

Interview with William Ginsburg¹
Music 194rs: Leonard Bernstein's Boston
March 24, 2006 10:30 AM
Interviewers: Stephanie Lai, Corinna Campbell, Katherine Chen
Location: Winthrop Tonkens Room
Minor editing by Elizabeth T. Craft

[Part of the opening of the interview is cut off the tape. The first question has to do with how William Ginsburg came to know Leonard Bernstein.]

Stephanie Lai:

. . . your family background?

William Ginsburg:

Mine?

SL:

Yes.

WG:

All right. Uh, well, I grew up in Roxbury, during the depression, and on our street—I had a father and mother; no siblings—and I'll get to my father in a minute. But it was a neighborhood where all the kids were Jewish and – including Leonard – and we lived on Brookledge Street, a whole bunch of us, and we went to the William Lloyd Garrison School—

SL:

Oh, yes.

WG:

- and we all... the smarter ones all went to Boston Latin School for six years, and the ones who weren't so smart went to Roxbury Memorial. Leonard of course went to Latin School, and then most of us ended up at Harvard, which was a time when Harvard took a lot of local boys because it was during the depression. And James Bryant Conant was the new president, very liberal, and he took a lot of local boys. Now uh, and Leonard was one. Now in the neighborhood where we lived, there was Temple Mishkan Tefila.

¹ Timecode is in five minute increments.

SL:

Yes, we've actually visited the building.

WG:

Good, good. And my father was treasurer and Leonard's father was vice president, and during services he would wear a black silk opera hat, and was very formal and very impressive looking along with the president. And on Sunday mornings his father would take a walk with my father in Franklin Park.

SL:

I see!

WG:

And they would talk about Leonard. And his father was very upset because he had this beautiful beauty parlor supply business that made a lot of money, and he wanted his son Leonard, when he finished college, to come in and run it—

SL:

Yes.

WG:

- and his son Leonard, all he would do was sit at the damn piano, which presumably he played [laughter] and practice all the time. He just, what was gonna come of this kid with the damned piano, he'd never make a living! [Laughter] I don't know whether you knew that story or not.

SL:

Well, we know that his father was not very happy about him playing piano.

WG:

Yes. If you've read Joan Peyser's book you've got quite a story about that. You know her book.

SL:

Yes.

WG:

All right, now at the synagogue there was a man—Professor Braslavsky.

SL:

Uh huh.

WG:

Whether he was really a professor or not no one ever knew, he came from Europe, but he was our organist and he was fabulous. He was a fantastic musician, and he also composed liturgical music. And Leonard just loved him. He sat at his feet, and he imbibed a lot of what Professor Braslavsky was doing and composing. And I believe that it had a great influence on him when he wrote both ‘Jeremiah’ and ‘Kaddish.’

SL:

Yes.

WG:

And it was not, according to Peyser’s book, Cantor Glickstein who influenced him; it was mostly Braslavsky.

SL:

I see.

WG:

He was a great influence in his life. Braslavsky was a great man and he was friendly with all the children including myself, and he had a big influence on everybody.

SL:

I see.

WG:

All right, now. Um...

SL:

I was wondering, did um... Professor Braslavsky spend any one-on-one time with Leonard Bernstein? Do you know, or did he—

WG:

Well, I spent a little time with him, yes. Uh, I have a sort of series here, but let me skip, if you want to know a personal relationship.

SL:

Sure.

WG:

In 1947, I had my first date with my now-wife, Rae Ginsburg. And she was from Pennsylvania, and she was in Boston for the holidays, and I asked her if she'd like to go to a Symphony Hall concert, and she said she'd love to, and Leonard Bernstein was conducting that night. And of course I knew Leonard from all our lives, and at the end of the concert I said, 'Would you like to meet Leonard Bernstein?' Well, every girl in her sorority was in love with him! And sure, she'd meet him, so we went back to the Green Room at Symphony Hall, and there was a long line; [5:00] we finally get up to the front and Leonard looks at me and Rae and he says, 'Billy, is this your wife?' And she was shocked. And of course three months later we were engaged. So that's a nice personal story if you want one. Now let me tell you one about when we were still in our teens. And we went to a birthday party at Edna Hibel's house. Do you know who she was?

SL:

No—

WG:

Edna Hibel is alive, she's still alive, she lives in Florida now, she was a painter. And her mother ran the party. She was very famous in Boston. Now she has an art museum in Palm Beach, and she still paints. And I met her recently and told her this story, which she didn't quite remember. But at this party, LB was one of the guests. And you know what kids do, they walked around and talked to each other drinking sodas, because we didn't have any liquor in those days, and Leonard sat at the piano. And all evening he played the piano. Even when we had cake and ice cream he was still at the piano. Never left the piano while he was in the house, which is an interesting personal story. Now, a little later at Harvard we uh—

SL:

Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt. Do you remember what he played at the party?

WG:

What?

SL:

Do you remember what he played at the party?

WG:

No, I don't. But, ah, I don't remember whether it was practicing or playing all kinds of things, but he just kept playing.

SL:

I see. Jazz or...

WG:

I can't tell you what he played.

SL:

OK. That's all right.

WG:

I can tell you what he played at the Pierian, though.

SL:

Oh—

WG:

At the Pierian we had a nice little symphony, and we played in various places like Wellesley and Colby Junior College and Longwood Towers we'd give concerts, And one time we were going to give a concert at Paine Hall at Harvard. And our conductor, Malcolm Holmes, convinced Serge Koussevitzky to come to our concert. And Leonard was the soloist. And he played, as he played only, at all the times, the Rach 2 concerto. He never played the 3; I don't think he was up to it yet, at that time. And Koussevitzky heard him. And of course as you know they became very intimate through the years. And I have a feeling that's when he first met him—now, I'm not sure of that, but I have that feeling. So you may find that of note.

SL:

Oh, yes. That's very helpful to know.

WG:

Yeah...now... All right, now we'll skip—how much time do we have?

SL:

As much time as you have available, so...

WG:

Well, OK. I have until 11, 11:10. Maybe 20, 30 minutes if you want that much.

SL:

Oh, that sounds wonderful, thank you.

WG:

All right, now here's an interesting story that you may or may not know. Well, I don't know how interesting, but Boston Latin School had a career day for the seniors where they invited distinguished, supposedly distinguished, guests to come and speak to them about their future careers. So somewhere in around the mid- '50s, I would judge, they invited three people: father Robert Drinan, who you may recall, he was a congressman as well as a priest, Leonard Bernstein, and William Ginsburg to speak at career day. So before we went on stage, we were in the teachers' lounge. And you know, the Latin School boys were scared to death of their teachers, we used to throw demerits at them, and so we all feared them. And here we were all of a sudden in their lounge and they were cottoning to us, because we were the stars of the day. And particularly Leonard and they fawned all over him, and it was very interesting. He was already pretty well known because he was forty years old then. And he had achieved a great deal. So I thought that was an interesting thing. Now in 1950, my wife and I made a trip around South America. And Jenny Bernstein, Leonard's mother, told my mother that we should meet Felicia Montealegre's parents, [10:00] who were in Chile in Santiago.

SL:

I see.

WG:

And their name was Coan, C-O-A-N.² The Montealegre was her mother's maiden name.

SL:

Oh, I see.

WG:

Yeah, and it's spelled, it's a very complicated name, but I won't take time to spell it. And he spelled his name C-O-A-N. He was an American who came from Ohio somewhere, a businessman, and he also lived in Santiago. So, and we didn't know anyone in Santiago, so we got there and called the Coan's, and unfortunately a Spanish-speaking maid answered—didn't understand a word of what we said, and couldn't take a message, but she did indicate that they weren't home, and so we never met Felicia's parents.

SL:

Oh, I see.

WG:

Which was too bad because we had hoped to have time to meet with them. Now, let's see, shall we go to Tanglewood?

SL:

Sure!

WG:

All right, at Tanglewood we saw him a lot, because we had a home in the Berkshires and we were there all the time. And he conducted the Berkshire Symphony, the young students who came from all around the world, you know all about that.

SL:

No, actually I'm not quite familiar with that, could you please elaborate?

WG:

Oh, well every year they would seek out brilliant artists, young people who had not yet reached their peak or their fame, and invite them to the Berkshires for the

² The correct spelling is actually Cohn.

summer. And they could come from the United States or from other countries, and they were on full scholarship and they formed an orchestra which was a marvelous orchestra. I mean, they played as well as most symphonies that you would normally hear—they were great. And Leonard was one of the conductors who worked with them, and he was terrific and they just adored him. And we used to go to some of those concerts, and they were, they were thrilling. They were almost as good as the Boston Symphony!

SL:

Wow.

WG:

And once a year they would play a combined concert with the Boston Symphony and that was always a wow. That was terrific. But he was always sensational in working with these young students; he was just terrific. Now also, do you know about the youth, his children's concerts?

SL:

Yes, with the New York Philharmonic?

WG:

No, uh, yeah, on the television.

SL:

On the television, yeah, the Young People's Concerts?

WG:

I guess they're probably within your time.

SL:

Um, I actually missed them. I've seen videotapes of them, yes.

WG:

Yeah. Anyway, I remember seeing those concerts, and his ability to work with children and teach them about music was simply fantastic; he was a great educator. And he would tell them the insides of the music, and he'd teach them how the notes were put together, all sorts of things, and he was really marvelous. And this appeared in a series of concerts on television; there were many of them.

SL:

Yes, on the Omnibus... Omnibus... program? The Omnibus series?

WG:

I'm not sure which program. It was a Sunday program I think, as I recall it, but maybe some of your students would recall it better, I don't know.

SL:

I see.

WG:

Yeah, how many students are there, by the way?

SL:

Um, 20 or so.

WG:

Oh really, and they're all music students?

SL:

Um, it's very—we have quite a variety, we have biology and anthropology and math majors as well, but predominantly music majors.

WG:

I see, OK. Now, incidentally, we were at his 70th birthday party. Have you any information on that one?

SL:

Um, no...could you please elaborate on that one?

WG:

Yeah sure, at Tanglewood. His birthday was in August, and at Tanglewood they had a 70th birthday party with Seiji Ozawa conducting the Symphony. And it was in the evening. And Lenny's mother Jenny was alive and she came in and sat in a box there at Tanglewood in the shed. And then he came in in a flowing black

cape, opera cape. It was very dramatic. He loved to be dramatic. He wore that a lot. And he came swaggering into the hall [15:00] there from the right side of the orchestra and he was followed by a short, blond young man. I guess you know about that. And that was kind of interesting and they had a wonderful concert, extolling his 70th birthday and his career and they played some of his music, and Seiji Ozawa was very gracious to him and so on. Now let's see, if I have something else here —

SL:

Oh, um. I'm sorry, could you please tell me what you mean about the short blond young man in—

WG:

What's that?

SL:

What did you mean by the short, blond young man? You were saying, 'I'm sure you know about that?'

WG:

Oh, he, uh, he was sort of ambidexterous. He liked men and he liked women. I presumed you knew all about that—

SL:

Yes, we do.

WG:

Or did you?

SL:

--yes, we do know about that. I just wanted to clarify that.

WG:

Well, he had this nice, young blond fellow following him on his birthday in front of the hall. So he didn't hide it. It was very public and, um, now, let's see what else. Does your class have any questions they'd like to ask me?

SL:

Um, yes. Here's one question.

Corinna Campbell:

Hi, uh, my name is Corinna Campbell, and I'm another student here. There are three of us here; there's Katherine Chen, myself, and Stephanie Lai who you've been talking to. Um, I just wanted to know a little bit more about yourself and what you...what you do and... Yeah, about your early life in particular.

WG:

OK. Well, I don't do a great deal now because I'm class of '37, so you can figure out my age. But I was a manufacturer of Serta mattresses. I had two of the 34 factories in the United States, and I was also president of the whole thing for a period. That was my career for many, many years until I retired.

CC:

Well, that's quite an achievement.

WG:

We lived in Newton, and we had three children, one of whom lives in Israel and has three children, my grandchildren, who all have served in the Israel Defense Forces. And we had homes beginning in 1964 in the Berkshires. So we had a home in the Berkshires from 1964 until about five years ago, and we went to all the concerts.

CC;

Great.

WG:

So we loved them, and had a great time there and met all kinds of wonderful artists. We would go to the, they had a tent luncheon once a week and we would go meet different players in the Symphony, and they were marvelous. And Governor Dukakas had a father-in-law, Harry Ellis Dickson; I don't know if you know of him, he later was conductor of the Pops. He was, he played in the first violin section, and he was there. He lived up the road from us, and he'd show us all the shortcuts to the Symphony, which was very nice.

SL:

Do you play an instrument yourself, or, are you musical?

WG:

What?

SL:

Do you play an instrument?

WG:

Yes, I played—well, I don't now, but I played the first violin.

SL:

Oh, I see.

WG:

In the Pierian Sodality. The Pierian was a pretty good orchestra, and today it's, uh, I guess very good.

SL:

Uh huh. HRO, what is it now, the Harvard Radcliffe Orchestra?

WG:

Yeah, the Harvard Symphony, well, the Pierian Sodality was founded in 1808, and it's the oldest continuously operating symphony in the United States. Now at one time, it was down to seven flutes that were there, and they existed all these years and they fathered, or mothered, the Harvard Symphony. You could be a member of the Symphony but not a member of the Pierian. You had to be elected to the Pierian. The musical muse. And we were there. Now do you have other people who were young at the time who knew him from Harvard? Did they respond to you?

SL:

Um, yes. So we're planning to speak to a man [20:00] by the name of Meyer Gertman who apparently grew up next door to--

WG:

What's his name, Gutman?

SL:

Gertman, [spells it].

WG:

Oh, I don't know him. Did Mr. Bunshaft answer you?

SL:

I don't think so... can you tell me his—

WG:

[Spells] Bunshaft. Robert. We used to call him Bobo. He was a fine violist, and he knew Leonard pretty well. Now, whether he's alive or not, I don't know. He was the class of '38 or '39.

SL:

I see. And you mentioned the painter, Edna Hibel. Do you have her contact information?

WG:

Do I have what?

SL:

Her contact information. Do you think she'd be willing to speak about Leonard—

WG:

Sorry, I can't hear what you said.

SL:

Do you have Edna Hibel's contact information?

WG:

Oh, well I have a Harvard directory.

SL:

Oh, that would be wonderful.

WG:

Also, you could look up Frederick Glike [spells] who lived in Connecticut, a doctor Frederick Glike, who was class of '37 in the orchestra, and I recall him. I know he's alive, because he comes to reunions. Now if you want I'll get the directory and see what the...of course it's an old directory, so it may not be up to date.

SL:

I see, well maybe—

WG:

But if you wish, do you wish it?

SL:

Yes please, perhaps as a—

WG:

It's on the shelf right in front of me.

SL:

Yes please, that's wonderful.

WG:

All right, hold on and I'll get it.

[Pause]

WG:

Hello?

SL:

Hello?

WG:

Yes, here I am. I'm looking up Bunshaft.... Yes, Robert Seymour Bunshaft. He's class of '39. So that's Leonard's class.

SL:

Oh, yes

WG:

Well, I'm sure he doesn't live there now. He lived on Hartman Rd. in Newton. I've lived in seven places since those days so he probably has, too. So that's the most I can give you on him, and Glike may or may not live in the same place because he was pretty well settled in Connecticut... Frederick Philip [sp?] Glike. Class of '37. Now if you call the alumni office they can give you up-to-date phone numbers for them. He lives at 270 Dexter Avenue in Meridian, Connecticut.

SL:

All right. Thank you very much. Could you actually tell us your address in Boston when you were living—you said you lived in Roxbury?

WG:

Yes, we all lived on Brookledge Street. [Spells] And Leonard lived there for some time, although he lived on a number of different streets in Roxbury. But like the rest of us he went the full six years at Latin School. That was considered the right thing to do. Those who went four years we didn't pay much attention to.

SL:

Could you please elaborate on your family's relationship with Leonard Bernstein? You mentioned that your father was the treasurer and his father was the vice president. Was it more of a professional relationship or was it more of a friendship?

WG:

Well, they were pretty close to each other, and as I said they walked every Sunday in Franklin Park. They took a morning walk. They knew each other for years, [25:00] now the synagogue was built there in 1924, and I know in the late '30s they were still walking around there. My father was treasurer for thirteen years, so they knew each other very well.

CC:

Mr. Ginsburg, I was wondering if maybe you could tell us your impressions of Sam Bernstein, too.

WG:

Of what?

CC:

Your impressions of Sam Bernstein. Did you ever meet him?

WG:

Oh. Well, he was a formal man. He was a good verse scholar, a Talmudic scholar, but he was basically a businessman. He wanted to know, did it make money; he was very aggressive about making money. And that's what upset him about Leonard, that Leonard wasn't interested in making money, although it ended up of course that Leonard made far more than his father ever dreamed of. But, uh, he was a nice man, very formal. And his mother was a very nice lady, very friendly. She and my mother were good friends. And I can't say much more about her except that she was a nice person.

CC:

That's fine. Did you know anything about the Sam Bernstein Hair Company?

WG:

No. But, let me tell you something about Leonard's sister Shirley.

CC:

Great.

WG:

I had a date in Chicago, before I got married, with a nice young lady, and I took her to a concert, a Chicago Symphony Concert down in Ravinia—it was in the summertime. And the conductor was Leonard Bernstein, and I remember one thing they played was the Beethoven Violin Concerto, which I loved. And I said to her—I guess it was a habit—'Would you like to meet Leonard Bernstein?' [Laughs] And she was all excited, and we went backstage and there was Shirley Bernstein, the master of arms, guarding the doors. And she was very bitchy; she would not let us in. She knew me, I told her I'd like to say hello to Leonard, and she absolutely had her arms folded akimbo, she wouldn't let us in.

SL:

Oh, no!

WG:

And I was very upset at the time. Although, if you read the Peyser book, she is very complimentary about Shirley. She says very nice things about Shirley. She devoted herself almost entirely to Leonard. She was one way with him. She spent all her time supporting whatever he was doing. So that's my story about Shirley. Let's see if I have anything else on my little list here...

SL:

So did you maintain contact with Bernstein after Harvard? How extensively did you relate—

WG:

Well yes, I saw him a couple of times at Tanglewood, up at the Saranac, the home that Koussevitzky lived in. I went there one day with my wife to have dinner—they served dinner there—and, uh, he was teaching a class in one of the living rooms there, and he was very preoccupied. He saw me, but he was so intent on his music and his students that he wouldn't say hello. Incidentally, he was a very difficult guy. He was very braggadocio. He was arrogant, you might say. And so he didn't always treat people nicely.

CC:

Do you remember him being that way as a kid as well, or is that something that -

WG:

As a what?

CC:

As a kid, or was that something that came later?

WG:

As a cantor?

CC:

As a kid, as a child.

WG:

As a child? No, he wasn't, but he was wrapped up in his music. In those days, he was more modest as an individual, but he spent his time and all his effort at the piano. He was a one-way man; always at the piano. I didn't see much of him at Latin School; he was two years behind me. So we were in different classes, but I would see him at synagogue [30:00] and around the street, you know.

SL:

You mentioned that Leonard had a remarkable gift for teaching, and I was wondering, do you know—did he—do you think that was an innate gift, that was a natural gift, or was it cultivated by his teachers when he was younger and any formative experiences during his childhood?

WG:

Well, I can't say. All I do know is that he had a marvelous personality with children, he was—unlike with some adults, he was patient, and he would teach them intimate details of the music so that you really remembered it. I remember him doing *Peter and the Wolf* for the kids, and it was fabulous, just fabulous. And describing the instruments and how they played, and those children certainly had to have remembered that, because it was just so wonderful. You're asking good questions.

Katherine Chen:

Mr. Ginsburg, I was just wondering if you could tell me a bit more about Bernstein's years at Harvard. What kind of clubs did he join? Any stories during the Harvard years?

WG:

No, I really can't. He was two years behind me; he took different courses. The only thing I can tell you about is that he spent a lot of time in his music courses with Walter Piston. And I'm trying to think of the name of another wonderful professor who wrote—maybe you guys know about it—he wrote 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' in the style of, like, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Schumann, so forth, and made his students identify which composer was represented as he played it. Do any of you remember about him?

[Collectively: No]

CC:

No, but if you do recall the name at any point, we would love to know who that is, because that's something we've encountered with other people, with Leonard himself. That's something similar to one of the things he used to do.

WG:

I see, well, I'm trying to think who you could contact... maybe the faculty offices or something? He was a wonderful... I took his course; he taught Music 1. And he used to play 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' and we had to answer the questions. You know, was it Beethoven, or was it Brahms, or so forth. And that's how I learned to identify the music of the composers. It was wonderful. And Leonard of course knew him, but he was very close to Piston. And one other professor whose name I can't recall, and he learned a great deal from them. All right?

SL:

Well, thank you very much. We greatly appreciate you taking the time to interview with us, Mr. Ginsburg, and if —

WG:

Well, it was my pleasure indeed.

SL:

Thank you, and if you recall anything else, please do not hesitate to contact us again. You have my email address.

WG:

I have your email number. I don't have any phone number, which I worried about, because I wondered whether maybe you expected me to call you, but I never had a number.

SL:

Oh, no. I'm sorry for the miscommunication. I'll email you my number as well so we'll be able to contact each other.

WG:

You want to send them to me?

SL:

Yes, I will.

WG:

OK. Thank you, and my best wishes to all of you students.

[Collectively: Thank you very much.]

You know, at your age, you could be my great-grandchildren. [Laughs] And Leonard's, too.

SL:

Thank you very much. Have a wonderful day.