

Music at MIT Oral History Project

Claudia Von Canon

Interviewed

by

Forrest Larson

October 9, 2001

Interview no. 2

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology
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Table of Contents

1. Teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (00:15)	1
<i>Teaching Introduction to Music at MIT—importance of silence—group singing—music to “wake the dead”—teaching Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—Marcus Thompson & the MIT Chamber Music Society—vocal coaching—role of Music at MIT—MIT offering a music major—musicologists—Lowell Lindgren—Otto Erich Deutsch</i>	
2. Performing at MIT (15:58)	6
<i>Playing Bach sonatas with Rose Mary Harbison— singing with chorus, conducted by John Harbison—John Harbison as a violist—Emmanuel Church—Craig Smith--John Oliver</i>	
3. Musical training and taste in music (19:13)	8
<i>Thoughts on training of musicians—thoughts on “taking” courses—studies with Viktor Graf—preference for chamber music—piano and harpsichord technique—Isolde Ahlgrimm—Wanda Landowska—Fernando Valenti—Igor Kipnis—Gustav Leonhardt—Nikolaus Harnoncourt—vocal performance and practices in early music—Ferdinand Grossmann—Max Reger—Anton Bruckner—performing Monteverdi with Susan Larson—Craig Smith</i>	
4. Claudia Von Canon, author (33:04).....	12
<i>Writing novels Moonclock, The Inheritance—Andreas Vesalius book—writing what you know—article about Peter Sellars—retirement</i>	

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.

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 9, 2001, in the MIT Lewis Music Library. Second of two interviews. First interview October 3, 2001. Duration of the audio recording is 00:42:33.

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. Teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

LARSON: This is the second interview with Claudia Von Canon. It's October 9, 2001. I'm Forrest Larson in the Lewis Music Library.

I'm pleased to welcome Claudia Von Canon for another interview. Today is October 9, 2001. I'm Forrest Larson. And it's in the Lewis Music Library. Thank you so much for coming and doing this second interview. Just a real delight to have you here.

Like to pick up where we left off in the last interview. And we were talking about your teaching at MIT.

And you taught, for a number of years, the Intro to Music course, 21.60 as it was known then. This was a course where students—most of the students don't read music. Can you talk a little bit about what it was like teaching that course, and some of the goals and purpose of the course?

VON CANON: Yeah, I told this already last time. The thing is this. The most important thing for me personally was that I assured the kids that silence was as important as sounds.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: And that they were all the time exposed to continuous noise.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: And as Igor Markevitch [1912-1983, composer and conductor], with whom we worked quite a bit, said, "Children, silence is music, too." And that's what I wanted to convey to the classes, because most of this generation cannot listen. And so I started with silence.

And then another thing is that not very many of those kids can make music. They listen. They have all the time a background. It's always professional, so that means that nowadays, music very much is a spectator sport. As conversation, as sex, as anything.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: It is—you look. You gape. But you don't do it yourself. And should I tell them just the story about the movie?

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: Well, and then I told the kids—the students, sorry—that they should see a certain movie. It's an old movie, and starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. It's a story of a poor newspaperman who runs away with a millionaire's daughter. Anyway, it plays during the Depression.

And you see the millionaire's daughter and the newspaperman in a Greyhound [bus]. And the Greyhound's passengers, they are very poor. They are farmers. They are unemployed people—all kinds of shabby folk. And at the moment after conversation, they started to sing. And they sang "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze."

And there was one sang. The next one got another verse. And the next one got another verse. Everybody took up the refrain. Finally the driver had one too. The only one who didn't know it was the millionaire's daughter. The newspaperman knew it.

And it was absolutely wonderful, that Greyhound going through that very arid and poor countryside, and those people singing away. And I said to the class, "Try this with a plane full of businessmen. Never could do it, because these businessmen, they—they just are arid."

And I went to the Music Library and got the *Fireside Book of American Folk Song*. And so I went there, plunked that *Fireside Book* on the piano, got the class around the piano, and for the first time, they sang "The Flying"— "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" with all the verses and the refrain. And they looked incredibly happy.

And this was, so to speak, the ground, the basis on which I did the 21.60 afterwards.

LARSON: Mm. Well, that's certainly something they'll take away with them. Was there anything about particular pieces of music that you felt particularly important for them to—

VON CANON: Oh yeah.

LARSON: Yeah? Tell me about that.

VON CANON: For instance, the "Resurrexit" of the—of the B minor Mass [Bach]. Or, I emphasized very much on pieces which, so to speak, wake the dead. And the "Resurrexit." Then the "Réjouissance" of the Fourth Orchestra Suite of the D major from—of Bach. And the whole *Don Giovanni*. Then Duke Ellington. And also—

LARSON: So which Duke Ellington were you thinking of?

VON CANON: "Caravan," [by Juan Tizol] for instance.

LARSON: Oh, uh-huh.

VON CANON: And they did—these kids didn't know. They didn't even know of Duke Ellington.

So you had to—you had to—how you say that? You had to fill that gap. And then I emphasized mostly on music, so to speak. I didn't do a lot of [Gustave] Mahler. I didn't do a lot of [Anton] Bruckner. Because there you really need to be—[sighs]. You have to be more conditioned. And if you confront music for the first time, you have to have greatness in.

LARSON: So with the Bach, what—and you said other things about raising the dead. Tell me about what was behind that. That's an interesting concept.

VON CANON: Yeah. What? What?

LARSON: You said you were into—you mentioned the, um—the—the movement from the—the Bach B minor Mass.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: And you—and you said that there were other pieces about raising the dead.

VON CANON: Raising the dead, exactly.

LARSON: Tell me what was behind this for you, as far as introducing this to the students?

VON CANON: That's all it says, that puts people in a state of bliss. And that's very necessary that you start with the biggest pieces. Well, for instance, the—there is a final, you know, certain Haydn trio. There is, as I said, there's a couple of jazz pieces. They do that, and that doesn't mean—that doesn't mean that they have to be noisy, or fast. But there are certain pieces of music—I cannot express this otherwise—that raise the dead. And that's the one you have to play to the—to the 21.60.

LARSON: I'll have to—when next time I hear the, um, Duke Ellington's "Caravan," I'll have to think about that. I—that's very interesting. Speaking of the Duke Ellington, is there something—is there a part of that piece or something that—? Because I certainly wouldn't have thought of "Caravan," you know, in "raising the dead."

VON CANON: No?

LARSON: Tell me, what's the connection there?

VON CANON: No connection.

LARSON: Yeah?

VON CANON: This is a—there's an insti—an insti—

LARSON: It's an instinct you have.

VON CANON: Instinct reaction from you.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: There's certain musics—

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: There are quite a few.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: And I kind of show them all to the kids. But I only show those pieces to the kids that are worthwhile, that raise the dead. Because otherwise, I think it's a waste of time.

LARSON: Okay. Yeah, it's—it's a metaphor. It's not a—

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Yeah, okay. I—I think I get it now.

VON CANON: Uh-huh.

LARSON: Yeah, that's very interesting. Now here's a question that's probably a little unfair to ask somebody from Vienna. And it's—you could write a whole book on the subject.

But the composers Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven are obviously Viennese composers. And they are, in many people's minds, the pinnacle of Western music.

How do you, in your own mind, see them in the world of music that you've known for all these years?

VON CANON: Well, they are like sun and the rain for me. They don't—I don't even discuss them.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. But you know how some people kind of put them up on a pedestal?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: And it sounds like—

VON CANON: No, you live with them.

LARSON: Yeah Yeah. That's great. And there was a course that you taught. I forgot the course number, but it was called "Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven."

VON CANON: Yeah. That is, everybody taught that, not only me.

LARSON: Yeah, right. But I remember when you taught that course.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Was there a thesis or some underlying themes that you had in mind as a teacher when you were teaching that course?

VON CANON: It's always the same: that I try to expose the kid to the music that raises the dead. It's—and you have a lot of choices with Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. For instance, the—the last moment of the Septet.

LARSON: The Beethoven Septet?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: Yes. Yes. Great piece.

VON CANON: Yeah. Or, I don't know. The B major Sonata. The Piano Sonata. The Schubert.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. I like that concept, music that raises the dead. That's—I'm not going to forget that! When you taught at MIT, did you coach any student chamber music groups?

VON CANON: No, I didn't. I didn't. Not that I remember. Maybe—wait a moment. I think sometime in the beginning, once. I think I coached a few that played a couple of parts in the Brandenburg Concerto [Bach]. But that's long ago.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Yeah, you came the year after Marcus Thompson came.

VON CANON: Right.

LARSON: And did he start the MIT Chamber Music Society right away?

VON CANON: I can't remember. You have to ask him. But it was pretty soon after he came.

LARSON: Yeah. Did you have any dealings with that as far as helping the program run?

VON CANON: No. Uh-uh.

LARSON: No. Did you coach any vocal groups?

VON CANON: Yeah, I coached individual singers. And then I was really hired and supposed to do opera.

LARSON: Right.

VON CANON: But for all kinds of private business, which had nothing to do with me, it never came to pass.

LARSON: Yeah. So what are some of the vocal groups that you coached?

VON CANON: I didn't coach vocal groups. I coached a couple of individual singers.

LARSON: I see. Okay. So there wasn't any madrigal groups or anything that you coached?

VON CANON: No, I didn't coach. No, not here.

LARSON: Yeah. There was for a time at MIT something called the MIT Early Music Society.

VON CANON: Yes.

LARSON: I don't know much about that. Do you—

VON CANON: I had nothing to do with it.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. Who started that? Do you know?

VON CANON: No idea. I don't know.

LARSON: That's something I certainly want to look into. You've mentioned this somewhat in passing, and I'll just ask it more directly. The place of music at MIT: This is a school that is, you know, that specializes in teaching science and engineering. What place do you see music in the educational curriculum here?

VON CANON: Well, Alessandro Scarlatti said that music is the daughter of mathematics. And it is very important that these kids know something about music, learn how to confront music. Exactly as they should learn how to confront language, literature, painting, whatever.

Because when you are nothing but a scientific specialist, when you become an absolute specialist, then you become an idiot in the sense of the Greek word, which says, only busy with himself, and not anymore turned toward the world. And it's very important that the kids learn that. And as I said, that they learn to respect music. And you respect music if, from time to time, you shut up. And that's what you have to learn.

LARSON: What are your thoughts there being a major in music at MIT here?

VON CANON: Good.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Great.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Because the curriculum here is different in just the way that MIT is, do you think that the music major at MIT can offer something different than a music major at a traditional liberal arts college?

VON CANON: This I wouldn't dare to answer, because that depends on the individual, how he handles the knowledge he gets. That depends entirely on what he retains.

LARSON: There are some people who have questioned if MIT should offer a major in music. From time to time I hear various discussions on that.

VON CANON: Yeah, it depends what that means, "major in music." Does it mean musicology? Or does it mean performance? That should be very clear-cut. Because musicology as such is rather a field of sterility, I think. Because you don't talk about music so much.

LARSON: Yeah. I had a feeling that you had some thoughts like that. Is there any more you'd like to say about that?

VON CANON: Mm-hm. It's like literature. You read a book, but you don't read all the time what other people say about that book.

LARSON: Yeah. You know, but obviously you respect some musicologists like Lowell Lindgren.

VON CANON: Oh yeah. But that's different.

BOTH: [laugh]

LARSON: Are there other musicologists that you've known that you'd like to talk about or anything?

VON CANON: Who I've known. I've known Otto Erich Deutsch [1883-1967, Austrian musicologist]. And, uh, he was rather fearsome [laughs], and very much specialized.

LARSON: Wow. Did you study with him?

VON CANON: No. Heavens, no. No, I knew him when he was about ten years old.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Wow. What was his instrument?

VON CANON: He didn't play any instrument. He did the Schubert catalog. And when you do the Schubert—

LARSON: Yeah, of course.

VON CANON: His deed was done.

LARSON: Right. I just didn't know if —if he—

VON CANON: No, he knew everything about music, but he couldn't play the C major scale.

2. Performing at MIT

LARSON: [laughs] Wow. I wondered about him. The only time that I actually heard you play, you played the Bach Violin and Harpsichord Sonatas with Rose Mary Harbison in the [MIT] Chapel.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Have you played with her much? And tell me what repertoire you've done.

VON CANON: I have played only Bach with her. And right now she wants to play again.

LARSON: Uh-huh. So you had only played the Bach.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Have you done that a lot with her over the years?

VON CANON: No. We played from time to time. But now I hope that I can play with her again.

LARSON: Yeah. I distinctly remember that concert. It was really, really beautiful. Did you ever play with John Harbison?

VON CANON: With John? No.

LARSON: No. No. I just wondered.

VON CANON: Oh yeah. I sang a couple of times when he was conducting some group here at MIT.

LARSON: Wow.

VON CANON: A couple of Bach cantatas.

LARSON: Oh, no kidding.

VON CANON: Mm-hm. Almost forgot.

LARSON: Now, were you singing in the chorus? Or were you—?

VON CANON: Yeah, sure. It was a very small chorus. It was even—.

LARSON: Do you remember which cantatas they were?

VON CANON: Which was...? I have to think it over.

LARSON: Yeah. Have you ever played any of his [John Harbison] music?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No.

LARSON: Did you ever hear John play the viola? At one time he was a viol—

VON CANON: Yes. Yes.

LARSON: Wow. Can you—do you have any memories of that? And on what occasion might you have heard him play?

VON CANON: It was some chamber concert, but I can't remember. I can't remember whatever it was. It was—I heard him play the viola.

LARSON: Yeah. Was it a concert at MIT?

VON CANON: No, it was—I think it was at Emmanuel.

LARSON: Emmanuel Church [in Boston].

VON CANON: But he was mainly my boss.

LARSON: Was that something conducted by Craig Smith [1947-2007, founder of Emmanuel Music] at the time?

VON CANON: I think so, yeah.

LARSON: When John Oliver taught here at MIT [Director of Choral Music], did you work at all with him?

VON CANON: No, but I had a lot of very, very good conversations with him. No, I didn't work with him.

LARSON: And you didn't work with him even outside of MIT?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: Yeah, okay. Any thoughts or comments about John Oliver?

VON CANON: No. I always thought that he was an excellent musician. But I wasn't particularly—neither away from him, nor very close to him. But I appreciate him very much.

LARSON: Are there any performances that you heard him conduct that are memorable?

VON CANON: Uh, yeah. A couple of choral works where he was conducting, he trained and coached a chorus. I think it was—let me think. I think it was the *Creation* once.

LARSON: The Haydn *Creation*?

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

3. Musical training and taste in music

LARSON: Now, apart from studying a particular instrument or voice, do you have any thoughts about how musicians should be trained? You have a very interesting, um, background. And for you, it's not unusual, because that was common in Europe. And having taught music for a number of years, any thoughts about that?

VON CANON: You mean how music should be taught?

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: This is very hard to answer, because that depends from what background the kid is coming. And it would be good to create a certain environment where a kid is not all the time exposed to noise. And I don't know how that is possible.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: That depends on the family life. If somebody comes home and turns on the TV, and there is noise from the very beginning, it's a far more difficult atmosphere to have music than in another family where there is dialogue or silence.

LARSON: If somebody, say, is learning to be a pianist or a singer, how do you see in their education, learning music theory and ear training? And any thoughts about how that should be integrated into training of a musician?

VON CANON: That is very hard to answer, because it depends. Does the kid go to a music school? Or studies in school in the music in school? Or does he start taking music at MIT? You know, this “taking” is already a thing that makes a European uneasy.

LARSON: I see.

VON CANON: Because this is referred to as, “Oh, I took French.” That doesn't mean a thing, if you “take” something. And whether it's language or music, I think that nobody can learn anything without the will.

For instance, you don't “take” a language. You learn the irregular verbs. And without the irregular verbs, you cannot speak a language. And without being able to play “Three Blind Mice” in any tonality, you cannot play the piano, as long as you don't have a sense of interval.

And this—well, it isn't taught. There are certain elementary things that have to go in the bones of these kids. And if that is not done, then you don't have any music education.

LARSON: Now in your training, particularly as a young child, that was just part of—say, if you took piano lessons, you were given ear training and stuff like that as part of it? There wasn't—it wasn't separate, correct?

VON CANON: No, ear training wasn't a particular thing. It was a matter of course that you heard these things. And, um—well, let me see. I know, for instance, at the [Vienna] Academy [for Chamber Choir], we had Professor Graf, Viktor Graf. He was a wonderful guy. He was the piano accompanist of every famous singer that came to Vienna. And at the same time, he was professor at the Academy.

And he said that singers—all singers are idiots. And he made a course, which was called Musical [German]—pre-education—from half-past 7:00 'til 9:00 in the morning. Because there were no classes. So we had to come at half-past 7:00, three times, in a morning. And there, we were put through the paces—sight-singing and everything.

And at the same time, he always gossiped to us about the famous people he was accompanying the evening before. And so we would sing whole snatches—I don't know, *Figaro* or whatever. And everybody had to sight-sing the part. And I never made a mistake. Never, ever.

And one day he says, “Oh, how do you do it?” And I said, “Well, I finger the keyboard.” And he said, “You what?” And from that moment on, I was more or less dead for him. Because he had realized that I was not only hearing but seeing... that maybe I was—I was cheating.

LARSON: Uh-huh. [laughs]

VON CANON: He did not admit that you can have the intervals with your eyes as much as with your ears. Of course, I was all right. But I still remember how scandalized he was when I told him that the keyboard helped me.

LARSON: Yeah. And that's often taught, so it being cheating—!

VON CANON: Yeah. A violinist or a singer should not have the keyboard. He found the keyboard an absolute crutch.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Wow. As a pianist, is there any performance tradition that you have an affinity towards?

VON CANON: Oh yeah, chamber music.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. And as far as a particular pianistic technique—I guess that's what I was getting at. Um, you know, there are various kind of—um.

VON CANON: Well, I'm a harpsi—I have a harpsichord training. And I'm not very good at thundering octaves.

LARSON: Can you tell me how you got interested in playing the harpsichord? How that came about?

VON CANON: Yeah, because we had a wonderful harpsichordist called Isolde Ahlgrimm.

LARSON: At the Conservatory?

VON CANON: At the Academy. And I wanted to study with her. That's what I did.

LARSON: In our previous interview, you had mentioned Wanda Landowska as an influence.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Did you ever hear—?

VON CANON: No. Wanda Landowska was not a great influence on me.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: Sure, I heard her play very often. And also very, very many recordings. And to me, she is a little bit too brutal.

LARSON: Uh-huh.

VON CANON: But this is—this is an individual feeling.

LARSON: So you actually heard her play a lot.

VON CANON: Oh yeah.

LARSON: Who were some other harpsichordists that you heard play that—that you—?

VON CANON: Fernando Valenti, who I like very much. And Igor Kipnis.

LARSON: Did you ever hear Gustav Leonhardt or Nikolaus Harnoncourt?

VON CANON: Yes. Oh, sure.

LARSON: And do you have any thoughts about those figures?

VON CANON: Leonhardt, yeah. I mean, he's a great musician. But, Leonhardt did—does things which I don't understand. For instance, last year in Amsterdam, he did the [Bach] B minor Mass in the so-called Westerkerk, in the Western Church. We ran away after the second part immediately, because it was such an echo that you heard still the first measure when he was already on the third. It was impossible. You couldn't. And I wonder how a musician like Leonhardt could do that in this church. And they said because he likes to conduct. But I think this is a poor reason.

LARSON: Well, there's a recording of Harnoncourt conducting the B minor Mass. And the echo in that recording is so much that I can't hear the polyphonic lines.

VON CANON: Yeah, exactly. You cannot hear a thing. And I remember when we did the St. John's Passion [Bach] in Washington, we stuffed a whole—it was at the campus of Catholic University. We stuffed the whole church with old clothes.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: And it went all right. But we couldn't understand how a guy like Leonhardt could do a performance like that.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Wow.

VON CANON: And Harmoncourt, I'm still very, very mad at his *Magic Flute* [Mozart].

LARSON: You want to get into that, or—?

VON CANON: No. No, this isn't—

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. I was delighted to find from the first interview your interest in Renaissance music, and a lot of the performances that you've done.

VON CANON: We did a lot.

LARSON: Yeah. Um, did you ever sing madrigals?

VON CANON: Oh, yes.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. Is there a performance tradition in Vienna to just informally sing madrigals?

VON CANON: Yes, yes. Some people just get together and sing madrigals, sure.

LARSON: And you kind of grew up during that?

VON CANON: Oh yeah. Sure.

LARSON: Do you have any particular ideas about vocal performance and practice in singing Renaissance music? I mean, things like vibrato and voice quality? Any particular ideas about that?

VON CANON: Well, I am probably prejudiced in the way that we sang them with [Ferdinand] Grossmann. We sang. And we didn't worry about vibrato and non-vibrato.

I can only tell you that two years ago, I was in Florence. And they played not Renaissance, but they played, 5th Brandenburg in a church called Orsanmichele. And of course, they played the 5th, and the girl who played the harpsichord was dying with fear because of the cadenza.

But they did not observe all kinds of historical considerations. They fiddled away, and it was wonderful. It was just music. And the formal laws of Bach's music came out wonderfully.

And when we were singing—not Bach, but Renaissance music, et cetera, we didn't care one bit of—about non-vibrato or vibrato. We just sang, and the music sang. And we did not even care about theory.

LARSON: Yeah. Well, that's—a lot of great music happens that way.

VON CANON: Sure.

LARSON: Yeah. The music of Max Reger [1873-1916, German composer] seems to have gone out of fashion.

VON CANON: Well, I hope so.

LARSON: Was it ever performed in Vienna when you were growing up?

VON CANON: No. Very, very little. Some organ music was performed.

LARSON: None of the cantatas or—?

VON CANON: No, no.

LARSON: No? I just wondered.

VON CANON: Not so very. No, Max Reger was, uh—kind of—kind of an embarrassment.

LARSON: I just wondered, because he had kind of a—his time, and I just wondered what that was like. Did you ever sing the—the [Anton] Bruckner Latin motets?

VON CANON: Yes. Yes, we sang the Bruckner motets and we sang the F minor Mass.

LARSON: Do you have any particular feelings about the Bruckner vocal music?

VON CANON: Oh yeah, I think that's great.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. The motets are just—

VON CANON: Great and difficult.

LARSON: Yeah. In the previous interview, you mentioned performing Monteverdi with soprano Susan Larson.

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Is there anything more you'd like to say about her as a singer?

VON CANON: Oh, Susan's a great singer.

LARSON: Anything else about performing with her?

VON CANON: Yeah, I learned enormously from her.

LARSON: Tell me about some of that—what you learned from her.

VON CANON: Certain ways of, uh—certain ways of reaching certain notes. Because you—you never end learning. I learned a lot from Grossman, and Grossman made me the voice, so to speak. But I learned from Susan to be able to have it more reliable.

LARSON: Aha. And that's so important for musicians, and for singers, particularly. Any other things about musical interpretation, or anything like that you learned from her? It sounds like she's been a big influence on—

VON CANON: No, we are more or less on the same line, you know?

LARSON: Who are some of the other Boston-area music colleagues of yours, um, that you care to mention?

VON CANON: Boston? No—nobody.

LARSON: Did you ever, um, work with Craig Smith?

VON CANON: No, I didn't.

LARSON: No.

VON CANON: I wanted to, but somehow it never came to pass.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

VON CANON: I know him well, but I have never worked with him.

LARSON: Uh-huh. I just wondered. Yeah. He's such a big presence in the vocal music scene here.

VON CANON: Sure.

4. Claudia Von Canon, author

LARSON: To change the subject, um, a little bit, there're two novels that you wrote, *Moonclock*, from 1979 and *The Inheritance*, from 1983.

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: I don't necessarily want to get into the specifics of them. But I wanted to ask you: they show a particularly—I'm thinking of *The Inheritance*—a really intimate knowledge of sixteenth century medical practices. The medical education and treatises. And I'm just curious—that must have take a lot of research on your part.

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: Is that something you had kind of grown up knowing?

VON CANON: No, no. That was simply that once I got somehow in the university—in a university library, there was the 400th centenary—what do you just call it?—of Andreas Vesalius, the great anatomist who died in 1564.

There's a wonderful book, which is called *The Fabrica* [*De humani corporis fabrica libri septem (On the fabric of the human body in seven books)*]. And I looked at this, and it interested me incredibly, because it's a very, very exciting book, where he tells you how to cut a body up, and what you learn, et cetera, et cetera.

And then I had to write, because they told me in the university life, there's publish or perish. And so I thought I could only write about things I know something about. And that limited the things already quite a bit. And then somehow this story just grew together.

I had absolutely no medical background. But I read a lot about Vesalius because as a person he interested me. It has nothing to do with any professional research.

LARSON: You also show, at least to my mind, a real amazing knowledge of very practical daily affairs. You know, cooking, hygiene, clothing, social relationships, and social mores that, to me, it seems like there's a real intimate knowledge with that. It seemed it wasn't just a matter of kind of opening up a book and getting it. There's nothing

superficial about what seems in that book. There's some fairly subtle stuff in there. And I was just really impressed with that.

VON CANON: Oh, thank you. No, but, you know, I don't like for you to read *Inheritance* because it has been totally fouled up by the editor. And it is not the way I wrote it. Just throw it away,

LARSON: Hmm. Is there any—since I have read it, is there anything that you'd like to just say about what might have been missing?

VON CANON: Yeah. I have re-written it totally. But in German.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

VON CANON: And I might have it out in—with Querido [Publishing House] in Amsterdam. I'm not sure. But it's very possible. It exists in German, real manuscript. But not in English.

LARSON: Is there a general way you can characterize your version and the version that was published in English?

VON CANON: Yes. The version in English was corrected, and it has all kinds of phrases I never put in. And it was very badly done. And my version right now, the German version is the one I want to publish.

LARSON: Did they change the plot, or any of the story?

VON CANON: No, no, no, they changed no plot. But it was amateurish. It was, uh—they did all kinds of mistakes and corrections. And then the title was awful. The jacket. So I'm not—I'm not very happy with this thing.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Did you have a particular interest in sixteenth century Spanish history?

VON CANON: Oh yeah, sure. I'm an Austrian, don't forget.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. Is there any reason that you chose that time period for this novel?

VON CANON: Yeah, because I wanted to write about these areas. And he [Andreas Vesalius] was very much involved in all this business between Netherlands and Spain.

LARSON: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Any thoughts that you might want to share about the other book, *Moonclock*?

VON CANON: Yeah, *Moonclock* is a Viennese book.

LARSON: Yeah.

VON CANON: They didn't foul it up.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: Yeah, The *Moonclock*, that was—exactly was the first book I wrote. And that was also the thought, I can only write about things I know something. And I know something about Vienna, and Vienna in the Turkish wars and so on.

LARSON: What kind of, um, research did you do on that?

VON CANON: Research?

LARSON: Was it stuff you just learned as you had grown up?

VON CANON: Mostly. But I did a little research at a townhouse in Vienna, with town records.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Because there's a... the knowledge that you have of some of the political affairs and social mores is—it's just I found that very, very interesting, and I learned a great deal.

VON CANON: Well, we learned that in school.

LARSON: Uh-huh. I see.

VON CANON: This is nothing particular.

LARSON: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Yes. See, to somebody not from Vienna, that's, um—yeah.

VON CANON: Yeah, well this is all local. The locals know it.

LARSON: Is there anything else that you've published or written that you can—?

VON CANON: Yes, I wrote a furious article against Peter Sellars [b. 1957, American director].

LARSON: Oh, really?

VON CANON: Mm-hm.

LARSON: Oh.

VON CANON: And that was published in the first—in the leading paper in Amsterdam. Translated into Dutch.

LARSON: Wow. You care to mention any more about that, or your thoughts about Peter Sellars?

VON CANON: I don't want to start my thoughts about Peter Sellars.

LARSON: Yeah.

[laughter]

LARSON: Oh. So that was published in Dutch? It's not a—

VON CANON: Oh yeah. It was published in Dutch. When he started to—I don't know what he did. He had a big, fat attitude he was very proud of.

LARSON: Was it in regards to—he's done some, um, productions of operas. Was it directed—?

VON CANON: Yes. Yes.

LARSON: Yes, OK. I know other people who've been quite upset with some of the things he's done, yeah. [laughs] Can you tell me about some of the musical activities that you've been up to these last few years?

VON CANON: Musical what?

LARSON: Musical activities. Things you've been doing since you've retired.

VON CANON: I do nothing. I do nothing but work the keyboard. That's all I do.

LARSON: Yeah. So just playing at home, and—?

VON CANON: Yeah.

LARSON: Oh. And you must—

VON CANON: And I do some chamber music with a friend in Amsterdam, a cellist. And mostly work for myself.

LARSON: Mm-hm.

VON CANON: And learn trios.

LARSON: So what music do you do with the cellist?

VON CANON: What did we do with it? The three Bach— you know, the—the Gamba Sonatas [BWV 1027–1029].

LARSON: Yes. Yes.

VON CANON: And, uh—and then I'm learning—I'm learning the Haydn trios.

LARSON: Cool.

VON CANON: And then one of these days, we play them with Ling [unconfirmed name] which is a very nice violinist.

LARSON: Did you ever do the [Johannes] Brahms sonatas with the cello?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: No. Do you have you played much Brahms?

VON CANON: No. Sang a little Brahms, but not really.

LARSON: Any particular reason?

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: Yeah. Just wondered if—

VON CANON: Just—just what came about. It's not what I want to learn, absolutely.

LARSON: Mm-hm. But you like Brahms, but it's just not something you want to learn.

VON CANON: Yeah, it's not something I cannot live without.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. Well, these are the—

VON CANON: That's it, huh?

LARSON: That's the basic questions that I had. Is there any concluding thoughts that you'd like to share or anything?

VON CANON: No. I don't think that—I think that as long as one is alive, one doesn't have concluding thoughts.

LARSON: Yeah. Yeah. I just thought with the interview here.

VON CANON: No.

LARSON: Well, you've been most, most generous in sharing your thoughts

VON CANON: Thank you.

LARSON: Thank you again so much.

[End of Interview]