

Stephen Tramontozzi Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives
50 Oak Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted June 8 and 9, 2016
Tessa Updike, Interviewer

UPDIKE

Could you describe him as a person?

TRAMONTOZZI

being a musician, but upon returning from the service he found that it was up and down and not secure. A _____ to get a more secure living. So they were very proud, and very supportive, and they even visited me there.

UPDIKE So what was it like when you got to Eastman? How was it different from Boston, and Arlington?

TRAMONTOZZI

itself is part of the University of Rochester, but the main university is on what they call the River Campus, and the Eastman School actually is downtown separate from the River Campus. So you stayed in dorms that were a couple blocks away, and then when the winters got really cold and snowy it was very conducive to studying and practicing. They had great facilities there were numerous practice rooms, great recording studios, the great Sibley Music Library, a wonderful concert hall to play in and academics were somewhat challenging for me. Although I did manage to get into some of the advanced courses mainly because when I decided I was going to be a score. My interest was with Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, Copland I was so attracted to newer music and did not connect so much with the Romantics at that time.

Of course I enjoyed playing Beethoven and Mozart, so I would get recordings and listen to them over and over, and follow the scores and mark them up try to analyze things. I met this

TRAMONTOZZI I did. He was one of the instructors at the New England Conservatory of Music, along with Henry Portnoi, who was principal of the Boston Symphony at that time.

UPDIKE And what was it like being back in Boston?

TRAMONTOZZI Actually, at the end of my second year I had met a woman and got married. So I was moving back to Boston, but I was not moving back in with my parents I was on my own. Not only was I studying, but I was also looking for freelance work. I did OK, and my wife at the time was also working she was a so apartment living, and getting a hand-me- that kind of thing.

UPDIKE And what was Larry like as a person, and as a teacher? How was his teaching style different from Oscar Zimmerman?

TRAMONTOZZI Larry was very talented and in fact got his job with the Boston Symphony even before he had graduated from the New England Conservatory. He was so musical, and held really gave me a lot of fundamental concepts of how to be a musician. Things like: technique serves the music. What do you want it to sound like? What is the musical demand of a given passage or piece? Is the fingering serving that moment? Is the bowing serving that musical need? That kind of thing. He gave me a lot of technical concepts to think about and to hold as I developed my musicianship. He was very generous with his time, he was very friendly. You felt like he was your buddy.

TRAMONTOZZI A few times. I had listened to the Boston Symphony quite a few times when I was in high school

Thomas was Principal Associate Director, or something like that, and was responsible for certain programs, including what was then called the Spectrum Concert Series, which were concerts that were innovative in their programming. Maybe one concert was about multiple orchestras pieces that had more than one group. Maybe they included music of composers of the day, like Steve Reich. I was able to go to these concerts because I was invited by Bob Olson, who was my teacher in high school.

Larry was good about playing recitals from time to time, and I was very good about going to those, and was very inspired by them. I would actually go and listen to the tapes of those recitals over and over again.

UPDIKE What sort of repertoire would he play for his recitals?

TRAMONTOZZI He did a combination of standard solo bass rep at the time, which would be Bottesini, and what we call the Paganini *Moses* Variations. Things that Gary Karr, who was a well-known soloist of the day, would perform. Larry would play contemporary music too, so he would find these obscure contemporary pieces. And the third thing he liked to do was transcribe music, so he for instance would transcribe the Schumann *Fantasy Pieces* nobody had done TJETBT/F4 12 Tf1

answered that audition call. I knew the concert master of that orchestra – he was a member of the Boston Symphony, and was a Brazilian who had come to the New England Conservatory to study. He eventually got a job in the Boston Symphony, but now he was being asked by the music director Eleazar de Carvalho to come back to his homeland and lead the string section.

So I auditioned for this orchestra, and was offered the job as principal along with maybe 14 other musicians who auditioned from New York and Boston – in fact, one good friend of mine another bass player. We all went down to Brazil in February of that year and joined this fledgling orchestra. It was really an adventure – it was kind of crazy. We rehearsed and played a few concerts, and then we were to go on a tour of Brazil with these programs. We started out in Manaus, which is in the heart of the Amazon house/concert hall that was built by the rubber barons. So we played a concert there, and then we went to Belém, which is at the mouth of the Amazon, and Fortaleza, and Natal, Joao Pessoa, Recife, and eventually to Rio and back to São Paulo. It was a terrific experience because I got to see more of Brazil than most Brazilians. And getting experience too, as an orchestra musician not only contributing musically, but also with my leadership, because I was now principal. I was dealing with a Hungarian guy, a Venezuelan, and a couple of Brazilians. It was a trip – we had a blast.

UPDIKE Do you have any stories from touring in Brazil that you could share?

TRAMONTOZZI Oh, my God, yeah. We were in Belém, and we were going to Fortaleza. We were flying in two groups on VASP Airlines. They were using jets that were hand-me-downs from the national Varig Airlines of Brazil, who were using hand-me-downs from, say, United. So our plane took off, and we landed in Fortaleza, and we all checked into our rooms. Hours passed, and the other plane never arrived. We later heard that as the second plane took off, the rudder got clipped by some wires, and the plane had only enough control to turn and re-land. So the second night, and we had to quickly assemble chamber music, and play chamber music for the concert. They arrived the next day, and we all got on a plane and flew to Salvador, which is the capital of Bahia. We played our concert there in a beautiful concert hall made out of Jacarandá which has an incredible sound. After that concert we left the next day (a lot of people are nervous about flying now) Bahia

Later we find out the pilot wanted to show us the view! And then another time we were flying from one city to another and we are all seated on board. All of a sudden the ground crew is bringing on suitcase after suitcase and lining them up and putting them in the aisle, so you can walk in the aisle. We find out the reason was because we were on this plane as well as a soccer team. So there was just so much equipment in the bottom of the plane that they had to put the suitcases in the aisle
tour stories.

Opera played in the Symphony, because the Symphony and the Opera had to share the same venue the Opera House. The Symphony in fact was not a full-time job it was only 9 months, and the Opera was a 3

UPDIKE

one-on-one interaction with musicians to hand this down from generation to generation. I really felt strongly about that.

UPDIKE And what was it like to come back to the Conservatory as a teacher?

TRAMONTOZZI I really had to understand the requirements that the students had. I had to understand your obligations regarding procedure and that kind of thing. But I think it was pretty smooth.

UPDIKE Were there changes that you made in the curriculum when you started?

TRAMONTOZZI Yes, I was asked to give input on the requirements for auditions for both -of-the-year juries.

UPDIKE Could you describe some of the changes that you made?

TRAMONTOZZI An important activity of mine as a faculty member is the entrance

important to understand the potential of a student. My ability to see their potential was enhanced by experience. So I understood that every student that comes to audition is a mixed bag of various strengths and weaknesses depending on their instruction and their life experiences. I would really run down a list

in their technique, and in their musical sensibilities and knowledge. So when I made requirements, I wanted to make sure the requirements were graduated an emphasis was put on Baroque music, and th

UPDIKE And how would you describe your teaching style at that time? Did you draw from experiences that you had with your own teachers? Molding yourself into the teacher that you would have wanted?

TRAMONTOZZI I felt like I was needing to get to know the person. In order for me to share what I have with them, I need to communicate with them, and avail myself of all of the skills of communication verbal, physical gestures, singing, and playing. I need to understand how that person thinks, and how they react to what I offer them. In other words, if I say something to them, I want them to give me feedback

everybody, because not everyone gets it that way. I have to find a multiplicity of ways to communicate one idea with many different people. That was a big deal for me back then.

I feel like I can get to that place with a person quicker now. There are some people that learn better from imitation initially they get a lot from the sensations of playing so I actually join

I do that sometimes. I

Hopefully I can still play things that they need to work on! I think that I am being educated at the same time. I love the way different people think differently. I remember that if you only do something a certain way, you box yourself in. You set yourself a limit. For instance, I can have a student come in and they will have fingered something a different way, and ave Iwiffe

Or

how your teaching has changed over the past 30 years?

TRAMONTOZZI I think my teaching has benefited from experience, from teaching many different kinds of people at various levels, and gaining the experience about what works what is more effective and what is not as effective, and helping them. So now when I teach I feel like I know the appropriate questions right away. What I mean by that is

you can get

bow arm

that we can explore and eliminate, and eventually come to the solution of their particular issue. So I get to that place much quicker now because of experience.

with them, or even just their body language. If I listen to that, that may be key to the real problem, or the real solution. I think

inspiration, their example

sometimes life coach. You have to reflect for them, you have to discipline them sometimes.

ma

equipment to deal with stools and all that. I want to give them an hour and 15 minutes sometimes more

your development, because what can happen

forget to hear it in their head. When the pianist plays, they
while playing

UPDIKE Do you do coachings with your students and the pianists?

TRAMONTOZZI , because you want to address the whole music, and the
pianist has to play the phrase in the correct style so that it complements the solo part. Or if
the music, that is attended to so it all has integrity. So

UPDIKE So typically during the school year you spend an hour and a half every
week with each student?

TRAMONTOZZI An hour

UPDIKE

TRAMONTOZZI I did. One of the more memorable performances was when Menahem Pressler came. He would come quite often, almost every year, for a number of years. I joined *Trout Quintet*. In some ways it was a revelation, because Pressler seemed so connected to the style of Schubert, being from that part of the world and very connected to older generation musicians who are very connected to that kind of stuff. So it was a very rewarding and satisfying performance.

UPDIKE And did you perform in any of the music marathons that they used to do?

TRAMONTOZZI As a student I did. There was a Bach marathon, and it was wild! In fact, I think it was scheduled a couple of years. You just signed up to perform a particular piece of Bach, and you were assigned a time and a venue a particular classroom, or a hallway. I remember performing a portion of one of the Bach suites for cello. That was wild, it was like a Bach convention. You could go to one room and listen, and then go to another room and listen to somebody else.

UPDIKE And it was morning to nighttime?

TRAMONTOZZI Exactly. 12 hour Bach.

UPDIKE And is Conservatory orchestra as a soloist? I know that we have this piece here that you played with the orchestra Mozart and Bruch as a faculty member.

TRAMONTOZZI I had met Alexander Schneider, who was a violinist with the Budapest *Kol Nidrei* by

and I did know it. So when the opportunity came up to play with the Conservatory orchestra as a faculty member soloist I chose that piece. I really feel a con play it at some memorial services at various temples in San Francisco, and I think the soulfulness of that piece is well brought out on the double bass the kind of deep tone.

Hermann le Roux of the voice faculty he and I enjoyed occasional conversations in the hallway, and we came up with the idea of doing something together. I knew of the Mozart concert aria called *Per questa bella mano*, K. 612 for bass baritone and double bass obbligato, so we decided to progra

UPDIKE

Center from the Sunset District. Could you talk a little bit about the move to Oak Street, and whether in your opinion, it changed the school, and how.

TRAMONTOZZI I can recall going to exciting meetings where plans were presented to us floorplans and architectural drawings. It was all very exciting, and we all got to sort of make our wish list about what we wanted for the school. And then when the school did move I was very much impressed by the impressive structure of this building or combination of buildings

UPDIKE

over the years at the Symphony, or in other places? Maybe some of the different styles or techniques between different conductors?

TRAMONTOZZI When I got in the orchestra, the music director was forever be grateful to Edo de Waart for giving me the job at the Symphony.

UPDIKE Did you have your audition with him?

TRAMONTOZZI At that time, the procedure was that you played a preliminary round of solo and orchestral selections, and that was behind a screen and a committee of ten voted. If you got six or more votes you were passed on to the final round. The final round was not behind a screen, but there was in the audience the same committee, and the conductor the music

another set of orchestral excerpts, and after that Edo de Waart came up on stage and said he

UPDIKE Lay it down?

TRAMONTOZZI Lay it down, and play with sticks on the portion of the strings from the bridge to the tailpiece. So on the other side of the bridge are these shorts parts of string, and they made this delightful pitched thumping sound.

UPDIKE Was Lou Harrison involved in the recording?

TRAMONTOZZI He was there, and he was there at all rehearsals and during the recording, and gave us notes (no pun intended). What was cool was that he came up to me, and he had made me these sticks they were these short drum sticks and he had wrapped them in a graduated manner with this medical tape. I had tried many other kinds of sticks wood sticks, plastic sounded fabulous. I still have those sticks.

And then I got a call to do a recording of all f *Madrigals*, with percussion and voice and double bass. George Crumb was there this was up in Chico, at Cal State. We were there a whole week, and it was really, really intense because the music is really tricky and difficult, and the ensemble is very touchy. But it came off really, really well and George Crumb was really fun to work with. He really knew what he wanted, but he was very, very supportive of us. In fact, I remember in one session the percussion sound we were recording in a giant rehearsal room, and it was bleeding into the other microphones that were around the room. Finally somebody came up with the idea of throwing a big blanket over a cage, and then the percussion was playing under a big blanket. You do whatever you need to do to make it work.

At the Symphony, it used to be that the music director, who was going to lead the orchestra in recordings, would bring with him his contract with a recording company. So Philips, the Dutch company, came in with Edo de Waart, and they had their way of setting up the microphones and having us seated on the stage. They wanted it all done during extra sessions in other words, not in live performance. I think that was the beginning of digital recording, and then when you heard those recordings you got a sense of how they wanted the sound the kind of space that you wanted to feel you were in. The depth and width. When Blomstedt came, he brought his contract

on stage, because we were too far to one side of the room. They wanted us in the geographic center of the hall, so they built out an extension of the stage over the seats the first twenty rows. So the whole orchestra moved to the center of the hall, and they had these really tall

where we play, and the kind of feedback we get from the walls and the floor, and here we are

now playing in the middle of the room, playing on plywood plywood that was a little spongy not as solid as we were used to. And I recall it made it much more difficult to play together with sections that were on the other side of the stage so say, for the cello/bass section to play with the violins, or even with some of the winds.

UPDIKE Is that because of the vibration and the echo in the space?

TRAMONTOZZI There was so much more reverberance and echo. It was difficult playing Hindemith together, which is more intricate counterpoint. And then when Michael Tilson Thomas became music director, the orchestra secured a contract with Sony. Initially we recorded on stage in our normal positions, and they set up their mics the way they did. These were done in extra sessions outside of concerts. And then they decided they wanted the feel of the energy of a live performance, so what they did was they initiated this procedure of recording every concert, with all the mics on stage and above and announcing to the audience beforehand

and I think that was very successful. And then classical recordings the market just dwindled for the large companies, so they were less likely to record orchestras. The Symphony decided to develop their own media company, and so now the orchestra records itself. It sets the projects, the dates, the artists, the rep, and record them, and they get edited and released on the San

performance.

UPDIKE And is it the music director who approves the final performance that is released in the recording?

TRAMONTOZZI

UPDIKE I know that you told some stories from touring in Brazil. Do you have stories from other the Symphony the first time, maybe?

TRAMONTOZZI

country national tour, and our first stop was Boulder, Colorado. We got to Boulder, and we had most of the day off, and that night was the concert. I be *Fifth Symphony* of the mountains surrounding the area. They had put us up in a resort, so someone organized this

great fun. That night, when we had to go to the hall to perform, I could barely move my fingers they were so stiff and sore. And this was Mahler *Five* it has one of the busiest and most difficult bass parts of Mahler symphonies. So you learn to do those kinds of things on your day off!

Wart was still the music director, and a bunch of us wanted to form a softball team. We called ourselves the Symphomaniacs. We would challenge various orchestras in the cities that we were in in Phoenix, we played the Phoenix Symphony, and that was in 100 degree weather. But here we are in New York City, and we challenged the New York Philharmonic to a game of softball. The game was scheduled to be played in Central Park, and their music director was going to pitch that was Zubin Mehta. Edo was pitching for us. It was a lot of fun I remember that day hitting two home runs off of Zubin Meh game.

When Herbert Blomstedt was music director, we were doing a tour of Europe. This was shortly after the Velvet Revolution, when the Eastern Bloc never been to Budapest. We were bussed to Pest, and we get to this concert hall, and one of the pieces we were doing on tour was Richard St *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In every city we had been to, there was an organ in the hall like we have at Davies Hall. But we get to this

electric organ this big electric console, and there are speakers lining the back of the stage where the sound came out of. We play this dramatic opening of *Also sprach Zarathustra* and a harmonic underpinning by the organ playing chords in very soft strings. All of a sudden, we start hearing these really wild space-age sounds [makes whooshing sound] electronically generated oscillators her, and playing this thing. Blomstedt is amazing entirely straight-faced. The organist was trying to turn it off, and he does still doing this thing [makes whooshing sounds]. Finally, somebody pulls the plug, and it still did this sound! Eventually it stopped. We did without the organ for the rest of the concert. Crazy.

UPDIKE

instrumentalists ensembles other than the Symphony?

TRAMONTOZZI I did what used to be called Mostly Modern. Laurie Steele was music director, and she programmed all contemporary music, and a lot of it was sort of cutting edge. Some of the concerts were given in Grove Street, in the loft spaces up there. She wanted me to do some solo piece, so I decided to do a piece by Jacob Druckman called *Valentine* bass, and I have to do many, many things. I take a timpani stick and play on the body of the instrument, and on the strings, and finger-notes, and on the other side of the bridge, and on the

tailpiece, and I have to sometimes use the stick end, and sometimes the felt end, and vocalize

piano, percussion and a couple of wind instruments. This haunting, complex and highly expressive music required intense rehearsing. We all enjoyed playing and performing in the extraordinarily warm and resonant acoustics of the recently opened Bing Concert Hall on the Stanford campus.

UPDIKE How have you balanced the roles and time management of performer and teacher over the years? Was it difficult when you started?

TRAMONTOZZI The Symphony schedule for the first maybe ten, twelve years, was very much regular
Our rehearsals can be on different days, and we could have five concerts a week sometimes, or

