

Music at MIT Oral History Project

John Bavicchi

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

with **Thomas McGah**

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**Massachusetts Institute of Technology
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Note on timing notations:

Recording of this interview can be found either as one continuous file or as split up over two audio CDs. Timings are designated in chapter headings in both formats, with the timing on the full file preceding the timing on the CD version.

Contributors

John Bavicchi (b. 1922), composer, conductor has taught at the Berklee College of Music since 1964, where he is now Professor Emeritus. He attended MIT 1940-1942, enrolled in course XV (business and engineering), and sang in the MIT Glee Club. After a brief engineering career, he studied composition with Carl McKinley, Francis Judd Cooke and Walter Piston. His output includes orchestral, choral, piano and chamber music, and concert band music, written for John Corley (director of the MIT Concert Band, 1949–1999). He has been an active conductor, notably directing the Arlington-Belmont Chorale for 44 years.

Thomas J. McGah (b. 1938) is a composer and has been professor of music at the Berklee College of Music since 1973. His music includes works for orchestra, concert band, as well as vocal and chamber music.

Forrest Larson, Library Assistant at the Lewis Music Library, has attended training workshops in oral history methodology and practice at Simmons College and by the Society of American Archivists, and is a member of the Oral History Association. He is also an active composer and violist.

Interview conducted by Forrest Larson on September 1, 2006, in the MIT Lewis Music Library. Duration of the audio recording is 1:52:17. Second of two interviews. First interview: June 30, 2006.

Music at MIT Oral History Project

The Lewis Music Library's *Music at MIT Oral History Project* was established in 1999 to document the history of music at MIT. For over 100 years, music has been a vibrant part of the culture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This history covers a wide variety of genres, including orchestral, chamber, and choral musical groups, as well as jazz, musical theater, popular and world music. Establishment of a formal music program in 1947 met the growing needs for professional leadership in many of the performing groups. Shortly thereafter, an academic course curriculum within the Division of Humanities was created. Over the years, the music faculty and alumni have included many distinguished performers, composers, and scholars.

Through in-depth recorded audio interviews with current and retired MIT music faculty, staff, former students, and visiting artists, the *Music at MIT Oral History Project* is preserving this valuable legacy for the historical record. These individuals provide a wealth of information about MIT. Furthermore, their professional lives and activities are often historically important to the world at large. Audio recordings of all interviews are available in the MIT Lewis Music Library.

1. Musical influences (00:00—CD1 00:00)

FORREST LARSON: It's my honor and privilege to have John Bavicchi back for an interview. It's September 1st, 2006. John is Professor of Music Emeritus at the Berklee College of Music. We are also joined by Thomas McGah, who is currently Professor of Music at Berklee [College of Music, formerly Berklee School of Music, Schillinger House] as well. Thank you both very much for coming.

John, I want to ask you about musical influences. These questions sometimes can be hard, and I've heard interviews with composers and asked about influences, and things get kind of surreal, so I'm going to try not to ask kind of stupid questions about that. There's certain composers that seem to have been important to you, J. S. Bach [1685–1750], Robert Schumann [1810–1856], particularly the choral music, Béla Bartók [1881–1945], Renaissance choral music, your teacher Walter Piston [1894–1976], and Richard Strauss [1864–1949]. I'm sure there's others. Maybe we can go through some of these—these composers here and talk about how they've been important to you as a composer. But I'm also interested in music that has really moved you but may not—influenced you as a composer, because that sometimes happens, too. But J. S. Bach seems to figure strongly for you also in your career as a choral conductor. You did Bach cantatas, which I had the honor of playing in the orchestra a couple of times under you, and your teacher Walter Piston strongly instilled—tried to instill a love of J. S. Bach in his students. Do you want to talk about Bach a little bit?

JOHN BAVICCHI: Well, Bach, of course—I mean, none of us could write without him in the background, and my interest in counterpoint, of course, is based on the conducting I did of his works, and the study I did of his works. Counterpoint is the—the muscle of contemporary music, or all music, and everything I've done started with Bach in the way of counterpoint, and harmony, too, in a way. But I think the active—the activity of the contrapuntal question and answer is what makes music viable in many ways. And Bach—all I can say is that I conducted one or two cantatas for thirty years each year, and I never got tired of them. And I did repeat some, but mostly I did a new one all the time and it was great fun.

FL: It's been interesting as I've studied some of your scores, and obviously, I've only seen a small portion of what you've written, and there's certainly a strong contrapuntal element to most of your music. I was wondering, though, I haven't seen anything that was kind of strictly fugal in an extended way. Are there any pieces that either have fugues or some extended fugal passages?

JB: Yeah, the one that comes to mind is the last movement of my Second Cello Sonata [Sonata no. 2 for Cello and Piano, op. 25 (1956)], which is a big fugue.

FL: Uh-huh.

JB: And, as a matter of fact, Piston once told me about that piece that if I'd left that movement off it would have been a great piece.

ALL: [laugh]

JB: But I had fun writing that. I very seldom write a fugue all the way through.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I have many fugal expositions, if you will—

FL: Yeah.

JB: —and a lot of fugato, of course, but mostly it's the imitation and I wouldn't—I wouldn't say it's strict all the time either.

FL: Yeah, right.

JB: It's—and very often I will use what I refer to as a rhythmic canon, or a rhythmic fugal subject or imitation, which doesn't necessarily have the same intervals, but has the same rhythm.

FL: Mm-hm. Right, right.

JB: Yeah.

FL: Is there anything else you want to say about the J. S. Bach influence?

JB: Well, what can one say about a god? I don't know what else to say. [laughs]

TM: [laughs]

FL: Yeah, yeah. There are so many composers who feel that Bach is a real touchstone in their work.

JB: Oh, of course. I mean, between Bach and Beethoven [1770–1827] you have really all the source of everything anyhow, and one of the reasons I got so interested in Schumann was because of his interest in Bach. In his choral music, he certainly was very influenced by the Bach counterpoint. It was very interesting to me.

FL: So, tell me more about the Schumann interest of yours and—

JB: Well, I felt very early on that he was a highly neglected composer, mostly because I wasn't so fond of the [Frédéric] Chopin [1810–1849] type that I would refer to as glitz and the [Franz] Liszt [1811–1886] bravura. I didn't really feel that they compared at all to what—to what Schumann had done, and so I set about in—in, without really realizing it, a lifelong quest to show people that Schumann's music was really important. And a lot of people tried to tell me that [Felix] Mendelssohn [1809–1847] influenced Schumann. Personally, I think it's the other way around. I always have felt that way and I find Mendelssohn, you know, very good, but I certainly have—I have never performed the big Mendelssohn pieces. Well, I did *Elijah* [1846 oratorio] once, but I find him very boring compared to the big Schumann pieces or the big Bach pieces, for that matter, or the little ones. [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: But I just felt that Schumann had such depth and he was always experimenting and his choral music is completely unknown; less so now with the CDs—I almost said LPs, which shows my antideluvianism.

TM: [laughs]

JB: You know, I went so far as to copy the parts out for the C Minor Mass [Missa Sacra in C Minor, Op. 147] and the parts for *Adventlied* [Op. 71 (1848)]. I copied them out by hand because they were not available anywhere.

FL: Wow.

JB: And I'd performed those pieces long before anybody else had. And, to my knowledge, the first—the only performances of *Adventlied* that I've ever heard are the ones I did. [laughs] There's no recording. I've seen no record of performances, although I know it was done—I assume it was done in Boston in the nineteenth century. I have no idea if it was. It's a great piece.

FL: Yeah. I don't know any of those.

JB: Yeah. Well, I did it several times and I wrote out all the parts. It took me two performances to find out that the mistake that the trumpets kept making was mine and not theirs. [laughs]

TM: [laughs] Early. Early.

FL: Some of Schumann's kind of free use of form—innovative forms, did that also influence you as a composer?

JB: Very much so, yes. I mean, the last movement of the Second Symphony [Symphony no. 2, op. 61 in C major]—I mean, I've seen it referred to as formless, but if you really take a look at it, it's not formless at all. It's taking a motif and developing it into a full-blown utterance, if you will. And I tried to take that into—and made up a form, which I thought would somehow ape that same succession of events, in which I've—I—the first time I used it I think was in my First Violin Sonata [Sonata for Violin and Piano no. 1, op. 24 (1956)], and I have five—at that time, one measure motifs, the rhythmic and melodic, and after the five were stated, then the first was repeated expanded, then the second expanded, and so on, so that the whole first part of the—turn reform was a succession of expansions of each one of those ideas and—in the recapitulations, so to speak, and the—on the return of the opening section I combined the two—two of the motifs to make it. And it combined with both rhythmic and melodic elements. It's—I think it's a successful movement.

FL: Yeah. Well, that technique I guess you used in that trio with harp. Was it violin, cello and harp?

JB: Yes, I did, yeah.

FL: Have you—has that—did that continue to be an important kind of technique for you?

JB: Yes, I used it in the last movement of the piano sonata that Jun [Editor's note: possibly Jun Togushi; pianist, composer] has played so much lately.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I use it a lot. It's a very—I mean it's—basically, it's a contrapuntal idea, although some of—some of the—obviously, one of the elements is going to have a harmonic basis, but the thing that's recognizable are the rhythmic motifs and sometimes an interval from a particular chord or something.

FL: We can get into this later, but since we're on it, when you're working with developmental principles like that—and that's kind of the force behind a piece, does the—does that kind of dictate what the final form of the piece is, or are you looking at a larger architecture with it, to put that developmental stuff in?

JB: Well, I'd have to say it's sort of a combination. I never write a piece without having a very strong idea of what the form of it is because I am convinced that that's the most important aspect of music, and actually that's why I went into conducting, to try and get some feeling for the form of the pieces, and the time scale relative to different parts of a composition. No, it—where was I?

FL: We were talking about form and development and—yeah.

JB: Yeah, oh yeah. The form comes first for me and this—the developmental idea of the increasingly large increments of the elements would fit into a form. The form and the movements that I spoke about were—in the violin sonata was a simple ternary form, and I had the A and the A prime using this technique—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —and then B something else. And I'm trying to remember. In the piano sonata it came on more like a set of variations than a ternary form, but I always try to fit anything that I do into a formal structure.

FL: Mm-hm. Yeah, your forms are not always evident on the surface. I mean, that's a real creative way of doing that.

JB: Yes. Of course, I've been accused by a lot of people of not having any form whatsoever [laughs], but no, I—my own notes are always related to a specific form. And every piece I've written, I've always kept—as I do it—and, of course, it changes as I go along, but I keep my own count, if you will, and, you know, from measure so-and-so to measure so-and-so was the development of the first phrase of the second theme, or something like that. It's very little arbitrary—arbitrariness in my music.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: It may sound it, but it's [laughs]—

FL: Have you done any stuff that has what you might call a rhapsodic form—?

JB: Rhapsodic.

FL: —with its kind of—kind of organic—you have a kind of particular idea and then it just kind of expands, kind of from the material itself?

JB: Well, of course, that's—that's what I was talking about with the elements, yeah.

FL: But it's—but as far as—you didn't kind of know where the piece was going to go, but it's kind of—have you ever worked that way, where the development of the material dictated the final form?

JB: Oh. Well, my friend, Jeronimas Kačinkas [b. 1907], that's the way he wrote. He—what was happening at this moment engendered what happened later.

FL: Yeah. Right.

JB: And I had—I must admit that I have very little of that.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I'm much more intellectual about it, which accounts for its lack of passion, I'm sure.

All Three: [laugh]

FL: There's no lack of passion in your music. That's one of those stereotypes about form and—

JB: Beethoven couldn't possibly have been a very good composer because he was so damn intellectual about it!

ALL: [laugh]

FL: I want to pick up on Béla Bartók later, but also I was reading that Renaissance choral music was really important to you.

JB: Yes, because well, I did so much of it with my—with my choruses. And I found, you know, well, [John] Dunstable [ca. 1390-1453], [Johannes] Ockeghem [ca. 1410-1497]—I performed pieces of almost everyone and it was fascinating. And, of course, I'd had that course at Harvard with [Otto] Gombosi [1902–1955] and re-barring the Renaissance music—

FL: Right.

JB: —and that had a tremendous effect on me and loosened up my concepts of what a phrase was and what measures were, and it was a great deal of fun. And the Renaissance choral music,

of course, even when it was barred, you could see that the phrases didn't necessarily have too much to do with the way that particular editor barred it.

FL: Right.

JB: And I mean the Dunstable pieces are wonderful and, you know, the *La Guerre*—who wrote that? You know, the French—?

FL: Dufay? [Guillaume Dufay, 1397-1474]

JB: Mm?

FL: Dufay?

JB: Dufay. Maybe. No. Earlier. *La Guerre*, where he imitates the cannon and everything. I'll think of it. [laughs]

FL: It's not—it's not Machaut? [Guillaume Machaut, ca. 1300-1377]

JB: No, Machaut—the Mass [Messe de Nostre Dame]. I have to look up my old programs. I did it twice, which was—

TM: Could I ask a question?

FL: Sure. By all means.

TM: Did you write an essay or an article about Schumann's—either his choral music or some aspect—? I thought when I first met you at Berklee there was something you showed me.

JB: Yes. And I'm sure I have done. It might have been a transcript of—I had a radio program at Harvard [on WHRB]—

TM: Ah.

JB: —in which I spoke a great deal about that, and it's—you know, I'm sure I did. And I used to write everything about every piece that we did with—with whatever chorus I had at the time.

TM: Yeah, I remember you showed me.

JB: Yeah.

TM: And it was some kind of article, so I bet it was [unclear] of that.

JB: Hm.

TM: It would be interesting to see again.

JB: [laughs]

FL: So, also, the music of Richard Strauss seems to have figured prominently for you.

JB: Oh, yes. Well I—see, I'm not sure he's influenced me as a composer but I just admire—I think he's certainly the greatest composer of the nineteenth century, including everyone. And—I feel that no one has had a larger technique in everything he did than he has. And I—I've—don't think that he has influenced me as much as Beethoven or Bach, or Schumann, or Bartók, but—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —but I certainly am very aware of his music, and I think the operas, *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* [opera; op. 65 (1917)] or *Egyptian Helen* [op. 75 (1933)] are the greatest music possible.

FL: Are there other composers like Richard Strauss that you really admire but haven't influenced—that have not influenced you as a composer?

JB: Oh, yes. I mean, I admire a great deal [Johannes] Brahms [1833–1897] [laughs], [Antonín] Dvořák [1841–1904].

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I'm trying to think of composers that I haven't stolen from. [laughs]

FL and TM: [laugh]

JB: Who else? I'm very, very fond of [Dmitri] Shostakovich [1906–1975] because I think he's a great composer, but I'm not sure that I have been influenced by him at all.

FL: Yeah.

JB: [Igor] Stravinsky [1882–1971]. I mean, there are some wonderful pieces, but I don't ascribe to the techniques.

FL: Yeah. Right.

JB: It's a hard question.

TM: Mm.

2. Compositional forms, harmony, and counterpoint (18:08–CD1 18:08)

FL: So, my next set of questions relates to stuff we were talking about earlier. Let me ask you this: I mean, we were talking a little bit about form. Is there anything more you want to talk about, just your concept of form and what it is, and how it figures in—in composition for you?

JB: Well, as you know, I teach a course in the Beethoven string quartets at Berklee, and a course on the Bartók chamber music, and the reason I got into the Bartók chamber music was because I recognized that he was using classical forms. And of course, looking at the Beethoven quartets for—even casually, you find out that he did a tremendous expansion of what [(Franz) Joseph] Haydn [1732–1809] had left him. And it seemed apparent to me that if I wanted to be a good composer, which is all one can hope for, is that I would have to get so that I had control of form. And sonata form is the biggest form of the classical period and includes all the others, in fact. And it was—for me, it was fascinating to follow through and figure out how Bartók used it, and then, thereby myself using the forms. And I use sonata form for most of my big movements, adapted, of course, but—

FL: Do you use some of the harmonic implications in sonata form, or do you see it more as an architecture? Because some people see it very much as a—as a harmonic kind of progression.

JB: No, it—mostly it's architectural. Yes.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: Because the harmony—well, the harmony for me changes with every piece. I mean, I—I don't have the same set of chords that I use. I mean I know that I-IV-V-I has not been exhausted yet, but –

TM: [laughs]

JB: —for me, I haven't got the imagination enough to use [laughs] those anymore. But, no, I—it's mostly architectural for me, not harmonic.

FL: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

JB: Yeah.

FL: You hear some composers talk about—they use the phrase of “control of the musical materials,” and it can mean lots of different things to different composers, but is that something—is that a concept that you think of and does it have any meaning to you, and—?

JB: Control of musical—?

FL: Yeah, they’ll talk about that they want control of their—their musical materials, as though some composers don’t. I mean, there are some serial composers who take it in a particular direction, but I mean—and maybe that’s where the concept came, but is that something that you kind of think about? Is it a concept that you think about or not? I don’t want to pursue it if—

JB: No, no. I think it’s a given. I mean, I think that willy-nilly that happens. If you’re writing music, you have to have control of your material.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I don’t set out to do it but I certainly—I mean, every time you write counterpoint, you have to have control.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: Well, I’m not sure I know how to answer that question.

FL: Yeah. I mean, one of the paradoxes that I find in some serial composition is that they—they talk about control, but they end up having some—because they’re strictly bound by these rules, they don’t actually have certain choices, and so there’s a certain lack of control that comes out.

JB: Yeah, well, I couldn’t agree more. I mean, I cover the serial writing all the time, and when I used to teach the techniques of composition I covered it all the time. I don’t ascribe to it; I think it’s narrowing. On the other hand, some of the techniques that they developed are very, very—open up all kinds of possibilities, but if you’re stuck with a row, then you have a construction that I don’t think is necessary to have.

FL: Right. Later on, I have a bunch of questions about serialism that we can pick up from there. A predominant element in your music is dissonant harmony. Can you talk about kind of how that came to be, you know, a central part of your musical language?

JB: Well, the opening of the last movement of the Beethoven Ninth [Symphony no. 9 in D Minor, op. 125] probably had as much to do with it as anything.

FL: [laughs] Isn’t that great?

JB: Yeah.

TM: [laughs]

JB: And I said to myself, “Jesus, that’s pretty—that’s pretty interesting.” [laughs] And I’m—that’s one of the earliest things that, you know, and then, with all due respect, listening to a lot of the Schumann things, where he will take an upper neighbor and resolve it about four chords later; in the meantime, it seems as if he didn’t know what he was doing, but it’s not true. And, for instance, in the Schumann Violin Concerto, he has a passing tone between, and you know, a third—he has a passing tone. But what he does is to have the third going at the same time as the passing tone, so you end up with a, you know, let’s say C, D, and E at the same time. Of course, they thought that was showing—approaching insanity. But all he was

doing was saying well, there's no reason why you can't have the passing tone present at the same time as the two targets.

FL: Yeah.

JB: And that sort of thing is what interested me from the very beginning, and then, when I got into the Bartók, the quartets and analyzing—finding that the counterpoint is arranged so as to be consonant as passing tones and dissonant on strong points.

FL: Yeah.

JB: It's just the opposite. And so when I taught my technical—my technique classes, I would always have them write dissonant counterpoint with sixths and thirds being passing tones only, and things like that, or upward neighbors, or something.

FL: Right.

JB: But the seconds and sevenths and tritones being the target points.

FL: Right.

JB: [laughs]

FL: You must be familiar with the Charles Seeger [1886–1979] book on dissonant counterpoint. [Editor's note: 'On Dissonant Counterpoint,' *Modern Music*, vii/4 (1930), 25–31.]

JB: No.

FL: Oh! Interesting. Or, how about Henry Cowell's book on twentieth century techniques? He has a whole section on that. [Henry Cowell, 1897–1965; *New Musical Resources* (New York, 1930/R)]

JB: I haven't seen the Cowell book, but I know [*The Banshee* [solo piano piece by Cowell, 1925], though.

FL: Yeah, right. He's got in his book—it's called—I think it's called *New Musical Resources*—he's got a whole chapter on dissonant counterpoint.

JB: Yeah, well I—

FL: He specified these rules that the strong points must come on a so-called dissonant—

JB: I must be—I must admit to being lax on that kind of research.

FL: Yeah. Yeah.

JB: Mostly it's the music that I've looked at, but I haven't read either of those books.

FL: Right. Yeah. Uh-huh.

JB: I might want to look at them now, though. [laughs]

FL: Again, the little that I've looked at your—the few scores that I've seen—and you've written a lot more than what I've seen—I would describe your harmonic language as dissonant but not atonal, in the sense that you're not avoiding certain tonal cadences and stuff like that. Is—would you—is that accurate, the way I'm looking at that?

JB: Yeah, I—I think it is, but I mean, for me—I always have a tonal center in my music.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And I know that for many people they would say, “Well, you’re crazy.” But I always have a tonal center, and half the time what I’ve been doing is to try and achieve different methods of—of proving that this is the tonal center. For instance, this—one thing I’ve found that if you will do fast moving counterpoint with eleven of the twelve tones and then zero in on the twelfth one and hold it, you’ve had a good cadence.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And that really works.

TM: Hm.

JB: And you know I’ve used it many times, including the piece I’ve just finished, and it seems formless, but it’s not because it really—it really functions well. The ear—you haven’t heard this one sound; you haven’t heard it and then when you land on it, it’s cadential.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And the other thing I do often in my music is to—is take the things from standard, what [Walter] Piston called “common practice harmony” [laughs] that will work for everything, like contrary motion. I mean, I—when I taught the techniques classes, I would show them the, you know, major triads and contrary motion, and it’s a perfectly wonderful cadence—like a G flat triad, B flat triad, E flat triad, D flat triad, C triad in contrary motion, breaks every rule in the book, but it’s a wonderful cadence. And I know [Paul] Hindemith [1895–1963] used it. And you can apply that—what I did then was, back in the days when I could play the piano at all, I would then show them that it didn’t really matter what I did in either hand; if I still kept the triads up here, or the open fifths down here, I could do anything. And then finally I said, you know, if you really want to adapt it so you can go *plock, plock, plock* and it sounds like a cadence because it’s in contrary motion.

TM : [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: Either way. But, I mean, I distinctly don’t feel that any old sound will do, but if you have contrary motion you can have incredible dissonances. And the biggest problem is to decide what the final resonance is, whether it’s a chordal chord, whether it’s an open fifth—as Hindemith often, disappointedly, does, or whether it’s a dissonant sound or what.

FL: Mm-hm. Yeah.

JB: But you can—you can achieve a cadential feeling by contrary motion very, very well, and it—what that does is to eliminate the need for the root motion that immediately says, you know, the IV-V-I.

FL: Right.

JB: Yeah.

FL: Right. A real striking feature of some of your pieces is you’ll have some real wildly dissonant stuff and then it—and at the end of the piece or the movement ends on a consonant chord.

JB: Yes.

FL: And John Corley [1919–2000; MIT Concert Band Director, 1949–99] mentioned that to me. It made him smile and, of course, it has made me smile. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

JB: Well, all I was doing was imitating Hindemith, that's all.

ALL: [laugh]

FL: Uh-huh.

JB: I felt that it—you know Hindemith is a very important composer to me because he had such control of everything, but I never could understand why he would open—end with an open fifth, when it seemed to have nothing to do with what came before, and so I was trying to—I was trying to find out that way in my own music and—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —I hope it worked; I don't know. John seemed to like it. [laughs]

FL: Yeah. Is there a little kind of twinkle in your eye with that, too?

JB: Sometimes, yeah.

FL: Yeah. Uh-huh.

JB: I mean, I know the end of my scherzo movement in the Second Cello Sonata [Sonata no. 2 for Cello and Piano, op. 25 (1956)], I—what the hell, I—I have C and D going, you know, *blunk, blunk, blunk, blunk, blunk* and then I end on an A flat. [laughs]

TM: [laughs]

JB: Little things like that.

FL: Another aspect of your music, again this is my—I guess my personal kind of interpretation of what my ears are hearing, and I mean this in a positive sense. There's a—the dissonant harmony creates a, what's to my ears, is a gritty surface texture and for me what that does is it takes my ears to a deeper level. Do you think about it that way, and how do you think of the kind of texture?

JB: Well, dissonance is—is harmonic motion. I mean, every style, no matter what it was, every harmonic style—what gave forward motion was what happened with the dissonances.

FL: Right.

JB: And it's—so I just tried to adapt that to my own music that—and, again, there's the Hindemithian principle that as you go toward the cadence, the amount of dissonance increases, and then the denouement is in his case the open fifth, or triad—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —and so I think this—dissonances creates harmonic motion.

FL: Mm-hm. Is there something about dissonant intervals in and of themselves that attracts your ear—if you're just playing some minor seconds at the piano and you just listen to the resonance that way?

JB: No. No, I'm equally fond of a major sixth; I really am. [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm, mm-hm. That's interesting. I mean, everybody comes to that differently.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

FL: For me, I love to sit down at the piano and listen to the resonance of so-called dissonant intervals.

JB: Well, sure, I mean I—you know, I—Bartók's use of the twelve tones is that they're all equal.

FL: Yeah.

JB: And for me, all intervals are equal. [laughs]

TM: Sometimes that final chord, that major chord in your piece, can be unbelievably intense. [laughs]

JB: Yes. Yeah.

FL: Yeah.

JB: And you know, I mean, you learn things. First is you can end on anything if you'll—if you'll just come back to it a couple of times and hold it longer than anything else; then it's a cadence. [laughs]

TM: Mm. Yes.

JB: And I've tried that on some pieces, too. I've written so much music that I've tried everything I can think of, actually. [laughs]

FL: So another aspect of your music is the musical content can be quite dense, but the textures are very clear. And that seems to be an important aspect of you, and I know that [Walter] Piston was real insistent on that. Is that a legacy from Piston, or is that something that's also—something that's also inherent in kind of how you write, but—

JB: I think both. I mean obviously Piston stressed that, and what criticisms he had of what I was writing always involved a thickness of texture that, you know, he'd say, "That's not going to work." But, on the other hand, that's the way I feel about it anyhow. I mean, I love Shostie [Shostakovich] because he does things that, you know, can be incredible complex, but it's always clear, you know?

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And I remember Kačinkas told me one time that the thing about my music that stood out was that everything was always clear, what I was doing, and—for him it was because he knew what was going on. [laughs]

TM: Yeah.

FL: I mean, it's particularly evident in the concert band music because that ensemble is inherently dense, you know, winds—

JB: Yes.

FL: —they are not inherently transparent, and you found a way to work with, you know, a large wind ensemble like that and there's not mud.

JB: No. And the thing is, with the concert band music—John [Corley] and I were such good friends for so many years and I knew he was going to do a piece of mine whenever I—whenever I did it, and he was always after me to write another piece. And so I started with the concert band—I wasn't re-orchestrating something that I'd done for something else—

FL: Right, right.

JB: —and, so, I had the luxury of thinking of the textures as they were, not as how they would adapt to something that was orchestral to begin with. And I think it shows in my concert band music if anybody takes the trouble to listen to it.

FL: Well, as John Corley put it to me, you found a concert band sound.

JB: Yes, I hope so.

FL: Not translating an orchestral thing, and seeing that concert band as a second cousin to the—to the orchestra.

JB: Yeah. I have only one piece that I did with the idea that it would be concert band or orchestra, and that's because of the commission that I got.

FL: That was *Caroline's Dance* [(for concert band or orchestra), op. 67 (1975)]?

JB: *Caroline's Dance*. That's the only piece I ever did that had anything to—the two had anything to do with each other. I mean, I feel very comfortable writing either, but I never thought of one as a reflection of the other.

FL: Mm-hm. Have you ever used pre-existent themes as a basis for a piece?

JB: Ah, let me see. You mean like *Sur le Pont d'Avignon* [15th c. French song], or something like that?

FL: Yeah, I mean, either you know as a basis for a theme and variations, or just, you know, a theme that becomes an important part of the piece?

JB: Well, twice I've used a theme of somebody else in the variation. My friend for many years, Nicholas Van Slyck [1922–1983], wrote a Cello Sonata, and I took a tune of his to—in my Piano Sonata [Sonata for Piano, op. 37 (1959)] for a variation movement.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: Yeah, because we was going to—well, he did the first performance of it. And then I have one piece that Bevy [Beverly Anne Lewis] wrote the tune. [laughs] Well yeah, it's the—she took lessons, you know, from Nick Van Slyck and she said, “I wrote a piece,” and it was going up and down a major ninth—

TM: [laughs]

JB: —dominant major ninth chord, and, anyway, I adapted it. [laughs]

FL: So, you are referring to someone name Bevy. Who's this?

JB: Excuse me?

FL: This person you're talking about, Bevy?

JB: Yes. She's my—my live-in companion. [laughs]

FL: Okay, okay. Yeah, and—

JB: For the past fifty years.

FL: Okay. Wow.

TM: More than fifty.

FL: Wow. Have you—and we'll get into Bartók in a minute, but a big aspect of Bartók's music is his use of folk material or folk-inspired kinds of material, and some of the, you know, rhythmic gestures and stuff like that. Have you used any things like that, any kind of popular forms or—?

JB: No, I never have used any folk tunes or anything like that. I certainly have used the rhythms that Bartók found in there and—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —it's fascinating to see some of the Greek folk tunes and the complex rhythms, Romanian, Bulgarian, and I certainly have used the uneven rhythms. I think it's a large characteristic of a lot of my music, but never have I ever used folk tunes.

FL: Right.

JB: Or any other tunes. I'm very narrow-minded that way.

ALL: [laugh]

JB: Besides, what they call folk music in the United States isn't folk music anyway. It's all written, so why do they call it folk music?

TM & FL: [laugh]

TM: You know, something just popped into my mind, John, getting back to the trans—the clarity of your textures. Since Piston was a product of the French influence, and naturally, absorbed that—that French clarity in his textures, and yet you've become such a fan of the German schools—

JB: Oh, yes, German music is my—

TM: —and it's kind of interesting that this—I'll call it a French influence, even though it's not—

JB: Yeah.

TM: —it's part of your music, in spite of the German—strong German influence.

JB: No, I would say that the German music has influenced me much more than the French, yes. In general, yeah.

TM: But not so much in the texture though?

JB: Well, perhaps not. I mean—

TM: I'm thinking of [unclear]

JB: —I never thought of it that way, but you're probably right.

FL: I find it interesting: in some of the German counterpoint, the individual lines can be very interesting but they're all together; you can't really make them out.

TM: Pretty—pretty heavy, huh? Yeah.

FL: Even some of the Bach counterpoint is, it's so—you know, in the B Minor Mass [Mass in B Minor, BWV 232] and stuff. Individual lines—just take the viola part and just like, that could be a piece all by itself. There's so much other stuff going on.

JB: [laughs]

FL: So I want to talk a little bit more about Bartók's music. You had a long-standing interest in his music and he's influenced you. And you've—you've used in your own music in the way that Bartók has—his interest in arch or pyramid forms.

JB: Yeah, the pyramid form that—I mean of course I know it all came from Beethoven, because Beethoven—you can find in the Eleventh Quartet [String Quartet no. 11 in F Minor, op. 95]; the last movement, you can find an arch form very easily. And Bartók—I mean, the arch form can come from two—two ways, basically, and one is invert the order of the two themes and the recapitulation of a sonata form, and you have an arch form.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: Or, you can take a rondo form and eliminate the repeats of the A until the final one; then you have an arch form. And, so—and that's what I teach my pupils, that an arch form is a sort of a logical adaptation of classical rondo or sonata, depending on which one. And I've always felt that way, and so therefore I found the arch form very satisfying. And the first incipient one is in the Eleventh Quartet of Beethoven, and Bartók uses it a great deal, of course. But so does everyone. I mean, ternary form in a way is an arch form, right?

FL: Yeah, right.

JB: So, you have to take it one step further.

FL: Right, right.

JB: Insert one more and—I mean, it’s not that far away from—it’s a classical form, really, if you’re just adding one little section. [laughs] A-B-C-B-A is pretty close to A-B-A.

FL: If somebody was looking at your scores and didn’t know about your interest in Bartók, one wouldn’t necessarily say, “Oh, there’s a Bartók influence there.” And there’s a movement in your Suite for Band, opus 60, that’s marked “Homage to Bartók.” [Editor’s note: Suite no. 3 for Band, op. 60, (1969).]

JB: Yeah.

FL: It’s the most consonant movement of the piece.

JB: Yes.

FL: Tell me about that. I was really struck by that.

JB: Well. In the throes of trying to keep my piano technique up enough to play it at, you know, the harmony class what I had to play, of course, I kept looking at *Mikrokosmos* [series of 153 piano pieces by Bartók progressing from easy to difficult]—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —and as a piece on which that slow movement is based that—what the hell’s it called? I don’t know. “Waves”—something. FL: Uh-huh.

JB: It’s got exactly that texture.

FL: Wow.

JB: And I—I just adapted it and then made a set of variations on it. And that’s why it’s so consonant, because in the Bartók it was. [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm. [laughs]

JB: And I’ve forgotten what the hell the name of the—it’s probably from the fourth volume—I want to say “Ocean” or “Waves” or something like that.

FL: I’m going to have to look that up. I’m curious. [Editors note: “Waves,” in *Mikrokosmos* volume 2]

JB: You’ll find that, you know, *ya-da-dee-da* that—

FL: Yeah.

JB: —you’ll find that in the Bartók. It’s absolute—well, I won’t say it’s a steal, but it’s pretty close. The beginning of it, I mean.

FL & TM: [laugh]

FL: It’s a time-honored tradition with composers; it’s the standard thing.

JB: That’s why I say “Homage à Bartók” and the reason I said “Homage à Piston” is because that’s Piston’s tune.

FL: Aha!

JB: And I asked him if I could use it, and he said, “Oh, that little snippet? Sure.” And he wrote me a letter saying it was okay.

FL & TM: [laugh]

FL: Your dissonant harmony is, to my ears, quite different from Bartók. Bartók's I think of as at times very acidic, but I never find your dissonant harmony with that kind of acidic quality.

JB: Yeah, I think the thing with Bartók's harmony is it's almost impossible to pin down any system. Every piece is different. It's amazing. That's one of the things that's so interesting about him that—if you're looking at the Second Quartet [String Quartet no. 2, op. 17 (1917)] or the Fifth Quartet [String Quartet no. 5 (1934)], you're not looking at the same kind of harmonic language at all.

FL: Yeah.

JB: When I'm using obvious dissonant harmony, I have made up a cadence formula which I use for the particular piece, and when I make up these cadence formulas or construct them, I use the Hindemith principle of an increasing dissonance and resolution, so that these chords—I use them in the same order, although not necessarily all of them. I mean, let's say I have six chords. I'd go I-II-III-IV-V-VI to expose them, then I might go II-III-IV-V-VI or I might go V-VI. Yeah.

FL: Mm-hm.

TM: Mm-hm.

JB: So that is—the theory in my head is that a listener who takes the time to listen would be able to get that series of chords as the basis for that movement, and I think that people who know my music well enough to have heard it enough times can do that. And I know it—I mean, [John] Corley certainly did, and I don't do that for every movement, but I do that a lot. And some of the most dissonant sounds that I have are when I use that technique.

TM: I know, too, that you've opened up a lot of possibilities for your students. I've heard you—

JB: Yes, yeah.

TM: —when a student is stuck, I've heard you—His desk is over around the corner from my desk at the school, at the college.

JB: Yes. He hears me doing all the swearing. [laughs]

TM: [laughs] Never, never. But I hear him explaining this process to students, and it seems to work many times.

JB: Yes, sometimes it does. Some students take to it. It saves their lives because they get stuck; they don't know what to do anymore. And so, when somebody is intelligent, like Silvia for instance, she took to that like it was mother's milk! [laughs]

FL: Is she a student of yours, Silvia?

JB: Yes. Silvia San Miguel from years ago. And she wrote a piece for [John] Corley that he loved.

FL: Do you remember the title of that piece that she wrote for John?

TM: Gosh. I was there, but I—

JB: He did it two or three times. He loved that piece and he loved Alain's [Alain Caron, b. 1962] piece, which was also influenced by that, but not so much as Silvia's. No, but what I did—what I do with my students when they're stuck is to give them something that they can—I say, "Well, you can write a piece with a I-IV-II-V-I, can't you?" They say, "Well, sure!" you

know. And then I say, “Well, how about, you know, I-II-III-IV-V,” and I show them this technique. And some of them really take to it, and they can write a whole piece by using that succession of chords, and some people have been very successful with it. I use it as one of the things that I do and it’s—it’s a way to really depend on and have a link with the past, I try to tell them.

FL: Mm-hm. A little bit more about Walter Piston’s influence on you. There’s obviously the clean textures and, I guess he was really big on this notion of stylistic consistency. How does that—how was that for you as far as—?

JB: Well, I tell you one of the reasons—of course, I’m getting onto dangerous ground now—one of the reasons I’ve never, I would say, have been influenced by or really have admired Stravinsky as much as Bartók and Hindemith, or [Arnold] Schoenberg [1874–1951], for that matter, is because of his chameleon-like approach to music. And I couldn’t stand it. I mean, there’s not the growth; in Schubert, for instance, there’s a growth in depth. If Schubert had lived another ten years, he probably would have been the greatest composer that ever lived, because he grew, oh, constant—Bartók, the same, Beethoven. They grew as they went on writing. For me, the approach that Stravinsky had, which was that every—*Le Baiser de la Fée* [(1928, rev. 1950)] and *The Rite of Spring* [(1913, rev. 1947/1967)] written by the same composer? I mean, it just boggles my mind, and so that’s—my idea was always to be consistent. You know. That’s all I can say about that.

FL: Mm-hm. And even within a particular piece or a movement, there is a kind of consistency of materials that I’m seeing there.

JB: Yeah, well of course, that’s composing, isn’t it, to have a minimum amount of materials and do a great—as much as you can with them?

3. Influence of painters, poets, and philosophers (49:28–CD1 49:28)

FL: Mm-hm. I want to ask you about some of your non-musical influences on your music: visual arts, poetry, literature, philosophy, science. I know that you have a particular interest in [Wassily] Kandinsky [1866–1944; painter, art theorist].

JB: Yes, I’ve been very interested in painting ever since [laughs]—ever since I grew up. And you know, I—when I’ve been to the Tate Gallery in London and seen the late Turners, I’m in absolute awe of the power of things like that! It’s like the Michelangelo sculptures that were still in the stone in Florence, near the—the “David” statue. I can’t help but—I mean, painting has had a very powerful influence on my—at least on my artistic thinking. I don’t know how it relates exactly to my music, but—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —I’ve been very—and I tried painting, too. I did about sixty or seventy things when I was younger—

FL: Uh-huh.

JB: —and I finally decided that I really should stick to writing music!

TM: [laughs]

JB: I also did—I wrote over a hundred poems. [laughs]

FL: Wow. Have you set any of those to music?

JB: No. I'm afraid that I didn't keep most of them. I didn't keep any of the poems, actually—maybe a couple of them. If I look in my—and then I kept a couple of pen and ink things that I did. But you know, hopefully I was—what's the word I want?—self-analytical enough to know that they were crap, so I stuck to the music.

FL and TM: [laugh]

JB: I knew I was on to something with the music.

FL: Is there any particular literature or poetry that has inspired you?

JB: Well, I'm very fond of—I mean, I was very fond of [Algernon Charles] Swinburne [1837–1909; poet, playwright, novelist] for a while because it was musical and—you know, *The Cataract at Lodore* [poem by Robert Southey (1774–1843)], and you know, the onomatopoeic things of—that even [Edgar Allan] Poe [1809–1849; author, poet] did sometimes.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: You know, things like that fascinate me because there is always a musical reference.

FL: Yeah.

JB: And I mean, I read James Joyce [1882–1941; author, poet] and read all of those—it was, you know, great fun. I still do a lot of reading, but I'm not reading technical journals as much as I used to. [laughs]

TM: [laughs]

FL: Are there any philosophers' or scientists' writings that have—?

JB: Well, yes. I was—I felt a kinship to [Baruch] Spinoza's [1632–1677; philosopher] idea of monads, and you know. I was trying to find some reason for my irreligious attitude toward the church in which I grew up, and in Spinoza, I found a way with the monads, and each one is—every individual a monad, and God is the monad of monads. And I—I struggled through the *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781] and, by the time I—

FL: That was Kant, right?

JB: Yeah, [Immanuel] Kant [1724–1804; philosopher]. You know, I never got through it all, but Spinoza, and then Bertrand Russell [1872–1970; philosopher, mathematician]. Finally, I found somebody I could understand. [laughs] And the German philosophers—the problem was, as far as I'm concerned, they spend so much time explaining every sentence, it was hard to figure out what the hell they were saying!

TM: [laughs]

JB: I mean, that's really true.

FL: Yeah. [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel [1770–1881; philosopher] was particularly—

JB: Hegel was the worst! Yes. I really—I went into it quite a lot when I was younger. I spent a long time with that.

FL: Yeah, yeah.

JB: And then Bertrand Russell was a godsend to me.

FL: Right. There's a short book that he wrote called *The Problems of Philosophy* [1912].

JB: Yes.

FL: It's a brilliant book. It's almost poetic.

JB: It was wonderful. And the *Principia Mathematica* [1910–1913] that he did with Whitehead [Alfred North Whitehead, 1861-1947], that—I mean, that was beyond me, but what he did with the philosophical was very important to me as an individual.

FL: Yeah. Yeah. You were speaking about your—as you described, your ir-religiosity. There’s some sacred music that you’ve written. How does that kind of relate to that?

JB: Well, the sacred music that I’ve written equates to—uh—income?

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: If you get a commission for a few hundred dollars, and they say well, we want you to set some psalms, then you set some psalms. And so that’s what I’ve done. And some of the greatest music ever written has been written to masses. I don’t have to necessarily agree with the text—

FL: Right.

JB: —but some of the greatest music ever written uses religious texts for whatever reason. And I know perfectly well that, for instance, the late Haydn masses were not written with the church in mind at all. So, it’s okay for me.

FL: Mm-hm. Well, Ralph Vaughan Williams [1872-1958] was an atheist and he wrote so much—he was a church organist, and he wrote all that sacred music.

JB: Yes, of course, and as I am fond of saying, I went to church every week—to rehearse my chorus.

All: [laugh]

TM: [Giuseppe] Verdi [1813–1901] would be another example of an atheist writing a very powerful religious piece.

FL: Yeah.

JB: Oh, yes. What could be more powerful than that piece? [laughs]

TM: Not much.

JB: Not much.

[END OF CD 1 55:11]

4. Twelve-tone and serial music [55:11–CD2 00:00]

FL: So, this next topic is huge and we obviously can’t go through all aspects of it, but I want to—it’s the legacy of twelve-tone and serial music. It’s had a huge impact in so many different ways on music and academia and all that. You came of age as a composer when it was a very powerful and dominating force in some circles. Do you remember at the time—are there kind of recollections you have, and discussions you had with fellow composers and students—I mean, as distinct from how you might see it now, but when you were really in the thick of that, how do you recall that?

JB: Well, I tell you, as far as I’m concerned, my attitude toward that has been consistent, because I felt that way from the beginning, that any technique in which you can count to twelve and write music is too simplified for me. And that’s the way I felt about it then and that’s the way I feel about it now.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I mean, you can have an absolute modicum of musicality, and you can write a symphony if you will use the twelve-tone system. It doesn't make it good music. It doesn't make it bad music, but it doesn't necessarily make it music either.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And I tell my kids if you want to write a twelve-tone—I made them write a twelve-tone piece because it's a technique, and you need a technique of some kind to write music. I made them write their twelve-tone pieces. Some of the things that they came out with are very important, and in a peculiar way it sort of freed up some of the kind of things—with this highly constrictive method, freed up a lot of thinking. And it's a paradox, but it's a very good one, and I hope I've used what I consider the important aspects of what happened with the twelve-tone. And I've written exactly one twelve-tone piece in my life, and that was just to do it for fun.

FL: What piece was that?

JB: Oh, it's *Tobal II* (1998). [laughs]

FL: What's the instrumentation?

JB: It's a symphony orchestra.

FL: Wow.

JB: It's strictly twelve-tone, and I haven't heard a performance of it. And as a matter of fact, I don't even have the parts because nobody's been interested in it. But still.

FL: When was that written?

JB: Oh, God.

FL: Or even a decade? Do you even remember what—

JB: Seven or eight years ago.

FL: Uh-huh. Oh, it's—?

JB: Ten years ago.

FL: Uh-huh.

JB: I know one thing. It's going to sound like my music, even though it's twelve-tone because it's twelve-tone, but strict. Absolutely strict. But I make it work for what I want to do.

FL: Well, when [Aaron] Copland [1900–1990] used it, it's the same thing. It still sounds like—the Piano Quintet is a twelve-tone piece. [Editor's note: Correction—it is the Piano Quartet, and the piece in reference is the Copland Quartet for Piano and Strings.]

JB: Yeah, yeah.

FL: And Roger Sessions [1896–1985], the same thing.

JB: That's right. The thing is, if you could—I tell—again, I tell my students, it doesn't matter what technique you do. If you're writing music because you have a need to or you want to, it's going to sound like you, even if you're using twelve-tone or you're using I-IV-V-I. [laughs] And it's going to sound like your music. And that's what I try to tell them from the beginning, to give themselves—you know, they need to have confidence in their own thinking. The twelve-tone, for me it's very constrictive and it's so easy to write that I don't consider it—for someone who writes all twelve-tone, it could be a great piece. I mean, the [Alban] Berg Violin Concerto [1935] is a great piece; *Wozzeck* [opera, 1925] is a great piece.

The [Arnold] Schoenberg, you know, Third and Fourth Quartets [String Quartet no. 3, op. 30 and String Quartet no. 4, op. 37], they're fine pieces. I don't know if I think they're great pieces, but I think, for instance, Schoenberg the middle period is by far the most interesting music.

FL: The pre-twelve-tone stuff? Yeah.

JB: Yeah. The stuff between *Gurre-Lieder* [cantata (1900/11)] and the Baritone Serenade [Serenade for Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Mandolin, Guitar, Violin, Viola, and Cello, op.24], yeah.

FL: Right, right.

JB: I mean *Pierrot Lunaire* [op. 21], and *Erwartung* [op. 17], and the Five Pieces for Orchestra [op.16]. That's just great stuff.

FL: Yeah, and then there's some short—I think it was opus 11, Piano Pieces.

JB: Piano Pieces, yes, yeah; that's what started it all.

FL: Yeah.

JB: But not that I don't love *Gurre-Lieder*, I do, it's probably one of the greatest Romantic pieces ever written—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —but I mean, he really shows what a great composer he is with that atonal period.

FL: Right.

JG: Yeah, but it must have been very difficult to write that stuff.

TM: Mm-hm, I know.

JB: “Well, if I do that, it's going to sound like, you know, V⁷ with a...you know. [laughs]

TM: [laughs]

FL: How did you see the effect of serialism, you know, kind of during its heyday—?

JB: Of what?

FL: The effect of serialism on other composers and just the music scene in Boston? How did you observe that?

JB: Well, I felt like they were doing—what Stravinsky did was to go with whatever the current mode was. I was never tempted, and I felt betrayed by my friends who started writing twelve-tone music because it was the thing to do.

FL: Mm.

JB: I mean, I really felt strange about that.

FL: Did you have discussions with composers who kind of went that way and why they did it?

JB: Oh, sure. [laughs] You kidding? [laughs]

FL: Because some people talk about it like it was this huge, kind of unstoppable force, in the way that it kind of dominated things.

JB: Well then, it had such a renaissance after a while, too. It went away and then it came back.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And I say—I know—I mean, I’m a bitter old man, but it’s the simplicity of it that makes it so viable for so many people. They can write without having to have a real technique.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I mean, you have to—to write music, you really have to have a technique. You have to have studied an awful lot and, I mean, I had a—I have a friend who was a painter. And he was restoring paintings for local museums, and he said he could teach all the techniques of painting in less than two years, the technical part of painting. And you and I and everyone who has ever gone into music knows that at two years, you’re scratching the surface of what you have to know to write music. And, so, you learn a twelve-tone system, and in six months you can write a symphony. For me, that’s not a technique. That’s one aspect of a technique.

FL: Right.

JB: I mean I just felt that it was a—giving in, to write twelve-tone music if that was your style.

TM: Hm.

FL: Do you think that one of the reasons that twelve-tone technique was so common in academia is because it was a way that it could be graded? You could say—?

JB: Yes. Yeah.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And yet, God forbid, who—somebody’s going to find a mistake in one of the Schoenberg pieces some time!

TM and FL: [laugh]

JB: I mean, I—I don’t know what to say; I just—I feel that it is a very limiting way to write music, not that it, say, doesn’t have viable appurtenances—

FL: Mm-hm.

TM: Mm-hm.

JB: —the business of the tropes and, you know, all those things. I mean, of course it pales into insignificance of what I think of as chance music, but that’s neither here nor there. [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm. Is there any music—?

JB: These narrow-minded, old guys?

TM: [laughs]

FL: [laughs] Is there any music of Milton Babbitt [1916–2011] that you like?

JB: I would have to say that Milton Babbitt’s music confuses me.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I mean, ever since I met him, when we both got that award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters—

FL: Right, and you both have pieces on that CRI disc. [CRI-138– Trio no. 4, op .33 for Clarinet, Violin, and Harp]

JB: —that CRI that I—he’s a charming man and he’s as intelligent and gifted in every way, but I don’t understand his music at all.

FL: What about Pierre Boulez [b. 1925]?

JB: Well, I've gotten something out of Boulez. I've gotten some—some of the pieces. I don't pretend to know much about it.

FL: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

JB: All of the—what I refer to as the iconoclastics; I don't find myself that interested.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And, you know, when you're working on your own stuff, it's—I don't feel it's beholden on me, necessarily, to know everything about all of the pieces that come out.

FL: Yeah. It's really hard to kind of keep up on that, otherwise you won't write any music.

JB: I can't keep up. I've got to write my own stuff. I mean, yeah.

TM: That's right.

FL: Yeah.

JB: I mean, like I tell my kids, "Don't bother me with facts. My mind is made up."

ALL: [laugh]

FL: This CRI recording, there's a piece called Short Sonata for Violin and Harpsichord, opus 39—?

JB: Yes.

FL: —and the liner notes say that it uses a twelve-tone melody in the opening section. Is that treated in any kind of serial fashion?

JB: No. It just used a twelve-tone—a twelve-tone row to make Danny happy, that's all. [laughs]

FL: [laughs] That was Daniel Pinkham [1923-2006], right?

JB: Yeah.

FL: Yeah, you [Editor's note: Correction—should be "he" in reference to Daniel Pinkham.] played harpsichord on that. One of the interesting legacies of serialism, and I think you mentioned this a little while ago, is that, you know, it brought so—it opened up new possibilities, you know, ways of making music, and there are certain kinds of musical gestures that come from that, that are used by composers who are, you know, as far from serialism as possible. I think of George Rockberg [1918–2005], who was so public in his renunciation of that, but yet, you can still find some serial-like gestures in his music.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

FL: And I've found some of that in your music as well.

JB: Sure.

FL: Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

JB: Sure. I mean, well, you know I once had a teacher, unnamed, who once asked me how I could have the patience to find all those notes, because I wrote a piece in which there was a running background. And you know, at the time I almost said to him, "Well, I would have, you know, spent four or five times more, if I needed to, to find all those notes." And one of the things that the twelve-tone has done for me is, for instance, when I do that cadence formula that I talked about, you can treat that as—it's not a twelve-tone row, because that's no attempt to avoid any notes or anything like that, but when I need a whole series of running notes, let's say I want a sixteenth note figure that goes on for seven hundred and thirty-three notes [laughs], well, I'll just run through the goddamn chords up and down like this, and then

this way, and I have all those notes, and it's still part of my—of my harmonic cadence formula—

FL: Yeah.

JB: —and it's a twelve-tone technique, which has stood me in good stead. And all it's done is to make one aspect of the writing a little faster.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And I don't do it all the time, but once in a while, there it is.

FL: Right.

JB: I have all those notes, I mean, I have those chords, and sometimes the chords are quite complex, and if I just run top—I can play little games like this and like this and like that if I need to—

FL: Right.

JB: —to get notes.

TM: I remember an interesting thing, John [Bavicchi] talking about this—the piece you wrote for Phil Wilson [b. 1937], the trombone and orchestra.

JB: Yes. Yeah.

TM: When you played it at the college, Don McDonald [name unverified], one of our colleagues—

JB: Yeah.

TM: —he said, “Oh, look at the opening. You've got all the twelve notes being used in this—in the opening.”

JB: Yeah.

TM: [laughs] And John [Bavicchi] said, “Oh, how cerebre—al...cereb—”

JB: Cerebral.

TM: —cerebral, “cerebral of me.”

JB: [laughs]

TM: And I remember, Don was so surprised that it wasn't some kind of plan, you know, that—

FL: Uh-huh.

TM: —and John [Bavicchi] just was—this was the sound that, that he wanted, and [laughs] certainly wasn't writing twelve-tone music, right?

JB: [laughs] I'd forgotten that. No, I wasn't writing twelve-tone music, no.

TM: But there it was, yeah.

FL: Have you even found some places in your music where there is some pointillistic kinds of gestures, like the opening of the Trio for Clarinet and Piano—or Clarinet, Cello and Piano [op. 13]?

JB: Oh that, yes, with the eighth note figures going back and forth. Yeah.

FL: Yeah. Or some of these wide melodic skips, like there are some parts in the Canto II [op. 102] for solo clarinet, things like that?

JB: Oh, yes. Yeah.

FL: And those seem to come right out of—

JB: Twelve-tone, yeah.

FL: Yeah.

JB: Oh, yeah. There's no question. Yeah.

FL: And some places where you have—you're deliberately having an ambiguous rhythmic pulse by—uh—rhythmic change—or meter changes and ties, so you're—and that's another legacy of that?

JB: Yes. [laughs] Yes. Yes, superimposing 7/8 over a 4/4 texture, for instance. Yeah, I do that all the time.

FL: Yeah, yeah.

JB: Yeah, that's obviously—I mean, the twelve-tone used it—I mean the serial composers used it, but of course it didn't originate with them.

FL: Right.

JB: And *hemiola*. I think even [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart [1756–1791] used it. [laughs]

FL: This—relating to stuff we were talking earlier, you talk about your music as having, you know, some tonal centers. It's not obvious to somebody initially hearing your music or, say, you know, the concert-going public, and they're going to hear the dissonant harmonic language. And there are some critics and theorists who claim that music like that is not, as they say, natural or it's not human—particularly, you know, a dissonant harmonic language. I'm sure people have asked you about that or accused you of that?

JB: Oh, sure.

FL: Do you want to talk a little about that? Is that—?

JB: Well, sure. I mean, the thing is that dissonance—it depends on who's listening.

FL: Right.

JB: I remember I had a—I wrote a brass quartet one time for Roger Voisin [1918–2008]. And when it was performed, Harold Rogers, who was the [music] critic at the *Christian Science Monitor* at the time, said that, you know, the piece was technically adept and rhythmically exciting but it was so dissonant, you know, that he hoped next time Mr. Bovicchi wrote a piece it would use dissonance for musical reasons, or something like that.

FL and TM: [laugh]

JB: And I said to myself, “Well, there's a guy who really understands my music.” [laughs]

FL and TM: [laugh]

JB: But the opening of the Bartók Fourth Quartet [String Quartet no. 4 (1927)]—

FL: Yeah.

JB: —I mean, is that dissonant? Well, I don't find that particularly dissonant—

FL: Right.

JB: —and, yet, I know people who would absolutely cringe if they listened to that piece.

FL: Yeah.

JB: Dissonance depends on who's listening to it. And I don't think it's whether it's dissonant or not that matters, it's what happens with the dissonance. I mean, dissonance in music is forward motion—

FL: Right.

JB: —and if it goes somewhere, then dissonance serves its purpose. That's the only way I can feel about it.

FL: Some of these critics, they talk about the harmonic series and that music must in some ways be fundamentally rooted in a harmonic series, and that dissonant harmony is a rejection of that. And they're saying that the harmonic series is embedded in our DNA, and to not do that.

JB: That's antediluvian; it really is.

FL: And that's gaining some real traction with some theorists these days.

JB: Is it really?

TM: Really? I didn't realize that.

JB: Boy, that's frightening. [laughs]

TM: I didn't realize that.

JB: God.

TM: Wow.

FL: Yeah.

JB: [laughs] Perish the thought.

FL: I wonder if you have some thoughts on this, since you also teach some music theory classes, and I found this in school puzzling and perplexing. There's this twentieth century fixation on pitch as a primary—as the primary musical parameter from which to analyze a piece of music.

JB: Pitch?

FL: Pitch. And there's this almost kind of obsession with that, almost to the point that you forget that it's actually music. Do you have any kind of—do you have any comments about that?

JB: Well, you know, I—some of the music criticisms of the past have been writing about—well, they—I'm trying to think of that fellow who wrote those horrible books on Beethoven quartets—[Joseph de] Marliave [1873–1914]? I don't know. He refers to the purple Neapolitan, you know, and the bright key of E major, and all of these things, and yet what he's talking about—at the time, Beethoven's pitch was considerably lower than ours—

FL: Right.

JB: —so, Beethoven said, “Well, you don't know what you're talking about, my good friend,” because what Beethoven thought of as Neapolitan in A flat—in A minor, for instance, certainly wouldn't be the same sound today. Nowhere near it!

FL: Right.

JB: And so therefore, all of that kind of descriptive baloney is worthless, as far as I'm concerned.

FL: Yeah.

JB: I really don't—I don't see it. Again, I'm proving my antediluvianism. Can't help it.

FL: Mm-hm.

TM: [laughs]

FL: But have you noticed with a lot of kind of analysis courses, they're strictly talking about pitch and harmony, but almost to the exclusion of the rest of what actually makes the music, you know, what it really is?

JB: Yeah.

FL: And I've just been really, at times, baffled by that.

JB: Well, I would be, too. I mean, for me the form and the use of the harmony is much more—is more pertinent.

FL: And almost—a lot of times they ignore rhythm, and you know, those other things that really make the piece. It seems as though they have this kind of quasi-scientific way that they're trying to justify it. And pitch, because you can quantify it in a certain way, they're kind of obsessed with it. But what really makes a piece what it is, is kind of hard to quantify.

JB: Yeah, that whole concept is an amusical concept anyway; it has nothing to do with the music.

FL: Mm-hm. What do you—one of the interesting things with—in the twentieth century, now the twenty-first century, is how with some composers, rhythm has been kind of liberated from pitch. So you can have, you know, percussion ensemble pieces where there's no pitched instruments, and stuff like that. How has that concept of rhythm figured in your music?

JB: Oh, very strongly. I mean, I think anyone who's heard my pieces, the rhythm is [laughs] more important, perhaps, than almost anything else sometimes.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And there are many times you have a texture going and, you know, and something going, and then splat! And another one, and splat! And I told somebody one time that it didn't matter what the notes were; I could play anything because it came rhythmically at that time. And they thought I was being very cavalier.

TM: [laughs]

JB: But that's how I feel, that rhythmically—that's what drives music is the rhythm. Yeah. And I mean even a cursory listening to any piece I've written [laughs] people would understand that, I think.

FL: Another prominent aspect of some twentieth century music, or contemporary music, is how timbre has become much more a primary focus with some composers, even with Edgard Varèse [1883–1965] and [Krzysztof] Penderecki [b. 1933] and [György] Ligeti [1923–2006], and, currently, Sofia Gubaidulina [b. 1931] and the Finnish composer, [Kaija] Saariaho [b. 1952].

TM: Saariaho.

JB: Saariaho, yeah.

FL: How do you think of timbre?

JB: Well, I mean ever since, you know, ever since [Hector] Berlioz [1803–1869]—what's the succession? First he has the violas in the *Fantastic Symphony* [op. 14 (1830)]. Some of the orchestration, the timbres which he uses are so unusual for the time and it's—'twas ever thus. I mean I think that's part of composing, isn't it? I mean even—even Bach, the snake-like music, when there's reference to a snake in the text and things like that. I mean, it's always—I don't think it's anything new, I think it's just—

FL: Yeah.

JB: Yeah.

FL: But sometimes the way it's new is where it becomes almost—for some composers, it's more important sometimes than the melody, so you're really focusing on that, and that's kind of where it's new.

JB: Yeah. Well, I mean after the Schoenberg Five Pieces for Orchestra [op. 16 (1909)], I don't know that anyone should ever worry about that. [laughs] I mean it's—that's the tour de force of that particular idea. And, I mean, for instance, that trio of mine that you spoke about, I remember a couple of places where I trade off the—in the cello and the clarinet, one takes over. It's a very nice aspect of the timbre because they're on the same pitch, you know; you can hardly tell where one begins and the other ends. And it's interesting, but I think it's part of composing. But of course, like anything else, if you take one thing and make it everything, then it's not—

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: —not viable.

5. John Cage and electronic music (1:19:00–CD2 23:49)

FL: Have you had any experience or interest in so-called electronic music?

JB: Zero.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: Yeah.

FL: Is there any of that repertoire that you like? You know, Vladimir Ussachevsky or Otto Luening, Mario Davidovsky or Edgar Verèse?

JB: No, I just tell people I'm an old guy, and that's it. I don't even think about it. I mean, I have—I find nothing of interest to me there, and I realize that the world is passing me by, but so be it. [laughs] I—ever since the beginning of that—I mean, is it music? I don't know.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: I don't know if it's music. It's something. I mean it's an organization of sound.

FL: Yeah.

JB: That's what John Cage [1912-1992] and I agreed on one day. An organization of sound.

FL: Uh-huh. So you've had some conversations with John Cage?

JB: Oh, yeah.

FL: Yeah. Wow.

TM: Hm.

FL: Tell me a little bit about that. That's fascinating. I've been very interested in his work for a long time.

TM: Yeah.

JB: Well, he's a very interesting man. He—I mean, once I found out that he was the president of the American Mushroom Association [New York Mycological Society] [laughs], I said, oh, here's a guy that's, you know—

TM: [laughs]

FL: Aha.

JB: I remember a project he proposed to his pupils one time, to write a one-minute piece with three notes. Have you ever seen that?

TM: No.

FL: No.

JB: And he explained to me that he told the kids to write a piece one minute long with three notes, and he gave them ten minutes to do it.

ALL: [laugh]

JB: And he said, "I'll write one, too." And he wrote one in about forty-five seconds. And they're sweating away, and the solution was—I attended this lecture with Steve Addis, who I went to Harvard with, and [laughs] his solution was you drew a circle as perfectly as possible, and you had dots with a pencil either inside the circle, on the circle or outside the circle. The inside of the circle is F sharp, the circle was G, the outside was A flat. And you went like this, and then you went [illustrating by making dots] and you wrote a piece.

TM: Uh-huh.

JB: And he said, "You'll have to develop a new style of conducting, where the composer—the conductor would go like this for thirty seconds." He said you'd have to learn how make the switch and go around here for thirty seconds. And so, that's how he could write a piece one minute long using three notes. [laughs]

TM: [laughs]

JB: He had a very, very inventive mind.

FL: I'm just—I'm still amazed. One aspect of—it's hard for me to stop talking about Cage because there's so much that I'm interested. There's a lot of his music that he wrote before he got into chance music. I think it's really extraordinary music that is being ignored because it has his name on it. Do you know that ballet score, *The Seasons* [ballet, 1974]? It's an orchestra piece.

JB: No, I don't. Love to hear it.

FL: The Boston Symphony did it a few years ago. They played it very badly, but the reviewers couldn't get over the fact that John Cage had written a piece that had, as they called—as they said, beautiful harmonies. And so the reviewer couldn't actually listen to the piece and judge it on its own merits.

JB: Ha-ha.

FL: But there's a whole body of his work that traditionally trained musicians could play, and if it had some other composer's name on it, this music would be in the repertoire.

JB: You must give us some recording of that. I had no idea.

TM: Hm.

FL: There's some extraordinary stuff, and I have played some of the music for people but didn't tell them who it was—

TM: [laughs]

FL: —and then I tell them it was Cage. This one guy got angry at me. He said, “You caught me with my pants down.”

JB: That’s okay.

TM: [laughs]

JB: You could do that with the Beethoven *Choral Fantasy* any time you want to confuse people. [laughs]

6. Composer colleagues (1:23:15–CD2 28:04)

FL: So, moving on here. I want to ask you about some of the people you consider your composer colleagues. There’s obviously Tom [McGah] here, but who are some of the—are there any composers that you’ve kind of felt close to in a collegial way over the years?

JB: In a what way?

FL: In a collegial way.

JB: Oh. You mean whose music I like? Oh, yeah.

FL: Yeah, and people that you’ve just, you know—?

JB: Besides Tom. [laughs]

TM: [laughs] Jerry.

JB: Yeah, I was—you know Nick Van Slyke wrote some very interesting things. I mean, I always—you know, I’ve respected what he did—

FL: Right.

JB: —and [Jeronimus] Kačinkas , of course, was one of my best friends. And, you know, Dave Callahan wrote a piece that’s not bad. [laughs]

TM: Yes, I know that piece, yes. Yeah.

JB: Yeah. But most of the people that I’ve been colleagues with, I get something—

TM: Bill.

JB: —Bill Maloof [b. 1933], yeah.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And Dennis, you know.

FL: Dennis Leclaire? Yeah, right.

JB: And then all the people that I’ve worked with who write music, I’m certainly—and with my chorus, I did—every colleague that I ever had I’ve done the music of, and with the orchestra too. I did [Bill] Maloof and [Tom] McGah and [Jeronimus] Kačinkas and [Dennis] Leclaire and [laughs]—

TM: Been very generous with your—

JB: —and when—everybody else, too, I mean, on the staff that—Steve Prosser and—that guy from Connecticut—Birdwood? [laughs]

TM: Welwood.

JB: Welwood, yeah.

TM: Arthur Welwood, yeah.

JB: He wrote a piece for the chorus and one of the guys didn't like it, so he kept calling him Birdwood. [laughs]

TM: Oh, God. [laughs]

JB: I never told Arthur.

TM: [laughs]

JB: But everybody that I've ever, you know—I've had colleagues, I've done their music.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And including my best pupils. I've always—if they were good enough, I had them write a piece for my chorus. Chamber chorus.

FL: Now, you've been just a wonderful advocate for—

TM: Yes.

FL: —for contemporary music in the area, and getting composers' music performed.

JB: Well you know, I'd tell you how I felt about that but when I took that—when I got the chamber chorus formed from the two choruses—I mean, you know, what they pay you, that's—they pay you what they can, but it's not—it's at least—the most musical job you have is the least paid you get.

FL: Right.

JB: It's always that way, and so I am—it was perfectly clear to them that the reason I stayed was that I could do these pieces. And every year I did either a colleague or a student.

FL: Right. And this was the Arlington-Belmont Chamber Chorus, right?

JB: Belmont Chamber Chorus, the Belmont—the Arlington-Belmont Chorus, the Berklee Concert Band, everything that I had anything to do with, I always did contemporary pieces.

FL: Right, right.

JB: And you know, some very wonderful pieces.

TM: And you made wonderful opportunity—presented wonderful opportunities, through your connection with John Corley for colleagues and students, too.

JB: Yes. Yes, and I would always—John would always—you know, I would always tell John: this guy could write a piece; it would be worth it. And so John did a whole bunch of Berklee people.

FL: Right.

JB: And I would tell my pupils that they were going to write a piece for the MIT Concert Band and would help them with it, and Dave Mott [b. 1974] was one of the first ones.

TM: Mm-hm.

JB: And, of course, we got Tom. And Dennis never could do it; he never wanted to write one.

TM: Hmm. That's right.

JB: But Bill did, certainly.

TM: Yeah.

JB: And Silvia [San Miguel], Alain [Caron] and—
TM: Christophe [Chagnard, b. 1962; composer].
JB: Christophe.
TM: Oh gosh, a lot of them. Yeah.
JB: Bunch of them. A whole bunch of my pupils and all of my colleagues that I would—that John did, and because I—well, he and I would talk about it, and I'd pick the person for the next year.
FL: Right. And John Corley was good about getting some commission money for some of these.
JB: Oh, that's right. He was. When he was able to, he got some commission money for them. Yeah.
FL: And he was a real national leader among concert band conductors in having—getting new music written for that ensemble, as opposed to doing orchestral transcriptions.
JB: Well, that was his credo, and that's why he and I were such good friends.
FL: Yeah.
JB: He wouldn't do anything that was a transcription, and that's the way it should be.
FL: Right, right. And what was interesting talking with him, it was not ideologically driven, that idea. It was just for him—his idea was that we have so many orchestras in the area, why should we do orchestral music? Why don't we do music that's—?
JB: For band, yeah.
FL: I was just really struck how un-ideological that idea was for him.
JB: Yeah.
FL: Because you could see with some people it might be this ideological thing: we don't do transcriptions.
JB: That's right.
FL: Because he also did—had done his own transcriptions of orchestral stuff for concert band, you know, throughout his career.
JB: Yup, yeah.
FL: But his idea was in Metropolitan Boston, why should, you know—?
JB: Not necessary.
FL: Yeah.
TM: Mm.
FL: I was really struck by that.
TM: Mm-hm.

7. Choral Conductor (1:28:52–CD2 33:41)

- FL: In the previous interview, we really didn't touch on your work as a choral conductor. You were conductor of the Arlington-Belmont Chorale for forty-four years, and the Arlington-Belmont Chamber Chorus for twenty-nine years, at least that's what I've been able to dig up. Maybe those number of years aren't completely correct—
- JB: Pretty close. [laughs]
- FL: How did your interest in choral conducting come about?
- JB: Well, it came about because the one thing I was lacking when I was writing music was a feeling for time scale. I mean, it was very deliberate on my part to try and find a job, because I felt I wasn't a good enough performer. I mean, as a pianist I was a bumbling idiot; as a trombonist I was good, but what can you do with a solo trombone? And I felt that the most important thing about music—one of the most important things—was the time scale and how long something went on. And at the time, you know, when I was much younger, I didn't realize that it was the form that I was thinking about. But I went after trying to get a conducting job to be able to perform music, to see how it affected, you know, the writing. And my good friend at the time, John Moriarty [b. 1930], found a job—heard about a job, because a friend of his had been accompanying a chorus and they got a new accompanist and the conductor had left—the Canton Community Chorus. And I conducted that for a few years.
- FL: Mm-hm.
- JB: And that—
- FL: And that was in Canton, Massachusetts?
- JB: Yeah, yeah. And then—I did Canton, I did—I had the Dedham Chorus, I had the Belmont chorus and the Arlington chorus. And since Belmont and Arlington were so close together, I came up with the idea of combining them, and after a while I convinced some people to do that. And then by combining them there were enough people to, by audition, have a chamber chorus. And so we ended up, I conducted the orchestra, the chamber chorus, and the big chorus. And it gave me all kinds of opportunity to do contemporary music and for me to learn the literature, and my *bête noire*, the time scale, about how things should relate to each other in a composition.
- FL: Mm-hm.
- JB: It is all very important.
- FL: When you're composing, you're not experiencing a thing necessarily in real time, but as a performer you have to.
- JB: That's right.
- FL: And I think some composers, who are—don't do any performing, they kind of lose that.
- JB: Well, and it's obviously—it's obvious when you see student works. The slow movements are always much too long because they use up too much paper [laughs]—
- TM: [laughs]
- JB: —and the fast movements are much too short because they've used so much paper, they figure they've written a piece.
- FL: Yeah.

JB: I mean, those are the little, nasty little things that you have to learn, and that was my method to try and learn it, because I knew that what Beethoven did was right. [laughs]

TM: [laughs]

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And, so, I had to figure out why, but that—it was on purpose. I mean, I'd been through the war so I knew a little bit about life. [laughs]

TM: You know, one thing wasn't mentioned there, Forrest, is the number of years he conducted the Arlington Philharmonic—

JB: Yeah.

TM: —at the same time—

JB: Oh, yes.

TM: —as well as the choral groups, you know.

FL: Yeah.

JB: Oh, I did the orchestra over twenty years.

TM: Pretty busy—kind of a busy week, wouldn't you? How many rehearsals sometimes? Three a week?

JB: One year I had seven rehearsals a week.

TM: Wow.

JB: And I always had—for many years I had three rehearsals a week: the orchestra, the chorus, and the chamber chorus, and—that's why I never figured on writing much during the winter.

TM: Oh. [laughs]

JB: That's why I wouldn't teach in the summer.

FL: So, the summers were your time to really compose?

JB: Yeah.

FL: Yeah. Can you talk about, I guess both with the choruses—that was the reason behind this question, but maybe also with your work with orchestras? Working with amateur musicians, but doing challenging contemporary works. And you seem to be particularly successful in motivating people to do that.

JB: Right.

FL: Can you talk about that experience?

JB: Well, yes. I mean, the thing—the important thing is that you have to have people's confidence, and working with amateurs is a very different thing than some people try to make it. I mean, you can't do something with them that they can't do. And if I could just tell some of the younger people that are working with amateurs: it's stupid to spend twenty minutes on five measures and get it perfect, and then the next time they won't remember, and you have wasted all that rehearsal time in getting a continuous performance. I mean, it's so important with amateurs, the continuity, and spending time—in effect, you have to close your ears, temporarily, to things that need to be corrected. And of course, you pay the price when somebody's saying, "Well, you didn't hear that." Ooh. You want to kick him or something, but okay, you have to put up with some people not understanding, but you've got to be consecutive with amateurs. Once they learn that, they're able to tackle things.

And with the chamber chorus, I was able to tackle contemporary pieces that were way beyond them because they were in the—in the habit of being able to go through a piece, no matter what. And I did some of the great pieces that I had no right to do, the Bruckner E Minor Mass—E Major Mass.[Editor’s note: there is no mass in E major; Mass no. 2 in E Minor, WAB 27.] I had no right to do that, but—and the Bruckner Te Deum [in C Major, WAB 45]. I was able to do those because I had trained them to be consecutive, and I did orchestral pieces that I had no right to do whatsoever. I had to close my ears to certain imperfections, but with amateurs, in the first place they don’t even realize the imperfections half the time, and in the second place, they’re enjoying it and it’s fun. And conductors who try to take amateurs as if they were professionals are making a sad mistake, that’s all.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And I was able to convince—and it wasn’t a hard job, just, I mean the chamber chorus knew that they were going to do a contemporary piece every year, and they did it. And some of them they liked, and some of them they universally—one guy universally hated everything, but he did it because the process was enjoyable. And some of the pieces they had a wonderful time with, you know. They did a piece of Jeffrey Bishop’s, that good fellow at Oxford Press that I was so friendly with. And they couldn’t stand it at first, but then they saw how clever it was and they had a lot of fun with it, most of them. And so I was able to do, every year, a contemporary piece with the chamber chorus. And then when I got somebody like Tom, I could—you know, who knew what the hell he was doing, I could do a piece with the big chorus and with the orchestra.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And for instance, Bill Maloof and Tom [McGah] have written for the big chorus, the orchestra, and the chamber chorus, and well, with somebody who knows what they’re doing, I could do that, and they were ready to accept it. The orchestra maybe less than the others, but—

FL: Mm-hm.

TM: Yeah.

JB: —their egos are a little more fragile. [laughs]

FL: What I find interesting with the scores of the choral pieces I’ve seen, that you loaned me: you’re not afraid to use dissonant harmony there. Some composers—contemporary composers, when they’re writing for chorus, they decide that they have to use a consonant harmonic language because they’re afraid that their—either the chorus won’t like it, or they won’t be able to sing it in tune. But you—

JB: Well, that’s just experience conducting a chorus because, I mean, to sing a minor second, you say well, that’s impossible. But it isn’t. I mean, if—let’s say the altos and the tenors are on C and the tenors go down to B, we’ve got a minor second and nobody’s in any question about what the pitch is, because they just went to the minor second down.

FL: Yeah.

JB: If you approach it that way, you can use some dissonances. You can’t use—you can’t land on a chord that’s built in seconds, because they haven’t got a ghost of a chance to hit it in a hundred years—

FL: Right.

JB: —but you could go from unisons to a second in both voices, and you could end up with—I mean, for instance, if you had the women and the men a fifth apart, and had them both go a major second on either side—

FL: Yeah.

JB: —you’d have a chord in seconds and they wouldn’t have had any problem, but they have to have the unison first.

FL: Right.

JB: If you try to land on that chord, forget it. You know. And certain intervals, I mean, I’m—it’s easy for them to sing a major seventh up because they can think of the octave.

TM: Mm.

JB: But to sing a major seventh down, my God, you’d think it was a different world.

TM: Yeah. [laughs]

JB: They can—you know [laughs], little things like that.

FL: Yeah, yeah.

JB: But that’s just experience, that’s all.

FL: Yeah.

JB: And a tri-tone. If it’s part of a dominant seventh chord, it’s a snap.

FL: Yeah.

JB: But out of the blue—

TM: [laughs]

JB: —huh-uh. [laughs]

FL: Yeah, I’ve been curious about that, too. [laughs] The choice of texts for your music—?

JB: The what?

FL: —the choice of texts?

JB: Oh, texts, yeah.

FL: Do you often have choice, or does that come from the person who commissioned it?

JB: Normally it comes from the person who commissioned it.

FL: Uh-huh.

JB: When I wrote—well, that piece called *The Linsin Fragments* [op. 118].

FL: Yeah.

JB: It’s because of one of my pupils presented me with four volumes of poetry that he’d written, and he was one of my most intelligent—I mean, he’s a tremendous pupil. And so what I did was to extract some things from there that I could set.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And he said now that when he hears that piece—when he sees that text of his, all he can think of is my treatment of it in music. [laughs] I’ve remained good friends with him. Of course, he’s going to Harvard now and getting his doctorate in education.

FL: So, how do you judge a text as suitable for a musical setting?

JB: Well, I remember reading that Schubert could have set a menu—

TM: [laughs]

JB: —and that set me to thinking that maybe I could set a menu too. But it isn't that—I find, for instance, Tennyson [1809-1892], it's so musical by itself that I—I've used a lot of Tennyson.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: When I was commissioned to do a piece for soprano and symphony orchestra, *There is Sweet Music Here*, [op. 93] I went, you know—it's easy because you could find music in the words. And I set—I mean for instance, I set—what was it called? *Talk to Me*, because the poet was teaching English at Berklee and I got very friendly with him, Stephan—boy, my memory, what was his name? [Editor's note: Stephan Schindler.]

TM: I remember when you wrote that.

JB: Yeah, I wrote that because I like him. He and I were friends and so I said, "Give me a poem and I'll set it." And I did.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: And, in a way, you can set anything that you want to, you just have to be able to take it seriously, that's all.

FL: Sometimes, I've—there was vocal music that the musical writing is fine, but the text just seems to be a vehicle for the notes, and it could be any words. How do you see the relationship between the text and the music?

JB: Well, I think that the music—it depends on what the words imply. I mean, I think—you know, in *Capriccio*, you know, first the words or first the music? [*Capriccio: A Conversation Piece for Music* by Richard Strauss.] You know the argument. Well, it's first the words. Because even if I am the composer [laughs], because the words dictate what kind of music you have.

FL: Right.

JB: And then all the lieder, all the great songs that Schubert and Schumann and Brahms and Wolfe did?

FL: Right.

JB: The text dictates what happens in the music. I mean, I don't think there's any question about that.

FL: Mm-hm.

JB: Yeah.

8. Current projects and interests (1:42:11–CD2 47:00)

FL: So, a couple more concluding things. What kinds of hobbies or interests do you have outside of music? What are some things that you like to do that—?

JB: Too many.

TM: [laughs]

JB: I waste so much time. The biggest thing probably was I did an awful lot of building things when I was younger and able to move around, you know. I built the shelves, I built myself a

bar, and all that kind of stuff. And the most—the biggest thing outside of music would be the stamps. I mean, I've collected and sold stamps all my life.

FL: Wow.

JB: Yeah. And I have very extensive German and American collections, still. I've gotten rid of the rest of them, but my German collection is about six volumes.

TM: Wow.

JB: Some very interesting stuff.

FL: Wow, so how far back do some of these stamps go?

JB: Oh, oh. 1845.

FL: My goodness!

JB: Yeah.

TM: Gee.

FL: Wow. [laughs] Wow. So, your engineering background has helped you with your building interests and stuff like that?

JB: Oh, yes.

FL: Yeah, yeah.

JB: And you know, once an Italian, always a carpenter, you know.

ALL: [laugh]

TM: He's got some other hobbies, too.

JB: Yeah. People have accused me of being—of drinking too much, but I don't drink too much. Just enough.

FL: Wow.

ALL: [laugh]

JB: Things like everything else: if you enjoy it, it's fine.

FL: I understand that you like rum particularly.

JB: I'm very fond of rum and bourbon and scotch and gin. And—

All: [laugh]

JB: You know, I've found recently from a new friend of mine. Do you know what a doctor's definition of an alcoholic is?

FL: What's that?

JB: A patient that drinks more than he does.

ALL: [laugh]

FL: Wow.

JB: And it's of course—it's a wonderful thing to find that up to three ounces of alcohol a day is beneficial to the human male, and I certainly never exceed that, so—well, except on occasional weekends.

FL: [laughs] So, to conclude here, are there any final comments you want to make about anything, or is there a topic that I haven't touched on that you'd want to talk about?

JB: All I could say is that without music, life would be very different. That's all I can say. And without my music, I wouldn't be me. That's all.

FL: Is there any—what music are you working on now? Is there a particular piece you're working on?

JB: I just finished a big piece for clarinet and mezzo soprano soloist with—I was commissioned by Gary Dranch [b. 1954], who did my clarinet concerto in Brazil a couple of years ago—and he's a wonderful player—to write this piece for him and mezzo soprano. And I was given to write for her as if she were Octavian in [*Der*] *Rosenkavalier* [opera by Richard Strauss], so I had pretty good—pretty good range.

FL: Wow.

JB: And he wanted a piece that was kaleidoscopic in the sense that *Pierrot Lunaire* [op. 21, a melodrama by A. Schoenberg] was, with the instrumentation and everything. So what I did was I have a string quartet, a brass quintet, piano, percussion, and a chamber chorus and the two soloists. And I have an arch form piece, and I use the total ensemble only in the outside movements and the middle one, and it's about seventeen or eighteen songs—he wanted me to use Haiku. I used haiku and tanka and choka, the three main Japanese poetic forms.

FL: Wow.

JB: And I had three—six haiku all together, and six tanka and the one choka, which was much longer, as the middle one. And I just finished it a couple of weeks ago. I'm putting it into Music Printer Plus [music printing software, developed 1988] now on the computer.

FL: Wow. So, is there a performance coming up?

JB: Well—would like to have a performance, and there's a possibility maybe a year from October. And I don't know what he's got—if he has any ideas or not, but hopefully we'll get it done sometime.

FL: Mm-hm. I mean, the fact that it was commissioned, you would hope he would then—

JB: Yeah, well, he's a wonderful influence for contemporary—as many clarinetists seem to be. I mean, they're interested in getting people to write for their instrument. And he's an incredible artist.

FL: So, how did you meet him?

JB: Well, I met him because he wrote to me and said that he was going to do my concerto in Brazil [laughs] and could I do something about maybe, you know, calming down the rights that Oxford Press had so that he could record it and all that? So we got to be very friendly. And since then he's done my unaccompanied clarinet sonatas and my Quintet for Clarinet and Strings [op. 109], and I'm writing this piece for him.

FL: Fantastic.

JB: I've written this piece for him. It's done now.

FL: Wow. So Tom, did you have any questions? Oh, there's one other topic, and I guess we skipped over it. Back to your vocal music. Do you see any distinct stylistic differences between your vocal and instrumental music?

JB: Well, I think that the voice parts have to be simpler or they can't sing them. Yeah, and so that's a stylistic difference, I would guess. I mean, the dissonance has to—as we were talking about before, if you don't handle the dissonance correctly, they can't sing it.

FL: Right.

JB: And so, you tell a clarinet to play a C sharp when somebody else is playing a C natural, so he plays it, you know. You tell a tenor to sing a C sharp, when all he can hear is a C. [laughs]

FL: Right. I was talking with Tom about your music, and Tom hears a real difference. He describes your vocal music as kind of romantic and your instrumental music as more, if you will, modernist. I don't hear the difference so much that way, but again, that might—that's just my ears. But have other people kind of described it that way?

JB: I don't know. I don't think so. I mean, I don't know.

TM: I'd say your solo songs, you know, I'm not talking about the choral music, but the solo songs.

JB: Yeah, yeah.

TM: Yeah. I've always—I'm always—startles me when you see this lush, romantic quality.

JB: They're romantic. Yeah.

TM: I don't mean romantic sounding, like you wrote it in the 1850s, but the gestures.

JB: I think everything I write is romantic. I mean, that's the way I feel. I feel that I'm a romantic composer, that's all, displaced by a few centuries. [laughs]

FL: Uh-huh.

JB: I approach it as—I think it is romantic music, even though the sounds are not, but. I mean, Bartók is a romantic composer, as far as I'm—

FL: But your—yeah, your gestures are very much rooted in that tradition.

JB: I think so, yeah.

FL: Yeah. The rhythms and all that.

JB: Yeah. No, what—you know the songs—you know, probably it's the bare bones shoulder the more, maybe? [laughs]

TM: [laughs] I remember the songs that Sharon—Sherry—?

JB: Sharon Baker [soprano].

TM: Baker, yeah, sang at the Harvard Music Association there. I think it was maybe your seventieth?

JB: My seventieth birthday, yeah. I had just written them for her, yeah.

TM: They were so, so beautiful, so lyrical.

FL: So, what pieces did she do?

JB: She did—there were *Six Songs For Piano, Soprano And Violin* [op. 97], the poetry of William Blake [1757–1827].

FL: Cool.

JB: Yeah.

FL: I'd love to see the score for that.

JB: She—they did a good job. The violinist was not quite up to it, but it's the only performance they've ever had. [laughs] You know, that may be because I used all modes for those, used all the seven modes—

TM: Hmm.

JB: —and for those songs I did nothing but modal.

TM: Yeah. [unclear]

JB: Counterpoint. Everything.

TM: [unclear] probably contributed to that then, sure.

JB: Yeah. I would love to hear those again.

TM: That's too bad. That was fourteen years ago now. That's too bad. They were beautiful. Probably still are. [laughs]

JB: I hope so. [laughs] Well, I've been trying to get Robin [possibly Robin Ginenthal, Berklee professor] to do something, but so far no bites.

FL: So, we can talk more after we conclude the interview. And I want to thank you so much for sharing your thoughts today. This is really, really good.

JB: Well, thank you.

FL: This has been just an honor and a privilege to do this with you. So, thank you again.

[End of Interview]