

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Marcella DeCray
AN ORAL HISTORY OF MARCELLA DECRA Y

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Crawford in 2004-2005

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Marcella DeCray (photo courtesy of Marcella DeCray)

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Interview History—Marcella DeCray

Marcella DeCray was interviewed for the music series of the Regional Oral History Office to document her long career as a professional harpist and champion of contemporary music. She grew up in Philadelphia, studied piano with Leo Ornstein and harp with Dorothy Baseler and Mildred Dilling, among others. During several summers in the 1940s and 1950s she worked with Henriette Renie in Paris and in Etretat on the Normandy coast. France and the French culture have been significant factors in her life ever since.

After studies at Temple University, a BA and graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and while a student at Juilliard and still in her teens, DeCray auditioned for and joined the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, where she played second harp, performing under conductors such as Fritz Reiner and Fritz Busch. In 1952 she was auditioned by Eugene Ormandy of the Philadelphia Orchestra and engaged as second harp. In the oral history she remembers the orchestra as “the holy grail of the music world” at the time, recalls European tours when the orchestra was received almost as royalty, and the many conductors who performed with the orchestra during her eleven years there, including Igor Stravinsky, Charles Muench and Sir Thomas Beecham.

DeCray eventually married and settled with her husband in San Francisco in 1963, where for many years she performed with the San Francisco Symphony and Opera orchestras. She established the harp faculty at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, as she had previously done at the Peabody Conservatory and elsewhere. She is still a member of the conservatory faculty and performs with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra.

Contemporary music was an abiding interest of DeCray’s in her Philadelphia years and she took an active role in the Bay Area’s vibrant new music scene of the 1960s. In 1973 she performed in composer Charles Boone’s Bring-Your-Own-Pillow Concerts, and with Boone and fellow San Francisco Symphony musician Jean-Louis LeRoux, she launched the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. In the history she documents the history of the players, now in their third decade of performance. She also discusses first performances of works written for her by composers George Rochberg, David Sheinfeld and Wayne Peterson.

The four interview sessions were conducted and videotaped in DeCray’s living room in San Francisco, a formal room that contains both concert and orchestral harps and a piano designed by her grandfather Alexander DeCray, who was in the piano business in Philadelphia. DeCray reviewed and edited the interview transcripts lightly.

The Regional Oral History Office, a division of the Bancroft Library, was established in 1954 to record the lives of individuals who have made significant contributions to the history of

California and the West. The oral history methodology consists of research in primary and secondary sources, recorded interviews, transcripts, reviewing and editing by the narrator, library deposition of bound volumes, and in most cases digital presentation at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO>.

Caroline Crawford
Music Historian
The Bancroft Library/University of California, Berkeley

Interview # 1 10-26-04

[Begin File DeCray, 01 10-26-04] ##

Crawford:

This is to be the oral history of Marcella DeCray, with Caroline Crawford interviewing for the Oral History Office, University of California, October 26, 2004. So Marcella, let's start right at the beginning, your beginnings, with place and date of birth.

DeCray:

June 2, 1928, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Crawford:

Good. What do you know about family names, and how far back?

DeCray:

Great grandmother or grandmother, I forget which, but they were all dead before I was born. So do you want me to tell you the names?

Crawford:

Just name and place, generally where you were.

DeCray:

My mother's maiden name was Loeb, L-o-e-b. Her first name was Elsie. Her mother's name was Bertha; her maiden name was Caroline Grau, and her father's and family's name was Ganz, G-a-n-z. My father was sixty-three when I was born. His father's name was Alexander DeCray, and he was in the piano business, made that piano here in this room, along with a series of other pianos, in Philadelphia. He was married to a woman whose maiden name was Maug, M-a-u-g, I believe, Mary Maug, and that's as far back as I know about my father's family. I think they emigrated—Alexander and Mary perhaps didn't know each other—emigrated as children with their parents. The only thing I know about that is that Alexander emigrated with his father and numerous other siblings sometime in the nineteenth century, from Alsace Lorraine. My mother's father came from Baden Baden, and my mother's mother's family, I don't know where they came from, some place in Germany.

Crawford:

Okay, let's talk about your parents. Could you give me their full names and tell me a little bit about them.

DeCray:

Yes. Elsie Pauline Loeb DeCray and Joseph Edwin DeCray. He was in the steel business, selling tool steel, and circulating with tool-steel companies, Columbia Tool Steel, and Wheel-Truing [phonetic] Steel Company, and I forget what else. He died when I was eleven.

Crawford:

And he had other families?

DeCray:

He had been married before. He was a widower; I was his only child. Neither one of my parents went to high school. I guess maybe they both stopped at eighth grade; I don't know. Anyway, this was in the day when compulsory education didn't exist, and they were all poor, and so they went to work.

Crawford:

And what did they do? What did your mother do?

DeCray:

She was a dressmaker. She apprenticed to a dressmaker, and then she became a dressmaker, and she had a clientele in Philadelphia. I don't know very much about my father's affiliations before I was born, except that he was an employee of Columbia Tool Steel Company. That's all I can tell you. Neither one were musical. My mother took mandolin lessons.

Crawford:

That's her mandolin?

DeCray:

That's her mandolin, and piano lessons, and we used to play duets once in a great while. They were both just interested in music as they were interested in many things. I expressed an interest in starting the harp after I'd played the piano for a couple of years, and that's how we got into the harp world.

Crawford:

But that was remarkable that you—you started piano lessons early, I assume.

DeCray:

Six.

Crawford:

Six, and that that was part of their planning for you. Was it?

DeCray:

No, they tried me out on different things. I think it was mostly my mother's impetus to do things, because my father was in his sixties, and back in the thirties sixty was a pretty advanced age.

Crawford:

How old was your mother when you were born?

DeCray:

Thirty-seven.

Crawford:

Thirty-seven; so that was getting on, too, for a first birth.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

I think you were her only child.

DeCray:

Yes. They tried me in sports, various sports like ice skating, swimming, gymnastics, and art, and I think music took and the other things really didn't take at all.

Crawford:

Because of you, because of your interest?

DeCray:

Because of my interest and what little ability I had. So they were open to just anything that would interest me, and that I would have some ability in, and piano seemed to be it. My mother and I went to a Christmas or Easter, or some holiday event at a very large department store in Philadelphia called John Wanamaker, and there was an ensemble of, I suppose, maybe ten harps, very well placed in a sort of row, on a balcony with baroque setting, and an organ and all that stuff. I was wowed by the appearance of the harps, and I guess I don't remember the sound at all. One doesn't necessarily remember sound as well as the visual.

But I announced that I would like to try playing the harp, so next thing you know we'd rented a harp and we found a harp teacher. She was a lovely old lady who lived in Philadelphia, and she came to the house once a week and gave me lessons, and after a few months or a year we bought a harp, which is that small harp over there.

Crawford:

We'll look at that more closely. Is that a regular-size harp?

DeCray:

Yes, it is. It's the orchestral size. The larger one is the concert size.

Crawford:

We see the concert one in the back of this picture.

DeCray:

Yes. So I started playing in churches on Sundays, and I was always paid. It was never a gratis thing.

Crawford:

As a child?

DeCray:

As a child. As an, I guess probably, eight-and-a-half, nine-year-old child, not very long after I started. Then I also began playing in what were called women's clubs, and I don't know if there are still women's clubs today that meet, like, I guess once a month. I have no idea how often they would meet, but they'd meet in the afternoon, and a group of women had a little budget, and they would have some entertainment after they had their business meeting, and then after the entertainment they'd have a little tea, and that took care of their afternoon. I was their entertainment, and I was paid for that, too. I began to amass a little bank account. It was very carefully kept, and I would go to the bank myself and do the banking, and it was all very good education in much more than music.

Crawford:

I should say. What did you buy?

DeCray:

Buy?

Crawford:

Or you saved?

DeCray:

Oh, I saved. No, I didn't buy anything.

Crawford:

What were you saving for, did you know?

DeCray:

No, no.

Crawford:

Just conservative by nature, economically, right, or fiscally?

DeCray:

Well, I don't know. I took my daughter to the bank with the first money that she earned from lemonade, and she cried terribly, because she was giving up her money. I explained to her that she would earn interest. That didn't intrigue her at all.

Crawford:

Different times. Well, really, that was the beginning of the Depression. Your early years were in the Depression.

DeCray:

I guess they were, yes. I was born just before the Depression.

Crawford:

Yes, '28. Did the family—did you notice a difference in your years, from the Depression?

DeCray:

No, not at all. No. I know that I was, you know, one year old, I guess, when the crash came, and here I was with a sixty-four-year-old father who was fired, because they downsized. I don't know what they called it in those days, not downsizing. He then started a business for himself, and that lasted really until shortly before his death.

Crawford:

How many years?

DeCray:

About ten. We lived in a town called Ambler, which is now virtually part of Philadelphia. It's one of those situations where Philadelphia spread and spread, and finally took in a few suburban towns. I remember things like a parade in the main street in Ambler, and I remember three Quaker ladies who were our next-door neighbors, and I remember roller skating and falling down; I was always hitting my knees. I was never anything athletic at all. [laughs] So those are my memories of Ambler. Then we moved to Philadelphia, and then—

Crawford:

For your father's business?

DeCray:

For my father's business, for my school, because my parents didn't like the Ambler schools, and so—three years later he died. He died at seventy-four. Yes, he died when I was eleven. I continued through public school, graduating two weeks after I was seventeen—then I went to Paris two years later to study harp more intensely.

Crawford:

Let me find out just a little bit more about your early years. For instance, your studies at the piano, two or three years?

DeCray:

I studied the piano from six until I was twenty.

Crawford:

Oh, you studied simultaneously.

DeCray:

I continued both instruments, yes.

Crawford:

Thinking that you would use both professionally?

DeCray:

Possibly, and certainly thinking that the piano grounded the harp. The harp solo literature was in those days very weak, and is now rather weak. Major classic composers didn't write for the harp. There's a concerto by Mozart for harp and flute. There are one or two small ditties by Beethoven.

Crawford:

How about transcriptions?

DeCray:

Well, I like transcriptions, and I learned a great many transcriptions. My French professor had transcribed many volumes of small works for harp from harpsichord and from other instruments, so I kind of grew up on those. But I felt really that it was important to validate the harp for itself by quality works originally composed for it.

Crawford:

To validate the harp.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

What was your piano course like for all those years?

DeCray:

A lesson every week. I studied some with Leo Ornstein in my late teens, too.

Crawford:

Oh, wow.

DeCray:

For a while I thought I'd like to be a pianist, but eventually I settled on the harp. And when I got terribly busy with the harp, the piano fell by the wayside, and I stopped lessons when I was twenty.

Crawford:

What was Ornstein like?

DeCray:

Oh, wonderful, intense and stimulating. How he ever managed to live so long I don't know. He would chain smoke through a lesson.

Thin as a rail, yellow of skin. I always thought it was not from his heritage, but rather from his tobacco. He would smoke and the ashes would fall on the keyboard, and he'd be smoking with a great big long set of ashes, you know, and talking at the same time [imitates sounds]. It was wonderful. And he was a live wire, really live wire.

Crawford:

What was his approach to teaching you?

DeCray:

Terribly intensive and very, very serious, of course, much more intensive than the rest of my piano training, and a little scary.

Crawford:

What years were we talking?

DeCray:

Oh, I guess when I was fifteen to eighteen, something like that.

Crawford:

Oh, a very important time. Did he—

DeCray:

Not all the time. I went to him for coachings.

Crawford:

Coachings, but did he think you had good grounding, good technique?

DeCray:

He never said.

Crawford:

He never said; so he didn't transform anything, didn't change your—

DeCray:

Oh, he tried, he tried. Yes, he tried.

Crawford:

What were you playing? What did he have you play?

DeCray:

Brahms rhapsodies and things like that. I don't remember, really. Maybe the Grieg piano concerto. I don't remember. It's been a long time.

Crawford:

Was the harp received differently? In other words, has the popularity or the fame of the harp, demand for the harp, changed?

DeCray:

Yes. It's increased. There are many more harpists. In the forties and fifties, it was a salon instrument. It sat in the corner of a lovely living room, and from the nineteenth century was

played by ladies, ladies in pretty dresses or gowns. It was a sort of after-dinner parlor instrument, and the repertoire that was available fit perfectly. The most successful harpists were male, and they played in orchestras, and, of course, orchestras didn't have many women, if any, in those days, and they wrote music that was very, very comfortable for the harp, and very comfortable for harpists to play; didn't usually have too much intelligent weight to it.

Crawford:

Did you like what you were playing?

DeCray:

Until I began to have a revelation and discover that there was better music, I felt that I was playing good quality music on the piano, and harp music on the harp, and that was one of the reasons the harp interested me less than the piano. But I really didn't have the strength for the piano. It requires a great, great deal of strength to play some of the music that I was studying.

Crawford:

Because you need more shoulder power?

DeCray:

Shoulder, hand, back. It takes a lot of power.

Crawford:

And you were aware of that as a very young person.

DeCray:

Yes, in my high school years.

Crawford:

What was your practice session like after school?

DeCray:

When I began, and through maybe the first, I don't know, six, eight years, until I came into full bloom in adolescence and began to assert myself, I understood from my mother that I would practice one instrument for fifteen minutes, then I would have breakfast. Then I would practice the other instrument for fifteen or twenty minutes; then I would go to school. School was right down the street, so I would come home for lunch for an hour, and I would practice one instrument, have lunch, practice the other instrument, go back to school.

I remember sort of that this is what happened, but I can remember her boasting about how it worked out so beautifully. I'd come home from school, practice one instrument for a sitting of twenty minutes, go out and "play," with quotes, come back, practice the other instrument, and then have dinner, and practice. I don't know when I did homework. I suppose I did homework after that, and then eventually I went to bed. Then the next day we'd start the same thing over. Once adolescence arrived I started doing a great deal of reading, especially in the summer, so summer was devoted really to reading and practicing. She and I would go to Theodore Presser's, which was a smallish music store at that time, and not yet very much of a publisher, and we

would look through their collection of harp music, which they had acquired for sale over the years and just nobody bought, because just nobody played the harp, and especially in Philadelphia. Maybe a little more in New York, but in Philadelphia there was not much clientele for Presser's to sell their harp music to. So we would go through all these reams of harp music in folders that were this big [demonstrates], that were like cardboard or wallboard on the top and bottom, and they were canvas around the edge of the folder, and we would buy anything that I thought looked like a good piece of music. As a consequence I have stored tons of what I call "lemons and turkeys."

Crawford:

Not throw it away.

DeCray:

Oh no.

Crawford:

You don't teach it, but you can't throw it away.

DeCray:

Oh no, I don't teach it, and you can't throw it away.

Crawford:

Well, now, who were your teachers before, during these years, sixteen?

DeCray:

Well, first I started the harp with an elderly lady in Philadelphia whose name was Dorothy Baseler, B-a-s-e-l-e-r. She was an institution in Philadelphia. Many people studied with her.

Crawford:

Was she with the orchestra?

DeCray:

No, no, no. She was a freelancer, if there was such in those days. When we went to New York City to buy this harp, there was a collection of brochures in a rack on the wall of the harp salon, which, incidentally, was the Lyon and Healy Harp Salon, and while mother was negotiating which harp and how much, and so on and so forth, I was picking up brochures, so we came home with a slew of brochures for teachers, and I guess for things to do with the harp. I don't really remember, but mostly teachers.

Presently, when I was about nine and a half, we became sort of aware of the fact that I was outgrowing Mrs. Baseler. My mother looked over these brochures and decided on a woman named Mildred Dilling, so we went to New York to have a lesson with Mildred Dilling.

Crawford:

Famous lady.

DeCray:

Yes. It took immediately. She was a single woman, a career woman in that day, which was very odd. She would go off on tour, playing recitals by herself, solo recitals for community concerts. She would play all over the United States, and she'd go to France and brush up with the teacher I subsequently studied with in the summer. Sometimes she played in other countries, or Canada or England. I don't know really that she had much of a series in other countries, but she certainly did the Columbia Artists Community Concerts Series. She was virtually the only harpist who did that. So I grew up deciding that that was what I wanted to do, go out and recitalize all over the world.

Crawford:

Like she did.

DeCray:

Yes, like she did. Then when I got to be about twelve and a half, or something like that, and my father had already died, and my mother was sort of watching her pennies, she realized that I was going to have to pay full fare on the train. So we decided, maybe it's time to look at Philadelphia harp teachers.

Crawford:

So how long with Mildred Dilling?

DeCray:

I had started with Mildred Dilling when I was about nine.

Crawford:

So three years.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

And so you traveled to New York once a week—

DeCray:

Sometimes, once a week when she was in town, but she'd go on tour for three or months at a time. I would learn a lot of new solos by myself with an occasional lesson from her best student. She'd go to Europe all summer, which was my free time from school.

Crawford:

Well, Mildred Dilling had seven White House appearances.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

And taught Harpo Marx.

DeCray:

Yes, she did.

Crawford:

She did?

DeCray:

Yes, I met him. I have an autographed picture from him. She had a little soirée for all her students to meet Harpo when I was a child.

Crawford:

What was she like, the teacher?

DeCray:

She was the ultimate career woman. She was very effusive, friendly, charming, beautifully put together, wonderfully adept socially. She was nicely sophisticated, politely sophisticated, perhaps, very New-York, and here we were these hokies from Philadelphia. So it was a real eye-opener to me to see elegant furniture, and a New York apartment that—her apartment went on from room to room. I don't know how many rooms it had. It was huge.

Crawford:

What was the address?

DeCray:

It was on 52nd Street, and it was just off the river. It was up the street, in the same block as Greta Garbo's apartment, which was across the street and a little closer to the river.

Crawford:

A fancy neighborhood.

DeCray:

Yes. I studied with her, as I said, until twelve and a half, something like that, and then we started to investigate Philadelphia harpists. The logical place to go was Curtis Institute. Since I was a little young for a post-high-school conservatory and the teacher there, we went to the teacher's most successful student, who played first harp in the Philadelphia Orchestra. I had three lessons with Edna Phillips. I already had been playing up a storm. She said, "You've got to stop playing. You've got to go back to playing just a single note at a time, and absorb my method, which is the method that is taught at Curtis Institute by Carlos Salzedo."

This didn't go down my gullet too well, and it didn't go down my mother's gullet too well, either. So soon we decided to scrap the idea of trying to have lessons in Philadelphia. We went back to Mildred Dilling, and I continued with her through my teens, and when I was nineteen, I guess, I went to France and studied with Renié, her teacher, in the summer. Then I would have

coaching lessons with Mildred Dilling in the winter when I needed them, and studied with Renié in the summer. This went on for several summers.

Crawford:

When you were nineteen, from nineteen?

DeCray:

It began, yes, when I was nineteen. Yes.

Crawford:

But how was that affordable? I mean, that had to be costly in those days. Your bank account?

DeCray:

It was. It was. We flew. We never took a boat, and our first flight ever was from Philadelphia to Paris; we never flew anywhere before that.

Crawford:

And she arranged it for you with Mlle. Renié?

DeCray:

She made the initial arrangements, yes.

Crawford:

Was Renié a little bit like Nadia Boulanger? I mean, it seemed like many people studied with Renié, everybody of a certain level.

DeCray:

To some degree only, because there was this definite school of playing. There was the Curtis Institute school of playing in Philadelphia, with Carlos Salzedo, and there was the French method, which was Renié. There was the Italian method; I forget who that was. So it was sort of like Catholicism and Protestantism and Judaism, you know; everybody's got the truth. There's only one truth; we've got it. No, we've got it.

Crawford:

Describe the difference, if you can.

DeCray:

The Salzedo method is very stiff. The gestures are fairly dramatic. The elbows are kept at a right angle to the body. They're parallel to the floor. The wrists are curved in, and the hand is cast forward in quite a stiff manner. [demonstrates] It's this, kind of. He was an excellent harpist, composer, teacher, a remarkable man, and he did a great, great deal for the harp. But the method I was trained in from the beginning was more relaxed and more limber, and the elbows virtually were where they were. You didn't spend a lot of effort on dramatic gestures.

So that was a big difference. So Renié, yes, was in her day *the* French harp teacher. She had studied with *the* French harp teacher, whose compositions were just voluminous, and belonged in

parlors and salons. His name was Alphonse Hasselmans, H-a-s-s-e-l-m-a-n-s. Heaven knows where he studied. I don't know.

Crawford:

Paris Conservatory, no?

DeCray:

No. He was *the* professor of harp at Paris Conservatory, and he probably was in Paris Conservatory on the ground floor, when it started. I don't remember when it started, do you?

Crawford:

No, I don't. Was this *the* Paris Conservatory?

DeCray:

The Paris Conservatory.

Crawford:

Now there's one in every arrondissement, as you know.

DeCray:

Yes, yes.

Crawford:

What was it like? I mean, that was really something.

DeCray:

Well, I did not study there.

Crawford:

No, I know you didn't study at the conservatory, but you landed in Paris to study with Renié.

DeCray:

Yes. I studied with Renié in her studio, which was in her house on Rue de Passy in the sixteenth arrondissement. She was a really scary woman.

She was very short, very tiny, very, very thin, with enormous beady eyes and a bird-like face, and she had apparently, before the war, been a very big woman. She must have shrunk several inches, and she also lost a huge amount of weight. We naïve Philadelphians went over in '47 thinking that the poor dear had lost all this weight from all the Nazi and Second World War hardships that had come the way of the Parisians. I don't know that that was true at all, but she certainly was maybe ninety, ninety-five pounds, but had a will of steel. She was anything but kindly, sweet, and gentle, but I survived.

Crawford:

But you survived. What did she say about your playing?

DeCray:

I guess she said it was okay.

Crawford:

Where did you stay?

DeCray:

She found us one room in an apartment that was occupied by a mother and father and maybe five children. It was very, very tight, but it was very close to her studio, her house, and that was our first summer experience in France.

Crawford:

How many weeks did you study?

DeCray:

Oh, I guess about ten, probably, nine, ten.

Crawford:

Did you profit, I mean, measurably?

DeCray:

Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. It was wonderful. So we planned to go back again. In 1947 she was only able to teach in Paris. She had previously taught, before the war, in Étretat, which is about seventeen miles from Le Havre.

Crawford:

Who painted Étretat? Everybody.

DeCray:

Yes, lots of guys, Monet, many, many guys.

She had a summer home there, but there was a great deal of Second World War activity there. It had been a British resort, and she would summer there in her house, and her students would follow her there and live in town, and take lessons from her, and practice furiously all summer. Well, she had to quit that when the invasion of France came along and for several years after the war she couldn't go back there, because the town was a mess. Not only was her house a mess, but Étretat itself was pretty badly hit.

So eventually we were able to go to Étretat as well as Paris for lessons, and that worked out very well. It was a change of venue and a change of atmosphere. It was delightful. I got to know several other harpists from Switzerland and Italy, and various other places who came to study. It was quite wonderful.

Crawford:

What did you do about instruments?

DeCray:

She rented; she had many harps, French. She rented me a harp. Soon I was finished with high school, and I went to Temple University for a year. I wasn't transported by Temple, but it had a much better music department than the other university in Philadelphia, which was University of Pennsylvania. So I went there for, I think, about a year, and decided then that I really wanted a better musical education other than the harp, than I was able to get at Temple. So then I applied to Juilliard. That made Mildred Dilling very unhappy, because her competitor, who had also studied with Mademoiselle Renié, was teaching at Juilliard. His name was Marcel Grandjany.

Crawford:

Would you spell that last name?

DeCray:

G-r-a-n-d-j-a-n-y. So I went to an audition for Juilliard and was accepted. She was very upset, but she still, you know—

Crawford:

She could not have been on the faculty there because—

DeCray:

No, no, no. He was European and lofty, and much more intellectual than she. No, no. There was a great deal of snobbism there, and I think also he was a much more serious musical intellectual than she. So I went there for a year, during which time I auditioned for the Met, because the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra had had a strike, their very first strike. They were not working for a number of months, and while they were not working the two harpists decided that they'd had enough of it, and so they both resigned. So I heard of this job opening, so I went and auditioned at the Met, and I got a job playing second harp full time at the Met, and I was still a teenager.

Crawford:

This was '48?

DeCray:

Yes, yes. So I quit Juilliard, because I couldn't do everything, and went and played opera at the Met. I didn't know opera from a hill of beans.

Crawford:

Were you the youngest in the orchestra?

DeCray:

Yes, and I think I was the only female, too. Yes, yes. The two previous harpists had been female, but when they resigned there were no other females. I played at the Met for four years, during which time we would tour, sometimes to Europe, and I would go meet up with Renié at that time and stay on and study with her after the tour was over. When the tour ended, wherever it ended in Europe, I would go back to Paris and study with her. So I continued my studies through my twenties with her.

After I was in the Met for four years, I heard that a job had opened up in Philadelphia for second harp, and I thought, well, it's an audition; why don't I take an audition and see how I make out? Much to my surprise I was offered the job.

Crawford:

You would rather have been in Philadelphia.

DeCray:

Well, it would have been easier than commuting from Philadelphia to New York for the Met—

Crawford:

Your mother was still in Philadelphia?

DeCray:

—or living in New York City. Yes.

Crawford:

Let's just talk a little bit more about the Met Opera orchestra and what impressed you, what conductors and so on.

DeCray:

They were all very impressive.

Crawford:

Did they have somebody like a counterpart of James Levine then?

DeCray:

No. There was Edward Johnson and then Rudolf Bing as general director. Max Rudolf was music director.

Crawford:

And did you have contact with them?

DeCray:

Very, very, very little, very little.

Crawford:

Did you have union representation?

DeCray:

Yes. I had joined the union in Philadelphia when I was in my teens, and yes, we had union representation. We had different conductors for different families of operas. We had a conductor for the Italian operas. We had Fritz Reiner for the Strauss operas. We had Fritz Busch for some other operas. And Fritz Stiedry conducted the Wagnerian ones.

DeCray:

He must have been at the Met for a hundred years, because he was very old and dodderly when I was playing there.

Crawford:

How did you prepare for an opera performance then?

DeCray:

By practicing the part and being very alert at the rehearsals. There were reading rehearsals and then orchestra rehearsals with singers, and then a dress rehearsal.

Crawford:

Was the rehearsal period shorter than it is now?

DeCray:

I think it was longer and I think there were more rehearsals, it just seems to me. It's hard to remember that.

Crawford:

But did it seem arduous to you?

DeCray:

Yes. It seemed arduous, but I was in my twenties, so nothing's very arduous.

Crawford:

So you came and went from Philadelphia.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

And you went home after performances?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

Oh, that was difficult.

DeCray:

Catching a train at 12:01AM sometimes. Once in a while I'd be lucky, catch an 11:30 train. And sometimes there was a rehearsal the next day, so I'd be back maybe on an eight o'clock train. The season was very short. The season began maybe in November. It ended with what could be a five-week tour in, like, April, May, but then there was the long, long summer of no opera.

Crawford:

What did you do during the summer?

DeCray:

Go to France and study harp.

Crawford:

Oh, you went back to France.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

What was her technique, Renié? I mean, in retrospect, what did she have that was different from any other exposure you had?

DeCray:

She and Mildred Dilling had the same technique, and it was very relaxed, and it was a lovely sound.

Crawford:

I think the Slonimsky dictionary said that she was extraordinary in developing really thick calluses for sonority.

DeCray:

Thick calluses don't necessarily play to sonority, because they become almost like fingernails, and it's hard to get a nice sound out of anything very hard. So she herself had very thin little fingers. She was nonetheless a very strong player. The pads on her fingers were quite thin, quite thin.

Crawford:

So that was not necessarily a distinctive feature of her playing.

DeCray:

No, but it had something to do with the way one handled the strings. One pressed into the string as one plucked it. Of course when one played fast it was hard to press into a string and pluck it and go on to the next note, if you were playing very fast. But it worked.

Crawford:

Did she play with any French orchestras?

DeCray:

No. She was a composer and a transcriber and a soloist. She had no affiliation with any school or orchestra.

Crawford:

She composed harp music.

DeCray:

She composed a lot of harp music, yes.

Crawford:

I remember that Frankenstein in one of his reviews of your recital, of a recital of yours, disdained her transcriptions. I think he called them hors d'oeuvres.

DeCray:

Yes. It's parlor music, not much content, and a lot of fluff.

Crawford:

But she was taken seriously in the French music scene.

DeCray:

She was taken seriously by the harp world. She was taken seriously by the French music world. But academic, formal, lofty, in that sense, no, no. She was a woman. Generally speaking, it was just not—she was not taken seriously because of those reasons, at all.

Crawford:

When did you first hear a harp in an orchestral context?

DeCray:

Well, probably when I went to the Philadelphia Orchestra concerts in my early days.

Crawford:

How early? Did you go with your mother?

DeCray:

With mother and father when I was, I don't know, eight, nine, seven.

Crawford:

Did they do that for you, or was that part of their routine.

DeCray:

No, it was done for me. I heard Paderewski's last recital, which was wonderful. I was probably nine or ten years old. He could hardly play a note, and he sort of shuffled onstage. Subsequently, by co-incidence, a number of years later I was in New York City the day of Paderewski's funeral. A big event. Dirge, etc.

Crawford:

What a memory.

DeCray:

Yes. As a child I heard many recitals: Rachmaninoff, Hoffman, Heifetz, Milstein, Rubenstein.

Crawford:

So your parents aspired to that for you. What did they do by themselves when you were very little?

DeCray:

My mother made clothes for me. My father was in business for himself.

Crawford:

But I don't mean what they worked at, but what was your life like? What do you remember of the family routine?

DeCray:

Very, very, very solitary.

Crawford:

You were solitary.

DeCray:

It was a very solitary life. We rarely entertained, rarely were guests.

Crawford:

You had no uncles or aunts or cousins around.

DeCray:

I had an uncle on my mother's side, and there was an estrangement there. They were not friendly; became friendly later. My father had a voluminous family, but for me it consisted of cousins in their forties and fifties. Since my father was sixty-three when I was born, his brothers' children were a generation or so older than I.

Crawford:

Like aunts and uncles.

DeCray:

Yes, yes.

Crawford:

Was there a signal one?

DeCray:

There were a few, but not very close at all. No, there just was very little interaction with family on either side.

Crawford:

So that going to the Philadelphia Orchestra was an occasion, and probably a large part of your social sphere.

DeCray:

Yes, and so was school. I don't remember too much else. I know that we had—I didn't realize that it was solitary at the time, but looking back on it, just a very solitary existence.

Crawford:

And then when you went to New York to study, did you go to New York concerts, or was that not part of it?

DeCray:

No. We went to New York on the train, took a lesson, came home. Sometimes went to Radio City Music Hall as a treat for me.

Crawford:

For a matinee or something like that?

DeCray:

Yes, yes, yes. No theater, no museums, none of that.

Crawford:

Did Ormandy make an impression on you, as juxtaposed with other people you—

DeCray:

It was Stokowski in those days, until 1931—

Stokowski came back, incidentally, while I was in the orchestra, as a guest conductor.

I had no particular impression of Ormandy, but he was very nice when I auditioned, and he chose me instead of the other people who auditioned.

Crawford:

Was there a big audition?

DeCray:

There was a big audition, yes. So, what can I say? He was the conductor. I didn't really have an evaluation of him.

Crawford:

Yes. Let's take a break here, because it's an hour.

[End file 01. Begin file 02.]

Crawford:

Recording again; this is tape number two. Marcella, a couple of more questions about early years before you get your tea. Was there a music system in your family? That is to say, did you listen to music?

DeCray:

Not really. We had a piano. No, nothing except there was a piano as I was a little girl growing up.

Crawford:

So you played. That was the music in the family. Was there religion in the family?

DeCray:

Yes. My father was very active in the Ambler Episcopal Church, ran the men's club, and was considered a pillar of the Episcopal church there, and then also of a church in Philadelphia, and my mother was a Congregationalist. There was not a great deal of religion, no.

Crawford:

Okay. So there were no recordings in your family. Did you go to church services, and did you hear music, and did it amount to anything?

DeCray:

We had a collection of recordings that I imagine must have belonged to my mother, 78s they were called. We had Caruso. We had various others—I still have them.

Crawford:

I was going to say, are these signed?

DeCray:

No, no. But various other opera singers, and I think we had some orchestral works, probably not symphonies, maybe overtures. You didn't get much on one side of a 78.

Crawford:

Did you have a radio?

DeCray:

We had a radio. We had an Atwater-Kent radio. We had a Victrola, one of those things that sits so high, and you wound it.

Crawford:

Oh, you had a lot.

DeCray:

I used to listen to the recordings. I thought that was just great.

Crawford:

Did you listen to the Texaco broadcast, anything of that sort?

DeCray:

Sometimes. Sometimes, yes. Yes. And as I was in my teens I was aware of Toscanini. That's about all I remember, musically.

Crawford:

What pianists would you have known, and/or harpists?

DeCray:

Paderewsky, eventually Horowitz, maybe a little bit Josef Hoffman, not much. Rachmaninoff. I went to several recitals as a girl, and he was soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra a number of times.

Crawford:

And that was impressive. That must have been tremendously impressive.

DeCray:

I collected autographs. I have Rachmaninoff's autograph and, oh, various famous artists' autographs.

Crawford:

How did you do that?

DeCray:

We would go to a concert and afterward I would wheedle my way backstage somehow, and ask for an autograph, and I was always given an autograph. I have a whole album of them.

Crawford:

So, now, you really were then an attendee.

DeCray:

I guess so.

Crawford:

You were intent upon listening and hearing.

DeCray:

Yes, yes.

Crawford:

All right. Well, we've left you going to the Philadelphia Orchestra.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

Who heard you? That would have been Ormandy.

DeCray:

At the audition, Ormandy. Then I began to work there, 1952, and I stayed there for eleven years. We had many wonderful conductors. We had many wonderful pianists: Daniel Barenboim, Byron Janis, and William Kapell Cappell. On occasion, Samuel Barber came to the rehearsals for one thing or another. Ned Rorem came. It was a great parade of big names.

When we would tour to Europe, in every city there was a huge reception after our concert, and we were treated as the greatest luminaries you could possibly imagine in the musical world. We had an audience with Sibelius in his yard of his house. He came out on his deck and he talked to us.

Crawford:

How many were you?

DeCray:

About 110 maybe. So it was really quite wonderful. We met King Olaf of Norway, Pope Pius, and I forget who else. Anyway, it was quite, quite something. I left the orchestra in '63 because I had married, and I had a child, Lexy, who was maybe a year old. Yes. And my husband had a job offer in California, in San Francisco.

Crawford:

Well, let's back up a minute. What made the Philadelphia Orchestra the great orchestra that it was, do you think, because certainly it was one of the tops.

DeCray:

It was around a long time. It was part of a well-established system. Philadelphia was a terribly well-established, stuffy place.

Crawford:

Talk about that.

DeCray:

Well, there was no social fluidity, and there was an enormous number of wealthy people who lived on the mainline, and who supported the orchestra, one of the reasons for its greatness, because it had the wherewithal to be great. It just was not as youthful a place, or as fluid a place, artistically or socially, as I discovered San Francisco was when I came to San Francisco, nor was it quite as overtly competitive a place as New York City, musically.

Crawford:

How so?

DeCray:

It had a different sort of profile. Boston at the time was up and coming. New York was—the New York Philharmonic was very well thought of, but the Philadelphia Orchestra was sort of the—

[Interruption. Telephone machine in background.]

DeCray:

—the holy grail of the music world. The Chicago Symphony was not that prominent at that time.

Crawford:

Cleveland?

DeCray:

Moderately prominent in the forties, moderately prominent. And gradually Chicago became more renowned and more well thought of, and Boston, of course, picked up with Koussevitsky, and once Toscanini hit the New York Philharmonic, that was all they needed to soar.

Crawford:

And I suppose there was competition between them.

DeCray:

Oh yes.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. Stokowski had a huge profile. That's a terrible pun, because he also had quite a profile. But he was terrific at his own P.R., and he had help. So as a consequence, Philadelphia was a very well "thought of" orchestra, and they did a beautiful job of playing.

Once Ormandy arrived, he started to revise the strings. He had been a violinist. He started to revise the strings' sound in such a way that made it more vibrant and more present and more rich, and less classical, less restrained. This became an issue with some people who felt that the Philadelphia Orchestra should not have done that, and that it was Ormandy's fault that it had happened, and so on. It really didn't bother me at all.

Crawford:

How was that done? How do you go about doing something—

DeCray:

I don't know. I didn't ever play a stringed instrument, although I did study violin one summer, but I don't know. I think it probably had something to do with pressing on the strings with the bow.

Crawford:

Well, Ormandy had a tenure of over forty years. Is that right?

DeCray:

Yes, yes. He also was very careful to hold onto his tenure. Yes.

Crawford:

So what was your schedule like, and when did you marry?

DeCray:

I married in '61. The schedule was pretty much year-round, save half of July, and all of August. But otherwise it was year round. The orchestra would begin its season in September with rehearsals maybe for a couple of weeks. Then it would have run-outs to New York City and to Baltimore and Washington. Almost every week we had a run-out to one of those places.

Crawford:

And how about your weekly rehearsal schedule?

DeCray:

It was almost daily, and there were sometimes double rehearsals, long hours of rehearsal. There was a concert on, I think, maybe Wednesday or Thursday, Thursday afternoon, perhaps, Friday night, Saturday night, children's concerts sometimes on Saturday morning, recording sessions on Sundays. It was a very, very taxing schedule, and a tour in the spring of several weeks, Europe or United States, or both. So it was followed by Robin Hood Dell in the summer, which was six weeks or eight weeks, something like that, outdoor concerts. So there was maybe a break of a few weeks between the end of the season and start of Robin Hood Dell, and then it was maybe four or five weeks after Robin Hood Dell before the orchestra season, the formal orchestra season at the Academy of Music picked up again.

Crawford:

Did you love that life?

DeCray:

Yes. It was fun. It was glamorous. Yes.

Crawford:

How did Ormandy communicate with the orchestra? You know, they always say Jorda lectured, and Krips played all the time and never said anything.

DeCray:

Ormandy didn't talk very much. He was Hungarian. He communicated very succinctly, and sometimes without words, with the hands, but also with his looks. You could call them glares, I suppose, but not necessarily always glares.

Crawford:

He'd glare at a player? Oh. [looking at pictures?] That was an illustration there of a glare.

DeCray:

And we had many guest conductors. We had one wonderful guest conductor whose name was István Kertész. I forget where he was from, someplace in the middle of Europe, maybe Hungary; I forget. Anyway, he was the one most of us absolutely adored, and he died in some sort of an accident in Europe. I don't remember anything about it, but we were all crushed by it. It was really sad. But we had many wonderful conductors. We had Stravinsky, Charles Muench, Barbirotti, Sir Thomas Beecham, all these big names.

Crawford:

Do you want to say anything about them, I mean, just a distinctive thing?

DeCray:

Stravinsky was not a very good conductor, and he would have Robert Kraft do all his rehearsing. Whatever became of Robert Kraft after Stravinsky died I don't know.

Crawford:

Up until a few years ago he was always in the *New York Review of Books*, these long, long essays.

DeCray:

On?

Crawford:

Stravinsky and, you know, academic music, pretty much. But I don't know. I haven't seen him for five years maybe, so I don't know. Well, what about Sir Thomas?

DeCray:

Oh, he was delightful. We enjoyed him very much. And Paul Dufay. I don't know, we had just about every name that there was. We had Edward von Beinum. We liked him very much.

Crawford:

Was it all nineteenth-century music then?

DeCray:

Once in a while a little Copland. Copland came around sometimes. We did a lot of Virgil Thomson.

Crawford:

Who liked Thomson? Isn't that usually the conductor who—

DeCray:

I think if I sat and thought for about three hours, I might be able to come up with one name. It's hard for me to remember who might have liked Virgil Thomson—

Crawford:

But the audiences—

DeCray:

—other than Virgil Thomson. We also did a great deal of music by a man named Richard Yardumian, who was a protégé of a man named Pitcairn, who ran Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, and this was apparently a conduit for money to come to the Philadelphia Orchestra, to Ormandy. So we would play music by Yardumian, which was only slightly—well, it was probably more than slightly vacuous. It had very little going for it. It had less substance than Virgil Thomson's. Yardumian was never heard of after I left the Philadelphia Orchestra. [laughs] I never played it anywhere else. Nice guy.

But one thing I learned from the Yardumian experiences was that Ormandy could take a piece of music that was absolutely, utterly vacuous, and he could manipulate it into something that people would listen to, intently. The process was wonderful. Is that good? That's a judgment which I think history makes. But I think it was a wonderful process to be part of, to see how you could take something, and particularly since, as I've said, harp music was rather insignificant, to take a piece of insignificant music and look for whatever it had that was worthwhile in it, as hard as you had to ferret, nonetheless find it and bring it to the fore, and present an absolutely impeccable performance. That was a remarkable experience.

Crawford:

Yes, that is remarkable. What nineteenth-century composers were kindest to the harp?

DeCray:

Berlioz, Tchaikovsky. We did very little Tchaikovsky in the Philadelphia Orchestra, because it's his ballet music that features the harp. Glière wrote a wonderful program-length symphony called *Ilya Muromets* which had huge work for the harp.

Crawford:

And were you always on call? I mean, what percentage of concerts had harp?

DeCray:

Maybe 90 percent.

Crawford:

So it was a big schedule.

DeCray:

And the harp parts were always doubled. Ormandy wanted them doubled. So if there was only a first harp part, two harpists doubled, the other harpist and me, and if there was a work like the Berlioz *Symphony Fantastique*, which had two separate harp parts, then we also played those. So we were kept fairly busy.

Crawford:

What did you think of audiences then?

DeCray:

The Thursday afternoons were filled with the ladies. The others were very vital.

Crawford:

So they knew good music.

DeCray:

Oh yes, yes. There were two artistic institutions going in Philadelphia. One was the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which, of course, as museums go, was rather static. The other great artistic goldmine in Philadelphia was the Barnes Foundation. It was private, and most people didn't even know about it. There was just little else notably artistic going in Philadelphia in the mid-twentieth century.

Crawford:

There was no opera company per se.

DeCray:

There were two independent opera companies that would give occasional performances. They would give maybe two, three operas a year, and just one performance.

Crawford:

Did you socialize with the other players?

DeCray:

Some, some, yes.

Crawford:

Then you met your husband, and how did that come about?

DeCray:

I decided to go to the University of Pennsylvania nights and Saturdays, because I had nothing but harp training, and so I did that for several years, and wound up getting a bachelor's degree in 1958. I met him in one of the classes that I was in there.

Crawford:

What area was that?

DeCray:

Maybe sociology. I decided somewhere along the way that I liked the sociology courses the best of any that I had, although their music courses, which were theory and that sort of thing, and music history—they didn't have any applied music, which Temple University had had.

Then I got into other disciplines, and the one that I liked the most while I was getting the bachelor's degree was sociology, really based on the first sociology teacher I had, who was the best. So I took every sociology course you could find, and after I graduated I decided I would go for a master's in sociology, so I took every sociology graduate course you could find. Then eventually, having married and having Lexy, we moved, because my husband had a great job offer here, and so I quit the Philadelphia Orchestra and said, well, I'll concentrate on a new city, and I'll finish my sociology work in California, and I have a child. I'd been working, well, I started working at age nine, so I'd been working a lot of years.

Crawford:

So you were happy to be a young mother and young wife.

DeCray:

Yes. Yes. When I was nine I would play almost every Sunday in a church. The first year, when I was nine, I had twenty-two jobs, and I distinctly remember that within a year or two, I was up to about forty-five, women's clubs, choruses that needed a soloist, and churches. So I really had had a whole thing going in addition to a young kid's life.

Crawford:

What did you make? Do you remember?

DeCray:

Make? Money?

Crawford:

Money. In terms of money, your stipend.

DeCray:

Five dollars when I was nine.

Crawford:

That's not mean. That's not little, I think.

DeCray:

No, it's not. Ten or fifteen dollars at women's clubs. Soon it went up to twenty-five dollars, and all this while I was still a young teenager, in the 1940s.

Crawford:

Do you remember what your salary was? Did you make a living wage in the Met Opera orchestra?

DeCray:

Oh yes. Oh yes.

Crawford:

A living wage?

DeCray:

I don't remember what it was, but oh, yes. It was a good deal of money. Less money for more weeks with the Philadelphia Orchestra, but fewer performances.

Crawford:

Yes, because of shorter seasons?

DeCray:

No, a longer season. A shorter season in the Met, but much more intensive.

Crawford:

That's right, because they had four or five performances in a week.

DeCray:

Yes. And four-to-six hour operas, versus two-hour symphony concerts.

Crawford:

What were the union benefits, do you remember, that you had early in your career?

DeCray:

I don't remember except that the pension started somewhere in there. James Petrillo started this pension fund, and of course as is always the case with somebody young, one doesn't think about pension, you know, off there somewhere. But I still get—every year I get a record of my first union jobs in 1948.

Crawford:

Every year you get like a recap?

DeCray:

Every year the musicians' union pension fund sends me information from every year, and it goes back to 1948, so it's a long time.

Crawford:

I should say so. Thank goodness for Petrillo.

DeCray:

Yes. Yes.

Crawford:

All right. Well, let's go to San Francisco, 1964 I think.

DeCray:

1963 in December we moved here. My husband went to work for Arthur D. Little as a city planner, and that job lasted a year. It was due to last in perpetuity, but . . .

I was pregnant with Lael, and we were living on Jackson Street. I was playing as second harp with the San Francisco Symphony and with the opera when they needed a second harp.

Crawford:

How did you get into those positions?

DeCray:

Well, it was known that a Philadelphia Orchestra member had moved here, who played harp.

Crawford:

So they recruited you, really.

DeCray:

Oh yes, sure. Yes. And Josef Krips had guest conducted in the summers for one week at Robin Hood Dell, so he knew me from the Philadelphia Orchestra. I don't remember how Kurt Adler found out about me, maybe from Krips.

Crawford:

Well, you gave a recital that was very well received by all three critics.

DeCray:

Yes, at the conservatory, in a tiny—I think somebody referred to it as a shoebox hall.

Crawford:

Which hall was that?

DeCray:

Oh, I don't know. It's long gone. The conservatory has redone itself thoroughly. But it was a nice little hall, and it was very, very comfortable for harp.

Crawford:

For a solo recital.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. A great big hall, the harp does not have that kind of a substantial penetrating sound.

Crawford:

What did you think at that point about your career, now that you had children?

DeCray:

Well, I had no siblings and no parents. I wanted very much to have some human roots other than my own, and it seemed to me important to look ahead and have children, and so I was very glad to get married and have children. I don't know, I hadn't any major life plan

Crawford:

But you wanted to be a professional. You wanted to carry on.

DeCray:

I wanted to be a professional. I had thought—incidentally, going back, I had thought when I was in my teens that I would be a recitalist just like Mildred Dilling, and I would get polish from my French harp teacher to become this great soloist. And I discovered that was a very thin field. You went out and you played a recital in some place that you wouldn't necessarily want to go to, for a group of people who had never heard a harp. It was just—it was not very rewarding, artistically.

And then you'd get in your car, or you'd get in your train, and you'd have this harp to schlep along somehow, and you'd go to another place just like that place. That may have suited Mildred Dilling just fine, playing the music, the florid, vacuous music that we had reams of, but it didn't inspire me. I preferred music that was more grounded. I preferred better quality music, and I didn't like going to third-rate little towns and feeling—I had no sense of mission that was satisfied by bringing the harp to people to people who'd never seen or heard one before.

Crawford:

How much did you do of that?

DeCray:

Quite a bit around Philadelphia, and I had a manager in New York for a while.

Crawford:

Oh, talk about that, when you first got management.

DeCray:

The manager was a woman, and her name was Molyneaux, and I don't remember the rest of her name, her first name. But she and a young man had this young artist management company, and they sent me off to Florida to play a concert. They sent me to a few other places. It was not really a very rewarding experience for me, though it can be perfectly rewarding for somebody else.

Today there's a great deal more going for the harp, I think, a great many more harpists than there were in those days. So I felt that I wanted to take an orchestra job when it presented itself, which is why I went to the Met, and then I went from that to another orchestra job, and so by the time I left the Philadelphia Orchestra I felt, well, I could still do solo work if I wanted to. I also could play some with the orchestra here if I wanted to, and I could also raise my children if I wanted to, and altogether, that was a life. So I felt comfortable with having left the Philadelphia Orchestra.

I continued to play with the symphony when Osawa came, and I meanwhile had started playing in Aspen in the summers. I founded the harp department at the Aspen Music School, as I had started the harp department at Peabody Conservatory before I left the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Crawford:

Oh, well, talk about that.

DeCray:

Well, Peabody in Baltimore had no harp department, and the Philadelphia Orchestra went to Washington and Baltimore for two days once or twice a month, I guess maybe twice during its

season. So I suggested to the dean of Peabody that maybe they'd like to have a harp department, and I would come to Baltimore every couple of weeks, and I could give lessons. And they thought that was a great idea, so I founded a harp department. That's all there is to founding a department.

Crawford:

Yes. But Peabody, that's a very good conservatory.

DeCray:

Yes, it is.

Crawford:

And it was then.

DeCray:

Yes, yes, yes. Old conservatory, too, a very old conservatory.

Crawford:

I think so. And how long a trip was that for you?

DeCray:

To Baltimore? It was about an hour and a half, hour and three quarter's train trip, and it was usually conjunct to the Philadelphia Orchestra's performances in Washington at—I forget the name of the hall. Then we would play in Baltimore at something that I think was called the Lyric Theater. I think; I don't really remember. Anyway, but in the afternoon I would be in Baltimore and I would teach the people who were studying harp.

Crawford:

So you were on the faculty.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

Who were your students?

DeCray:

I don't remember. They were teenagers, not signed up for a degree, a bachelor's degree or anything like that. They were high schoolers, because Peabody, as most conservatories do, had an extension department, and they had no one who signed up immediately for a degree. I did that for a couple of years, and then I left the Philadelphia Orchestra, so when I came here I immediately went to work at the San Francisco Conservatory as the harp teacher, because the conservatory had no harp department either.

Juilliard, Curtis Institute, and Indiana University were the only secondary schools offering a degree major in harp.

Crawford:

Who were the outstanding teachers then?

DeCray:

Marcel Grandjany, Carlos Salzedo, and that's about it.

Crawford:

Well, that's remarkable, when you consider that they were supplying—or was it that most orchestral harp positions were given to Europeans?

DeCray:

No. I think they were mostly given to American women.

Crawford:

Considered a woman's instrument then.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. And there were many programs that many orchestras played that had no harp, because they played Beethoven and Bach, and those guys didn't write for harp. Harp was a small delicate instrument of strings and no pedals in the days of Beethoven. Mozart wrote his harp and flute concerto for a harp that had few pedals, very few accidentals.

The pedal harp, invented in 1810, did not really develop much in the nineteenth century. Erard produced beautiful instruments with an exquisite but small sound and an enormously complicated mechanism. Wurlitzer and Lyon Healy, two American companies, began developing sturdier harps around 1890.

Crawford:

I didn't realize that Beethoven never wrote for the harp.

DeCray:

He wrote a little bit, a couple of very short pieces, and they were buried in some library somewhere, and Nicanor Zabaleta found them.

Crawford:

So the harpists for all these orchestras basically came from two conservatories.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

Until Marcella DeCray got active on the conservatory scene. That's quite something, isn't it? And how about in other cities, then, what happened? How about Chicago conservatory?

DeCray:

There was a conservatory that developed in Cleveland. The harp teacher was a student of Carlos Salzedo's. Chicago, I don't remember that there was a conservatory. There was a little harp activity out here in Southern California, maybe at USC. The teacher who taught—the people who taught in USC, and eventually a couple of other institutions in Southern California started having harp departments—was a man named Attl, A-t-t-l, and I know nothing about him except that he was a Californian, and some outstanding California harpists studied with him. And some California harpists emigrated to Philadelphia to Curtis, or to New York to Juilliard, and rarely to the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Crawford:

Had Juilliard had a harp department for some time?

DeCray:

Maybe it started in 1925 or '30. I don't know.

Crawford:

How do you explain that—

DeCray:

It was a parlor instrument. I mean, like there was a day when the guitar was not what it is now. Mr. Segovia took care of that.

Crawford:

So that if you to take lessons, you found a harpist who had a private studio somewhere, and you played a parlor instrument. Was that it?

DeCray:

Yes, yes, your first several years. Then off to conservatory, a college/university harp department or a renowned teacher.

Crawford:

Okay, good. Well, we're in San Francisco now, and you are playing with the San Francisco Symphony.

DeCray:

And the opera, and teaching at the conservatory.

Crawford:

Well, let's just talk about Krips, because people disagree very, very diametrically about Josef Krips.

DeCray:

He was, I thought, very sweet. [laughs] Very dedicated, deadly serious, and very well grounded musically.

Crawford:

I'm thinking of something that David Sheinfeld wrote about him, that he was such a temperamental man, and nasty to the players, didn't like women.

DeCray:

Well, that could be, but I had come from that. I mean, Ormandy liked women, but he could be very nasty. All conductors were nasty. Toscanini was terribly nasty. But was that as important as what the guy can do? Is that as important as the results?

Crawford:

Well, wait a minute, because remember who Sheinfeld had before Krips.

DeCray:

Jorda.

Crawford:

Jorda and then—

DeCray:

I don't know anything about Jorda at all.

Crawford:

He started with Monteux, who was—

DeCray:

Oh yes, Monteux was very sweet. We had Monteux in Philadelphia as a guest conductor a number of times, yes; very sweet, very cuddly, very French, very quiet.

Crawford:

Well, the other thing Sheinfeld thought was that he didn't understand contemporary music.

DeCray:

Krips? He didn't. He was a rather specialized musician, I'd say. He was quite good on Mozart, and he was quite good on some of the early German and Austrian, but get him out of that into Russian, you know, he was a fish out of water.

Crawford:

What was the makeup of the San Francisco Symphony?

DeCray:

It appeared to have about ninety players, I'd say. McGuinness played clarinet, Rense played flute. We had Jake Krachmalnick for a while as the concertmaster, and he had been in Philadelphia. That was very nice. I think did we also have Stuart Canin as concertmaster for a while. Yes, and he had been in Philadelphia. He followed Jake in Philadelphia. We had Ralph Persinger on viola, and we had Bobby Sayre on cello.

Crawford:

Was Elayne Jones in the orchestra then? Were there other women in the orchestra?

DeCray:

In the San Francisco Symphony? Anne Adams had been first harp for years. There were several other women, I recall.

Crawford:

Oh, I thought she was, and then Adler took her because she didn't get tenure.

DeCray:

Really?

Crawford:

Was that before your time?

DeCray:

No, but I don't remember that.

Crawford:

I'll check it, but I remember Adler took her after—

DeCray:

Yes, that could be.

Crawford:

I'll find out. She sued the symphony, because she felt that she'd been dealt with racially.

DeCray:

I see.

Crawford:

But I'll check that. Okay. So then Osawa came in '70.

DeCray:

Yes, which was a great change from Krips.

Crawford:

Was Krips let go?

DeCray:

I don't remember, no idea.

Crawford:

Well, before we go to Osawa then, let's talk about your meeting with Adler. When did you start with the opera orchestra?

DeCray:

I think in '64, and Anne Adams was the first harp in both the symphony and the opera. It was a very different situation for me, because in Philadelphia a precedent had been set. I was under a full-season contract. The previous harpists had either been hired by the service or they had a half-year's contract, and when I auditioned and got the job it was agreed upon that I would have a full season's contract. Then when I came to San Francisco I played by the service, both in the opera and in the symphony, which was the common way to treat a second harpist in any venue, including the New York Philharmonic and Chicago and so on.

Crawford:

What do you mean? I'm sorry. Which was the way to treat a second harpist, by giving two contracts?

DeCray:

You have a full-time contract for the first harpist, and the second harpist is hired per service, or if they felt there were enough services she would be needed for, she might be hired for a half season, but the half season to be spread over a full season. In other words, if there were sixty performances, a hypothetical number, she would be hired for thirty performances, but they would spread them throughout the season.

Crawford:

Okay.

DeCray:

So it was a big change for me to find that I was hired by the service, by the rehearsal, by the performance, as opposed to having a guaranteed yearly wage the same as William Kincaid, who played flute, or Jake Krachmalnick, who was concertmaster.

One thing I might additionally say about the Philadelphia Orchestra is that there were wonderful, wonderful players on the first chair of various instruments, very, very renowned players.

Crawford:

Want to name them?

DeCray:

Marcel Tabeteaux on oboe was one of the greatest in the world, William Kincaid on flute, Samuel Mayes on cello, Alexander Hillsburg, the concertmaster before Jake and Stuart came in. I don't know, various—Sam Lifshy on viola. I forget the names offhand, some of the other first-chair players, but they were very, very, very famous. They had a huge history behind them. There was not that sort of history in the New York Philharmonic or the Boston, the sort of P.R. history type that was worked up. That was one of the reasons I think that Philadelphia Orchestra had such a fantastic name back in the twenties and thirties.

Crawford:

They always talk about the Philadelphia sound.

DeCray:

Yes, well, that's the Ormandy sound.

Crawford:

That's the reconfigured string.

DeCray:

Yes, which was the string sound, yes.

Crawford:

So what were your reflections about San Francisco Symphony?

DeCray:

That it was a good B-class orchestra, and it was trying, trying hard. In general I felt that California music was not like East Coast music. It was a little more unestablished. At the same time it was a little more forward-looking, which was nice.

Crawford:

In terms of programming.

DeCray:

Yes. Right after I moved here I discovered 321 Divisadero Street, which was the Tape Music Center.

Crawford:

Talk about the San Francisco Tape Music Center.

DeCray:

It was wonderful. We went to many and many a performance there, Pauline Oliveros, Morton Subotnick.

Crawford:

You and your husband, you mean.

DeCray:

Yes. It was great. Then, of course, there was 1750 Arch.

Crawford:

Who ran 1750 Arch then?

DeCray:

Eva Soltes, Bill Buckner, maybe.

Crawford:

Oh, she went way back, then.

DeCray:

I don't know. I really don't know.

Crawford:

I came there when she was very active there.

DeCray:

Yes. She's still around.

Crawford:

Oh, I know. I see her. She's making documentaries now. So what made this vital contemporary music scene possible, do you think?

DeCray:

I don't know, other than that the California music scene was not so well established, so it was open to more ideas, and less steeped in the snob classicists, so to speak. In the Philadelphia Orchestra, it was modern if they played Richard Strauss or Aaron Copland.

Crawford:

But the San Francisco Symphony didn't play Pauline Oliveros.

DeCray:

No, no, but there was Pauline Oliveros somewhere in the musical scene at the time, and that was refreshing.

Crawford:

How influential do you think she was, herself?

DeCray:

I don't think very; together with Morton Subotnick, maybe somewhat. He was a little more influential, but the Tape Music Center died eventually.

Crawford:

It went over to Mills, I think.

DeCray:

And I think maybe 1750 Arch was more influential in its own way. I had heard one new music concert in Philadelphia just a couple of months before I moved here, and one composer whose work impressed me very much was Ralph Shapey and I thought that was wonderful. It sort of opened all of classical music to a widened venue. It was quite wonderful. It's like having only so much of a view, and then suddenly it was expanded.

Crawford:

What was it about Shapey's music that you—

DeCray:

It just seemed to speak more than the other people on the program, and I think in general he was one of the heavyweights in what I now believe is a very lightweight musical world. I don't feel that contemporary music in America has really said much, done much. I think it sort of marked time.

Crawford:

Since that time, or do you think that the sixties were very much more vital?

DeCray:

I think they were more vital in other countries than they were here.

Crawford:

But with the Tape Music Center and 1750 Arch being exceptions to that?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

What happened to them?

DeCray:

Well, 1750 Arch went on for a long time. It generated Cage and so on and so forth, so it had an important role, I think, a very important role.

Crawford:

Well, how did you feel about the music scene here? So you didn't really miss the East Coast or Philadelphia.

DeCray:

I didn't miss the East Coast, no, and I had a rather full life. I was teaching more than I had taught in the east, and playing enough, and taking care of two children, so life was fairly busy.

[End of interview]

Interview # 2- 10-30-04
[Begin File DeCray, 03 10-30-04]

Crawford:

October 30, 2004, interview number two with Marcella DeCray for the Regional Oral History Office.

DeCray:

There are just a couple of things I thought relative to our last meeting, one of which is that I think I indicated that my parents had both been poor as children, and yet you asked how come we were able to go to France, and I was able to study harp, and so on and so forth, because that, of course, is not something that happens to very poor people.

These people, who did not go to high school, went to work; my father in a hardware store, at, I guess, maybe fourteen, twelve, and my mother as apprentice to a dressmaker, worked very hard. It was in the era when people worked seven days a week, and they gradually saved enough money so that when they met they each were doing pretty well. My father had a lovely corner house in Ambler. My mother had the dregs of her inheritance from her mother, who was dead, and the stock market crash gave them some inspiration. My mother particularly was very astute at buying stocks that appreciated very well.

Crawford:

How did she know that?

DeCray:

She was very astute that way. So that was responsible for their being in a better position than they had been as children. And I think also that there's a lot of incentive among some people to raise yourself up from being poor.

My mother graduated from Drexel Institute in dressmaking, and she taught dressmaking in private schools, such as a private school for disabled girls. Let's see. I guess that's most of it, much of what I had buried so far back in my history.

Crawford:

How long did your mother live, Marcella?

DeCray:

She lived until I was twenty-eight.

Crawford:

She was a great champion for you.

DeCray:

Yes, she was. Yes. When I was a little girl she would sit dutifully by me while I practiced, and she had studied piano, so she must have been able to read music a little, but she was not artistic

or musical. She recognized that if she sat there by me, beside the harp, it would lend a certain importance to it.

Crawford:

You can't get better support than that, can you?

DeCray:

Yes, you can't.

Crawford:

So she was there for your Carnegie Hall recital, debut recital.

DeCray:

Yes, yes.

Crawford:

I can't imagine any greater honor for a mother.

DeCray:

I think she was very pleased when I joined the Philadelphia Orchestra, because we'd been to occasional Philadelphia Orchestra concerts, and it was *the* musical organization in Philadelphia, so that I'm sure—she never expressed it, but I'm sure she was very pleased.

Crawford:

That Carnegie Hall recital—I think it was 1953—what did that represent for you?

DeCray:

It represented a coming of age musically, and an effort not to be cast solely as an orchestra harpist, because I'd come out of the teaching tradition that a harpist should be a concert player who recitalized all over the United States and the world, which I didn't really like too much, as I mentioned before, and yet I felt that pull to continue to be as much of an individual musician as possible, in addition to playing with ensembles and playing in an orchestra.

Crawford:

Did you go back to Carnegie Hall as a soloist?

DeCray:

The recital was in Carnegie Recital Hall.

Crawford:

Yes, the smaller hall.

DeCray:

Which is no longer there, but Zankel Hall has replaced it, I guess. But yes, the Philadelphia Orchestra played many, many times in Carnegie Hall. About once a month.

Crawford:

If you had stayed on the East Coast would you have done more recitals, just because of the press of the demand?

DeCray:

I don't think so, and the demand was thin, very thin.

Crawford:

Was there ever a recital you played in the National Gallery?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

That must have also been a very good venue.

DeCray:

Yes, in Washington, yes. But at the same time, it's always an uphill slog for a harpist. It's a little better today.

Crawford:

Is that because of repertoire, there's more repertoire?

DeCray:

It's because of more repertoire, because of more harpists, because the instrument has become more popular. The American Harp Society has more than 3,000 members, just the U. S., and the World Harp Congress has many hundred members. It's a worldwide organization with members from Iraq, Turkey, Slovenia, and, of course, all the Asian countries, as well as Europe and Latin America. It's a much more popular instrument than it was some forty, fifty years ago.

Crawford:

Well, that said, let's pause and look at the instruments.

DeCray:

The dynamics, whether one plays loudly or softly, or does a crescendo or diminuendo, that's entirely controlled by the hand. There is no way to stop the sound other than by the hand. It gently pats the string. The instrument is peopled with forty-seven strings, most of which are either gut or nylon. Gut has a much nicer sound than nylon. The gut is made out of sheep intestine, and the predominant color of the gut strings is either red, or more popularly, white.

But all the Cs and all the Fs are differentiated in color, so that one can tell all the strings apart. The Cs are usually red in a white-strung harp, and the Fs are always purple. In a red-strung harp the Cs are green and the Fs are still purple, dark, dark purple. So the sheep intestine is dyed. After it's processed it's dyed in such a way that these colors hold throughout the life of the string.

The lower section of the instrument [loud noise] is wire strings, and that means that we have a shaft of wire with silk over it, and then coiled wire around it, and the coiled wire is silver. In the case of the Fs and Cs, as in the gut strings, they're colored copper, so there wire covering is copper. That's so you can tell them apart.

The oddity with tuning the instrument is that the wire strings go flat in cold weather, and the gut strings go sharp, and the opposite happens in hot weather, so one is always obliged to be aware of the temperature.

Crawford:

How often are you tuning those forty-seven strings?

DeCray:

Often, very often, it takes about maybe five minutes to do a thorough tuning, maybe three minutes; touch-ups, oh, a few seconds. In recent years—by recent I mean maybe the last three, four decades—tuners have been developed. Prior to that one used a tuning fork. If one was lucky, one found a C tuning fork. Otherwise one used an A tuning fork. But since the instrument is diatonic like the piano, it is built on C, or actually on C flat, which is the loosest position for the pedals, and one would, prior to the advent of the tuning mechanism, tune by ear, and tune by interval. The pedal loosens the string, because if you come over here and photograph closely, you'll see that there are discs along here, as well as tuning pins. There are two sets of discs for every string, and when you have a string in sharp [demonstrates note] or this one [plays note], both these discs are involved. When you lower to natural, the lower one has loosened. When you lower it to flat, both have loosened, but there's always the bridge that stays intact.

Crawford:

You touched on this, but what is the touch function, or what I mean to say is, how does the concept of touch differ from a piano?

DeCray:

Piano you're dealing with perpendicular fingers to flat keys, and the keys themselves give little response. A key is not malleable to the touch. A very competent piano player makes the sound malleable, but the key itself is as fixed as a piece of wood, or ivory, and they're now plastic of various sorts.

The harp strings are always malleable. You can push them. You can pull them. And as you are tuning them and putting in new strings, you move them sideways or you push them inward, so they're much more attached to what the finger does to them. The touch is by plucking, so the finger is curled slightly around the string, not a great deal around the string, but enough that one can get leverage and not be so engaged with the string that one can't get off it and get to another string quickly. [plays notes] That sort of thing.

Whether you pluck strongly, gently, lightly, or whether you press and pluck, all those things change the sound. They change the timbre. They change the pitch sometimes. It's a very intimate instrument. One can feel, when one has it on one's shoulder and one is sitting down with it with one's arms around it, one can feel almost at one with it.

Crawford:

That's a beautiful way to put it. I guess one feels that way about a keyboard instrument as well, because it's orchestral. I mean, it's the whole way of playing.

DeCray:

I've never quite found that with a piano.

Crawford:

No. It's more intimate, then.

DeCray:

Yes. The ivories are hard. In some temperatures they're cold.

Crawford:

So are you saying the nuances are more with a harp, tonal nuance is greater?

DeCray:

I think it's possible, yes. But they're also much more subtle. Piano is a much stronger instrument, so it has, in that sense, a wider range of *fortissimo*, *fortississimo*, versus *pianississimo*, and its tone is more substantial than the harp's.

Crawford:

Yes. And so you have to have a certain amount of strength to produce a clear tone.

DeCray:

Yes. And then, of course, one also needs a lot of strength to move the thing around.

Crawford:

I was going to ask about that very practical matter. How have you coped with that?

DeCray:

Well, there are all sorts of little carriers. They don't look unlike the carriers that deliverymen pile several boxes on and then pull them back and scoot them into some shop. You put part of the carrier under the harp. You lean the harp back on the carrier, and away you go.

Crawford:

And you can do this yourself?

DeCray:

Yes, yes. It pays to have somebody strong around to help you if you can't always do it yourself. You need either a truck, preferably a closed truck, or a van, or an SUV or station wagon.

Crawford:

Like a Volvo station wagon, which I think is what you have.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. I'm one of the few people who doesn't have a van.

Crawford:

For environmental reasons?

DeCray:

I guess in part, yes. The station wagon suffices, so that works for us.

Crawford:

When you're in Paris or Tokyo or wherever you play, can you rent a taxi big enough to carry an instrument?

DeCray:

I suppose you can, but I've always had delivery service in any other country. I've always had a lorry of some sort.

Crawford:

Do you rent an instrument?

DeCray:

Yes. I've never taken my own instrument to Europe or to Asia. I've always been loaned a fine harp.

Crawford:

Marcella, in reviews it's often alluded to that you are a very attractive woman, handsome woman, graceful. How important is that in terms of a harpist's career?

DeCray:

Well, I would only be able to give a subjective judgment, and I don't think it's terribly important. I think it's probably as important as seeing a great actress who is ugly, if you like, funny-looking if you like, versus a lesser actress who is very attractive in a movie, where the close-ups and where the visual aspect counts so terribly much. The harp is a very visual instrument. I often refer to it as "a nice piece of furniture."

Crawford:

Yes, like a grand piano, I suppose.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

And so you want someone graceful and beautiful to play that instrument.

DeCray:

Yes, but I think it's much more important that they have musical talent, much, much more.

Crawford:

Of course. On the other hand, I've never heard of a timpanist referred to as beautiful or handsome.

Tell me about brand names. Is there a special Steinway of harps?

DeCray:

[laughs] Going back, the first harps were made here by Wurlitzer. The Wurlitzer Company was eventually bought by Lyon and Healy, which was a piano maker that decided to go into making harps. The Wurlitzer harps were fine. They were very good, big-sound harps. I've never played on one, but that's what I hear. Lyon and Healy bought them out probably around 1900, maybe even in the late 1800s, and Lyon and Healy for a long time was the only harp maker in United States.

In France, Erard, E-r-a-r-d, the piano maker, made harps. They were very nice harps, but they had a horrendous mechanism. The little discs that we were looking at were attached to one another, so there was a disc here, there was a disc here, and there was a shaft of metal that ran between the two. As a consequence, if one of the discs got out of whack, which they certainly do, it messed up a great deal more whereas the American harps, if a disc loosens, or its screw which is holding it in place is stripped, it's easy to replace if necessary the disc, and certainly the screw, and have that contact the string in the proper way. Erard harps had an exquisite, sweet sound. They were not as big a sound as the American harps, but they are not made anymore in France.

But there are several other harp makers now beside Lyon and Healy, which reigned completely until maybe 1950, something like that. The Lyon and Healy Company was bought by an Italian harp maker named Victor Salvi, and Victor was making his own harps in Italy, which he continued to do maybe until 1980, somewhere in the eighties, when he bought the Lyon and Healy Company, which had first of all been bought by Columbia Broadcasting Company, I think, and was not doing well, and Victor Salvi came along and sort of saved it. He now makes both Lyon/Healy harps and Salvi harps.

There have been many other harp makers who've come along throughout the world. There's one in Boston. There's one in Japan, Aoyama. That is a little Aoyama troubadour harp.

Crawford:

Troubadour?

DeCray:

Troubadour. It has levers instead of pedals. And there are several other harp makers in France now, and I believe there's even one in England. So in addition to the harp community burgeoning, the harp maker community has burgeoned.

Crawford:

That's a sure sign, then, that the instrument is more in demand.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

But is there a sound for Debussy? Would you rather play a French harp for Debussy?

DeCray:

Not really. I think one can make sound.

Crawford:

You can produce the required—

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

Maybe some for a lyric sound?

DeCray:

Gentler but enormously clear, sweeter perhaps, but yet with that vitality and strength available when needed.

Crawford:

Is the harp an instrument that to play it is age-related at all? I mean, does it require a very strong erect spine, or something like that, that when you're perhaps in your nineties you wouldn't have?

DeCray:

I don't know. I started when I was eight. It requires long enough legs to be able to have the leg stretch from the seat to the pedal. Many people start as children on a troubadour harp, because it has no pedals. It's a more physically encompassable instrument, and they don't bother very much with the levers, which are the means of changing pitch, and which are rather limited in their changes. They can only make a half-step change, whereas this can make a full-step change.

But other than that, you have to have a strong enough right shoulder that the instrument just barely touches it, and it helps if you have tough enough padding on your fingertips that they don't blister all the time. That's about it.

Crawford:

Good. That's a very nice harp lesson indeed.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Crawford:

Marcella, we are now back in San Francisco, and we talked quite a bit about your playing in the symphony. I wanted to ask you, it's kind of a sexist question, which is, in the orchestras in which you have and have played, was there any discrimination against women?

DeCray:

None, no. No.

Crawford:

Auditions would have been blind, or not?

DeCray:

The auditions that I played were not blind. Now they are, and usually in two stages, the first stage blind. But no. At the time I was playing in the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Met there was a male harpist in Boston who'd been there for many years. There was a male harpist in Los Angeles, the symphony. I'm sure there were a few others here and there. The majority were female.

New York Philharmonic was very anxious to have only males in the entire orchestra, and when I auditioned for it around 1958, probably, the—right now I don't remember who the previous harpist was, but that man left. They, without saying so in so many words, they were looking for a male harpist to replace. Three of us auditioned, and I don't remember who the third person was. The second person was a woman named Christine Stavrache, who was European, and I also auditioned. The fact is that they desperately wanted a male harpist but didn't say so, so I was offered the job. I was not very much interested in the job, even though it was first harp, because I just didn't want to live in New York City. So I turned the job down. They hired Christine, and she lasted about a year or two, at which point they succeeded in getting Myor Rosen, a male harpist, a New Yorker, to take over the job, and he held it for a number of years.

Now the scene is very different for the New York Philharmonic and all orchestras, and there is, if anything, a preponderance of females.

Crawford:

What do you remember of the benefits and conditions when you joined both of the orchestras, opera and symphony?

DeCray:

Nothing at all.

Crawford:

There was nothing at all, or you—

DeCray:

I don't remember anything at all. I was just pleased to be in the orchestra, and I had no interest whatsoever in how much money I made or what the perks were.

Crawford:

Jerry Spain, AFM representative, called the opera orchestra "slave labor."

DeCray:

Oh, that's true. That's quite true. It was. Yes, that's quite true, now that you call my attention to that. Yes. We would have maybe a rehearsal on a Saturday morning; I don't remember, perhaps an afternoon performance, and then an evening performance. I don't remember, but I know it was nonstop from the time the opera season started, very, very, very intensive. One's only relief was the last couple of weeks when there were no more rehearsals, because everything had been rehearsed. But it had been the same in the Met.

Crawford:

No day off?

DeCray:

There was no specific day off. Sometimes there was a day off every week, but then there were times when there wasn't.

Crawford:

So the unions really became stronger.

DeCray:

The unions, yes, became stronger. Yes.

Crawford:

Were you aware of union militancy in the middle sixties?

DeCray:

I was only really aware that James Petrillo had started the pension fund, and that he was an ex-player, as, actually, are most of the people who rise to officership in the union. They've all been ex-players. I don't really remember that now.

Crawford:

How many programs would you play, would you say, in those two organizations?

DeCray:

Maybe 85 percent of the full season's program.

Crawford:

Oh, really?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

In both symphony and opera?

DeCray:

Yes. Yes.

Crawford:

Oh, that's quite a lot. According to what I've researched, the pay was about \$130 a week at the symphony.

DeCray:

I don't remember. The pay was much more in the Met than it was in the Philadelphia Orchestra. When I played here in the symphony it was as-needed, because they only had one harpist under contract, so that was a different situation from what I had had in Philadelphia.

Crawford:

Well, according to what I read, there was a big strike in 1967. Do you have any memory of that, or were you involved in that? That was the first time that the symphony players got tenure.

DeCray:

I see. As an extra I wouldn't have had to be involved in any of that.

Crawford:

So you never had tenure. That was never an issue for you.

DeCray:

No, nothing like that.

Crawford:

What do you think of tenure?

DeCray:

In general I would say that tenure could lead to sloth, but I have not found it to do so, so I think that's probably a flawed idea of mine. The tenured players and the longtime players still work very hard. They still dig into their instrument, and they still give as much as they can. I do tend to think that that's because they love the art.

Crawford:

And that's almost without exception in your experience.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

I remember Adler saying that he had to work six years to get two minutes of playing time from the musicians as the unions got stronger. Was he a presence for you, other than conducting?

DeCray:

Yes. He was not so much of a presence as a conductor as just a presence. He was always around and he was always very hands on.

Crawford:

What do you remember of him?

DeCray:

Slow movement, physical movement, and very watchful presence. And he was always there. It was like he lived day and night opera.

Crawford:

How was he with conductors, because, of course, he wanted so to be conducting all the time?

DeCray:

Yes, yes. And I don't think we have to go into the quality of his conducting. But he was okay with conductors. I don't think he wanted anyone who was likely to challenge him in some way, but they really didn't have that role that they could.

Crawford:

Although Felix Khuner told me that Adler would ask him occasionally about something, about the quality of a performance, or to interpret something for him. I don't know if that's true or not. It was a very small orchestral pit, wasn't it?

DeCray:

It was. They've taken out several rows of audience seats now.

Crawford:

The opera orchestra was considerably smaller than the symphony.

DeCray:

Yes, I think so. Yes.

Crawford:

That's right, they finally took the two front rows out.

DeCray:

They have them stashed in the back of the orchestra-level seating and some backstage, down in the basement, yes.

Crawford:

But they're permanently out.

DeCray:

I'm not sure whether—I guess they are, because between the ballet and the opera the building is pretty well used all year, so I think for a while they had them available for those who would rent the building for a single performance or for a couple of weeks performance during the dead time. They would put them back in and reduce the pit.

Crawford:

Was that helpful to you?

DeCray:

A larger pit? Much more helpful, yes.

Crawford:

I would think particularly for you, because you have the most giant instrument of all.

DeCray:

Well, the basses take up room, and don't forget about those kettle drums. No. There are few things that are quite as concise as the woodwind players, but then you get around to the tuba, which, you know, takes up a fair amount of room.

Crawford:

Yes, that's right. What about conductors? Who do you remember, fondly or not so fondly?

DeCray:

Among the San Francisco Opera conductors, I remember Kurt Boehm as being quite nasty and dreadful—not to me, but just—to everyone.

Crawford:

He was very disdainful of the orchestra. He came for *Frau ohne Schatten*, as I remember.

DeCray:

I don't know. He was not so wonderful as far as I was concerned, that one could write off his general attitude.

Crawford:

How did he show his contempt?

DeCray:

Well, he spoke very quietly, as, of course, did Fritz Reiner. He conducted very undemonstratively. As far as I was concerned I did not find it an enjoyable experience, and I don't think anyone else did.

Crawford:

Was he not communicative?

DeCray:

Not very, and he—

Crawford:

And you had the feeling he was displeased?

DeCray:

I don't know what would ever please Kurt Boehm. I really don't know; that kind of personality. Gergiev was fun and very intense. Among the San Francisco conductors, well, Jimmy Levine conducted *Butterfly*, which was a bit hairy.

Crawford:

Why?

DeCray:

It's a rather complicated thing to explain, but there are pickups to downbeats, and he would not give any sort of a gesture that would help a pickup. If it was an independent pickup of a few notes [demonstrates, sings notes], he wouldn't give any sort of a gesture that would help the person who had been swimming from the last beat of the previous bar, to know when to come in with da, da, da as the pickup to the downbeat. Do you understand what I'm saying?

Crawford:

Yes. Now, was this early in the seventies when he first came?

DeCray:

I think probably yes. But I remember some great conductors in the past, but they were not really with San Francisco Opera or with San Francisco Symphony. Fritz Reiner was wonderful, and he conducted in minuscule fashion, and you watched. But his whole art was there, and he was not disdainful.

Crawford:

Where was that?

DeCray:

With the Met. It was a wonderful experience with some of those conductors.

Crawford:

So would you say that there was rather a weak slate at San Francisco Opera?

DeCray:

Not an illustrious slate as I remember, and conducting in general, I think, is acrobatic, and though the back of a conductor faces the audience, the audience is never forgotten. I felt that some conductors of some decades ago were far greater.

Crawford:

I'm remembering Gavazzeni from the old school. Did he make—for somebody like him, he conducted very—maybe he didn't make an impression on you.

DeCray:

No, I don't remember him at all.

Crawford:

Well, maybe perhaps it was another situation for you then. What about the symphony conductors? Did you get to know them personally?

DeCray:

A few of them. It was more workaday, I'd say, then what I would hope for. I remember Osawa having trumpets up in one of the boxes on the first tier of the opera house, and there were more and more gimmicks like that, which seemed to appear in orchestral performance, as opposed to just, "Now we will play the music, and we will give our all to the music, because this is really serious, moving, touching stuff." Sometimes it turned into a circus act.

Crawford:

Was there one conductor during your tenure with more commitment, would you say, than others?

DeCray:

In San Francisco?

Crawford:

Yes.

Crawford:

Perhaps Krips, yes, was very deadly serious. He wasn't a fun guy. The people who complain about conductors I could never really understand. There were zillions of complaints about Eugene Ormandy. There were so many complaints, and are still, as you've called to my attention, about Krips. One is not there for fun. One gets paid. One is doing something that one has worked on—playing one's instrument—for a number of years, in some cases since childhood, and if you want to go have fun, do something else.

Crawford:

But what about the overall sound and the general quality? Did that change? Did it improve?

DeCray:

The sound and the precision improved.

Crawford:

When did you leave the symphony?

DeCray:

Quite a while ago, sometime in the late 'seventies.

Crawford:

Well, let's talk about Davies Hall and what that meant for the players.

DeCray:

It meant that the opera could be divorced from the symphony and could have its own season. The ballet could have more of a season. I think gradually the acoustics have improved somewhat.

Acoustics is a witchery of an art. Frank Gehry has done very well with acoustics in Disney Hall in Los Angeles. The Boston Symphony Hall, of course, is great, but that's simply a box, a rectangular box, much wood and not much upholstery. So it isn't that surprising.

Crawford:

It's like the Mozart Theater in Prague, sounds like, which is of course a much longer theater.

DeCray:

Well, small, too, is great. They keep making them bigger and bigger, for bigger orchestras, for more audience, for more money.

Crawford:

How does that affect you as a pit player, since the sound isn't amplified?

DeCray:

I really don't know that it has much of an effect on one as a pit player. I play just the same way as I played when I play onstage.

Crawford:

Do you like the Davies Hall, as opposed to the War Memorial?

DeCray:

The War Memorial has a great deal more physical charm. Davis is a lot more commodious.

Crawford:

And that counts for something. Let's go to the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra—when did you join?

DeCray:

In 1980.

Crawford:

And so in 1980 you were playing opera and—

DeCray:

I was playing opera and ballet, yes, and I continued playing opera till two years ago, as well as the ballet.

Crawford:

What about your impressions of ballet conductors?

DeCray:

Denis DiCoteau was the music director for a long time, and he was very competent, a very practical conductor, no histrionics, no hysteria, no—and lots of history.

Crawford:

Lots of history?

DeCray:

History. He had begun as a ballet dancer.

Crawford:

He got his Ph.D. in conducting at Stanford, though, didn't he?

DeCray:

I think so. But he had a long history in L.A. and in music. And Jean Louis LaRoux was the associate conductor with Denis for a long time, and of course his conducting background dates, I think, from some of his period in South America, and he did a great deal of conducting I think maybe in Washington, East Coast, and then he came out here and did some chamber music conducting, and chamber orchestra conducting, and new music conducting. So he was very competent.

Crawford:

Anything else about the ballet as a player?

DeCray:

Michael Smuin was the artistic general, the general director of the ballet when I came in, and he had a great deal to do with the orchestra, as compared with most artistic directors of ballet companies. I think Balanchine had some interest and involvement with the orchestra in New York City Ballet, but for the most part there's no inter-reaction and inter-familialness.

But Michael Smuin would sometimes ask, not through the conductor, but directly to the player, that some particular musical gesture be given emphasis, because it was related to something onstage. He was also very interested in some of the people who were auditioning for chairs in the orchestra. I remember when I auditioned he was—Actually, I played for two or three years before auditioning for the job, because the present solo harpist was on leave and was in Germany. So Michael asked me to play with the orchestra, and he was directly involved in some of the harp parts that I played.

Crawford:

So he was a musician?

DeCray:

He was a musician to some extent, but he was more sensitive to music than some general directors of ballet companies, yes, yes.

Crawford:

That's very interesting. Did that ever happen on the opera scene, that a director, somebody like Jean-Pierre Bonnelle, who was a good musician, would speak to the orchestra?

DeCray:

Not to my recollection.

Crawford:

You don't remember anybody doing that.

DeCray:

No. I think there was always: go through the conductor.

Crawford:

Yes, you would guess that would be the hierarchy. So that's kind of a touching story about Michael Smuin, I think.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

Good. We're at our hour's break, so let's break.

[End of interview]

Interview # 3- 01-27-05
[Begin File DeCray, 04 01-27-05]

Crawford:

A couple of questions about our last interview before we move on to teaching and the conservatory.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

We've talked about your three orchestras, and what I want to ask you is, what's the difference in approach to—how do you fit into those three pits? What's best, what's least best, what's most rewarding?

DeCray:

You mean symphony, opera, and ballet?

Crawford:

Right.

DeCray:

For the harp, which is an instrument that sounds very large and very vibrant when you're this close to it, but whose sound dies rather quickly further away, a smaller orchestra is better than, like, Philadelphia Orchestra was 110 people, and the opera orchestra was often ninety. The ballet orchestra is usually around forty-five, so a smaller orchestra is terrific for a harp. That's why the symphony orchestras use two harpists, and actually, Wagner scored for six harps in his operas.

Crawford:

Routinely?

DeCray:

Yes. He must have had a pit that went on to kingdom come, or maybe they just put the harps, I don't know, elsewhere. Anyway—

Crawford:

Must that have been the biggest orchestra, the Wagnerian orchestra?

DeCray:

Yes, yes, yes. So it is usual for a symphony to have two harps, and often have a one-harp part doubled by two harps, just to make it stronger. Although it's not as frequent in the symphony that the harp really cuts through, there's a terrific lot of stuff to play in ballet that's cadenzas and solos and so on and so forth. As a matter of fact, last night I was playing the gala, and Roy Malan and I played the *Meditation* from *Thais* with string orchestra in the background, which was lovely.

Crawford:

You're not going to get to play that in the opera pit very often, *Thais*.

DeCray:

No, no, and when you do it's one little harp with a singer onstage who has a much better ability to project her sound into the audience, and it's just a whole different bag.

Crawford:

Well, you're a soloist.

DeCray:

Ninety people, a duo. So that was fine. Then also there was a ballet on the theme of *Don Quixote* which they did a scene from last night, and there was a nice harp solo in it that's three, four minutes long, with orchestra accompaniment and with a cadenza, and it's really wonderful, comfortable—you feel like you're there.

Crawford:

Talk about your cadenza.

DeCray:

Well, what can I say? Harps play chords. They sometimes get to play a melody, and they do very well on arpeggios and glissandi. The arpeggio that I played last night at the beginning of the solo began a forty-second cadenza, I guess, and then the orchestra joined in the background, and the solo went on for several more minutes.

Crawford:

Forty seconds, that's huge.

DeCray:

Well, for a little cadenza. And in *Nutcracker*, for instance, the *Waltz of the Flowers*, there's a very nice cadenza, very comfortably written by Tchaikovsky, and in all the other big Tchaikovsky ballets there are wonderful cadenzas and wonderful minute solos for harp, where everybody else is either quelled or not there, and therefore the harp cuts through. That's a really nice experience.

Crawford:

You can be lost in the symphonic context.

DeCray:

You certainly can be lost, yes. And frequently you're doubled with a second harp in order to not be quite so lost. Of course in the opera they never double anything. They only have instruments that the score says to have. But frequently you will accompany a singer, so you do get some sense of self presence, which is nice.

Crawford:

But you're not seen. You're seen on a symphonic stage. Does that make a difference to you?

DeCray:

You're seen, yes, yes, you're seen. Yes, and many symphonies insist that all the women in the orchestra wear the same gown, which they prescribe for all the females. In the case of the symphony, I often felt that it was very important to people to see you, and that's not really what they're there for. They're there for the music. They're there for the art.

Crawford:

So that doesn't give you a greater rapport with the audience. You don't seek that.

DeCray:

Not really. Oh, the first three rows.

Crawford:

It sounds to me as if you'd almost rather be in the ballet pit.

DeCray:

When I was in the Philadelphia Orchestra, one of the people who auditioned to replace me was a ballet harpist from New York City. At the time I thought, gee, I had learned in my student days so many ballet cadenzas, isn't she lucky to be able to play all those? And here I'd been in the Philadelphia Orchestra for eleven years, and there was rarely anything of that magnitude and that impact, so I entertained the idea then. Then I went into the San Francisco Symphony and into the opera here. I had already done opera with the Met, and I knew just about what to expect to do there. There's one solo work in the opera repertoire, which is a lovely, lovely solo from *Lucia* for harp. That's just about the only thing that shows up as the solo or cadenza—

Crawford:

Nothing in Wagner.

DeCray:

Harp is all part of the heft and swarm of notes in Wagner.

Crawford:

Well, what about repertoire? The Berlioz must be a good piece for you to play.

DeCray:

The Berlioz, the second movement, the waltz of *The Fantastic Symphony* is great. It's a lot of fun to play, too. It's terribly fast. It's over very quickly, as compared with the rest of the symphony, and one sits forever and ever through the third and fourth and fifth, and maybe nineteenth and twenty-second movements. It just seems to go on forever. But it used to be entertaining. The English horn player would go offstage during the break between movements and play his part offstage, and then he'd come back onstage after—he would sit in the rear after the movement in which he played, and that was, you know, terribly exciting to see somebody get up and walk off the stage. That's the degree of activity that one experiences when one is sitting there for nearly an hour while that symphony is going on.

Crawford:

So you aren't necessarily rapt concerning the conductor. You're not totally focused on the conductor when you don't need to be.

DeCray:

Not between movements, when people are assembling themselves and getting ready for the next movement, and when we're all done playing our parts.

Crawford:

Well, I interviewed one orchestral member who told me if he didn't play chess he would go insane. You can guess who that is.

DeCray:

What did he play?

Crawford:

Chess.

DeCray:

What instrument?

Crawford:

Oh, violin. Felix Khuner.

DeCray:

I guess it was during the breaks, and sometimes an hour's break for lunch, or sometimes you finish work late enough in the day that you don't go home.

Crawford:

Unlikely he could have set up a chessboard in the pit.

DeCray:

No, not in the pit.

Crawford:

What other repertoire is of special interest to you, rewarding?

DeCray:

I've always been interested in contemporary music, always being since the sixties. I first heard some really strictly contemporary music in Philadelphia very shortly before I left and moved here. It was interesting. It said something new, and I then flirted with it for, as you know so well, another maybe twenty years, twenty, twenty-five years, I guess. I don't think it ever went where I hoped it would go. I thought it would become a much healthier, much more distinctive voice. It's hard to sell to an audience. It's hard to sell the idea of writing contemporarily to a semi-starving composer, also, so it's a rather beaten-down field, I think, unfortunately.

Crawford:

Well, we'll get to that in some detail when we talk about the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. Does it make a difference to you what's going on onstage, in the ballet? Do you watch rehearsals?

DeCray:

No, not unless I'm sitting out on the edge close to the audience. I can see nothing.

Crawford:

You can see nothing. Well, so when Beverly Sills sung *Thais*, you weren't transported. I'm not talking about that specifically, but—

DeCray:

Well, that's fine, but once again I think it's largely aural and not so much visual. So it was great to hear her, yes, yes.

Crawford:

So you'll perk up for a very great singer.

DeCray:

Sure. Sure.

Crawford:

But you don't see the dancers anyway, so—

DeCray:

Unless I'm not playing and I go out to the edge of the pit and watch.

Crawford:

And you do that?

DeCray:

Yes. We all do that when we have a chance. It's lovely.

Crawford:

All right, that's good. Let's see where else we are. Did any conductor, at the symphony principally, in your experience change the sound as you said Ormandy did in Philadelphia?

DeCray:

I didn't find any other one did. Osawa changed the presentation somewhat of the San Francisco Symphony, but didn't really change the sound. Krips in his own way changed the sound perhaps to be a little more Germanic, but there was a very distinct difference with Ormandy as far as the strings were concerned. The rest of the instruments, no.

Crawford:

So that would be sort of rare for a conductor to change the sound?

DeCray:

It was also a very much criticized thing. Of course, he followed Leopold Stokowski, and just by being, just by existing, Stokowski turned heads, and he managed with publicity also to turn a few more heads. Ormandy came along and was interested in making his presence felt. He also had a heritage of playing the violin in his native country, and he had a very lush sense of sound for it, and so he was anxious to have the strings develop that. And it was more distinctive, yes.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Crawford:

You joined the conservatory faculty when?

DeCray:

I think it was 1964. I had taught at Peabody before that.

Crawford:

In Baltimore?

DeCray:

Yes. There was no harp department in Peabody, so I founded it, and then I proceeded to leave the East Coast area only a couple of years after that. So we had a few students and I had a very, very comfortable relationship with the dean and with the school. It was really nice. I came out here and talked to Robin Laufer, who was very much interested in having a harp department, so developed a harp department. Soon he left, and then Milton Salkind came in, so it's been an evolution. But the conservatory's a wonderful place. It's very hands on. It's very intimate, which is nice.

Crawford:

More so than Peabody or Juilliard?

DeCray:

More so than Juilliard; maybe the standards are not as high, but it's not a big mill, so to speak, and that's very nice. It's very nice.

All I do is teach harp, have occasional master classes when some harpist is coming to town who is of renown, and occasionally I play a recital there, or chamber music, but otherwise I have nothing whatsoever to do with curriculum.

Crawford:

What are you looking for in a student?

DeCray:

I'm looking for dedication, musical intelligence, some sensitivity, which can be expanded, willingness to work, willingness to work.

Crawford:

At what age do you take a student?

DeCray:

Oh, I'm the collegiate teacher, so extension students (that would be adults or kids), they're taught by one of my students. I just take people who are in the collegiate years and are going for either a bachelor's or a master's or a Ph.D.

Crawford:

Professionals, they will be in some sense professional.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. To be a player one doesn't need a degree. One needs ability to play the instrument and play it well, the ability to sight read, and if one starts out in freelancing, which, of course, is the way most players start out, most classical players, the ability to live with a professional life that is an elaborate collage pasted together, which becomes a little more complicated if you play harp, because you have to transport your instrument. So one day you can be playing one kind of a job, and another day another kind of a job, and before you know it, it can get very hectic and very improvisatory in terms of just how much time you have to prepare, and how much insight you have to give to this or that job.

But it's very good training for becoming an orchestral player or becoming a soloist. There's a rather thin field, actually, for the harp, for recitalists traveling all over the world. There are very, very few, and they don't last very long, because the field is just—a concert series will hire singers, pianists, occasional violinists, rarely but maybe a cellist, a flutist, especially if there's a certain glamour and P.R. Harp? Oh, so rarely.

Crawford:

In harp playing, where is the strength located?

DeCray:

It comes from the hands, the forearms, the upper arms, the shoulders, the feet and the legs, because there are seven pedals at the base of the harp, and they have to be moved up and down. Each pedal has three positions, flat, natural, and sharp, and so the right foot deals with four of the pedals. That's twelve positions. The left foot works three of the pedals, and so the feet are busy. That implies that the legs stretch out, because all the pedals are not close together. And the upper part of the body is put to work, not to mention what's between the ears.

Crawford:

Talk about your general approach to teaching first.

DeCray:

Well, I have rarely begun a student. Actually, I did begin a student of someone who played in the San Francisco Symphony, Detler Olshausen, his daughter Roxanne, and she plays in, I think it's the Berne Symphony in Switzerland. She was one of the few I began. For the most part I take

advanced students who are at the collegiate level, and have probably started harp anywhere from eight to twelve years of age.

Crawford:

What's ideal?

DeCray:

Whatever works. In one case one of my students, Gillian Benet Sella, who is the harpist with the Cincinnati Symphony, started maybe at fourteen. I don't remember quite, but not at infancy.

Crawford:

Keyboard before, usually?

DeCray:

I don't think she had keyboard before. It helps, I think, to have keyboard before. It also helps to have harmony training. Counterpoint doesn't help so much as harmony. But mostly I take students who have had their training elsewhere. Their training may not particularly jibe with mine, because there are several schools of harp playing, just like there are several religions, and just like there are several schools of this, that, and the other thing.

So it requires a little free thinking on the part of the student, a lot of willingness to work diligently on the music, and we have varying degrees of success, as is always the case with teaching. I've had some very good students, and many are well placed throughout the world, in Israel, in France, in England, and in Asia. It's gratifying.

Crawford:

Oh, I should say so. Do you stay in touch with them?

DeCray:

Somewhat. When they come to San Francisco, if they've gotten married and had children, they'll want to bring them to me to see the teacher they studied with.

Crawford:

That's nice.

DeCray:

It's fun.

Crawford:

Do we talk about developing a technique with your students?

DeCray:

We do.

Crawford:

What are the particular problems that a student has, somebody who isn't hugely gifted?

DeCray:

They don't have any motor problems that can't be worked on, and I tend to allow students to develop pretty much on their own, and I kind of observe, and I try to take off from there, as opposed to placing a regimen on their bodies and insisting that it's that regimen or bye bye. Eventually—eventually being maybe a couple of months—they begin to absorb the advantages of the technique that I teach, which is largely the French technique, and they see the benefits of it, so on we go.

Crawford:

Are there bad habits that you have to correct sometimes?

DeCray:

Not really. The harp is—all these people with their factions of how to play a harp, and this method and that method, it's all played from the same end of the harp. You know, nobody turns it around and plays with the column on their shoulder. Nobody lays it on the floor and plays it like a sitar.

Crawford:

Good. Let's clear that up right away. How about practice?

DeCray:

I like them to practice. I like them to practice intelligently, with their head there, and not have any other disturbances going on at the time. I would rather see a person practice less and have their head there than practice for hours and be, you know, involved in several other things in their mind and their body at that time.

Crawford:

It struck me when you were talking about your early years that your commitment was total right away. When you saw the instrument and heard it, you said, "This is for me."

DeCray:

My commitment actually was much more to the piano, because the harp did not have the literature that the piano had. Mozart wrote one concerto for flute and harp. Beethoven, there are a couple of brief works which were discovered in libraries. So there's not, you know, a great deal of historical depth to the repertoire, and I didn't like that. I liked all the "big-name guys" who wrote such great music for piano. I liked the idea of plucking a string, which is a direct contact with what comes out, as opposed to pressing a piano key, which is related to something back here that goes eventually to a hammer and produces—

Crawford:

Yes, much more intimate.

DeCray:

So that pleased me, and it pleases me more and more. Playing just for half a second and having all the vibration of the harp, it trembles! It's wonderful against your shoulder, and if you don't

want the vibration to continue, because it will interfere with what's being played next, you gently, quietly dampen it. And that's wonderful, too.

Crawford:

You're right there. It's as if you were in the piano box.

DeCray:

You're right there, but your motions are gentle, loving, adept, and deft. I don't know, it's just, it's a very satisfying thing to play the harp.

Crawford:

Well, the point of my question was, it strikes me that a young person studying the harp has made a choice, whereas often with the violin or the piano it's a parent who's behind, saying, "Take a few years." Do you know what I mean? Is that a fair observation to make? Or do you have the mother and father who say, "I want you to play the harp"?

DeCray:

The mother and father become involved very quickly, because the instrument is initially expensive. The finest harp you could buy is not nearly as expensive as a fine violin, not to mention, you know, the name violins. But the initial outlay for a violin can be several hundred dollars. You can't do that on a harp. So it's a financial commitment. Then there's moving the thing around, and so you wind up frequently with a vehicle that you might not have chosen to buy, muscle, learning a little bit about the technical aspects of changing strings, helping the child student to change strings, and maintenance of the harp. It has 2400 parts, and they often go out of whack.

This harp here at present has a broken pedal rod. Pedal rods go from the bottom, and there are, of course, seven, because there are seven pedals. They go from here, and the column is over here. They go into the column where they all come together, but individually they go up the column. When they get up to the top of the column where that metal plate is at the very top of the harp, they spread out onto the curve of the harp, and so when you talk about breaking a pedal rod, which this one has a pedal rod broken last night, it's something that happened inside the column, and it often is related to something that may have gone out of whack in the curvature of the harp.

The curvature of the harp takes the rod, which, of course, had many joints, takes it to each of the, let us say Cs, or each of the Fs on the harp, and since it has forty-seven strings there are a lot of Fs, there are a lot of Cs, and so on. So that it's a complicated thing to repair, as opposed to a violin, which unless it gets some sort of assault and has some physical damage, doesn't have too many things to repair; a bridge maybe, something like that.

Of course, a violin has both, so once again, it's not direct playing like it is on the harp. Every instrument has its problems, but a harp requires parents to be able to put out maintenance money, and help.

Crawford:

So a kind of commitment's been made before your students get to you.

DeCray:

Yes. I think often the child is interested in the harp, and it's such a visual instrument that that sells it to everybody, but there are fewer harpists by far, and fewer harp students than there are on other instruments. Of course, the trumpet, you know, and the flute particularly, you tuck under your arm, and you can buy flutes at all prices.

Crawford:

Do you see fluctuations in fads in harpism? In other words, is there a time when all of a sudden you're just getting rushed with students because there's been a movie with a harpist in it, something like that?

DeCray:

No. No, that hasn't happened.

Crawford:

Because they're—they've got background.

DeCray:

I think it's such a large commitment initially that any fad doesn't really get a chance to come to life, but then there are not many fads on the harp. I mean, there was a harpist—there was a movie actress who played harp a little, I think, maybe in the thirties or forties. Her name was Anita Louise, and there was Harpo Marx, who actually was one of my inspirations, and I studied with his teacher.

Crawford:

How did he inspire you?

DeCray:

Oh, I was a little kid and I saw his playing in movies, and I thought it was fascinating.

Crawford:

You said he'd been a serious harpist.

DeCray:

Pretty serious, yes, good harpist, yes. I also, of course, adored the way Chico played the piano. That was wonderful.

Crawford:

Did Groucho play anything?

DeCray:

The public. Yes, indeed, oh yes.

Crawford:

Well, let's talk in some detail about your students, naming them and where they've ended up, and why they were special.

DeCray:

Well, one teaches at Ann Arbor, at University of Michigan, in the music department. I don't know. Another one teaches harp at Cal Arts, and she plays a great deal of contemporary music. Another is harpist with the Cincinnati Symphony. Another was with the Israel Philharmonic.

Crawford:

What's her name?

DeCray:

Susan Allen. And a number of them have, as I said, gone into orchestral work. It's wonderful, gratifying to know about the ones who stay with it and succeed, and enjoy it. It's a real joy, and it's nice to go visit them as I go around the world, too.

Crawford:

Yes, you have friends everywhere to visit. What about the one in Israel? I think you said she was Ruth Ma'ayani.

DeCray:

She was the sister of a composer who wrote a good deal for harp, and I think she is still—I have been out of touch with her for a long time. I think she is probably still playing harp. I know she's very much interested in it, and I've had students from San Francisco area who have gone to Israel and played in the Israel Philharmonic for a year, because they had a vacancy, and also played second harp as a guest, maybe for a few weeks, and have met her and talked to her, and had something to do with her. But it's hard for me to say whether she still actively plays. I don't know.

I played in Israel at a World Harp Congress maybe about 1980 perhaps. Also, we have the American Harp Society, which has more than 3,000 members. There are a number of folk-harp societies. The folk harp is different. It's different from the concert harp in that it has no pedals. It has little levers above the strings, where you see all that mechanism on this harp, and by hand you turn a lever so it stops a string and makes it a little shorter, and thus changes its pitch.

Crawford:

And you obviously play that one as well.

DeCray:

Yes, but not as well. [laughs] Not nearly as well.

Crawford:

What has been your participation in these congresses and societies?

DeCray:

Well, I was treasurer of the American Harp Society for a long while. They asked me to be president and I refused. Then I became—

Crawford:

Why?

DeCray:

Oh, too many decisions that I really care too much about, carrying a lot of responsibility, dealing with many factions, was far too political for me. Policies—

Crawford:

Administration.

DeCray:

And the World Harp Congress I have been treasurer of, I don't know, for maybe eight or ten years. That's a job that's confined. I like that. You do your work and you turn out something at the end of a six-month period. For instance, you turn out a financial report and it's done. That's great.

Crawford:

What is the budget? Is it dues?

DeCray:

The budget consists of income from dues and donations, and the money made from conferences and congresses, and that's about it. That's about it.

Crawford:

Do they have a congress every year?

DeCray:

No, every three years. And the American Harp Society every two years.

Crawford:

And you go; you attend those.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

And there's normally playing?

DeCray:

Oh yes. There are four or five days of concerts and workshops, and harp repair, and all sorts of things like that, the usual thing that goes on at conventions and conferences. And there are exhibits, and harp makers come from all over the world and exhibit their merchandise, and there

are harp makers who come and bring their either folk harps or full-size harps. Some harp makers make both little harps and pedal harps.

Crawford:

Are any of those ever held in third world countries?

DeCray:

Well, I guess you would say Israel is the closest to a third world country. The organization was founded in Holland. There was a competition in Israel for harp which was a great influence to it, but it was founded in Holland. The American Harp Society was founded here. It was preceded by something called the Northern California Harp Association, I think, because there were a lot of wonderful harpists playing in the studios in Hollywood in the days when they had live music and didn't use synthetic music, or farm it out to some other country that had a cheaper orchestra to hire. So there were many wonderful harpists who could sight read like a dream, in Southern California. They formed the Harpists Association, which then kind of spread to the Northern California area. So that was a big movement in the harp world in, like, the fifties, I would say.

Crawford:

The fifties, before electronics promoted music in that way.

DeCray:

Oh yes, oh yes.

Crawford:

And where did they go? The studios were employing live orchestras?

DeCray:

Not now, no, no. They do sometimes employ a small ensemble, including a harp, but not so much now.

Crawford:

But you record a lot at Lucas Film, don't you?

DeCray:

I have done quite a few things, yes. Yes.

Crawford:

Talk about those.

DeCray:

Well, I recorded with David Byrne. I recorded with the Kronos Quartet, and a number of recordings with the ballet, some soundtracks for some movies, never anything great.

Crawford:

No Academy Awards yet?

DeCray:

No. No Academy Award murmurs. No. Recording is not a very rich experience. I think that's why it pays well, because there's no audience, there's little feedback. There are complaints from the engineer perhaps. The conductors are distracted, and the whole thing is a less gratifying kind of work. It's gratifying later to hear your recording, and it's gratifying to get the paycheck, but the actual work is not as pleasurable, I don't find anyway.

Also, playing for TV I've found a strange experience, because there was no audience.

Crawford:

What was the TV?

DeCray:

KQED, there was a man named Bill Triest. He had a series of half-hour recitalists in the sixties. I played several recitals for him, and it was a very strange experience to prime yourself to do a recital, you know, and then do it with no feedback. Strange.

Crawford:

I'm interested in David Byrne. How did that come about, and what did it amount to?

DeCray:

Oh, I don't remember. Somebody was doing recording with David Byrne and he needed a harp. That's how. And David Byrne had, of course, written the music, and he and I chatted about how to write for harp. He's a very nice man.

Crawford:

Smart? Good music?

DeCray:

Oh yes, sure. As is usual with people who succeed like that, they're not only smart, they're canny, and they're very politically adept.

Crawford:

What's his music like?

DeCray:

What I played in was sweet and pleasant and sort of lilting. I don't know, it was a long time ago.

Crawford:

Well, and then Kronos, of course, a phenomenon.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. And it's nice that they're still doing well, I think. They've had a pretty long life.

Crawford:

Thirty years. A new string quartet every thirty days, for thirty years. Is that right? Every three weeks.

DeCray:

It's interesting to look at how many of those have lasted. How many of those new string quartets are still being done, and not only got satisfactory-to-good reviews at first, but continue to pull their own weight?

Crawford:

Talk about that a little bit, playing with Kronos.

DeCray:

It was a job that they asked me to do at Lucas, and I just don't remember what we played at all.

Crawford:

So the quartet will contact Lucas and say, "This is what we need for our recording. Just find us the musicians." They don't—

DeCray:

They called. David Harrington called himself.

Crawford:

David Harrington called. I'm interviewing him, and he told me that he was invited to play at the inauguration, and he said, "No way."

DeCray:

Yes. Fine. They'll get along without him. Unfortunately, they will.

Crawford:

Are they democratic? Is the string quartet truly democratic, as Bach was said to have said?

DeCray:

Yes, seems to be, yes, which is nice.

Crawford:

David's the head, but musically they're all right there.

DeCray:

And as a consequence, David gets the headaches. David may be the head, but David gets the headaches. They are a well-known quartet.

Crawford:

Most recorded, certainly.

DeCray:

Most recorded, yes, yes, probably.

Crawford:

Do they tour more than others?

DeCray:

Well, I don't know. The Juilliard Quartet, for instance, toured a lot, and Simon Goldberg had a wonderful quartet, the Netherlands Quartet in Holland that traveled all over the world. And there's the Arditti.

Crawford:

Well, back to the conservatory, what was the faculty like while you were there? I mean, do you just kind of go and come, or are there collegial dealings?

DeCray:

No. Some people have more collegial dealings than I. I've had very little to do interlacing with the rest of the conservatory. They had a wonderful dean for a while named Richard Howell. Milton Salkind was, of course, a great mainstay. Robin Laufer was—as I understand it, he was only there when I started to teach, but I think he got the conservatory on its feet. I don't know anything about before.

Crawford:

When must have he—he came in the fifties, I guess.

DeCray:

I suppose so, yes.

Crawford:

I think there was some controversy about him.

DeCray:

He was a POW, you know. He was held in Europe in a camp for, I guess military, I guess soldiers, and I don't know what country he was serving for—

Crawford:

He was European.

DeCray:

Yes, I know. But he had quite a history of having survived the Second World War as a POW in Europe, I believe, somewhere.

Crawford:

Very personable I understand.

DeCray:

Yes, he was. A warm fellow.

Crawford:

What about Milton Salkind? He was there; such an institution.

DeCray:

Yes, and his wife is still around.

Crawford:

Peggy is still there.

DeCray:

Yes. And he was very good at leadership and creative, innovative ideas that would not rub too many people the wrong way. It's very hard to follow that narrow path.

Crawford:

Why?

DeCray:

Why? Because there's only a small faction of people who will absorb the new. There's a sub-faction of people who will absorb the new at any cost, anything, doesn't have to be good.

Crawford:

Just to be new.

DeCray:

Yes. Doesn't have to be good. And there are a great many people in a far larger faction who like the familiar, and within that there is a sub-faction of people who like what they think are the classy familiar, the classy old, whether it's antiques in music or whether it's antiques in furniture. It's dependable, it's validated, we don't have to question it. We don't have to evaluate it. It's not a matter of taste so much, because the taste has already been established. All they have to do is subscribe to it.

Crawford:

And these are often the people on your boards. You need your boards.

DeCray:

Often. Once in a while there's an innovative, creative mind on a board, yes. But these are the folks you have to handle carefully, and you can't rub the wrong way, you can't press them too much to take on too much that's new. It's scary, I guess.

Crawford:

Were you involved in this ever?

DeCray:

Oh, just very peripherally. I read reviews all the time. The New York Philharmonic's schedule for next season has come out. There's not much that's new and innovative on the program, says the reviewer who put together the article. It's the old story, old story. So a contemporary music ensemble of any size, or a contemporary music player has a built-in small audience and occasional people who are willing to experiment, look a little further, maybe widen their vistas. It's just, it's very different, I think.

Very few contemporary composers were interested in the harp, very, very few. It's an instrument that has some limitations, and it is a challenge for composers in that they really should learn how to play the instrument in order to get the hang of it, and they're not about to do that. Moreover, they realize that the instrument costs money to transport, isn't going to play in every piece on a program, whereas a violin will, is not a sure sell, so altogether, why should we bother?

Boulez and Berio were two courageous composers who did much for the instrument. They intrigued a few composers who have carried on their mantle to some degree, but it's not, you know, it's not a house-afire sure-sell.

But when you consider that something like the American Harp Society has 3,000 members—that's a lot of harpists.

Crawford:

Are they all professionals?

DeCray:

They're not all professionals. Some are teachers. Some are professionals who play in restaurants or play weddings, play perhaps in churches, and some had a few years of harp lessons as they were growing up, have gone to other aspects of life, but still have a dear place in their heart for the harp. But there are a large number of professionals, yes.

Crawford:

About juries: when you're jurying for graduation, is that your job alone?

DeCray:

No. I always have at least one other conservatory person involved. I have been on juries for competitions, and it's an interesting experience. Of course the jury thing in general, it's very much like an audition. You can't bring your whole self and your whole musical history to it. You try, but you're compacting it into fifteen minutes, let's say. Or maybe if you're a master's candidate at the conservatory, you're compacting it largely into a recital. So it's a responsibility for people on a jury to take very seriously, and all the juries I've been on, people have taken it very, very seriously.

If you want to teach harp in a school, even at a university, you don't need a Ph.D. You may not need a bachelor's degree. If you want to play harp, classical harp in a symphony or an opera or a ballet, you need no degree. You need to be able to play the instrument well. You need to be able to play the repertoire.

Crawford:

So who goes for Ph.D.?

DeCray:

People who, I think, want to write books about some obscure harpist or some obscure movement in the harp world. I think they're rather rare, and they usually get involved in other aspects like administrative aspects of a university.

Crawford:

So what are your students principally training for, what level?

DeCray:

Some of them think they're training to be the world's greatest solo harpist, touring all over the world playing recitals, and I try to dissuade them of those thoughts. Some of them have been interested in playing chamber music and playing in an orchestra, and an occasional one has just been interested in learning how to play the harp, and then has gone off and gotten married and plays maybe in a restaurant, does that sort of thing, which can be very lucrative.

Crawford:

Sure. Professionals.

DeCray:

Yes.

[End of file 04. Begin file 05.]

Crawford:

Well, one more question about the conservatory, and that is the master class. Talk about its value if you would.

DeCray:

A master class has mixed value. It depends, of course, initially on the artist, and it depends on the publicity that is given to the master class, but some artists conduct better master classes than others. Some artists really, I think, probably just do it for the money. It's crass to say it, but they'll give fifteen minutes to a student. Others will give thirty minutes to a student. Some teachers, artists, will do a master class for nothing, for the love of it, and some want quite a lot of money, and give many of the students very short shrift, and maybe one whose teacher has gotten to the artist in advance and said, "You know, you must listen to 'Dolly', and she's just wonderful, and she's done this and she's done that, and she's got this hope and that aspiration," so they give more attention to 'Dolly' than the others.

So it's a very uneven experience, but I do recommend it to any student on any instrument, if they can afford it, to take master classes. You get a different stream of thought. You may learn something just from listening to other people play, in addition to playing yourself.

Crawford:

I can remember master classes out there that used to be open to the public. They would have Ned Rorem and Lou Harrison, and I just thought they were so wonderful for a piano student at any level, or a music student at any level. So who did you get?

DeCray:

Oh, gee. Marie-Claire Jamet.

Crawford:

Would you spell that name?

DeCray:

Marie, M-a-r-i-e hyphen C-l-a-i-r-e, and her last name is Jamet, J-a-m-e-t. Susann McDonald given classes here a number of times. That's S-u-s-a-n-n McDonald, M-c. Golly. I know recently there was a Russian harpist from the Bolshoi Ballet who came here, I guess with the Bolshoi. I don't know, I was away at the time, and she gave a master class. I understand she was very generous with her time, and very participatory and enthusiastic and lively, which is nice. It's a mixed bag, but even at its worst I think it's important for a student to do them.

Crawford:

Different approach.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. I think it can be helpful. Any sort of cross pollination I think is likely to be useful.

Crawford:

I used to go to the master classes that Adler would give, and I was amazed when he picked apart a voice, which, of course, he did, how true it was. It just struck me as, that's right, but not something necessarily that everybody would have seen. Is that true with harp? I mean, is it easy for someone to see?

DeCray:

Oh, sure. It's true in any discipline.

Crawford:

What are they going to tell a young student, for instance?

DeCray:

Sometimes technical things like your hand position or something like that, and sometimes they criticize an interpretation of a piece that the person plays. It varies, and I think it's pretty much the same for any instrument, that sometimes the technique is criticized, but rarely is it criticized in a way that is political. There's not much you can do with the technique of somebody who is good enough to play in a master class, so it's mostly interpretive and taking apart the approach to the whole experience.

Crawford:

Can that be cruel? In your experience?

DeCray:

I don't think that. I think that's theatrical. The play, the theater play on the Callas master classes, it's purely theater, purely theater.

Crawford:

I remember once Misha Dichter at Aspen said, "That is the most self-indulgent thing I've ever heard," and got up and walked out of the room. [DeCray laughs.] And I thought, that is devastating.

DeCray:

Why not better to have said, "Do you feel that you are at all self-indulgent, and why?" Or I don't know, just approach it obliquely and—

Crawford:

A better way.

DeCray:

—get feedback from the student.

DeCray:

Harvey Fierstein right now is going through criticism for being self-indulgent in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Have you been reading about it?

DeCray:

Ben Brantley is a fine critic, theater critic, *New York Times*, and his review of Harvey Fierstein's fit with the whole—he is a new addition to the play—was wonderful, I thought. So many reviews are just, you know, sort of walk through it, and well, we'll say this, and we'll hit that, but we'll give our encouraging words and so on, and we'll inform the audience a little bit, the reader a little bit about what this is about, and we'll use a few long words and show that we're very knowledgeable, and maybe we'll make some philosophical insight known, and then we'll wrap it up. And this Brantley review was nothing like that. It was great!

Crawford:

How about music critics? I have a whole passel of reviews of your playing. Was there anybody that you felt was perceptive, particularly?

DeCray:

Alexander Fried I liked very much, and Frankenstein I didn't know at all. He had a wonderful reputation.

Crawford:

Everybody loved him.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. Fried was a warm sort of fellow.

Crawford:

And knowledgeable.

DeCray:

Oh yes, oh yes. The present-day critics I don't know very much about. Robert Commaday was insightful, and yet not—he was insightful, s-i-g-h-t. He was not inciteful, i-n-c-i-t. He did not incite people's anger and get their backs up.

Crawford:

Really.

DeCray:

I didn't think.

Crawford:

He liked new music, I know. He seemed to be kind to new music.

DeCray:

Yes, yes, yes.

Crawford:

Certainly music in the schools.

DeCray:

Yes. He's still writing, or at least he recently reviewed maybe on the web.

Crawford:

Well, he has San Francisco Classical Voice, an online service—

DeCray:

Is that what it is?

Crawford:

—and he employs musicians to review, exclusively.

DeCray:

Yes. So he reviewed a chamber music concert that I played in a few years ago, and he was his usual mellow self.

Crawford:

Well, that's good to know. I think he would like that reading. How about Huwell Tircuit.

DeCray:

Oh, Huwell I thought was very intelligent. I didn't know him very well, and I didn't see an enormous number of his publications, of his published reviews.

Crawford:

He's reviewing for I think *Musical Scene* or something, some periodical that came out of *Musical America*. *American Music Review*, I think that's it, if I'm not mistaken. But do you follow music reviewing in this year?

DeCray:

Not in periodicals, no. I remember the days of *Musical America*. I think it's probably not as important a publication as it used to be. I don't know. Nobody ever quotes it anymore that I run into.

Crawford:

That's interesting.

DeCray:

Nor do I see it for sale much. The conservatory, of course, gets it, but it seems to me that it hasn't got the status that it used to have.

Crawford:

What do you read about for music and theater? You're obviously interested in theater.

DeCray:

Do you remember Michael Walsh?

Crawford:

Oh yes. *Time* magazine.

DeCray:

Time magazine has no arts section now at all.

Crawford:

Really. I haven't seen it in years.

Crawford:

How do you set up the master classes for harp? For the conservatory, did you invite the harpists to come, and organize that?

DeCray:

Sure. First I analyzed whether the harpist would be worthwhile. Secondly, would the harpist possibly be interested, obliquely? And then I sold the idea to the school, and then I asked the harpist.

Crawford:

And then you prepared your students, I'm assuming. Didn't—

DeCray:

Oh, it was open to any student of harp from anywhere, and some came from other cities.

Crawford:

To the conservatory?

DeCray:

Yes, for these classes. Yes.

Crawford:

And did you want to present your best students? Is that part of the dynamic?

DeCray:

Yes, but I was not interested in anything political, so I wasn't interested in showing my best students for me. And some students are afraid to do a master class, and some students just don't have the wherewithal.

People always have to sign up in advance. It's not an open scene. They sign up in advance and they have to indicate what they will play, and so on. I've staged master classes where somebody gave only fifteen minutes, very short shrift, and then the person who knows it's going to be of limited time plays a piece that's like eight or ten minutes long. Well, they don't get much out of—

Crawford:

Not fair.

DeCray:

It's not fair to them, but they made the choice. They didn't use their head and play a portion of the piece, or something so they would get the benefit of that individual.

Crawford:

Who would be the harpist today, right now, that you wish would come here? Who are the greatest names in the instrument?

DeCray:

The greatest name in teaching in the United States is Susann McDonald. She teaches at Indiana University, which is, of course, a magnet for teaching music. It's a really, really big music school.

Crawford:

Why is that?

DeCray:

I don't know. And then a few people perhaps from Europe, from France, or there were one or two from England. She would be the most popular teacher today. Soloists who don't teach, or who teach very little sort of come and go. As I said, it's a thin field. So they usually either join an orchestra, or just kind of eventually burn out of touring. A touring harpist never gets first-rate cities and big presentations, so it's just a little harder role, I think, to be a touring harpist.

Crawford:

How many students have you had?

DeCray:

I had a lot of students at Aspen.

Crawford:

Yes. Well, we're going on to Aspen now.

DeCray:

And I had students at Peabody, so it's been a lot of students.

Crawford:

A lot of students, yes. All right. Well, let's go to Aspen and really explore Aspen in its various aspects. When did you start there?

DeCray:

In 1961, yes.

Crawford:

Oh, even before you came here. I didn't realize it went way back.

DeCray:

Yes, yes, yes.

Crawford:

How was that connection made?

DeCray:

They had no harp department, and I was skiing in Aspen and stopped at the office in Aspen that consisted of one person, and the principals were in New York City. We talked to the fellow in Aspen, whose name I forget.

Crawford:

This was Aspen Music School?

DeCray:

Aspen Music School and Aspen Music Festival, in the dead of winter, and he directed us to the New York managing director, and I got in touch with him. He actually, I think, knew of me

through the Philadelphia Orchestra, and so he was delighted to have me come teach. They put it in the catalog and I guess the next summer we had a few students, and it continued to go along.

Crawford:

Is the music school open in the winter?

DeCray:

No, not at all. Only in the summer.

Crawford:

It's just in conjunction with the festival.

DeCray:

Yes. It's changed very much from what it was in the sixties. It was wonderful, and the festival was wonderful in the sixties, and Aspen, of course, was wonderful in the sixties. It's become a whole different shtick now.

Crawford:

What was it like?

DeCray:

I've played at Telluride a number of years, and it's very much like old Aspen.

Crawford:

That's what I hear.

DeCray:

And once you've seen something that is very precious and wonderful, when you see rubber replicas they just don't—

Crawford:

Well, what's happened in Aspen?

DeCray:

Money. I don't know. I really haven't analyzed it too thoroughly, but money is a big factor.

Crawford:

What has money done?

DeCray:

Money has built big houses, invited colorful luminaries.

Crawford:

Music?

DeCray:

Not only in music, no. The Aspen Institute has had many famous people come, and there's some Hollywood people who are made much fuss over when they turn up there. I think Aspen didn't really make an effort to maintain it's historicity, and Telluride, I think, does. It's still a wonderful place, Aspen, wonderful place.

Crawford:

It's kept its opera house, Wheeler Opera House.

DeCray:

It's kept its opera house. It's been redone several times, once by a slightly famous Bauhaus architect who—

Crawford:

Who is that?

DeCray:

Herbert Bayer, who also was responsible for much of the architecture at, if not all the architecture at the Aspen Institute. It's just, it's not the same Aspen, now.

It's sort of like a great smallish restaurant that gets a little larger and gets greater, and its name gets renowned, and it stays with what it does so well and so magnificently, and then it decides to expand, and it becomes a different venture, it changes its personality, sometimes not for the better.

Aspen did not try to spread out to other cities so much as it became a little bigger and a little less personal than it had been, which is what I think is so nice about the conservatory here, that it has confined itself. What it does well it wants to do well, and has recognize that you can get a little too big to maintain quality.

Crawford:

Who was there when you—describe it when you came in the sixties.

DeCray:

Rosina Lhevinne, Simon Goldberg; golly, I don't remember; oh, Darius Milhaud. I don't remember. I'd have to jog my memory on that one.

Crawford:

What was Milhaud doing? He was at Mills then, I assume.

DeCray:

Yes, he was. He would have a program of all his music once a summer, and he would conduct the orchestra. It was an orchestral program. And there were a number of chamber music presentations of his work also at chamber music concerts.

DeCray:

How different it was when I first went to Aspen in '61—aside from Main Street all the roads were dirt.

Crawford:

That's a big difference. So it wasn't much of a ski hangout then either, was it?

DeCray:

Yes. It had one lift in town, and it was one of the first ski areas to have a chairlift.

Crawford:

And the campus was where it is today.

DeCray:

The campus was not. The campus was in town, and there wasn't much of a campus. They took over a couple of old hotels as dormitories, and those hotels have since been torn down, and office buildings or other hotels or apartments have been put up in their place. But no, the students all lived in town, and it was pretty much makeshift; wonderful. They had concerts in a tent, and they had concerts in Wheeler Opera House, and it was just, it was a whole different bag. But it's wonderful now. It's wonderful now.

Crawford:

Who was the executive director then?

DeCray:

Norman Singer from I think in the music department of Hunter College. I think he was more administrative, but he was definitely very, very familiar with music, and had contacts all over the world, and would bring one or two big-name people each summer, and I've forgotten who those people were.

But there's a book of the Aspen Music School and the music festival's history that can tell you all about that.

Crawford:

And how long a period did you go for?

DeCray:

Probably the first summer I went for, oh, maybe five weeks. I don't know. But that whole period was maybe nine weeks, and I think after the first summer I went for the entire time.

Crawford:

You bought a house there.

DeCray:

Eventually we bought a house there, yes. Yes.

Crawford:

So you had a place to stay; it was a wonderful summer for you for you and your family.

DeCray:

Yes, and it's rented out to an artist who's been there for many years now. He loves Aspen and he loves the house, dearly, dearly, dearly, just so good.

Crawford:

What was the structure of the festival in the sixties?

DeCray:

Very much like it is now. There were master classes. I had Luigi Dallapiccola do a master class for harp students only.

Crawford:

You organized that?

DeCray:

Yes. And there were chamber music concerts and orchestra concerts each week, and recitals. Jimmy Levine was a student there of Rosina's when he was just a kid, and the scuttlebutt was that he was due to become something very special, because he was such a fantastic student.

Crawford:

Was that a full-time job while you were there?

DeCray:

Just for the summer.

Crawford:

Yes, but you were teaching actively.

DeCray:

Yes. I was teaching and playing in the orchestra, and playing chamber music and an occasional solo.

Crawford:

How long did you stay in Aspen?

DeCray:

How many years?

Crawford:

Yes. I mean, when did you no longer—

DeCray:

Maybe twelve or thirteen.

Crawford:

And why didn't you go then, after that?

DeCray:

They started—I don't know that we really want this in something graven on stone, in stone, but they started bargaining with the salary, and I didn't like that. I was used to the Philadelphia Orchestra way with musicians, which was, I guess you would say, high class, and Aspen was somewhat fly-by-night. So if they had a hard year, then they wanted to cut salaries. It didn't appeal to me.

Crawford:

Did the audience change?

DeCray:

I don't think the audience has changed very much. It's just grown larger.

Crawford:

But it was always wealth that came to Aspen in the summer?

DeCray:

Not always only wealth, no. There were a few well-to-do people. There were a few famous people, and there were the Aspenites, and there were the devotees of one of the few festivals existing in the sixties. I mean, there was Aspen. There was Tanglewood. There were just a few festivals, summer festivals, in the late fifties and early sixties. Albert Schweitzer and Walter Pcepcke really put Aspen on the map. Walter Paepcke had the beginnings of the institute going, and he invited Albert Schweitzer, and that was a startling enough, exciting enough personality presence to put Aspen on the map.

Crawford:

So it was really the institute that put it on the map.

DeCray:

I think so, yes, yes. Schweitzer, of course, played violin.

Crawford:

And organ.

DeCray:

Yes. And I think he had a soft spot for music, so I think that was really what—Pepke wanted to do this in Ouray, Colorado, and Ouray would have nothing to do with it. He wanted to start the beginnings of the institute, and he wanted to bring Schweitzer, so then he went and looked for other valley towns.

Crawford:

Schweitzer, did he take part in the institute?

DeCray:

I'm sure he did, yes. That was before my time. It was sometime in the fifties. You know, it was a silver mining town. When the standard went off silver, then silver mining was not so lucrative, so people didn't come from all over to mine silver, and the silver barons died off. They had been well-to-do anyway, from their mines. Aspen really didn't flourish at all for many, many decades. Then I think it was Paepcke and the Schweitzer thing that really put it back on the map.

Crawford:

I get the feeling there are a lot of politics.

DeCray:

In the music festival, in music school, I'd guess there are now, yes, undoubtedly. Anything that gets very big and ceases to be personal has a strong political vein running through it. Sure.

Crawford:

And it's very hard to get in there, I think.

DeCray:

You mean to teach?

Crawford:

No, no, as a student.

DeCray:

As a student? I think it probably depends on your instrument.

Crawford:

So the strings would be difficult, and then piano would be difficult.

DeCray:

Strings probably are difficult, yes. There are two orchestras and lots of chamber music, and student performances, so they can process a lot of people.

Crawford:

Is it considered one of the best?

DeCray:

Yes, but it's expensive. It's expensive for the student. It's an expensive way to pass a musical summer.

Crawford:

Yes. I know that a young cello teacher got in but couldn't go.

You mentioned Telluride; talk about Telluride and your history there.

DeCray:

Telluride is a little Aspen. It has a charming opera house, beautiful opera house in mint original condition, and the town, too, is a lot—

Crawford:

Silver town?

DeCray:

Yes, yes, and it has a lot of mint, original condition. Telluride is, I think you call it, a box canyon. It's in a box canyon, which means that it has mountains on either side, and it has a mountain at the end of it, so it can't grow anywhere. So the only way it could grow would be backwards, because it's hemmed in on both sides and in the front, or the end of it. I think that's part of the reason why it hasn't expanded.

But it has a festival that lasts maybe four weeks in the summer. It's about thirty years old now, and it was started by Roy Malan and Robin Sutherland. They, I understand, put on sandwich boards and paraded up and down Main Street.

Crawford:

They started it.

DeCray:

Yes. And Main Street has like one or two parallel streets on one side of it, and two or three parallel streets on the other side of it, and then mountain. So it makes for a very cohesive little society. Everybody knows everybody and knows what's going on, knows these guys are walking up the street with sandwich boards on, saying that there's going to be concerts, classical music. So it's an intimate setting now with an enthusiastic board that's not large, but committed people, and no school.

Crawford:

No teaching function?

DeCray:

It's professional players coming in during the summer; much less complicated.

Crawford:

And is it mostly contemporary music?

DeCray:

No, not really, no. It's a mixture. It's an intelligent mixture; not much contemporary music, I wouldn't say.

Crawford:

Who programs?

DeCray:

I think Roy Malan is probably the principal programmer. I think everything goes by him.

Crawford:

And how many summers have you participated?

DeCray:

Oh, golly, maybe six or seven. I don't know. Not anymore since that equipment I fell on, backstage at the San Francisco Opera House. I cannot play for long periods of time, intensively. I cannot do the rehearsing with other musicians that will go on for an hour and a quarter of intensive playing. My body can't take it anymore. I have half a rotator cuff, and some of the other injuries, like the kneecap has healed, but not well.

Crawford:

So it's endurance that you—

DeCray:

Endurance without pain, severe pain. I can't really play through severe pain.

Crawford:

But when you're sitting in the pit are you relaxed?

DeCray:

When I'm sitting in the pit and playing ballet for three or four minutes, even a solo, then I have nothing to do for a few minutes, so I can move around. Sometimes I have a fifteen-minute break. I can leave the pit and walk around.

Crawford:

Walking alleviates it?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

Well, who have been the key figures in Telluride?

DeCray:

I think Roy and Robin. Steven Harrison was there for a while. A man whose name right now escapes me from the Reno, Nevada Philharmonic was one of the original founding players, plays both French horn and cello. And once in a while Roy's wife will play second violin in a quartet. Polly and Barbara Chaffee play flute. They had the first clarinet of San Francisco Symphony, whose name escapes me, who's still first clarinet, one year. They retain a small ensemble.

Crawford:

And it's solvent, that is, they can afford to bring the musicians and pay?

DeCray:

It's solvent. Small ensemble, small opera house, small dedicated board, small audiences, as compared with hundreds, shorter season.

Crawford:

So you personally would probably rather play and go to Telluride than Aspen?

DeCray:

It's been a much nicer experience, yes. You know the audience, some members of it, and you know board members. It's just a more human, personal experience.

Crawford:

Are the board members local?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

They're all local, so they fundraise there—

DeCray:

I don't know that they're all local, but most are.

Crawford:

—in that community, because I know people from here go.

DeCray:

And they're not board members who are wealthy and live in New York, or in Texas, and go there for the summer and stay in their mansion that has twelve bathrooms and, you know, so on.

Crawford:

No mansions.

DeCray:

No, no mansions.

Crawford:

What other festivals have you been involved in?

DeCray:

I used to play in Robin Hood Dell in the summers. That was the summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra, which now goes to Saratoga in addition to playing at Robin Hood Dell. I think that was called the Robin Hood Dell Festival. It was not legally known as the Philadelphia Orchestra's summer series. I think that's all.

Crawford:

Did you ever go to Tanglewood in any capacity?

DeCray:

No. No. I've had very little to do with Boston, unless the orchestra I was playing in went there, which was the case both with the Met and the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Crawford:

The California festivals, Ojai and what's the new-music one?

DeCray:

Cabrillo? I've been to concerts at both, and I've had students who played at both.

Crawford:

What's the caliber of those festivals?

DeCray:

Well, Ojai, of course, is very, very old, and was originally a Stravinsky baby. The concerts that I've heard there were excellent, and the audiences were large. Cabrillo, I'm trying to remember if I ever went to a concert there. I may have a number of years ago.

Crawford:

Well, I think that's good for today.

DeCray:

Great.

Crawford:

We'll take on the contemporary music players next time.

[End of interview]

Interview # 4 - 05-03-05
[Begin File DeCray, 06 05-03-05]

Crawford:

This is interview number four. It's May 3rd, 2005. Today let's talk about the creation of San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, of which you are founder.

DeCray:

Well, I first became aware of new music just before I left Philadelphia, about 1962. As a matter of fact, it was at a concert at which Ralph Shapey had music performed, and I thought he was just wonderful, and the music was the best on the program.

DeCray:

It was shortly before I moved to California, so I always had in the back of my mind the essence of the New York ensembles for contemporary music. And then Charles Boone suggested that I play in a Bring-Your-Own-Pillow (BYOP) concert, and shoved a Luciano Berio piece at me, which seemed absolutely inscrutable.

Crawford:

For what?

DeCray:

For harp alone.

Crawford:

No, but for what—what were you doing at the time?

DeCray:

Playing with the opera and the symphony.

Crawford:

Yes, but he gave you a Berio piece for a concert series?

DeCray:

Oh, for a concert series, or maybe it was one concert, at the Museum of Modern Art. So gradually more and more doors to the subject opened, and Jean-Louis LeRoux and I were both playing in the symphony, and he was very much interested in the harp, and he introduced himself shortly after I started playing with the symphony. So between the three of us we got together, and I suggested that the New York new music ensembles were just so fabulous, and especially Speculum Musicae, that it would be wonderful if there were something on the West Coast to counterbalance all that stuff on the East Coast, and why not San Francisco? There was no place in the West more in the forefront of culture and art, not that I necessarily think that's so today anymore. But when one sat in the east, one looked at San Francisco as being the only high point of that sort of culture.

Crawford:

Well, it had been, with the Composers' Forum. What would have been the counterpart of the Composers' Forum on the East Coast?

DeCray:

In the east? Don't remember. Here there was no contemporary music ensemble. There were the California composers. They were much touted by Californians and especially by Los Angeles. But that was sort of like a little ghetto, a little enclave.

Crawford:

Then there was the Monday night series.

DeCray:

That was at the L.A. County Museum, but they did not only California composers, they did composers from all over the world. But there was, to those who lived in the east, the enclave of California composers, and that we sought to break and become more worldwide. That was one of my things that I pushed when we started an ensemble here.

Crawford:

What was Charles Boone doing at the time? He's a composer, of course.

DeCray:

Yes. He was presenting these bring-your-own-pillow concerts at various—I don't know how he found the sites, but they were always a large room with a clear floor, and very simple but very clean, and, you know, twenty, forty people would come to the bring-your-own-pillow concerts, and they were the beginning of a movement, sort of.

Crawford:

When did it start? I thought you started the BYOP concerts.

DeCray:

No. I think he already had it going. But it was not terribly active. It was maybe at first one concert a year, and then moved up to two or three concerts a year, and for each one he assiduously did all the legwork, and sent out postcards and all sorts of things like that.

Crawford:

Was that a showcase for his music in any way?

DeCray:

Not really, no. Very, very rarely was something of his done. He was not a prolific composer, so he didn't have a lot to be done, either. I think it lent itself largely to his composer friends, so that when we moved out of the BYOP stage and into something more catholic, it was a different repertoire. So that's how we started.

Crawford:

Well, I remember Jean-Louis was overwhelmed by the speed at which you moved to become an entity, to become incorporated.

DeCray:

Well, Malcolm had incorporated a couple of schools, and he knew that it was one of these things that we have so much of in society, where, “Oh, it’s terribly hard and terribly complicated and mysterious and involved and dangerous, because you might get trapped up, and you might have to pay taxes, and you might get fined, and you could wind up in jail.” It was none of that. It was a very simple, straightforward experience to incorporate if one knew how, and he knew how. So he sent us through the motions with Sacramento and with City Hall, and it just happened.

Crawford:

So 1971?

DeCray:

I think ’73 maybe. I had a concert at Grace Cathedral of harpists and harpists with other instrumentalists, and everybody played contemporary music. Jean-Louis conducted a piece or two that required conducting, and Charles Boone was hovering around helping on the programming, and so on and so forth, and that was really the inception of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players.

After that we sat down with a woman whose last name escapes me—her first name was Irena—and discussed how to present an ensemble, and how to schedule concerts, and what sort of image we should have, and all that stuff, just miscellany. For a little while she managed the organization, and then it didn’t seem to work out with her, and so we went out on our own. She did the publicity for a while. Then along the way somewhere we discovered Caroline Crawford, who sat right there, in our music room, and we talked with her when we were interviewing people. We decided Caroline was the way to go.

Crawford:

I wasn’t the first, though?

DeCray:

I don’t think so, no. Oh, there was a young woman named Kathy, who did publicity for us for a while, sort of the mommy of the group, you know, that sort of thing. She didn’t play, but she liked the idea of the new.

Crawford:

Was there any idea of continuing the Mills performing group? Was the Mills performing group kind of dying out at that point?

DeCray:

I suppose so. I don’t know.

Crawford:

Milhaud left about that time, and Jean-Louis took over. I think Jean-Louis took the baton for a while, and I don't know what happened. But I read somewhere that when the three of you were talking you said, "This will be something like the Mills—."

DeCray:

I had played a Milhaud concerto with Milhaud conducting in Aspen, and he became as much of a dear friend as he could to a non-French young harpist.

Crawford:

What do you mean?

DeCray:

Well, the French are very choosy about who they become good friends with, and that's to their credit. But I still see Madeleine from time to time in Paris. The last time we were in Paris I tried to look her up and couldn't find her.

Crawford:

Did Milhaud write well for the harp?

DeCray:

He wrote adequately for the harp. He wrote very thickly in general, and I remember the concerto had two bars of harp alone, in three long, heavy movements. It was sort of digging your way uphill, if one could dig down uphill. It was hard to make it a success. I also played a sonata, a solo sonata that he wrote, just a few years ago.

Crawford:

You played that at the conservatory, I think. Did you?

DeCray:

Maybe. I also played it in Prague. His music is very wonderfully intellectual. That doesn't necessarily mean that it's a good experience for the listener. As one learned it one could see how it was put together. One could understand why this chord went to that chord, and they had no harmonic relationship, in a traditional sense, at all, and why this material was here and not over here.

Crawford:

But not something necessarily that an audience could grasp.

DeCray:

Not in one hearing, no. No, you'd have to be deeply immersed in it, and it would have to unfold gradually to you, as would be the case when you were learning it. If an audience member chose to study the music over an intense, immersive period, that would be the case, yes. But that kind of music is just rarely, rarely successful. I've played other composers who, same thing, and the audience just is bored to tears.

DeCray:

Some new music manages to make itself, shall I say palatable or plausible enough that there is a little something somewhere that catches the audience.

Crawford:

For the players, who programmed?

DeCray:

Jean-Louis largely did the programming with Charles Boone. Perhaps at first the two of them did it together, and then gradually Charles receded, and I think he was busy composing from time to time also, so he didn't have much time to lend himself to this sort of thing. So Jean-Louis largely did the programming. He would keep up with new music all over the world, and new music aficionados, and new music personalities, and that sort of thing.

Crawford:

Did you bring scores to him?

DeCray:

Sometimes, sometimes.

Crawford:

How did you divide your duties, the three of you, when you were a trio, working on it?

DeCray:

Well, I think mostly I did, shall we say dirty work?

Crawford:

Paperwork.

DeCray:

And I would bring in a couple of people to help with that. I think that the music auditions were largely up to them. There was a little bit of the male thing of the males can decide, and you, girl, you'd go—

Crawford:

Marcella, I can't imagine you putting up with that.

DeCray:

We all evolve. Times evolve, too. The seventies were very different from the nineties, which are very different from this century.

Crawford:

You moved to the Green Room, and probably about that time you changed your name from BYOP to San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. Was that very early on?

DeCray:

Quite early on; we adopted a name that we felt included the name of the city and included what we did, included the area that we were trying to hit, which was not modern music. It was contemporary music.

Crawford:

Talk about that.

DeCray:

Well, it just seemed that modern included everything from maybe Paul Hindemith and Stravinsky on out, so we were not interested in that era. We were not interested in that image.

Crawford:

How did you get the Green Room?

DeCray:

I don't remember, except that we were looking for space, not too large, with adequate acoustics. It seemed like the place to be. Before that we were at the Grapestake Gallery, you know. It's now called, I think, Backs to Work, or something like that, and it's on California Street. Do you know where the Grapestake was?

Crawford:

Oh yes, I went to concerts there.

DeCray:

Yes. That's where we began.

Crawford:

And you wanted something bigger.

DeCray:

That's where we began. We began in a gallery, and Charles' concerts with BYOP had been often in galleries, very, very low-key galleries. And he had tried to meld art, painting, and sculpture with music.

Crawford:

Wonderful concept, I think.

DeCray:

I think it was a wonderful concept in the mind. It didn't necessarily work overly well. Sometimes it was not as comfortable. Grapestake was very, very glad to have us, and they were very hospitable, and it was wonderful.

Crawford:

Was that Otto Meyer?

DeCray:

His daughter and his son, yes, through Otto. Then I think Grapestake closed and so then we were sort of homeless, and the Green Room seemed like a possibility. Herbst Theater was just too big, and the acoustics were not good, and the conviviality of people sitting in makeshift folding chairs and on the floor, that sort of thing, around us sort of, just couldn't be had at Herbst. So we found the Green Room.

Crawford:

Was Bob Whyte at the museum then? He was so wonderful and supportive.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. How is he, do you know?

Crawford:

I don't know. Last time I heard he was at the Italian Museum.

DeCray:

Yes, at Fort Mason. Yes. And our great aim was to be like Dorrance with his new music series at the Los Angeles Country Museum of Art. Dorrance Stalvey, yes. We were very anxious to establish enough of a name that we could attach ourselves to the Museum of Modern Art here, not some other museum, but the Museum of Modern Art. Henry Hopkins was very, very helpful with that, and, of course, Bob Whyte was his man who put it all together and made it happen. But we had to have the blessing of Henry Hopkins, who was very supportive.

Crawford:

And it was a different time. We didn't have all these security considerations, I don't think.

DeCray:

Oh no.

Crawford:

Here we were, sitting with paintings three feet away from us, listening to music and just it was a wonderful experience, I thought.

DeCray:

I'm sure it was a great deal of trouble for the museum. The acoustics were varied, you know, it depended on the room, and we were not always in the same room at the Museum of Modern Art. This gallery or that gallery.

Crawford:

But it was unique because the L. A. Monday evening concerts weren't in galleries, were they? No, they were in an auditorium.

DeCray:

And the Museum of Modern Art did have a large sort of rotunda at the time that I played the Boone concert there. This was about '66 or '67. He had a concert series at the Museum of

Modern Art in an auditorium-type space in this central court that they sometimes had sculpture in.

DeCray:

I forget what they called it—the Rotunda. He had a concert there in which I had played this Berio *Sequenze*, and there were several other pieces on the concert. I think they were all solos, and we played a few concerts in there with the Contemporary Music Players, but it was pretty big and pretty spacey, and a little boomy.

Crawford:

But wonderful art. What would you say would be the high points, programmatically?

DeCray:

Well, we had Ralph Shapey. We had Frank Zappa. We had, golly, I can't think of some of the names.

Crawford:

Well, Jean-Louis seemed to utilize California composers to a great extent.

DeCray:

Yes, but always with an eye to the rest of the world. Some of his programming worked and some of it didn't. A varied program of several works usually had something for everyone.

Crawford:

The Zappa benefit gave you mileage.

DeCray:

A money raiser. I remember going to the Opera House for the dress rehearsal and the performance, or maybe just a run-through right before the performance, and of course I got there early with the harp. I put the harp on the stage and I looked at this big, empty hall, and I thought, "My god—" [laughs] "Let's go home." But—

Crawford:

That was a leap of faith, wasn't it?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

A 3200-seat house.

DeCray:

But we had an audience, a large audience, and Frank Zappa delivered. We were worried about whether he would deliver.

Crawford:

He wanted to conduct Varèse, is that right?

DeCray:

Yes, yes. We were worried, of course, about whether he'd show. Then we were worried about whether he would deliver, and he was just a fine showman. He was just fine, and it worked very well. So it was exciting.

Crawford:

Whose idea was it?

DeCray:

Zappa was Jean-Louis' idea, I think.

Crawford:

And he called him and he said, "Well, why not?"

DeCray:

I guess so. I guess so. So it worked out well, and I think it gave us much stronger footing than we had had.

Crawford:

Okay, we're recording now, and we're just talking about the Zappa performance, which I think nearly filled 3200 seats.

DeCray:

We did not use the top balcony, may not have used the grand tier; I don't know. I don't remember. But we filled the downstairs. We filled the boxes, and it was absolutely astonishing.

Crawford:

Did you have a guarantee from the board?

DeCray:

I don't remember that. Probably something like that.

Crawford:

Who did you get for the board, because I think the board was essentially your development, wasn't it?

DeCray:

Well, we kind of, you know, went around and talked to people who we thought were interested in music, and then the subsection who had au courant taste in the arts. That was one of the reasons why the Grapestake Gallery appealed to us, because the image that they presented was the new, not the well cooked. So gradually we would pick up a name here or a personality there, or an aficionado somewhere else, and that was how we developed a board. Charles was on the board for a while. Yes, we built a board that seemed to, for a while, be very supportive of the

whole thing. We also were rather conservative in our choices of what we would do. We did not get too splendorific. The more grandiose—

Crawford:

When you say we, the board didn't handle the artistic issues.

DeCray:

Jean-Louis and I, and for a while Charles was also involved in decision making. The three of us did not get too far out of budgetary line.

Crawford:

You did things like the Berg *Lyric Suite*.

Crawford:

Which would have to be considered pretty ambitious.

DeCray:

Ambitious, yes. But while it was definitely a precursor of more far-out things to come, it tended to fall into the modern music era, so we tended to not want that image, and not allow ourselves to get yoked into that image.

Crawford:

You played Ned Rorem and Dave Sheinfeld, I know. Ned Rorem wrote you this letter in March of 1978. I assumed it was the first performance of *Sky Music*, but I don't know. [reads] "Dear Marcella DeCray, Believe it or not it was only last night that I was finally able to hear the cassette of the *Sky Music* which you so kindly sent nearly ten months ago. Your performance is marvelous. I'm dazzled at how so cleanly, wisely, and sonorously you bring forth colors and phrases which I myself didn't realize were in the piece. You are the best harpist I've ever heard, and I salute you."

DeCray:

I forgot all about that.

Crawford:

But let's talk about David Sheinfeld—did he dedicate a piece to you?

DeCray:

Yes, I think he wrote three pieces. The first piece I think was almost written or had been finished when we got together, a very good piece, I thought.

Crawford:

Was that *Patterns*?

DeCray:

Yes. And he wrote a couple of other pieces after that. He, I would say, was an example of somebody whose work was highly intellectual but nonetheless combined with enough rhythmic and incisive material to make for what I felt was a good piece of music, a salable piece of music.

Crawford:

He said that in his oral history about this piece, exactly what you just said.

DeCray:

Really. Well, there you go. I have had quite a bit of success with that piece. I would not play it for an audience that wouldn't be able to absorb that, and, of course, it's hard sometimes to foretell how eclectic an audience is. But you can tell a little bit from the presenters, and so on and so forth. Time of year also; never present something like that in the summer.

Crawford:

You recorded that?

DeCray:

Yes, I thought did a good job in that piece.

Crawford:

Did you work with him on the piece? Did you do the first performance ever, or the first West Coast performance?

DeCray:

I think it had been done somewhere.

Crawford:

I think it had, too.

DeCray:

Maybe on the East Coast. But yes, I played the first West Coast performance.

Crawford:

Did you work with him?

DeCray:

Yes. He listened to it. I was going to say that after the Frank Zappa concert we were so pleased with our success that a couple of years later we did a Gunther Schüller concert at Herbst Theater. I had known Gunther when I was in the Met. He was a French horn player in the Met, maybe third, fourth horn. He was very young and I was very young, and at the time I don't think he had composed very much, but he was interested in the whole non-opera ethos, although he was in an opera job. That was his bread and butter.

Crawford:

What job was he in?

DeCray:

Metropolitan Opera horn section. So I kept in touch with him after I left the Met and went to Philadelphia Orchestra, and he eventually left the Met and went into composing, and publishing also. He and his wife established a contemporary composers' publishing company. So we had this concert which he conducted, of music that he chose, including a solo for harp. It was at Herbst Theater and it was scarily, marginally successful, in terms of the audience and the whole—the enthusiasm that went with the Zappa personality, who was, of course, a crossover from pops, did not hold up with Gunther Schuller, who had absolutely no image other than his serious music image. But it was interesting to do it with him.

Crawford:

Did he write well for the harp?

DeCray:

Fairly well; uncomfortably, as with Sheinfeld, uncomfortably. But the comfortable is not necessarily the au courant, because it's trying to break a lot of barriers, both for the listener and for the player.

Crawford:

Sheinfeld seemed like such an ebullient personality. And I think that told in the music.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

I know Kent Nagano thought very highly of him and of his music. His music was difficult to listen to, but listenable at the same time.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

You got some pretty big grants. I remember Hewlett Packard was a good angel.

DeCray:

Yes. I enjoyed doing that very, very much. The very first one I got was from Martha Baird Rockefeller, and I had been studying where organizations like Speculum Musicae were getting money from. Anything I came across that indicated that a foundation was giving money for the new, I ticked immediately, checked immediately, and if they did anything in the arts, they got another check. If they did anything in music, I was right there with an appointment to see them. [laughs]

I also knew Don Engel, who had been the general manager of the Philadelphia Orchestra when I was there. He was in the last years that I was there. He had not been the general manager when I arrived. That was Harl McDonald. Don Engel became the head of the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund. But I saw his predecessor, a very wonderful lady whose name I don't remember, but I was

scared to death when I was sitting in the outer lobby waiting to see her. I'd called up and asked for an appointment, and I got an appointment, and I suddenly realized while I was sitting there, I had a kind of an epiphany or something, that, say, you know, these people are in the business of giving out money for things like what you're asking for. And that was all I needed. I went in and I talked about the organization. I talked about what we wanted to do, and she was very receptive, and we were off. It wasn't the world's biggest grant, but it was a start. It was a mark of, a stamp of approval.

Of course we went for the CAC [California Arts Council] and the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts], which Richard Nixon had established.

Crawford:

Yes. How successful were you with the NEA?

DeCray:

Quite. Quite. I remember an interview with the head of the NEA and it was fine.

Crawford:

So you would go back to Washington.

DeCray:

Yes. I also went to New York and talked to Nonesuch Records, was it? It was fun getting a grant, yes.

Crawford:

And Hewlett Packard, that was a substantial multi-year grant, as I remember.

DeCray:

Yes, I think it was three years.

Crawford:

Eric Peterson comes to my mind.

DeCray:

Can't remember. San Francisco Foundation also was a big help. John Kreidler.

Crawford:

It was a different time. It was kind of a time of innocence, wasn't it?

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

There was no competition. Now there are lots of contemporary music outlets.

DeCray:

There was no competition. Oh yes. Chamber Music America was also—I never was in their offices, but I had the greatest conversations on the phone with a lady there, very encouraging and very supportive. It was wonderful to find that there wasn't this flourishing, visible group of supporters, either with money or with ideas or with enthusiasm, just general enthusiasm, but if you ferreted them out they were there, and they came out of the woodwork. That was quite wonderful.

Crawford:

It was fun. The concerts in those years were fun.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. After a while they ceased to be fun, and there was more groveling for more pennies, and more competition, and more wannabes. It also came to me rather clearly that new music wasn't really going anywhere, and I haven't really noticed that it is still going anywhere.

Crawford:

By that you mean it's not going to live.

DeCray:

It hasn't molded itself into any set of images, or any—perhaps one image, but I would refrain from saying one image—that is able to push forward. But who's to say? In history there were plenty of down periods in plenty of arts.

Crawford:

So it validates itself in a sense, you could say. In the early years did you pay salaries? Did Jean-Louis as artistic director get a salary? Were the players paid?

DeCray:

Not in the first years, no. We always had to pay a union wage to the players, and eventually we had a contract that was blessed by the union. At first it was just single gigs.

Crawford:

Who developed into the core? I remember we talked about Marta LeRoux, very vibrant.

DeCray:

The core players?

Crawford:

Roy Malan came onboard I think, about that time.

DeCray:

Yes. He was not the first violinist, but I don't remember who was the first violinist, perhaps Nate Ruben. I just don't remember that.

Crawford:

It was never really important that the players be a core group.

DeCray:

No.

Crawford:

And that was a difficult thing, because you couldn't tour in the summer, say, in case you wanted to tour.

DeCray:

[laughs] In case we were asked to tour in the summers? Those are two loaded words, tour and summer. You couldn't sell an awful lot of contemporary music back in the seventies in the summer. There are not too many places that are interested in having you, and supporting your travel as well as your fees, and then scaring up an audience for what is being performed in a desert somewhere, a musical desert, an artistic, cultural desert somewhere. No.

I remember we went to the University of Nevada, I think, in Las Vegas, and it was rather early on in our lives, maybe in the early eighties or the late seventies, and it was a very thin audience that we played for. We also went down to Dorrance Stalvey's series at LACMA, and each time we were sure this was going to be *it*. Somebody else, fortunately, was doing the work of getting the audience and putting out the publicity in their own particular bailiwick, and it was never quite the success as when we did it ourselves and were hands on in our own native territory.

So, you know, you would have a sense that things were getting better, and then you would get pulled back, and then you'd start up again.

Crawford:

Yes. So it was just that it was frustrating. It was the nature of the music itself, and largely an audience of composers, for one thing.

DeCray:

Yes, yes. And one wonders whether the composers were there to find out whether there was any option for their music to be played in the future, based on what they were seeing and hearing.

Crawford:

What about composers, Gordon Mumma and Wayne Peterson? Those were favored by Jean-Louis, as was, I think, Charles Shere, to some extent.

DeCray:

Charles was involved for a little while, yes. He was never a board member. He was an advisor and he had a path to Jean-Louis' ear, I'd say, for a brief while. He left town, I think, didn't he?

Crawford:

Yes. He's living in the north part of the state.

DeCray:

Doing what?

Crawford:

I don't know. I've been corresponding with him a little bit about the composer's series, but I don't know.

DeCray:

1750 Arch, of course, was also in business when I arrived. 1750 Arch didn't seem to be as noticeable in San Francisco as it was in the East Bay. They had their own little coterie of composers, as did 321 Divisadero. Both were sort of closed shops. It was interesting.

With the Contemporary Music Players not to have that happen. There was always the threat of it happening, as the friends of Charles and Jean-Louis would get their music played. I think it never really happened, but there was always that threat that it would become inbred, that it would become, therefore, provincial.

Crawford:

Yes. But as long as you have one person programming that does tend to happen.

DeCray:

Yes.

Crawford:

And Jean-Louis finally decided to leave, and replace himself.

DeCray:

Yes, yes.

Crawford:

What happened then?

DeCray:

He thought to replace himself with Randall Packer. And where has Randall Packer gone?

Crawford:

Yes. Well, the feeling was on the committee we should have a real search that would be broader than here.

DeCray:

And so I think we got Lucky Mosko, yes.

Crawford:

Well, you left about that time.

DeCray:

Yes. Yes. I don't know what's become of Lucky Mosko, do you?

Crawford:

Not at all, no. And what's become of the players, in your opinion?

DeCray:

They still exist and they still give performances, and a few of the oldies are still involved. Roy is still involved, and Barbara Chaffee. I don't know who else.

Crawford:

Steven Harrison is still there.

DeCray:

Richard Feliciano.

Crawford:

Well, I see him in Berkeley, although I think he's retired.

DeCray:

I know. I know, but where?

Crawford:

He's the one that Jean-Louis LeRoux thinks will live, and so on, so I wanted to ask you about him, because he did have a rather big, principal role with the players there for a while.

DeCray:

Yes. He was not directly involved, but he was giving information to Jean-Louis, and, you know, feeding ideas, as were a few people feeding ideas to Jean-Louis. Yes.

Crawford:

You played under Lucky Mosko, right?

DeCray:

A little bit, yes.

Crawford:

Steven Mosko.

DeCray:

A year or two, yes.

Crawford:

Did the players like him?

DeCray:

I don't think so, not very much.

Crawford:

They loved Jean Louis, of course.

DeCray:

I think Mosko was not grounded in classical music. He had been strongly recommended by Morton Feldman, who was a musical figure of enormity and graciousness, and just a very, very big American composer, as was Ralph Shapey, and at the time that Jean-Louis stepped out we had already done a couple of Feldman pieces in the last couple of years, and I turned to Morton Feldman as a source for who could take over for Jean-Louis, and he suggested Steven Mosko. It gradually came out in subsequent years that Moscow had no grounding in serious classical music, no grounding in the routine of it. He had a kind of musical personality that would permit him to put on a production, a performance that could work, but with players all grounded in classical routine, classical repertoire, who were then taking on new music as it became available to them, it didn't go down their throats too well.

Crawford:

And you departed from the players about that point.

DeCray:

Yes, yes.

Crawford:

Was that instrumental in your leaving?

DeCray:

I think that was part of it, yes. Yes, because, of course, I had been largely responsible, through Morton Feldman, getting him there, getting Lucky Mosko there.

Crawford:

And you've not been really involved in the players since.

DeCray:

Not at all; not at all.

Crawford:

They have a large budget now, almost half a million dollars.

DeCray:

That would be necessary. We had a budget of \$100,000 back in the late seventies and the eighties.

Crawford:

Well, let's move on. I want to talk to you about the American Harp Society and the World Harp Congress, which you're going to, and ask you to reflect on the importance of that in your life, of those organizations.

DeCray:

Well, the harp came out of an image of being a salon instrument which sat in the corner of a living room and was played by a lady in a brocade dress. It moved from there to receptions, restaurants, that sort of thing. In the mid-twentieth century it was a dressier piano. It was a more elegant piano. And yes, there was a harpist, usually just one, in a major orchestra as a regular member. In the Grade B orchestras, the harpist, who was almost always female—was brought in for concerts that required harp. If there was harp in the orchestration of one or two works that were done on a program that was being done for a week in, well, let's take, for instance, the St. Louis or the Kansas Philharmonic, then they would bring the harpist in as an extra.

The major orchestras, Chicago and L.A. and Philadelphia and New York and Boston, had one harpist as a full-time member of the orchestra, who, of course, did not play every week, because every week there wasn't a part for harp. Philadelphia Orchestra was the first one to hire a second harpist full time, and that was me. That job consisted of playing second harp parts and often doubling parts with the first harpist.

Sometimes a first harpist would be ill or would be doing something else, and even though she had a contract, the second harpist would fill her role, and, of course, going on all the tours and that sort of thing. But the harp was always a marginal, a single instrument in the majority of orchestras.

It has gradually come into its own. More orchestras now hire a harpist full time. A few orchestras hire a second harpist full time, but really, really very few. It sort of developed like the tuba, in that when it's needed, it's needed, because the scoring calls for it, and when it's not, it's relegated, it's not there, it's not part of the orchestra, so to speak.

Meanwhile, there are harpists trying to play recitals all over the world. That's a really thin field. When I started the harp, I felt that I wanted to play recitals all over the world. As is the case with kids, they think they're going to rule the world. Therefore, I started learning the music that was available, which was beautiful, comfortable to play, very florid, and largely trash.

And gradually I uncovered transcriptions of pieces that had been written for other instruments. One of the most influential people in that line was my teacher in France, Henriette Renié. She transcribed many, many works for the harp. Then I discovered Nikanor Zabaleta, who was a wonderful Spanish harpist, and who didn't believe in transcriptions. He started asking composers that he could establish a connection with to write for the harp, so I began to get interested in original music only for the harp. That made the field of what could be played in recitals even thinner.

Then in the sixties, I guess, while I was still living in the east, the Northern California Harpists Association existed here in the Bay Area, so as soon as I moved here I connected with them.

Eventually they joined forces with Southern California Harpists, because in Hollywood at the time, each studio had its own orchestra, and the harp was used a great deal in film music, and there were many, many fine harpists in Los Angeles. So we became sort of a California coterie of harpists, and I would go down there and play a recital of new pieces for them, now and then.

When Hindemith had written a sonata or Benjamin Britten published a solo suite, I went down there and played it for the Southern California Harpists. Things like that gradually made the harp a more flourishing instrument, and I think it has very much come into its own in the last, oh, in the last thirty-five, forty years; forty years, yes. And it's really wonderful to see, and I think many of us harpists really feel that we have a sort of mission to have the instrument validated. So there are more than 3,000 American harpists in the American Harp organization. There are about six or seven worldwide harpists in the World Harp organization.

The American Harp Society has a conference every two years, and has an institute, which is a smaller version of a conference, in the intermittent years. The World Harp Congress has a congress every three years here and there throughout the world. There's been one so far in the United States. The ninth one is coming up in Dublin, and it will involve harpists from all over the world.

In the sixties Israel established a prize for harp playing. This was solo harp playing, and every three years, I think it was, they would stage this competition at various levels, and produce a prizewinner, and that prizewinner then would be featured in a concert in New York and a concert in Israel, and I believe a concert somewhere else.

[End of file 6. Begin file 7.]

Crawford:

Well, let's talk about your private life a little bit, your pastimes. What would you describe as your pastimes?

DeCray:

My pastimes—reading. It used to be skiing. Children. Gosh.

Crawford:

Talk about your children.

DeCray:

Well, there's Lexy and Lael, and Lael's husband Adam, and their daughter, Ava Jane Wasson, and they're all fine people. They're all fine people.

Crawford:

Did you raise any musicians?

DeCray:

[laughs] I saw to it that both children had piano lessons, which didn't take. Lael had harp lessons, actually with my old harp teacher, Mildred Dilling, who I started with when I was about ten, I

guess. I used to commute to New York to study with her, and she was a product of Henriette Renié, the French harp teacher that I went to Paris and studied with many, many summers in my teens and my early twenties. Mildred Dilling gave Lael a few harp lessons and that didn't seem to take.

Then she got interested in singing, and she had some voice lessons with Anna Carol Dudley [phonetic], who is a relative of Malcolm's, and she did a little bit with singing, but not very much. Then she moved into film studies. She got very much interested in that at Wesleyan, and she's now a film critic and she really enjoys that, I think. So she's sort of in the culture business and sort of in the arts.

Crawford:

Did you meet the marvelous Malcolm through Anna Carol Dudley?

DeCray:

Oh no, no, no, no, no. I met the marvelous Malcolm through a master class that I was giving at Aspen, of all my harp students, and one of them was playing harp with a friend of hers who was also at the Aspen Music School, and who played French horn. The piece she chose to play in this master class was for French horn and harp, and her French horn player was Priscilla McAfee, who was Malcolm's middle child. Malcolm had come to Aspen for a couple of weeks to visit with Priscilla and to enjoy the Colorado air, and he was dragged along to this master class.

And my daughter, who was then, I don't know, maybe five—no, seven—had been dragged along to the master class because I didn't have a sitter, and when we got to the class and all these girl harpists were there, and this French horn player, there was this gentleman in the back of the room, and I was about to plant Lael, my daughter, in the back of the room, and so I took her over and I introduced her to him, and I assumed that he was somebody's father, and he bent over and he shook her hand. And that really zinged in my head. Anybody who would treat a kid as a human being worthy of a handshake I thought was really something else.

Crawford:

I should say.

DeCray:

And I would say that that has measured up all these years, and it's been, like, oh, what has it been, thirty-three years, or something like that now. Yes, oh yes.

Crawford:

That's Malcolm.

DeCray:

That is Malcolm, who is a very rich person.

Crawford:

Oh, I should say so, yes, wonderful person. Would you say something more about your Paris summers, as you look back on all of those, and Madame Renié?

DeCray:

I started going over when I was in my teens, and I spoke high-school French. My mother went with me. She didn't speak any French. It was just at the end of the Second World War, and it was remarkable. They were selling horsemeat in the butcher shops, and life was rather grim. The first summer we lived with a family who had seven children in their apartment. They cleared out a room for us and I guess doubled up some of their children, and Mother, the harp, a little cooking facility, and I were all in the same room for several weeks. How Mother ever stood that I don't know. But I would practice. She would sit in the corner and read. Once in a while she'd go out for a walk, and I did little else but practice my French, practice my harp, and take my harp lessons. And it was hard.

Crawford:

You were—

DeCray:

Very spare, a very spare time, I would say, in terms of the rest of life, and I worked very hard on the harp, yes. Mademoiselle Renié was pint-sized. She was about four-and-a-half-feet tall. She'd been a very big woman, but as she got older she had shriveled. She must have weighed about ninety-five pounds. She had glaring eyes and she was extremely intimidating, and scared the dickens out of me, and I had a wonderful experience with her. She was far more intense than her student with whom I had studied all previous years, Mildred Dilling, and it was my first immersion in intense, real, serious classical music.

Crawford:

Did she approve of you?

DeCray:

I think so, yes, as much as she would approve of an American, and someone who had not come from a rigorous classical background, because I had played all those soupy French and otherwise pieces of music that were being written for harp at the moment, and had been written in the previous fifty years.

Crawford:

Did she revise your technique?

DeCray:

No, no, because it was the same technique as I had learned.

Crawford:

From her student.

DeCray:

Yes, yes.

Crawford:

Was it fun? Was she fun for you? Did she inspire you in any way?

DeCray:

She inspired me greatly. She was never fun. Yes. And I also took some lessons with a couple of other harpists in Europe while I was there, which was quite an eye opener. She was far more dramatic and far more intense than any of the others. I had also studied in both Philadelphia and New York with a few other teachers while I was working with Mildred Dilling, none of whom I found as gripping and inspiring as Mildred Dilling. So inspiration and intensity really were factors in my study. They really wafted me ahead, sort of.

Crawford:

What did you make of the French culture?

DeCray:

What I made of the French culture in the mid-forties was that people were really working very, very hard to get their lives back together, and life was very dry, very, very dry, and the nose was to the grindstone, so to speak. It gradually loosened up, and I would go over for maybe eight, ten weeks each summer, and I found also, oddly enough, that the French attitude toward Americans seemed to be different in different summers. At times they became more cool to Americans, and then some summers they seemed to be warmer to Americans.

Crawford:

How did you experience that?

DeCray:

It's awfully hard for me to remember, because it was such a long time ago. But shopkeepers, people that you would get into conversation with, I don't know. Of course it was very hit and miss. I wasn't involved in the study of French attitudes toward Americans. We were great heroes, yes. And then heroism, of course, gets its edges burnished now and then, and filed down, and sometimes there was a little distance.

Crawford:

You still go to France a great deal.

DeCray:

Yes, yes, once or twice a year. Yes. Renié has been dead since, gosh, sometime in the fifties.

Crawford:

But is your choice France because of your early experiences there?

DeCray:

Yes, yes. I like the French people. I think they're very interesting. I like their sense of independence, which is a leaning kind of independence.

Crawford:

Leaning? How so?

DeCray:

They lean on each other. They lean on their culture. I'm not quite sure that the young French in their early twenties are as stiff-backed as the older French, who are wonderful, wonderful people. Their taste is marvelous, just in general, sort of like the Japanese taste excels many other tastes, culturally, artistically, what they say, the words they choose. It's so much less boorish than the United States.

Crawford:

Do you think that their concept of civility is very different than ours?

DeCray:

I think the European concept of civility is very different than ours, yes. Yes. I remember being in Amsterdam with my children, and one of them said something to me, and a woman was standing nearby, an older woman, and she said, "Why don't you say thank you?" or something like that, to one of my children. And we all sort of were taken aback. Oh yes, that child could have said thank you, because oh yes, I did do something or say something that could have been responded to with "thank you." Hmm. Yes, much, much more civility, and much more comportment, I'd say.

Crawford:

Let's for a moment just reflect on your career as a harpist as we wrap up here, and let me ask you, what have been the greatest rewards? What great rewards come to your mind?

DeCray:

Well, I get a great deal of joy out of music, and intense involvement, interest in playing the harp, playing with other instruments, other people. I think many people would turn to reading as a form of solace, support, enrichment, being uplifted, being transported, and I get all that from music. It just has a great deal of significance for me, and I don't know, as blood flows through the veins, I think music does, too, for me.

Crawford:

That's a good place to end. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

Caroline Cooley Crawford

Caroline Crawford has degrees in linguistics from Stanford University and the University of Geneva, and a keyboard degree from the Royal College of Musicians, London. She has a doctorate from Padeiea University in cultural studies. During the 1970s she worked as an arts editor at *Saturday Review* magazine and on the staff of the San Francisco Opera. For the past two decades she has written for *Opera* magazine and several California newspapers on the subject of music. Since 1986 she has been ROHO's music interviewer, documenting the lives and work of American musicians.