very serious about the Composition Department. However, due to … I'm not sure what … I guess the program was not very strictly organized, it was a bit of a Ma and Pa store, but charming. I just noted all that, and David was also a very serious person who knew his music, loved choral music – that was our bond. He was very scholarly and thorough about what he did, so they became my fast friends, both of them, and I still consider them family. Elly and David have a rather cool relationship, you might say. They're mutually respectful but not rabidly friendly. Whereas I find myself drawn to them both, I like them very much. Elly liked me so much, later on when they did *Transformations*, she was very impressed with it and she declared me an honorary lesbian. [laughter]

BISCHOFF Congratulations.

SUSA I found that was a very high honor.

BISCHOFF Can you think of any favorite courses that you taught at the school?

SUSA Well the Shakespeare in Music courses, those early courses, I was very fond of them because I was very drawn to those subjects. I was very drawn to them, but I began to realize that the students didn't need that course, they needed so many other things. They needed to learn – in my opinion – to read and write and learn the piano. To play the piano – why? Because they lacked in themselves the sense of what one traverses in a large work – a Beethoven sonata for example. So that they were always writing short movements without any real size or emotional weight to them. They themselves were not drawn sufficiently towards the arts. They didn't seem to go to the museum and look at things. And this is a problem in American in general – we're surrounded by so much good stuff, and they don't care. Or at least I

thought they didn't care, I think they would probably all disagree with me, that they see plenty of it, but I don't think they do.

BISCHOFF How did you approach that in your teaching? Were you able to encourage that?

SUSA Well, yes. I certainly tried to encourage that. When I thought that there were certain key movies or something like that, I would show them. One being *The Red Shoes*. Which I think would solve all of their emotional problems, because they don't see how in their relationships – they're asking for success for short term relationships and being composers. I have simplified that now, there's no time to show the movie – I just tell them, "Remind yourself, you're already married. As composers, you're already married to music. And she's going to move you, and you're going to have to put down whatever you're doing, and run to her and work. If you dedicate yourself in such a way that you say, 'Well, it's not my fault,' but simply 'I'm moved to do this, I must do this now.' Your life will simplify, and your partner will know which ear she is dealing with." Because they like to pretend there's this romantic fallacy, where you need to find one person in your life to do that. But if you're a composer it's already done. You're already married. I think that it's easy for the partner to accept that. They cannot compete against that. And because it's not like them, it's not on a level, and they grant that. And there's suddenly room in the relationship for a relationship. "Well honey, I'll see you Monday morning, I have to get to work." "It's only Thursday!" "I know … I know, I know. But I really have to get this done. I know I said I would do that, but I just can't." "Well, okay." But who could complain against that? It's God asking you to do something.

BISCHOFF Do students get that? Do you feel like they understand that level of commitment?

SUSA No, not always. They don't know about commitment for some reason. I don't know where they expect this music to come from. Stravinsky said that you have to keep working so if a good idea strikes you, it finds you with pencil in hand. If you have a good idea you're already working so you can put it down. They don't get that. Stravinsky – I spent a month with him in Santa Fe. When he was turning eighty the Ford Foundation sent a couple of us to Santa Fe to be with him where they were going to be staging a lot of his theater works. *Oedipus Rex*, and *Persephone*, which I had never heard or seen, and was devastated by it. That work is so great, so wonderful, and so peculiar. Michael Tilson Thomas does it beautifully. Anyway, Stravinsky came out and we were around him. It was during a rehearsal, and in those days it was an open theater – it was that old theater – we were all outside sitting around Stravinsky and it started raining. Stravinsky looked up, and said, "I hope not." And it stopped. He had been working on this score, and he said "Up, up." Robert Craft, who was conducting *The Nightingale*, turned around and said, "I told you never to bother me when I'm conducting!" We were

horrified, and Stravinsky sat there and he said, "Hmmm, you see how he treats me?" Of course it was very funny, and then it did start to rain. And Stravinsky said, "Just in time."

We went to retreat to these lobbies that were covered over. The people were gathered in a kind of heap, but Stravinsky was given a chair. I just watched him, and in the course of about twenty minutes, he began concentrating on something, and his feet moved in a pattern that he was working out. It seemed to be a two against three pattern, and as he was working there, quite automatically the crowd – which wasn't able to see him altogether – began clearing a larger and larger space around him. So what began as a little three foot space ended up about a six foot space. It was as if he was pushing them slowly away. I thought, "That's fantastic. He's just concentrating, but the power is almost like a visitation." Mrs. Stravinsky told a story about driving across the desert. He loved driving – he'd driven plenty – and he loved long trips. To be in a car with him, when he said, "Turn off the radio," you knew you were going to be subjected to one of those … he would sit mumbling in one corner of the car while it filled with this unseen power. She said it would nearly push you out of the car – pushed out the walls. There was just this immense pressure. He carried this around in a comical kind of performance. I finally did get to speak to him at happy hour that day. But before that the composers were all sitting around listening to Craft rehearsing. That morning he was rehearsing *Vom Himmel Hoch* variations. Stravinsky pointed at some phrase – I was sitting next to him – he said, "That's where Bach got his union card." I thought, "What? What are you talking…." Another composer said, "Stravinsky has repudiated the ostinato." I thought, "Oh, for Christ's sake … he's used them all up, hasn't he?" [laughter] What's he repudiated? There aren't any more!

He was walking … I heard his voice downstairs late at night, and Mrs. Stravinsky suddenly appeared, and I thought, "Oh, what's she doing?" And she was talking over her shoulder like this [demonstrates] and in the distance I could hear Stravinsky … I thought, "This is very odd." When I turned the corner and saw Stravinsky, he was walking with his canes, his legs or whatever varied in the kind of tottering body they were supporting. And when he talked, he had to stop walking. But she kept going, so if they began together, she got further and further ahead, but they still kept up the conversation. She was walking like this [demonstrates] and he was shouting … it was so comical. I started laughing, and when I passed them he didn't even see me because he was so intent on getting along with his canes.

He only conducted one show, and that was *Reynard the Fox*, and I'll never forget this, because this showed me … I had gone to the festival deeply concerned about his switch to serial music. At that time I thought, "Oh, what's he done?!" I was determined to figure it out while I was there, if I could. I got permission to watch him conduct *Reynard the Fox*, and was down in the pit when he entered. It was a small orchestra, about nine people – all stood up, "Maestro! Viva maestro!" He looked around and he bowed in a mock comical way. To the bassoon player he said, "And how is your wife?" The bassoon player said, "It was a boy, maestro." And he said,

"Very good!" Everybody applauded, he got so much joy into that. He looked up and said, "We must begin," and the orchestra assembled, but it turned out that the signal was wrong so we waited some more. And I thought, "I'm going to learn by watching him conduct the score, which makes no sense." Why doesn't it make sense – it's because the changing meters were so irrational and so complicated. I thought, "Why is this so complicated?" Well, watching him conduct solved everything. He conducts the way a child finger-paints. The hands went up – he did this, he did this … wiped the air a little bit with clarinet … and it was in a way irrational, but necessary, because that's the way he felt the music. He did not bar the music the way it made sense, which would have been in 4/4 or 3/4 with some accents here and there. It did not have to be the way he did it. He had a very strange idea about intellectual penetration into his music. He thought he could show you something about the inside of it. And maybe he did, but no orchestra person needs to do that to play it. In fact the only way you could play is not to watch the conductor. When it was over I felt I had been cleared of a problem with Stravinsky. Even though *Reynard* was an early work, it cleared up the problem of his complexity as far as I was concerned. I realized that even later on that was all a question of, to some extent, his analysis of the music, rather than the blueprint for achieving the music.

So there we were in the pit, the musicians left and I was still with Stravinsky. He always had this towel that he wiped himself with, and since no one was around I thought I'd help him. I helped him off the podium, and he said, "Very good." I still stood there, and he began fumbling with his shirt. I realized his shirt was wet and he had a dry shirt hanging there, and he wanted to change. I took over changing – took the studs out here and there – and got the idea suddenly that here I was in the middle of the Santa Fe desert, undressing Stravinsky. I thought, "This is just too peculiar." And he was overwhelmed, looking at me and staring into my face. And I was staring into his eyes, and his eyes had a kind of thick film and there was a light back there that reminded me very much of a lantern in a canoe on a lake that had pushed a little offshore. The light was kind of far back. And he said, "You see what it's like to be trapped in a rotting cheese." I felt it was not appropriate to say anything. At that moment his dressers arrived, abashed because they were late, but they took over undressing him. I still had his studs in my hand, I gave them to him. "I thank you sir," he said, and he did a courtly little bow. "You are Susa." I said, "Yes, maestro." He said, "That is very good."

Toward the end of the week he was sitting in front of me at a roast the cast was having for all of us. I had given a barbeque party together with one of the people at the Santa Fe festival, and the cast came up and sang, "We love you Conrad." Stravinsky turned around to me and said, "I think they mean you!" So I had the chance to see this charming genius, and I was hearing also what other people were saying about him, about the complexity of this … and this and that. And I thought, "It's nothing like that. He has the complexity of a simple person. And when you begin trying to talk about it and intellectualize it, it's a bunch of nonsense. It's nothing like that because his music is fundamentally simple. And you shouldn't analyze it according to that

system." Virgil Thompson was there, for example, and he was giving a complicated explanation of this and that, and other people too. But I felt very alienated from those kinds of discussions they were having, because I think he put his simple self into his music but then when he tried to analyze it he saw it from the point of view of what he would like it to be, and it got embellished with a lot of verbal nonsense, and that's what they were. That was a very powerful influence on me at that time, and that happened right around the time … well no, it happened a couple of years before I met Elly and David. But both of them … who hadn't been influenced by Stravinsky? We don't talk about him at school very much. To my knowledge, anyway.

BISCHOFF Did it change your mind about serial music?

SUSA No. Well only in the sense that it confirmed the notion it is totally unnecessary. I thought – that's a great game, and you can play it if you want to. I love the music of Berg, particularly. *Wozzeck,* and *Lulu*. It showed why it's futile. The *Violin Concerto* of course is a great masterpiece. The *Lyric Suite* is wonderful and divine, and Berg … it showed it was absolutely right to want to study with Berg. It seemed to me that my era was greatly troubled with the notion … or very concerned with the notion that that was the music of the future. That we should all bow down and take up that yoke. And I thought, "Why should I tie up my life with rules, just when I freed myself from my family and from all the things that I thought were holding me back. Why do this?" I have no compulsive, masochistic qualities of that kind. I thought, "It's just a waste of time." But you see, this was the music of the future. And I think it's a great danger of talking of the future as if it's not now. This is something I guard against at the Conservatory, where they say, "We're going to prepare for tomorrow." Well how about doing it for today, where we can play that scale correctly? How we can finish that work and give it perfect form … do that for today, and see what happens. Tomorrow is now, and it can't be then if it doesn't have a present. What is the past of all that music, it's historic. But I don't know of anybody who <u>craves</u> it. It never came up with a hit tune. Even in the *Violin Concerto,* which is such a great, beautiful work, the best tune in it is by Bach in the last movement. His music too, he gives the wrong example of the way one should compose. He composed for himself, largely. A lot of his organ fugues are frankly very ugly. You listen to the great organ, all the great pieces, they are for a lonely genius who's up there in the organ loft playing. Okay – but our future demands a preparation for now, and that means most of our students haven't had a deep enough training for now.

Elly and I were sitting at a concert one day and we were listening to one of our composers playing, and we turned to each other with a mutual – "Why aren't they trained like us?" I said, "Elly, let's do it now. We're going to revise this program." And because I was chairman of my department then, I set about doing that. Firming up the curriculum so, as I mentioned earlier, it resembled the college training where personal skill is enhanced so as to stimulate the imagination and the imagination becomes strengthened so as to demand more personal skill. And this wheel

sets it in motion, but it doesn't do it unless you have the foundation to start the wheel. You have to do it that way, you can't do it just with your imagination. The department had fallen to a dangerously low level of new students. So I went to the person who does the recruitment, and we talked about a different way of doing that, working with our department. Lo and behold, a year or two later when Alex came, he came with the same system. And organized it better than I did, because on his end there needed to be a kind of thing to do the recruitment with the standards of the department in view. They were going to chase down people who wanted to study that way. Well, we began to attract the best students we've ever had. They could play the piano, they could play their own compositions. And because my secret image was Leonard Bernstein, God help us, I wanted them to be able to play. I thought I was coming through a more tangible musical experience than just sitting and whistling. So I count the growth of the department from that day, and I think we all pretty much agree that we attract – and with all the other changes – that we attract very high talent.

BISCHOFF How about students that you've worked with? Do any stand out in your memory?

SUSA Yes, but I tell you I don't keep them there until I hear from them again! It's so dangerous to get locked up with students, because they leave. To some extent, your relationship is personal but not permanent, and so I personally don't get involved that way. I'm not moved to, either, and if they have problems I say, "Look, you have serious problems. You've got to go to someone to deal with this." I do not have the belief that I'm put on this earth to solve those problems. I state that at the outset of our relationship. I say, "I don't care how many problems you have, please don't come to me with them." I don't tell them that I don't want to hear it, because I like to give the impression that I'm available for anything, but I don't want to hear it! No one trained me what to do. We've not been given that set of guidelines. I think that common sense should dictate … they should be of the age to get their private life together.

Now we have some students that come in that some people claim are very talented, but they're a mess. And it's usually their parents that are all screwed up, and are enacting some drama through the child. I call them children, because I feel in some way avuncular at least toward them. Without feeling exactly personal, I feel that I like them more than other students. I want them to do well, so I'll do anything I can to help that. But what happens to the parents … I try to tell the parents, "Hands off! Let your child go, stop this nonsense." Frequently they're shaken into kind of an awareness. I've had this several times, where the parents say, "Good heavens, we're doing this." And I say, "Yes you are." But the kid doesn't always see it. What is one to do? You do what you can. I think a teacher is there to improve the learning and their growth and their peace of mind, and to keep them healthy, much as you might an athlete. You put on your training shoes and run with them. I feel that toward the classes, too. It's a great journey from counterpoint one

to counterpoint thirty-six. You have to learn so many complicated things, and the teacher has to go through that process with them.

In the case of the classes, they're very demanding. I teach counterpoint, sixteenth century counterpoint in the first semester, eighteenth century counterpoint. Now why they leave out seventeenth century is beyond me! Because those are my favorite composers – Corelli and Purcell and Monteverdi – and you discover that they're a wonderful blend of tonal and modal music, and that the heavy duty counterpoint is just getting going – and yes, Purcell sounds like Handel – but that's why Handel sounds like that! Because he's stealing from Purcell. I think it revises their image of music, or at least fills in what is a murky spot. That's where I depart and expand the scope of the class. I'm also lucky enough to teach a lecture class, and they let me do whatever I want. What I've been doing, since I realized that the class on theater isn't going to get them to Heaven, I've picked major composers and have done a kind of analysis from a certain point of view. I've done Stravinsky, I'm going to be doing *The Ring* this fall because of Wagner's birthday. I'm going to do, next semester, Benjamin Britten. I've done … who else have I done? I've done Strauss, for example. Because this opera combines my experience, this class combines what I've learned about opera and history. This class brings in … I want to try to bring in the voice students of the school, who from the point of view of the actual education are very neglected, in my opinion. They have a very full schedule, and there isn't enough time of day to teach them. The languages, and all kinds of stuff. But they don't take musical classes.

BISCHOFF Musical in what sense?

SUSA Well, counterpoint. I think I've already mentioned that one of the teachers said to me, "But Conrad, singers don't sing counterpoint." Well what do you do with that? But persisting, and trying to find a way … maybe there should be a version of a class … counterpoint for singers. I would like to draw them in so they have a higher education – so they come out with more education than they do now. I think that the Voice Department would have a whole different idea of this … but wherever they come from we could alter it so they use the composers as resource material. I have to say that the composers have made it their practice to know more about their subject and music in general than a lot of the other faculty, who teach largely variations in classes where you develop skills of some sort. They don't do a lot of historical analysis in there. In the Composers' Seminar, when I began that course, it was really a place to look at things we don't teach in the other classes, that I made sure at least an hour a week would be devoted to some composer they didn't know. Composers that are not in fashion right now – I would mention Vaughn Williams – stay out of fashion because they're not mentioned in school, because they're not in fashion. Those are the people you want to mention, it seems to me. I introduce them to other beautiful music, and that has led to discussions about, "Should we give them a listening list? Should we require our students to know a certain amount of music?" Other schools are wrestling with this problem also, but we've not entirely solved how this is to happen.

BISCHOFF I'd like to ask you – you've talked about addressing the commitment and discipline students need to have – especially composers – composition students – how about pursuing a career in the field? Should that be part of their education as well?

SUSA Well, I don't know if there is any way to have a career except to write good music. I think the career is something that takes you along, I don't think you can create it. Unless you have a lot of money, in which case you buy publicity and your name suddenly appears everywhere. Or you're just an ambitious person and create performances and get good jobs. I think they're strangely aware of careers, and I can't think of any topic that is more changing than that. I think it's a good thing, what you say. I think you would have a hard time keeping it in a straight line through a semester. Or that it would be useful for more than a semester. All of the things I know about getting a job are quite useless to the people who are students now, because those things don't exist anymore. That world is gone, in fact – the world I grew up in, and dearly love. It's one of those things that makes you feel old. What makes you feel young is when you have real contact, and you waken up their desire to learn more and find ways of getting them to teach themselves. We're having a lot of success with our composers, who are getting back to us for various reasons. We have prizes whose due dates extend beyond their graduation.

BISCHOFF You're talking about the Highsmith Award?

SUSA That's right. That didn't used to be, or it was the only one. But now there are other prizes that extend into the post-graduate years, and that creates a bit of a bond with the school. This is where Juilliard and some of the other schools already probably get more where they have a lot of money to do that. I think that teaches career in a better way than any teacher could, because that student comes back and says, "These are my experiences." So whatever they have learned is at least good for the next, maybe one more year. It's a very changeable area, but it must be done it's just improbable. The classes are kept very loosely organized to admit current ideas and their changing nature.

BISCHOFF As you said, you weren't particularly interested in serial music, you felt … do you sense that students are writing with a sense of their own voice? Have you seen styles of music come that are fresh, with the different students you've taught?

SUSA I think so. I hear a lot of fresh sounds. I make a point of going down to hear their new music, in the orchestra and so forth. That's another thing that I did for the school, was establish those readings. We didn't used to have those. I began them with the orchestration department, where I got the orchestration (a class I was teaching in there – I got that extended two semesters) I got an orchestra to play our selections we orchestrated, so a student could hear

that immediately. Later it was expanded to have other ensembles. The difficulty is that training them to write for little ensembles is not training for orchestra at all. It's like teaching them how to write *Brandenburg Concertos*, but not *Symphony Number Fifteen*. And yet those divisions are not always discussed. David Conte has, against all reason except his deep understanding of what composers need, forced them to write vocal and choral music. He has been very … it's almost like the most important thing he's managed to push under their plate. Because they're having to do with choral music is the biggest leap they need to make. That's the one where I tell them they're already married. Because when you add text to the love of music, that's a very big load. That's more than just mashed potatoes, it's something else on your plate besides that. It's a serious business reading and a lot of our students are just on the fringe of understanding music – I mean, understanding English. So there's another problem, sometimes Asian languages are involved, of which I know not a syllable. I don't know if that's being handled correctly or not.

BISCHOFF You mean when someone goes to write something that's say, in Chinese or Korean? It's hard to know how to go about that?

SUSA San Francisco reveals itself to some people as being the place where they're going to change. Whatever they've been, they're going to be someone else when they leave here, depending on how long they stay. Simply because the city is creative socially. Helpful, and used to the notion that you're going to become who you really should have been all along. You find somebody who's on the same journey. I know I did. You get to know people in a way that you don't know them anywhere else. You take New York, for example, the thing is not to attract attention in New York because your life may be at stake. San Francisco isn't quite like that. I would say that it's much more open.

Some of our students – I've had two students who left because the city frightened them. And when I ask what it is that frightened them, they can't tell me. Or it's obvious. It's some personal problem, and they just can't do it. This is a serious business because their emotional life is in such turmoil. Maybe a little more than in other schools. I only ask the question. But it's also set up in such a way that if you want help you'll find it. People come to the West Coast in general to change. You go out west and go back east, and coming out to the west even moves you sometimes beyond the Pacific, to the islands and to Asia and other stuff. I think it may be even to the Native American life, something becomes apparent out here. I know it did for me. I find it in Elly also. That's the form that Americanism in music – nationalism I suppose – takes place. I remember hearing Native American music – kind of delineated in some of Ernest Bloch's music. But it was so hilarious because they all sounded like middle European Indians. Instead of sitting down to a roast ear of corn, they seemed to have a pot of sauerkraut and knishes or something. It was all a very strange mixture.

BISCHOFF Let me ask you about microclimates, then. What was it like to teach on Ortega Street, compared to moving to Van Ness?

SUSA Do you mean about the faculty?

BISCHOFF You mentioned that other people you might have something to talk about are Robert Greenberg, or Dorothy Steinmetz.

SUSA When I came to the school finally, I discovered it to be quite different than I expected. It had a very local feeling to it, you might say. Because the building, way out there … on Noriega? It had a feeling of a country club or something about it. But it was in very raggedly shape, like a rundown Ma and Pa store. But charming and fun, because it was a one floor school and one saw everybody all the time, which is the greatest disadvantage we have at the new school – we don't see each other anymore. I'm talking about the faculty. I was always running into Mack McCray, or somebody that I would want to chat with – Sonja [Neblett]. We had the feeling of interacting quite a bit. I don't have that feeling at the new school at all. I hardly see anybody except David Conte, whose studio is to one side, and Elly Armer, whose studio is to the other side of me. When you're not teaching you're giving lessons privately. When I wander, I wander down to the cafeteria, which is subterranean … six floors plus two, to an empty space. In some ways I am not thrilled about that aspect of the school. Which however is very beautiful, and workable in any other way.

We have a beautiful concert hall there that we did not have in the old school. Our classrooms are excellent. I liked the country air and the view of the sea that I had from the old place, but you get caught up in your classes, and that's that. You can teach anywhere. That end of San Francisco, which is just on the edge of a kind of rundown section, is now undergoing a great change. They're putting up skyscrapers. I'm amazed at the amount of building going on downtown – why don't I hear anything about this on the radio? It seems to be a sight of an improving economy when that's happening, I don't hear a word about it! And what was in the paper – one of the most beautiful buildings, it was to be built right next to the school – I hope they haven't changed the shape of that, it looked like a partially unfurled scroll of some sort – gorgeous, gorgeous building. I hope that is in its originally designed form. And so downtown is moving slowly up towards the Castro, and that's fine because that particular section is fairly dreary and it's not my idea of Heaven when you're talking about standing in front of the school, or getting there, you have to go through this kind of slum. That wasn't true at Ortega – Noriega – out there it was a residential district. It was boring and similar everywhere, like you were in Siberia or something. I called it Avalon, if you know the book by Marion Zimmer Bradley. *The Mists of Avalon*. You'd go to the school and when you came out it was three days later but it seemed like the same day! The new school, the verticality of it really brings about a different frame of mind. But the students don't mind, I think maybe only some of the old teachers still carry the preferments of

the kind I'm referring to. That all changes. It's not a business to like where we teach, our business is to teach well and to shut up and do it. I have no problem. We have departmental meetings, and Elly and David and I talk things out and watch the progress of the students, which is our main topic of conversation during the year. How they're doing, and why they're not doing well. And why they're doing well … we don't often know the answer to that.

The faculty that I miss – I miss terribly much Dorothy Steinmetz, who was a teacher of English and some other things at the school. She was chair of one of the faculty committees that I was on when I came to the school. We had our problems at the time because the President was doing some hirings and firings without consulting our committee – we represented the faculty. We hadn't been told about these things, but he consulted a bunch of other people, I guess he felt he would get the kind of replies he wanted to from them, he didn't trust…. So I developed a great animus toward him and I think I was unkind and unjust, and maybe unnecessarily sarcastic. It's always something I have to watch. But when it was all solved, he developed a lot of physical problems – he was in the hospital – my compassion went out to him, where it still remains. He came to visit me in the hospital when I was there, and two sick people talking about their bad backs for two hours is bound to create a bond of some sort. But Dorothy died of cancer and I didn't realize how much I missed her until she was gone. She stood for all the things I liked – standards of decency and academic probity. And so I missed her – I spoke at some funeral rites commemorating her and I did the *Dirge* from *Cymbeline* – I read it in her honor.

Teachers that are gone that I didn't get to know very well but I had a very high feelings about were Robert Greenberg, who's all over the place now getting rich with his recordings, teaching us about the golden age of music and Wagner and so forth. I knew him enough to have very pleasant and funny conversations with him. And to know that he was a very good composer. I heard some of his music in LA – and he is a surprisingly good composer, for being a teacher. He has great intellectual stamina, and his works show a lot of integrity. I don't see him very much. Teachers I was very fond of who are fun to talk about – learning with them – Sonja Neblett, who is still at the school. But because of the arrangement, in the old school I had chance to talk to – but now she's in one of the farthest away classrooms there is to me, and so I just don't go down there anymore to chat with her like I used to. We have a teacher's lounge – I just don't like it so I don't go in there very much. Marcie Stapp is always in there winning a game of Scrabble from somebody. She's the acknowledged genius of Scrabble in the school. She's lots of fun.

I have in mind a cookbook that I approached Marcie about. Somehow I'd like to get this going. I'd like to have at a minimum a cookbook which is based on the notion of the favorite foods of composers, or composers in music – their experiences of composers and food. I have some of the recipes of the things I know that Mozart was very fond of. He was very fond of liver and sauerkraut. Liver dumplings with an onion sauce. I happen to like sauerkraut, so it's not revolting to me. As far as liver dumplings goes, I'm very fond of that too. So I understand why he likes it –

it's definitely a mid-European taste – Viennese. But it's found in the provinces where my grandmother comes from – the Slovakia part. As far as food goes, the food in my family was always a mystery, because when I went to relatives and had Czech or Slovak food, it was quite different from ours. It was more austere. Our food at home was very elaborate and rich. I found out, or remembered, that grandma cooked for some doctor. And when I studied the situation there historically, it was just after Franz Josef created a treaty in which Hungary gained part of Slovakia. And it was the part that my grandparents lived in. Since the requirement of New Hungary was that the inhabitant become Hungarian, there was a mass immigration of 200,000 people I think that left Slovakia for the United States, two of them being my grandparents. This would have been about 1910 or maybe somewhere in that area. And the food we ate at home was very grand Austrian cuisine.

So later when I joined the Wagner society here in town with friends, I had a dinner here that was like a ship's board, where I had a grand table of things you could take. I prepared six or seven very grand dishes in that style – I love to cook – cooked my way through Julia Child, just like that girl did in the movie – when it first came out that's the very first thing I did. Started on page one, and learned to make stock and ended up making desserts. I didn't cook every single recipe, I didn't make some duck recipes, but I cooked everything else and I learned how cooking and music are very much aligned. Where you make your effect with the least possible things, and it explained some of the scores of Stravinsky where the sounds are made with less, not more. It revises your idea of the omelette, where a new cook will start throwing everything into the pan, where all you really need to do is rub it with oil and garlic, and it's a taste you just haven't heard. It taught me a lot about cooking. Passing a paper out among the faculty, I discovered a lot of them had experiences with food and other composers. Elly had some experience with Milhaud, dinner and things of that kind. So I thought we had the basis of a book, and the question is whether we want it to be a student cookbook, or an adult … I don't think students cook that much.

BISCHOFF Do you mean for students?

SUSA For students, yeah. But there could be a chapter where they could make something very elaborate very simply, which I've learned to do. Anyway, that's the kind of odd side – I really want to do something like that for the centennial, if only I can get it out.

BISCHOFF It sounds like a great project.

SUSA Yeah, and Marcie is very into it, and so is Sonja, and so is Elly. So we're a little committee – the question now is to get some kind of funds so we can afford to bring it out. We applied for teacher's funds, but apparently the teacher's committee for the dispersal of those funds considers music a little more important than cooking. So the scholarships are always given

out, and we can't get anything, which I think is crummy, you'd think that cooking would be important too. So we have to somehow find some funding from some other way.

BISCHOFF You were mentioning before some – not related to cooking – but some musical behind the scenes work that you did to promote performances – second performances of works?

SUSA Yes. You know, I've done enough opera … I've done four operas. And I've been called to the National Endowment to be on those panels that discuss funding a new opera. New operas that I've dealt with are John Adams' and Arnold Schoenberg. I guess I'm not allowed to tell stories about that, but I'll only say that I've learned a bit about how that money gets dispersed, and about techniques you use to get the things you want funded. Or better yet, unfunded, but discussed so they pass off the schedule of things to do. One of them was *Moses and Aaron* the New York Opera was going to do. I thought, "Okay, let's fund it and then unfund it, so we can get it off!" The great scandal had been that it had never been funded. Well, let's fund it, but not enough. Bless her heart, Beverly decided that she was going to do it anyway. We gave her enough to have her do it but not enough for her to do it again. Even in the cases of places you wish would do an opera again, there was never any grant for that. All the grants go for first performances. So that dozens … all that work is thriving, but then it vanishes. I was doing a lot of complaining and tugging of elbows, and the Lila Wallace Foundation put together a second performance scholarship and I was given the chairmanship of that. And that, I think I can wave it in front of Saint Peter and say, "Now how about that?" Because it's unglamorous, but immensely useful when an opera can be performed again in another big house. For them to have funds available. It angered me so much to learn how many senators were opposing the National Endowment, only to have it funded twice as much by the next Congress. I don't know how it's doing now in these years of recession. I really don't – but it's hanging on. And it's loaned together money – because that second performance is where the value for composers truly is. I had a chance to watch Carlisle Floyd work and other composers – who's the big Broadway …?

BISCHOFF Sondheim?

SUSA Sondheim! Can you imagine Sondheim having problems raising money to do a musical? I can't! And yet he couldn't raise money for *Sweeny Todd*. Eventually he did somehow, but I thought to myself, "My God! What chance is there if Sondheim is having trouble? What is this conservatism with all this money – what are they doing with it?" I didn't like *Sweeny Todd*, everybody else did. I just thought it was … but he's a great genius, and one of the best we've ever had. I'd like to get him to the school. I got to know him a little bit, I went to his house and spent some hours talking. It was interesting to hear him talk. He immediately gets very technical. So it's very easy to get drawn into deep sympathies with him. The other person I

met at the O'Neal Center was Ray Bradbury. We spent a lot of time talking about theater and opera and how you write stories and how you tell stories. He was there working on new musicals with people, he came up for six weeks. Wonderful, beautiful man. Very helpful about creating climax and all of those technical things. Composers that were interested in musicals were up there studying. It was all put together in such a wonderful way, in a beautiful setting, right there on the bay, on the Long Island Sound, next to the nuclear plant – the electrical power – that was a wonderful place. Other people came out there too – Robert … I'm forgetting … the guy who wrote the play about the Puritans. The play about *The Crucible*.

BISCHOFF Robert Ward.

SUSA Robert Ward came out. He turns out to be published by my publisher, so we knew each other's works, well he seems to know mine surprisingly. We became friends. Along that line I did not get to know Ronald [Randall] Thompson, who was also with my publisher and a great choral writer of course, with that famous *Alleluia*. But I heard his last concert in La Jolla, and he performed everything twice. He said he wanted to hear it again and he didn't know whether he would get to conduct it again. He conducted all of his works the second time was always slower than the first. His concert was dragging on until the twilight, and then it was over. He had a heart attack on the plane on the way back, went to the hospital and then died. So that was his last concert, it was a little creepy. Loved his music, he did a very important thing for me. He pointed out ways – before I heard Copland – that music can evoke early America. He was a great master of that. Yet when he wrote the *Alleluia*, which is the famous thing that any choir director walks into a room the choir immediately starts to sing it whether they know it or not. It's just in the air someplace – was written so quickly and without much thought. Again, it shows that thing that I said earlier, that is another life in which we're married to our music, and no matter what we do on this side of things because he wrote it very quickly, on his way to the rehearsal, it got passed out just in time for him to rehearse it, and it's been the great choral work ever since and always makes a lot of money. There was only one year when my wealth exceeded his, and that's because I wrote a Christmas piece that became a great sensation. I love Christmas and for a while there was drawn toward music of the southwest, toward Mexican music and set a bunch of carols for marimba, guitar and harp. I was worried about the combination, I thought, "Is that really going to blend?" Lo and behold I went to a rehearsal one day, and somebody put together the very ensemble. It turned out to be Elly! Had written a work for that combination. It sounded like a Mexican music box. And so did mine of course, that's *Carols and Lullabies*. *Carols and Lullabies* became such a widely known Christmas piece that when I gave it to Philip Brunelle – do you mind me talking about this piece for a moment?

BISCHOFF Yeah – no, great.

SUSA I gave it to Philip Brunelle, out there in Minnesota, he had commissioned it. Eleven carols in Spanish. I played it in his little group that were around the piano – Janice Harding and some others. He said, "That's lovely, Conrad, but what am I going to do with it? We're in Minnesota!" Everybody said, "Yes, where everybody's white and everything is white and Christmas is white." I said, "Well I don't know, don't you have a Barrio here?" And said he, "Well, I think so." So taking my suggestion he went down there and arranged for a scholarship to bring the choir into the Barrio and sing that piece at Christmas. Found a little church that had a big enough space to do the song, and had a Christmas program that you could get scheduled on. Because of all the churches, it was the one that had the largest draw, and Philip was very concerned with that. The priest said, "Yes, Mr. Brunelle, it's going to be just fine and the piece is lovely." Philip had things to do – this was in late October, I think. The concert was going to be early in December. He had to check up on things to see how it was going. The priest said, "Oh, it's wonderful. Never sold so many advance tickets." Well, this church holds about five hundred and thirty five people. And Philip said, "Well how many did you sell?" "We've sold forty tickets so far." Well, his heart sank because he thought, "This is going to be a great disaster, singing to an empty room on a city grant."

So he went ahead and fulfilled an obligation to appear on the Lake Wobegon Series with Garrison Keeler, and they were going to do the first three of the carols, which they did. I happened to be listening to that program, and we were driving around somewhere up there in Minnesota. I couldn't go to the concert, I don't know, but anyway I was in my car when it was being broadcast. The next thing my mom calls, and she says, "Conrad, was that your music…?" I said yes. She said, "Well Steve," (that's my father) "Pull over, they're doing Conrad's music." And he said, "Well maybe it's some other Conrad Susa." How many could there possibly be? Anyway, they pulled over and listened to the rest of it, and they both enjoyed it very much. And one of my brothers called, he had been driving around Virginia someplace and he heard Garrison Keeler, and was very excited and called me and told me he loved it. Then I called Philip, and I said, "Well this has been a great success." This was after the concert at the church that I called him. He said, "Conrad, I have to tell you that that church was packed with people. They were even standing in the back aisles. There were more people than the fire laws admit. We're going to have to give a second concert for people who want to hear it live." I said, "Oh, well, that means it's a great success." He said, "Yes, there was a woman who came up and said, 'Thanks for giving us back our carols.'" I burst into tears. That's the biggest thanks you could possibly get. Wikipedia or something said it was the most played Christmas thing of three years running. In the United States it was the most widely performed. But it's not been performed by a major group on a station or on television where it would make many more. Oh, I don't know why … I'm the best anonymous well known composer. That's how I feel.

BISCHOFF Well, you got your second performance out of that. Are there any particular pieces that you know were funded with this – Lila Wallace Foundation grant?

SUSA In Minneapolis?

BISCHOFF Wherever.

SUSA Oh, the Lila Wallace one. There were several – some that were by Carlisle Floyd, and some other people. I can't remember the names now, I was only happy that one of my works got done. In time the rest came along in the grant, I was aware of it at the time.

BISCHOFF I'll just ask, because we're coming to a close here. Would you give any advice to students at the Conservatory, or teachers, administrators at the Conservatory. What, from your point of view, should the school be doing, should students be doing at this point to continue…?

SUSA I honestly can't hand advice that's useful for everybody. The training of singers still eludes me. But for composers, I would wish that they could enter into a schedule that's more like training, so the teachers can enter with them and train alongside. I feel like that anyway when I do counterpoint. I put on springier shoes, because to do this course you have to stay in there and not have too many ideas about yourself. You should just learn to run the mile.

BISCHOFF When you say a schedule – what do you mean? How different from an academic schedule?

SUSA Well their schedule is such that they have different varying times when they can compose at school, and most of them do but I think that they don't live a life. They don't go to sleep early enough. They don't eat well enough. They all suffer from [?] and they're all worn out and catch all the colds. I would like to see a healthier and more athletic kind of schedule for them. People helping them. I think that that would intensify what they're doing, and focus on what they're doing.

BISCHOFF So really taking composition and the study of it as something to build your life around.

SUSA That's right. It's like learning how to be on a team of one.

BISCHOFF This actually brings me to something you said right at the very beginning, on the first day we were talking, that you felt you had different families along the course of your life. That you left, that you met – kept on moving, but of course music was the constant. Is that how you see what you've done?

SUSA Actually, yes. Thank you for bringing that up. I feel very – again – avuncular and my conversations with David and Elly, we talk a lot about the students, is always on that level, on how to improve our courses so they have the right subjects, and how to get the right answers from them so that we know they're training properly. Because they need to act on their own, but they also need to be led through a serious schedule. But some of our faculty don't see it that intellectually, they're much more, "Today we'll do this, tomorrow we'll do that." It's a thing that in real life is the most uprooting. But the thing that they really need to learn is how to control time so that they abolish it. And move into a zone in which nothing is hurrying them, they're working according to the speed they need to. But they need to be aware of how they're working. All the great masters seem to know that. What are the notebooks of Leonardo about? They're about how you paint, how you dissect. He didn't just cut into a bird, he sliced into it with a kind of knowledge of discovery. He was poised to discover something because he knew where to aim his knife. And you learn that as a composer if you're on course with yourself. Otherwise the work has aroma but has no substance. If it's too technical, it has substance but no savor. I've had so many students come from other schools just being a wreck. Coming out of school to recover. And I say, "What's wrong with you?" And they say, "Oh my teacher said that I must not use triads anymore." "Why?" "They're not used in the twentieth century." "And who banished them?" They said, "Henry, we don't write with triads anymore." I said, "We?? Who is this we??"

These are all personal decisions, and they're profound for a young person. But they have to learn to be made, and they have to learn not to fear it. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will have no fear. For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff to bear. And what is walking with them is their strong self that they can turn to.

Later on, and this is maybe an internal postscript. Later on they'll learn to live with ghosts. I've lived in this house – it's a large house, I forget how many rooms I have here, but they're large rooms, and there's an upstairs. And there's a beautiful large garden in the back. And it gets very quiet, even during the day. As I said I love to cook, and sometimes I bother making bread. And I say, "And how do you do this?" And I hear grandma's voice saying, "You do this, and this, this, and this." And the correct cook appears for whatever dish I need. Sometimes it's Cardinal Richelieu, saying "I need more wine, darling," and you put in more wine. This is fun – but I realized I was floating on a bed of light ghosts. I asked myself the question – when you hear somebody say something and you think it's your mother, or your uncle, or whoever you want – what voice is speaking in your ear? Is it a separate person or is it you? If it's a separate person, how is that connection made? That's what I mean about the dead, because those voices, you unlock them and let them say all kinds of things. And they even say things they didn't say in life, and so you find yourself cooking something that grandma never made but she's telling you to cook it. Her voice is in…. What do we learn from that? I guess we learn the favorite foods of ghosts!

But I had an experience here that I think is the ghost story of all ghost stories, and it was about discovering the ghost of myself. I had just broken up with my partner, and I was in a terrible mess and I was alone in the house for the first time in twenty years. I was working on my opera, and I thought, "I have to get act three, I have to get the proper intensity of her rage and anger, this Madame Merteuil and I have to dig down to a layer that I felt I hadn't contacted. So I – one night, it was fortunately quite warm – I went down in the basement, where they were preparing the floor to lay the cement. I was originally going to have the entry door downstairs, so you would come up through the house. So at the door – what's the bottom of the door called? Door-sill? I had read that the Viking warriors are buried in the sills of their homes sometimes in an erect position so they are intact, and ready to go. Well, I didn't have anything Viking ready to bury, but I had some things of my previous partner – a gold medallion that I bought him from Tiffany's, and I had one of my own. A matching astrological sign. I buried them in a box and left it in the paper I had, and lo and behold, it was a thing of Mercury – the god Mercury had a lantern, going down some steps into the underworld. I thought, "Oh this is perfect." So I buried it there, and the next morning when the men came I told them I had buried some stuff, and they said, could they bury some stuff? So in the other doorways they buried some of their own things. They were very much into astronomy, and I had been at one time. Anyway, I knelt down at the door base there, and lit a bunch of candles, and started chanting, and I took off all my clothes and started this dance. I got quite frenzied, and I could feel coming up through my legs this warm viscous. Dark red, dark amber, kind of fumid, and as it rose through my body it changed to a lighter and lighter color, somewhere around the chest it began to bubble. When I looked at my arms it was bubbling already in my arms. It was an extraordinary sensation, I was bouncing and jumping around. I thought, "Oh my God, I'm going crazy. I'd better call Elly." Then I thought, "Oh I'd better not call Elly." So I got – it was this back door here in the kitchen – I fell asleep on the floor for about ten minutes and then I woke up and got into bed. I realized that I had committed myself to my work during that thing in such a way that it could have my life if it wanted to, but I begged it not to want that. But anything short of that it could have. I gather the answer was okay, because it danced with me there for a while. I don't have any pictures of that event, and I only tell it for the purpose of showing what commitment is sometimes with me. You get everything back…. And I went upstairs and started act three, and finished it in two months. I worked thirteen to fifteen hours a day without any letup. I was coasting on this thing, and it ignited itself.

BISCHOFF That's … that's extraordinary. I want to say thank you for these stories, and for taking the time to share your thoughts.

SUSA Well thank you for getting it out of me. I never thought I would speak about anything so private in a place where all may hear it. But that's the other side of composing, because you're speaking from something very close – I mean, look at the *Sixth Symphony* of

Tchaikovsky. That man is right there, you can feel his pulse. Tchaikovsky says, "Hold my hand, I'm dying. And I love you." And it's true in so much great music you come to this point where incandescence or ignition of some kind takes place. I like to think that that third act is in fact better than the rest of the work, I saw more precisely into it in some way. But I thank you for sitting here and listening to all of this and getting it out of me.

BISCHOFF It's been a great pleasure. And you'll get to listen to it yourself, in fact.

SUSA Well, I hope someone will hear it and care. Thank you.

BISCHOFF No doubt. Thank you.