

Vivian Fine
With Jenny Raymond
Hoosick Falls, NY
March 18, 2000

R. This is Jenny Raymond with the Oral History American Music Project for Yale University with Vivian Fine on March 18th, the year 2000, on Saturday, in her beautiful home in Hoosick Falls. Thank you so much for meeting with me. I wanted to just start with some general questions about your early career and starting off with something as basic as what was your motivation to be a composer?

F. I started to study the piano when I was five. I had a scholarship at the American Musical College in Chicago. At the age of eleven I became a student of Djane Lavoie-Herz. After I studied with her for a few years, she thought I should have some theory lessons. She made an agreement with Ruth Crawford that she would teach Ruth for free, and Ruth would teach me for free because we didn't have any money. So I had about a year of theory. I was twelve years old. Then Ruth said one day: "Why don't you compose a piece?" So I went home and composed a piece, and it's a very nice piece. She listened to it very intently, and the expression on her face made me become a composer. She saw something individual in it. I found that I love to compose. And so that's just the way it happened. If she hadn't asked me to compose a piece, I would never have become a composer because there was a lot of competition--to struggle to be a pianist in that town, so that's how it happened.

R. Were there any role models at the time, or was it pure coincidence that she asked you to write a piece?

F. She said I had been studying theory long enough and to write a piece. I had been going to the symphony—

R. This was in Chicago?

F. Yes, it was the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. And they from time to time played the Firebird, and there was--I think it was called a lullaby, at the end of it. I forget now. But anyway, it was a lullaby-like piece, and that was in my ears when I wrote this. I quickly became a modern composer.

R. Was there music in your family?

F. My mother was very musical. She had some piano lessons, but she had to go to work at the age of fourteen as a private secretary. My parents were very tolerant of my efforts at composition, and also they were very pleased with Henry Cowell--I was sixteen then. He scheduled a performance of my solo for oboe in 1930, so that's how that happened.

R. Was your sister involved in music?

F. I have two sisters, one younger than me and one older. Adelaide, my older sister, is three years older than I am. She studied violin. It wasn't her greatest talent.

R. [laughter]

F. But she studied.

R. Did you ever collaborate with her as a young child?

F. No. I remember playing a Vivaldi concerto with her, but she didn't have a big talent for the instrument, and she had unfortunate teachers, cruel teachers.

R. Cruel teachers? [laughter] Speaking of role models, even working with someone like Ruth Crawford, did you find yourself--this is leaping ahead to your later years in your career--did you find yourself acting as a role model for younger generations, either of women or just of other composers?

F. I certainly wouldn't act as a role model, and I don't think Ruth acted as--She just naturally wrote [indistinct] that she felt like writing. We didn't have the word "role model" in those days, so she was doing very natural [indistinct]. This is [indistinct] I wanted [sp?].

R. Do you feel that there were any real obstacles in your way, becoming a composer, particularly as a woman?

F. I don't think [there were] any obstacles. Yes, I think there's a lot of prejudice against women. It was all right to write songs and piano music, but no orchestra compositions. And certainly [indistinct] wasn't music thought of as being something women were capable of. But I never suffered too much from it because at the same time Henry Cowell and Dane Rudhyar and other people were getting interested in my music, so I had a lot of support as a teenager. It was a very nice time to be a composer. There were very few of us. When I look at this immense list you have; it's tremendous. And I felt very much [indistinct], and I was his [indistinct]. I was very fortunate.

R. As a member of that young group, did you feel that you were really breaking new ground, or were you just doing what you wanted to do?

F. Both.

R. In the span of your entire career, how do you think that the opportunities for women composers have evolved?

F. They've evolved very well. I think there's an altogether different attitude. I remember one time I made an orchestration of a ballet by [indistinct]. I made the orchestration--[indistinct] in

the thirties and made the orchestration in the fifties. And a composer came up to me afterwards and said: "That was a very good orchestration. Did you do it yourself?"

R. A male composer.

F. Yes. [indistinct] woman [indistinct]. He was quite surprised [indistinct].

R. Now, working as a composer with choreographers, was that a field that many young composers were working in, or how did you find yourself in that niche?

F. This is very funny. I had come to New York when I was eighteen, and I was standing in line at Carnegie Hall, waiting [indistinct] concert. And the woman in front of me or in back of me--I was talking to her. She was talking about her son. I almost remember his name. There was a position open in a dance company, in the company that [indistinct], a choreographer. His name was Gluck-Sandor, so I went and tried out for the position. I played the Brahms Rhapsody in G minor, so they hired me. They had very little money, so I was paid fifty cents an hour, and that sporadically.

R. Oh, my gosh. This is in 1931?

F. Yes. The highest rate was a dollar and a half now. I very quickly established myself as a person who could play and sight-read contemporary scores.

R. And that was common with dance companies at that time? Or are you saying independent of—

F. What was common?

R. That you were reading contemporary scores with dance companies.

F. I would say—

R. Were you playing more traditional music for the dance companies, like ballet, or was it modern dance?

F. It was modern dance, modern dance.

R. Okay.

F. I prepared on my own contemporary music in Chicago, but in New York I found I could operate professionally.

R. Obviously, there were a lot of composers working in New York, but what—

F. There weren't so many.

R. --what tempted you to move from Chicago to New York? You weren't in school.

F. No, no. I didn't care for the traditional school. My parents were very good about supporting my kind of composing. What was the question?

R. What drew you to New York?

F. Louis [sp?] thought, and so did Henry Cowell, that I should study with Charles Seeger, counterpoint. I didn't study it, actually. I took one lesson with Charles, and the lessons were [indistinct]. We remained good friends, but—

R. Because you had a difference of styles or because it just didn't seem like he could instruct you?

F. Nothing that ignited. It didn't take off. But later--I should answer that soon after that I began to study with Roger Sessions. I didn't think [sp?] that was a good idea. He was wonderful to me. He charged me five dollars a month for a private lesson every week. It was just wonderful. But he didn't even listen to my compositions, and I had some things published. He got me connecting the tonic with the dominant.

R. So he wasn't really giving you any style instruction.

F. That's right. I needed a teacher, a mentor, and during that time that I was studying with him, I performed in a modern music concert. The atmosphere was very different. There were no grants, and you were very much out there by yourself [indistinct].

R. How were you supporting yourself?

F. The dancing company. I got married very young, too, at the age of twenty-one.

R. How soon was that after you moved to New York?

F. I went to New York when I was eighteen.

R. Eighteen. And your husband is an artist?

F. Yes.

R. How did you meet? Did you meet him in New York?

F. Yes, I ran into Izzy Citkowitz, who studied with Boulanger. My husband had lived in Paris for about six and a half years, I think.

R. In the late teens and early twenties?

F. He went there in 1927 and then left there--during the worldwide Depression he left, in 1934, I think. Shall we take a little break? [interruption in recording]

F. And then in Paris, six and a half years, seven years after that. And then he went to Israel, Izzy Citkowitz, who introduced me to him. He came back. [sp?]

R. And it was a quick courtship and marriage?

F. Yes, it was a quick push.

R. [laughter] Is he American?

F. Oh, yes. His name is Ben Karp. He's upstairs, actually, but he has Alzheimer's. You're dealing with some old composers.

R. [laughter] If you don't mind me asking, how old are you now?

F. I'm eighty-six.

R. Eighty-six. And your birthday's in September?

F. Yes

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R. As one of the very few women who's been actively composing since the 1920s, I wonder if you ever had a palpable sense of being very lonely or kind of being--I don't want to say excluded, but a feeling that you were really doing it on your own.

F. I had the support very early on, as I mentioned, of Henry Cowell and Ruth and someone by the name of Paul Arma. He was published by [indistinct]. And they were very supportive and generous. They were [indistinct] teenage composer who was writing this music.

R. Were you younger than many of your colleagues?

F. Oh, yes. Henry Cowell was born in '97, and I was born in '13, and at that age that's a big difference.

R. With your appointment as a professor much later in your life at Bennington, did you feel that that was a mark of--not from your own behalf but of the composer environment--as kind of validating you as a composer?

F. I think something else happened. Academic credentials had become very important. I remember at one point late in my career--it must have been in the fifties, an organization called [indistinct] recommended some people for a post as a professor-in--Actually, I came to Bennington--wanted some recommendations of women. And so I said: "Well, that might be interesting for me to try. I would also be interested." He said: "Well, do you have a Ph.D.?" I

said: “No.” He said: “Well, we can’t consider you.” They were asking for recommendations. It was so idiotic.

R. Yes.

F. But I felt that I had a lot of support. It was in the realm of orchestral music, and I didn’t have much, but I thought that they didn’t support women as much as they--like the composer who asked me did I do the orchestration myself.

R. I want to go back, actually, to the 1930s and your early years, when you were in Copland’s Young Composer Group. What was the dynamic between the members of that group?

F. Antagonistic [laughter]. We were all well under twenty--well, under thirty, I should say. The older, in the mid-twenties. The picture probably comes from Vivian Perlis’s book, a picture of the young composers.

R. Oh, you have a picture.

F. Yes. I think Alan Shawn [sp?] has got our--you go up to the dining room and look at it. I think it’s there.

[interruption in recording]

R. So this photo is of the Young Composers Group?

F. [farther from microphone] [indistinct] was happening Copland’s search for an American music. This festival was in 1932. This is Roy Harris. That’s Copland. This is Citkowitz. There’s Wallingford Riegger. There’s Piston. There’s Sessions.

R. Oh, my gosh.

F. There’s Paul Bowles. Elie Siegmeister. Ruth Saint-Denis.

R. Who was this other woman?

F. I don’t know. But I’ve had this picture--came from—

R. It says: “Courtesy of the Yaddo Corporation.” And here’s another woman.

F. Marian Bauer.

R. Oh, that’s Marian Bauer. Did you have a relationship with her at all? As kindred spirits or just as colleagues?

F. I played some of my music for her, when she was writing for The Musical Courier, I think.

R. Was she a composer or was she more of a journalist?

F. She was a composer.

R. A composer. She was writing for?

F. For The Musical Courier. And Lehman Engel. Isn't Copland cute? He was already talking about American music.

R. American in the sense of?

F. [indistinct].[interruption in recording] He had written the Piano Variations, which is a marvelous work. And then he wrote El Salón México almost at the same time. I have a little feeling he had to justify that change.

R. The change in style?

F. Yes. Something personal was driving him [indistinct]. That isn't to say it wasn't a good thing. [indistinct]. He organized a festival to see if there wasn't some common American [indistinct] and so on.

R. Did he find that there was, or did you hear that there was?

F. He thought it was in the rhythm. [indistinct]. [indistinct] opportunity. [indistinct] regarded me as a freak.

R. Because you were so young?

F. I was eighteen years old. I have a feeling [indistinct] opportunity [sp?] published his book [sp?]. He has a book.

R. On Copland.

F. Yes.

R. How old were you in that picture?

F. Eighteen.

R. Eighteen.

In addition to there being kind of an antagonistic [relationship] between [indistinct], were most of these young composers in that group that you were meeting—

F. No.

R. Who was in that Young Composers Group with you?

F. Henry Brant, Elie Siegmeister, Jerome Moross, if you know that name. He went on to do some theater music. Bernard Herrmann. He was a very unpleasant person.

R. Oh, really? How so?

F. He was just—

R. Competitive, or?

F. Downgrading. But no one minded it too much because he was just sour on the world.

R. [laughter] What was the format of the group? Were you each playing your compositions?

F. Yes. These are the days before recordings, so we met about once a month in the Empire Hotel, [indistinct]. Copland was living there. He gave him a living space. We met there about once a month and played our compositions, and he had to play it on the piano. He had a much greater fear [sp?] [of that] than turning on the tape recorder.

Are you a composer?

R. Not at all, not at all. I'm a huge fan of new music, but I'm not a composer. I tried my hand once, with limited success.

F. Well, it has to be something that--and I tell you [indistinct].

R. And very driven.

F. Yes.

R. You have something very personal to say.

F. Yes.

R. How long was the Young Composers' Group going on?

F. I think it just went on for one season.

R. Oh.

F. The Yaddo festival came in June.

R. And that came out of the Young Composers Group.

F. Partially. Obviously someone like Sessions wasn't going to be in it. Is there much talk in New York about the Copland [indistinct]? They called me and asked if I wouldn't come and talk about the early days, but it was too tiring for me to make the trip.

R. As part of the Philharmonic festival?

F. Yes, this was the Philharmonic festival.

R. What are your impressions, as you look back, of Copland, either as a mentor or a fellow composer?

F. He was a very bright spirit. He enjoyed working with young people. He wouldn't have called himself a mentor. He was more of an organizer of the festivities. [indistinct] go to a very inexpensive restaurant--inexpensive. He had a portion of macaroni and cheese, fifteen cents at the automat.

R. [laughter]

F. The [indistinct] was too expensive for us.

R. And your impression of him was just that he was very collegial and very supportive?

F. That's right.

R. Were there other composers like Sessions or other bigger composers at that time who were also taking an interest in young composers?

F. Not in the same way Copland did. Copland liked being around young people and being involved with them. [indistinct], which was a wonderful thing. And then after that, the [indistinct] to last [sp?]. [indistinct] *avant-garde* music?

R. Ruggles.

F. Yes. Ruggles didn't stop writing, but the populist element, American folk music, was something that intrigued Copland. Arthur Berger once said that Copland knows a variant of [indistinct] little cow [sp?].

R. Wasn't Ruth Crawford also getting interested more in folk music?

F. Yes. That was because of the social radicals and the Communism. Seeger had a pen name, Carl Sands. He wrote revolutionary—

R. Really!

F. Some material must exist from those days. I forgot what the name of the—

R. I'm going to check the tape.

[Tape continues for many minutes without speakers, then Ms. Raymond says]:

This is Side b. [*Actually Side e; this is where Side e of the dub begins.*]

F. Varèse did not write any of his *avant-garde* music for twelve years, I think. The atmosphere became very leftist, and it had to be: write for the masses.

R. That feeling was coming from within the composing community, or do you mean just larger context culturally?

F. It came particularly from the Communists, who were boring from within [sp?]. That was their phrase.

R. That's interesting, because it doesn't seem, really, that--I wonder how modern music was supported by audiences a little before that, and if there was really an evolution from the audience from the cultural community and what they were wanting to hear, that there was such a dramatic change to more--it was definitely the end of the *avant-garde* period.

F. The Depression was something--it's hard to imagine.

R. What impact do you think the Depression had?

F. A third of [indistinct] unemployed. Professional men like [indistinct] were probing--describe it: they were probing ash cans for leftover food. Architects, every kind of professional, highly qualified professional person--practically everyone was unemployed. And then the Communist Party had its directives. The Communist Party--these came from Marx. I did not find myself sympathetic to them. One time I moved over to the left somewhat, but I disliked their authoritarian manner.

R. How was the Communist spirit sort of infiltrating? Were there certain composers that you knew that espoused Communism?

F. They were the workers corps. Lan Adomián. I don't know if you know that name.

R. What is the name again?

F. Adomián. And Earl Robinson. People began to write workers songs, revolutionary workers songs. And Ruth, who was totally under the influence of Charlie Seeger.

R. And he was a sympathizer?

F. Oh, yes. Sympathizer. Oh, yes. He told her to tear up her violin and piano sonata that she wrote and write for the masses. And she happened to have given me a copy, a hand-written copy, [indistinct]. And I remember I went backstage at one of the Joel Sachs concerts. I said, "I have a

copy of the violin and piano sonata.” He was simply flabbergasted and overwhelmed. And this patrician--I like Charlie Seeger very much, but he was a patrician. I said to Michael once, Mike Seeger--I said: “Was your father jealous of you?” He said: “What do you think?” You know how she stopped writing. I don’t know exactly how Judith Tick handled it--this is another phase in her composition. I read it, but I have to read it again. I think it’s a very good book, [indistinct]. But that question of why did Ruth give up writing concert music, music on the threshold [indistinct], is remarkable. And the string quartet, for instance, is a very fine piece. She worked with Charlie on that. It was he who had the idea of the crescendo of counterpoint. So that’s all right. It’s not the person has the idea; it’s the person who does it.

R. So you were saying also about the effect of the Depression.

F. Yes. Oh, yes. It had a great effect. You felt you couldn’t write any more for a small group of people, that you had to get close to the masses. I remember one review, an article on music in The Daily Worker, which was a Communist paper. It said: “The masses will decide what direction we’re going to take.” But the masses, you see. There was a magazine called The Masses, and so on. You know quite a bit about; you’ve read about it.

R. Yes.

F. They have the materials at Yale?

R. They have some materials at Yale, but just also in my research.

F. That’s interesting. What time is it?

R. It’s about eleven thirty. Do you want to take a break?

F. [indistinct]

R. Okay.

[End of Interview]