

## Joan Gordon Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

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50 Oak Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted August 6, 2015  
Sam Smith, Interviewer

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

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

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

### **Joan Gordon Interview**

This interview was conducted at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on Thursday, August 6, 2015 by Sam Smith.

### **Sam Smith**

A professional singer as well as a trained violist, Sam Smith appears regularly as a tenor with the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, the American Bach Choir and the medieval consort EUOUAE and plays viola with several recreational chamber music groups. Smith sits on the board of directors of the Civic Center Community Benefit District and was a founding board member of Schola Cantorum San Francisco, serving for four years as its president. He earned a B.A. in classics and history from USC and an M. Phil. in classics from King's College, Cambridge University, with further graduate work at Stanford University.

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**August 6, 2015**

**SMITH** I'm Sam Smith, and I'm here with Joanie Gordon, who is the director of the Pre-College and Adult Extension divisions of the Conservatory. We're going to record a short oral history interview of her time here at the Conservatory. Hi Joanie, nice to talk to you. So, tell us about your time as a student at the Conservatory. How did you choose it?

**GORDON** I never actually refer to myself as having been a student at the Conservatory, because I was not a traditional student, I was just here on a limited basis after a post-Bachelor's degree. I was what they called at the time a special student, and I was here almost exclusively to study with Bonnie Hampton. So I was here in the early '80s, and I studied with Bonnie Hampton privately, and took cello class, which at the time was the seminar taught by Irene Sharp. So that was my time here.

**SMITH** How many years were you here, would you say?

**GORDON** I think in that capacity maybe for two years. The Conservatory has always been part of my life. When I was growing up in Palo Alto, it was that funky little building on 19th Avenue, and we had rehearsals here occasionally, so it's come in and out of my life many times.

**SMITH** What was it like to study with Bonnie Hampton?

**GORDON** Oh, it was amazing. Bonnie is one of those teachers who – it's almost just enough to be in the room with her. The knowledge and artistic energy that she imparts just sort of leaps across the room. Some of my greatest memories of studying with Bonnie have to do with when she would just sit and play with me, because you just feel the energy entering your body. She's got a fantastic bow-arm and she has tremendous musical – I keep using the word energy, but that really is what it is. And just the formation of phrases ... it's very, very contagious.

**SMITH** So she would play with you – would it be cello duets, or playing alongside you on the same piece that you're working on?

**GORDON** All of the above. She also talked to me a lot. She's got a very strong personality, and I think all of her students have interesting stories where things aren't going so well necessarily in lessons. But even now, I still have Bonnie come occasionally and give a master class for us – usually chamber music master classes. It's so funny, we have so much going on here on Saturdays and it's all hustle and bustle and it feels great – but when Bonnie's in the building, you can tell. How old is she now? She still commands that kind of ...

**SMITH**                    Respect.

**GORDON**                Respect, but it's also – she actually said this to me once, we were talking about I think some Rostropovich master classes I had gone to – I was trying to describe how it felt to even be watching it because we weren't participating, we were all just sitting in the audience. This is way off topic, but he came and did three days of master classes at U.C. Berkeley and we all joined this club so that we could go, and we all cut school. I was talking to Bonnie about it, and saying, "I just can't even describe..." and she said, "That's just how you feel when you're in the presence of genius." And she almost has that same effect.

**SMITH**                    Wow. Was there a key moment when you had a difficulty or breakthrough with her in a lesson that you remember and could describe?

**GORDON**                Well, it's a fairly negative one, but that's the one that comes to mind. I think I would say – I had a lot of physical challenges with the instrument. It's not a natural thing for me to play the cello.

**SMITH**                    Do you mean like tension issues?

**GORDON**                I'm completely double-jointed. A lot of my natural physical instincts with the instrument were wrong. So I had to relearn a lot of things by the time I was in college, and then later studying with Bonnie. So the most important thing that she gave me was her physical ease with the instrument. And again, there wasn't one seminal moment, but it happened at various different times where I could just feel her approach to the instrument kind of clicking in for me.

**SMITH**                    One of my questions was going to be, what was the biggest thing technically that you learned, and it sounds like it might have been the comfort with the instrument as a kind of foundation for technique.

**GORDON**                It's not even just that you all of a sudden learn to be comfortable with the instrument – it's recognizing that you already are and you should just get over yourself.

**SMITH**                    What musically – you mentioned phrasing – what do you remember as her most important contribution to your development of your musical instincts – as separate from your technique?

**GORDON**                Just that everything has direction, that you're never in-between things.

**SMITH** Nice. And what was it like to be in Irene Sharp's cello class?

**GORDON** It was great. I studied with Irene previous to that when I was doing my Bachelor's degree, and I had studied with one of her students before that, so I'm very familiar with her teaching. Both of them took all of their teaching methods from Margaret Rowell, who was the cello guru.

**SMITH** She was the queen of cello in the San Francisco Bay Area, right?

**GORDON** Pretty much in the country. She was kind of the "it cellist" from 1960 to 1990, I would say. Both Bonnie and Rennie both took different things from her, and applied it differently, but that's where it really all came from. Margaret was sort of way ahead of her time in emphasizing the physical approach to the instrument – and so much more than that, she just addressed the individual. Margaret's favorite saying was – she hated it when people called her a cello teacher because she said, "I don't teach the cello because the cello can't learn." She taught people.

**SMITH** Where did you get your undergraduate degree?

**GORDON** At San Francisco State. Rennie was the teacher there, and that was the reason for my decision to go there, because of anyone I had ever met Rennie had the patience to really fix physical things, and I just had so much stuff. She was a good teacher for me.

**SMITH** What was your impression of the Conservatory? What was it like as a student at that time, when you were there as a special student?

**GORDON** It was pretty funky. The facilities were what they were. I was working almost full-time when I was a student there, so I was just there on I think Thursdays, or something. That was kind of my "music day" aside from all the gigs I was playing. Agnes Albert Hall was kind of the main area, other than Hellman, which had been built fairly soon before that. I think back in the day the Conservatory sort of prided itself in attracting unusual people, both as faculty, staff, and students. So it was a fun place, it didn't have anywhere near the gravitas or the focus of any of the big East Coast conservatories. In fact, when I was looking for a place to go to school to do my undergraduate degree, it didn't occur to me to go to the Conservatory. It was considered a very unusual choice for serious musicians.

**SMITH** That's an interesting leap. So when you came back to the Conservatory in 2011 to direct Pre-College, what was your impression of the school and how does it differ from when you were a student?

**GORDON** It was completely different. I should say that there was a segment in there from 1994 to 2000 when I was here as director of admissions for the college. So I had been, as I said, back and forth. Already in the '90s the school was quite different. It was operating pretty much like a full-tilt conservatory, and had garnered a lot more respect on the scene; albeit certainly not on the top level. I think the biggest thing for me coming back in 2011 was of course the new building. It's so interesting, occasionally I will go to a collegiate faculty meeting and sit in the room and look around and go, "OK yeah, it's just the same – everybody's just twenty years older." It's almost like you're dreaming, because it's exactly the way you would picture them twenty years hence, and here they all were all. All of their idiosyncrasies were exaggerated, and all of the great things are also exaggerated. It's sort of lovely, if I can use that word, that there's all this new stuff, and much better facilities, and much better vision and support and presence in the community, and yet we've retained so much of what initially formed the Conservatory, with the people.

**SMITH** Do you want to talk a little bit more about the time you spent as director of admissions – and you were assistant director of admissions before that, right?

**GORDON** No, it was a one woman office, so I was all of those things, I guess. I ran the whole admissions process. It was part of student services then, so it was a very different sort of structure. But I worked with Ruby [Pleasure] and Colleen Katzowitz was the director of student services, so I guess my title was officially admissions officer, and I did all of the recruiting, travel, processing of applications, notifications, auditions – all of that stuff. So I knew all of the students – it was a really fun job. It was a ton of work, but I really loved it.

**SMITH** How far did you travel? Were you traveling to China at that time?

**GORDON** No, we didn't do any international travel then.

**SMITH** And where were the students coming from at that time?

**GORDON** We had a good chunk of international students but at the time our recruiting efforts were focused domestically for all sorts of reasons. A lot of recruitment is alumni word of mouth. I did go to places and try to build bridges with organizations, but we had the same issues we have now in the collegiate, I think – it was really trying to build up the freshman class. Back then I think we were even more slanted towards graduate students.

**SMITH** Even more so than today?

**GORDON** The first year I was there – I got there right after the class had arrived – and there were ten freshmen.

**SMITH** Ten.

**GORDON** Ten. So that was my big charge – to build that up. I spent a lot of time really saucing out some of the better youth orchestras in the country – Interlochen, the year-round Interlochen – Idyllwild, Walnut Hill in Boston – I was out looking for really high level high school students. And of course we did Oberlin and New York and all of those, because graduate students were attracted to us quite easily.

**SMITH** Would you say that's been a long time feature, that there's always been interest for graduate study from graduates of other high level conservatories?

**GORDON** Depending on the instrument. Because we have so many San Francisco Symphony members on our faculty here that have big names, when people are picking graduate schools – more so than undergrad – they go specifically for the faculty member. Up until now we didn't have a dorm – that was a big deterrent for undergrads.

**SMITH** Absolutely. How big was the size of the class when you were the admissions officer? Full-time enrollment now is approximately 400 students.

**GORDON** Oh, it was much smaller. I'm trying to remember what the FTE was, but it was in the 200's – so much, much smaller.

**SMITH** Was Colin [Murdoch] the president?

**GORDON** Yes.

**SMITH** Who was the dean?

**GORDON** Debby Berman was the dean. Colin had – he became president a couple years before that.

**SMITH** Right. So the school was smaller. Did most of the students come from California?

**GORDON** They did when I started. I tried to change that, to make it ...

**SMITH** More diverse.

**GORDON** More national and international, so that it wasn't just a community thing.

**SMITH** Right. So your focus was to build underclassmen.

**GORDON** I was all about quality. That was my own personal mission. I think we did build a strong class. The last class I brought – it was the biggest we'd had, and also the level went up to a certain extent. It's a tough game – you're always balancing that with money.

**SMITH** That hasn't changed.

**GORDON** No, it's all the same stuff, just on a different level. I remember when the tuition was \$12,000 for college, when I first started there. It's gone up higher than the rate of inflation, I think.

**SMITH** Did you have much contact with the Pre-College when you were admissions officer?

**GORDON** A little bit, because John McCarthy started in the middle of my time as admissions person. They always used collegiate students as student workers in their office, so I would kind of help because I knew all the incoming students, and I knew all the current students – so I would help identify people for them. I also – one of the people who was an office manager there had also applied for my job, so we knew each other and were kind of friends. And they were across the hall. But that's the main extent. And I knew May Kurka pretty well from the past.

**SMITH** May Kurka? Who was she?

**GORDON** May was the one who started the Pre-College. She was quite a force and a visionary. Under her leadership the Pre-College ran like a well-wound clock. There was a very strict dress code for the performances, and people needed to report to her and show her what they were wearing before they allowed to go on stage. Everybody had to go to the concerts. It actually ran very well – it was extremely structured. And then kind of got bigger, and changed. Under John [McCarthy] there was sort of a different emphasis for a while.

**SMITH** This maybe is a good place to move into your most recent job at the Conservatory. So, describe your impressions of the Pre-College and Extension programs when you came back after so many years hiatus.

**GORDON** OK. I will say I had certain impressions when I came to interview. I was here on a Saturday as part of that interview process and saw all the kids and parents. It seemed like people were doing well and having a good time, but it was very chaotic. There were about

450 students – bodies, anyway – doing various different things, and there were lots and lots and lots of concerts going on constantly, with no one in the audience. But it was an opportunity for the students to play in the hall. It was a little disconcerting for someone coming in from the outside – you just see these people kind of running back and forth between the halls. And I would walk into the hall because I would want to go in and listen, and I felt like there was something wrong with me because there was nobody sitting in the audience. There might be a couple of video cameras set up. So it was like that, and the Adult Extension was suffering a little bit from having moved here.

**SMITH**                    To 50 Oak Street.

**GORDON**                I think there was a nice community of primarily older people who lived in the Sunset District who liked going over at 7:00 at night to take a class or listen to a lecture or participate in the Sing-It-Yourself Messiah group. We hadn't really figured out a way to market to this current community that we're in – we still haven't, I might add. We haven't fixed that. So anyway, that was my first impression, and then when I actually started my job I uncovered some other things that were surprising to me. I'm not saying ... it was working on some level very well, and many students were getting a very good quality experience, but there were just things that aren't apparent to the outside. For example, we had so, so many pianists. It was almost exclusively pianists with a decent smattering of strings, and virtually no other instruments.

**SMITH**                    So the instrumental diversity was limited.

**GORDON**                I think it's very true – my good friend Veda Kaplinsky, who is the director of the pre-college at Juilliard, often says, “Any music school left to its own devices will become a piano school.” There are just lots of pianists, and we were growing them here, too. We would take our early childhood classes and point everyone toward piano. I think that's a long-held belief that before you start anything else you have to learn piano first. It's great to have a background in piano, but if you want people to learn other instruments you have to find ways to expose them to that.

**SMITH**                    That's right. So has that been a goal of yours as director of the Pre-College?

**GORDON**                It has. I tried to do it within the structure that was already here. We had two early childhood programs. Once is basic Dalcroze Eurhythmics, which was very big in the 2000s, I think – the last decade – and has sort of waned. Yoriko Richman, who teaches the classes here, is one of the only people in this area of the country who teaches it. She keeps looking at me and saying, “I need someone to hand this down to!” She's very worried that it's

going to die out. So she has a bunch of classes at various different levels, all based on age. And it really just teaches people about music through music and rhythm and pitch. It's a good start.

**SMITH** And it's a popular course, isn't it?

**GORDON** It is. It does pretty well. And then we had this First Steps at the Keyboard class, which is a very, very structured curriculum that was taken from one of our faculty members – it's her method, and I think John McCarthy sort of arranged for her to adjust this to a class setting. So it's small classes – just five or six students and a parent has to be with them the whole time. They learn on these electronic keyboards. It's a very meticulous kind of teaching. Ultimately we all decided it was maybe not the best program for us. This year we're starting a new program – we've gently retired our First Steps at the Keyboard, and now we have Sound Safari, which also has a background in keyboard – they learn at the instrument but they're doing a bunch of other things too. It incorporates exposure to all of these other instruments, and is more of a, "So you want to take music lessons – here are all of the things that you're going to need to know that will help you learn your instrument." We've got quite a few people signed up already. We're excited about it.

**SMITH** This is the first year that we'll be introducing this course?

**GORDON** Yes.

**SMITH** That's great. Are there memories of particular colleagues of yours at the Conservatory that I can ask you about? You mentioned May Kurka, who started the Pre-College. What about Colin Murdoch?

**GORDON** Oh, Colin. My goodness. Well, he was president for a very long time.

**SMITH** Did you work closely with him, or did you not know him well in the day to day of your job?

**GORDON** At various different times we worked more closely than others. He was a different sort of manager and leader than I'm used to, but he did get some great things done when he was here. The thing I always liked so much about Colin is that he's a really good musician and he has a really great ear. My best memories of talking with Colin have to do with talking about musicians. I just really admired his ability to assess.

**SMITH** Did you ever hear him perform? I don't know if he was still performing at the time when he was president or dean.

**GORDON** No, I don't think he was. He had a very, very strong background in teaching.

**SMITH** What about Conrad Susa?

**GORDON** Conrad ... my main memory of Conrad is sitting on that bench at the front door of the old Conservatory. There was an old wooden bench that he was pretty consistently on.

**SMITH** He lived there?

**GORDON** Yes. And nothing ever came out of Conrad's mouth that wasn't of import. I won't quote my favorite stories because we probably don't want them in the archives, but it was never boring talking to Conrad, and you never wasted your time.

Can I go back to Colin for one moment? My favorite thing that Colin ever did as an administrator was when I had first started we were sitting around – this was when there were a bunch of people involved in putting together the collegiate brochure, and I was very annoyed when I first started as admissions officer about the model of the brochure. It was all kind of cute smiley pictures and the word “friendly” appeared 500 times, and I kept screaming, saying, “Can't we say something about ‘excellence’ in here somewhere?” I was fairly new, and we were sitting at this meeting, and I was trying to put forth my agenda very gently without offending anyone. And in the middle of it, Colin just turned around and said, “Shouldn't we just be a little more assumptive here, and act like we're good?” I could have kissed him. I was like, “Yes! Of course! Thank you very much.” And we did – we ended up with a very different sort of image.

**SMITH** It changed the image, and it helped you recruit the kind of students that you wanted to bring to the school. That's good. Are there anecdotes that are amusing or revealing about your colleague Mack McCray?

**GORDON** Everybody has a Mack McCray story. Mack is sort of the local character. He also teaches and plays piano.

**SMITH** And he teaches in the Pre-College, doesn't he? Or did he?

**GORDON** He occasionally does. He's so busy in the college, and he's very particular about the students he wants to take in the Pre-College. He was teaching someone when I first came. But Mack is just so much a part of the fabric of the archive of this place. When we used to have Christmas parties every year at various different venues, Mack always wrote a skit.

**SMITH** I've seen ephemera from some of those.

**GORDON** That was sort of the whole reason that you went to the party, was to see the skit. He would enlist the dean to play a role, and I believe Didi Boring appeared as an elf one year. He's sort of slapped the personality on the place. It's hard to imagine what the school would have been like, and would be like without him.

**SMITH** So there's nobody else in the school that kind of took on the creation of a certain kind of camaraderie in a way, it sounds like you're talking about. In the sense that you got a chance to bring people together for fun – he would organize a kind of group fun.

**GORDON** Well, Mack is an entertainer, first and foremost. So in that sense, that was a nice kind of mascot to have. I wouldn't say there weren't others. The Conservatory has always had a very interesting cast of characters, in faculty and staff.

**SMITH** What about Elinor Armer?

**GORDON** Oh, Elly. My goodness. She doesn't teach in the Pre-College, although she is so generous and gracious to us. She allows us to use her studio on Saturdays – I was getting a little push-back from the dean's office when I asked for it, because we're always short of space. They said, "Well, you can ask her yourself." I wrote to her, and I got back the loveliest response. She said, "Of course you can, I can't think of a better group of people to use it!" But we have a competition intensive that goes on every summer that has students ages – it's really a wide range, I think they range from 9 to 18 – and Elly came and spoke (not this last year, but the year before) and it was the highlight of the program for the kids. She brought her own music, but she also just chatted with them. She is a really extraordinary person. When I was working as director of admissions, my favorite audition sheets to read were those from the composition faculty. Between her, and Conrad, and David Conte – such an erudite group of people, I just wanted all of their vocabularies to insert themselves in my brain. There was never a bad read.

**SMITH** Davis Law?

**GORDON** Oh, Davis is such a part of the fabric of the Pre-College. He sort of has flown under the radar for twenty years, but Tessa [Updike] found an old recording from the '70s when Davis was a student in the Pre-College, performing with the chamber orchestra, and that was fun. Davis teaches violin for us, and he is again, one of those people who – it is very tempting to take him for granted, because he just shows up, does this amazing amount of work, cares about his students, and very quietly leaves the building at the end of the day. He has shaped so many of our violin students, and he has such a perspective on where we've been and where we are now. He does just plod along, and when we were unveiling this new program and sending out all these emails to faculty, I kept worrying about Davis. "Are you reading these things...?"

At one point I ran into him and said, “Should we chat?” And he was like, “No, I think I’m fine – I’ll read them, I’ll read them.” And then one day I got this phone call from him saying, “Oh my goodness, I just read the last twenty emails you’ve sent out,” which is over a period of nine months, or something. He said, “Do I still have a job?!” It was very cute. He’s so devoted here, and his wife ... I had no idea, one of our main accompanists for the Pre-College is Miles Graber, who also has a long history here – and Miles lost his wife about eight years ago in a very tragic accident. After that time, Miles was not taking very good care of himself, and Davis’s wife happened to stop by on a Saturday and saw that Miles was working straight through lunch. And from that day forward, every single Saturday, she packs Davis a lunch and she packs a lunch for Miles. So there’s that kind of thing ... again, whoever knows anything about all of this stuff that just sort of happens? People take care of each other, and Davis is sort of the center of that.

**SMITH**                      Are there current students or alumni that you would like to share stories of?

**GORDON**                      Oh my goodness, there are thousands of them. You know me, I’m always full of stories. The one who kind of stands out from this year as having taken off in an extraordinary way is Elliot Wu, who won the Hilton Head Competition, which seemed to me completely out of the blue. He’s an extremely talented fifteen-year-old pianist who studies with Yoshi Nagai, and he came into the Pre-College I think two years ago – he came in and auditioned. He’s an extremely elegant player, not the kind of person you would expect to win a competition, because they tend to just be the biggest, most athletic players. Elliot has distinguished himself in numerous competitions this year – the Cleveland Competition, this e-Competition where the first part of it is done online. But most importantly – I’m not a huge fan of the piano, but I could listen to him play forever. It’s just wonderful communication – it’s very, very artistic, elegant playing.

I was extremely pleased that we were able to put him on the From the Top show. I don’t know if you remember that one of the prerequisites for being on From the Top is not just that you’re really good at playing your instrument, but that you have to be personable and interview-able for Chris O’Riley. They vet them pretty carefully for that, and Elliot’s very quiet. What they did for him, is they had him pre-record everything. So when they got to his segment of the show, which they taped live here, he walked out on stage and sat down at the piano, and they played a recording of him talking about himself, and how isolated he was growing up – that he was homeschooled and he’s very shy, and it helps to be a musician so that he can express himself that way. Then he talked about how music has brought him out of his shell in that he’s participated in these competitions and stuff. And it’s so interesting, because my non-musician friends who heard this show, or were at the show – that was the story that touched them the most. He’s doing wonderfully, he’s going to play in our classical festival at the beginning of the year.

**SMITH** That's right, I saw that. So he'll be with us for one more year? Two more years?

**GORDON** Two more years.

**SMITH** Are there other student performances, or stories that come to mind, that stand out to you as really exemplifying what makes your job rewarding? Your life, devoted to music? Or that inspire you?

**GORDON** I have to say, sometimes I feel sorry for myself on Fridays when everyone's rushing out of the building saying, "Have a nice weekend!" and I know that I have a ten hour day ahead of me here. But almost to the week, Saturdays are my favorite day. As long as I do get out of my office and go hear what's actually happening. It's astonishing what's going on in these kids' lives, and how they are growing not just as musicians, but as people. Our kids are so nice. They're such a great group of students, and they're so respectful ... you know, I have this candy bowl in my office which the staff sometimes comes down and raids, but it's very funny on Saturdays because James Encarnacion opens the office at eight, and I don't usually get here until nine, because I usually end up staying later. The candy is locked up in my office, and I usually remember to fill it up in the outer office before I leave on Friday. But if I haven't, I get this text while I'm on my way to work ... "OK, we're out of candy ..." They peek in the door of the office to see if there's candy, and then they come in. But I do it for a reason; I want them to come in and chat with us, and feel like we care about them. We have one student who lives quite far away – I want to say it's below San Jose, and he is homeschooled. He is a pianist, he is a composer, he is actually quite a brilliant singer – although he hasn't started taking voice lessons here yet. And he's an unusual boy – he's tremendously friendly, but I can see if he were in school that he would be maybe on the fringes, not the most popular kid. To watch how he just comes alive here is enough to get me through any Saturday. He wishes every single day were Saturday, his mother tells me that constantly. We're very lucky to have him, he's super talented and he's going to do really well.

**SMITH** Can you tell if someone is going to be a musician in that way?

**GORDON** No. You mean if they're going to be a career musician?

**SMITH** Yes.

**GORDON** I can't, and I don't think I should be able to. I mean, I think that's the beauty of it, it's one of those things. When I was growing up, I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be a musician, and there was nothing else I wanted to do, even when I thought I was terrible and should quit I didn't because I couldn't think of anything else that would satisfy

me as much. A lot of the students in our Pre-College do not feel that way at all – they love music and they can't imagine their lives without it, but they're going to study molecular biology, or they want to be doctors, or they want to do other things. And I don't think it's necessarily reflective of what their level is as a musician.

**SMITH** So you can identify the talent, as somebody who's spent their life in music, but you can never know what someone's path is going to be.

**GORDON** Of course not, and I also would say I think I'm extraordinarily good at identifying talent, but with this age group it's quite challenging. If anybody has any kind of spark, we'll take a chance on them. Because how can you say at six years old that somebody will or won't be successful ... you just never know what people are going to do. And I love being wrong! I love it when somebody really, really takes off. One weird story of something that I found incredibly touching here has to do with two students that we have who operate very much on the fringes of our program. They are very unusual kids – they are nice but they have a lot of trouble making friends and are very different ages. They kind of drive their individual teachers crazy, but there is talent in both cases. They are outliers. I was at a composition recital and I saw the two of them in the back row talking up a storm – just chitter-chattering and giggling. They weren't really being disruptive – it was just on the edge of that – but I was so amazed that they found each other here at the Conservatory. My composition and musicianship chair noticed it as well. We both came up to each other at the end and said, "Well, that's a miracle right there, that we brought those two people together." We totally didn't intend to, but they found some community there.

**SMITH** Do you want to talk about that for a moment? The community aspect of a Saturday program, and how a student can wish every day was like Saturday, and then they have to go back to the other days that are not – but it's a special time where students come together for a particular purpose and there's a common thing that's bringing them there that isn't the same thing that makes everyone else have to go to school every day.

**GORDON** That's the thing, they are excelling in something that's not mainstream. So if they were great soccer players, everybody at school would know it. And that's the tough thing about music being taken out of the schools. Even when it was in the schools, it wasn't mainstream. It's one of the most amazing things about From the Top that they've taken that sort of nerdy classical music thing, and made these kids rock stars within their own communities. And we've created a community where they can be rock stars – not only be rock stars but also be supportive of each other. We're trying to impart all those wonderful skills that make people fabulous human beings as well as making them musicians. To do that, people have to be in the same building, so with our enhanced program – with our comprehensive program – we are almost forcing the community aspect on them. I don't think they'll object to it too much.

**SMITH** I want to ask you some more questions about the comprehensiveness of the program, but you mentioned the ‘Top’ a couple of times. For our readers who don’t know, it’s a nationally broadcast program that comes to different locations in different cities and it’s come to San Francisco and the Bay Area numerous times before, but in February there was a special presentation that focused exclusively – almost exclusively – on performers from our own Pre-College, and you were instrumental in putting that all together. Aside from what you’ve already said about that event, is there anything noteworthy or that really strikes you about what went into that? What was most memorable at that taping for you, other than Elliot Wu being the unlikely person who drew listeners in?

**GORDON** It’s always fun to watch how a show gets put together. I’ve had a long relationship with From the Top because I worked with them closely at Aspen as well. But I think what was really special about that show is that – yes indeed, From the Top does go to various venues all across the country. And their general game plan when they go is that they do auditions – they hold kind of a cattle call set of auditions – not really a cattle call, they vet them all first. And in this particular case, because of their relationship with us, and knowing how many students they regularly put on other shows from our school. They just said, “We’ll let’s just do a show at the Pre-College,” and it was exclusively Pre-College students. So that was extremely unusual. The other thing that was unusual about it is that it featured a lot of chamber music, which was nice for us to kind of showcase our ensemble program, which we hope will be even more evident in this new program. Now that everyone will be playing in a small ensemble it fits nicely into the whole SFCM image, in that we’ve always been known as a chamber music school – so why not have the Pre-College known that way as well?

**SMITH** Right. Whereas in previous years, chamber music was something that many Pre-College students participated in, but it’s receiving new emphasis in the comprehensive program that’s rolling out this fall.

**GORDON** Not that large of a percentage of our students participated in chamber music every year. I want to say that maybe the program had sixty or seventy kids in it.

**SMITH** And what’s happening this fall is a dramatic transformation of that. Let’s make that clear for the readers – how is chamber music in the Pre-College going to be different this year than previous years?

**GORDON** Everyone will be participating. Everyone who is enrolled – it’s a comprehensive program, it’s a flat fee, and everybody does everything – as compared to people sort of picking and choosing their courses as they do in a community school. They certainly have always had the opportunity to do three or four things, but now everyone will be doing four things

– private lessons, small ensemble, large ensemble (chorus) and musicianship. And then we have electives, and we have people already who are signed up for this comprehensive program who are begging us for electives in addition.

**SMITH** Let's break this down a little bit, and talk about some of the different components in the program.

**GORDON** Well, we can continue with the ensemble. The small ensemble piece was the most challenging for us, because we are still greatly overbalanced in piano. So we've come up with all kinds of different ways to serve pianists – some of them who have a lot of experience and are really – not to tier this too much – are really top players who are paired off with string groups. We have some high level duos – four-hand piano mostly. We had a bunch of pianists who are fine – they are going to be fine – but they haven't had any experience. The exciting thing is now we're getting them experience starting at age eight. So this will never happen again – we'll get them going right. We will have an essentials class, where they'll be learning how to play with other people in a classroom setting with electronic keyboards that they can plug into each other, and listen to each other, and listen to the teacher.

**SMITH** And this starts at age eight.

**GORDON** We've got some great – well, we have some older students in that class too who haven't had that experience. And we have some wonderful teachers who are doing that – Alla Gladysheva is taking one of those sections.

**SMITH** Alla teaches Pre-College musicianship as well as piano? And the college as well, musicianship – is that right?

**GORDON** She teaches keyboard class in the college. She doesn't teach musicianship for us now, at the moment, but she teaches private piano as well. So we have a couple of those classes; we have this really interesting model created by one of our faculty members where students will participate in duos, but the second half of the class they get together for a high level masterclass with William Wellborn, who is an absolute expert in all things multiple handed piano. And he will incorporate recordings as well. We're trying to make it as vibrant an experience for everybody as we can. And then we had this string coordinator who looked into every single string student – our piano coordinator listened to every single pianist. We made giant spreadsheets, we put all these groups together – we scheduled everybody in their small ensemble first – we gave it that emphasis – and then we scheduled them in their musicianship classes, and chorus, and private lessons come after that.

**SMITH** That sounds impressive. How often do the students in the small ensembles rehearse and play together, in the past and in the future?

**GORDON** It's the same as the past, they'll rehearse and be coached once a week.

**SMITH** Separately?

**GORDON** I very much trust my ensemble coaches to kind of gage how much time the kids need to be on their own, and how much time they need with the coach. We pay the coach for the whole time, they can go in and out depending on the week, because it's different for different groups. So the short answer to your question is that every week they get together for ninety minutes, and some of that time is rehearsal and some of that time is coaching. Some of these students live near each other and they rehearse during the week sometimes.

**SMITH** That seems like a luxury.

**GORDON** Well, we all did it when we younger. We didn't have these kinds of programs, we had our own groups and we made it happen ourselves. Had this kind of program been available when I was growing up, I would have clawed my way into it. We all had to put together our own music education.

**SMITH** Right. And the distinctiveness of this program is it's providing a place for that program to exist off the shelf.

**GORON** Right. It's one stop shopping.

**SMITH** The large ensemble experience – what will that be for the students in the Pre-College?

**GORDON** We made the decision not to try to build an orchestra here – not only because we don't have the instrumental diversity to pull that off right now – although in strings we do – but because this area of the country is incredibly rich with wonderful youth orchestras, and many of our students already play in them. We didn't want to compete with them. The San Francisco Youth Orchestra right up the street – that's been a long standing collaboration with the Pre-College. Back in the days when we were on 19th Avenue they used to have carpools – they'd do all their stuff in the morning over there and they'd all jump in these cars and drive over here to Davies to do their youth orchestra rehearsal. Now they just walk two blocks, so we've made it easier for them. But El Camino Symphony, YPSO, all of those are wonderful. What we've done is that we've created two choruses with a wonderful chorus master, Margaret Clark. They're just divided by age. The way it's set up is every student sings in chorus. They can get an exemption if

they don't want to sing and they're in a youth orchestra that is of an appropriate level – we will waive that requirement, but they don't get any money back, necessarily. And if they are in an orchestra and still want to sing, they're welcome to do that. We're going to have big choruses, and I'm very excited about this because it's something that I avoided my entire musical education life – I was terrified of singing. I think I would be a different person if I had sung.

**SMITH** That's an interesting point. How does training the voice fit in with building the musicianship and the personhood that you've been alluding to in the Pre-college?

**GORDON** Well, being able to produce what's in your head physically within your own body, without benefit of an additional piece of wood, I think it adds a dimension to music education that you can't get anywhere else. I always tell the story of sitting in my cello lesson – when a teacher is trying to get you out of whatever crazy physical thing's going on with you in a certain passage and says, “Well just sing it,” with the idea of course that if you sing it, you're going to phrase it in a way that doesn't have anything to do with the physical act of playing the instrument, so that it will be more musical. Now, if you're terrified of singing, it doesn't have that effect. I would say, “Can I just play it ten times instead of singing?” because I didn't want to hear my own voice – I was scared it would be out of tune, I was scared it was going to be wobbly – and I think if you're comfortable singing it just opens you up in so many ways musically. Like I said, we all hear what we want to produce in our head before it comes out – every single person does that. And the idea that you can try to produce that with your voice before you even try to produce it with your instrument. It adds a dimension, it adds a step, it adds depth to what you're doing.

**SMITH** You think that has ramifications beyond strictly the musical education for these students?

**GORDON** Oh sure. If you feel comfortable with your singing voice, you go up ninety points in self-esteem right there.

**SMITH** And this is a place where the students come to do something that they're not getting in the rest of their school – it would seem like maybe that would be of value to them, that they're building confidence that they can bring back with them when they're not here on Saturday.

**GORDON** Oh, absolutely. There are all of those sitcoms where somebody finds themselves in a position where they are supposed to be singing, and there's somebody like a major business man or somebody who's generally revered and everyone envies them, and all of a sudden they start to sing, you kind of go – “Oh my God, look at that weakness.” It's a strength, but it's also potentially a source of embarrassment for people, I think, or a weakness. It's part of

who we are. I'm going to sing in chorus, because to this day I hold that fear. And I sit in on some of the musicianship juries, and some of our most advanced students, who are spectacular players, when they have to sing these exercises – and they know the stuff, but having to produce it with their voice, it sends them into conniption fits, and they don't do well. So I can't even imagine how well they're going to do if they have this training from early on. We're building a new kind of musician.

**SMITH** That's great. Voice lessons are offered in addition to the chorus. The chorus is new, we haven't had a chorus for the Pre-College at the Conservatory, to my knowledge.

**GORDON** We have. Apparently there were choruses on and off. There have been all kinds of different offerings, and it's kind of fun to look back and see these things. In some ways what we've created here was actually May Kurka's vision. I'm not sure she had the support or the wherewithal to kind of require all these things and pull it off to the extent that we're doing it, but it looks much more like that than it does for the last fifteen to twenty years.

**SMITH** That's an interesting point. So it's been at least a generation since there's been a chorus in Pre-College at the Conservatory?

**GORDON** I think there has been a chorus more recently than that, but it was an elective offering.

**SMITH** The other thing that you've alluded to in the Pre-College is the musicianship and the ear training and theory that supplements the performance skills. Do you want to talk about the musicianship program?

**GORDON** I think we've gotten it to a point where it's about as rigorous as it can possibly be. The chair of that department – I had a conversation with him, I said, "Build something that's like cradle to grave." What was happening when I got here is there were kids – twelve and thirteen years old – who had completed our musicianship program because they started so young and there were five levels, including introduction. So now we have 'intro to intro' – Introduction to Musicianship – then six levels, and then we have this Advanced Musicianship, which is really history and analysis. Every year we offer that course and every year it's a different time period. So it was Romantic, last year it was Baroque – I can't remember what it is this coming year.

**SMITH** That requires quite a pretty comprehensive toolkit of the part of each young student – to reach that stage where they're able to analyze a score.

**GORDON** And you know, you asked me if I can tell if a student's going to go into music – what I can tell almost to a person (occasionally I'm wrong) is whether or not they're taking musicianship when they are performing.

**SMITH** What tells you?

**GORDON** Just the form and structure of they're playing – it makes sense, always. They understand the harmonic progressions, they understand how the music was built. You can hear – students who haven't studied musicianship can certainly turn a nice phrase, but in terms of a whole movement – to build that and have it make sense – there's nothing more annoying to me as an audience member than unstructured playing – just a bunch of notes.

**SMITH** So you can hear that but does that mean that they're actually showing you a story, or communicating their knowledge of the music?

**GORDON** Not necessarily. It's not an artistic thing. It supports an artistic vision.

**SMITH** Ah, so they haven't yet reached the stage of, "I'm going to tell you the story of this Schubert sonata."

**GORDON** Oh, they might have. I'm just saying, there are people – we all know them – who have a nice physical approach to their instrument. They understand the music, they understand the phrasing – they build nice phrases – but it's not stirring, it doesn't touch you. And that's just their personality. It's very pleasant to listen to, but it's not ... I would say those are two different things. If you have that natural communication and that passion for what you're saying, having that structural understanding underneath it just makes the impact 200 times stronger.

**SMITH** Well, for our readers who maybe haven't taken six levels of musicianship, can we walk through briefly, in general terms, what it means to go through the musicianship program? You start off with what?

**GORDON** You know, I'm the wrong person to ask. I've agreed to adjudicate introduction juries, but I don't feel really qualified. It's amazing how quickly you forget seven diminished seven chords, and things like that.

**SMITH** But the students learn harmony, and they learn rhythm – to sing back phrases.

**GORDON** There's a lot of sight-singing, there's a lot of dictation.

**SMITH** Dictation meaning the teacher will play something, and they have to write down a melody, a rhythm, and a harmony sometimes?

**GORDON** Yes, and sometimes they then need to harmonize it.

**SMITH** So the teacher would play a melody, and they would be responsible for creating a harmony underneath that.

**GORDON** That might be some exercise, yes. You know what's interesting – you already brought this up, thank you – our musicianship courses cover both theory and ear-training in the same class. Many other schools separate those two things. Our faculty feel pretty strongly that they go well together, so it makes for difficult placement in assessment. Some people come in – they're at level four in music theory, they understand all that stuff, but their ear-training is terrible, they can't match a pitch. So that's what the ear-training is, it's matching pitch and understanding intervals – being able to sing those. Some very fine musicians just have not had that training. Again, it's one of those things – it's like practicing something over and over and over again, it gives you confidence. And understanding – being able to sing and match those pitches and recognize those pitches – gives you confidence as well.

**SMITH** Exactly. And that's a kind of building block at looking at the larger structure, or pieces – knowing the intervals, the harmonies, the melodies – those building blocks. Then you can move onto learning bigger things about the architecture of the piece, and that's part of the program too.

**GORDON** Again, this is what is so intriguing to me about having all of our eight-year-olds doing this right from the very beginning. What are they going to be like when they're seventeen, if they really start this at eight? When I do do these juries for the intro class – you've got the kids in this room with their stuffed teddy bears, that they put down to go play the tetra chords on the piano! We're starting a tech class as well – a couple of tech classes – and talking to a perspective faculty member who said, "Oh my God, just think if you teach Pro Tools to a ten year old – what are they going to be able to do when they're in high school?!"

**SMITH** Well, we're talking about a formal study of art at a very young age, which they're not getting anywhere else. You're not studying works of literature or poetry or painting or sculpture at this level when you're eight years old, unless you're in some sort of strange art academy.

**GORDON** Or you have unusual parents.

**SMITH** Right. There are a couple of other things that I wanted to ask you about. Talk about the performance opportunities that are available to the Pre-College – and I’m also curious to know how important you think the performance opportunities are in relation to the rest of the training that they’re getting here, and the rest of the learning experience. What are the ways in which they perform, and how does that fit into the overall program?

**GORDON** It’s a bit of a sticky wicket with us. I think when we moved into this building that became a huge battle cry for the faculty – “Oooh, access to the halls! Access to the halls! Which is fantastic – it’s a wonderful thing for students. And we do have recitals – we have a division recital which is just an hour, and those are supposed to be students that are ready for prime time, and they can play pieces that are for ten minutes or less – and the recital is just an hour. And everybody’s supposed to come, so we have an audience. I’m really big on people inspiring each other, so I kind of demand that they inspire each other, and that they allow themselves to be inspired. And it works.

**SMITH** How do you demand that students inspire each other? By showing up?

**GORDON** Just by making it a requirement to come to recitals. We don’t have anything up against that recital.

**SMITH** There’s nothing else scheduled.

**GORDON** Right, because I think it’s extremely valuable to be able to play through your piece in a real hall. It’s a very different experience than playing it in a practice room, or in your teacher’s studio. However, it’s only marginally helpful if you don’t have an audience. It’s still helpful, but if you’re really trying to gain practice skills, you need an audience, because that’s a very important part. So I think also, as one raises musicians – or rears them – you need to teach them to be an attentive audience, that’s part of being a good musician. So I was a little – not offended, but concerned when I first got here about how much our students were focused on their particular three minutes on stage and nothing else here. We have changed the culture to a certain extent – it’s very fun at the end of the recital to hear people going out after hearing a spectacular violinist and say, “Oh my God, that was amazing!” And we get faculty members walking out saying, “OK, I’m going to practice now.” It’s part of our work, it makes everything easier if we’re inspired.

We have three wonderful halls, we have that sort of formal-ish recital, and we have people from the community who come every Saturday at 11:30 – this is their big thing, to come hear our kids, they love it. Then we have what I call “dress rehearsals” – and that’s really the opportunity to play through your piece in a hall. If I have a chunk of time we set it up, people sign up for it – they can play longer pieces, they can play through something that might not be quite ready but

their parents can film it and send it to the teacher, or whatever. So we do open up the halls for that as well. Music is such a personal thing. It's one's art, and people have different ways of having it in their lives. For me, there's no point in playing music unless you're going to perform at some point. Other people don't feel that way, they're very content to sit in their living room and play for themselves. And who am I to say that's not a good use of music in your life? I think for our kids, it's a very important skill to learn.

**SMITH** How will the chorus perform, and do the recitals every week include the chamber music performers and smaller ensembles?

**GORDON** Of necessity, we have "ghettoized" the chamber performances. We have already scheduled that out because we're going to have so many more groups. At the end of the semester there's a series of four chamber music recitals – concerts – and we also have a couple chorus concerts scheduled. We'll probably do some holiday thing.

**SMITH** Nice.

**GORDON** I know! How fun is that going to be?

**SMITH** So the performances are a vital piece of the education process for the students, and it compliments practice but each of these aspects are part of becoming a complete musician.

**GORDON** Yes, absolutely.

**SMITH** What do you think students learn by getting a chance to play in a hall with an audience? What is that they get from a performance that they're not getting from the practice room or in the classroom – singing back phrases that the teacher is asking them to remember?

**GORDON** Well, some people practice better than others, but the fatal flaw in practicing is that you practice things that you can do, rather than things that you can't do, because it's more annoying and we all want to play well. You're practicing along, and then you get to something that you can't do, so you play it fifteen times wrong and then you finally play it right, and then you move on. So you've basically practiced it wrong fifteen times and played it right once. I think when one prepares for a performance, and then actually does the performance, that becomes evident, and it teaches you how to practice correctly because it exposes what you haven't prepared. That's what happens in the dress rehearsals – you get out there and you have to play something straight through, as if it was a performance, and you understand where the weaknesses are.

We tend to practice in sections – you must, in order to learn. But then you need to be able to put it all together, and most of us don't spend enough time putting everything together. So that's part of it, and that's probably what most faculty members would say. For me, I think the biggest part of performance is understanding how your playing affects other people. We've all had that experience where you go out and you think, "Oh my God, that was just awful." And people come backstage who have heard you many times and they say, "Never have I heard you play so well." The idea that one's perception of what you're doing right under your fingers can be so different to you than it is to somebody in the audience is a huge thing to understand and learn from. And then eventually you start being able to hear it both as yourself and as an audience member. I always refer to it as this hyper awareness, where you can be concentrating on that guy's shoes in the front row as well as the passage coming up. It's a performance mode that is very exhilarating, I think. It's terrifying, but exhilarating at the same time.

**SMITH**                    So you're saying that the ability to maintain simultaneously two separate perspectives on what's happening.

**GORDON**                And adjust in the moment.

**SMITH**                    And adjust. It takes many performances to reach that.

**GORDON**                I think so. Some people are natural performers, but I certainly have had the feeling ... I'll be playing a whole Bach suite, for example, and if you get the sense that people are bored ... it ups your game. It's like – I'm not grabbing them. It's the same if you're giving a verbal presentation – you have to try to read people. You can't always fix it, but I think it's essential – it's an art form but it's based on communication.

**SMITH**                    Right. Do you think that – is there something distinctive about learning music as a young person – maybe athletics, or anything – that's a little bit different from the traditional academic subjects that are in schools where identifying your weaknesses where you're preparing a piece for performance and realizing that there's this fast passage that you just never learned, and then having to work through that – is that a distinctive discipline that's particular to classical music, that's valuable to make it a wider learning opportunity? A commitment to excellence, is I guess what I'm wondering. Being able to apply that in their lives elsewhere.

**GORDON**                Absolutely, and I'm sure they would tell you that. It's a commitment to excellence. You could pull out specific things. I could make a case that you only get from music – you only learn this skill specifically from music. But it's probably more the cumulative effect, all of these skills together that you can get. You do learn self-esteem, you do learn problem solving. Anybody who's tried to finger the passages in the first page of *Don Juan* understands problem solving.

**SMITH** Exactly, I was just thinking of *Don Juan* myself.

**GORDON** It's self-discipline. It's persistence, it's all of those things – you can't be a successful musician – empathy is a huge one for me. You can't be a chamber music player if you don't have empathy. You can be a soloist – sort of.

**SMITH** We haven't talked about Summer Music West, which ended in 2014, but I think we should hear about it and mention the summer programs that do exist today.

**GORDON** Summer Music West I think went through many iterations, and I know that people have talked with Laura Reynolds and will talk with Doris Fukawa, who lived and led it for thirty years, but it was really designed for students in the community who for whatever reason couldn't go to the big festivals like Aspen or Tanglewood or ones that are even designed for younger kids. This was right here, it was a day camp, as they referred to it. It was a lot of fun. I saw three years of it very closely – four years, actually, from when I started. Some years it had some good kids in it, some years it was a little scarier in terms of level. But I think it provided something wonderful for these students. There were short little snippets – two weeks for chamber music, two different age levels of chamber music – or levels of skill. And the Gilbert and Sullivan program, which we still have. It's brilliant – it's the Lamplighters, we collaborate with them, and they really do the whole thing, and it's their best people. Monroe [Kanouse] comes over and conducts, and Baker Peoples does all the musical preparation, Ellen Kerrigan is the director and the coolest thing that they do – this is designed for students ten through eighteen, boys and girls – they do scenes from all of the G&S shows, and the costumer brings all of the costumes over here and fits them to our kids. A student participating in this program in addition to all the vocal training and stage training they get to wear three different way cool costumes – there's always some twelve-year-old kid who's three feet tall who's singing "I am the very model of a modern major general" and she cuts down that costume to fit him. The concert at the end is always packed, full with content and a sold out Concert Hall. It's three hours straight of scenes, no break or anything. It's one of the best feel-good programs I've ever seen.

**SMITH** And Lamplighters – for our readers – is the major professional musical theater production company based in San Francisco that puts on Gilbert and Sullivan operas every year, and it's a nice partnership.

**GORDON** And many of our collegiate students have gone on to sing there.

**SMITH** That's right. But there are other sequences within the Summer Music West program.

**GORDON** There are the chamber music ones I referred to, which are strings, piano and winds. And then we had this composition intensive. We still retain that, but in the past it was five weeks – now it is down to three. These students come and write four pieces in the first week.

**SMITH** Oh, my goodness. That’s a lot of music.

**GORDON** In the past when we had chamber music going on simultaneously, we recruited students from the chamber music program to perform their compositions at the end of the intensive, which was really nice. This year because we didn’t have the chamber music, we hired musicians to play them, but the concert was fantastic – and we gave a prize, it was selected by the audience – we had voting and all of that. That’s an area within the Pre-College that is really growing, and that’s composition. So many of our students are taking composition as an elective, or as a major. We have a student who’s probably going to be studying with David Conte this coming year. What strikes me about these pieces is that they’re so cheery – you know, I was listening to all of the pieces over the summer, and they were mostly teenagers, and thought, “Where’s the Sturm and Drang?” They’re so happy!

**SMITH** The Adult Extension program is changing and evolving. We do continue to offer private instruction.

**GORDON** We do have private instruction, we have a small group of students who are doing that. I actually made a fairly decent push when I first got here to try to revitalize that program, which had been waning. We tried to start an adult extension chamber music program, and we’ve done a few other things. I think what we haven’t figured out, is given our limited resources and space, what works best, and how do we reach out to our current neighbors, which are government workers and tech workers. I’m pretty excited about coming up with a strategic plan for that. While the college was undergoing all of these changes and we were creating this new program with the Pre-College, our president asked us to put adult extension on ice for a while – until we could figure out what direction we wanted to go in, which makes a lot of sense to me because we were sort of floundering. In the past, some of the courses that were really popular back on 19th Avenue were the Learn it With Lou, which was the adjunct course to the Sing-It-Yourself-Messiah – all of these people paid money to come to a series of classes where they really learned the *Messiah*, so they could be the core in that giant audience that we had in Davies Hall.

**SMITH** This was called Learn it With Lou, or was that informally the name of the course?

**GORDON** Actually that was the name of the course, because Lou Major conducted it back then. And they would fill Hellman Hall with the class. And of course we also had Bob

Greenberg, who was doing a series of lectures that were extremely popular. Right now, we usually do offer an opera class with Kip Cranna.

**SMITH** In conjunction with SF Opera, right?

**GORDON** He sometimes plans it around what they're doing. This year we did Who's Afraid of Opera? where he just sort of gives an introduction, and helps people get settled.

**SMITH** And people do attend those classes.

**GORDON** They do attend. It's not oversold, but they do do that. Probably our most popular classes are our vocal performance classes that Heidi Moss does. They always culminate in a recital in the Recital Hall. She does wonderful work with them, and people sign up for them multiple times, they vary. We have a seventy-five-year-old woman who comes every year and sings her heart out. And sometimes there are people who are in-between undergrad and grad school who just kind of want to do this, and they're wonderful singers. It's probably the most human aspect of the school – is our Adult Extension program. I would love to see it grow into something that we can really be proud of, and that really serves our current neighbors.

**SMITH** I realize that we didn't actually cover all of your background, but you have quite an extensive working in music education for young people. You were the vice-president and dean of the Aspen Music Festival. When were you there?

**GORDON** 2001 through 2011.

**SMITH** Ten years. And before that you actually worked as a professional cellist for some time, is that right?

**GORDON** I was a freelancer for a long, long time. I kind of gradually stopped playing, but I stopped playing completely in Aspen because it was a huge job.

**SMITH** Were you working here in the Bay Area?

**GORDON** As a freelancer?

**SMITH** When you were playing the cello professionally, where was that?

**GORDON** Here, and in L.A. and D.C. I kind of moved to various places. Probably the only place where I made a fairly decent living in music was in D.C. When I was in school here in San Francisco, there were a zillion cellists out here. Between Margaret Rowell, Irene

Sharp and Bonnie Hampton, they attracted all the best students in the country. People would come out here to study, and they would stay because it was such a fun place to live. And so there were gazillions of us, and we were all good enough for all of these jobs, and it was just luck. So when I moved to Washington D.C. at some point – when was that, '89? – it was kind of fun for me because I auditioned for all of these orchestras, and I got in, had some really interesting experiences there, I played a lot of different sorts of gigs. I played backup for Smoky Robinson.

**SMITH**                    That's a good gig.

**GORDON**                And chamber music has always been central to me. I had a string trio there that actually did pretty well.

**SMITH**                    So you spent some years as a working freelance performer.

**GORDON**                Except for the years that I was in D.C., I always had a straight job because I was kind of a snob. I didn't want to take any music job that came along, I was picky. If it paid really well I took it no matter what, but otherwise it had to be somewhat musically satisfying. Just for me – I just didn't want to be one of those people. I don't enjoy doing music so I can say, "I'm a musician." It has to be meaningful and of a certain level. Now I really do sound like a snob.

**SMITH**                    No, I understand. And then at a certain point you made the transition to become a full-time administrator, and stopped performing.

**GORDON**                Actually, the admissions job here was the only job I ever had where I actually felt as satisfied as I did when I was playing and performing. That was always the thing – it was always like, "Well, it doesn't work for me to do something else." The job at Aspen where I worked with the guest artists – I worked with really high level students. The bulk of the students there are college age and older, so they're embarking on careers. I loved that demographic, so it was super fun. Very crazy, but kind of a dream job. I went thinking I would stay for three years, but that's how that happens.

**SMITH**                    Ten years, yeah.

**GORDON**                But it was there that I got so interested in pre-college age. I actually had some pre-college students from here come out there – we had very few students there under college age. But this was one of the places I would come to recruit, because they offered musicianship, and other things, and they could really play in orchestra, because it's an orchestra based festival. I started realizing over the course of the time I was there that the students who won the concerto competitions went from twenty-four-year-olds down to fifteen-year-olds, and

they're competing against the thirty-year-olds, but these kids – they're like super-kids. They have all this understanding and background and self-esteem, and they don't have the weight of those years. And I started thinking, "Wow, what could we do if we really pulled together an amazing music education for them? What kind of musicians are we going to produce in the future?" So I started paying more attention.

**SMITH**                      And now you're here. So is that your hope for the Pre-College here?

**GORDON**                     Absolutely. We're going to change the world.