

Interview with Harold Shapero and Sid Ramin
Music 194rs: Leonard Bernstein's Boston
February 21, 2006
Professors Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Carol Oja
Class Interviewers: Ryan Raul Bañagale, Emily Abrams, and Corinna Campbell
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0:00

Ryan Raul Bañagale:

Today is the 21st of February, 2006. We are in the Davison Room of the music library at Harvard University. My name is Ryan Bañagale and today myself, Emily Abrams and Corinna Campbell will be speaking with Harold Shapero and Sid Ramin regarding Leonard Bernstein's Boston.

So, it's my pleasure to introduce to the class Harold Shapero. Mr. Shapero was born just north of Boston in Lynn, Massachusetts and has had a distinguished career as a pianist, composer, and educator. He studied composition under luminaries such as Slonimsky, Piston, Hindemith, and Boulanger, and was singled out in 1948 by Aaron Copland as belonging to "a *new 'school'* of American composers." In 1951, three years after Brandeis University was founded, Mr. Shapero was hired to start the school's music department where he remained a distinguished member of the Brandeis faculty for thirty-seven years until his retirement in 1988.

As I am certain that we will learn more about today, Mr. Shapero had a long musical association and friendship with Leonard Bernstein which may have begun in this very building. Mr. Shapero, welcome and thank you very much for joining us today.

[Applause from the members of the class]

We know something of your years at Harvard and Brandeis as well as something about your compositional career. I was wondering if we might just begin with you telling us something about your family background.

Harold Shapero:

You don't want to go though that, do you? [Laughs, class laughs]

Bañagale:

Briefly, a little bit. [Laughs]

Shapero:

Uh, um. I had parents who were encouraging and they were very musical and in the '20s they had all the – they bought records and things like that. You know, very long playing

records – old fashioned, what do you call them? Short playing records... Ah, big RCA Victor discs and I remember... I'll tell just one memory of my father. When I started taking piano lessons (I was probably six or seven) and I didn't take the – and my mother sat on the bench with me and made sure I'd practice. And I had a mother who, you know. And so, pretty soon, I caught onto it and I rather liked it. And I remember calling up another six or seven-year-old friend down the block. I said, "You gotta come over here right away! I'm playing this piece that's absolutely terrific." And what the piece was, was Schubert's *Marche militaire*. You know? [Sings first 10 notes of piece.] It is an absolutely – a wonder of inspiration with the two little lines, you know? And I was thrilled with it. So that is what I remember, sort of - And then my father, later on my father came home with a record of Stravinsky's *Firebird*.

Can everybody hear me? I hate people that mumble in a group. [Laughter] But if you can't, speak up.

He came home with a record of *The Firebird* and sort of put it – he said, "They say he's greater than Strauss," my father said. So, I listened to it and gave it back and said, "I don't think he's so hot." [Laughter from RRB, HS, and class] A seven-year-old! The nerve and thechutzpah and the stupidity – it's endless! So, that's a little of that. I had a very supportive family and they...uh...they sent me to Harvard and gave me...and they gave me whatever I wanted. So, I had no, ah, no... And they were very musical. My mother was very musical.

When they played Schumann symphonies at [Boston's] Symphony Hall, she said, "Ach, Schumann!" Beethoven she thought was terrific, but Schumann she thought was kind of weak, you know? [Laughs]

Bañagale:

Could you tell us a little bit about when you moved to Newton and your experience coming in[to the city]?

Shapero:

About 1929, before your mothers were born, there was the Great Depression. We had a wonderful house in Newton and we moved from poor quarters in Roxbury, which was then a Jewish section, into Newton, which became a Jewish section. And we had a wonderful house and...uh...then they lost that house in the Depression. And it didn't take my father long, and we immediately had another big brick house. And that one has a connection with Lenny because it was on a street called Cotton Street in Newton. And Lenny lived, just by coincidence, in a little house on Park Avenue. Was it Park Street or Park Avenue?

Professor Carol J. Oja:

Park Avenue.

Shapero:

Park Avenue, I don't know what the number was. And uh, I didn't meet him of course, immediately but, well, you ask the questions.

[5:00]

Bañagale:

Well, we could, we could follow that. Um, you mentioned in the writings you did in the *Leonard Bernstein: The Harvard Years* book that the first time you met Lenny was – huh, Lenny – Bernstein, was during the Music B seminar that Professor Merritt conducted in the fall of '38. Is this correct and could you tell us a little bit about your earliest –

Shapero:

I always tell the same story about that seminar. It was a seminar on sixteenth-century counterpoint in which Tillman Merritt was expert. And, by modern standards, it wasn't much use for composers. You needed Baroque counterpoint, which was not taught at Harvard, if you can believe it, in those years. So anyway, we go into this seminar and Lenny – Lenny was two years older than I was. So, he was a junior when I was a freshman. And I was a good little student, I did my work everyday and I brought my motets in to Tillman to mark up.

And Lenny never showed up, at all. He was already – not, I wouldn't say famous, I mean, he definitely wasn't *Leonard Bernstein* yet, but he was playing piano concertos or solos with the WPA Orchestra. Do you know what that is? WPA is the Works Progress Administration of Franklin Roosevelt. It was a great idea, everybody was broke and didn't have any jobs and so he started these artificial jobs and among them were musical jobs, like a whole orchestra. And this is all through the country. And they had - they were pretty good. Lenny had already got a reputation with playing with the Boston WPA. And so I'd heard of him, but he wasn't very famous yet.

But, whatever it was, he lived at school and I didn't, so it was easy for me to be good and not easy for him to be good. He loved to horse around and stay up all night with his dorm guys, you know. I don't know what it is now, but there were no pot then, but there was a lot of beer, you know? Well, Lenny –

Anyway, he didn't come to class. Around Christmastime it came time for grading time, right? There were no exams and Lenny had to pass in something. So, he came in and Tillman was sitting there and Lenny played this piece. I think, I remember it was a little piece, a dance piece for Anna Sokolow, a dancer who was quite well known then. And I remember it being awful. I mean it was, it was a dissonant – but it was nothing much. He played this piece, and Tillman said in his best Harvard accent [uses a snobby voice], "You know, Leonard, that's not exactly what we are doing in this class." [Laughter] And Lenny took his fist and went [bangs fist on table] BANG, like that "*I like it!*"

And you know, imagine this class if that happened, you know – everybody had their tongues hanging out. I was amazed, I thought it was funny, but I was amazed. And I thought it was horrible in taste, too. Um, years later I thought, that's a wonderful sample of Lenny because his confidence was enormous. Right or wrong, his confidence was gigantic and his confidence in performance was like that too. And he didn't worry about making mistakes and he was secure. So he was pretty tough right off at the beginning. But it was an awful little piece! [Laughter from class]

Bañagale:

Do you have any other memories of that time period in the classroom?

Shapero:

In the classroom? Well, that class was, we just, it was 16th – ah, that's how I sort of met Lenny almost, really. And then uh, then of course I was trying to get ahead, you know. And he was. And he found out that I could play a lot of piano. I was a pretty good pianist then. And he said, "Why don't we give some two piano concerts together?" And that is how we started having some fun! So we developed all kinds of things – with him in charge. He got all the jobs and all the venues, as you's call them. And he didn't decide what we should play, but he was the motivating force. I mean, I was very passive. Whatever he said I did. But I was a good player and he always, when the piece was hard, he always made me play first [part] too. [Laughter from class]

Oja:

What was some of the repertory you were playing?

Shapero:

We were pretty good. We played the Stravinsky piano, er, Concerto for Two Piano solo, which is not easy and we played Hindemith's Four-Hand Sonata. We played some Mozart four-hand sonatas. It's hard to remember. We didn't – it wasn't ever that big and that long. I don't think we every played the Debussy stuff.

Oja:

Was either of you writing pieces for the two of you to play?

[10:00]

Shapero:

Well the piece, my Four-Hand Sonata eventually, I sort of – I didn't realize I was writing it for us to play, but it was something we did play. And it was originally dedicated to Lenny and me. And then when his homosexuality got enormously known, I decided, I'd

better change that dedication because, well you know [laughter from HS and class] We were good pals, you know, but, huh, there was nothing of that sort.

And the strange thing is, in those years, no matter what the books say, I didn't notice anything. I was naive, but I didn't notice anything. We were both taking out the same girl at one point. A dazzling beauty named Kiki Speyer who was the daughter of the English Horn player of the Boston Symphony. Of course, Kiki was crazy about Lenny. I was just, she would, uh...She would go out with me because she'd get more information about Lenny. [Laughter from class] It was a very serious relationship for her, and she wanted to marry him. They were very seriously considering it. You probably know all about it by this time, you're [to Carol Oja] the historian.

Oja:

[I've] heard the name, yeah.

Shapero:

I don't know what the years were, but um. He had a terrible time with her, because when he finally decided not to do it she was pretty mad.

Professor Kay Kaufman Shelemay:

But if he was dating Speyer's daughter – if he was dating this young woman, but you said people also knew that he was very active with male partners that –

Shapero:

That I didn't know about!

Shelemay:

You didn't know about it then?

Shapero:

At that point I don't think so.

Shelemay:

Yeah, oh.

Shapero:

It wasn't very active. I think his homosexuality at that point was a typical kind of college homosexuality. It happens in the dorms, you know, sporadically...And, uh...I never...you

know...I was especially naive, but it wasn't very, it wasn't a consuming thing, the way it got to be very later – a very serious thing in the way it got to be later. And uh...so ok, how did that come up?!? [Laughter]

Bañagale:

That's a good question. That came out through, we were talking about, we were going back and we were talking about your first interactions –

Shapero:

Oh, and playing concerts.

Bañagale:

Yes, playing concerts.

Shapero:

We had a lot of fun on those concerts. Among – I can tell you one of the funny things we did. We were, I would be arrogant – we were brilliant. We were very lively. I was lively and he was *very* lively. And uh, as I say he was a powerful motivator, even in those – [imitates Bernstein] “Come on! Come on! Rehearse, rehearse!” You know, and push me around and a, but.

We sounded pretty good together and we played, I remember, we played a concert locally for an organization or a group, they were very nice people, but they didn't know one note from another. So I said to Lenny, “This is boring,” you know, “we're gonna play this Mozart piece, let's flat all the dominants,” you know, “what are they going to know?” You know? All you kids know what a flatted dominant is. I should, should I give them a demo? You want a demo. [Gets up and moves to the piano] Oh, I don't remember the Mozart, it was a famous four-hand piece, two-piano piece I think. But if you take Mozart and start flatting all the dominants, you get this effect. I'll try to get it straight.

[Plays first four bars of Mozart's Sonata in C major K. 545 flatting the dominants and over-trilling the final pre-cadential note. Laughter from class. Then he plays around with another [unidentified] piece (less successfully) and sings along.]

So we went through with the whole concert that way! [Laughter from class] Flatted all the dominants, nobody knew anything. [More laughter from class, HS returns to table].

Bañagale:

It seems that with an instance like flatting the dominants that you are introducing some almost, more jazz qualities to the –

Shapero:

Well, I thought it was – Grieg. Grieg was someone who flattered a lot of dominants. It sounded a little like Grieg. And then we did other tricks. My mother, my mother had some culture group in New York and she said, “Harold, why don’t you do a concert for them.” So we said, fine. We’d get two free trips to New York. They’ll pay for our trip; that’s all we wanted, train fare.

So, we come. We announced the program we were going to play. We were going to play Shostakovich stuff, and I think Prokofiev...routine stuff. So, it got to be concert time, we were going on the train. I said to Lenny, “Did you practice any Prokofiev, did you practice anything?” I said, “No, I didn’t practice any Shostakovich either.” So, we didn’t have any of the Shostakovich that we announced. So I said, “Ok, you do the Prokofiev and I’ll do the Shostakovich and we’ll make it up, ok?” Which is what we did. We went to play this concert and I played fake Shostakovich and he played fake Prokofiev, and it was reviewed in the papers too! And the [laughs], the Shostakovich, they gave us a great review on the Shostakovich.

[15:00]

So, we had – it was high jinks then, you know? Um, I don’t know how it ended. The climax of our performances probably was the – we were invited to play at the opening of the Boston New Museum – Museum of Modern Art? Museum of Contemporary Art? I think that we still have it here. Is it still on Newbury Street somewhere?

Oja:

It is right around the corner from Newbury Street, yes.

Shapero:

Yeah, well...it was a rather gala occasion full of what we used to call “society people” in those days. What do you call them now...? [Laughs] Rich people from Boston! [Laughter from class] And we gave a bang-up concert and for that we did play my Four-Hand Sonata. And uh, it was all a big hit. We played the Stravinsky two-piano concerto, we played the – I’m not sure about this program. I think we played the Hindemith Four-Hand Sonata, which is a delightful Hindemith piece, if you don’t know it. One of the best and most inspired and pleasant pieces... But in that, the Hindemith, there is a third movement. Can everybody hear me? I tend to talk very fast, is it too fast? Ok. There is a third movement that went [sings an excerpt] so, we’re rehearsing, and I said to Lenny, [with a German accent] “*Schwing it!*” You know? That brought Lenny to the floor, because it is what Hindemith was doing, this sort of German-Jazz, *schwing*, you know? [Laughter from class]

Anyway, we played a good concert and our reward was to get taken to the posh-est night club in Boston, in those days, it was called The Fenway. It’s not there anymore. And so,

there we were inside with the fancy people that ran the Museum of Modern Art. And a couple – and Lenny found out that Paul Lukas, who was then a famous movie actor. Paul Lukas, made a – his most famous picture was I think called *Watch on the Rhine* [1943 movie with Bette Davis] He was a good actor. And Lenny decided he would charm him.

So, he went, without being asked, he went to the nightclub piano and he played the Chopin Nocturne, F# Major, which is a gorgeous piece [sings main theme] – heavenly piece. And he played *affettuoso*, and Paul Lukas was absolutely charmed and he came *right over* to his table to be with Lenny. He had the power to affect people that way. Lenny did something *bad* though! Which I thought was bad. Remember we were nineteen and twenty years old, and so Lenny – there was a very attractive couple there, and Lenny, with the husband there, Lenny started to smooch with the wife. Which I thought was very bad taste in front of the husband. [Laughter from class]

And I being very prudish – And so, at one point I got mad and said Lenny, “Cut it out, this is not good manners.” And he reached out and went BANG, like that, and he gave me a whack across the face, which effectively ended our friendship you see. I didn’t appreciate that. But, don’t put it in a book, for God’s sake! [Laughter from class] It’s just that I knew I was getting that smack. Not just because of them but because my Four-Hand Sonata had been a hit.

I mention it because, as I said, I didn’t see any of the homosexuality, but I did notice - even then, and all through his life, he always attached himself to married couples. I don’t know what it was. But, marriage fascinated him. He didn’t understand how people could be together or what it was – a constant fascination.

And you go back, all the back to Rome in ah – [to CJO] you probably know the history so well, with such precision. When did he play for the Pope? He conducted some concerts for the Vatican.

Oja:

I can’t answer that.

[20:00]

Shapero:

I was at the American Academy, was it 1970 or something like that? So, Lenny comes and we said, so, “Let’s go to Lenny’s concerts.” So Lenny got us tickets and we all went. We were still friends you know...and...but he was then the big Leonard Bernstein, so it wasn’t so easy to be friends with a fellow like that. So, um...we went to a party afterwards, and there he was, doing the same thing fifty years later. It was amazing! Well, uh...ok, I’m – don’t let me talk because it has no educational value. [Big laughter from class.]

Bañagale:

Returning to the story with the, uh, Fenway club where he smacked you, you said, um that –

Shapero:

Well, it wasn't a big smack.

Bañagale:

But you thought that perhaps also it was because your four-hand piece had been a success.

Shapero:

Well, we had a lot of mutual jealousy then.

Bañagale:

Were you in competition compositionally or socially?

Shapero:

Well, he hadn't written very much then. He was writing a few pieces for the dancers and not much else. I had not written more, but I was officially interested in composition. Because, um – And he was a performer already and the conducting hadn't started, that was much later.

Bañagale:

What was the general reception of Bernstein amongst the students and faculty in the department? You said he wasn't so much in it, as far as certainly with regards to coming to class, but did people talk about him when he wasn't around?

Shapero:

I don't know that he was liked or disliked. He was noticed of course. He didn't spend much time in the music department he was busy with all kinds of social activities in the dorms. And he spent a lot of time with the theatre people. The, those um, what's the name of your theatre club? It's still the same name. Not the Hasty Pudding, the, the other one. The one that did the, did the Greek plays.

Bañagale:

The Classics Society?

Shapero:

What? Yeah, probably. And he uh, he played during our undergraduate years – we both played for the film. – Harvard had a feature in Sanders Theatre where they played classic films, mostly black and white, I think, always black and white. They were famous films like [*Battleship*] *Potemkin*. And they had us playing the piano along with them to make a silent track. And I did it for a while, and Lenny did it a lot. But when Lenny did it, it was terrific, I have to admit. His um, my *Potemkin* was lousy compared to his. He worked in all kinds of Russian folk songs, and *Petrushka* was in there, it was great. I – I put *Mathis der Maler* in *Potemkin*, which really had no, Hindemith had no point – but he was good at that.

Shelemay:

Do you know where he got the Russian folk songs that he worked in? Was this – any idea?

Shapero:

I guess he probably knew them.... I may be exaggerating too. But a lot of Russian music got in that was very suitable.

Bañagale:

What sorts of other, other social groups or campus groups was Bernstein involved with during those years?

Shapero:

Well, I didn't live here, so I don't know...mostly...classical, the classical group...the movie group...up all night drinkin' beer, talking philosophy, you know! And God knows what else. That was undergraduate life for him, I think that's the way it was. And uh, we also had fun exploring the classics [of music]. Um, we were totally ignorant, of course. Even he was. And, uh – not totally, but pretty bad. And so, every time we found a new theme I call him and say, "Listen to this theme." And it was Schumann or Debussy. "Wow, you know, that's great." And then he'd call back the next day, he said, "Listen to this, Sibelius!" And he found the theme in Sibelius's seventh symphony, he heard that – that – my voice, my singing is terrible, so but, does anybody know Sibelius's seventh symphony? Can you sing the theme? [Sings six notes of the theme] That one. [To Emily Abrams] Sing that.

[25:00]

Emily Abrams:

I think everyone got that! [Laughter]

Shapero:

[Begins singing theme again, continuing until he reaches the top flatted note of the theme] That's the note that killed Lenny. The blue note! Wow! What a B-flat that was! That was the note. So, that's the way we went at the music. The themes that were killing us – brand new. And we were, we were sensitive listeners too. And when we went to a concert it was a disaster for the people that were around us. We didn't shut up for a minute! Yap yap yap yap yap and noise. Oh, God, they'd beg us to leave [laughter].

And then we went up into the – in those days it was all, let's say short playing records. Big, big disks and we went up – and the library was on the third floor – is it still, of Paine, of this building?

Oja:

It's around us here, yeah.

Shapero:

Well, it was on the top floor, and it was very modest and it had records and scores. And we'd pull all the records out and we played them, whatever they had. And that's the first time I heard Schoenberg's stuff. And Lenny, uh. Lenny – either that or we took the records off to his dorm and we were playing the *Heiliger Dankgesang*. Which is Beethoven [opus] 132. Is it? Where's Lewis Lockwood? [Laughter] Uh, it's the – it's the famous movement where Beethoven is cured by God and uh, writes this interminable, miraculous piece in the Lydian mode. And, it was very famous.

And it had a literary fame too. One of the authors that undergraduates read in our time was Aldus Huxley, and the famous book was *Point Counter Point*. And so, there is a chapter of *Point Counter Point* which ends – I think the hero's name is Ransom, if I remember – with Ransom saying to his colleagues: "If you want to put faith in God, listen to this piece." Or something of that sort. And so Lenny and I had to find out right away, you know. And so...we got the record out and sat there playing it. And we started play it – and do any of you know the Lydian *Dankgesang*? The Beethoven piece in question? You've probably never heard it.

Well, it's not fair to speak of it – it's a very long piece, maybe twenty-minute movement. And it's very...it's not dull...but it is slow and it is really serious and it's got this Lydian mode, which is unusual. And it goes on...[sings first six notes opening violin line] like that, at that speed. And of course a couple of jazzy American kids like Lenny and me – Lenny said, "That's just damn boring! It's boring!" [Laughs] So, so, I didn't say yes or no, but, but uh, that was our first reaction to the great theme. But we did, uh, run through all kinds of things and got to know the repertory more and more, and it was sort of thrilling you know. OK.

Bañagale:

Did you listen to music that was not of the classical genre together? I know that one of the things I've read is that Bernstein really enjoyed going to the Briggs & Briggs music store.

Shapero:

Yeah, we did that.

Bañagale:

Where was that located, in the square?

Shapero:

It was up on Mass[achusetts] Avenue, I think. Up – is that Mass. Avenue? Going towards MIT? It was there where, where J. Arthur's clothing was. Is that still there?

[Agreement from the room]

Shapero:

This is so – so old. I'm so jealous of all of you, you've got so much life ahead! Um...up Mass. Avenue, not very far out. And it was a store, it was a, a pretty good – it was a famous music store. And it was run by people who were very intelligent, and you could get rare things by asking them to get it for you. And you'd get...

Bañagale:

What were some of the things that you guys sought out?

Shapero:

Well, I don't know exactly what we found. I just don't remember...but, what, we already had some sheet music. We bought sheet music in those days. And one of Lenny's favorite – Lenny was a very brilliant entertainer at parties. If you had a party and Lenny was there he sooner or later, very sooner, got to the piano and started to play. And he was very entertaining. He played all of these wonderful pieces, you know? One of his favorites was the *Malagueña* by [Ernesto] Lecuona [written in 1927]. You know that? [Sings first line of song.] It's a catchy piece, which I loved too. And he would play it...and uh, and uh...a whole repertory. He wasn't playing things like the Copland Piano Variations yet. They were mostly pops and jazz too, and songs, jazz songs. And maybe a Chopin Nocturne or two...and uh... – I'm trying, trying to think of something before my mind collapses!

[30:00]

Oh, yeah! ... One time we had a party and – you gotta remember, this is when we were seventeen or eighteen years old, and he wasn't the famous person yet. So, some poor,

unfortunate girl had sat down at the piano. She was going to entertain, right? Well. Lenny went over, like a Harpo Marx movie – Lenny went over to the piano bench and took his butt and went WHEECHH! He knocked her right off the stool like that! He didn't ask them to leave, he just did a physical thing and then he took over the way he always did. But he was good, you gotta say that!

Bañagale:

You mentioned, "He wasn't the famous person yet." Did the two of you ever discuss, or did you have a sense for your futures and the paths that you might, might follow?

Shapero:

[Laughs] Well, I don't know whether to tell this one or not!

Shelemay:

Oh, definitely!

Bañagale:

Please do!

Shapero:

As I say, we lived rather close by. Only two or three houses away – a minute. And Lenny didn't know me yet, but Aaron [Copland] got involved because I had an early woodwind trio that Walter Piston said I should write, when I was a student, when I was a freshman. And he'd written a very nice one, Piston had. And so, I mean, we were kids you know. In those days we wrote a piece in a week, you know? Brought back a trio to Walter Piston, and it wasn't very good. It was pretty good, but it was much too long. My teacher, one of my teachers was Nicolas Slonimsky, you ever hear of him? And Nicolas thought the piece was pretty good. And he put it in the mail to Aaron Copland. And Aaron called Nicolas and said, [impersonates Copland] "Hey, that's pretty good you know! You don't expect to get anything good in the mail!" So he, so, so...then Lenny – Aaron already knew Lenny a little bit, and so Lenny. He wrote Lenny this fatal postcard: "Look to your laurels, in your neighborhood there may be another composer." That was me.

It took Lenny five minutes to be over at my house, you see. He wanted to see this piece – and of course he looked at it and he thought it was lousy. So, but we did know each other. And to get back to the original point. And regards – with Aaron, one of the things that we had...Aaron had just written the movie music to *Mice and Men*. I don't know what the dates are. And Boston was the scene of the premiere. MGM. And the whole city was lit up with these big floodlights...and the Lois Theatre [?] in Boston, and Aaron told us we could come. So, off we went. It was quite the gala...we went to a fancy dinner

afterwards. The star of the picture was...was somebody. We went to the Ritz to have supper and we were, and we were paid for. What was her name? Barbara Bel Geddes. [KKS nods.] Was that the girl, are you sure? It's of that era anyways; it was a girl that looked like her. And so it was a high time, you know. And Aaron was very nice to both of us as usual.

So – you're talking about ambitions – I was athletic, Lenny wasn't terribly athletic, but he wasn't bad – I played baseball and tennis every day and I want to play, you know. So I call up Lenny and say, "Let's play catch in the backyard. I want to play baseball." Ok? So I brought my bat and ball and glove. So we're playing catch and soon he started to holler at me, "You're throwing it too hard, you're going to hurt my piano fingers!" You know, it was you know, it was just a joke. So, finally we got tired and we sat down – this is the thing I shouldn't tell, but I'll tell it – so we started talking. "What's your ambition?" So I said, "Well, my ambition is to catch every girl in the world." So he thought and he said, "That's not my ambition. I want everybody in the whole world to love me." So I said - and I always say – he got much further along in his, his ambitions than I did [laughter].

So that, that's, you know? You're talking about seventeen and eighteen year olds. You're much more sophisticated than we were.

Bañagale:

I wish I was a seventeen or eighteen-year-old myself right now! When you were at Harvard in the 1930s, it was a very significant time to be Jewish at Harvard, and I was wondering if you might tell us about some of the challenges that Jews like yourself and Bernstein faced at the institution during that time.

[35:00]

Shapiro:

[Pause] I don't think anybody did bad things to us. But...I would say that Harvard was *pervaded* by anti-Semitism at that point. The music department included. Uh...I felt it all the time and uh, but it didn't...so what...so what if there's a quota, so what? Nobody wants a whole school full of Jews, do you? I mean, if you think about it [laughs] even Brandeis – When it got to be 80 percent Jewish, I thought that was a little too much! Well, but – it wasn't only Harvard, it was the whole country. Everywhere. And, uh, the stereotypical Jew was the little tailor who came out on Delaney Street and grabbed somebody passing by on the sidewalk and pulled him in to make him a suit. Hollywood movies were full of scenes like that! Even – but, little anti-Semitism – I remember with Walter Piston once...he forgot I was Jewish one day. And we were talking about New York composers and uh, uh, somehow it came up how...there were so many Jews, Walter said. He didn't mean it in a mean way. It was literally true. I think if you were not Jewish facing a New York with Marc Blitzstein and Aaron, and David Diamond, and God knows how many...[laughs]. The biggest anti-Semitic guy – not really anti-Semite – was Virgil Thompson, who was very funny...[laughs]. Virgil said [impersonates

Thompson], “I can’t get ahead here! Look it. There’s Aaron Copland, Jew...David Diamond, Jew” [laughs]. Well, that was a little later.

But, Harvard was, um, like the rest of the country. Full of a certain kind of anti-Semitic profile. And um, probably...I was anti-Semitic myself...in that sense.

Bañagale:

How, how so?

Shapero:

Well, I was crazy about girls, like a dummy and I loved blue-eyed blonds, you see? And those were not Jewish types. I didn’t marry one...but, uh...forget this whole thing.
[Laughter from class]

Shelemay:

Could I just ask...when, did your family go to a synagogue when you were a child?

Shapero:

My family were communists.

Shelemay:

Uh huh.

Shapero:

They weren’t card carrying ones.

Shelemay:

Uh huh.

Shapero:

But *The New Masses* used to come in the mail, and uh. I inherited all that stuff...they were Russians after all...and they had grown up in Russia...they came in 1913 or so...Lenny’s parents, I don’t know when they came. There were not born here either, were they?

Oja:

No, they weren't. No.

Shapero:

But they weren't communists. Lenny's parents did go to synagogue. Lenny had synagogue background.

Abrams:

I think that Mr. and Mrs. Ramin have arrived.

Bañagale:

While they're coming in, can I just follow up a little bit – you were talking about political issues with regards to communism. Did Bernstein involve himself at all in any sorts of political issues while he was at Harvard?

Shapero:

Well, he got involved when he...when he uh, directed *The Cradle Will Rock* by Marc Blitzstein which was a frankly...communist...piece... [Ramin comes in] Can I stay, or should I- ?

Bañagale:

Yes, please stay!

Abrams:

Of course, for about half an hour we're going to have the two of you...

Shapero:

I'm so thrilled that you're among the living, Sidney! [Laughter from room]

[Timer starts again: 0:00]

[Indiscernible conversation]

Oja:

So tell us about the band.

Shapero:

That band?

Oja:

Yeah.

Shapero:

Well, it was a very successful group... [inaudible]... a band that played gigs – you know, weddings and things like that. And it had a quite a big... it was quite a big band for that kind of thing – you know, 12, 13 pieces and...

Sid Ramin:

Yes.

Shapero:

And er, we just wrote the... [inaudible]

[Muffled voices as group sets up for joint interview]

Shapero:

I'll just tell this one story about Sid and then I'll get off. Years, years passed, Sid gets to be a famous arranger and God knows and he wrote that immortal piece which was ... did you have a lot of other hits too?

Ramin:

No, that's it.

[Laughter]

Shapero:

Does everyone know his wonderful hit? He wrote a piece with the most wonderful title and the most... called "Music to Watch Girls By." You sing it: I'll sing it with you.

Ramin:

[Sings "Music to Watch Girls By."]

Shapero:

No, the flat note wasn't... [Sings end of line without flat note that SR gave it]

Ramin:

But you know actually I also wrote the Patty Duke theme, and Arthur Lawrence, who was a writer, we were at a party together and some young girl from Oxford had come in, and she loved the Patty Duke theme, and as we were all having dinner she said, “We’d love to sing the Patty Duke theme.” So the whole table started to sing it and I was in ecstasy...

Shapero:

Can you sing this? I don’t know this – I forgot it.

Ramin:

[Sings] “Meet Patty Duke ba ba ba ... in Berkeley Square.” I’ve forgotten the damn thing. However, Arthur said, “What are they singing?” And so here the whole young group knew everything and Arthur was in his own world and didn’t even know what it was – that was kind of funny.

Abrams:

Mr. Ramin, would you mind if I introduced you to the class, briefly?

Ramin:

Please, yes.

Shapero:

Do you want me to get out?

Abrams:

No, we want you to stay. But we must introduce Mr. Ramin, so that everyone knows all about him. So, Sid Ramin grew up in Boston – as you all know – where he studied music at the New England Conservatory and at Boston University.

Shapero:

That’s right.

Abrams:

In 1959 he moved to New York where he worked initially as an arranger on the “The Milton Berle Show.” While working for RCA records, he was hired by Leonard Bernstein to help with the orchestration of *West Side Story*. He later scored the music to accompany the movie, for which he won an Academy Award. Further successful

arranging work on Broadway followed, including more work for Bernstein on *Trouble in Tahiti* and *Jubilee Games*. In the 1960s, he returned to television as music director of “The Patty Duke Show” and “Candid Camera.” He also continued to write movie scores and wrote a number of very successful jingles, including the one that you just sang. Mr. Ramin and his wife Gloria have come to visit us today all the way from New York City, and we are incredibly grateful to you for doing this and delighted to have you both with us. Welcome.
[Applause]

Ramin:

We are flattered and honored, and thank you very much.

Abrams:

I was wondering first whether... um... whether you could perhaps tell us a little bit more about how you two know each other.

Ramin:

Yes – we actually met, er... We both wrote for this little orchestra, Jean Dennis [?], and there’s one story I’m sure Harold probably doesn’t remember at all, because he wrote the good stuff, and it was, he wrote an introduction that was so beautiful and I was just saying, “God, why can’t I write something like that” and Harold said, “I hate it. It sounds like cats on a fence.” That’s exactly what you said. So, he was his own severest critic obviously.

Shapero:

But he was a much better arranger.

Ramin:

No.

Shapero:

He was better at it and he was quicker at it; that was the main thing. Very quick and very good. He was a professional.

Ramin:

But we had a lot of fun together. We... I guess later on I met you in New York several times and er... I’ve often wondered how it would feel to sit next to a man who had won the Prix de Rome, so that was something that was... that’s an honor. And other than that...

Oja:

So when was this work you were doing with the...

Ramin:

When was that?

Oja:

Yeah.

Shapero:

Before your mother was born.

Oja:

You'd be surprised!

[Laughter]

Ramin:

No, I would say it must have been about 65...

[5:00]

... some odd years ago, you know. Er... I think it was at the same time I was coming... when Lenny was here at Harvard. He stayed at a place that we're trying to find. Wigglesworth Hall. Has anybody...

Shelemay:

Yes. We could take you there.

Ramin:

Oh – great. Well, er... I used to come and take my weekly lessons with him, and of course as you know a dollar, in those days, meant a lot more than it means now. And he didn't want to accept anything for my lessons. I said, "No Lenny, I've got to pay you something." So we arrived at a dollar. But I also knew that he loved a Milky Way candy bar. So I would arrive on my lesson and I would take my lesson, and afterwards I would give him the Milky Way and he would devour it. He just loved it. However, one of our lessons fell on Passover and I don't know whether you know, but on Passover that you have to eat certain foods and I said, "Well how can I give Lenny this bar of candy? It's Passover. But I'll bring it anyhow." So I brought it to him and I said, "Lenny, I don't

want to be sacrilegious, but here's the Milky Way." He grabbed it, devoured it, and didn't say a word. So that was the end of that.

Abrams:

I wonder if we could ask you – while we have you both here. I'm interested to follow up with something that we were talking about before with you [to Shapero] about Bernstein's growing interest in jazz. And I'm wondering what your two takes are on where that came from – what kind of... what was jazz for Bernstein and where... what was the beginning of that trajectory for him? What kind of jazz was he listening to... do you have any thoughts on that?

Ramin:

Well. Lenny was interested in jazz and interested in popular music very, very much. And he would sit down and play for example "Smoke Gets in your Eyes," let's say, which was a popular song at that time. And as he was playing, he would get to the bridge, if "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" is in E flat the bridge suddenly goes into B major, and he'd say, "I'm in B major!" you know, as if "you can't be in B major but I know how to play in B major" – that kind of a thing. But he was very much interested in pop music and in jazz, but I think in all fairness, he would be the first to admit it, he... it was pop music, it wasn't jazz. He wasn't a jazz... nick. He didn't... he appreciated pop music. Whereas somebody – I don't want to compare people – but somebody like André Previn can play beautifully in the jazz idiom. Lenny never... couldn't do that, but he appreciated it very, very much, but of course his... but his love of jazz made him write so many wonderful things, and then a jazz player would come along and pick up what he had done and play it, you know, so... You're on. [Gestures to HS]

Shapero:

I was thinking of one day when Sid had become a famous arranger and was... as I say, he was terrific at that, you know. And he could write at a speed at which my eyes would pop out, you know. And he knew his changes, that's the main thing, he knew his jazz harmony. Are you all familiar with jazz harmony? Do they teach that here? [Laughter] OK, well, he knew his... the jazz people call it "changes" these days, not harmony, and they still do it, I don't know... And so Sid was... he knew that stuff all cold, and one day I get a call – I was living in Newton – I get a call from Sid. "You know – I want to study regular classical harmony. Would you teach me a couple of lessons of classical harmony?" I said, "What? You're going to go bored stiff! You know all those chords, you...." Because when you study classical harmony and you know jazz, you get in there and it takes up six months to get out of a triad, you know, anyhow, bee bee bee, little hymn tunes, and you're sitting there with added sixths chords and 9 minus 5's and all these jazzy chords and God knows what else. So anyway, so I made fun of it and said, "Ok! If you wanna come, come!" So, he... I think you took the streetcar all the way from Roxbury...

Ramin:

I'm sure I did.

Shapero:

...and I came in and I say, "Ok, sit down!" So I said, "Ok, take the piece. This is a one, this is a five."

[10:00]

You see jazz – you know – in a certain way, in those days it wasn't so sophisticated as a technical thing. They didn't have functional harmonies... in jazz, the chord was an entity. It had a name. But that didn't tell you how to connect it... there was no functions of dominants and all that stuff. You just found out about it. So Sid listened to this stuff, you know, for a little while, and then he stood up and he said, "That's it?" So I said, "I told ya!" and he went home.

Abrams:

So when do you think that was?

Shapero:

Oh God.

Ramin:

Trying to think.

Shapero:

Forties? '45, '43?

Abrams:

So after college years.

Ramin:

I think, in line with what Harold just said, when Lenny taught, he didn't teach... I mean, he taught his own... when he was teaching me he just taught his own system. A dominant chord was a finishing chord. He didn't... he never used the word dominant. It was a finishing chord: five, one. That's the way it goes. And a sub-dominant was a pre-finishing chord, so he had all his terminology, and he wrote everything down, which I still have, incidentally, in Lenny's writing, you know, pre-finishing chord, dominant... er... equals dominant, er sub-dominant and dominant is dominant 7th. But he had his own

way of er... and was very clear and very valuable. But I used to listen to Harold's arrangements, and boy I was knocked out. He was...

Ramin:

I did that one fancy arrangement, but...

Ramin:

You did *Clair de Lune*, I remember that, which incidentally I still have that.

Shapero:

Yes, I did play a little [inaudible].... You see, the jazz guys didn't know anything about counterpoint. But I was a Harvard student! And I knew about counterpoint, right? So I...

Ramin:

Clair de Lune, you know?

Shapero:

[Sings]

[Class member sings *Clair de Lune*]

Shapero:

Yeah. Take that and run the saxophones in counterpoint [sings] against the tune, which was... and it was pretty clear counterpoint, you know. Sid thought it sounded like real music, you know!

Ramin:

It was wonderful. I still have that score, Harold.

Shapero:

You do?

Ramin:

I do indeed, yes.

Shapero:

Throw it out!

[Laughter]

Ramin:

No.

Shelemay:

Give it to us!

[Laughter]

Bañagale:

You mentioned doing the arrangements. One of the things that we've come across is an arrangement of *Rhapsody in Blue* that Bernstein did, while he was – I believe – a sophomore or a junior in college. Do either of you know anything about that?

Ramin:

No. I just know that... that was one of his favorite... I was there – it sounds funny to say. I was there when his father gave him the money to go in and buy the *Rhapsody in Blue*. It was two dollars and we both went... and so Humermeyer or some store like that. And he bought it.

Shapero:

Homeyer.

Ramin:

Homeyer, yes. And we back to Lenny's place, and he opened it, and at sight he started to play it. Because he was, as you know, a prodigious sight-reader. He could read anything immediately. Then he got to a certain part and he said, "You know? I wonder why Gershwin wrote in this key." And he started to play it in another key! And now that was the first reading. So it was an astounding story, and I was there so I know it was true. It happened. He was an incredible sight-reader. Don't you think so... Harold?

Shapero:

Oh yeah. Big scores too.

Ramin:

Big scores, yes. What he couldn't play he would sing, and what he couldn't play and sing he would stamp. And he would just... to hear him read a new score. I remember once, a score had gotten lost in the mail from Israel, and he was supposed to conduct it. And it was lost, and he only got it the night before it was supposed to be rehearsed and performed. Didn't bat an eye. I guess we all have heard those stories...

Oja:

So when was this *Rhapsody in Blue* moment? Was this in high school, or...?

Ramin:

He was... yes, it must have been in high school, yes.

Oja:

Could it have been earlier? Were you in high school together?

Ramin:

It could have been. It could have been even earlier, yes. I know we had to beg for the two dollars, I know that.

[15:00]

Abrams:

I wonder, um... again, while we have both of you here if I could ask you about, um.... Of course we know Bernstein now as a New York personality, which is one of the reasons why we are doing this class, by the way, to try and situate him again back in Boston where he comes from. I'm wondering what the two of you think – both originally coming from this town – about what he thought about Boston, whether he felt confined, whether he felt it was too small a town for what he wanted to do, whether New York just offered things that Boston just couldn't offer.

Ramin:

What do you think, Harold?

Shapiro:

Well, when he graduated, when he graduated college, I remember, it was a terrible trauma to him, because he had no job and his father was nagging him all the time about making a living, and Sam Bernstein would come – when we were together – Sam would come over to me and say, "What do you want me to do with this boy?" you know, "he's not going to make any money! I mean..." And, er, of course his father made the biggest financial blunder of his life, because he had a chance to become partners with the fellow

who founded Revlon and he decided against it. So... but... Lenny had... So Lenny went to New York and at that point, I mean, I got agonizing postcards in the mail, you know. He was having a terrible time but what he did was latch on as a fellow who wrote the arrangement, the piano arrangements, the sheet music arrangements of pop songs at Witmark or some place like that.

Ramin:

Witmark, yes.

Shapero:

And that job, which was a torture chamber for him, in a way, and didn't pay him very much, was a fantastic proving ground. He learned how the whole sheet music and Tin Pan Alley system worked, you see. And, you know... I don't know how to describe it. It's not so easy to write those arrangements of a pop song. It's not... they're simplified... And so he knew the métier of how to write pop songs and when he started to write musical comedies and all that stuff there he was. He had the whole thing learned. So... and of course he was very good and a very sharp student and all that, so.... That disastrous year, when he was agonizing so turned out to be a blessing in disguise. And that's almost up to... his big breakthrough is '43, isn't it? When he conducts [inaudible]...

Ramin:

Yes, '43.

Shapero:

This was only '41 when he graduated... he's just barely graduated and the breakthrough comes very quickly. I remember sending him off... he used to conduct the... he was invited to conduct the Boston Pops Esplanade concert, I think. Once, anyway. At least once. It was Aaron Copland who discovered him as a conductor. Probably these historians know all about that, right?

Oja:

Well, we want to hear your version, your take on it.

Shapero:

Well, you know it better than I do, because you're accurate and we're just reminiscing. Did we say that Lenny was in the classical club? [To Ramin] I'm taking up your time...

Ramin:

No no no no, please, no.

Shapero:

... in the classical club. And he wrote the, wrote the incidental music for Aristophanes' *The Birds* and I remember being there and Copland.... He invited Aaron to come. And Aaron did come and he saw... The music for *The Birds* was pretty good, too. It was kinda fun and, er... Aaron spotted something completely surprising because Lenny conducted it. And he noticed that he was sort of a born conductor – suddenly realized, you know? And he... and that set him on the conducting thing, and Copland arranged it. Tanglewood was brand new then, and so Aaron got him off to Tanglewood, and Koussevitzsky's class, and that started that whole linkage of his conducting career. That's what it came from: that night. When Aaron spotted him conducting *The Birds*. This was not exactly the question, though...

Abrams:

I was asking you what he felt about Boston. Maybe another way to look at it is looking back, maybe...

Shapero:

About Boston? Well, I don't know. I guess he... there was no job. I don't think he thought Boston was small-time, but...

Ramin:

But he was so friendly here with Koussie.

Shapero:

Well, later, later, but not yet.

Ramin:

Maybe not yet, I guess not.

Shapero:

The Bernstein phenomenon, its a phenomenon you see. That kind of – how do you describe it – that kind of connection with people and desire to please and entertain and... When I read some of the people who wrote Bernstein biographies what struck me was... my old pal from the old days. What a lifetime of work! You know, no amount of celebrity and the money... You know how rich he was at the end? Make a guess, you wouldn't believe. It's colossal – it's like 400, 500 million dollars, the foundation has. Because something like *West Side Story* brought in in initial years \$250,000 a year.

Ramin:

Now you tell me!

[20:00]

[Laughter]

Shapero:

Well, you got some of it! That's the joke. When we were kids, the arrangers.... I always thought the arrangers... we're the arrangers, we sit at the bottom of the pile, economically and we do all the dirty work that counts, you know. And these big shots who get up and sing, you know, in front of an arrangement that we made, and make them sound good but all the... It was not fair. But Bernstein was... he was born to succeed in New York, and all that.

Abrams:

Do you have a thought about that, Mr. Ramin?

Ramin:

Well I think that, yes, he just loved New York and er... But I always felt that he felt that his roots were in Boston somehow. I just had that feeling. His family lived... his mother was still here and, er... I guess... but, er, I think that, er, New York was his town, after a while. It still is, as a matter of fact!

Abrams:

Right.

Ramin:

Amazing, really.

Shapero:

The last time I saw him socially was, er, not so long ago – only about 40 years ago, not 70. I was walking down 57th Street or something like that, and there was Lenny on 57th. So he grabbed me and he says... You know, as you say he had a nostalgia for Boston and... at a certain point, at certain points with all the celebrity and everything else and all the honors and the greatness, um, he got lonely because what happens when you get great and famous, you have a lot of hangers-on, you know, people that you don't care about but that you have to pay attention to. And at certain points he'd get very sick of it, and he'd call up Irving Fine or someone like that. And this time it was me. "Come on, I'm sick to death of all this. Guys, come on, you've got to come up for a drink." And he had a big apartment on Park Avenue. I knew what was going to happen. I didn't want to come.

And, but, ok, he twisted my arm so I went. We were grown-ups by that time. So with the best will in the world he tried to entertain me and be nice – like old times, you know – but he had two secretaries screening his phone calls, and he brought me a drink and then he couldn't get off the phone for the next two hours. I read magazines or something. He just couldn't: the celebrity was so gigantic it fed in. There he was talking on the phone: on and on and on. So finally I just sneaked out. I got down on the sidewalk. No, there was just no point sitting there! He was trying to be nice, but he couldn't get off the phone! So I got down the sidewalk and I said, "You know? You pay a price for that fame." And the price – that was part of the price. But also, as I say, reading his biographies and, um, you... I had a sense every night he's playing something, you know? The performances – for years and years and years and years and years. It goes on and on and on and on. All over the world. And you have to realize that every time there's a performance for a big conductor like that, there's a rehearsal week in front of it. The performance is Saturday, but you've got to rehearse Monday, Tuesday, Friday, Wednesday, you know. True. So every one of those is a colossal amount of work. No matter how big and famous and how glorious it all is, what a lifetime of work. So he deserved everything that happened to him.

Abrams:

This reminds me a bit of an interesting question of [temporary loss of sound – only a few seconds. tape change]... how Bernstein behaved in classes at Harvard. Sometimes he would, you know, he could come across very assertive and self-confident – you know, bang his hand on the table and say what he thought. You er, Mr. Ramin you mentioned, or there's a description in the Humphrey Burton biography of him saying that when there was a threat of confrontation, um, Bernstein would always back down. You said that he "hated scenes" which I thought was very... it's this sort of contradiction that seems to be a very interesting element of Bernstein's personality.

Ramin:

Well, I think the most famous time when I saw Lenny back down, that even may be in the book, was during when he and Jerry Robbins [again, short loss of audio and visual]... And Jerry really hated arguments too, but Jerry couldn't help it, he would always make a disclaimer, he would always get up before the cast and say, "I know I'm going to hurt somebody's feelings, but I can't help it. That's the way I am." But Lenny – I guess it was during the Jet song in *West Side* when somebody... it went [singing], "When you're a jet, bam ba bam ba bam ba ba." And there were "Bam bam bam bam."

[25:00]

There were a couple of answers. Jerry decided to only put in two: "Bam bam." And Lenny said, "No, it's got to be four. I wrote it as four." Jerry said, "No, I've got to take out the two." And I'm sitting there saying, you know, well, scratch it out, put it in, scratch it out, put it in, and finally Lenny got up and stamped out, walked up the aisle to the back of the theater and just was so upset. And I raced after him and said, you know, "Don't let him upset you! Why..." He said, "I hate confrontations," and that's what he

just hated – hated that, and of course as you know, it was cut to two, so if anyone wants to buy two “bam bams” I have them for sale. But, er...

Bañagale:

Did he ever say why he hated confrontations, why he wanted to...

Ramin:

It was a waste of time, I think. It was a waste of time. You know, I think that we people who were lucky enough to meet him and know him and spend some time with him in the early years didn't realize – Harold just mentioned that actually... I was... just the other day I happened to – just for the hell of it – listen to the Shostakovitch Piano Concerto number 2, and it was Lenny conducting and Lenny playing. He was the soloist as well. And as... on the other side of the tape it was... I guess it was number 3 where Lenny conducted and André Previn played – that's a whole different thing. But suddenly I heard this thing, and I said, “Wait a second. That's Lenny playing.” It was fantastic. It was fabulous. And as many years... 70 years sitting next to somebody on the piano bench, I still got the thrill that I couldn't believe that somebody could play this and conduct the orchestra so well and then munch a Milky Way. I mean it just was... the whole thing became so different. I guess that maybe we're just er... I'm just constantly overwhelmed by it, and I never... I don't think a day goes by – and I'm 87 – and I just don't... don't... that I don't think about Lenny in some way. He's just, you know, he was somebody that, er.... And if it sounds like, like, like worshipping somebody so be it. That's the way it was.

Abrams:

Well, on that note I think we're going to take a little break now, so that I can take Mr. Shapero down to his car so that he can get home – he's probably worn out. But then we would love to continue talking with you [to Ramin] after the break.

Ramin:

Ok. What a treat, Harold.

[Applause]

Shapero:

[To Ramin] Do you want to study ordinary harmony?

Ramin:

Please! I never did get it.

Shapero:

You don't need it!

[Conversation about permission forms]

[Harold Shapero taken out of the room]

[Timer starts again: 0:00]

Corinna Campbell:

Well, thank you again, and I think we're just going to continue on with the questions, if that's all right. Just to give another background question, we were wondering, well, we wanted to ask, I mean it's really remarkable that two such successful musical figures as yourself and Bernstein grew up in such close proximity to one another, and we were wondering what idea of...we talked about this a little bit but, your musical futures, how—

Ramin:

First of all, thank you for including me in the same sentence with Lenny. Of course, I met Lenny when I was twelve years old, so that's a long time ago. And there's an old story that I hope I don't bore you with. At that time, kids (I have to call us kids) played in the street, you know, you were just down there, and Lenny said, "I'd like to"... there was another very good friend of mine—of ours—called Eddie Ryack, and if you've heard this story please stop me. Eddie lived...and we were all playing in front of Eddy's house. So we all went into Eddy's living room. And of course the moment Lenny saw the piano it was a magnet, and he sat down and he looked at Eddy and he said, "I'm going to teach you to play 'Good Night Sweetheart.'" So Eddy sat down next to Lenny and it was in the key of C, and it was so easy, so basic. And if you don't know what the song, obviously nobody in this room knows what that song is but it goes [sings], "Good Night Sweetheart, dah da da da dah da." It's as diatonic, it's as simple as anything. Eddie could not play it. And he sat there, and Lenny said, "No, you've got to do this." And he couldn't play it. So finally I, in a burst of bravado said, "May I try the piece and show you how I think it." So Eddie got up and I sat down next to Lenny, and I played it. And Lenny said the immortal words "I think *you* should be my student from now on." And from that day on there was a relationship of teacher and student that never changed throughout the years. Lenny was a born teacher; I was a born listener, and I didn't—my sight-reading was horrible, it still is to this day. So we were so opposite, so the opposite. But when I sat next to him on the piano, I would let everything by rote, Lenny would play the bass part and then he would move up to the treble part, and I would repeat what Lenny showed me. But it was strictly by rote. I had no idea what I was doing, but we would do things like the Carioca, and wonderful songs and...but that's...that relationship really was one that lasted until Lenny passed away. Always, it was always teacher and student. And I

think...that's about it. It sums it up, I guess. As far as his musical talent goes, God it's such a...how can anybody judge that.

Oja:

Do you think, when you were kids, did you have an idea of what would become of your professional—

Ramin:

I knew that he some- Everybody knew, everybody that met Lenny knew that he was going to be famous. And also he was very grand.

[5:00]

He wore a vest. And when we would go to a party together, and he'd meet a girl he would bow. All the things that...were very grand, and so I think that was...I used to belong to a club called The Young Maccabees, and I said to Lenny, "Would you mind speaking to the club." Well, Lenny got up and made a speech that had everybody absolutely so enchanted and the elder people there were saying, this kid of fourteen is speaking like a man of forty. It was so interesting, and so—

[Tech. Support]:

I am so very sorry to interrupt. I think his scarf is creating a noise on the microphone.

Ramin:

Oh, I'm terribly sorry.

[Tech. Support]:

That's okay.

Shelemay:

Before we leave the young years could I just ask a question about Eddie Ryack, because I—the Rybernia language?

Ramin:

Rybernia, yes.

Shelemay:

Do you know any Rybernia?

Ramin:

I know Rybernian, yes. As a matter of fact, I used to try to in my own way say to Lenny, “Couldn’t it be Rabernia?” [Laughs] He said no. I was the interloper; I was the third, but—

Shelemay:

Could you speak some, could you talk to us a little bit about—

Ramin:

I can’t, I’ll tell you why. I can’t, and even Jamie at some point tried to finagle me into... because I promised Lenny I would never ever do it. And we both adhered to that. It was our secret language, and we both stuck to it, and to his dying day he didn’t, and to my dying day I guess I won’t either. It’s just that we were...we promised each other we would never do it, it was based on—I can just give you a hint—it was based on an old speech defect that an aunt of his had. It was a very weird, weird language, and I remember when his brother Burtie was born, and at that time I guess Burtie was just an infant, and there was rubbing alcohol next to Burtie’s bed. I guess they used to, in those days, use it for something. And Lenny would say, “We have to...experiment,” and we would heat the alcohol and it would go up through a tube, and we’d take a cold rag and then the condensation would put it back through. But we would speak Rybernian throughout that whole thing, it was just one of those things.

Oja:

So as adults did you continue to speak Rybernian, or did it get left behind in childhood?

Ramin:

No, what we would do is we would...I would see him after a concert sometimes, I would lean over and I’d give him the password. And he would absolutely... In the midst of everything, he would fall on the floor. Because you’ve just finished a concert, and with everyone there, and I’d just whisper to him. He would absolutely fall down, it was so funny. But that was our little...secret which will remain a secret.

Shelemay:

Was Shirley in on those secrets, his sister Shirley?

Ramin:

No. No.

Campbell:

So it was the three of you.

Ramin:

Yes, it was the three of us and...but I think Lenny and I spoke it more than Eddie somehow, along the way. I don't know why. But ah, my story about Shirley is when Lenny and I snuck into her bedroom, 'cause Lenny said if you put somebody's finger while they're sleeping in a glass of water, they will then wet the bed. So Shirley was sleeping [laughs] and we did that. I don't think it worked.

Campbell:

Uh, just going back to the speech that you mentioned a little while ago, do you remember what that was on, when he was talking to the Young Maccabees?

Ramin:

I don't. I wish I did, but I don't. It ...I'm sure it had some sort of other religious content to it, because Lenny was...you know.

[10:00]

His father, as you may know, was the Vice President of the Mishkan Tefila Temple in Roxbury, and so...he was...sort of...religious. But Lenny was not... and the funny thing is that Lenny's father, even though he was the vice president of the Temple, was not really a religious man. I remember during those famous holidays that I mentioned earlier, Passover, I happened to go into the room and everyone was eating on the holiest day of the year when you're supposed to fast. So obviously they were...you know...that kind of thing.

Shelemay:

Did they sing *Dayenu* at the Seder, do you remember? Did you attend any of the Bernstein's Seders?

Ramin:

No, I never did.

Shelemay:

OK, I was just curious if they sang *Dayenu*, because that's on the list in some of his papers.

Ramin:

No, I never...I never.

Campbell:

I wanted to go back to some of the things you were saying earlier about your experiences as his student—

Ramin:

Yes.

Campbell:

—and you talked a little bit about the harmony, and his own system that he used to teach, and if you could maybe explain a little bit more about that.

Ramin:

Well, there's really not too much to explain, um, except that he had his own name for the chords. Everybody in this room knows that when they hear a dominant seventh chord that there's usually the tonic waiting for it to resolve. That's our, our music. So Lenny called it a finishing chord because that's what it was. He didn't call it—now I'm not sure at that point whether he knew—I'm sure he knew that it was called the dominant chord, but he preferred to call it the finishing chord. And so, he just had his own names for some of the, some of the, you could call them rules, I suppose, but I wish I could elaborate more on that for you, it's just not...

Abrams:

Can I ask, do you think that any of the methods that he was teaching you were things that he learned from his harmony teachers or music teachers?

Ramin:

Oh, I don't think so.

Abrams:

These are just things he worked out for himself.

Ramin:

I think it was instinctive. Just, yes, I don't... Because his music at that time, I don't know. It was just very, very simple. I wish I could fill you in more but...

Campbell:

We were also wondering, I mean, dance is such a huge part of Bernstein's later life, and we were wondering how and at what point that kind of filtered in to his, kind of, field of vision, maybe.

Ramin:

Well, he loved to dance himself, and as I said, he was...he would tell me how to ask a girl to dance graciously. The words were, "Are you dancing?" Okay, so, of course he got a lot of wise-apple answers, you know, throughout the years. But he did love to dance, and he was very good at it. But as far, I think, I guess it was his association with Jerry Robbins that uh really he...

Campbell:

Did he...so he didn't take lessons or anything at any point, or—

Ramin:

No. Oh no, no.

Campbell:

OK.

Ramin:

Not that I know of, yes.

Campbell:

Sure. We were also wondering about the Garrison Grammar School, and we know very little about the Garrison Grammar School, and so we were wondering if you could tell us something about it in general, and also about music there.

Ramin:

Yes. Well, it was the William Lloyd Garrison School, and it was an elementary school, which...Lenny got so fed up with...the school, when he had the opportunity to go to Boston Latin School, then he just grabbed it, and he went to Boston Latin School. I, on the other hand, have the...I...I wasn't that smart, because you had to be really, really smart, and I, I couldn't cut it, and so I went to Roxbury Memorial High School. But Lenny and I would always meet. Of course, Lenny was always a year ahead of me in any event, so with the...

[15:00]

...but as far as Latin School goes, he just loved it. And he would meet me after school and I would, and he would do all my algebra problems for me because I was terrible at

math and he would do them so effortlessly. Another thing that I think was interesting was when his father bought him a typewriter, and he sat down at the typewriter and he studied the keys, and he just whizzed through, almost like he had taken a course in touch-typing. It was amazing. He just somehow had that mind where he just...he studied it. He looked at it for about two or three minutes and then went to work at it.

Bañagale:

When was that when he got his first typewriter, do you know?

Ramin:

I guess it was his first typewriter.

Bañagale:

Do you know when this was?

Ramin:

Oh, when that was? Well, it was during his high school years, so that would have been 19...early 1930s.

Campbell:

Also, we were wondering, how central was George Gershwin to you and Bernstein both growing up, and as you entered your careers in music.

Ramin:

That's a big – and you've hit upon something that I think was the biggest link that Lenny and I had. We both loved Gershwin. We adored Gershwin, we adored the Three Preludes, we adored *Rhapsody* obviously, we loved the Second Rhapsody, which is the *Rhapsody in Rivets*, and we just... And we both shared that love for Gershwin, and especially the *Rhapsody*. The *Rhapsody* became something that we just vicariously loved, just love it. And, there's not much further to tell except that I'm sure that it influenced him a great, great deal. He would also, he would always point out how Gershwin found the seventh in a chord, which was the basis of all blues, and he would sort of analyze it. He'd say, "You know, he could have gone here, but he went there because it was the seventh," so he was very, very much into that. And, there's not much else to tell, except that Gershwin I'm sure was his favorite composer, even though he loved Cole Porter and all the wonderful composers at the time. But Gershwin was something, something special. And, that's about it.

[Indiscernible conversation]

Ramin:

Oh, yes. My wife just mentioned something to me which I had forgotten. I told her this story many, many years ago. In the *Rhapsody in Blue*, there's a chord that's a D flat pregnant ninth, whatever you want to call it. And, Lenny and I were in the balcony watching Sanromá perform *Rhapsody in Blue* with the Boston Symphony, and as we got closer and closer to that chord, we were both waiting for it, and Sanromá played it and Lenny grabbed my knees, my thighs, and squeezed them during that chord, I couldn't walk afterwards! [Laughs] We got closer to that chord, and as it arrived he just pounced on my thighs, so that's the famous chord. Every time I hear that now I [laughs].

Oja:

You mentioned before, being with him when he purchased the sheet music, but did you have the Whiteman recording before that, or had you heard it on the radio?

Ramin:

No, we hadn't heard anything. Oh, well I'm not sure. He must have heard something, yes. Of course he heard something.

[20:00]

Oja:

Yeah. So the Whiteman recording isn't the one that you listened to together—

Ramin:

No, I don't think so. Whiteman, as you know, was not a great conductor, but he sure did know how to pick a repertoire, that's for sure.

Oja:

That's right.

Campbell:

I guess, going off on the listening a little bit more, you talked a little bit earlier about some of the tunes that you would listen to together: "Smoke Gets in your Eyes," and this idea of kind of pop jazz in a way. I was wondering if you could say some other things that the two of you listened to together that made a particular impression.

Ramin:

Yes, for example “Mine,” from *Let ‘Em Eat Cake*...No, that’s from *Of Thee I Sing*, isn’t it? And of course, there was that countermelody to it [sings] the lyric is, I guess [sings “Mine....”] We used to switch around, he’d sing and I’d sing the counter, and we used to love that tune. And he loved, he loved...he just loved Gershwin in all forms, especially his pop stuff, it was wonderful. And I don’t know much else to say about that; I wish I could...

Campbell:

I guess we’re wondering also, what was on the radio? What was really popular during that time?

Ramin:

Yes. Well, there was a movie called *Flying Down to Rio* and of course it had a lot of pop stuff in it. He liked all that, all those Hollywood show tunes very, very much. You know, the amazing thing is that when I listen to Lenny’s pop tunes now, I didn’t realize then how sophisticated they really are. Now that I’ve grown older, and I’ve even arranged them many, many times, now I’m beginning to have the full impact of what I was privy to, I mean its wonderful, wonderful harmonies. And how he just...for pop tunes...he was way ahead of his time, I think.

Campbell:

And another question: did you and Bernstein remain close throughout your growing up, or was there a point at which you lost contact?

Ramin:

No, we were always...we never lost contact. We were very, very close as kids. You know, when you’re young and you make friends, those are really friends. And you don’t have much else to do, and you’re together a lot. And you become very, very close, and so as the years went by, when Gloria and I were in Paris, my first thought was to go in and buy him a necktie. We bought him a blue polka dot necktie. And then we walked into the Koussevitzky Publishing Company there and I saw all sorts of wonderful scores that I knew Lenny would probably love to have, so I spent my last dime on buying whatever I could. And I brought them back for Lenny, and he obviously was so touched and he loved them. But that’s the kind of...we never lost touch, and I know that whenever I would go to a rehearsal or something, I would sneak into the Philharmonic, watch him rehearse, sometimes he’d walk out on stage and you could see he was thinking of something, he’d be snapping his fingers. Suddenly he’d look down and he’d see me, and his eyes would light up. It was always a wonderful moment when we got to see each other. Then, of course when I began to become a little well known myself, he would...I think he got great pleasure out of the things that I did.

[25:00]

Pop tunes that he would hear that I had arranged and he kind of liked what he heard, so it was a relationship that, that's hard to explain. So here I am trying to explain it.

Campbell:

I was wondering also, just if there's anything either of you would like to say, any particular memories that stick out in your mind.

Ramin:

Well, one thing that, of course Gloria, you know, we've been married for a long, long time, and Lenny knew Gloria all that time. I think, we have some wonderful photographs at Tanglewood, and I was looking at them just the other day because my son bought me a scanner, and so I can take slides and put them into my scanner and print them, and email them, and there are some wonderful ones of Lenny and Gloria, and Lenny looks exactly, I should say, if you didn't know it was Lenny, it's his son Alexander. I don't know whether you know Alexander. It's almost as if it's Alexander with Gloria. But we have those wonderful photographs. Lenny, as you know (maybe you don't know) loved to drive fast. And so Gloria and I had a new convertible, and we were at Tanglewood, and Lenny said, "Follow me." And he got into his car—

Gloria Ramin:

His convertible—

Ramin:

His convertible. And I was in my convertible. He started to race through some of those roads in Tanglewood, in Lennox, or wherever the heck it is, and it was hair-raising because he just drove so fast. And foolishly really...

Gloria Ramin:

But we had a good time in Israel with him.

Ramin:

Oh, yes, we had a great time in Israel with him. I guess we went there for the 50th anniversary of the Israeli Symphony. He had written *Jubilee Games*. I hope I don't offend anyone here, but he used to call *Jubilee Games* "Jew Games." So, that was his joke. But I orchestrated the second movement for him, and he said, "We have to go to Israel to hear this," and so we did, and we had a great time. And, is there anything you want to add to that, that's it?

Gloria Ramin:

No. We had a great time!

Shelemay:

What year was it, do you remember?

Gloria Ramin:

1977. Yes, in the seventies.

Oja:

So, when were the two of you married, if you don't mind my asking?

Gloria Ramin:

Well, we've been married for 57 years.

[Indiscernible responses]

Ramin:

We had a terrific time in Israel. I think, Lenny was going to conduct, which he did, and as – he loved to line his jacket with a red lining for some reason. So Lenny put on his jacket with the red lining. And the three of us went to the concert hall. And the guard wouldn't let us in. The guard said, "No, sorry. You can't get in." Lenny said, "But we have to get in," and the guard said, "No, you can't get in." So Lenny got up, opened his jacket with the red lining and he says, "I'm the conductor, you asshole." [Laughter]

Shelemay:

Did Leonard Bernstein speak any Hebrew?

Ramin:

Oh, yes. He spoke fluent Hebrew. Fluent Hebrew, as well as fluent German, because you know, and... German, Italian, French.

[30:00]

French was... And I think if anybody has the opportunity you ought to listen to this new eight-part set came out. As you know, Leonard recorded all the Mahler symphonies, and this new set has him rehearsing with the orchestra in German. And you know, and explaining what he wants... It's tough enough explaining to a musician what you want anyways, but to do it in German! And when we were in Italy, it was Italian to the orchestra, never English. And so he was...a linguist of the highest order.

Oja:

So, did he learn these languages in childhood, did high school...

Ramin:

I guess he...I guess he learned them in both.

Oja:

What about Hebrew? Do you know how far back?

Ramin:

Well, he went to Hebrew School. That was in Boston, yes, of course.

Shelemay:

Did they speak Yiddish at home also?

Ramin:

I don't think so. I don't think so, no. Not that I know.

Shelemay:

Do you know if Sam and Jennie spoke Russian together at all?

Ramin:

I don't know. You know, Lenny's father was a rather foreboding man, and he was difficult for me to be with because he was so stern. And so I avoided him. On the other hand, his mother was an outgoing, wonderful... I remember Lenny was driving. He had... at one point the family had a convertible, but at that point there was something called a rumble seat in the back where you sat. There was no roof, but you sat in the rumble seat. I was in the rumble seat, and Lenny's mother was driving. And Lenny sat next to her. And there was a song called "Lazy Bones" [sings "Lazy Bones..."] and when Lenny was singing it in the front with that cackley, cackley voice, he was singing it to his mother, we were driving along, and we came to a certain point, he said, "By Crackey!" but the way he said it he scared his mother so much as she was driving, she was startled, and I was in the rumble seat, I was almost thrown out of the rumble seat. [Laughs] She got so angry. But that was Lenny and his mother. They were very, very close. Wonderful woman. But his father was very stern, and of course everybody in this room knows the famous remark, he said, "How was I to know my son was going to be Leonard Bernstein?" But he didn't know.

Campbell:

When do you think he figured it out?

Ramin:

I think he figured it out right after 1943 when Lenny got up, and suddenly he was on the front page of the *Times*, and... You know, it's interesting. If you're a strong person you're a strong person, and Lenny was a very strong person when it came to doing things. Much of his work, for example there's a great recording of *Candide*, which Lenny conducted, but Lenny had a bad case of the flu. Now to get up and conduct if you're feeling good is OK, but he was really out of it. But, his determination, we can all learn from that. Remember that really. Nothing deterred him. I remember standing on a street corner with him when he was first accepted into Harvard. I remember the street. And we were standing there, and I said, "Gee Lenny, you're going to Harvard." And he said, "Yes, and I'm going to develop a Harvard accent." And he did. Maybe you don't think that there's a Harvard accent, but coming from Boston, there was.

[35:00]

It was a very educated, wonderful accent, which I don't have. But he had it. It's, I guess people would call it a cultured accent today. But I remember him standing on the street, saying, "That's what I'm gonna do. I'm going to Harvard," and he zoomed in on it.

Oja:

Is this a street in Roxbury?

Ramin:

In Roxbury.

Oja:

What street, do you recall?

Ramin:

It began with a W, but I can't remember the name of the street. Yes, we would...

Shelemay:

Just taking you back again to the Garrison School, were there music classes there, do you remember?

Ramin:

Uh...yes there were. There was a school orchestra. There was a school orchestra. Although I think... When I went to Memorial High School, there was an orchestra there, and Lenny would come on by. I don't think he ever did anything with the orchestra. He was interested, but—

Shelemay:

Did you go to Garrison also?

Ramin:

I went to Garrison. I was a year behind Lenny.

Bañagale:

Lenny's first performance as a pianist, from what I've read, was the Greig Piano Concerto that he played with the Boston Public School that he played with the orchestra. Were you there?

Ramin:

I was there.

Bañagale:

Can you tell us anything that you remember about that or...

Ramin:

Well, I just remember he was in the wings, waiting to go on, I was standing next to him, and he...one of the few times I've seen Lenny a little bit nervous, he put his hands up to his face and [demonstrates] blew on them before he went out to play. But you're right. The Greig, I had forgotten all about that.

Campbell:

As far as his role as an educator, which played such an important role in his later life, and your being such an important early student for him, I was wondering if you could comment on how those two are related, or if there are things you noticed in his later broadcasts...

Ramin:

Well, I think I mentioned before that he was just a great teacher. He loved to teach, and he was just very demonstrative. He would kiss people; he was just that way. He just loved people and he loved to...but as far as his...we once went to a theater called the Metropolitan Theater, it may still be there. It was on Washington Street, I think. And as

we walked into the theater, in the lobby there was a piano. And so Lenny immediately ran over to the piano, not noticing that there was a velvet cord around the piano so that nobody ought to touch the piano. Lenny just stepped over the cord and sat down at the piano and started to play. And the manager of the theater got very angry and chased Lenny away. But it was just that magnet of whenever he saw a piano. Whenever we went to a party, he would eye the room. If there was a piano, that was it. Which was similar to Gershwin in a way, I understand. I didn't know Gershwin, obviously, but that piano was a magnet for them all.

Shelemay:

I think the next class is hovering outside the doors. So only because we're forced to stop...

Ramin:

Well, I thank you very, very much.

Shelemay:

We thank you very much.

[Applause]