

Irving Fine Centennial Oral History: Barbara Kates

Speakers:

Barbara Kates (Irving Fine's youngest sister)

Nicholas A. Brown, Music Specialist, Music Division

Date: July 15, 2013

Location: Kates Residence, Providence, Rhode Island

Description: Irving Fine's youngest sister Barbara Kates discusses her brother's life, music and career, in commemoration of the Library of Congress Irving Fine Centennial Festival.

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

^00:07

>>Nicholas A. Brown: So it's a great pleasure to be here with you today. The Library of Congress is doing a set of interviews in preparation for your brother's centennial which is in 2014 of course. There's a lot of fantastic events and concerts gonna be taking place all over the country and hopefully some internationally as well and what we'd really love to gain is sort of just your impressions and favorite memories of your brother and anything you would like a researcher in fifty years to remember about him and you and your family.

^00:33

>> Barbara Kates: Ok, thank you for coming

00:35

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Thanks for having me

^00:37

>> Barbara Kates: Ok so where shall we start.

^00:39

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Perhaps what is your earliest memory of your brother? That might be a difficult question to answer.

^00:47

>> Barbara Kates: You know what, that is a difficult question to answer. You know, what is my early...I just adored him from the time I was born let's put it that way. I really can't say what the earliest memory is. He was just my big brother and basically that was it. And actually I guess we really didn't communicate until I was a little bit older where he could discuss certain things with me because I was also into the piano. And we took from the same teacher. And we would discuss that. And I often remember about his coming home late and we having [inaudible] sandwiches at night. I don't know there were so many little episodes at this point that you know they might come to me later on but I really don't remember too much about it.

^1:58

>> Nicholas A. Brown: What was the age difference?

^2:01

>> Barbara Kates: Well let's see. He would be 98 at this point, 99 and I'm 90 so it's almost 9 years. So that makes a big difference when you're very young. We actually not until I probably was 12 or 13 that there was a communication between the two of us.

^2:29

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Where there any special family things that you all did together like vacations or just outings or traditions?

^2:40

>> Barbara Kates: No, you know what, I really don't remember too much about it. I know that he was always...music was his passion and there were many discussions at dinner table over the fact that my father thought it was completely crazy. That I do remember. There were some very ugly times. And of course things changed completely once my brother showed him that he could be a success and that was terribly important to my father. And I, no I really can't say anything more than that.

^3:29

>> Nicholas A. Brown: I was reading in Phillip Ramey's biography this episode of when your brother had been moving out of the house and wanted to take your sisters piano with him, the grand piano because he was using it more than your sister and your father had refused for a long period...

^3:48

>> Barbara Kates: Well see I don't remember that. We do have my brother's piano that he used when he was a student and actually I have it. It's in my son's apartment right now. Something I don't ever want to give up. But unfortunately I don't have, you know, I can't use it and...that's it. I really don't remember too much about the piano. I do know that he...did he have it?

^4:23

>> Nicholas A. Brown: According to what I read, eventually your father relented and finally let him take it out of the house.

^4:29

>> Barbara Kates: Yeah, right but these...

^4:33

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Little moments a long time ago

^4:35

>> Barbara Kates: Little moments a long time ago and little things happen in every family and of no consequence. But anyways so...

^4:46

>> Nicholas A. Brown: How aware were you of his...how his career progressed. How did you see him from when he was at Harvard versus Brandeis or any of that business?

^4:56

>> Barbara Kates: Well how did I see it? Tell you the truth I don't think I was that part of his life. I wasn't terribly involved and by that time I must have been...I don't know when did he start with Brandeis?

^5:17

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Uh, '48

^5:20

>> Barbara Kates: '48. Ok well I was married for five years by then and...cause I was married during the war. From 1943 is when I was married. I probably...he did come out to visit when we were living in Dayton. My husband was stationed at Wright field and he did come up to visit and... But we didn't have terribly much contact because I was away. I did come back and a few years later and that's when we did have tremendous contact but we were on a different wavelength. He was married, he had children by that time and... Claudia by that time. Emily wasn't born then. So it was a different period. I mean my biggest time of being with him is prior to his marriage. And he wasn't in Brandeis at the time. So that was it. It was right in my teen years up to when I was married or when he was married because come to think of it. My sister and my brother and I were all married within three years.

^6:49

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wow

^6:49

>>Y Barbara Kates: eah, right

^6:50

>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's amazing

^6:51

>> Barbara Kates: Well it is amazing because my sister was six and a half years older than I and he almost nine years but we all were married within three years. We left...we left the, what is it, what's the proverbially word I want for the family house...we left it, yeah right.

^7:13

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Flew the coop

^7:14

>> Barbara Kates: Yeah, that's it we flew the coop. You got it.

^7:20

>> Nicholas A. Brown: What were your parents like?

^7:22

>> Barbara Kates: My father was a very, very, very bright guy. Extremely bright. Very into his...what he wanted to do. He had a developed a relationship with my brother in the beginning,

definitely. My mother was well I adored her so... how can I judge when you like a person so much. She was sweet. She was good, very good. He was tough, he was a very tough man. I often wondered whether he really cared whether I was born or not, you know? But he did in his way. He really did. And he was single minded. A successful man, was interested in being a success actually didn't, in my estimation, didn't use it for any needs. It was just the idea of being successful. He was very proud of my brother, extremely so. That's all I can remember, really. I really wasn't that close to him as a child. But don't forget, I was an afterthought so you know that was it.

^9:04

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Where in Chestnut Hill exactly was the family home?

^9:07

>> Barbara Kates: It was on Wallace road, I don't know if you know it.

^9:10

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Vaguely

^9:12

>> Barbara Kates: Do you know where the municipal golf course is? Ok, across from that municipal golf course is Walcott road. If you went up Walcott Road and kept going you'd go to Walcott Road Extension and then Wallace became an extension of that. So that's where it was. And when we moved there, there was nothing in back, nothing except pheasants cause they moved there, I think I was about 10 so that's 60 years, I'm 90. That's 80 years...yeah, like 80 years ago and there were very few dwellings. So Edith C. Baker School, did ya ever hear of that one? We had to take a bus to go to a school on Heath Street and it was a completely new area.

^10:26

>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's so ironic because now it feels like it's an older area in terms of being built up and

^10:30

>> Barbara Kates: It is, it is, it's amazing it really is cause I visit. I used to go on a yearly tour to see my house. And one day it was, the front of it was changed.

^10:46

Nicholas A. Brown: Oh my gosh.

^10:47

>> Barbara Kates: And I said I've got to find out what happened. And I went in. I went to the door and the woman looked at me as if maybe I was a little crazy and I told her I said, 'You know you're living in the house that I was married from. So she took me inside. It turned out that they were from Canada, he was a doctor, and they had changed it a bit. So I visited it, that was a few years ago. Right. Yeah, it was.

^11:18

>> Nicholas A. Brown: How long did the house stay in your family?

^11:21

>> Barbara Kates: Not that long because after we all left I think they decided to sell it so it was only, it wasn't there. Actually, I was only there like for 10 years because I got married at 20 and I think I was there when I was about 10.

^11:43

>> Nicholas A. Brown: So you mentioned your husband served in World War II. Was he a pilot? Or was he the army...

^11:48

>> Barbara Kates: No, no he was in the air corps but he was an engineer. He had gone to MIT and he was a metallurgist and he was in the reserve and then he was in the air core. They considered him an essential which we were very lucky about and he was stationed at Wright Field in the materials lab during the war.

^12:19

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Had he volunteered or was he conscripted in?

^12:22

>> Barbara Kates: Well he was in ROTC so therefore once you're in that, you, that's I guess a volunteer.

^12:31

>> Nicholas A. Brown: My mother works at MIT and she's spent her whole career there.

^12:33

>> Barbara Kates: Really, where does she work?

^12:37

>> Nicholas A. Brown: In the libraries. When I was a baby she worked over at Sloan at the management school and now last 15 years she's been at the libraries.

^12:45

>> Barbara Kates: Oh isn't that interesting. Yeah he graduated in '43. Yeah, and then he went back afterwards, after the war, he went back for his masters and he worked there for about, I think maybe a little over a year and then he got another job. We lived in New York, right. Oh that's very interesting.

^13:07

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Funny how paths...you know, the different times in history the world sort of crisscrosses

^13:12

>> Barbara Kates: It's amazing how there's always connections. No matter what. The older ya, the longer you live, the more connections you find.

^13:26

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yeah, I already see it. It's crazy. The music world is so small and the conducting world there are a fair amount of conductors out there but so far in the last five years, I've never been more than one person removed from any conductor I meet for the first time. It's fascinating. Very interesting.

^13:45

>> Barbara Kates: You know, I have a granddaughter who has been involved at Berklee here. She was in The New School and then she wasn't very happy there so she transferred to Berklee. But she's a drummer so it is a Tuesday, last Tuesday night I went to a gig in Boston and I was the, as my son said, the oldest person by maybe five generations. But it was so great. It was... I said, I'm living again. It really is, it's a terrific thing.

^14:26

>> Nicholas A. Brown: So there is definitely something in the blood.

^14:29

>> Barbara Kates: Well, oh definitely my grandson. I have a grandson who is a terrific cellist. Beautiful cellist. He went to, he used to go to NEC. There is definitely in the blood, there's no question about it.

^14:47

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Were your parents musical at all?

^14:49 My mother had a beautiful untrained voice and I think it was really in her family. She did have some family that were definitely musical.

^15:02

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Do you remember if your brother had kind of come into music on his own or do you think he was sort of helped by your mother.

^15:10

>> Barbara Kates: He started out...he started out as a very very small child picking out tunes on the piano. He did it on his own. In fact, he used to be at the piano so much that my mother would say, 'It's enough already'. Right, but he had a passion there's no question about it. You know, now a days you hear about parents encouraging and bringing their kids, taking them to their music lessons or constantly seeing who would be a better teacher and all that. He did it, I don't know how he got ahold of this Francis Grover who was, I don't know if you heard about her.

^15:59

>> Nicholas A. Brown: The teacher?

^16:01

>> Barbara Kates: The teacher. And she was a remarkable woman. And I think she had a lot to do with his development.

^16:13

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did you ever do piano lessons or anything?

^16:16

>> Barbara Kates: Well I took lessons from her too. So, and I didn't start with her until she was 80. So, she was really quite remarkable. She had a studio...you know where the Copley Plaza is. Well on the opposite corner there was a big brown stone building where SS Pierce was. I don't know what it's called now. But she had a studio in there. I used to go every day.

^16:49

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wow, oh my gosh, for how long a period of time?

^16:54

>> Barbara Kates: About a year. But she unfortunately she became ill and that was it.

^17:05

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did you go to many of your brother's concerts once you were sort of... of the teenage years.

^17:10

>> Barbara Kates: If I was available, I went to many of his concerts. However, once he died, I didn't go at all. I couldn't. And for years I couldn't go. But I have recently gone to some and they still affect me terribly. I guess that's the artist in me. I'm very emotional I guess, I don't know!

^17:40

>> Nicholas A. Brown: I think we all are

^17:43

>> Barbara Kates: Yeah, I cry easily. Unfortunately, I try to control myself 'cause I really don't like it but that's me and that's it and you'll have to take it as it is.

^18:01

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Do you feel like his personality shines through in his music? From someone who knew him on a, as a brother?

^18:09

>> Barbara Kates: I understand what you're saying. You know what? Maybe the very early things but I wouldn't say that some of this uh, dissonant stuff that I could say it does. I really can't. I think he had the capacity of being melodious which was really part of him. But that's a hard question for me to answer. But it must have. You know, it has to be when you write it has to be part of you. I mean you can't just write.

^18:58

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Do you remember anything about his time studying in Europe? His various trips over there?

^19:05

>> Barbara Kates: No, I just know that, that wasn't...you mean, before he was married when he went to Boulanger? That was a very difficult time, don't forget because it was just during, practically during the war. I just remember when he was leaving. I probably have some pictures somewhere. Going on the boat and seeing him off and how devastated I was cause I was so nervous about it. You know, that's such a long time ago that I didn't really know too much about it but I knew it was something that he definitely wanted and, hey go for it.

^19:58

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Do you remember corresponding with him at all while he was over there?

^20:00

>> Barbara Kates: No, no I don't believe I did actually. He did...I had a wonderful letter from him I don't know what I did with it. It's somewhere around cause I did save it. But, no I really don't remember anything about that.

^20:23

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Is there a piece of his that's a favorite of yours? Or maybe the choral over the chamber or anything like that?

^20:30

>> Barbara Kates: No, not really, no. I mean anything he did I thought was great so never ask me about what I think because hey, you know I am so prejudice.

^20:40

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Hey that's a good prejudice though. Supportive family.

^20:42

>> Barbara Kates: I am so prejudice. I can't...you know...I'm not the one to ask.

^20:55

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did you ever get out to Tanglewood while he was there?

^20:57

>> Barbara Kates: I was in Tanglewood...in the early, early years, way, way back when there was Lucas and a lot of the important people today. None of them are living at this point unfortunately. Yes I did, I did. Definitely.

^21:25

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Any memories from that?

^21:27

>> Barbara Kates: Well it was just a very exciting time basically. Nothing that I can be specific about. I just loved being in this world even; I wasn't a part of it but I just felt so good about being there.

^21:46

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did you get to know any of those colleagues and friends like Lukas or Harold or Lenny?

^21:51

>> Barbara Kates: I knew them at the time. I mean I certainly knew Esther and...I'm just trying to think of who else. I did get to meet them.

^22:10

>> Nicholas A. Brown: I'm going to see Esther this afternoon.

^22:12

>> Barbara Kates: How is she doing?

^22:14

>> Nicholas A. Brown: She's doing ok. She sounded in good spirits when I talked to her.

^22:17

>> Barbara Kates: Well do say hello to her for me. I don't know if she'll remember just tell her Irving's younger sister. No, these are tough times to have to go through these things. Hey, he lived to be 92.

^22:32

>> Nicholas A. Brown: And he was a character until the end.

^22:34

>> Barbara Kates: Oh God was he a character. He was...he was too much. But Lukas had quite a history. Lukas Foss. Oh my yes...with his wife. And actually, I must tell you that when my daughter was born, I think my folks were at Lenny Bernstein's parents' house and he happened to come in and I think he played a song in her honor of her birth. Do you know how many years ago that was? Over 60.

^23:20

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wow. That's...like...amazing.

^23:23

>> Barbara Kates: Sam and Jenny lived very close to where my folks lived. Those were...really...such a long time ago.

^23:41

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did Irving have...was he close with your husband at all? I'm sure they knew each other but...

^23:49

>> Barbara Kates: Oh yeah, yeah. You know, we were living in New York too at the time so I really didn't...really didn't get to see much of my family at that point. And then we moved back. But we were here...such a short time before he died that we did get together. But it wasn't enough. It really wasn't enough. It was just a dreadful, dreadful situation.

^24:28

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Seems like it was a complete shock to everyone that... some of the stuff that I've read seemed that he thought he was gonna die young. I don't know if there was a sense that...is there something in the family that both people had passed early or suddenly...

^24:45

>> Barbara Kates: Well I had an uncle who died at 50 who we were very close to and that might have been the thing that affected him. I never knew that actually. Maybe. Well it was a shock but he was under optimum care when you think of it. I can remember the doctors, Dr. Paul...Dudley...White, who was an eminent heart surgeon said that 'oh he's gonna have to stop smoking and all this stuff and never appreciating how...tremendous this attack was because it didn't show up completely I guess on the tests that they took. I think in this day and age, he could have been saved. Definitely with all the knowledge that they have now. But it was a dreadful thing. It was dreadful from every aspect and I had to be the one to tell my parents and that was the worst. That is awful, awful. So, yeah, but hey, I'm a true believer that you are really born with a number. Might think I'm crazy to say that because there's just too many things that happen that don't make any sense. After he died, I would see these derelicts on the street and say, 'What are they living for?' Is there a reason? It isn't there time. That's it. That's the way you have to look at it because there's no answer to it. At least I don't think so. Too many things happen to too good...to people who were so good.

^26:55

>> Nicholas A. Brown: I think despite his having not lived as long a life as I think everyone would have hoped, I think his legacy is enormous and the impact that he had at Brandeis and Harvard and internationally with the music is astounding.

^27:11

>> Barbara Kates: Ya know, it's true. There's, I think, two ways of looking at it too. You can think that 'Look what he could have done'. But you can also think maybe he would have struggled to do more 'cause you don't know. That's the way things go.

^27:40

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did you attend any of the festivals that he put on at Brandeis.

^27:45

>> Barbara Kates: No I don't believe so, no. No because. Actually, I wasn't living here you see at the time. I was in the New York area for quite a few years. So I really couldn't be part of it, which was too bad.

^28:10

>> Nicholas A. Brown: What has your relationship been like with his daughters and his grandkids?

^28:16

>> Barbara Kates: We were very, very close. Of the course the fact that we don't live close to one another makes a big difference, unfortunately. It happens, this happened in my own family. I have a son who lives in Charlottesville, Virginia. So because of that, I really don't get to see them that much. You can talk on the phone but it's not quite the same. And it's the same with the girls. I was very, very close to them, particularly close to Claudia. Claudia is the same age as my daughter and they were very close. But they've all gone in different directions and their lives are so different than ours. We really don't get to see one another. I'm sure they feel as close as I do to them and we care about one another but we don't see each other and that's what happens. And it's too bad. But that's why the old way of living, and it's still happening certainly in certain parts of Asia, maybe in Europe too of the family always being together. That when a person got to be old, they didn't send her off to a assisted living or a nursing home. They took care of the parent. It doesn't exist here. And it makes a big difference, it really does. And it's too bad, it really is too bad but everyone's life is so different here. I think people, young people, they're into their own needs and it's enough already. It's true.

^30:18

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Were you very close with Verna?

^30:22

>> Barbara Kates: I wouldn't say very close with her as close but not very close.

^30:31

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Did you keep in touch much after...

^30:34

>> Barbara Kates: Well she was very good about keeping in touch with things that were occurring. We'd try to get together occasionally.

^30:48

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Have you gotten to know Claudia and Emily and Joanna's kids well?

^30:55

>> Barbara Kates: Have I gotten to know their kids? Basically, no. I have gone to see Ezra perform in Florida. I did get to go backstage and meet him which was terrific. What happens is, I usually get a ride because it isn't close to me and I beg the people to maybe meet him but you know no one every cares about that so I don't get to see him unfortunately but I have been occasionally said I miss seeing him, I loved his performance. But I don't see, I really don't see the others. They're all on a different wave length. It isn't...it just doesn't work out. I mean think about it. Do you have siblings?

^31:46

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Younger brother.

^31:50

>> Barbara Kates: So neither of you are married?

^31:52

>> Nicholas A. Brown: No, no, no

^31:53

>> Barbara Kates: So I mean you know, wait. It changes. And particularly if you're in a different area you'll fly home, you'll see them for a little bit, you'll fly back and you won't see them for months. You really...you lose the ties, you do. Each has a different life. So you keep up with what's going on with Facebook.

^32:23

>> Nicholas A. Brown: It's better than nothing.

^32:25

>> Barbara Kates: Yeah. True. Absolutely true.

^32:30

>> Nicholas A. Brown: One of the interesting things with Isaac is he looks so much like your brother.

^32:37

>> Barbara Kates: That's what they say. I see, the only thing I really see so much like him, well he's bald which is not...didn't happen yet. Maybe...no, it's from Verna's family actually. Her father was bald. But Isaac, the expression around his eyes. That's what I see, more than anything else. From what I...from the pictures I have but that part is true. You've seen Isaac?

^33:20

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yep he's...I'm sure you know his role with the New York Musical Theatre festival. Nina is a nurse now.

^33:26

>> Barbara Kates: Yes, I know that.

^33:28

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Nina was a classmate at Brandeis

^33:30

>> Barbara Kates: Oh was she! Isn't that interesting? So did you know her then?

^33:35

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh yeah very well. And she sang in the chorus and she sang for me and some of my Irving Fine society concerts.

^33:40

>> Barbara Kates: What kind of voice does she have?

^33:43

>> Nicholas A. Brown: I think sort of mezzo

^33:48

>> Barbara Kates: Was she trained?

^33:50

>> Nicholas A. Brown: I think at least to a certain extent. But I think she hasn't been doing as much music lately.

^33:56

>> Barbara Kates: Now she's into nursing

^33:58

>> Nicholas A. Brown: We even went on...I organize a tour for the chorus to Germany and Austria. So we sang all over Germany and Austria together.

^34:04

>> Barbara Kates: Oh that must have been great fun. Now I really, I really do not know. I believe it was the twins who were going to be Ba and Bar Mitzvahed and we all went to New York at the time. And that's when Verna had a massive stroke. And it was just horrendous because we were literally waiting, she was in the hospital, waiting...my sister, my husband, and I...no it couldn't have been. I'm just trying to think of who it was. But it was one of the grandchildren of Verna's and we stayed and it didn't happen and we went home and then after that she died. I guess it was postponed to a later date which we didn't go to but that was...that was terrible. Some tragic moments, right.

^35:22

>> Nicholas A. Brown: As in every family we all have them

^35:24

>> Barbara Kates: Oh absolutely, this is life. You have your ups and downs so you better enjoy the ups because they're not so many of them these days. And do what you can while you're young. Don't say 'Oh I'm gonna wait.'

^35:44

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Can't have those regrets

^35:45

>> Barbara Kates: Go for it

^35:48

>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's been my motto that's why I know, I feel like I am where I am because I've lived like that.

^35:54

>> Barbara Kates: That's it, so continue!

^35:55

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Hopefully. Were you aware much of when Verna took Irving's archive to the Library of Congress or were you sort of not paying attention to it.

^36:09

>> Barbara Kates: I didn't know much about that but...I didn't know anything about it. I had no idea, really no idea about it at all. Right, yeah it wasn't discussed but I think it's great that she's done...she was a promoter. Very much so. And I give her credit for it. And I think a lot has to do with her efforts.

^36:37

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Definitely, without a doubt

^36:38

>> Barbara Kates: She was quite a remarkable woman really when you think about it. She made up her mind to do things and she accomplished them. So give her credit.

^36:50

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Very much like Irving in his career at least in the way he built Brandeis up from nothing in the arts.

^37:04

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Is there anything else that has come to mind that we haven't covered?

^37:09

>> Barbara Kates: No. I mean, I could answer all your questions and as I said, my relationship with my brother was really of his very young years which I don't think would be too important for this particular session that you want, right. And I would say from 19...maybe from 1940's, I was kind of the sister and that was it. That's all I can tell you.

^37:55

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Well it's been a treat to hear your perspective on your brother and your family and so nice to have another personal side to it. I've come up sort of always hearing from Verna's grandkids and Irving's daughters and I haven't really had a chance to get to know anyone else in the family.

^38:17

>> Barbara Kates: Well unfortunately there's no one else.

^38:21

>> Nicholas A. Brown: I know

^38:22

>> Barbara Kates: My sister probably would have been informative. I mean, she was so close in age to him. But it would have been of his young years basically, that's basically what we were involved with and yeah...I think that's about it. So happy to have been able to help you with a few things. I don't know how much.

^38:52

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Great help

^38:53

>> Barbara Kates: But it was very nice to meet you.

^38:56

>> Nicholas A. Brown: Definitely. My pleasure to be here.

^38:57

>> Barbara Kates: Hopefully we see one another again.

^39:02

>>This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov