Stephen Tramontozzi 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 June 8 and 9, 2016
Tessa Updike, Interviewer

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project

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

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

Stephen Tramontozzi Interview
This interview was conducted at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on June 8 and 9, 2016 by Tessa Updike.

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

Stephen Tramontozzi

Stephen Tramontozzi, assistant principal double bass of the San Francisco Symphony, studied with Robert Olson of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Oscar Zimmerman at the Eastman School of Music. He held the position of principal bass of the Symphony Orchestra of Sao Paolo, Brazil and has also performed with the Chamber Music West Festival, San Luis Obispo Mozart Festival, Grand Teton Music Festival and the Cabrillo Music Festival. Formerly on the faculties of Stanford University and the Universities of California at Berkeley and Santa Cruz, Tramontozzi currently serves on the faculties of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and Mills College. He has been called upon to present clinics and master classes for the Hammond Ashley Double Bass Symposium, Indiana University, University of Michigan, University of Texas, New England Conservatory, New World Symphony, Pacific Music Festival and the Asian Youth Orchestra. Engagements as a recitalist have taken him to Japan, Washington and throughout California. He received a B.M. from the New England Conservatory of Music, where he studied with Lawrence Wolfe, and an M.M. from the Conservatory.

UPDIKE Could you tell me where and when you were born – where you grew up?

TRAMONTOZZI I was born June 18, 1955 in a borough of Boston called Brighton. My earliest memories are of my paternal grandfather, Dominico Tramontozzi. He had come over in the '20s from Italy, having been born in Abruzzo, the region in the central part of Italy. My grandmother was born in the United States just after her Italian parents had immigrated to the United States, and I remember that my grandmother loved to sing at home while she was doing her chores, especially in church – she had one of the strongest voices in church. My grandfather really enjoyed listening to the accordion, which was a very popular instrument at the time in that part of Boston. My father and his two siblings were born and lived in this borough of Brighton that was settled originally by Irish Catholics and Italian Catholics. The community was such that everyone coexisted very peacefully, and very harmoniously. Flourished, in fact – shared a lot of cultural similarities. The accordion was one of those. My dad enjoyed listening to his uncles play the accordion, and that's when he became interested in music. My grandfather took him to a teacher and said, "Does my kid have talent?" and the teacher agreed to take him on.

My dad took regular accordion lessons all the way through high school, and then he entered the service. When he was assigned to the U.S. occupation of Germany he was stationed at the 279th U.S. hospital in Berlin. Part of his duties were to work at the hospital, but also to manage the German Youth Club that the U.S. Army had set up to help the German youth come together and enjoy social gatherings, and listen to music and dance. So he entertained the German youth of that day. And so it was at this youth club that my mother, who was born in Berlin, came to enjoy an evening. She saw and heard my dad play, and they eventually fell in love and got married there. Then they moved back to the Boston area and settled in Brighton. At the time it was important to raise a family, and so to make a good living my dad got a job at a bank and became rather successful at the banking business. But he never stopped playing music – in fact I can remember him leaving early in the morning for 8 o'clock work, coming home from 5 to 6, having dinner, and then going out to play a quick job. He would hire two or three guys, and they would go and play these social parties – weddings, bar mitzvahs, you name it.

UPDIKE Did he play any other instruments than the accordion – or did he sing?

TRAMONTOZZI Well, he could play some piano. In fact, when he was in the service he was asked to play the piano sometimes at the officer's club, and then the accordion. Even a chaplain had asked him to play organ at the church services.

UPDIKE And was your mother musical?

TRAMONTOZZI My mother always enjoyed music. She would always be listening to music on a radio, or listening to the phonograph. She had quite an extensive collection of phonographs … vinyl. So we would hear anything from popular music to operetta to classical, and I got a big taste of the musical world.

UPDIKE Did your father teach you accordion?

TRAMONTOZZI In fact he did. We started on piano, because when we were really small it was easier. When we were big enough and could hold a small accordion, he taught myself, and my brother and sister as well. When my brother was in fifth grade (he is a year older than I am) our public school was terrific in that they offered instrumental string instruction – class instruction on string instruments. Of course when you're a dad, it's hard to wear a lot of different hats, including the teacher of your son or daughter, so we all looked to playing another instrument. My brother chose the cello, and when I got to fifth grade I was very competitive with my brother. I went to the string instrument instructor – this curmudgeon from Czechoslovakia named Anton Kovar – and I asked him if I could play the cello as well. He said, "No! We have too many cellos. You play the double bass." I didn't know anything about it, or what it was. He showed it to me, and I was delighted because it was bigger – and that means it was better! Eventually my brother gave up the cello for drums, but I loved the bass and I stuck with it.

UPDIKE How old were you?

TRAMONTOZZI I was eleven. My first teacher of double bass my dad had found. His name was Henry Carrai, and he was a teacher of bass for beginners. He was especially good at it, and was also a gigging musician like my dad. Every week we would drive 45 minutes for my lessons, and he would give me exercises to learn each position. Each week I learned a new position and an exercise, and then eventually a piece. After one year he said to me, "I've taught you everything I know. Now I want you to find another teacher." So my dad searched around, and in his church community he had heard of a bass player in the church that was a member of the Boston Symphony. He approached him about teaching me, and this fellow, John Barwicki, said, "Well, I don't teach – but there is a new member of the Boston Symphony who just moved to the town you're living in." When I was about four or five we had moved from Boston to a residential suburb of Boston called Arlington. This new member of the Boston Symphony was Robert Olson, and he was just getting started as a teacher. I met him and we decided it was going to work out very well because after high school I could walk across the street and up the hill to his house and take regular lessons. Part of the benefit of taking lessons with him was I got to play my lessons on his instruments. I think it's really important for students to have a good instrument to play on – something that's flexible and set up really well so that the students can really learn what is possible on an instrument, rather than struggle physically – especially at tender young ages. So I studied with him for four years.

UPDIKE Could you describe him as a person?

TRAMONTOZZI He was Swedish – from Minnesota, he had studied there and eventually got a job in the Minnesota Orchestra. He was a very sort of quiet man – and then suddenly he'd blurt out wisdom. He was ingenious – he could make little things, and fix his own bass. He even taught me how to reroof houses, because he needed help reroofing his house. He was very methodical – he was organized with his teaching materials, and brought me along very methodically. I learned things from him that I think every young bass player should learn – for instance, how to use the reference points on an instrument to develop and establish the positions on the double bass so that you can rely on these reference points for good intonation. He exposed me to some repertoire that he favored that wasn't necessarily bass repertoire. He would write out organ fugue parts of Bach and have me play those. At some point he was smart about where I was at, and advised me to look for a new instrument. He knew that I was playing on an inexpensive plywood bass, and he thought that my development and talent deserved better, so he suggested I go out and look for instrument. I did quite a bit of that and didn't find anything that I liked better than what I was playing on in my lessons at his house.

UPDIKE His own instrument?

TRAMONTOZZI One of his instruments; he owned two or three. I asked him if he would sell me this instrument – the one I was playing on. Eventually he agreed. He said, "I'll sell it to you for what I paid for it, plus repairs that I put into it." That came to $900. It really was a wonderful older Eastern European instrument. It had an interesting voice. That was the instrument that I ended up playing all the way through my college career, and in fact got my San Francisco Symphony job on.

UPDIKE How old were you when you studied with him?

TRAMONTOZZI Fifteen to eighteen.

UPDIKE And at that point, did you know that was what you wanted to do with your life?

TRAMONTOZZI Good question. I was the kind of person that had to know what I was going to do for the rest of my life when I was a sophomore in high school. I struggled … I was very much interested in architecture, and some other disciplines, but I wanted to plan out the rest of my life, and I had to know. Was I going to do architecture, or music? I spent a lot of time thinking, and being quiet about it. The answer came, and it basically said: "You're going to be a musician." I felt such relief – now I know, and I can plan. I auditioned for youth orchestras, and

a very good youth wind ensemble, and I started taking theory lessons. By the time I got to my senior year of high school I had developed, for the first time in my high school, a music major program. I was a music major in my senior year, so I took all music courses except for the required English course.

UPDIKE Do you remember the first time you played in public?

TRAMONTOZZI Wow. I remember playing at the junior high level, but I don't recall the concerts. However, while I was in junior high I was contacted by the high school orchestra director saying, "We really need a double bass player down here! Can you come down and play with the high school?" I remember those concerts, and then eventually they needed not only a bass player for their orchestra concerts, but they also needed me to play their musicals.

UPDIKE Was that part of what you loved? The performance – or was it learning and thinking about the music? Or a combination.

TRAMONTOZZI When I play the bass in an ensemble … when I was younger the feeling was – you're really part of something bigger, something grand, in fact. That is the music; the idea of many people having one purpose – one goal – to bring this music to life. For me, that was really exciting.

UPDIKE So you studied with Oscar Zimmerman in college. How did you choose him? Did you go to that college because of Oscar Zimmerman?

TRAMONTOZZI When it was time to think about applying for colleges and universities I made applications to all the top schools and then made arrangements to audition, which meant a lot of driving. However – some schools, like the Eastman School of Music, actually came and did regional auditions, just as we do here now. The Eastman School had a regional audition in Boston, so I was able to go and play my audition there. Oscar Zimmerman was not part of the audition team. It was the dean that I remember. So I got accepted to a couple different schools, but the Eastman School gave me pretty much a full ride, and I knew of their reputation. At that time I knew it was a really good school, and that Oscar's reputation was such that he turned out a lot of good students, who were then successful in major symphony orchestras. I'd never visited the school prior to attending, and I hadn't met him until my first lesson. I think another part of it was – you want to get out of town.

UPDIKE And how did your parents feel about you going to school for music?

TRAMONTOZZI Oh, they were incredibly supportive. My mom and dad were both very proud. My dad at one time, prior to going into the service, really felt like he could make a living

being a musician, but upon returning from the service he found that it was up and down and not secure. And so that's why he went into the banking business – to get a more secure living. So they were very proud, and very supportive, and they even visited me there.

UPDIKE So what was it like when you got to Eastman? How was it different from Boston, and Arlington?

TRAMONTOZZI Eastman is in Rochester, New York, and that's a smaller city. The school itself is part of the University of Rochester, but the main university is on what they call the River Campus, and the Eastman School actually is downtown – separate from the River Campus. So you stayed in dorms that were a couple blocks away, and then when the winters got really cold and snowy it was very conducive to studying and practicing. They had great facilities – there were numerous practice rooms, great recording studios, the great Sibley Music Library, a wonderful concert hall to play in – and academics were somewhat challenging for me. Although I did manage to get into some of the advanced courses – mainly because when I decided I was going to be a musician, on my own I studied theory. I got books and every week I'd buy a new score. My interest was with Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, Copland – I was so attracted to newer music and did not connect so much with the Romantics at that time.

Of course I enjoyed playing Beethoven and Mozart, so I would get recordings and listen to them over and over, and follow the scores and mark them up – try to analyze things. I met this incredible teacher/musician in high school – he was a pianist and he taught piano in high school and in middle schools, but he also taught other theoretical courses. He decided to start this advanced theory course, and put up a notice – anyone interested would come to the first meeting of this class. He wanted to test all of us, so he went through various musical examples and asked us questions of them. I was answering everything, and then he said, "I'd like you to be in the class," but then he found out I was a freshman, and it was only for juniors and seniors! But he allowed me to take the course, and he was so generous and wanted me to succeed that he invited me and another lady to private theory lessons before school started. So I had a <u>lot</u> of theory. This guy was so amazing and inspirational – he was part of an improviser's society. For instance, one day he played a Bach chorale, and then he improvised in the style of Bach, and then he went into Mozart, and Beethoven, and Brahms. He ended up with something that sounded not unlike Scriabin, because Scriabin was one of his favorite composers. He was one of the biggest influences on me musically in those formative years.

UPDIKE He prepared you well for college.

TRAMONTOZZI Yes, so I was able to take advanced courses at Eastman. However, after my first semester at Eastman, I was struggling because my lessons with Oscar Zimmerman consisted of my going in, and he would assign to me a scale, an arpeggio, and we would play

through it. He would either play along with me on the piano, or he would solfege it with me. Then he would say, "I want you to play through this Billè etude," (Billè is a method book) and he would again play through it, or sing it with me, and he would say, "Now I want you to learn this Cuneo etude (another method book) and the first movement of this Baroque sonata." I did that all in my first lesson, however I could, and I would come back and play through all of that material with him playing or singing with me, and then he would give me another Billè etude, another scale and arpeggio, another Cuneo etude, another movement … it went on like that for the whole first semester. Every week he was just piling it on – the feeling was "sink or swim". I had many questions – "I have trouble doing this kind of bowing," or, "I don't understand how to finger this passage." He would say, "Just play it again!"

He was a wonderful, gentle guy – very generous and knowledgeable, and had great stories about when he played in the NBC Symphony under Toscanini and all that, and he would have this stub of a cigar on his lip the whole time. The whole studio reeked of cigar, and when you left the studio and went downstairs in the elevator people would ask, "Did you just have a lesson with Oscar? You smell like a cigar." I felt like I wasn't getting what I needed. I had all of these different questions, and I was struggling somewhat, physically, with the bow and what have you. So I went home for the winter vacation and was searching my soul for an answer to my situation. I ended up going back for the second semester, and at the end I knew it wasn't a good match. So I spent the summer studying with someone I had heard play a solo recital, and that was Larry Wolfe, who was a member of the Boston Symphony. He had joined the Symphony in 1969, right out of school, and he played a recital that was just so musical and accomplished. When I heard him I said, "I want to sound like that." So I studied with him, and decided that I eventually wanted to study with him at school, but it was too late for me to transfer out of Eastman so I went back for yet another year. I had to have a heart-to-heart with Oscar and say, "This is the way I feel – I'm struggling and I'd like to get more help in this area." He understood, and was willing to let me search for answers, but he didn't necessarily have the answers for me.

UPDIKE Was he the only double bass teacher at Eastman?

TRAMONTOZZI He was. I later surmised that he had success as a teacher mainly because he just threw so much material at people. That school attracted a lot of good talent too, so those people, if they were able to do all that material, they would overcome all these obstacles.

UPDIKE If they weren't having technical difficulties.

TRAMONTOZZI Right.

UPDIKE So you studied with Oscar for two years at Eastman. And then you studied with Larry for two years?

TRAMONTOZZI I did. He was one of the instructors at the New England Conservatory of Music, along with Henry Portnoi, who was principal of the Boston Symphony at that time.

UPDIKE And what was it like being back in Boston?

TRAMONTOZZI Actually, at the end of my second year I had met a woman and got married. So I was moving back to Boston, but I was not moving back in with my parents – I was on my own. Not only was I studying, but I was also looking for freelance work. I did OK, and my wife at the time was also working – she was a soprano. Somehow we made it work … apartment living, and getting a hand-me-down car from my dad … that kind of thing.

UPDIKE And what was Larry like as a person, and as a teacher? How was his teaching style different from Oscar Zimmerman?

TRAMONTOZZI Larry was very talented and in fact got his job with the Boston Symphony even before he had graduated from the New England Conservatory. He was so musical, and held no limits. For example, if he heard a violin lick, he'd figure out how to do that on the bass. He really gave me a lot of fundamental concepts of how to be a musician. Things like: technique serves the music. What do you want it to sound like? What is the musical demand of a given passage or piece? Is the fingering serving that moment? Is the bowing serving that musical need? That kind of thing. He gave me a lot of technical concepts to think about and to hold as I developed my musicianship. He was very generous with his time, he was very friendly. You felt like he was your buddy.

He was actually somewhat new at teaching, but he had so much to share. In a typical lesson with him, he would explain something, and then he would explain it again, but a different way … and then he would explain it again. He might explain it seven different times – to the point where I said to him, "Larry, just play it." And he did – he would play it, and I'd go, "I got it! I know what you're talking about now." Part of the reason why that worked was because as musicians we learn in many different ways. We learn by imitation, perhaps, early on – listening to our teachers play, listening to recordings. But of course at some point you're going to have to make it your own. You don't want to imitate someone, and that's it. That's only a starting point. When he gave us all these generous explanations about "how to do it" – those things stick. They support what you're hearing. Later, when I chose to teach, I could draw on a lot of those. In fact, I started teaching when I was a student at the New England Conservatory – I started teaching some private lessons.

UPDIKE And did you go to listen to Larry at the Symphony often?

TRAMONTOZZI A few times. I had listened to the Boston Symphony quite a few times when I was in high school – I'd go in and check it out. It was at a time when Michael Tilson Thomas was Principal Associate Director, or something like that, and was responsible for certain programs, including what was then called the Spectrum Concert Series, which were concerts that were innovative in their programming. Maybe one concert was about multiple orchestras – pieces that had more than one group. Maybe they included music of composers of the day, like Steve Reich. I was able to go to these concerts because I was invited by Bob Olson, who was my teacher in high school.

Larry was good about playing recitals from time to time, and I was very good about going to those, and was very inspired by them. I would actually go and listen to the tapes of those recitals over and over again.

UPDIKE What sort of repertoire would he play for his recitals?

TRAMONTOZZI He did a combination of standard solo bass rep at the time, which would be Bottesini, and what we call the Paganini *Moses* Variations. Things that Gary Karr, who was a well-known soloist of the day, would perform. Larry would play contemporary music too, so he would find these obscure contemporary pieces. And the third thing he liked to do was transcribe music, so he for instance would transcribe the Schumann *Fantasy* Pieces – nobody had done that kind of thing at that time. His main concept of playing music on a double bass was that we're playing music on a string instrument – the double bass is a member of the violin family, and we need to play it as if you were playing a violin, or a cello – we shouldn't have these old preconceptions or limitations.

UPDIKE Were you interested in transcribing pieces yourself at that age?

TRAMONTOZZI I did eventually transcribe quite a number of pieces. When I was in college I'm not sure I transcribed very much.

UPDIKE How did you first hear about the Conservatory in San Francisco?

TRAMONTOZZI After graduating from the New England Conservatory, I was living in that community and had to make a living, so I waited by the phone for it to ring and offer me work. I was getting some work, and I knew that area was saturated with musicians and it was going to be a slow process of breaking in for the better work. So after I graduated, in June I went to Tanglewood and participated in that program there. Then I settled down in my place in Boston. I had seen an announcement for an audition for an orchestra in Brazil. There already was a city orchestra, but they wanted to form the state orchestra of São Paulo. They were looking to audition and recruit musicians from all over the world to come and make São Paulo their home. I

answered that audition call. I knew the concert master of that orchestra – he was a member of the Boston Symphony, and was a Brazilian who had come to the New England Conservatory to study. He eventually got a job in the Boston Symphony, but now he was being asked by the music director Eleazar de Carvalho to come back to his homeland and lead the string section.

So I auditioned for this orchestra, and was offered the job as principal along with maybe 14 other musicians who auditioned from New York and Boston – in fact, one good friend of mine – another bass player. We all went down to Brazil in February of that year and joined this fledging orchestra. It was really an adventure – it was kind of crazy. We rehearsed and played a few concerts, and then we were to go on a tour of Brazil with these programs. We started out in Manaus, which is in the heart of the Amazon – this city where there's a famous opera house/concert hall that was built by the rubber barons. So we played a concert there, and then we went to Belém, which is at the mouth of the Amazon, and Fortaleza, and Natal, Joao Pessoa, Recife, and eventually to Rio and back to São Paulo. It was a terrific experience because I got to see more of Brazil than most Brazilians. And getting experience too, as an orchestra musician – not only contributing musically, but also with my leadership, because I was now principal. I was dealing with a Hungarian guy, a Venezuelan, and a couple of Brazilians. It was a trip – we had a blast.

UPDIKE Do you have any stories from touring in Brazil that you could share?

TRAMONTOZZI Oh, my God, yeah. We were in Belém, and we were going to Fortaleza. We were flying in two groups on VASP Airlines. They were using jets that were hand-me-downs from the national Varig Airlines of Brazil, who were using hand-me-downs from, say, United. So our plane took off, and we landed in Fortaleza, and we all checked into our rooms. Hours passed, and the other plane never arrived. We later heard that as the second plane took off, the rudder got clipped by some wires, and the plane had only enough control to turn and re-land. So the second group of the orchestra didn't make it that night, and we had to quickly assemble chamber music, and play chamber music for the concert. They arrived the next day, and we all got on a plane and flew to Salvador, which is the capital of Bahia. We played our concert there in a beautiful concert hall made out of Jacarandá which has an incredible sound. After that concert we left the next day (a lot of people are nervous about flying now) and we take off … Bahia means "bay" and so as we take off we're flying very low over the water, and everybody's just freaking out. Later we find out the pilot wanted to show us the view! And then another time we were flying from one city to another and we are all seated on board. All of a sudden the ground crew is bringing on suitcase after suitcase and lining them up and putting them in the aisle, so you can't walk in the aisle. We find out the reason was because we were on this plane as well as a soccer team. So there was just so much equipment in the bottom of the plane that they had to put the suitcases in the aisle – of course that's totally illegal, but anyway…. Those were some of our tour stories.

UPDIKE Traveling with a double bass can't be easy, either.

TRAMONTOZZI Before the tour they had a carpenter come around, and he measured all of our basses, and about a week later he came with these trunks made out of plywood that fit our basses perfectly. This orchestra had never travelled. They moved all that stuff, so we didn't have to.

UPDIKE How long were you in Brazil?

TRAMONTOZZI I was there for one season. The end of the season included going to do the orchestra's music festival, which was primarily chamber music. It was up in the mountains, and it was beautiful. The setting was like a Swiss village, and it was cool. I actually got to play the *Four Seasons* with Ruggiero Ricci on violin, which was nice.

You asked about the San Francisco Conservatory, and by that time I had decided to not stay in Brazil. I felt like I really wanted to have a career in the United States. There were some Americans who went down who decided to stay there, they really enjoyed the whole scene, and some of them are still there. But I really wanted to come back to the United States. I had the thought that I could go back to Boston and try to break back into the freelance world and then take auditions as they came up from there, which I thought would be a struggle. All the music schools were churning out musicians in that area. And then I thought, "I'll come to San Francisco, maybe." And that was because my wife from that time was from this area. We came basically with nothing – we said, "We want to live here." When we first came we lived in San Jose, and I was trying to do some freelancing and make connections – take whatever auditions there were. It was very hard. I think the Bay Area at that time was much more provincial than it is now. There wasn't as much going on musically.

UPDIKE This was the late '70s?

TRAMONTOZZI This was the late '70s. Those musicians that were working had it all sewed up, so it was kind of hard to break in. I ended up working as a temp at places like Intel Corporation – pushing paper. Again, after six months of that, I had this angst – this seminal moment where I had to figure out – am I a musician or not? And if I am, I have to really make a push for that. So I quit work and I practiced. I auditioned for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music because I thought that there were many benefits to studying here, including further musical development, but also making connections, and making music with other people. There was already an established musical community at the school.

UPDIKE Could you describe your audition?

TRAMONTOZZI Do you want the truth? There were two auditions. I walked into the room, and in the room was the dean, the bass instructor at the time, Charles Siani, and one of his better students. I played the audition, and I thought it went fairly well. Prior to that audition, even while I was working as a temp, I arranged a couple performances of a solo recital, so I was in pretty good shape. So I played this audition, and at the end the dean leaves the room, and Mr. Siani came up to me and said, "Well, we're not going to give up on you yet. We want you to come to the school as a special student," (special meaning not being in a degree program) "and then after six months of that we want you to re-audition to see if you can get into the Master's program. He basically was saying no. That was upsetting, and I thought it was odd that it was just him and a student that were adjudicating. So I went to the dean and expressed my dismay and my feelings about the whole thing. I decided not to be a special student at the school – I was discouraged.

I ended up continuing to work in Silicon Valley, and practicing, and then I decided that I was going to audition again and prove myself. So I did – I auditioned again. This time it was Zaven Melikian – head of the string department and a violin teacher – the bass teacher, and the dean. Maybe someone else – maybe [Isadore] Tinkleman. I played this audition, and after I played Zaven came up and hugged me, and said, "Wonderful! Congratulations! Welcome to the school." The face of Mr. Siani was indescribable…. Afterwards, he came up to me and said, "Why do you want to come to this school and study?" I said, "Because I want to get my Master's degree." He said, "Why this school, and not some other school back East where you come from?" I said, "Because this is my home now, and where I want to go to school." He thought long and hard, and he said, "Well you know, I don't take any crap in my lessons." And I said, "Well you know, I don't give any." From that moment on I was his best student – he was very supportive. He was also the instructor at San Francisco State, and pretty much anybody who was working in town had studied with him – he had maybe even taught them in high school, and brought them up … they were all his boys. It was that kind of scene. I was the first person to sort of challenge that "old boy network."

He was one of the best things that could have happened to me. It's really surprising how it played out. He gave me challenging pieces to play, and excerpts, and my lessons basically were like this – I'd go in feeling prepared, and I'd play, and he'd say, "That note's out of tune! That rhythm isn't exactly right! You've got to fix this!" I couldn't get away with anything, he was just such a nitpicker – very particular. So after a lesson I'd go, "Dang! Next time, it's going to be perfect!" It really made me examine myself more. I listened better while I was playing – I practiced better – and I ended up playing better. It was really good for me. It was like this extra set of big ears that I needed at that time. I could play pretty well, and I could get through almost anything, but to really get over the top…. It was during that first year I studied with him that there was an audition for the Opera orchestra. This was in 1979, where the Davies Symphony Hall was being built, and was going to open in 1980. A lot of the musicians that played in the

Opera played in the Symphony, because the Symphony and the Opera had to share the same venue – the Opera House. The Symphony in fact was not a full-time job – it was only 9 months, and the Opera was a 3-3.5 month job. So when Davies Hall was nearing completion the musicians in both orchestras were told that they had to make a choice between taking the job at the Opera or the Symphony. So that created a number of openings at that time – probably the largest hiring period. I auditioned for the Opera, and got into the finals, which were going to be a few weeks later. In the meantime, I auditioned for the San Francisco Symphony, and I won the position. Mr. Siani says to me, "Don't take the Symphony job! Wait 'til the Opera finals and see what they are for you!" He really wanted me to be in his orchestra. By that time he had decided to leave the Symphony – he was second chair there – and he became principal of the Opera orchestra. I said, "I'm sorry, but a bird in the hand…." So that's when I got the San Francisco Symphony job.

UPDIKE And that was a year into your Master's program?

TRAMONTOZZI Right. So that was May of 1980. I want to go back and say one thing. The very next day after auditioning for the Master's program at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music I was offered sub-work at the Symphony and the Opera. In other words, that's basically how it worked – if you were in Mr. Siani's favor, he would recommend you.

UPDIKE How many other double bass students were there at the Conservatory at that time? Do you remember?

TRAMONTOZZI I think we were about five.

UPDIKE And what was your impression of the Conservatory compared to Eastman or the New England Conservatory?

TRAMONTOZZI The Conservatory when it was out on Ortega was in this residential neighborhood – quite an extensive residential neighborhood. It was a small facility, and all the students lived close by and rented studio apartments, and one bedrooms. Sometimes they shared flats. But the life centered around the school in that area. Everybody had their favorite local restaurant. So you got to know everybody – it was a smaller student body, you were in closer quarters. I felt like, for instance, the Concert Hall was smaller and couldn't accommodate a big orchestra, so you had to make adjustments there. There were almost no permanent teaching studios – teachers had to reserve a room to teach in – but it worked out. I enjoyed the library there.

UPDIKE Could you describe the library?

TRAMONTOZZI Every useable space was used. There was an angled roof, and you were walking down narrow corridors. You could get lost in there and not be found. I really enjoyed the listening part of it, and exploring sections. It was a tactile place – you could see, and touch, and look at stuff real easily.

UPDIKE And Hellman Hall was fairly new at that point too – it opened in 1976.

TRAMONTOZZI Yeah, and it got quite a bit of use, because so many ensembles had to use that hall.

UPDIKE Do you remember any other students from that period? Did you form any smaller chamber ensembles when you were a student?

TRAMONTOZZI Krista Bennion, she was a force, musically. And Jenny Culp. I was very good friends with Jenny, and I enjoyed playing chamber music with Jenny, and others. I had gotten all of my academics done in one year, and when I got the Symphony job at the end of that year I still had a requirement, which was to do another recital. So I had worked it out with the dean's office and with Mr. Siani that I would decide on a solo recital program with him. He was really great about that – I would present it to him from time to time. But that year is when John Adams came on board to be the school orchestra's music director. It was an exciting time because we did a world premiere of his *Common Tones in Simple Time* in Hellman Hall. In fact, I ended up taking composition with him as an elective course.

UPDIKE What was that like?

TRAMONTOZZI He was very supportive. He kind of let you go and do something, and then you'd come back and he'd give you some impressions of it, and encouragement.

UPDIKE Is that what you wrote the *Quintet for Brass* for?

TRAMONTOZZI Right. We had that goal, where you had to have a composition performed. He said he liked what I wrote. I think his main message to me was to develop things further. From time to time when I would see him as a member of the San Francisco Symphony – he was composer in residence – he would come to me and say, "Have you written anything lately?" I think I also took an advanced analysis class with him.

UPDIKE Were there any other teachers from that time who stood out to you?

TRAMONTOZZI Was it Wyatt Insko? He was so full of great stories.

UPDIKE I know you've talked about Siani a little bit, but could you describe him more as a person, and as a mentor and teacher?

TRAMONTOZZI He had very strong opinions about the way things should be done on the double bass. If you had a different idea, it had better sound good. It was initially very formal.

UPDIKE I don't think I've ever seen a picture of him. Could you describe what he looked like?

TRAMONTOZZI He was taller, short hair, mustache … of Italian extraction. Well dressed, usually. I did get to play in the Opera while I was a student. It was an incredible experience – we did *The Flying Dutchman* without intermission … a lot of notes. The other was Strauss's *Elektra*. So I got to sit very close to him in the pit. I think where he influenced me was in his sound production in that scenario. He really had a presence. You had to work to match his pitch, and understand his dynamic approach to things. He was a very strong leader in that regard. It was a good experience for my future of playing principal.

UPDIKE How many years were you in the Symphony before you started teaching at the Conservatory?

TRAMONTOZZI Well I started in the Symphony in 1980, the fall, and in 1985 I went to Munich to compete in the International Solo Double Bass Competition. I was staying with my German uncle outside of Munich, and practicing for this competition. I received a phone call from the Conservatory asking me if I would consider being a teacher here. Apparently Mr. Siani had decided to retire, kind of last minute. So that's where I was, about five years later.

UPDIKE Did you finish the competition?

TRAMONTOZZI I did – in fact, I took a trip around, because it was July, and I had the whole month of August off.

UPDIKE Is that something that you wanted to do? Did you see yourself as a teacher?

TRAMONTOZZI I did see myself as a teacher. I had already been teaching privately – I taught when I was in school in Boston. I didn't teach in Brazil, but when I came here I had a few private students – word of mouth. That started to take off; I started getting more and more students. I think that's how I got the job – the word was out there, and I was already known as a teacher. I was doing it because I was having some success at it. I was very much aware that music is an art that's passed down orally. Paper is only sort of a map, but you really have to have

one-on-one interaction with musicians to hand this down from generation to generation. I really felt strongly about that.

UPDIKE And what was it like to come back to the Conservatory as a teacher?

TRAMONTOZZI I really had to understand the requirements that the students had. I had to get more organized with my materials. You're dealing with an institution, so you have to understand your obligations regarding procedure and that kind of thing. But I think it was pretty smooth.

UPDIKE Were there changes that you made in the curriculum when you started?

TRAMONTOZZI Yes, I was asked to give input on the requirements for auditions for both bachelor's and master's, and also for end-of-the-year juries.

UPDIKE Could you describe some of the changes that you made?

TRAMONTOZZI An important activity of mine as a faculty member is the entrance audition. There, my main job is to get an overview of the student's abilities – but also it's very important to understand the potential of a student. My ability to see their potential was enhanced by experience. So I understood that every student that comes to audition is a mixed bag of various strengths and weaknesses depending on their instruction and their life experiences. I would really run down a list – they're deficient in this area, but they're strong in these areas. Once I've determined that I feel their potential is worth investing in, and accept them, then I know in the beginning (and I'm speaking mostly about freshman) that I'll have to fill in the gaps in their technique, and in their musical sensibilities and knowledge. So when I made requirements, I wanted to make sure the requirements were graduated – an emphasis was put on Baroque music, and then Classical, eventually including Romantic and contemporary music.

I didn't want students to be overwhelmed. It's important to have successful experiences in performing, and a jury is a kind of performance, so I wanted to fine tune how many movements of a suite or a sonata are required – what kind of technical presentation they should make as well – and then the inclusion of excerpts, initially as an add-on, but eventually that became an essential part of their jury. Here we are as bass players – a lot of what we're going to do is playing in an ensemble – orchestra and otherwise. Having said that, I think our main job is to teach the whole musician – not just be teaching, "Here's how you play this excerpt," and, "I'll give you all the bowings and fingerings," and that's it. No – the more solo music you play, the more chamber music you play, the more you study scores, the better you're going to play excerpts.

UPDIKE And how would you describe your teaching style at that time? Did you draw from experiences that you had with your own teachers? Molding yourself into the teacher that you would have wanted?

TRAMONTOZZI I felt like I was needing to get to know the person. In order for me to share what I have with them, I need to communicate with them, and avail myself of all of the skills of communication – verbal, physical gestures, singing, and playing. I need to understand how that person thinks, and how they react to what I offer them. In other words, if I say something to them, I want them to give me feedback. "What did you hear me say?" Or, "What did you understand of that?" And then at some point I start understanding our dynamic. I learned that I have to teach everyone a little bit differently. I couldn't just spew out the same directions to everybody, because not everyone gets it that way. I have to find a multiplicity of ways to communicate one idea with many different people. That was a big deal for me back then.

I feel like I can get to that place with a person quicker now. There are some people that learn better from imitation initially – they get a lot from the sensations of playing – so I actually join them in their playing. I will take their hand, and we'll both play together – I do that sometimes. I show them things visually … play for them a lot. Hopefully I can still play things that they need to work on! I think that I am being educated at the same time. I love the way different people think differently. I remember that if you only do something a certain way, you box yourself in. You set yourself a limit. For instance, I can have a student come in and they will have fingered something a different way, and I might early on have had a knee-jerk reaction – "No! You can't do it like that!" But now I'm more – "Well, let me look at that." I always try to hold musically what it should sound like, and then I'll try this new fingering and I'll say, "Is there something that is gained by this new way of looking at it?" I've learned, and my technique has improved, because of a student's fresh look at something.

TRAMONTOZZI I thought it was really important to do faculty recitals, so the students could hear you play. It's also really part of my growth as a musician – to not be part of a group of 100, but rather be responsible for one part, or the whole thing, depending on the repertoire. And making all the musical decisions, and forming a personality musically. And bringing across a sense of style and understanding of that person that you're trying to bring to life.

UPDIKE How has the repertoire for bass evolved over the past 30 or 40 years? Is there a lot more solo repertoire today than there was back then?

TRAMONTOZZI There's quite a bit more. Historically, there's chamber music and solo music written by virtuosi of the day – take Domenico Dragonetti, who was born in Venice and at an early age identified as having a lot of musical talent, so they handed him a bass; a really fine double bass, and he developed by leaps and bounds, and actually was sent off on his own solo career. But part of being a soloist in those days as a bass player – and later generations as well – there wasn't much solo repertoire in the Baroque era or the Classical era because the bass was not conceived as a solo instrument initially – it was thought of as an ensemble instrument. But people like Dragonetti who mastered the technique on the instrument and wanted to do more than ensemble work – they had to actually write their own music. So Dragonetti wrote many concert pieces for himself – solo – wrote pieces for himself and piano, and some duo pieces. And in fact wrote six concertos for double bass and orchestra.

A bit later in Germany, Sperger wrote his own concerti and sonatas, and enjoyed the admiration of Haydn and others at the time. Later, Serge Koussevitzky, who was a conductor; he started his career out as a double bass soloist, and he wrote his own concerto and salon pieces. All of them also were very active in transcribing music. The first place you'd look would be the cello repertoire, and transcribe Baroque sonatas for cello, or classical sonatas. Koussevitzky, for instance, would transcribe Romantic salon pieces. So we had to settle on playing that kind of music for many generations, but along the way from time to time someone would write something for double bass, if they were inspired by, say, seeing Dragonetti perform, or Bottesini – who I left out. Bottesini, in Italy, in the mid-1800s – the incredibly great virtuoso double bass soloist and conductor and composer – he wrote many operas, and conducted the premiere of Verdi's *Aida* in Cairo. He predominantly played his own music, and he was quite prolific. In any event, Mozart was inspired to write a concert aria for double bass and bass baritone and string orchestra. Glière was inspired to write pieces for the double bass when he heard Koussevitzky play – and many others. Dittersdorf, I think, wrote for Sperger. Vanhall wrote also for classical solo bass.

But anyway, moving into the 20th century, we still have the mover/shaker Gary Karr, a famous soloist who is in semi-retirement now. He was very active in commissioning music from composers of his time, so we have quite a bit of contemporary music written for the double bass, and of course the evolution of technique on the double bass has evolved incredibly fast in just the last century. So composers were encouraged by that, and not just for writing solo music for double bass, but also for writing chamber music. We have quite a bit of chamber music now that includes double bass.

UPDIKE This might be a good time to talk about the works that you've commissioned recently from Conservatory faculty members.

TRAMONTOZZI This past season I was asked to perform on both composition faculty members David Conte and David Garner's faculty concerts. In both cases I was very much moved and impressed by their music, and so after performing them I was moved to commission both of them for works of chamber music that would include the double bass and other instrumentalists, and/or vocalists. Both of them were very excited by the prospect. I believe David Conte's going to write a set of songs for our new voice faculty member Susanne Mentzer, and Richard Savino on guitar, and myself – I believe texts of Latin or Italian poetry. And David Garner – I played on a set of songs for his vocalist wife, and Emily Laurance [harp] and Kevin McLaughlin [trumpet], and that was a lot of fun, and that sound world was really engaging. David wants to write something for myself on double bass, and oboe doubling on English horn, and clarinet doubling on bass clarinet. So we'll try to figure out more later. The whole idea is that these two works will be presented, along with a number of other innovative projects, on my faculty recital this coming April [2017].

UPDIKE You told me yesterday that when you are on tour in other places and other countries you frequently go to music stores to look for new music that could be used for double bass. Do you want to talk a little bit about that? Maybe some of the pieces that you've found on tour that you've performed?

TRAMONTOZZI I noted that the library, when I first joined as Conservatory faculty, was deficient in repertoire for the double bass, outside of the excerpt book, or a few of the standard repertoire sonatas, so I made it my mission to peruse and scour all the music stores of the various places that I would end up on tour – in Amsterdam, or London, or any number of cities in Germany. I would just buy up whatever I found there. My plan was (and is) to get to know this music and select various pieces, and form a program. And every year to present that recital program here at the Conservatory. After the concert I would include that music in the library collection so that by the time I retire, the library here will be quite extensive in the bass department.

UPDIKE Do you find things that are specifically written for solo double bass, or are you usually looking for cello pieces?

TRAMONTOZZI All that I'm looking for is music written for the double bass. Occasionally, if I'm not finding much in a store in the double bass racks I'll look at the cello racks and I'll say, "This looks interesting," and I'll pick that up and decide whether I want to transcribe it or not.

UPDIKE How often do you transcribe things that you find? Is it something you do on a regular basis?

TRAMONTOZZI Pretty much. A big project was discovering Prokofiev's forgotten piece for cello and piano called *Ballade*. A very important piece to him – one that he performed many, many times when he was a student. I was so struck by that piece and its power so that I spent a lot of time playing through it, and transcribing it in my mind first, and deciding, "Yes, this is worth doing." And then knuckling down and getting the music software going, and producing the edition for bass. That particular piece works very well for bass – in fact, you can play every note that he wrote at pitch – at the pitch that he wrote. You don't have to take anything down a notch.

UPDIKE Once a musician has transcribed something like that, how is it made available to other musicians? Is it by word of mouth, or could a double bassist at Curtis or Juilliard search and find that transcription?

TRAMONTOZZI A transcription would be automatically copyrighted. So that particular one is my copyright, but I would love to have others play it. One way to do it is to publish on your own and make it available on various sheet music stores, or online sheet music websites. And we have the wonderful International Society of Bassists, where you can actually look at and purchase music hardcopies or PDF versions. That's what I do – I try to give them copies of my transcriptions.

UPDIKE So they would have that on their website.

TRAMONTOZZI Right.

UPDIKE The world is changing.

TRAMONTOZZI It's getting easier in some ways, and smaller.

UPDIKE When we left off yesterday, we were talking about your teaching style, and when you started teaching at the Conservatory, and a little bit about the department and

curriculum when you started. Are there students that you'd like to talk about over the years? Or how your teaching has changed over the past 30 years?

TRAMONTOZZI I think my teaching has benefited from experience, from teaching many different kinds of people at various levels, and gaining the experience about what works – what is more effective and what is not as effective, and helping them. So now when I teach I feel like I can analyze what they're doing and ask the appropriate questions right away. What I mean by that is – something's not going well with their playing, and I will ask them, "Is it your right hand? Is it your left hand? Is it coordination between the two hands?" Depending on the answer, you can go down the line and say, "Well, if it's your right hand, what about your right hand needs to be changed or fixed?" Meaning right arm – bow arm – and there's a whole list of things that we can explore and eliminate, and eventually come to the solution of their particular issue. So I get to that place much quicker now because of experience.

I also find that I'm now an even better listener. For instance, not just listening to what they sound like, but also what they're saying when they tell me what's going on with them, or even just their body language. If I listen to that, that may be key to the real problem, or the real solution. I think that also, as a faculty member here, you wear many hats. Of course you're supposed to be their inspiration, their example – you're supposed to instruct them. You have to be their mentor, sometimes life coach. You have to reflect for them, you have to discipline them sometimes. There's a lot that you have to do – it's not just, "OK, we have one hour, we have to work on this material." There's a lot more that goes on there. I always like to give them more time. First of all, if you're a double bassist, coming into the studio – you want to get set up, there's some equipment to deal with – stools and all that. I want to give them an hour and 15 minutes – sometimes more – but I gauge that. I find that I have often more stamina and energy than they do – as young as they are. I can tell when they start phasing out, or glazing over. I also want to be more flexible with schedules.

I know that they can be so busy with class, and ensemble, but also in life – they're gigging sometimes, they're playing in outside youth orchestras, so I make sure that I'm flexible – but at the same time I want to make sure that I have a structure that they are aware of so they don't abuse my flexibility. I also find that the school year has a kind of rhythm, so you can get super busy at times – say, midterms, and the like – orchestra rehearsals, writing papers. I try to be aware of that, and I might suggest that we don't have a lesson at our regular time, but maybe wait a few days and have a lesson later. Or we'll skip a week, and have two lessons the next week, or something like that. Or as we're approaching juries I might schedule more time with them – especially since they spend months on their solo rep and they've learned their part of the music, but at the same time I make them aware while I'm teaching them what the whole music is about. So if they're playing a sonata with piano, making them aware of what's going on in the whole music, so that they don't just focus on their part. In fact, I encourage them to work with a

pianist, if they're playing a piece that involves piano, more regularly if possible. It's good for your development, because what can happen is they'll work on their own part, and then two weeks before the jury they get together with the pianist and they're totally thrown off because they're used to playing their part their way – hearing it in their head. When the pianist plays, they forget the fact that they're making music together with someone. So they're not used to listening while playing – that's a really fundamental, but learned skill. So I'll need to spend more time.

UPDIKE Do you do coachings with your students and the pianists?

TRAMONTOZZI Yes. It's essential, because you want to address the whole music, and the pianist has to play the phrase in the correct style so that it complements the solo part. Or if there's counterpoint or question/answer in the music, that is attended to so it all has integrity. So I've had to coach pianists too!

UPDIKE So typically during the school year you spend an hour and a half every week with each student?

TRAMOTOZZI An hour to an hour and a half with each. I'm not supposed to, but I do.

UPDIKE And how much time do you recommend students to practice each week?

TRAMONTOZZI That's a really good question, and sometimes they'll ask me that. It's a more complex answer. First of all, you want to make sure that you take care of yourself physically so that when you practice … I advise them to take numerous short breaks so you don't lose track and get defocused. Physically, you want to take time, because this instrument requires a lot of physical activity. Having said that: if they do take numerous breaks, I find that I can actually practice longer. Ultimately, the most important thing is for them to learn how to set goals for their practice. Too often I'll see young students come in, and they just start banging away practicing, and playing through stuff … and playing through stuff … and playing through stuff – and really not getting much done. You want them to set goals. If it's a piece of music I'd say, "Why don't you section off the piece and learn eight bars of this piece, and look at various fingering combinations? In fact – even before you do that, you can listen to the music, read it through on the piano, sing it, and then sit down and finger it and consider different bowings – and then evaluate at the end of that period of time where you're at. One way to do that would be to sit down and play through it, and say, 'My next goal is to work on the next eight bars.'" Another way to set goals is to say, "I know this piece, but I need to identify those places that need work." So they might play through the piece and record it for themselves, and listen back and identify the places that have intonation or rhythmic problems, or tonal problems, and then make as a goal – "The next half hour I'm going to work on the intonation of this piece on these particular spots." Of course intonation depends primarily on our ears, and the concept of what

the pitch should be – but physically it depends on spacing in our left hand, and shifting. So those are the questions I ask – why is that note out of tune? Is it because of the shift, or the spacing, or both? Just having goals along the way, you get a lot more done, and you can get more done in less time if you have these goals. You can have short term goals like that, or you can have long term goals – "OK, I've learned all six movements of the third cello suite by Bach. But I've never performed them, or played through all of them." So one goal might be: "Today I'm going to play through the whole first prelude?." Another goal might be, "Now I want to play through the first three movements." That kind of thing – working up to the eventual performance.

UPDIKE And what are the performance opportunities for students at the Conservatory? How many recitals do they give, and how long would they prepare for something like that? Is it a year long process, where they identify the repertoire at the beginning of the year and work through it to perform in the spring semester?

TRAMONTOZZI The rep and the work is based on the jury requirement. So as an undergrad for the first three years you have jury requirements for instance that might have you play the first two movements of a concerto, and a whole sonata, and then maybe a series of three or four excerpts. Or later it might require a whole concerto, and a whole sonata, and a contemporary piece. Or early on it might just be one movement of a concerto, one movement of a sonata, and excerpts. So that's your main goal – however, when you're a senior you have to perform a recital. That recital can be an accumulation of pieces that you've done over the last couple of years, or it can be a whole new program. So that's a requirement – the recital in your senior year – but you could also at any time decide to do a partial, joint, or complete recital. Say if you're a junior and they think they want to do that and I think it's appropriate, they can do a recital sometime during the year. Students can also air out some of their rep during departmental concerts, so you can program all the students in one particular department on a recital, and everyone gets a chance to hear each other.

UPDIKE And is it a requirement for bassists at the Conservatory to be in the school orchestra?

TRAMONTOZZI It is. But it doesn't preclude being rotated off a piece, or sometimes a whole concert. It all depends on the instrumental needs the repertoire requires. A small section for a Mozart piece, or a large section for Strauss. Sometimes students get off, but they can electively take Baroque Ensemble, or they can do the contemporary music ensemble, where they use a lot of bass!

UPDIKE Could you talk a little bit about some of the ensembles or festivals at the Conservatory that you've participated in over the years, either as a student or as a faculty member? Did you play in any of the Chamber Music West festivals?

TRAMONTOZZI I did. One of the more memorable performances was when Menahem Pressler came. He would come quite often, almost every year, for a number of years. I joined him and Ian Swensen and two students to play Schubert's *Trout Quintet*. In some ways it was a revelation, because Pressler seemed so connected to the style of Schubert, being from that part of the world and very connected to older generation musicians who are very connected to that kind of stuff. So it was a very rewarding and satisfying performance.

UPDIKE And did you perform in any of the music marathons that they used to do?

TRAMONTOZZI As a student I did. There was a Bach marathon, and it was wild! In fact, I think it was scheduled a couple of years. You just signed up to perform a particular piece of Bach, and you were assigned a time and a venue – a particular classroom, or a hallway. I remember performing a portion of one of the Bach suites for cello. That was wild, it was like a Bach convention. You could go to one room and listen, and then go to another room and listen to somebody else.

UPDIKE And it was morning to nighttime?

TRAMONTOZZI Exactly. 12 hour Bach.

UPDIKE And is there anything that you'd like to say about playing with the Conservatory orchestra as a soloist? I know that we have this piece here that you played with the orchestra – Mozart and Bruch – as a faculty member.

TRAMONTOZZI I had met Alexander Schneider, who was a violinist with the Budapest Quartet, and when he found out I was a bass player he said, "Oh! Do you play *Kol Nidrei* by Max Bruch? I think it's a wonderful piece on double bass – it's much better on double bass than on cello!" In fact, Larry Wolfe, my undergrad double bass instructor, turned me on to that piece, and I did know it. So when the opportunity came up to play with the Conservatory orchestra as a faculty member soloist I chose that piece. I really feel a connection with that piece, I've gotten to play it at some memorial services at various temples in San Francisco, and I think the soulfulness of that piece is well brought out on the double bass – the kind of deep tone.

Hermann le Roux of the voice faculty – he and I enjoyed occasional conversations in the hallway, and we came up with the idea of doing something together. I knew of the Mozart concert aria called *Per questa bella mano*, K. 612 for bass baritone and double bass obbligato, so we decided to program that piece. That's always really fun to do – it's all about love.

UPDIKE So let's go back in time to 2006 when the Conservatory moved to Civic Center from the Sunset District. Could you talk a little bit about the move to Oak Street, and whether in your opinion, it changed the school, and how.

TRAMONTOZZI I can recall going to exciting meetings where plans were presented to us – floorplans and architectural drawings. It was all very exciting, and we all got to sort of make our wish list about what we wanted for the school. And then when the school did move I was very much impressed by the impressive structure of this building – or combination of buildings – and the newness of it all. It has a very spacious feeling – very much in contrast to the old school, which was close quarters and low ceilings. There were adjustments about having enough facilities for people to practice, to rehearse, to teach in … those adjustments were gradually made. For the new students that entered that year, they had no experience with the old school, but I and the students who had been at the old school found that this was a dramatically different setting. It's very much an urban setting. At the old school, everyone was part of the neighborhood, all the students were part of this residential area where they lived and ate, and worked and practiced. They could walk to school, they could bike to school. Here at Civic Center, students could avail themselves of many different parts of the city to live in, so they are now using bikes, cars, public transportation. They could even live in the East Bay – I've had some students who lived there. It just required more planning on their parts.

UPDIKE Did it feel like more of a community music center when you were in the Sunset? Where everybody was living nearby, and it was more like a big family, than being down in the center of the city?

TRAMONTOZZI As a student, yes, I felt that. You bumped into everybody anywhere.

UPDIKE Did you find that students acted differently in the new school – or had a different way of approaching their lessons or their careers, being downtown?

TRAMONTOZZI It is the case that, for instance with freshman, there's so much adjustment they have to make. They're coming from out of town, they're living away from home, they have to take care of themselves. They have to be organized, show up for classes – there are all these demands of them, but they're also exploring life, and each other, and so I found that freshman – you have to keep an eye on them, and if they're going south it might be because of all that. You have to gently guide them. So to answer your question, I would say that when we moved here I found that even more so because of the city, and the multitude of distractions and what have you. It's interesting, because once they survive the first year, they really get it together in the second. They've developed life skills, and they've figured out some things – scheduling, and managing their time, and taking care of their bodies, eating properly, and that kind of thing.

UPDIKE Could you talk about some of the different conductors you've worked with over the years – at the Symphony, or in other places? Maybe some of the different styles or techniques between different conductors?

TRAMONTOZZI When I got in the orchestra, the music director was Edo de Waart. I'll forever be grateful to Edo de Waart for giving me the job at the Symphony.

UPDIKE Did you have your audition with him?

TRAMONTOZZI At that time, the procedure was that you played a preliminary round of solo and orchestral selections, and that was behind a screen and a committee of ten voted. If you got six or more votes you were passed on to the final round. The final round was not behind a screen, but there was in the audience the same committee, and the conductor – the music director. That was Edo de Waart at the time, so you'd go through another selection of solos, and another set of orchestral excerpts, and after that Edo de Waart came up on stage and said he wanted to conduct the candidate through a particular excerpt or two. In my case, it was the recitatives to the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Of course he's looking to see how responsive you are – how you respond – and he gets a feeling about that, and about you personally. Then the committee votes, and if you get six or more votes you're qualified for the job. Then he decides whether you get the job or not. I had a very good audition that day – I in fact was joking around with Edo de Waart on stage a bit, and maybe he appreciated that as well. Now all rounds of auditions are behind a screen, but with a similar voting procedure. He was the kind of conductor that had simple movements and didn't vary them very much. He was an instrumentalist – an oboist – and I think he relied on us to take responsibility for the music making, and he would provide a general flow of the music.

He was an idea man – he came up with the Composer in Residence idea, and invited John Adams to be our Composer in Residence. That was a very, very successful partnership. In fact, part of John's duties were to actually write orchestral music that we would premiere. I remember he wrote *Harmonium*, and we were rehearsing it. Because he and I had a relationship – I had studied with him both composition and advanced analysis, and he was also the conductor of the school orchestra while I was in school – he came up to me and he asked me about this opening passage in the third movement of *Harmonium*, because it was this kind of low arpeggiated, rumbly music. He sensed that it was a little tricky, and he wanted to be sure it was playable. So I played it for him, and said, "It's a bit challenging, but it does work." So it was that kind of very cool interaction. I remember he wrote *Harmonielehre*, and we were rehearsing that and in the opening of the third movement there's this sort of arpeggiated ostinato harmonic section on the double basses. He wanted to know what that sounded like – specifically what kind of articulation we should use for that to make that clear.

And then in 1985 Herbert Blomstedt was brought on as the next music director, and he in contrast was this musician who had a strong idea of what he wanted in the music, and was very well read on the composers whose music we were doing. He shared that with us, and brought his experience with European orchestras, especially Dresden and Staatskapelle, and Leipzig to us, and he was very involved at the moment with making music right there in rehearsal. He was very specific about exactly what he wanted, and he worked and worked and worked it, over and over again. Once he got what he wanted, you knew exactly what he was going to do in the concerts. In some respects, it was all very worked out, and musical, and moving, but there was less apt to be something different that night. The tempi were going to be exactly what they were – the pacing. So that really created an orchestra that had a more distinctive sound, that had much more cohesive ensemble playing.

And then Michael Tilton Thomas joined us in 1995. It's interesting, because the contrast from music director to music director is very evident. There's the high energy American trained, culturally informed music director bringing all his innovative and wild ideas about programming, with a strong emphasis on American repertoire.

UPDIKE How does he differ as a conductor from Blomstedt? It he a little bit looser in his conducting?

TRAMONTOZZI I would say. He'll do a lot of rehearsing, but he wants us to step up and say – if there's a solo part for oboe, he wants to embrace what that musician brings to the solo. He won't necessarily inhibit them, or be over-controlling, and he is much more flamboyant in his motions, and has much more technical repertoire. The other part is that when we do a performance, it would be decidedly different than the night before. Not in a bad way – it would be more about the way we feel, or the way he feels, at that moment. The energy of starting this particular movement might be different than the night before. Or the climax is such that it requires more waiting at the end of it … it's making music in the moment more than having it all planned out exactly how you want it to go.

UPDIKE Let's talk a little bit about some of the recordings you've done over the years, and maybe how you've seen the way music is recorded change over the years. Do you remember what your first recording was?

TRAMONTOZZI I was part of this project that was spearheaded by Dennis Russell Davies, the conductor – he was at the time music director at the Cabrillo Music Festival in Santa Cruz, and I was the principal bassist. He was very close to Lou Harrison, who also lived in the Santa Cruz area. The project was a recording of chamber music of Lou Harrison's, and the piece that I got to play and record was *Solstice*. I'm very, very proud of that recording, because one of the movements required that I actually put the bass on a table –

UPDIKE Lay it down?

TRAMONTOZZI Lay it down, and play with sticks on the portion of the strings from the bridge to the tailpiece. So on the other side of the bridge are these shorts parts of string, and they made this delightful pitched thunking sound.

UPDIKE Was Lou Harrison involved in the recording?

TRAMONTOZZI He was there, and he was there at all rehearsals and during the recording, and gave us notes (no pun intended). What was cool was that he came up to me, and he had made me these sticks – they were these short drum sticks and he had wrapped them in a graduated manner with this medical tape. I had tried many other kinds of sticks – wood sticks, plastic sticks, metal sticks. He one day came into rehearsal and said, "Try these!" I did, and they sounded fabulous. I still have those sticks.

And then I got a call to do a recording of all four books of George Crumb's *Madrigals*, with percussion and voice and double bass. George Crumb was there – this was up in Chico, at Cal State. We were there a whole week, and it was really, really intense because the music is really tricky and difficult, and the ensemble is very touchy. But it came off really, really well and George Crumb was really fun to work with. He really knew what he wanted, but he was very, very supportive of us. In fact, I remember in one session the percussion sound was bleeding … we were recording in a giant rehearsal room, and it was bleeding into the other microphones that were around the room. Finally somebody came up with the idea of throwing a big blanket over a cage, and then the percussion was playing under a big blanket. You do whatever you need to do to make it work.

At the Symphony, it used to be that the music director, who was going to lead the orchestra in recordings, would bring with him his contract with a recording company. So Philips, the Dutch company, came in with Edo de Waart, and they had their way of setting up the microphones and having us seated on the stage. They wanted it all done during extra sessions – in other words, not in live performance. I think that was the beginning of digital recording, and then when you heard those recordings you got a sense of how they wanted the sound – the kind of space that you wanted to feel you were in. The depth and width. When Blomstedt came, he brought his contract with Decca, and they wanted us to play more in the center of Davies Hall. They didn't want us on stage, because we were too far to one side of the room. They wanted us in the geographic center of the hall, so they built out an extension of the stage over the seats – the first twenty rows. So the whole orchestra moved to the center of the hall, and they had these really tall microphones set up everywhere. That was challenging for us, because we're used to playing where we play, and the kind of feedback we get from the walls and the floor, and here we are

now playing in the middle of the room, playing on plywood – plywood that was a little spongy – not as solid as we were used to. And I recall it made it much more difficult to play together with sections that were on the other side of the stage – so say, for the cello/bass section to play with the violins, or even with some of the winds.

UPDIKE Is that because of the vibration and the echo in the space?

TRAMONTOZZI There was so much more reverberance and echo. It was difficult playing Hindemith together, which is more intricate counterpoint. And then when Michael Tilson Thomas became music director, the orchestra secured a contract with Sony. Initially we recorded on stage in our normal positions, and they set up their mics the way they did. These were done in extra sessions outside of concerts. And then they decided they wanted the feel of the energy of a live performance, so what they did was they initiated this procedure of recording every concert, with all the mics on stage and above – and announcing to the audience beforehand – "You're part of this recording project, and your job is to be absolutely quiet!" So we did that with Sony, and I think that was very successful. And then – classical recordings – the market just dwindled for the large companies, so they were less likely to record orchestras. The Symphony decided to develop their own media company, and so now the orchestra records itself. It sets the projects, the dates, the artists, the rep, and record them, and they get edited and released on the San Francisco Symphony label. So that's the difference. And everything is done in live performance – if we do four performances that week, they'll record every one of them. What they'll usually do is they'll take one night's performance that they feel is the most impressive, and then they'll maybe splice in a moment here or there if there was a cough, or something that wasn't quite together in one spot. But it's essentially one performance.

UPDIKE And is it the music director who approves the final performance that is released in the recording?

TRAMONTOZZI Yeah, it's his job.

UPDIKE I know that you told some stories from touring in Brazil. Do you have stories from other tours that you've been on that you'd like to tell? What it was like to travel with the Symphony the first time, maybe?

TRAMONTOZZI The first time travelling was in 1980 or '81. We were doing a cross-country national tour, and our first stop was Boulder, Colorado. We got to Boulder, and we had most of the day off, and that night was the concert. I believe the concert was Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*. Boulder is beautiful … it was the perfect time of year … the weather, and the scenery of the mountains surrounding the area. They had put us up in a resort, so someone organized this volleyball game. Edo de Waart wanted to be part of it, so we're all really going at it, and it was

great fun. That night, when we had to go to the hall to perform, I could barely move my fingers – they were so stiff and sore. And this was Mahler *Five* – it has one of the busiest and most difficult bass parts of Mahler symphonies. So you learn to do those kinds of things on your day off!

I remember being on tour in New York City … this was back in the early '80s when Edo de Waart was still the music director, and a bunch of us wanted to form a softball team. We called ourselves the Symphomaniacs. We would challenge various orchestras in the cities that we were in – in Phoenix, we played the Phoenix Symphony, and that was in 100 degree weather. But here we are in New York City, and we challenged the New York Philharmonic to a game of softball. The game was scheduled to be played in Central Park, and their music director was going to pitch – that was Zubin Mehta. Edo was pitching for us. It was a lot of fun – I remember that day hitting two home runs off of Zubin Mehta. I won't forget that. We basically killed them in that game.

When Herbert Blomstedt was music director, we were doing a tour of Europe. This was shortly after the Velvet Revolution, when the Eastern Bloc was open, and we were in Budapest. I'd never been to Budapest. We were bussed to Pest, and we get to this concert hall, and one of the pieces we were doing on tour was Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In every city we had been to, there was an organ in the hall – like we have at Davies Hall. But we get to this concert hall in Budapest and there's no organ on the wall – no pipes, nothing. But there's an electric organ – this big electric console, and there are speakers lining the back of the stage where the sound came out of. We play this dramatic opening of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and everything seemed to be OK, and then we get to the very soft next section, and there's a harmonic underpinning by the organ playing chords in very soft strings. All of a sudden, we start hearing these really wild space-age sounds [makes whooshing sound] – electronically generated oscillators, going crazy. We're all trying to hold it together, and playing this thing. Blomstedt is amazing – entirely straight-faced. The organist was trying to turn it off, and he does – but it's still doing this thing [makes whooshing sounds]. Finally, somebody pulls the plug, and it still did this sound! Eventually it stopped. We did without the organ for the rest of the concert. Crazy.

UPDIKE Are there any stories that you'd like to tell about working with other instrumentalists – ensembles other than the Symphony?

TRAMONTOZZI I did what used to be called Mostly Modern. Laurie Steele was music director, and she programmed all contemporary music, and a lot of it was sort of cutting edge. Some of the concerts were given in Grove Street, in the loft spaces up there. She wanted me to do some solo piece, so I decided to do a piece by Jacob Druckman called *Valentine*. It's for solo bass, and I have to do many, many things. I take a timpani stick and play on the body of the instrument, and on the strings, and finger-notes, and on the other side of the bridge, and on the

tailpiece, and I have to sometimes use the stick end, and sometimes the felt end, and vocalize sounds. It's notated in three or four different staffs with all unique notation – it's like learning a new language. What this piece is about is texture, and all new sounds, and then the major point of it is that you climax towards the end of the piece, and it's basically sort of … based on what you're saying and the sounds that you're making, it's kind of an orgasm that you're having in front of everybody … and then it dies down. In rehearsal, when I was playing, I was so into it that I hit the side of the bridge and broke off a piece! It didn't disturb the bridge, it was just a piece of the side that came off. So then in the performance, I ended up being just as enthusiastic, and broke off the other side of the bridge! Everybody thought … "Wow!"

UPDIKE The equivalence of someone smashing their guitar on stage.

TRAMONTOZZI Exactly.

The first professional string quartet that I got to collaborate with was the newly formed Alexander String Quartet. We were working on a program that included the Dvorak *String Quintet in G*. I soon found out that a string quartet (group) has its unique culture. It's not unlike a family with its dynamics of energy and moods and its functions of communicating and disfunction. Rehearsals included much starting and stopping, discussions about big musical ideas and the smallest details. There was a give and take on differing opinions and a negotiating on solutions. However, occasionally things broke down and no one wanted to give in to the other on a musical issue. At that point cellist, Sandy Wilson, would turn to me and ask, "Steve, what do you think?" Which in turn I would answer, "Let's play the passage again and feel what the moment brings." In that way I had hoped to act as a catalyst to bring everyone together. The performances were memorable.

Sometime later I started a relationship with the St. Lawrence String Quartet (the in-residence quartet at Stanford University) which is still ongoing today. One of our first projects was to perform a program of J. S. Bach with the pianist Awadagin Pratt and then record it for Angel Records. For the two keyboard concerti my part most often was a doubling of the left hand of the keyboard part. Awadagin played on a modern piano with equal tempered tuning. I felt that for this performance and recording I would try to play in equal temperament which was a challenge. I also studied the way he phrased particularly in the left hand voice and endeavored to match him. The result was a strong sense of unison in the bass part.

Sometime later the St. Lawrence Quartet we were to give the premier of *Last Round* by Golijov, a piece based on tango music sensibilities. It's for 2 string quartets and lined up on either side of center and one double bass in the middle. I had questions about the music so I called Golijov to get a better sense of style and expression for this piece. He was very helpful and encouraging. My primary role was to provide strong structure and propulsion. We have performed this piece many times over the years with a number of other guest quartets.

A most interesting project with the St. Lawrence String Quartet was the premieres of two chamber operas by resident Stanford University composer, Jonathan Berger. It also required

piano, percussion and a couple of wind instruments. This haunting, complex and highly expressive music required intense rehearsing. We all enjoyed playing and performing in the extraordinarily warm and resonant acoustics of the recently opened Bing Concert Hall on the Stanford campus.

UPDIKE How have you balanced the roles and time management of performer and teacher over the years? Was it difficult when you started?

TRAMONTOZZI The Symphony schedule for the first maybe ten, twelve years, was very much regular – the rehearsals and the concerts. Since then, it's become more and more varied. Our rehearsals can be on different days, and we could have five concerts a week sometimes, or four concerts, or only three. Early on, it wasn't hard to fit the teaching in. I could dedicate a particular day to the teaching. You have to poll the students as to their schedule and figure out what's going to work for everybody. Having said that, I made it more complicated for myself, because prior to being on faculty here I was also on the faculty of Stanford, teaching bass there, and also at U.C. Santa Cruz, and U.C. Berkeley. So I was running around the Bay Area … but I had it all worked out. And it was pre-kids – pre-family. I made it work, but then when you have a family there are more demands on you. I ended up wanting to focus on teaching just at the Conservatory, and so I gave up the others.

UPDIKE How much time a week do you devote to practicing, and how has that changed over the years?

TRAMONTOZZI …. Practicing?

UPDIKE This will be good for your students to hear.

TRAMONTOZZI With experience, I've pretty much played most of the standard repertoire with the orchestra. For that, I might reacquaint myself with whatever we're doing that week – let's say, Brahms symphony or something like that. The muscle memory comes back pretty quickly, and you know how you're going to approach things fingering-wise, and how it's going to feel with the bow on any given piece. I might practice with that piece until I feel like I'm ready, which might only be fifteen minutes. I might put in quite a bit of practicing for something that's very unfamiliar – a new work or commission or something like that. Having said that, though, I would say that as you get older, you practice so much more efficiently. I can sight-read so well already, and I can recognize patterns and read ahead very far, and I can intuit what's needed in the music. I can learn things pretty quickly.

However, I might spend a lot of time practicing solo repertoire, if I'm doing a solo recital, or chamber music. If I'm doing a recital, I would probably start months, or even a year in advance, working on things regularly – maybe not every day. You practice as needed – you try to be good

about evaluating where you're at with something, and projecting out into the future how much time it's going to take, or work it's going to take to do that.

UPDIKE Is there anything that you'd like to say about how the musical culture of the Bay Area has changed over the past 36 years?

TRAMONTOZZI Again, when I first came to the area, I felt like it was more provincial, so there was less going on, and you had to make your own opportunities if you wanted to do anything outside of the big institutions like the Ballet, the Opera, or the Symphony. Now, there's just all of that going on and so much more. There's all the informed musical performance practice stuff, and we're much more connected to the rest of the world. Great artists come here from all over the world, and ensembles from all over the world. That I think has put us on the world map. San Francisco is a musical cultural center. In the past, the distance of San Francisco to anywhere else in some cases might have been prohibitive for artists and groups to come here, to some degree. But now, everybody wants to come to San Francisco.

UPDIKE I know we're talked about the works that you have commissioned from Garner and Conte. Are there any other projects coming up in the future that you are excited about, that you'd like to talk about?

TRAMONTOZZI I was first introduced to playing solo Bach on the double bass back when I was a student, and there were a couple of transcriptions for double bass of the solo cello suites. As an instrumentalist, a cellist, or a violinist for the partita sonatas – all the solo works written by Bach are so alluring and engaging, and require so much of us. There's so much to investigate, and to master, and it's so beneficial for our playing as well. Bass players naturally gravitate towards the cello suites, and I've lived with them since I was a student. Starting in 2009, I created, after much study and much practical performance, my own editions of these suites. The first one was the third suite, and I was very much aware that there were all of these editions out there for Bach for bass, and none of them for me really hit it on the head. So I went back to the Anna Magdalena autograph. There is no manuscript or autograph in Bach's own hand. She was a wonderful musician herself, and was often his copyist; so we have her autograph. I thought that would be a really great starting point – and later learning that there was some evidence that Bach actually did read through her autograph as an editor. On the viola he played through them, and if you look closely you can see a few ink marks – slurs and what have you – that are very different in character from hers. So we can assume that they were his, perhaps, and so all the more reason to use her autograph as the basis.

So that's what I did with the third suite, and then with the fourth suite, and just now, this week, I published the second suite. It involves living with the music for quite some time, and understanding these markings in the music – mainly slurs – and the non-regularity of some of

those slurs – non-symmetric phrasing – and to understand the harmony and the voicing is so fundamental. Once you can get a grasp on that, then you can attempt to bring that all out. Even though I'm playing a modern instrument – a bass with metal strings and a modern sounding French bow – you can imitate and be informed of the performance practice of the day, and imitate that with your modern equipment. Of course you can help yourself even more by changing the setup on your instrument – adding gut strings and maybe using a different kind of, more flexible, fluid bow. But anyway – I made these editions and I'm very proud of offering this to the bass world. We'll see how they pan out.

UPDIKE Have you used gut string on your own instrument?

TRAMONTOZZI I have different instruments. I have a Vincenzo Panormo, which I used to have strung up with gut strings and silver winding. It was fantastic on that particular instrument. I do have another bass – a smaller bass that I have set up with just gut strings. Every instrument is different, and you want to find what strings work best to give its voice the most character. I think that gut strings are incredible. They're a revelation, because they speak quickly – you might not imagine that, but they do – they speak very, very quickly. You don't need a lot of weight to make them work – to set them in motion. They're very flexible, too – you can change a sound quite easily with more weight, less weight, more bow speed, less bow speed, you get more changes in the sound with gut strings. I also feel like they – at least in the instruments that I've tried – they free the instrument up. There's less overall tension on the instrument. I think that works well for some instruments, they're not as closed down with the heavy metal strings. They vibrate more – ring more. And if they ring more, you can actually use that element in playing Baroque music, where you can play a note and let it ring, and be the bass voice – and then you can play an upper note against that.

UPDIKE Is there advice that you would give to young musicians starting out on their career, or Conservatory students?

TRAMONTOZZI I would advise that they hold high standards for themselves, so that wherever they play, whatever they play, and with whomever they play, that they're always putting their best forward. They will get back more in return if they do – they'll be appreciated more, they'll be invited to make music more. High standards. With musicians who are – in the case of an orchestral concert – there for an hour and a half or maybe two hours, you have to be at your 99 or 100% level of performance focus, and energy – and then when it's done you can blow off steam and relax, but to really be earnest with what you're doing, and not do it halfway.

UPDIKE Thank you so much, Stephen.