

Allen Barker Interview
Music 194rs: Leonard Bernstein's Boston
Friday, April 7th, 2006, 2:15pm
Interviewers: Stephanie Lai, Corinna Campbell, Katherine Chen
Location: Adams UCR, Harvard
Minor editing by Elizabeth T. Craft

Allen Barker:

Hello.

Katherine Chen:

Hello. Is this Mr. Barker?

Barker:

Yes.

Chen:

Hi. This is Katherine from the Bernstein in Boston class at Harvard, and I'm here along with two other classmates, um Stephanie Lai, and also Corinna Campbell. And we would like to talk to you about um, Heinrich Gebhard. So um,...

Barker:

Sure. And did you get my email saying you had permission?

Chen:

Yes, I did.

Barker:

Ok.

Chen:

That's great. Ok. Um, why don't we start with, um, asking you how did you meet Heinrich Gebhard? When did you study with him?

Barker:

It was about 1943, I think...and I just came back from the Navy. And uh, I don't quite remember. Oh I know, I contacted somebody in a neighboring town and uh, and interviewed with her and and she uh, uh, she was interested in having me study with her but she happened to mention that she had studied with Heinrich Gebhard so I thought, why don't I go to the top and so I did. So that's how it came about.

Chen:

Oh. That's nice. And how old were you at the time?

Barker:

Uh, let's see, I must have been about twenty two – twenty two or twenty three.

Chen:

So does Heinrich Gebhard only teach younger students or does he have students of all ages?

Barker:

No, no, no. He had many adult students...many of them, um, was...well, some of them at least played with the Boston Pops regularly and um, yeah. He taught a lot of professional people.

Chen:

Ok. That's great. um, did he had a specific teaching style? What was his teaching style like?

Barker:

He had studied with Leschetizsky and all uh, all of those people who had studied with Leschetizsky had claimed that they had the Leschetizsky method and the Leschetizsky method, uh, I think lasted for about the first two or three lessons. [laughter] and it was not like the Matthay system in London, which was more thoroughly worked out. I may be wrong about that, there may have been more to it. But I don't remember him talking much about it after the first few lessons.

Chen:

Oh, so what did he say during the first few lessons...about Leschetizsky?

Barker:

Well, there was...there was what was called the fundamental touch and that was where you had five fingers on five key and you played them with a certain kind of oh, um, roundness of tone, you know, until you get that sort of evened out and that was what it was. As it, I, there was not much more to it than that. Cortot, [indistinct] I say this as somebody later on who had studied with Cortot. And Cortot has an elaborate, uh, and very sort of almost scientific, uh, approach to things - he's got things really broken down. But uh the Leschetizskythe Leschetizsky thing was sort of, a um, um, how do I say...inspirational...that was what it was ...inspirational. And there may have been more...much more to it but that's what I got from Gebhard. And I had studied with somebody else who has studied with Leschetizsky when I was in Cleveland and um, and he never talked much about the Leschetizsky method.

Chen:

Who was he? At Cleveland? Who was the teacher?

Barker:

Yes. I beg your pardon?

Chen:

Who was the teacher at Cleveland?

Barker:

The man's name was Riemenschneider – he came from a very famous music, musical family. His brother, Karl...no, my teacher was Karl Riemenschneider and he had a brother, um, I've forgotten his first name but he had uh, he was at Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, and he was a pretty famous person. He'd edited the Bach - books of Bach Chorales and that sort of thing.

Chen:

Ok. That's great. Um, was Gebhard a strictly a classical pianist?

Barker:

Yes. Yeah.

Chen:

Did he specialize teaching any period of piano music like Classical, Baroque, Romantic...

Barker:

Well, of course, heavily on Chopin.

Chen:

Chopin?

Barker:

Heavily Chopin. And Rachmaninoff. I never did any Rachmaninoff with him. I did do some Chopin with him.

Chen:

Ok. And was there a specific repertoire that he taught all students?

Barker:

Uh, I don't, I don't remember that. Now, I remember that one of his students when I was with him, uh played the Tchaikovsky - the Tchaikovsky piano concerto with the Boston Pops. And another one of his students played um, uh, um Rachmaninoff concerto. I don't remember which one. He tended to be on Romantic side.

Chen:

Romantic side. Ok. And um, what were the lessons typically like with Gebhard?

Barker:

Uh, well, they were very uh, I would say for one thing very kindly. Um, his personality was somewhat flowery and um, he had made his his I think he came from the Alsacian section of France, which is half of the time it was Germany, then it was France - you know, back and forth, one of those border towns. And his uh, aptitude for music was discovered at a very early age. How he happened to come to this country, I didn't know - at which I had been more curious about his his background if I...you know, when I was with him. He uh, he finally got quite a reputation and he played with the ...he went on tour with the Boston um, Symphony. And there's a there's a Charles, uh, uh, composer by the name of Charles Martin Loeffler. L-o-e-f-f-l-e-r. I think Loeffler lived next door to Gebhard in Brookline at at some point. And Charles Martin Loeffler was one of those composers who were...was a bit in the shadow of um, other composers. However he um, he flourished and some of his things were played by the Boston Symphony and um and uh, and one of them - it was either a concerto or some kind of orchestral work for piano. And I believe that uh, um, that uh, Gebhard

went on nationwide tours with the orchestra playing this Loeffler piece. They were great friends and you know, being next next door and having the interest in music.

Chen:

Ok. And you mentioned that Gebhard had a flowery personality. Can you explain, elaborate more on that?

Barker:

Well for instance, one of the songs he wrote was called Flower Phones [sp?], which was, um, inspired by seeing morning glories. And um, um, there was nothing, it was nothing effeminate about it. It was just that um, he, uh, I think he he tended to be more um, descriptive than um, than specific.

Chen:

I see. So he was more of a...did he talk more than um, demonstrate on the piano?

Barker:

Um, he he demonstrated quite a lot. Now, one of the early works I studied with him was a Mozart concerto so I wouldn't say he didn't do the the classical repertoire. He knew the uh, the Beethoven and the uh, and the Mozart concerti. We do... I don't think we did very much Bach. Uh, I may have, I had started, I had learned a Partita a part of one on my own, and he may have - he may have helped with more than what I have learned. And I think that where he and Bernstein might have parted was that um, I don't think that uh, Gebhard had much patience with um, modern music beyond Debussy. And a, and a I remember one time I played a piece by Virgil Thomson for him, and it was called, "Ragtime Bass." Do you know Virgil Thomson?

Chen:

Um.

Barker:

He was a critic for the New York Times and also collaborated with Gertrude Stein, and he was quite a, quite a big figure in music in the um, in the 20s and 30s. He wrote a set of ten etudes and the tenth one uh, is uh, called "Ragtime Bass." I played it one time for Gebhard and uh, he sort of turned his nose up by that. Then I played another piece called "Bumble Boogie." And he he he was sort of embarrassed that I did it, you know. And uh...I was a kid and I thought it was fun to do.

Chen:

And do you know any more information about, um, Gebhard's relationship with Bernstein?

Barker:

I don't. That, this is all that's in my mind and...and again it's it's just a sort of crumb of memory that uh, uh, he... I think he was sorry that uh, that Bernstein didn't spend more time with him but I think that I don't whether it was a year...or even a year or maybe two years but um, Bernstein was already uh you know, so he had such a strong personality that um, I suspect that um, with his interest in popular music, it may have estranged them a bit. But I am just guessing at that.

Chen:

Ok. And um.

Barker:

I can tell you one more thing right off the top of my head as I was thinking about this uh, possibility of talking is that um, um, Gebhard...I don't know quite how he managed to get the reputation he got, not that it wasn't justified, but he eventually became Amy Lowell's sort of court pianist and she gave elaborate dinner parties, and there'd be a greyhound back of every guests' chair and uh, and before the dinner uh, there be some music and uh, he would play perhaps a, a Bach suite and um, and she would say uh, "now don't go on, play that one again, that was so charming or you do it so beautifully." And so, she was sort of managed the the, the programs at the event. And do you know Amy Lowell?

Chen:

Um, no we don't.

Barker:

She was...she was President of Harvard's sister. Uh, I think it was uh, Robert Lowell. And uh...and um, and she was quite an embarrassment to him because she was socially very advanced, and she used to take...she was very rich and she'd take these transatlantic trips and uh, she'd be out on the deck smoking cigars, you know. And uh, so she was kind of uh, she was a little bit of an embarrassment to him. She wrote a lot of poetry. For a while she was considered America's leading woman poet. Amy Lowell.

Chen:

I see. Amy Lowell. And um, I just have a question about student recitals. Did Gebhard hold any of them? What were they like?

Barker:

Um. You mean student recitals?

Chen:

Yeah. Student recitals.

Barker:

He sometimes opened his house and...and arranged his students to give a recital and they'd uh, you know put chairs around and uh, and um, there was nothing um, they're the kind of thing that any piano teacher might do, as I as I do myself, is arrange for my students to perform either to perform either here at home or in uh, various venues.

Chen:

I see. Because I think I read somewhere that Gebhard's um, emphasized giving recitals as an integral...integral part of the learning process?

Barker:

Yeah...well I think that's quite true, because a couple times a year, he would do this and uh, and it was a chance for their students to try their things out and bring them to a uh, kind of focus.

Chen:

Ok. And also, I have a specific question about his teaching spot...uh, teaching style, um Bernstein used the term finishing chord and prefinishing chord, um, did Gebhard use those terms in his teachings?

Barker:

I don't remember those terms.

Chen:

Ok. When were you...Um, I just have a question. When were you born?

Barker:

Um, 1923.

Chen:

Ok.

Barker:

I'm very very old. [laughter]

Campbell:

Also, I was wondering if uh, maybe you had any knowledge of Helen Coates, who...uh...

Barker:

Of who?

Campbell:

Helen Coates...who worked under Gebhard for some time, I understand...

Barker:

No. I don't, uh, how do you spell her last name?

Campbell:

C-o-a-t-e-s.

Barker:

I don't, uh, I don't know...that name doesn't come to me. The people I remember...there was a fellow by the name of Chester Fanning Smith, who was a graduate of Harvard and um, then uh, I remember one of his pupils was Ethel Hutchinson. She was married to a dentist. And she played and she was the one who played Rachmaninoff concerto.

Chen:

Ok.

Barker:

And um, the other one was Hazel Halitt and uh, Hazel did a lot of playing around. I don't know whatever happened to Hazel um...

Chen:

Were they Gehbard's assistants or students?

Barker:

Well, uh, they were students of his. But they and then they had had at least Ethel I think had a large uh, following of of piano students herself.

Chen:

Ok. And do you know anything about um, the assistant's role in Gebhard's studio?

Barker:

The what?

Chen:

The assistant's role in Gebhard's studio.

Barker:

I don't I don't remember um, of course, the assistants if he if they were called assistants um, uh they all had their own place and I don't I don't remember ever ever talking uh in the in any detail with any...[indistinct] assistants.

Chen:

Oh ok.

Lai:

Mr. Barker, I was just wondering where were the lessons held? Did you go to his house?

Barker:

He had a a a large home in Brookline and I went to his home there. He had he had taught for a while at the um New England Conservatory and when I went to the Conservatory I was a little bit reluctant to leave him so I think for a little while I studied with him and with a conservatory teacher which is a very bad thing to

do. [laughter] And I think that um, I can't quite remember and and uh, when I, he invited me to come back to play in one of his student recitals after I had gone to the conservatory and um, I played the Ballade Chopin 3rd Ballade and um, and he said um, well I, he said something to the effect that I had lost something in it...in the process so um I think it was um...it hurt him a little bit that I had left him and yet uh, that's what I had to do. And I remember one time um, after I had left him maybe a year or so, he invited me to lunch at his house and he had a lovely lunch prepared for me. And I think it was a little bit hoping that uh, as I went on with my career, I would mention his name. There was nothing implied in that, but um, uh, I mean nothing uh, nothing specific but I always wondered why he did that. And I suspect that that might be it.

Chen:

Oh ok. So um, what was the one thing you learned from Gebhard? The most...

Barker:

I think that um, probably the uh, an inspir...an inspirational approach as uh..in another words let your heart uh, take over um, in addition to reason. I think it...he was more of a um, as I say an inspirational rather than an analytical person and yet he could uh, he could pull out uh, passages from a Wagner opera or that that sort of thing. So he was a very...he was a very knowledgeable person.

Chen:

Mm-hm. And...any more questions? [to group]

Chen:

And I think...and do you have any more stories about Gebhard...lessons? Performances? Anything you particularly remember?

Barker:

Uh, well, I don't see how you can use it but he did one time come to to my home and I was living in a suburb north of Boston and uh, and it was a um, I think uh, sort of uh, Christmas party or something like that and he graciously... We asked if he'd play and he did. He sat down and played um, I think it's the second or third Chopin etude um, from the first book and uh, so he was...he was a very accessible and kindly person.

Chen:

Ok.

Barker:

I think there was a a a somewhat of a kind of withering of his uh, uh, clientele as he got older which is apt to happen and I think the the end ...I think I heard but again, I'm not sure I think I heard that he went finally to live with his daughter in New Jersey and it was um, it...I think it was not a happy time...I think uh, perhaps she was not as gentle to her elderly father but maybe she had reason. One never knows about things like that. I was not privy to that sort of information, and I didn't seek it.

Lai:

I'm sorry, go ahead.

Barker:

No that's it.

Lai:

Oh, so you have students of your own right now? Is that..?

Barker:

Oh yes, yes.

Chen:

I see.

Barker:

I do um, I do a lot of teaching and um always giving concerts.

Lai:

That's wonderful

Chen:

Uh, I think that's about it. Well, I thank you for your time. And...

Barker:

You're very welcome, and I hope that uh, I feel as though I just have crumbs and fringes of that uh, use whatever you can, and uh I would be very interested to know the uh, results when it is put together.

Chen:

Yeah. Ok. Thanks.

Campbell:

Thanks very much!

Barker:

You're very welcome. Bye!

Chen:

Bye!

Barker:

Bye!