Music at MIT Oral History Project

Brian Robison

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

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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

Brian Robison (b.1964) was Assistant Professor of music composition at MIT from 2002-2006. His teaching and creative work reflects his performing experience in a broad range of musical styles. He has written orchestral, chamber and vocal music; recent works have drawn on his interest in the electric guitar, the theremin, and the vocalizations of non-human primates.

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 July 2, 2007 in the MIT Lewis Music Library. Duration of the audio recording is 1:52:22. First of two interviews. Second interview: August 17, 2007.

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. Biography (00:18—CD1 00:18)

FORREST LARSON: It's my honor and privilege to have Brian Robison today. It's July 2nd, 2007. We're in the Lewis Music Library. I'm Forrest Larson. Brian was Assistant Professor of Music at MIT from 2002 to 2006. Thank you very much for coming in this morning; I really appreciate it.

BRIAN ROBISON: Gladly.

FL: So I want to ask you about your childhood and growing up. Can you give your birth date?

BR: April 24, 1964. Exact same day as Augusta Read Thomas, it turns out.

FL: [laughs] Wow! That's interesting.

BR: And also the composer James Mathe—Matheson, but I think six years later.

FL: Uh-huh, wow! So where were you born, and where did you grow up?

BR: I was born in Bryn Mawr Hospital, in western suburbs of Philadelphia, and as long as I can remember, lived in a little town called Lionville, which is about thirty miles west of Philadelphia—deep, deep suburbia.

FL: And you did all your growing up there? You didn't—did you move at all or anything?

BR: No, no.

FL: So tell me about your parents, their artistic interests, professions?

BR: They both—they both trained as scientists, in fact I think they both trained as chemists, although my Dad, for most of his working career, was doing work as essentially an electrical engineer for General Electric, and I—then some work as a microinstrumentation engineer, the last decade or so before he retired. My mother had trained as a chemist, and started to pursue graduate work, but this was back in a time when women were strongly discouraged from pursuing a career in the sciences, and so she decided it wasn't worth the hassle.

And in terms of their musical training, my Dad had played the clarinet, and something he dusted off when I started clarinet lessons at the age of eight, I think. And my mother had had piano lessons, and also saxophone, played saxophone in high school.

FL: So, did they have any—did they do any musical activities as adults, when you were growing up?

BR: Not much. I'm trying to—I can't remember exactly when—when I was a very young child there was no musical instrument in the house, except my Dad's clarinet up on a bookshelf. But then, I think probably around the time I was around eight or so, that—my parents did buy an upright piano. And my mother would play that a little bit.

The main things I remember being on the piano rack when I was a kid were vocal selections from *The Sound of Music* and *My Fair Lady*. My Dad had a fairly large collection of L.P.'s, all strictly classical, and scarcely anything from the twentieth century. The most modern items were the *Rite*.

FL: That being *The Rite of Spring*?

BR: *Rite of Spring*, of [Igor] Stravinsky, and—I'm struggling to remember anything else that's even in that category. And then mostly nineteenth century—I mean, mostly L.P.'s from the 1940's, 1950's. So what little baroque music there was predated the early music movement. Except one really awful recording [laughs] of some of the Bach *Brandenburg Concertos*.

That was from the good old bad old days of the early music movement, really scratchy, thin, unpleasant sounding playing of viols.

FL: [laughs] You said your mother played saxophone. Did she have an interest in jazz at all?

BR: Not a strong one; not one that she—she didn't keep up. She wasn't—I can't recall her ever referring to a single jazz artist. I remember she, you know, it was more just playing in a pep band, and—.

FL: Yeah, yeah. Do you have any siblings?

BR: I do. I have an older brother, who—Arch Douglas, who is a computer scientist. And when were kids, he showed musical ability; he played baritone horn, and then started piano lessons. And my younger brother Keith is a genetic—a geneticist. And he also had some ability, although he didn't pursue it as far as the others of us did. He played trombone for a while, and lost interest in high school.

FL: Backtracking a little bit, can you give me your parents' first names? I didn't get those.

BR: Oh, sure. My father is Arch George Robison, and my mother is Alice May Poe Robison.

FL: So when you were growing up, were you actively encouraged to play music or do other creative pursuits?

BR: Yes. I had a little, I think, Fisher Price record player for 45 R.P.M. records, and apparently I had several disks that I just loved to listen to over and over again. And sang in school chorus. And then when—at the age when one could start playing an instrument, my parents did start each of us, and encourage each of us to take part in the elementary school's instrumental program.

FL: Did your parents go to concerts at least somewhat regularly?

BR: No. [laughs] They didn't.

FL: Do you know why they encouraged you to get involved in music?

BR: Well, I think it's something that they thought to be worthwhile, and something they had enjoyed when they were younger, even though they hadn't actually pursued it further.

FL: Was the choice of the clarinet partly dictated by the fact that there was one in the house?

BR: No! I had no strong sense of what I wanted to play, and it may have had more to do with what the band director needed at the time. I just—have only this kind of vague recollection of going in, and I can't remember what the test was like, but some brief appointment with the band director at the elementary school, where he said, "Okay, you should learn clarinet." So, I don't know.

FL: Do you remember the director's name?

BR: Oh, his name was Doug Bennett, Douglas Bennett, was a marvelous teacher, very enthusiastic, and come to think of it, was a fine clarinetist himself.

FL: Did you also study privately with him?

BR: I did, very briefly. The—gosh, it's been so long, I can't remember exactly. There was a ye—probably a year or two that I studied with a fellow named Rick Jaeschke, I think that's how they pronounced it, J-A-E-S-C-H-K-E, who was a marvelous player. His—in fact, I may be misremembering. I think he may have played in one of the armed service bands. But I studied clarinet with him for a while, and then my elementary school teacher put me on

contrabass clarinet, and then at some point I drifted over to saxophone, and I worked with him a bit on saxophone, too.

FL: So what were those lessons like for you?

BR: I don't remember clearly. I know initially I wasn't much motivated to practice. In fact, for the first—I think the first five years that I was playing, it just didn't much interest me. And then there was one Easter vacation, I think I was in the eighth grade, and I was playing saxophone. And somehow I just didn't have much else to do for a week. I think some of my friends may have been out of town with their families, and I just wound up playing the saxophone [laughs] much more than usual. And then I could tell, after a week, that, hm! [laughs] My tone was much better, and I was emitting fewer clams, and playing everything more smoothly. So, and I th—think that—I can't remember where exactly that falls in terms of the workups when I was studying with Rick.

FL: So tell me about some of your earliest musical experiences, musical memories, and things that kind of stand out for you.

BR: Oh, boy.—I don't have clear—I don't have clear memories of early musical experiences. I can scarcely remember anything from these disks from the little Fisher Price record player.—I mean, music was one among several activities; it certainly wasn't he principal one. For most of my childhood I was—somehow early on I was tagged as having talent drawing, and for most of my childhood and adolescence, right up until I was seventeen, the default assumption was that I would pursue a career in the visual arts.

FL: So when did you hear a professional concert for the first time?

BR: — I'm not certain. I think the first time that I would have heard an orchestra, live, in concert, would have been—don't tell me—when I was fifteen. I can't specifically recall hearing one before that. Although, no, I think there must have been—I think there may have been one or two school trips to hear the Philadelphia Orchestra in The Academy of Music. [Editor's note: The Academy of Music a concert hall in Philadelphia.]

And I know when I expressed an interest in learning guitar, of course, I was more interested in popular music, and the electric instrument, but my father is thoroughly averse to anything of the sort. So he tried to nudge me in the direction of the classical, and the instrument that he bought for me was a classical one. I remember he took me to hear Carlos Montoya, and I think I also—I'm trying to remember. I believe I got to hear [Andrés] Segovia once.

FL: And you were—

BR: I'm not clear on where. I think Segovia was in The Academy of Music, and Montoya might have been elsewhere; I can't remember clearly.

FL: You were age ten when you started the guitar?

BR: I think so, ten or el—or wait, no, that may be a little early. I was eleven or twelve.

FL: And you also started taking piano lessons?

BR: Right. This was an odd little kink. My brother had started piano lessons, and it was clear that —and I showed an interest, so then I started, too. But our teacher apparently figured out pretty quickly that I would—had more ability and would surpass my older brother. I had no clue of this at the time. It was only years later, only comparatively recently, that my mother let me in on this, that our teacher saw that I would probably surpass my brother Arch, and decided to hold me back. And as a result, I became bored, and quit out of—at a very early

stage of these formal lessons. I don't believe I was playing any actual pieces yet, strictly basic exercises.

And so for the next several years, I was still interested in the instrument, but I was learning to play pop songs at the piano. And it was only—and I can't remember exactly when—there was a summer that my Mom decided, oh, it might be good to have me work with a real teacher again, and somebody more—somebody with more solid credentials than the woman I had studied with previously. And so she took me to the nearby college, West Chester—I'm not sure what it's called anymore. [Editor's note: West Chester University of Pennsylvania.] I think at that time it had become Westchester State University, which one of its strengths was its music program, and especially music education.

And so I got to spend one summer studying with a marvelous teacher named Richard Veleta, V-E-L-E-T-A. And he was just a delight to work with, and he had me start to learn technically simple pieces, but real repertoire. And I got to see that, oh, yeah, all these—some of these nifty, exotic, wacky seventh and ninth chords and so on, that I had been trying to absorb through a jazz-rock context—they were there in Bach, too! They were just used in a different way.

FL: Getting back to the guitar, what kind of music were you playing in your guitar lessons?

BR: Well, it was the Aaron Shearer method. I can't remember my first teacher's name. I liked him; he seemed like a nice guy, but he was moonlighting, and at one point he was holding down three jobs, and he just, he had to—I think he axed me! [laughs] But he said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I can't give you lessons anymore." And then I got to work with a woman named Diane Bader, who I actually knew somewhat from a local amateur theater group that I was involved in. And she had majored in guitar at the, what was then the Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts, what was later absorbed into the University of the Arts. And she was a marvelous teacher, and so she had me continue, and I was playing the kind of usual classical repertoire, pieces by [Fernando] Sor and [Matteo] Carcassi, and [Mauro] Giuliani.

But of course, and then, when I would of course run off and be learning, trying to learn these rock tunes as well—for which the instrument is not necessarily suited, but—but for example, there's Steve Howe of the British group Yes, who was a—had very far-ranging tastes, and his style included what he himself described as "electric flamenco." So he had a piece from 1972 or so called "Clap." Or, sorry, not that—"Clap" is a ragtime piece. "Mood for a Day," which was this sort of faux-flamenco piece that was actually idiomatically written for the instrument, and not that hard for an intermediate player to learn. So, and then I would come to lessons and say, "Oh, here, I was working on this, too." And she was like, "Oh, you have to play that for my boyfriend! He'll love this."

FL: [laughs] To digress a little bit, you mentioned you were involved in a local amateur theater. So you have some kind of theater background as well, then?

BR: Yeah, as I say, I mean, so then I was in this family of scientists, and especially my older brother Arch was always—is a very, very sharp natural talent for mathematics and the sciences. And it was clear early on that he was headed toward—even when, before personal computers, when the only computer you could have in your home would be some little kit with integrated circuits, and data entry by touching a lead to a little pad on the circuit board.

So when we were teenagers, the joke was that I was going to starve, because it just wasn't clear how, because I had, as I say, the kind of default was that I was going to be a visual artist, but I also showed some ability as a writer, that I was acting in the local theater, and as a musician. So the one joke was, well, I'm going to starve, but how? And the other

was that, Arch said well, whichever profession I chose, he would program a machine to put me out of business!

FL: [laughs] Tell me about your visual artwork that you were doing then. Did you study with a teacher and all that?

BR: No, I never had any kind of private teacher. It was mainly, the skills were mainly with pencil, or pen and ink, and especially, I think when I was about ten, my parents gave me a calligraphy pen, and in a way, that's not nearly as demanding as other things, because it's really—that's more a matter of geometry. I mean, once you've mastered the various letter forms, then you can become more creative with them. But I did that, and every now and then they would give me things like paints, or a couple of summers where they would sign me up for some kind of kids' summer art course.

But my skills were very much in the two dimensions. It was always incredibly frustrating to me [laughs] when we would do ceramics, because I was terrible in three-dimensional media, and it was always irksome that my older brother Arch, who nominally was not the artistically talented one, actually would—he would, I think because he was sufficiently meticulous, and—he would create really beautiful things in art class. Whereas mine—the greatest success I ever had with a three-dimensional form was in high school, where I was trying to make a car. And the longer I worked with it, the worse it got. And finally [laughs], it hit me that it would be more successful as a car wreck, so I made a tree, and proceeded to shatter the windshield, and so on.

But, and then, so this was why—here's a detour about a detour. When I was in graduate school, I discovered polymer clay, things like—brand names of Sculpy and Fimo. So this kind of plastic clay that comes in all sorts of different colors, and it's very easy to work with, and you can fire it in your home oven instead of some professional kiln. And this started as a kind of inexpensive Mother's Day present for my Mom. "Oh, I can make her some kind of customized bead necklace."

And then it became—took on a life of its own, because compared to writing music, and at the time I composed very slowly, and it could take me a couple of years to write a piece, and then you have this long rehearsal process, and finally a performance. Whereas with the polymer clay—and especially I had terrible, terrible insomnia at that time—and at times, it might be the middle of the night, and I couldn't sleep, and I was tired and I was cranky, and I was out of sorts, and I couldn't concentrate; I didn't feel I was up to trying to write any music, but I could just take clay, and play around with it. And if something was coming along well, I could just smash it and start over again. But in some cases, it would—something would come out well, and so it was gratifying, for one thing because it was instant gratification—within an hour or less I'd created something presentable. And then also the fact that as a kid I had always been so bad with three-dimensional media that it was especially satisfying. Aha! Ha! I did it! [both laugh]

And going on to another detour that will probably come up: when I was six, I think —yes, six, my brother and I on some Saturday morning stumbled across a television show called *Lancelot Link, Secret Chimp* which was a spoof of sort of James Bond, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, and so on, but with chimpanzees dressed up in clothing, and dubbed by human actors. And I just became fascinated. I'd never seen these creatures before! What were they?

And I became very interested in them, and it's an interest that has continued to the present day. So most of what I was making in—with the polymer clay was actually chimpanzee bead jewelry, beads in the shape of various chimpanzee heads, or pins that were,

you know—I had a friend who was a flutist, and so I made for her a pin of a little chimp playing a flute. Or, I think I never actually tried to pull it off with a friend who played the violin. And so there are all sorts of various things.

And there was a well-attended and healthy farmers' market in Ithaca, so the joke with my friend and housemate, Jesse Ernst, who's a physicist, currently teaches at SUNY Albany, was that I was never going to leave Ithaca. I had already been in Ithaca for some years at that point, and so the joke was, "Oh, yeah, you know that guy who sells the ape jewelry at the farmer's market? Yeah, I hear he writes music!" "No!" "Or, he used to, something like that!" [both laugh]

2. Musical inspirations (26:03—CD1 26:03)

FL: So, we'll pick up on the ape theme later. So, getting back, you mentioned that you had a neighbor kid named Fred who played the electric guitar, and introduced you to music that's been influential to you?

BR: Fred Derr, and I should look him up. It's been a while since I've talked with him. Yeah, Fred's family moved down the street from us, I'm not sure, but I think it must have been about eleven or—no, I was probably twelve or thirteen. And he was actually my brother's age, and he had a brother Kevin who was a year younger than I. But Kevin and I didn't actually have interests—any common interests, whereas Fred was already a highly skilled guitarist. He would buy L.P.'s of what things he liked, and he had one of the Ibanez copies of a Gibson Les Paul, and this was one of the—something that, it was such a good copy that apparently the Gibson Company sued Ibanez to take them off the market.

And Fred was just a marvelous player, and he would buy things that he found interesting, and just play along—you know, the kind of classic, disciplined teenage guitarist, just as John Covach puts it, with one ear pinned to the speaker, and just listen, listen like thieves, and play along, over and over, until you can copy exactly what's on the record. And he introduced me to a lot of much, much more interesting repertoire, because there was no, virtually no contemporary popular music in my family's household, that my parents' tastes—my parents were somewhat older. They were born in what, 1925, and I think, '27, respectively. So their tastes were very conservative, and my older brother's tastes were fairly conservative.

And I recall being introduced to the Beatles by our elementary school music teacher, right. It wasn't anything around the house. And so it was Fred who introduced me to a lot of rock music, and especially jazz-rock, jazz fusion, and progressive rock, acts like Yes and Genesis and Jethro Tull. Perhaps most centrally, the John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

FL: You mentioned that I guess it was around this time that you got, you found out about the octatonic scale from *Guitar Player* magazine?

BR: Mm-hm.

FL: Tell me about that, what effect that had on you at the time?

BR: That was a bit later. I mean, that was I think around 1980 or '81. And it was just, I think probably a two or maybe three page spread in *Guitar Player* of exotic scales to extend one's palette for soloing. And it appeared under the name of the "symmetric scale" because of the regular alternation of whole steps and half steps. And I remember especially, it wasn't so

much with the guitar, but it was at the keyboard, and in particular, I was taking organ lessons at the time.

This was, I mean, my musical training was somewhat scattered, throughout my adolescence, because I had started on clarinet, but then I had this interest in more kind of rock and pop, so I migrated toward the saxophone. But then I also craved polyphony, so then I was interested in the piano lessons, and then those didn't play out so much. So, I remember that our high school had an Allen organ, so—an electric instrument, but of course one designed for concert use, or the sort of thing that would be suitable for churches, rather, I mean, it wasn't a Hammond B-3 or anything. And I remember particularly with that, just sitting and playing with, "Oh, what are the chords that I can make from this scale?"—

FL: So it looks like you had kind of a knowledge of basic chord vocabulary? Some kids, you know, in high school, kind of music lessons, the teachers don't give them any kind of theory at all. It sounds like you had some knowledge of that?

BR: A bit. Although, you know, this was—I think I didn't have any strong formal training in it until college. But the whole—the adolescence where I was especially learning a lot of pop songs without any formal instruction, I just started to notice certain relationships and patterns. So, by the time I got to formal study, a lot of it was just learning what to call things that were already in my head, that—I remember especially, for example, just voice leading was something that was a concept that no one had actually taught me. I think there was one point where I had briefly borrowed a music theory book from the high school choir director, because he taught a music theory class, but it didn't fit my schedule, so it was something I couldn't take. And I vaguely recall at some point reading about the forbidden parallels and what not, and it didn't mean anything to me, really.

But it was at some point, throughout high school, that I would try my hand at writing things, especially using these nifty chords that John McLaughlin, or Steely Dan, or George Gershwin used. And why is it that when they use them, they make such clear sense, and when I try to use them, it's arbitrary, and it doesn't really work? And I think, as I recall, it was in high school, in I think my senior year of high school, it was some kind of Gershwin medley that we did at a regional chorus festival, and I remember basically discovering inner voices! [laughs] In Gershwin—oh, it's not just about chord, chord, chord, right, these vertical slices, but it's these horizontal connections that really give it the forward pull.

FL: Was there any classical music at the time that really interested you, during—when you were in high school?

BR: It was, well, I was being exposed to serious repertoire mainly through singing in choir. Our school did not have an orchestra program at the time, or I mean, there'd be these school trips, where we would ride a bus into Philadelphia and hear the Philadelphia Orchestra play student concerts. But let's see. The—well, I was of course fascinated by Bach.

Oh, and one early thing I should mention was one of these kind of random discoveries in, I think, local public library's L.P. collection was the disk of music that then-Walter Carlos [Editor's note: later name change to Wendy Carlos] wrote for, composed for the soundtrack of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. And there's this kind of recurring story with Kubrick, where whatever composer is contracted to do the film—and I think it's happened to Carlos on a couple of occasions—creates a scratch track of kind of dummy pieces, say, "Okay, I'll write something in the style of this, or something like this for the film," but that Kubrick would listen to the scratch track over and over again, and then become habituated to it, and develop a fondness, and even a preference for it.

So Carlos tells—I think it's *The Shining*, where then-she, Wendy, had created a scratch track that included the "March to the Scaffold" from [Hector] Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*, and just as— to kind of present the "Dies Irae." She knew she was going to use the "Dies Irae." And she kept bringing things to Kubrick, who was like, "No, no, no, no, no, I don't really like that! It doesn't work!" [laughs] And then at some point she figured out he basically just wanted the "March to the Scaffold."

And so there's this kind of funny thing, where a lot of people got the impression that, oh, Kubrick had this wonderful, inventive—this broad knowledge of classical music, and this inventive use of certain numbers from the established repertoire, and it was really just that he had become wedded to these, what were supposed to be the models, for some kind of model composition.

So anyway, so this had happened with *[A] Clockwork Orange*, where Carlos had created an entire L.P.'s worth of music, using the Moog synthesizer—Moog Modular Synthesizer, right, strictly monophonic. So who knows how many hours of overdubbing and careful processing, and what not. And then Kubrick's, "No, no, no, I want to use orchestral versions of *La Gazza Ladra* [by Gioachino Rossini], and *Funeral Music for Queen Mary* [by Henry Purcell]," and what not. But I remember hearing that album, and being fascinated by all of it, fascinated by the sound of the synthesizers.

FL: What about that piece on that record called "Timesteps?" Do you remember that?

BR: Yes! I haven't heard it in ages, but there are moments, yeah! See, you're doing a good job here; you're dredging up some of these early experiences that I had forgotten about! So yeah, and this was years before—I didn't get to see the movie until I went to college. So there was that, and then from that there was his album of, his recording of all the *Brandenburg Concertos*. So I actually encountered those pieces first in the Moog realizations, and then it was a novelty!

And at one point in high school, I was taking a dance class, and the teacher was using a conventional [laughs] recording of the first movement of the third *Brandenburg*, in G. And it was this weird shock [laughs], to hear a non-Moog realization of it. So those were something that was on my mind through these choral festivals.

And I sang in choir; I was doing things like the [Antonio] Vivaldi *Gloria*, and [Handel's] *Messiah*. And so certainly the baroque choral repertoire was making a big impression. My first experience of [Richard] Wagner was the "Wach Auf" from Act Three of *Meistersinger*. [Editor's note: full title *Die Meistersinger von Nürnburg*.] And that just knocked me over! So that, I became curious to learn more about Wagner, so, and hear—I was able to dig in my Dad's collection and hear the various overtures and preludes.

FL: With the choir, did you do any twentieth century repertoire?

BR: A bit. Again, this is this funny thing, that in middle school, I played in the band, and then toward the end, I think in ninth grade, I was recruited to sing one or two numbers with a small choral group. And then for high school, I left the band, and especially the marching band, because I just didn't enjoy—it didn't interest me. The stage band was sort of fun, but it was still a little square compared with the kinds of edgy, rock, electric things I really wanted to do!

So, and fortunately, I was one of two students who initially were not accepted into the select choir in high school; we were both alternates. But then, who knows what happened. We were both not only accepted into the choir; we also then were accepted to audition for the various district and regional, and so on, choral festivals—the other one being

an incredibly talented pianist named Thomas Wallace. Tom and I were even in a rock band together for a while in high school. Boy, the stories!

But anyway, he was also, he was a fabulous tenor. And so for the district chorus, even before arriving at high school, I was told, "Oh, yes, congratulations, you're in the Concert Choir, and we'd like you to audition for the District Choral Festival, and here are the three audition pieces." And they were—wait, don't tell me: Mozart *Coronation Mass*,—I can't believe I'm drawing a blank on this! There were three of them. One was the Ives, *Psalm 150*. I think it's *150*.

FL: Yeah.

BR: Right, six voice? Right, so that was [laughs] a real trip, to try to learn to do that! And there were some other kind of lesser—I think probably the highest quality twentieth century things we were doing in situations like that were [Vincent] Persichetti, a bunch of the [E. E.] Cummings settings.

FL: Did that stuff leave an impression on you, as somehow especially interesting, as opposed to Mozart and Brahms?

BR: Yes, I mean, obviously, it was a different interesting. But is was—this was something that seemed to connect more closely with the strange time signatures, and odd sonorities that were in the progressive rock, and jazz-rock fusion. But I mean, I was certainly—I was also just thrilled—I think it was either that first year, maybe second year, that I sang in the Brahms *Song of Fate*, *Schicksalslied*, and that was—that was profoundly exciting.

I mean, a wide variety of music, again everything ranging from these substantial works of classical repertory to arrangements of—selections from *Candide*, or *Porgy and Bess*, arrangements of African American spirituals. So it was an interesting education, and that was really probably my first serious kind of inroads into real repertoire.

FL: What was your choral director's name?

BR: The choral director in high school, Timothy Lutz, who is currently in Riverside, California.

FL: What was his background?

BR: He was a marvelous bass-baritone, and certainly a competent pianist. He had studied at West Chester State College [West Chester University of Pennsylvania], nearby.

FL: So, it looks like the choir was a real important music experience for you?

BR: Absolutely.

FL: You also mentioned that being able—singing from a choral part, where you could see all the other parts, that that was—made an impression on you?

BR: Yes, that was hugely, I think—again, it's part of this voi—what in retrospect seems obvious [laughs] in terms of, especially I had started off as a bass, and then when I was about, I don't know, fifteen or so, that I took some voice lessons for a while with a woman named Joy—oh gosh, I don't remember her last name precisely. I think it's Vandiver. It's a variant on Vandeveer. I think it was Vandiver. And within the first lesson she said to me, "You're not a baritone, you're a tenor!" So of course, it was traumatic, because of all the slurs I'd been slinging at tenors for the previous years.

FL: [laughs]

BR: Sorry, I'm zoning out.

FL: Your voice lessons?

BR: Right, no, how did I get to that? What was the question?

FL: Well, I asked you—

BR: Oh, right, right, right, about having all the parts in scores!

FL: Right.

BR: Yes, so I had started as a bass, so I was singing bass lines, and learning, by induction, what bass lines ought to do. And then switched to tenors, and then I spent a couple of years, and then into college singing with the Men's Glee Club at Penn State, singing tenor. So, or as a second tenor, so, right, either singing the melody, or singing inner voices. But, sorry, but back in high school, a couple years singing inner voices, and catching on that some repertoire was more fun than others, so in retrospect, you'd think it would be obvious! [laughs] Sooner or later I had to catch on that one of the secrets to really interesting music, or music that had a really strong sense of forward motion, was to have interesting activity in the inner voices.

FL: So was it through your friend Fred that you first heard jazz?

BR: Yes. And again, it wasn't—he didn't have a lot of jazz. It was jazz-rock fusion. And what few L.P.'s I had in the jazz vein were things like Weather Report.

FL: Which Weather Report albums, because they're so different?

BR: Yeah. [sighs]

FL: Did you hear *Sweetnighter*?

BR: I'm drawing a blank on the titles.

FL: *Heavy Weather*?

BR: I think I did not actually own a copy of *Heavy Weather* but I can't swear to it; I might have. I think it was the one or two albums after that. I remember one of the ones I had had this arrangement of Ellington's "Rockin' in Rhythm." [Editor's note: from the album *Night Passage.*] I can't remember the others. So jazz—my jazz quotient was quite low for a while. In high school there would be times when, I guess, I can't remember if it was study halls, or what not, where we would be sort of installed in the library. I remember happening upon *Downbeat* as a fun way to kill—

FL: *Downbeat* being the magazine?

BR: The *Downbeat* magazine, yes, as a fun way to kill fifteen or twenty minutes between, while waiting for the bell to ring. And it was mainly from that that I started to pick up names of various players. But I think in high school the only way I heard any of them was through a friend whose father was younger, and much more hip, than my parents, who had things like Thelonius Monk, and Dave Brubeck, and whatever, around the house. So I got to hear some things there, but it was really only in college and graduate school that I got to hear—in fact, really only graduate school [laughs] that I began to develop my jazz quotient.

FL: So in high school, you played electric bass guitar in, I guess you called it the Stage Band. Was it really—not really a jazz band? How would you describe that ensemble?

BR: Well—I mean, any characterization will be unfair, because it's through of the fog of decades of unreliable memory. But it—I mean, I don't recall that there was anyone who was really—or there were precious few students who actually knew much jazz, and knew how to improvise. So it was this very mainstream, commercial flavor of jazz—not classic big band arrangements, not any kind of classic small combo work, but more of this, you know, imitating the house band on the Tonight Show, or something—that vein.

FL: Did you kind of mess around with the piano, and kind of improvise, and stuff like that, as a player, or either the piano or the clarinet or saxophone?

BR: Not much. Not much, and not well. There were—I mean, I knew these various scales, and I had some sense of which scales to use with which harmonies. But at the time I wasn't very good at trying to create anything on the fly. Or I would, I don't know, somewhere I have cassettes of, so, with my friend Fred, and another friend named Bill Jemison, who was an extremely talented drummer. We would get together, and then we would just jam, now that you mention it, in extended fashion! [laughs]

I mean, the sort of thing where we would start with just some simple four chord progression, and we would play it over and over again, but it would mutate, especially with only the three of us, that Fred would be running off doing other things as soloist, and I had a short attention span, and I would start playing with things as the bassist. And the sort of thing which made a logical progression, but if you listen to the beginning of the tape, and then went fifteen minutes in, it would sound like two different pieces.

And we would—usually it was over at, or at least we had the most—we weren't stuffed in a basement when we were over at Bill's house. And he would pop a cassette in his stereo, and then we'd start up. And we'd just be going on and on, and thinking, like, "Oh, maybe we should wrap up now." And then we would discover that the tape had run out ten minutes ago! [laughs] That we had been going on for close to an hour! So, I should go back and find those, because I remember that Fred was two years ahead of me, and when he graduated from high school, he went into the Army, the United States Army, as a guitarist.

And when he would come back on leave, the three of us would get together, and sometimes he would take these cassettes with him, and he would come back and he would say, "Oh, yeah, I was playing this for the guys, guys at the base." And they were wondering, "What is that? Is that a synthesizer?" and he would explain to them no, this was his friend Brian playing a fretless bass guitar going through a wah pedal. [laughs] So it was often unrecognizable. So there might be something worthwhile there. As I say, somewhere I have some of these cassettes, and in a way I'd be kind of afraid to listen to them.

FL: [laughs]

BR: But, it's a funny thing. Because—maybe it's because early on I internalized the kind of jazz standard of improvisation. I don't—for a long time I didn't think of myself as a competent improviser, and I still don't feel entirely comfortable doing it. But, people from a classical perspective sometimes, friends say, "What are you talking about? You're so good at it!" So, it's one of those funny, I suppose, neither fish nor fowl situations, right, where by classical standards I'm an accomplished improviser, and by jazz standards I'm an utter neophyte!

3. Other artistic pursuits (53:02—CD1 53:02)

FL: [laughs] So what other artistic activities were you involved in in high school? You were still doing visual arts, and some poetry, right?

BR: Right. Visual arts, it was problematic because there was—of course you weren't supposed to do both art and music [laughs] in our high school. So there was a schedule conflict. I could not take the regular art major classes, because they conflicted with the Concert Choir. So we just found other times it fit in my schedule, I would just go down to the art rooms, and the

teachers would set me loose on various projects. And still active in theater, that doing both performing in musicals and non-musical plays.

And the poetry thing was very much a kind of fluke. There was a program in the state for talented high schoolers, a summer program, I think six weeks, called the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Arts. And the art teacher I was working with principally, a woman named Rebecca Desmond, whom I got to know, incidentally, because in junior high school, I was drafted to write a column for the local newspaper, and the editor was a wonderful man named Perry Desmond. And so Becky was his wife, and she was one of the art teachers at the high school.

So she was always marvelous and wonderful and encouraging, but she also knew, from experience, that in our particular district of the state—you know, it was suburban, comparatively affluent school districts, well-financed art programs—very competitive. Maybe if I had grown up in farm country I could have gotten to the Governor's School as a visual artist. But Becky knew that it as unlikely I could get there on my visual arts skills. But she had a sense that I could probably get in on the creative writing side.

And I also knew that the music side was extremely competitive! That I have a very good friend who attended a nearby school who somehow was not admitted in music, which still shocks me, because at the time she was a much better musician than I was a writer! [laughs] So this gives you a sense of the, you know, the—it wasn't a level playing field in the various art disciplines, and the various portions of the state.

But yeah, Becky figured out, "Oh, Brian, you should try—you should apply in creative writing." And so I did that, and because I had some writing ability, and always been good with language and vocabulary and what not, that I passed whatever minimum threshold they had for poetry. And so I spent a summer studying poetry, mostly, and then being a music minor, and taking a composition class in the afternoons.

FL: So have you continued to write poetry over the years?

BR: Not especially. The closest has been song lyrics. When I was in high school, I wrote one or two pop songs, but they were always satirical, and this actually continued to be the case in college and graduate school. And more recently, I have a friend who is creating a musical based on the life of Martin Luther, and her training is as a journalist. So she's a neophyte playwright, a neophyte lyricist. So she's taking a crack at writing the song lyrics, but she just doesn't have much experience with meter and rhyme and what not, and is still developing an ear for it.

So just a couple of months ago, I found out that she and the director had decided to rent a theater in the East Village in New York for a public reading of the play. So that's, I think, called a table reading, although this was almost staged, that there was some minimal costuming, and actors weren't just sitting down, but those who were speaking would stand up and confront each other, or what not. And for this occasion I had to whip up some songs, but the lyrics weren't really ready for me to set, so for each one I had to take a couple of days to revise the lyrics.

So that's the extent of my poetic activity these days, but I would not hold it up as poetry. From a poetic standpoint, it's hack work, right, the same qualities that got me into that program way back when, where I can—I have the ear for meter, and I have the vocabulary to be able to find rhymes and even to compose trick rhymes. But I don't do serious. I can't do gravitas; I do silly.

4. The birth of a composer (58:52—CD2 00:00)

FL: But you've employed your literary talents in interesting ways. We'll get to that with some other stuff. When you were in high school, you mentioned you'd written some pop songs. Had you written any other kind of music?

BR: No, no, I think I can say with absolute certainty I did not try to write anything that was, that tried to be serious until I was seventeen, and I took a poem by a high school friend, and I arranged it—and I set it, I set it for—and now I can't remember. I think it—I can't remember if it was women's voices, or mixed voices. I think it may—because she wasn't in the Concert Choir, but she sang in the Treble Choir, so I think I set it for treble choir and piano.

And I think that same year I also took an Emily Dickinson poem, "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed," and set that for women's voices and piano. The former item, which I think was called something like "I'll Remember," the idiom was essentially pop-ish. I mean, not in a syncopated way, but more slow, calm, very much diatonic. The Dickinson setting was more chromatic; there I was trying to create a jazzy feel to it, because that was the spirit of the poem. And—so I suppose that was—the idiom was probably along the lines of a kind of swing [Sergey] Prokofiev or [Paul] Hindemith. I haven't saved scores [laughs] from my juvenilia, but that's what I remember.

When I got to college as a freshman, and I was really trying to write serious pieces, and when I showed my piano teacher a solo piano piece that I was writing for my composition lesson, he said, "Oh, this is."—and at the time, I didn't know the music of Hindemith, or [Dmitri] Shostakovich. He said, "Oh, this is a lot like Hindemith, or Shostakovich. Do you know their music?" I said, "No, I don't." And it was kind of scary, because at the time, he was preparing, with a faculty trumpeter, a performance of the Hindemith *Sonata for Trumpet and Piano*. And my piece was sort of a Siciliano rhythm. [laughs] And so on top of the piano, he has a copy of the score for the Hindemith *Sonata for Trumpet and Piano*, and he opens it up, and looking at it. And it's very, very similar rhythms, and very similar sonorities, partly from the influence of the progressive rock, these kind of chordal—I loved chordal secundal harmonies when I was in high school, loved dissonant—and I mean, that became—well, also loved dissonant suspensions. I hadn't quite identified that at the time; it was only when I got to college, I figured, oh yeah, that's what they call those moments, so many of those moments that I loved so much in these pieces that I enjoyed singing in choir. "Oh, that's a dissonant suspension."

FL: So when was it in high school that you became serious about music as a possible profession?

BR: [coughs] Pardon. This was at the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Arts. As I said, I was a writing major, but a music minor, and very much enjoying being exposed, for the first time, unless you count the soundtrack to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, music of [György] Ligeti, and—I have to be careful and remember exactly which ones were from that summer. Well, I mean, post-tonal repertoire, classical repertoire generally. And lessons with a man named John Dulik, D-U-L-I-K.

And toward the end of the summer there was an afternoon when a bunch of us, a bunch of my friends, were putting together a volleyball game, and I was inviting our friend Joe, whose last name I've forgotten—and the yearbook for that Governor's School program is stashed away in a friend's attic in Pennsylvania, so I can't consult it! And so, Joe was a music major, and he was one of—I think there were two music majors who were not only majoring in an instrument, but also in composition, so this was a real composer!

And I was inviting Joe to join us for this volleyball game, and he said, "Oh, I'd love to, but I have to put together my electronic music project." And as I mentioned, I was already fascinated by synthesizers. I said, "Ooh, electronic music! What kind of equipment are you working with?" And then he started telling me about it, and I must have been drooling liberally, or something, because he said, "Oh, you want to come along and watch?" I said, "Oh, could I?"

So I did this, and it was a very strange experience for me, because while he was slapping together his project, even though I had absolutely no experience with any of that equipment, I was having these instant reactions of, "Oh, no, that's"—I didn't say anything; I kept my mouth shut. But I just kept thinking, "Oh, wait, oh, this could be so much more interesting if he did this." And I would have this kind of sonic image in my head of something that would sound better. And so that was this first strange inkling that I have, like wow! I have these—you know, it's not just these opinions about the way things sound, but this sense of what they could sound like, or what they ought to sound like.

So that was the epiphany for me, in terms of saying, "I think I'll try to become a composer, rather than,"—as I say, at the time I had just no sense of whether to try to pursue a career as a visual artist, maybe probably a graphic designer or a commercial artist of some kind, or whether to try to become an actor. Writer was never at the top of the list, but it was always the fallback, for many, many years. Always a sense, like, well, if this doesn't work out, I can at least support myself as a writer of some kind, or starve less pathetically as a writer and whatever.

FL: So what year in high school was this?

BR: This was between junior and senior year, so the summer of 1981. As I say, I have to dig out that yearbook some time, and get Joe's last name! [laughs] Find out where he is, what he's doing now, and what kind of music he's writing.

FL: You also mentioned that in high school you'd met two composers. How do you pronounce—

BR: Ah, yes! In the old country it would have been, I think, Kshi-veets-kee. But Jan Krzywicki, and Andrew Rudin. And actually there were a couple of others. So our high school had a career experience program, so that graduating seniors, in their last quarter, I guess it was, could spend a certain amount of time not in school, but hanging out with professionals in their putative chosen career, and find out what daily life was really like, whether it actually corresponded to the glamorous portrayal of doctors or lawyers or what not, on television.

And so I contacted several composers, and who knows how I got their names! So, and there were a couple that I just met with on a single appointment, and we sort of chatted about what—their training, or my background. For example, one fellow, Robert Capanna, who at the time was director of the Settlement School of Music in Philadelphia, and who was friendly and cheerful about it, but was—made sure that I was aware that I would be competing with child prodigies, and people who had been composing much longer than I had, composing seriously much longer than I had.

And the other was Richard Yardumian. I met with him briefly, and I remember that especially, that here is this senior, essentially retired, composer, who was very gracious about talking to me, and looking over what I had done, and looking at this poem I had set by my friend, and noticing there were some words where he said, "I don't believe I would have set a poem that had those words in it." [laughs]

But the extended experience I had was meeting with Jan Krzywicki, who at the time was teaching at again, what was then the Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts, and

Andrew Rudin, who—I can't remember, I'm trying to remember whether he had an academic teaching position at that time. I remember he was someone who had—I think had studied at University of Pennsylvania.

So the sessions with Andrew were more like lessons, conventional lessons where I would—early on—showed him what little I had done, and told him about things, what my ambitions were, which at that time, right, the most ambitious thing I could think of was, "Well, I want to be the next Stephen Sondheim." And, but when he saw that I was interested in theater music, he showed me a vocal score for this fairly new thing called *Sweeney Todd*, basically saying, "Look, if you're going to do theater music, at least do it at a high level like this."

And he showed me scores of—I remember one thing that one of his students had written, and Andrew was going through it, essentially just pointing out, like, "Oh, look at this, here are these quintuplets. Do these really matter? Do these need to be quintuplets? This is just something that looks stylish, to impress a jury for a competition, that's all. Why couldn't this have been sextuplets?" And—so those meetings with him were more like normal composition lessons.

And then the sessions with Jan, I actually spent most of my time with Jan—and to this day he expresses guilt that he didn't know what to do with me! So he, one thing he had me do was go through his filing cabinet [laughs], and help him kind of clean it out and organize it, sort things out. And that was—that was an education for me.

Some of it was scores, and things he had written. And then I could see them, and he could point out like, here is this choral piece that he had written, I think for the Philadelphia Boys Choir, and then they had declined to perform it, because it's harmonically very thorny, very hard for them to find the intervals. And some of it was just various canons, puzzle canons that he had used as musicianship exercises in theory classes. So in many cases, if there were spare copies, he would let me just take one home with me, and—

But there were also conversations about music and composition. So I actually—I found them very useful. As I say, he expresses guilt for this nowadays; we saw each other again some years ago at a regional composer's conference, and we've kept in touch since then.

FL: Were they—how did they view your pop music background, and stuff like that, and your interest in rock music? Did they—was that a problem for them?

BR: No, we didn't talk about it much. I mean, they didn't complain about it; they didn't say, "Oh, you've got to stop listening to that trash and listen to some serious repertoire." And it may be that I didn't talk about it so much with them, because again, I was only too happy to hear from them about these figures like [Alban] Berg and [Olivier] Messiaen, that were new to me.

5. University experiences (1:12:24—CD2 13:33)

FL: So it was at this time when you decided you wanted to be a music major in college, right?

BR: Yes.

FL: Yeah, yeah. And you went to The Pennsylvania State University, and you got a bachelor's degree in theory and composition in 1986, right?

BR: Yes.

FL: Who—let's see, your principal teacher there was somebody named Burt Fenner?

BR: Mm-hm.

FL: Yeah, tell me about him, and what things you learned from him.

BR: Burt was a—had studied with Otto Luening, I think at Mannes [School of Music]. And the wonderful thing about Burt as a teacher is his extremely laissez-faire attitude. He had particular tastes, and he didn't conceal them entirely, but he largely let me explore what I wanted to explore, as—. Even though my theory training was very spotty, it was enough to, that I scored, on the Advanced Placement test in Music Theory, I scored well enough to place out of the freshman year of theory classes.

And so by doing that, I was not only able to start in sophomore theory classes, but also to start in—to take the composition class early on. And one feature of that was—I think it must have been called Composition Seminar—that we would meet once a week, and Burt would have—each of us would take turns presenting some piece that had, that was—I think the limit must have been twenty years, no more than twenty years old, and from whatever scores and recordings we could find in the music library.

So partly from that, and, right, these various names that I had picked up along the way getting to college, he essentially—you know, he sometimes had suggestions like, "Oh, you might want to look at this." I especially remember the main thing that he introduced me to that I probably would not, might not have encountered otherwise, or might not have purs—dug as deeply, was Harry Partch. And I wound up reading *Genesis of a Music* essentially on his suggestion. Yeah, at this point it's long enough, I struggle to remember specific comments that he would have made.

But, like one I remember is when I decided in my senior year to write something for—we had a very good faculty wind quintet, and the flutist was married to a faculty percussionist. So I decided to write a piece for the six of them. And so I started looking into wind quintets in the literature, and [laughs] I remember Burt saying, "Well, it's a tricky ensemble to write for, in terms of sonority, because if you think of a string quartet, you have these two wonderful sopranos, and you have this very good alto, combination alto-tenor, and you have this wonderful bass-baritone, the cello." He said, "In the wind quintet, you have these three really good sopranos, and you have this tenor who doesn't really fit, and then you have this old man singing bass." [laughs]

So in general, I think, the comments that Burt was making to me, they were not, "Oh, stay away from that! That repertoire is awful!" or, "Here, you should be doing this!" They were just more practical comments, "Well, here are things to watch out for when you're writing for this instrument, or this group." And that was perfect for me, because, I mean, I had so much to learn at the time! I mean, most of the stuff I wrote for him was just dreadful! Or, you know, I was constantly—my reach was exceeding my grasp.

FL: So tell me about, kind of, the style of composition you were working with at that time.

BR: Right, so getting into college—I think when I was a freshman, if you had asked me, "Oh, who are the—your favorite composers?" I think what I told people was Bach, Wagner, and Stravinsky. So I thought that I was trying to draw on what they were doing, although as I say, it turned out that the style was very much along the lines of Hindemith, Shostakovich, and maybe [Walter] Piston. And so that's what I was doing initially. And then in college I was able to dig into things like [Anton] Webern and [Krzysztof] Penderecki I remember I was fascinated by, and Ligeti, [Iannis] Xenakis, [Edgard] Varèse.

And then, of course this was the 1980's, and minimalism was becoming very big, and I remember the first couple of instances of minimalism that I heard, I was thoroughly underwhelmed! And I mean, one—this is unfair—one of these presentations in the composition seminar, a friend had presented some little waltz that Philip Glass had written for a collection of contemporary waltzes. And I mean, you know, it was not a piece with any great pretensions, but it didn't interest me.

And then for New Year's Day 1984, I can't remember who produced it, but there was this multimedia extravaganza which was, I mean, some rock acts, but then also some kind of middle brow, or pop—avant-garde acts that had some kind of pop potential. So for example, I remember [laughs] Laurie Anderson coming out and doing one of her routines, and it was with her voice—her voice was being electronically altered in real time, being dropped an octave. And she had the very spiky haircut, and was wearing a suit, so I remember at one point my Mom wandering into the living room, watching Laurie Anderson for a few seconds, and asking, "Brian, is that a boy or a girl?" [both laugh]

So anyway, so another item on this—I think it was called "Happy New Year, Mr. Orwell," or something. [Editor's note: probably "Good Morning, Mr. Orwell."] And so there was something of Philip Glass's, probably from *The Photographer*, and I think it had some kind of avant-garde visuals. But I remember listening to it and thinking, "Eh, big deal. This just sounds like licks—licks from Yes or Genesis or something, being repeated too many times, without any vocals." And but then somehow—and that didn't really do much for me.

But it must have been some time not long after that that I decided to investigate and find out: what is all the fuss, really? And so I began to explore minimalism, and at least be interested in some of the ideas behind it, and then started to acquire a taste for it, and wound up choosing it for a senior thesis project, to investigate this issue of minimalism for the orchestra. Because at the time, the pieces that Glass and [Steve] Reich wrote were simply not idiomatic, or not entirely idiomatic, and to some extent, deliberately so. And there was this hot young, hot new kid named John Adams, who was getting attention.

But it was the kind of thing which, by the time I was writing the thesis, I'd kind of had my fill of most of it. It was absolutely horrifying to me [laughs] when in my senior year my roommate, a guy named Rob Dennis, developed an extreme fondness for Philip Glass! [laughs] And he started buying all the albums, and playing them a lot of the time. And he was in the—he was a theater tech person, so he would tell me about getting to the theater before, to set things up, and before anyone showed up, he'd put one of these Philip Glass albums on the sound system, and just blast it, and have it reverberating in the hall. And I'd think, [sighs] "Why are you telling me this? I don't want to hear this stuff!"

But it was this funny kind of love-hate relationship where I remember especially there was, I think for some time even into graduate school, if minimalism came up in conversation, I would slam it, until I heard somebody else slam it, and then I would rush to its defense. And I think it's partly that I enjoyed some of the sonorities, and I enjoyed the steady pulse. And I enjoyed this idea of transformation, and especially of audible—right—intelligible, transformation. But, I don't much care for the literal repetition, and especially the high degree of literal repetition.

So in my own music, to the extent that any of my music can be described as minimalist, or really post-minimalist, I've—I don't know if I've used this in print anywhere, but I think of it as a kind of screwball minimalism, where things repeat, and it's sort of like [Harrison] Birtwistle, in a sense, that things repeat, but not exactly.

FL: Yeah, yeah. Some of the other music you'd written in college—what were those pieces like?

BR: Well, the one minimalist piece I wrote was kind of satirical. I called it "Beckett Fanfare," I'm thinking of Samuel Beckett. And it was a very simple kind of fanfare—this was for brass quintet. We had a very good graduate brass quintet. And it was a very simple fanfare figure that would repeat over, except that it wasn't even entirely continuous. It went, [sings] "Buh, buh, bum bum, bum bum bum, buh!" All right, this big wind up to [sings] "Buh, bum, bum, bum"—so it was just the single phrase, but then it became a game of expectations, like which bits would I decide to loop, or how long would the pau—where would I interrupt it, and how long would the pause be?

So, I mean, that was essentially a joke piece, again, that even by the time I finished, even though I was listening to, and fascinated by what was essentially the—mainly the European avant-garde—oh, I can't believe I forgot George Crumb's name, earlier. The avant-garde of the sixties, fifties, sixties, in to the 1970's, I wasn't writing music like that.

And in fact it was when I was applying to graduate programs a few years later, and when up to Eastman for an interview—and it was to have been with Warren Benson, but he wasn't feeling well—so it was Christopher Rouse who met with me instead. So I remember going to meet Christopher Rouse. He has a box of scores and tapes that he said, "I haven't had a chance to listen to these, because it was going to be Warren." And he asked me about, "So, which composers are you interested in?"

And as I was telling him, I was just acutely aware that in this box, over on the piano bench, were—somewhere were my scores and my tape—that the music I had submitted, the music I was writing, didn't sound like the music of the composers I was really interested in! That I'd been playing it safe, and that essentially all the music that I had written up to 1989 could easily have been written before 1939. So— so that's, yeah, that throughout college, the idiom was fairly conservative. And again, in my defense, I can say I was a beginner! I was still learning a lot.

I remember at one point, I think when I was a sophomore, I was trying to write a brass quintet, and I was trying to write it as a kind of sonata form, because that's what I was learning in class. And I remember sketching some ideas at the piano, and then going off to a study lounge, and instead of writing at the piano, just writing things out, using my inner ear, and choosing, and this and that, and so on, and writing a couple pages of material, trying to spin things out. And then checking it at a piano, discovering to my horror that it didn't sound anything like what I thought it did. My ear just wasn't developed enough yet. And I think within a year or two, I was like looking back, and discovering, yeah, that piece is very clunky. The use of sonata form is terribly, terribly schematic.

So it was really only in graduate school where I had, after this experience with the interview with Rouse at Eastman, deciding, okay, you know what? I've got to just take a certain leap, and start writing music that sounds as though it might have been written within my own lifetime, and that actually draws on these more contemporary—more directly on some of these more contemporary idioms. And there was still a certain conservatism that the materials I would lay out at the beginning of the composition process were almost always more interesting and more experimental than what wound up in the piece, that I was being selective.

FL: So for those pieces in your undergraduate years, did you feel like you had kind of left some of your interest in rock and jazz kind of behind, or something?

BR: Well, no! Because—and this is one of the funny things, which I hadn't, somehow I didn't really notice at the time, but it was only some years ago when I had a piece premiered in a concert of music of Frank Zappa. And I realized: oh yeah, you know what? Because, it's

one of these quirks of my education, in terms of the rock idiom, was which acts were getting radio play, and which acts did my friend Fred have in his collection, or not? And Frank Zappa was or not. So I didn't really discover—and King Crimson was another, by the way. So I didn't discover Zappa until I got to college, around the same time I was discovering Penderecki, and Crumb, and what not.

And so, no, I hadn't left it behind. I mean, I was still listening to it. I was playing some of it; I played in a rock band comparatively briefly. I had a friend, friends with whom we were trying to start a band, and it wasn't really getting off the ground. And then there was a local band that was losing a couple members, and so we auditioned to replace them. And so I played with that band for essentially one summer, and into the fall, and I realized that it was taking too much of my energy, and that my school work was going to suffer. So I ended up leaving that band.

But no, I mean, the whole time I was still interested and involved. And then my role model evolved from Stephen Sondheim [laughs] when I was in high school, to actually David Byrne, who was the leader of the band Talking Heads, right. And they became, were very surprisingly—a surprising commercial success in the early 1980's, given their kind of art school background and their avant-garde attitudes to many aspects of the music and its visual presentation. And then he was also collaborating with people like Robert Wilson. So yeah, so at that point I had not left behind the rock. There was more, maybe, the sense that I was less interested in exploring it than I was in the classical avant-garde.

FL: Did you—?

BR: But I didn't try to incorporate it in the music I was writing, no.

FL: Yeah, that's what I was going to ask, yeah.

6. Multi-instrumentalism (1:30:10—CD2 31:18)

FL: Did you play guitar, clarinet, or saxophone in college at all?

BR: No. Or sorry, no clarinet or saxophone; I essentially stopped playing reed instruments when I joined the choir in high school, when I was fifteen. I very briefly deluded myself into picking up the clarinet again when I was in grad school, and then that did not last long. The guitar I did play, and still had the classical instrument, and I still had a bass guitar.

In the band I actually played keyboard, synthesizer. I was particularly—I mean, I'd always been interested in synthesizers, and of course when there was a big explosion of synth-pop, in the early 1980's. So that was—and somehow, yeah, I managed to scrape together the money, and the instruments had become inexpensive enough that I could—

FL: Which synthesizer did you have?

BR: This is embarrassing: the Roland JX3-P, which was not a bad instrument, entirely. The main problem with it is that it had, let's see, I think sixty-four—I can't remember; I would have to check this online. I think it had thirty-two ROM patches, and thirty-two user-programmable, the catch being that it was Japanese manufacturers, and the factory patches were always a little strange, a little off. They were just not the things you wanted to be there permanently, and some you dearly wished you could replace with your own sounds.

And I had bought it, mainly—if I hadn't bought that, I would have gotten the Sequential Circuits Prophet 600, which I didn't buy mainly because it had the membrane

switches, and I hated membrane switches. I still hate membrane switches! But I remember within a year of getting that, hearing some other band playing locally, and the synth player was doing this fabulous, this kind of fake saxophone in one number. I said, "Wow, what's he playing?" and it turned out it was a Prophet 600.

And I mean, in terms of their abilities, they are largely comparable, except the Prophet 600 had one hundred memory locations, and they were all user-programmable. So in a very weird binge last year, I actually bought a Prophet 600 on eBay [laughs], somehow to atone for making the wrong decision when I was twenty!

FL: Now in undergraduate college, you also played piano? You took piano lessons, right?

BR: Yes, I took piano lessons with a man named Steven Smith, who was a wonderful player. And I was, by far, his worst student, at least in terms of technical ability. This was a quirk. When I had originally pre-registered, the assumption was I was going to take piano class, because my abilities were not advanced. But I had been taking organ lessons in high school, first with an absolutely awful local teacher, who just lived behind the block from my family. But then for a while I got to take with a marvelous organist who was a college buddy of my high school choir director, and who was choir director at a nearby high school, a man named H. Ray Hunsicker.

So there again, I was thoroughly late in early life, again, in some substantial lessons, with a really marvelous performer. So when I got to Penn State, and I think before the semester had started, right, it was still orientation week, and I thought, "Oh, I need to go over and practice," and went into a room, and it was some little practice room with a Yamaha upright, and I was playing through, you know, what piano pieces, and some of the pieces for organ manuals that I had learned.

Well, and I swear I had not done this consciously, but it turns out I had happened to choose a practice room that was next door, or maybe two doors down, from the organ teacher. She heard this, and she recognized this was not one of her students, and these were not pieces she had assigned to anybody. So she came down and knocked on the door, and said, politely, "So, who are you, and why are you playing these pieces?" [laughs]

So it was through her intervention that she alerted Steven Smith to me, "You should probably take this—this kid will be an interesting student, even though he's not up to [Frédéric] Chopin and [Sergey] Rachmaninoff of your other students." And he was a marvelous, marvelous teacher, not only in terms of technical issues as a pianist, but just as a musician all around.

And then yes, I also studied organ for about a year. This was June Miller, was her name. And that was fun. I was just—I mean, all along the organ had been an interesting thing for me, because I was at best a mediocre pianist. In fact, in high school, not yet mediocre. In college, when I really practiced assiduously, I attained, I think, a certain solid mediocrity. But, so it didn't seem to me that organ ought to be something I would do well, but somehow it suited me, and I did fairly well at it.

And I wound up not pursuing it just because at the time I was a more militant atheist, and I couldn't imagine myself taking money from churches to play this thing! And I also, I knew I didn't have the chops to make it, have a concert career on it! So again, it was something which I enjoyed, and found June marvelous to work with. And it was fun to make all that noise with that machine. But I wound up not pursuing it.

And the education, again, was similarly checkered—that's the word I was looking for earlier—because I decided, well, as a composer, I ought to know how all the instruments work. So I studied viola briefly, to get a sense of what it feels like to play a string instrument.

FL: How long was that?

BR: That was about a year. I gave it up because I couldn't stand to hear myself practice! I was just, you know—from guitar, it's—can play a guitar with vibrato, but when I curled the left arm up, and the left wrist, to the playing position for violin or viola, I just couldn't move it. And since then I've had friends who do play say, "Oh, what? Only a year? Come on, it takes much longer to learn to do that."

And it's a very long story that I purchased an instrument from a graduate student at the school—it was actually a brass player. He had told me that the instrument was his brother's. It turns out it belonged to the school, and he had been stealing instruments from the school for some time, and selling them! It was in my senior year that he was caught, and then when I got word of this—or actually, I didn't get word of this immediately, that his friends were very good—various mutual friends who were very good about covering for him, and keeping their mouths shut.

And it was one time when I was changing strings on this instrument that I thought belonged to me when I saw a serial number of some kind scratched into the back of the head, and became very distraught, and figured out what was going on. And it took me a while to explain to my teacher what was wrong, because he had recognized it all along as a school instrument! He didn't realize that I was under the impression that I owned it! [laughs] And fortunately I was able to get restitution from the guy, and got my money back, the money that I had paid him for it, to purchase it.

But anyway, this left me with a hole in my schedule my senior year, because this instrument—it was not great, but it was okay. And the next instrument the school had for me to work with was just dreadful, and my teacher could barely get a good sound out of it. So it was like, oh, what else am I going to do? And around Christmas time I heard a concert by the Harp Ensemble at the art museum. I thought, "Wow! What a cool idea, a harp ensemble!" Went to hear that, and was thoroughly underwhelmed, because it was mostly four or five beginning harpists playing Christmas carols in unison! I thought, "Wait, this can't be that hard!" [laughs] and so I tried it myself, you know, arrogant bastard, I.

And it turned out I had excellent preparation for it, because the, in terms of the spacing of what your fingers are doing, it's like playing the piano, that the distance between your fingers corresponds to the distances between notes, more or less. But what your musculature is doing is nothing like the piano; it's more like what you do when you're plucking strings of a guitar. So that was a trip, because between having this, you know, what amounted to useful preparation, and the fact that there was only maybe one or two of the other students who were particularly dedicated or gifted, or motivated, and the fact that the teacher was a marvelous player herself, but was—tended to foist work onto her students for their benefit whether they were ready for it or not.

So I remember there was—so in January I start my very first lessons on the instrument. And that semester the choir and orchestra were going to perform the [Gabriel] Fauré *Requiem*. And at some point in, I suppose—and so that concert was going to be in April. And some time in February, the teacher, a woman named Nan Gulow Mann, brought in the harp part to the *Requiem*. I thought, "Oh, wow, this is fun. It's like, she's letting us see what an orchestral harp part looks like, and then we'd work on it."

And that particular part is mostly very easy; there's not so much pedal work. It's largely things like the "Sanctus," and the "In Paradisum," essentially diatonic, these repeating patterns. You learn to play it once, you can get through nine, ten, twelve bars, no problem. Except they each have a kind of wildly chromatic patch in the middle where you're suddenly tap dancing on the pedals. And in one of these lessons in February or maybe early March, I was playing through this, and got to the hard part, and fell apart, and laughed it off, saying, "Well, I'm glad I don't have to—I'm glad you're doing that with the choir and the orchestra instead of me." And without smiling, her eyes just kind of opened. She said, "Oh, no—you're going to be playing it." [laughs] This was the first she had told me! I said, "What?"

So fortunately I had a month to practice; I was able to master it. But I remember there was also, there was—what was it? Her daughter Molly was also learning to play, and there was a production of *Peter Pan* that summer. And I was dragooned into the pit orchestra for that, and Molly was tremendously relieved that I was doing it, because she knew her mother was going to have her do it otherwise! And that was fun, because mainly they just needed somebody to provide a gliss every time Peter Pan threw the fairy dust! [laughs] And but of course, I took it seriously, and tried to practice the part, and at first was in despair, because some of it just, you know, I knew I wouldn't be able to do. And the music director was my director from the Glee Club, Bruce Trinkley, who was very casual about it, and calm. He said, "Look, as long as you provide the fairy dust, we're happy."

And then especially as I dug into the part more, and worked at it very carefully and figured out, some of it was literally unplayable, that it was something that some orchestrator who really didn't understand how a harp worked was just essentially writing out a piano part. And there were just some things where I would just, you know, try to find respellings, like, no, this just can't be done! So that also helped, where I just knew what the chords were, and come up with parts that were within my abilities. And then people were happy.

As Bruce pointed out, in a small pit like that, the advantage of the harp is that can help give the illusion of more string players than you really have. And in fact the concertmaster, who was the wife of the trumpet professor, at one point in rehearsal—I knew who she was, but she didn't know who I was. And so she was making conversation; she said, "Oh, so are you a harp major here?" [laughs] So that was kind of a kick, to start an instrument, and just very quickly [snaps fingers], within half a year, be performing in public!

FL: You've really used that harp experience for some of your later music. That accounts for some of your good harp parts.

BR: I like to think so.

FL: I wondered about that.

BR: Or, yeah, at least knowing how the instrument works. I remember in graduate school, a very talented composer who brought in some piece, and again it's the kind of thing, whenever I see some—it's the same way when I see an organ part, and I just instinctively start: toe, heel, toe, heel, how is that pedaled? How do you play that?

And in this case, something he had written, which was very chromatic, and I looked at it, and there's some very chromatic cluster chords. I pointed out, like, "Matt, this simply cannot be done, right." It's like, if the C's are set to C sharp, and if the D's are set to D natural, and the E's are set to E flat, and the F's are F flat—right, it was just chromatic collection that cannot be played on a harp without specially tuning the instrument for it. And I said, "This just cannot be done." "Oh, no, players always figure out a way to do it." [laughs] And so I couldn't believe he was oblivious to it!

7. Aspirations after college (1:45:35—CD2 46:44)

FL: So when you finished up your undergraduate degree, what were your future aspirations at the time?

BR: During my senior year, I thought I might want to become a conductor, and explored that for a while, and the figured out that I just hadn't grown up on the repertoire in a way that would make that really work. I just didn't know, especially the symphonic repertoire, I didn't know intimately. So I really didn't know what I was going to do.

And at the time, I thought that my composition professors didn't have much time to compose. At the time, Burt Fenner's wife was very seriously ill, and somehow no one had told me; I was the last to hear about everything. So it was only after her death, after I'd graduated, that I learned that she had had these health problems, and that that had taken a lot of Burt's time and energy. And Bruce Trinkley at the time simply chose to devote a lot of his time and energy to choral conducting, to not only the Glee Club at Penn State, but some other groups, and these summer theater productions at Penn State and so on.

So it was a couple years later that I figured out: oh, wait a minute; actually teaching college was not such a bad way to pay the rent. But in the mean time, I really didn't know what I was going to do, so I took several years of being out in the working world, trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

FL: So you still weren't sure about being a composer, then?

BR: Well— right. I mean, in particular there was a self doubt; I didn't know whether I really had it, whether I really had what it takes, whether I was really musical. There was—because I had always done so well in school, in so many subjects, there was this persistent self doubt, that it's like: well, maybe I'm not really musical, and so far I've been smart enough to compensate, compensate intellectually for my musical shortcomings. Because I didn't have absolute pitch; I didn't have a good musical memory.

So—and it wasn't that I made a conscious decision to stop composing. I wound up working in music retail for a couple of years, and I was on my feet all day. And there were many aspects of the work I enjoyed, but at the end of the day I didn't have much time and energy left to compose, so I did very little composing in those years. And I was sort of drifting away from it, from pursuing it in any serious way.

And then around 1988 there was this sort of coincidence of—oh, gosh, well, it was the centennial of the Penn State Glee Club, and there was, I think it was an anniversary of the School of Music, for which the Concert Choir, the select mixed voice choir, commissioned a piece from me. And in both cases they were very, quite silly. For the Concert Choir, I wound up arranging "My Darling Clementine" in a very over the top fashion. And for the Glee Club it was a piece entitled *Academic Festival Overture*, which is essentially a kind of list song, a patter song, of all these great names that you were supposed to have learned in college. Of course, now I won't remember any of it.

But it was the experience of sort of knocking out those two pieces—oh, and especially of that for—I think it was for the Concert Choir, I had a much larger, more ambitious piece in my head, and arguable even sillier, which was—so this was around 1988. And it was, like, what was the basic premise? It was about junk mail. And the climax of it was going to be a sequence imagining the idea that the way of solving the Federal budget crisis would be if Publisher's Clearing House happened to send the winning envelope: "Dear Mr. President, or current resident," and so on. And that was something which I started to

imagine, and then I realized: oh, I don't have time to really work out the words, and write all the music. So I ended up copping out and doing the silly little "Clementine" arrangement.

But all of that together made me realize: oh, yeah, I do still want to be a composer. I do want to be a composer, and if I'm going to be a composer, I have to get out of retail! [laughs] I have to get out of this music publishing business and find some other way. And I had been living with someone who was a college lecturer, and earning, like, oh, yeah. Well, he was on a trust fund, so he could laugh it off, but he, in his words, "Oh, yes, the professoriat is the closest thing we have to a leisure class in this country."

So, armed with this knowledge, and again, the sense of having tried various other ways of making a living, I said, "You know, I think I'd be happier teaching college." So: the decision to go back to graduate school.

FL: This might be a good place to stop, because if we get into graduate school stuff, it will be hard to kind of break it up.

BR: Oh, yeah.

FL: And the tape is basically two hours. But—yeah, I think the better thing is to start the next interview with your graduate school stuff, because it gets into stuff that relates to your current work now, and—

BR: Yes.

FL: So, I want to thank you for coming in today. And when we're done with this we'll schedule another time for you.

BR: Okay.

FL: Thank you very much.

BR: Oh, thank you.

[End of Interview]