

Music at MIT Oral History Project

Claudia Von Canon

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

with **Lowell Lindgren**

October 3, 2001

Interview no. 1

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Contributors

Claudia Von Canon (1923-2002) was born in Austria, and attended the Vienna Academy of Music, where she sang in the chorus under the noted conductor Ferdinand Grossmann, and studied harpsichord with Isolde Ahlgrimm. She was a vocal coach and harpsichordist for opera productions, and played chamber music. At MIT she was Lecturer in Music from 1974-1991, teaching courses in musicianship, music history, as well as courses in Latin. She was also the author of two historical novels.

Lowell Lindgren, Professor of Music at MIT, joined the faculty in 1979. His research has focused on English and Italian opera and theater music. Subjects of courses taught include music from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, as well as American 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 October 3, 2001, in the MIT Lewis Music Library. First of two interviews. Second interview October 9, 2001. Duration of the audio recording 00:54:40.

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. Family background and early musical experiences

FORREST LARSON: This is an interview with Claudia Von Canon. It's October 3, 2001. I'm Forrest Larson in the Lewis Music Library.

I'm delighted to welcome Claudia Von Canon, who was Lecturer in Music at MIT from 1974 to 1991. And also joining us is Professor Lowell Lindgren, who's still, currently, teaching here at MIT. I want to thank you all for, um, coming for this interview. Today is October 3, 2001. We are in the Lewis Music Library.

So Claudia, thank you very, very much for, for coming. Can you tell me a little bit about your family, your father and mother's occupations?

CLAUDIA VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Yeah. And, were they born in Vienna?

VON CANON: I was born in Vienna. And then—what do you call it—a Viennese, dyed-in-the-wool.

LARSON: Uh-huh. [laughs]

VON CANON: Ancestors, ancestors way back in Vienna. Ah, my father was the company lawyer of the Danube Ship, Ship's Company.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Steamship's Company.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: And my mother was a housewife.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: But she had a degree. She was a pianist and had a degree from the Vienna Conservatory.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: And when she was growing up with music, it was—our family was not unique. Everybody, almost, in Vienna was like this and is like this.

LARSON: So what kind of performing did your mom do?

VON CANON: She was a pianist.

LARSON: Yeah, but did she perform?

VON CANON: From time to time, yeah, she played chamber music. And, of course, everybody sang; everybody played. This was a matter of course. This was not sensational at all.

LARSON: So what were your parents' names?

VON CANON: Names?

LARSON: Their first names, yeah.

VON CANON: Yeah. My, my father's name was Karol [spelling unverified] Winiewicz.
And, uh, my mother's name was Maricevic. [spelling unverified].

LARSON: Oh, beautiful. Wow. I'm sure your father must've liked music. Did he play at all
or sing?

VON CANON: He sang. No, he was too lazy to play.

LARSON: Yeah. [laughs]

VON CANON: But he sang.

LARSON: Did he sing like in a church choir or something?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No?

VON CANON: No, he didn't. Ah, Sunday, from time to time, because in Vienna, very often,
you sing in church choir, because you sing all the masses of Haydn and Mozart on
Sunday.

LARSON: Wow. [laughs] Wow. How many siblings do you have?

VON CANON: I have a sister.

LARSON: Was she, is she a musician?

VON CANON: No. She's a writer.

LARSON: Yeah? What's her name?

VON CANON: Lida.

LARSON: Lida? That's beautiful. Is she living in this country?

VON CANON: No. She lives in Austria.

LARSON: Aha, wow. And you say she's a writer. What kind of writing does she do?

VON CANON: Plays.

LARSON: No kidding?

VON CANON: Yes.

LARSON: Wow. Wow. So there's a literary connection, because you're also a writer too.

VON CANON: Yeah. Uh, no, no, no, no, no. I, I have been writing a book because of
"publish and perish."

LARSON: [laughs]

VON CANON: I feel absolutely no, no vocation for it.

LARSON: [laughs] All right. So the obvious question, what year were you born?

VON CANON: Oh, this is my business, not yours.

LARSON AND LINDGREN: [laugh]

VON CANON: For you to guess. You don't ask this [of] a lady!

[Laughter]

LARSON: OK.

LINDGREN: Probably around 1945, I think! [Ed. Note: Von Canon was born May 10, 1923. Lindgren jokes here to be graciously oblique about her age, but Von Canon notes herself that she was in middle school around 1945.]

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: [laughs]

LARSON: So I understand that you were growing up in Vienna during the Nazi—

VON CANON: Oh, yes.

LARSON: Nazi occupation.

VON CANON: Was in school at the time.

LARSON: Yeah. So were you in like middle school or high school?

VON CANON: Elementary school and middle school.

LARSON: What was musical life like during that time?

VON CANON: During the Nazi time?

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: [sighs] Undisturbed. You know, of course there was, there were terrible things and all kinds of, uh, nasty things with the Jewish artists, et cetera. But at the opera, et cetera, I must say that this was apart. That people did not allow all these terrible things to encroach on their music.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: There were terrible attacks, you know, air attacks.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: But the opera was playing until '45.

LINDGREN: Mm-hm.

LARSON: My.

VON CANON: And I remember once, it was a very funny, because there was a big, big alarm. You know there were, there was a big air attack and [Set] Svanholm, the Swedish tenor, who came and sang Radames [in Verdi's *Aida*]. And he was so scared that we always said, look at the Heldentenor [in English: heroic tenor].

LINDGREN: [laughs]

LARSON: [laughs] My.

LINDGREN: But the Germans occupied Austria—

VON CANON: Oh, yeah.

LINDGREN: —in what year, 19—

VON CANON: '38

LINDGREN: '38. And so that from '38 to '45, the opera house continued?

VON CANON: Oh, absolutely.

LINDGREN: But wasn't it, it bombed or something at one time?

VON CANON: It was bombed in '45.

LINDGREN: By the—

VON CANON: Well, it was bombed by the Americans, unfortunately, because they thought it was a train station from the air.

LINDGREN: I didn't know that. Wow.

LARSON: Wow. Can you tell me about your early musical training, how you got started in music?

VON CANON: Training? I was left alone with the keyboard, with a piano.

LARSON: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

VON CANON: And my mother always says the best thing is to leave a kid alone with the keyboard.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: It's then you find things out.

LARSON: Wow. But at some point, you had a piano teacher, right?

VON CANON: Oh yeah, sure.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Sure.

LARSON: How old were you, about, when you—?

VON CANON: Seven.

LARSON: Anything you want to tell me about the teacher? Who—what was the teacher's name?

VON CANON: Anni Holberg [name unverified] but she wasn't, she wasn't very, very remarkable. But then my mother died pretty soon, and I was left to myself, more or less. And we had a lot of cousins and uncles and spinster aunts, who played four hands [piano].

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Everybody had a spinster aunt to play the Haydn symphonies four—

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: —four hands.

LARSON: Wow. Wow.

VON CANON: It was—but in Vienna, this was a matter of course. This was not a particular thing. And on Sunday you went to the philharmonic. Ah— *that's* the way of the sound! —you know?

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Or you were kind of stumbling through the symphony.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: You know, all the Haydn symphonies, they're set for four hands. And there's always some bachelor uncle or spinster aunt who plays four hands with the children.

LARSON: Wow. Wow.

LARSON: That's a great way to get to know the literature, too.

VON CANON: Oh, absolutely.

LINDGREN: Well, you mentioned Haydn. Did you do Mozart, Beethoven—?

VON CANON: Yes. And when—

LINDGREN: Mendelssohn—

VON CANON: The Fifth [Symphony], Beethoven.

LINDGREN: But the symphonies, did you do those four hands?

VON CANON: No, no, no the symphonies were too scared.

LINDGREN: Too scared. And how about Schubert symphonies four hands?

VON CANON: No, no, they're too scared.

LINDGREN: Too scared?

VON CANON: That is a little bit too—

LINDGREN: OK.

VON CANON: I didn't play them. At the time, Mozart and some of the chamber music.

LINDGREN: Well, you've always loved Haydn, very much.

VON CANON: As I say, I had a bachelor uncle and a spinster aunt who would play with us.

LARSON: Good. Wow.

VON CANON: And I, I recommend strongly a spinster aunt in every family, for their musical background!

LARSON: So what were the, the aunt's and the uncle's names?

VON CANON: The aunt was called Henriette. And my uncle was called Otto.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: But this is—is this stuff relevant?

LARSON: [laughs] Sure. This is fun—fun to put names to these figures from the past. Yeah. So by the time you got to high school—at what point did you start, start studying the piano seriously?

VON CANON: Oh, when I was 10, something like this. And all, all our classmates knew, more or less—knew their way around on the keyboard.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

VON CANON: And then, of course, came the opera. That means standing only.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Three, four, five, five times a week.

LARSON: Wow. Of course you were also singing opera all the time.

VON CANON: Yeah, and we were sing—in the, in the choir and so forth. The real singing came far later when I was with the, with Ferdinand Grossmann [1887-1970, choral conductor and vocal teacher]. That was serious.

LARSON: Yeah. So at, at what point in your childhood did you think of a musical career, or was this just something that came naturally to you?

VON CANON: Came naturally.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Came naturally. And I always wanted to be an opera singer. But that was impossible. Because I have a voice that is not reliable.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: That means one day it sounds fantastic. Next day, I don't get anything out.

LARSON: Are you a soprano?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: But and so, of course, I could sing with girls and I could sing in the, in the chamber ensemble. But you could never build a career on such an unreliable voice. That's impossible.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: But, um, I have sung—Ferdinand Grossmann. I don't know if he is a, a—

LINDGREN: He's a household word.

VON CANON: Is he a household word?

LINDGREN: For those of us who knew his recordings, sure.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Yeah. Well, anyway, He's, he was just my master and mentor and everything. And, uh—

LINDGREN: From age 16, 17, 18?

VON CANON: From age, from age 16.

LINDGREN: 16.

VON CANON: Yeah. And ever since until he died.

LINDGREN: And you traveled with his—

VON CANON: Yes. I traveled with his choir, which is the Vienna Academy Chamber Choir [*Wiener Akademie Kammerchor*]. You have recordings from us.

LARSON: Oh, really? I'd like to—wow. Wow. So where did you, where did you go on tour with them?

VON CANON: Italy, France, Switzerland. I didn't, I didn't make the American tour, because I was a little bit too late. But, I would have done the American tour, but then I got married.

LARSON: Oh. So what, ah, what music did this, this choir do? What was their specialty or things he particularly liked—

VON CANON: Oh from Josquin [des Prez] to [Krzysztof] Penderecki.

LARSON: No kidding?

VON CANON: Oh sure.

LARSON: Wow. Wow. Wow.

VON CANON: And what we knew, we knew from him [Grossmann]. He taught us all of it. And he said—when he started the choir, he put on the blackboard—“Instrumentalists preferred.” Because he said, “I can make you a voice. I cannot make you ears. I cannot make you an intelligence.” So that we, everybody knew how to play an instrument.

LINDGREN: Good.

VON CANON: And I was not only on the piano, but on the harpsichord with Isolde Ahlgrimm.

LARSON: Did you give keyboard recitals when were a child?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No.

VON CANON: No, we played [piano] four hands with the spinster aunt.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Uh-huh, I just wondered if you had any. In America, they, when you take piano lessons, every year there's a recital. And you're forced to play. And sometimes the—

VON CANON: And the parents sit there.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: [laughs] No.

LARSON: No. You did not, you didn't do that. Yeah. Wow.

VON CANON: Well, at the Academy, the kids give these recitals. And when you have these kids' recitals, there are always the parents sitting there. And the parents, I call it, the cotton. Because they stuff the audience.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: And when a kid is finished, then the cotton of that kid leaves. And so at the very end, you only have the cotton of the last player.

LARSON & LINDGEN: [laugh]

LINDGREN: Sometimes true.

LARSON: Wow. So from your childhood, are there some particular concerts that you went to that are memorable?

VON CANON: Musically?

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Thousand things, sure.

LARSON: Well, yeah, I mean anything that stands out? That you have a particular memory of?

VON CANON: Sure, at the opera.

LARSON: What were some of your favorite operas?

VON CANON: *Don Giovanni* with Ezio Pinza.

LINDGREN: Yes.

LARSON: Uh-huh. [laughs]

VON CANON: *Figaro*, in Salzburg.

LINDGREN: Did you go often to Salzburg to opera?

VON CANON: No, now we went only twice.

LINDGREN: Twice. With your family or with, uh, friends?

VON CANON: With my father, and I spend—I saved my whole pocket money for a whole year for Salzburg.

LINDGREN: Wow. Wow.

LARSON: Wow.

LINDGREN: Summer festival?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: And you said that you would have liked to have been a singer.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: Were there sopranos that you particularly admired? I know how you admired Ezio Pinza, but he's not a soprano.

VON CANON: Yes. No, no, no, no. Let me think. For the technique—just for the technique, I didn't like her, but for the, for the way she used her voice—[Elisabeth] Schwarzkopf.

LINDGREN: Schwarzkopf, yeah.

LARSON: How about pianists that you admired?

VON CANON: Well lots of— [Artur] Schnabel. Schnabel, then, then Isolde Ahlgrimm. And [Wanda] Landowska.

LARSON: Oh wow.

VON CANON: And she was a harpsichordist.

LARSON: Yeah. Was she influential in getting you interested in the harpsichord?

VON CANON: Yeah. Mm-hm.

LARSON: Yeah?

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Because she influenced a lot of people that way. Um, so what kind of, um, elementary and high school education did you have? Was it a public school that you went to?

VON CANON: No, it's called the Humanistic Gymnasium. Everybody goes there—

LARSON: Aha.

VON CANON: For classical, you see, you see.

LARSON: And then that's probably where you learned Latin, right?

VON CANON: Oh, we all learned Latin. That's not me.

LARSON: Uh-huh, yeah. Yeah. And did you learn English at school as well, or—?

VON CANON: A little bit, but I must say, I picked English up. I never learned it.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Well you've done beautifully. [laughs]

LINDGREN: Yes, you have.

LARSON: I suppose during the American occupation, you got a chance to speak English a lot?

VON CANON: Not so much.

LARSON: No?

VON CANON: Not so much. No, we were not too, too, uh, no.

LARSON: No? I wondered about that. Um, did you write any stories or poetry when you were a kid?

VON CANON: Mm [shakes head].

LARSON: No?

VON CANON: Never.

LARSON: No. No. Um, did your parents ever read stories to you?

VON CANON: They told us stories.

LARSON: Told it, yeah.

VON CANON: They didn't read to us.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Were they stories that they made up, or stories that they had read that they were reciting to you?

VON CANON: All kinds of stories.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: All kinds of stories. And then, of course, we had stories where we said who had to come.

[Laughter]

VON CANON: We could choose the protagonists.

LARSON: Oh, cool.

LINDGREN: My father used to do that frequently at night.

VON CANON: Yeah?

LINDGREN: When we went to bed, he told me.

VON CANON: We, choose the stories. We made it, we made it together.

LINDGREN: Yes, that was wonderful.

VON CANON: Sure.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: No, we were never read [to].

LINDGREN: [laughs]

LARSON: While you were in Vienna, you must have gone to concerts where music of [Arnold] Schoenberg, [Alban] Berg, and [Anton] Webern was performed.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Was there anything special about hearing that, in Vienna, since—

VON CANON: Yeah. Well, I know that once, at the Kammerchor with Grossmann, we had to do that [inaudible] Songs by Webern. I don't know if you know them.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: They are fiendishly difficult. And, uh, they're not rewarding at all, because what you do, when you, when you sing Webern, you hear for instance the orchestra, dah dee dee doh. But it is this dah dee— it is dah deeee.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: You know? So you have to—

LINDGREN: Approach one note—

VON CANON: Orient yourself around the orchestra. And from the, during two hours, he tortured us with those, with this. And then he said, OK. And he gave us the *Regina coeli laetare*, immediately. We sang like angels. You know it? [setting by Mozart]

LINDGREN: [laughs] Yes. This is a baroque composer, who lived in Vienna in the beginning of the 18th century. Beautiful piece, *Regina*. [Ed. Note: this is an esoteric joke about a non-existent composer.]

LARSON: I don't know that. Oh.

LINDGREN: So that if you have to live through Webern, you can sing anything, right?

VON CANON: Any—anything—we sang like, like baroque angels, on that, you know?

LINDGREN: Baroque angels.

VON CANON: You know it starts, [sings] *Re gina coe li lae tare*.

LINDGREN: Oh yes.

VON CANON: And it was immediately after this stuff. [laughs].

LARSON: So when your fellow musicians and teachers, whether, um, what were people's feelings about Webern, Schoenberg, and, and, and Berg? Were there any? You must have heard conversations about this—

VON CANON: Oh yeah.

LARSON: —music. And, um—

VON CANON: Mostly they were kind of irritated and bored.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: And, uh, our friend Bouli [Ed. Note: possibly referring Pierre Boulez and his quote, “Schoenberg is dead.”], for instance, he says that Schoenberg is a dead end. And I think I agree. Because what you do is—what he does is to cook up his rules. But the rules come afterwards.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: That's the way it should be.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: You write the music and then the rules—

VON CANON: Yeah, then, then the rules—

LINDGREN: Somebody figures out what the style was.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: But he cooked them up before he wrote the pieces.

VON CANON: He cooked them up. And it's a little—do you know? I don't know how you say in English. There's a certain game which is called [German]. You jump from one—you, you have it with chalk.

LINDGREN: Hopscotch.

LARSON: Yeah, hopscotch.

VON CANON: Hopscotch.

LARSON: Yes.

LINDGREN: Hopscotch.

VON CANON: Right? And hopscotch was there all the time. All of the sudden, there comes a guy and says, "I have a new hopscotch. And you have to jump in a new way."

LARSON: [laughs].

VON CANON: And. [laughs]

LINDGREN: You have to jump with legs you don't have.

LARSON: [laughs]

VON CANON: Yeah, so to speak.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

LINDGREN: But you must have known people who were like friends, or they knew Webern personally.

VON CANON: Sure.

LINDGREN: Or they even knew Schoenberg.

VON CANON: Oh, well certainly.

LINDGREN: Or Berg personally.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: And they were, then you must have known friends of theirs, in other words.

VON CANON: Yes. Yes.

LINDGREN: Who admired them, at least as human beings. Or maybe, I don't know. [laughs]

VON CANON: Well, I must say—and that would certainly... [laughs] I would certainly deserve all kinds of contempt here—but I must say I avoided them. Because they were always—

LINDGREN: You avoided those people?

VON CANON: —there was always terrible discussions.

LINDGREN: Uh-huh. Interesting.

LARSON: Now Webern was supposed to be a good conductor.

VON CANON: Could be.

LARSON: Um, you, you were at—? You weren't at any concerts that he was conducting, were you? No. Just wondering.

VON CANON: No. Grossmann from time to time, he made us sing some of his stuff.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah.

VON CANON: But, ah.

LARSON: Did you ever play any of the keyboard music of, of Schoenberg?

VON CANON: No.

2. College education and music study

LARSON: No? No. That's very interesting. So I want to move on to your, your college education. You studied at the Vienna Academy?

VON CANON: No. I studied—you mean the lycée, until the maturity?

LARSON: OK. OK. Oh.

VON CANON: And then the Academy Vienna, I graduate in harpsichord.

LARSON: Aha.

VON CANON: And voice. I never did it officially, but I was with Grossmann.

LARSON: Wow. So who did you study harpsichord with?

VON CANON: Isolde Ahlgrim [1914-1995, Austrian harpsichordist].

LARSON: Uh-huh. What, um, tell me a little bit about, about your studies there and the repertoire that you worked on, and—

VON CANON: Mostly Bach.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Mostly Bach. And I learned enormously from Isolde.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: I say I learned also from, from Grossmann.

LARSON: Ah-hah.

VON CANON: Musically in every way. Because they were all real, no-nonsense musicians.

LARSON: Did you play much chamber music when you were there?

VON CANON: Oh yeah, quite a bit.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah.

VON CANON: Mostly continuo like the—

LINDGREN: So in, in cantatas or, or what did you play continuo for, trio sonatas or—

VON CANON: Trio sonatas and Handel, a lot.

LINDGREN: Ah, Handel, interesting.

VON CANON: You know. Mm-hm. And then I play continuo all the time when we, when we sing cantatas.

LINDGREN: OK.

LARSON: Did you do any college study here in the, in the United States?

VON CANON: Well, I, I did a few courses at Catholic University. And I was also assistant to Professor [Michael] Cordovana at Catholic University—

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Where we did the *St. John Passion* [Bach] and *Don Giovanni* [Mozart] and all kinds of things in Washington.

LARSON: Wow. Did you study conducting at all.

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No. No. No. When you were in college, did you give recitals?

VON CANON: No, we don't—I played chamber music.

LARSON: Yeah. Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Mostly continuo.

LARSON: Uh-huh. But you didn't play in a solo—

VON CANON: Solo recital? No.

LARSON: No. No. I just wondered about that. Did you learn organ, by any chance?

VON CANON: Never.

LARSON: Never? [laughs]

LINDGREN: At Catholic University, did you play for cantatas or—

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: Did you play continuo—

VON CANON: I played for cantata. I played [harpsichord] continuo. I coached a lot.

LINDGREN: Coached? That's good.

VON CANON: I coached for the whole *St. John's Passion*. And the—

LINDGREN: The singers and the instrumentalists?

VON CANON: The singers and the instrumentalists. And the *Ein feste Burg [ist unser Gott]* by J. S. Bach]

LINDGREN: Wonderful.

LARSON: Wow.

LINDGREN: Cantata [BWV] 80?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: And did you ever, for example, sit at the keyboard through a whole performance of *Don Giovanni* or anything?

VON CANON: Yeah, sure.

LINDGREN: You did?

VON CANON: I did *Don Giovanni*.

LINDGREN: As a keyboard player?

VON CANON: I did. I accompanied the recitatives.

LINDGREN: Wonderful. Wonderful.

VON CANON: And, uh—

LINDGREN: This was in Washington?

VON CANON: In Washington, when we did *Don Giovanni*.

LINDGREN: You hadn't done that in Vienna?

VON CANON: No.

LINDGREN: OK.

VON CANON: I did a lot of operas in America.

LINDGREN: In Washington, yeah.

VON CANON: I did *Don Pasquale* [Donizetti] , *Acis and Galatea* [Handel]—

LINDGREN: Good.

VON CANON: Uh, *Don Giovanni*, and what else? A couple others, but...

LINDGREN: And this was mainly at Catholic U?

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: Good.

3. Music performance and colleagues

LARSON: This is a big subject, and I'm sure that you might have a lot to talk about it. The whole historical performance practice movement in this country with...looking at, you know, so-called original instruments.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Do you have any comments about, about that movement?

VON CANON: I think one has to be very careful not to fall into a certain snobbery.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: That we don't know how these things sounded.

LINDGREN: That's right.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: And sometimes I have the impression there is far more discussion than music. But this is my personal opinion, absolutely not as a scholar.

LARSON: When you first played with baroque violins as opposed to modern violins, what was your experience like for that, as a harpsichordist?

VON CANON: I don't know because I was so concentrated in not making mistakes that I didn't really think too much about the sound of the baroque violins. I wanted to be sure that I'm right.

LARSON: Because my experience was, “Oh, I can hear the harpsichord.”

LINDGREN: [laughs]

LARSON: That was my experience.

VON CANON: Yeah, sure, sure. But, I couldn't, for me, I couldn't pay myself the luxury to listen to the others. I had to make sure that I didn't make a mistake.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. A related kind of question—what is your feeling about playing Bach on the piano versus the harpsichord?

VON CANON: That depends on the player. You have pianists who play wonderful Bach. And you have terrible harpsichordists. It depends. And then there is sometimes with the harpsichordist a certain rigor, which makes me a little unhappy.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. I mean, some pianists who I've talked to, who also play harpsichord, say that there's certain polyphonic lines that just don't come out very well on the harpsichord. And they prefer to do it on the piano, even though they prefer, in general, to play baroque music on the harpsichord.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: I don't know if you had an experience like that. Or I'm thinking of like, say the Bach [viola da] gamba sonatas [BWV 1027–1029]. Those are really trios.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: How do you bring out those lines so they balance with the gambist or the cellist, who's playing those? Sometimes those lines get lost.

VON CANON: I like to play them better on the harpsi—um—on the piano. I play them very often. And, uh, I feel better on the piano with them.

LARSON: I've arranged those for string trio, and they actually work very nicely.

VON CANON: Sure. Yeah.

LARSON: Yeah. Though I did hear an organ performance. It was a little chamber organ.

VON CANON: And he played all the voices?

LARSON: No, played the two voices, and it balanced very nicely with the gamba. I forgot who the organist was. But it was, that was very nice. I just wondered about that. That's very interesting. Can you tell me about some of your musical friends and colleagues in Austria?

VON CANON: Sure. Aside from Ferdinand Grossmann?

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Well, all my colleagues, they, there is Laurence Dutoit [soprano], for instance, who's a wonderful singer with almost no voice. But, Grossmann made her the voice.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: He made us the voices, you know? And he could, Laurence Dutoit, Leopold Marksteller [name unverified], who's a wonderful organist. Ah, Walter Berry [1929-2000, bass-baritone], he died half a year ago.

LINDGREN: Yes.

VON CANON: He was one of ours.

LARSON: And what, was he a singer?

LINDGREN: Oh, yes.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: He, he played the lead role in *Wozzeck* [opera by Alban Berg]. He did everything.

VON CANON: Yes.

LINDGREN: He was an amazing singer.

VON CANON: Oh, he was wonderful.

LARSON: Oh.

VON CANON: And, um, quite a few.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Were your friends mostly singers or did you have harpsichordist friends in, in Austria?

VON CANON: Instrumentalists—

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Singers—

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: Whatever.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Did you, um, like play piano trios and stuff like that?

VON CANON: Yes.

LARSON: Who were, who were some of the violinists and cellists that you played with?

VON CANON: Well, there's Peter Wagner [name unverified]. They're not, they're not very famous.

LARSON: That's OK.

VON CANON: They're just good.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: [laughs].

LARSON: A lot of great musicians aren't household names. I just wondered if there was somebody—

VON CANON: Mm-hm. I say, Peter Wagner and they go to Italy every year to teach chamber music—

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: —to the Italians in Acquasparta.

LINDGREN: They did then, or they still do now?

VON CANON: They still do, sure.

LINDGREN: That's wonderful.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: And because the Italians, they are very eager to learn real chamber music.

LINDGREN: Yeah.

VON CANON: And I must say, I think the Italians play wonderful chamber music. It's not true that they can only sing opera.

LINDGREN: That's right.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: And, uh, two years ago I was in Florence Orsanmichele, they played the 5th Brandenburg [Concerto by Bach].

LINDGREN: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: Italians. And the girl [the harpsichordist] was dying with fear, because of the [inaudible] [Ed. Note: referring to the harpsichord cadenza in the 5th Brandenburg], can you imagine? But they pretty just fiddled away. It was wonderful.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: There was no construction. And no, you know, second entrance, et cetera, not at all. They just played! And that's the way you should be able to play Bach.

LINDGREN: With passion.

VON CANON: With passion.

LINDGREN: Exactly.

LARSON: Did you ever play the Bach 5th Brandenburg?

VON CANON: I never had the courage.

[Laughter]

VON CANON: Maybe one of these days.

LARSON: [laughs] Well there's the version with the short cadenza, too, you know, there's a, there's an alternative—

VON CANON: I've played all the, all the Brandenburgs except the 5th—

LARSON: [laughs]

VON CANON: —because I just got cold feet.

LARSON: Yeah. Well, I'm sure there's lots of people who get cold feet over that piece. Wow. Did you have any favorite—or not did, but still—favorite piano chamber

music? Piano trios, quartets, quintets, anything that stands out that you particularly liked?

VON CANON: Well, a lot. Let's see, well, the Beaux Arts Trio.

LARSON: Uh-huh. No, as far as, um, repertoire.

VON CANON: Oh, repertoire. Well, all the Haydn, all the Mozart, all the Beethoven, all the—certainly.

LARSON: Anything that, that stands out in particular that's—?

VON CANON: Yes. The A-major Trio by Haydn [likely the G-major Trio, see below].

LARSON: Uh-huh. Wow.

VON CANON: You know the, the finale? Da da dum da be di di d—

LARSON: Yes. Yeah.

VON CANON: This one.

LARSON: Yeah. How about the G-minor Piano Quartet of Mozart, do you like that?

VON CANON: Oh yeah, sure.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: And then the [Haydn's] Ongarese [Trio in G-major H:XV No. 25, movement 3, known as Rondo all' Ongarese (Gypsy Rondo)].

4. Coming to the U.S. and MIT

LARSON: All right, I want to ask you what brought you to the, the United States? Was it musical reasons?

VON CANON: Marriage.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. [laughs] And was your husband a musician?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No? No.

LINDGREN: He was a Von Canon.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: Wow. Yeah.

LINDGREN: That's where she became a Von Canon.

LARSON: I see. Yeah.

LINDGREN: A "fon" Canon.

LARSON: And let's see, you had two children?

VON CANON: Yes.

LARSON: Is that correct?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: And I've forgotten their names.

VON CANON: Well, Susanna and Michael. Michael died.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. And either of them musicians?

VON CANON: Yeah, sure.

LARSON: Yeah? They played piano and they probably sang—

VON CANON: No, no, but they sang.

LINDGREN: Well, Susanna's a manager of concert artists.

LARSON: Oh, she is?

LINDGREN: Don't you know that?

LARSON: No.

LINDGREN: And she managed many classical people in the past, even the greatest of them all, Yo-Yo Ma. And now she has dedicated herself to a jazz group, the Breuker Kollektief.

LARSON: Oh, those are—they're great!

LINDGREN: Yeah, all kinds of other jazz musicians she's managed.

VON CANON: And from time to time, she does things for people—

LINDGREN: She still does some—

VON CANON: For Yo-Yo [Ma], for the [inaudible], et cetera—

LINDGREN: She still does the classical.

LARSON: And what's her last name?

VON CANON: Susanna Von Canon.

LARSON: OK, I didn't know if she was married and—

LINDGREN: She is married.

VON CANON: Yeah, she is married. But for, for the business she still uses her name.

LARSON: I see. Yeah. OK. Wow. Wow. That's great. I didn't, I didn't know that. [laughs]
When you first came to the United States, where were living?

VON CANON: In North Carolina.

LARSON: Ah-hah. [laughs] Wow. Did you do some teaching there?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No. No. So when did you go to Catholic University? Was that after that?

VON CANON: Yeah, that was after I went to Catholic University. And I had a job with Catholic University. And then, one day, in *The New York Times* there was an ad from MIT from John Buttrick [Professor of Music].

LARSON: No kidding.

VON CANON: And I looked at it. And I felt, I'll never get it, not in—But just [French], I wrote to John Buttrick. And I got a phone call, “Come immediately! You are just the person we need.”

LARSON: My. And, um, let's see, that would've been—

VON CANON: That was in '74.

LARSON: Wow. Wow. And when you were hired, what were your initial duties?

VON CANON: My duties was [Course] 21.60 [Introduction to Music]—

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: And, uh—

LARSON: That's Introduction to Music.

VON CANON: —and I saw John Buttrick wanted, he was very ambitious. He wanted opera.

LINDGREN: Yes.

VON CANON: And, uh, since I had quite a bit of practice at Catholic University, too, and there was John Cook. Do you remember John Cook?

LARSON: Yeah, the organist, right.

VON CANON: And he had a wife. And she was like—she, she liked to sing.

LINDGREN: Susan, her name was—

VON CANON: Sandra.

LINDGREN: Sandra, that's right. Sandra.

VON CANON: Sandra Stewart.

LINDGREN: That's right.

VON CANON: And uh—

LARSON: So did you do some opera productions here then, at MIT?

VON CANON: Yeah, but then they did *Orpheus*.

LARSON: They did what?

VON CANON: *Orpheus* from [by] Gluck.

LARSON: Oh yes, of course, yes.

VON CANON: And but I retired from it because I had a car accident. So they did the *Orpheus* without me. And then the opera production fell into—

LARSON: Oh, so you were supposed to sing a role in *Orpheus*?

VON CANON: No, I was supposed to put it on.

LARSON: Yeah, but I see. And then the, the accident kept her—

LINDGREN: Producer, director—

VON CANON: Producer.

LINDGREN: Producer, director.

LARSON: Yeah, yeah, wow.

VON CANON: But this, this is off the record, what I say.

LARSON: OK. You want me to—I can turn the tape recorder off?

VON CANON: Turn it off. [Recording stopped.]

[Recording resumed.]

LARSON: So you taught at, it was at Gloucester High School?

VON CANON: Yeah. And I'll tell you why. Because John Buttrick said he could only get me next year.

LINDGREN: Good.

VON CANON: And so for that one year, I was teaching in Gloucester [MA].

LARSON: I see, so there was a year there.

VON CANON: Yes, mm-hm.

LARSON: So what did you teach at Gloucester? Were you the choir director?

VON CANON: Yeah. Mm-hm.

LARSON: And this was in the high school?

VON CANON: This was in the high school.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: And I thought, "I can certainly wait for a year for MIT."

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: I totally forgot. Thank you.

LARSON: [laughs] Wow.

VON CANON: But, as I say, and then there was a lack of organization and so on. It was impossible to put on an opera. And then they wanted to do, *The Magic Flute* [Mozart]. And if—it's totally ridiculous. You'll never find a [soprano to play] Queen of the Night.

LINDGREN: [laughs]

VON CANON: And Rufus Hallmark [MIT] wanted to sing Tamino.

LINDGREN: Oh yes.

VON CANON: And I was very unhappy. And I said you—we don't have to cover ourselves [inaudible]. We can't. I understand, uh—

LINDGREN: He was teaching here at the time.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

LINDGREN: He was an assistant professor.

VON CANON: Yeah. But they were, they all had the singing craziness.

LINDGREN: Yes, I know.

VON CANON: And, uh—

LARSON: So whose idea was it to do opera? Was it, was it John Buttrick's?

VON CANON: I think it was, eh, it was John Cook's—I think it was Sandra's.

LINDGREN: John Cook's idea. Sandra's idea.

VON CANON: It was Sandra's idea.

LARSON: I see, uh-huh.

VON CANON: And so, there was—I was very pleased that I was kind of getting out of this.
[laughs]

LARSON: Now did you do any vocal coaching?

VON CANON: Yeah. I did, I did a couple of recitals with, with David Breitman [pianist,
MIT class of 1976].

LARSON: Oh, you actually sang some solos, some song recitals?

VON CANON: Yeah, I sang a couple of—mostly, what did I do? [? García Lorca. ?]

LARSON: No kidding?

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Wow. Wow. Wow.

LINDGREN: David Breitman is now a faculty member at Oberlin [College]. He's made
some recordings of Beethoven sonatas—

VON CANON: Good.

LINDGREN: On the fortepiano. He's become a very successful pianist.

VON CANON: I'm very pleased.

LINDGREN: He's a very nice person.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Wow. Did you do much harpsichord or piano playing when you were at MIT?

VON CANON: Well, I practiced—right now, I practice like crazy on the keyboard.

LARSON: But like, were you ever—did you ever play chamber music with any of the faculty
for concerts?

VON CANON: With Rosie [Rose Mary Harbison].

LARSON: With Rosie. With—

VON CANON: Rosie.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. I was going to ask you about that later. Because I heard you two play Bach in the chapel once.

VON CANON: Ah, yeah.

LARSON: But I want to get to that later. Did you ever play piano for the choir? As—

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: So most of your performing here at MIT had to do with vocal music, pretty much?

VON CANON: Yeah, I played—we had two concerts with Suzy [Susan] Larson.

LARSON: So what did you do with her?

VON CANON: Italians. Monteverdi in 17th century, “Zefiro torna.”

LINDGREN: Oh yeah, wonderful piece.

LARSON: Now, it—you were playing harpsichord or were just—?

VON CANON: No, I was singing with Susan.

LARSON: And who played?

VON CANON: I think it was David Breitman and a cellist called Phoebe. But I forgot her other—

LINDGREN: Phoebe?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: Phoebe Carrai?

VON CANON: I'm not sure.

LINDGREN: She was around.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: It could've been her.

LARSON: Yeah, that name is familiar. Yeah. Yeah. She's still active, isn't—?

LINDGREN: She's still active around here. Yeah.

VON CANON: Yeah, we did, you know, uh, [inaudible].

LINDGREN: Yeah.

LARSON: Mm.

VON CANON: [inaudible]

LINDGREN: Those are beautiful pieces.

LARSON: Oh my gosh, wow. Wow.

LINDGREN: They did duets.

VON CANON: [inaudible]

LINDGREN: She and Susan Larson are still best friends.

LARSON: That's great. That takes quite a voice to do that stuff. That's not—

LINDGREN: Well, Claudia is—Claudia could still sing the beginning to the end of every Mozart opera for you, if you'd—

VON CANON: [laughs]

LINDGREN: If you, if you want to tape her one day.

LARSON: Wow, wow.

LINDGREN: You still remember the beginning of “Zefiro torna,” don't you?

VON CANON: Sure.

LINDGREN: Can you sing the beginning?

VON CANON: (singing) *Zefiro, zefiro, zefiro torna.*

LINDGREN: Yeah, wished I could join you. [laughs]

VON CANON: [laughs]

LARSON:[laughs]

VON CANON: [singing] *Zefiro, zefiro, torna—*

LINDGREN: Hm.

VON CANON: *Zefiro*

LINDGREN: Wonderful

VON CANON: *Torna. Torna zefiro—et cetera.*

LINDGREN: *Zefiro, zefiro torna.*

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: You know it?

LINDGREN: “West, west wind return, return, return, return.” It's just wonderful.

VON CANON: Ever heard it, “Zefiro torna”?

LARSON: It's been a while.

LINDGREN: It's such a great piece.

LARSON: Yeah. I miss some of that music. I heard a lot of it in college.

LINDGREN: I did a [Heinrich] Schütz duet in class today, *O quam—O quam tu pulchra es.*

VON CANON: Oh, yeah.

LARSON: Oh, no kidding?

VON CANON: Were they--?

LINDGREN: I mean, he studied with Monteverdi. And it's just—

VON CANON: Were they impressed?

LINDGREN: Oh, they loved it.

VON CANON: Good.

LINDGREN: [laughs] They'd better love it. [laughs]

5. Klaus Liepmann

LARSON: Wow. So when I spoke to you a few weeks ago, you mentioned that you had played music with Klaus Liepmann, so you obviously knew him. He had retired by the time you came here.

VON CANON: Yeah, uh-huh.

LARSON: But he was still teaching an occasional course.

VON CANON: Yes.

LARSON: Can you tell me some of your impressions of him, as a, as a person?

VON CANON: He was great.

LARSON: Yeah?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: Uh, it sounded like he had a sense of humor.

VON CANON: Sure.

LARSON: You read his writings, and there's a—

VON CANON: I never read anything of his writing, but he used to invite Rosie Harbison and me to a Greek restaurant.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: And so we had great evenings together.

LARSON: Wow, wow.

LINDGREN: What kind of things did you discuss?

VON CANON: Anything. Politics, mostly.

LINDGREN: Politics mostly.

VON CANON: Klaus Liepmann said that when he sees somebody driving up at the filling station and asks the guy to fill his tank, he can say by the way this guy behaves, whether he's been a Nazi or not.

LINDGREN: Wow.

VON CANON: And I believe it.

LARSON: Well, he was certainly profoundly affected by all of that.

VON CANON: Sure. But that's what, that's what Klaus said. And I said to Rosie, "He's right."

LINDGREN: You could say the same thing?

VON CANON: Oh, absolutely.

LINDGREN: OK. OK.

LARSON: Wow. Now, you told me that you played violin and piano sonatas with him. How often did you do that?

VON CANON: I don't know. Once every two month.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Any particular favorite pieces you liked doing with him?

VON CANON: Whatever he—some Bach, some Bach. But we never had the time to really work on it, you see. It was what makes me sometimes a little unhappy is when you just play through. I don't like that, playing through.

LARSON: Yeah, right. You're one of the few people—in fact, you're the only person I've talked to up to now who actually heard him play.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Tell me about him as a violinist. How would you describe his style and—

VON CANON: I couldn't. I haven't heard him enough.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Did he have—tell me, you must remember, his vibrato. Was it a big vibrato? Was it a small vibrato? Did he use it all the time? Or was he kind of spare?

VON CANON: I don't know.

LARSON: You don't know?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: No, I couldn't. I would tell you all kinds of fibs.

LINDGREN: [laughs]

LARSON: Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: She was probably paying attention to her own part—

VON CANON: Exactly.

LINDGREN: Which is what I say when I play the pianoforte.

LARSON: Because I've just been very, very curious what he was like as a violinist.

LINDGREN: I didn't even know he was until just now.

LARSON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: I didn't know that.

LARSON: Did you ever play the Brahms sonatas with him?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No. You must have gone through the Mozarts.

VON CANON: Yeah, but not all of them. He hated [Richard] Wagner—

LARSON: Yeah, huh.

VON CANON: With a passion.

LARSON: [laughs]

LINDGREN: Interesting.

LARSON: Yeah. What music really made him come alive?

VON CANON: Mozart.

LARSON: Mozart. Uh-huh. And he seemed like he had a wide taste in music. At least when I read his writings.

VON CANON: You know, we talked mostly about *Don Giovanni*.

LARSON: Really?

LINDGREN: Really?

LARSON: Wow. Wow. What, uh, is there anything particularly that he talked about *Don Giovanni* with you?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No?

VON CANON: Everything. We did—inexhaustible *Don Giovanni*.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Wow.

LINDGREN: Had he ever directed an opera? Because he directed the Choral Society and the Orchestra here.

VON CANON: I don't know.

LINDGREN: You don't know if he directed opera here.

VON CANON: No.

LINDGREN: And, he was at Yale before he came here.

LINDGREN: And did he talk about his past life with you, before he went to Yale?

VON CANON: No, not really. You know, Europeans don't like to talk about the war.

LINDGREN: I'm sure they don't.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Except sometimes, but the—in general, we've had it.

LINDGREN: Yes.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. And rightfully so, that's, that's—

LINDGREN: Exactly.

LARSON: You know.

LINDGREN: Right.

VON CANON: But I had once a very particular experience, and that was in Middlebury. I was teaching during a summer in Middlebury College.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: And for, I was responsible for the music in the German school. And there was Gerhard Stoltz. And Gerhard Stoltz is a wonderful scholar. He's the pres—he was—[he stayed --lieder[inaudible]. Unfortunately he was the president of the German Academy, et cetera, et cetera. Fantastic guy. And he had done a couple of conferences. And one day we go to the cafeteria. And we go to the table. And both of us take the chair that has the back against the wall.

LINDGREN: Oh wow.

VON CANON: And we just looked at each other.

LINDGREN: [laughs]

VON CANON: And this is an instinct from the Nazi time. You want your back protected.

LINDGREN: Yes. Uh-huh.

VON CANON: And both of us, you know, we had that chair. Uh-huh.

LINDGREN: And you looked at one another and you knew what—

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: —had happened.

VON CANON: Yeah, exactly.

LINDGREN: Yeah.

LARSON: Did you ever sing in a choir under Klaus Liepmann's direction?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No? No. But you must have seen him conduct concerts and stuff like that.

VON CANON: Oh yeah, yeah.

LARSON: Tell me about him as a conductor.

VON CANON: Well, I have the impression that he got the music out and so on. But I have no particular impression of him, Klaus Liepmann. I have a far more human remembrance of him.

LARSON: Sure. Was he a singer as well?

VON CANON: I don't know.

LARSON: Uh-huh. I just wondered if he was a tenor or a bass.

VON CANON: This I don't know.

LARSON: Because he did a lot of choral conducting, and, you know, I just wondered if he was—

VON CANON: Well, anybody who is a decent choral conductor has to know how to produce a voice.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. And you weren't ever a piano accompanist for him?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No. OK. There was a course that he taught here at MIT on the Beethoven string quartets.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Did he ever talk to you about that?

VON CANON: No, no.

LARSON: No?

VON CANON: I was terribly busy because at the time it was the [Course] 21.60.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: And there was old Barry Vercoe [MIT Professor of Music while Von Canon was at MIT; later, he was MIT Professor of Media Arts and Sciences], who at the last moment, couldn't do his section, you know. So I didn't have time.

LINDGREN: Well, you had to do three things, in music. And then you did Latin, besides.

VON CANON: Yeah, but the Latin was a totally different proposition.

LINDGREN: You enjoyed it?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: But it was, but you were doing much more than anybody else?

VON CANON: I don't know. But the thing came, the Latin thing was really a kind of a freak. Because when I was teaching 21.60, I explained the Mass [Catholic liturgy]. Because, of course, you have 1,500 years of music on the same text that you know, a fantastic comparison possibility. And I said, listen, I'm sick of it. I'm going to have a little seminar, Latin for Musicians, so that I do not always have to explain what the *Dies irae*, et cetera is, right? And, uh, so we did that. And all of a sudden, I get a phone call from Jerry [Jerome] Lettvin [MIT Biology faculty].

VON CANON: Mm.

VON CANON: Can I send you a couple of physicists? Sure, send them. So there came the physicists, and within two weeks, I was sitting there with a full-fledged Latin class. I didn't know how. And I was a little bit like the, like the virgin to the baby. You know, I didn't—

LARSON: About what year was that?

VON CANON: Oh that was long ago.

LINDGREN: Yes.

VON CANON: It was about ten years ago.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

LINDGREN: No, ten years. It was more than ten years.

VON CANON: It was more than, it was very long.

LINDGREN: It was by the time I came here.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: And I've been here for twenty-two years. And so it was in the '70s.

VON CANON: It was very long. It was in the '70s. You're right. And, uh, all of a sudden, I was sitting here and, um, Harold Reiche [MIT Humanities faculty]—

LINDGREN: Yes.

VON CANON: —said, well, my dear, we are holding up the humanistic tradition.

LINDGREN: He was a classicist too.

VON CANON: The classics. And—

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: But I would have never, without Jerry Lettvin, I would never had that.

LINDGREN: But you weren't brought here to do classics.

VON CANON: No.

LINDGREN: And there you were, doing Latin.

VON CANON: Here, here I sit.

LARSON: Wow.

LINDGREN: And it was wonderful.

LARSON: And then you started teaching a formal, for-credit class, right?

VON CANON: Oh, yeah.

LARSON: Yeah, wow.

VON CANON: Now I do it at IAP [Independent Activities Period].

LARSON: Yeah, right. I didn't realize it had gone back that far. My goodness.

LINDGREN: It went back that far and then you were teaching more students on the side.

VON CANON: Oh yeah.

LINDGREN: And doing anything. And they wanted you to be the opera director as well.

VON CANON: Sure. Mm-hm.

LARSON: And did you teach piano here as well?

VON CANON: Sure, the piano lab. I didn't have a proper—

LINDGREN: She did piano lab too, right.

LARSON: And did you have private students as well?

VON CANON: I had one.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: And then for a very memorable session, I had once Cynthia.

LINDGREN: [laughs] [inaudible] Did Cynthia take one piano lesson with you?

LARSON: Who is this Cynthia?

LINDGREN: No, we don't talk about her last name.

VON CANON: No, no, no, no.

LINDGREN: First name is Cynthia, that's all.

LARSON: OK.

VON CANON: Let that suffice.

LINDGREN: But you, you taught, the fact that you taught piano lab means that you were doing fundamentals of music.

VON CANON: Yeah. Mm-hm.

LINDGREN: So, you know what that is?

LARSON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: And then you teach piano lab besides. That means you have one on one students.

LARSON: Right. Right.

LINDGREN: So that that's, but, you know, everyone who does [Course 21M.] 051 now, Fundamentals, like Pam [Pamela Wood] or anyone else, George Ruckert, they do not have to do piano lab. I mean, they don't...they just do one thing. You were doing everything.

VON CANON: Oh yeah, I was, I was a girl for—

LINDGREN: You were doing the sight-singing and the training of—

VON CANON: Sure.

LARSON: Wow. Well I think a question that we can maybe end with. When you were hired, what did you understand the purpose of the MIT music program to be, as opposed— and how it was different from other music curriculum? How was that explained to you? Um.

VON CANON: That's a difficult question, because I don't know. I just accepted it as part of the curriculum. And I thought it was very good, because the humanities had to have a place in this here Institute, because otherwise you get nothing but specialists. And the specialist becomes an idiot.

LINDGREN: Right, right.

LARSON: How did you find working with MIT students? Did you find working with them to be different from other college students that you had worked with?

VON CANON: Yes and no. What I was very much fighting, and I do it to this day, is the attitude toward music. Because, and I told my class, when we once were singing

under Igor Markevitch [1912-1983, composer and conductor], and Igor Markevitch said to us, “Children, silence is music too.” And I said, “You have to understand that. And we have to start this course by being quiet. For five minutes, I don’t want to hear anything. I just want you to shut up and be quiet.” And you cannot imagine what fidgeting and what, what, they could not be quiet, you see? And I found that my, when you say, mission in MIT is to teach these students to be quiet. Because they always, when they do their, their homework, they have music coming out of every room. They cannot shut up. And the most precious things you can teach them is to shut up. And that’s what I feel has been my mission here, what I teach the students. Because if you cannot have silence, then you cannot have music.

LARSON: Absolutely. When you’re working with students who aren’t being trained to be professional musicians, but yet people who are very eager to learn and to become good musicians, did you find working with students like that different from conservatory students?

VON CANON: I don’t know any American conservatory students. But very different from the Academy Conservatory students in Vienna. Very different.

LARSON: Can you talk about some of the differences?

VON CANON: Yeah, the difference is just that the students here have a great difficulty not to hear anything. They get panicky when there is not something in their ears.

LARSON: Oh, interesting. Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Once, at the beginning of the school year, I went and got all the Walkmans, like a stewardess, you know.

LINDGREN: [laughs]

VON CANON: I said you can have them at the end of the term.

LINDGREN: [laughs]

VON CANON: [laughs]

VON CANON: Yeah, because—

LINDGREN: Did you keep them all term?

VON CANON: Sure.

LINDGREN: You did? Wow.

LARSON: Whoa!

LINDGREN: Well, you know there’s a famous article by John Harbison [composer, MIT Professor of Music] about the fact that—this was 15 years ago, 20 years ago—that every student came to his class wearing Walkmans, listening to rock music. And he could hear it, the drums coming through the ear—

VON CANON: [drum, cymbal sounds]

LINDGREN: Yeah, exactly.

VON CANON: Yeah, sure.

LINDGREN: And that they would turn it off and take their headphones off during his one hour or one hour and a half class. And as soon as the class was over, they'd all go back on again. So that there were three hours a week when they took the headphones off.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LINDGREN: That was how depressing he thought it was.

VON CANON: Sure.

LINDGREN: It's not that bad anymore, but—

VON CANON: No, no, certainly not.

LINDGREN: It was terrible for a while.

VON CANON: But there was a time, it was terrible. And then they didn't listen. And then I told them there is no such thing as classical music. There's only good music and bad music.

LINDGREN: Yeah.

LARSON: Yeah that's what, what Duke Ellington said too. "There's two kinds of good— music, good music and bad music."

VON CANON: Sure.

LARSON: Well, I think this is a good place to, to stop.

VON CANON: OK, sure.

LARSON: And, um, I want to thank you so very, very much.

VON CANON: You're most welcome.

LARSON: This is great.

VON CANON: I don't know if, I don't know if you have gotten anything pertinent out of it, but—.

LARSON: This has been fantastic.

LINDGREN: It's been very good. Very good.

LARSON: You're filling in a lot of stuff that's not really known about about music at MIT.

VON CANON: It's only from my point of view, you see.

LARSON: Yeah. That's OK. That's, [laughs]. So I want to thank you so much.

VON CANON: You're most welcome.

[End of Interview]