

Irving Fine Centennial Oral History: Martin Boykan

Speakers:

Martin Boykan, Irving G. Fine Professor Emeritus of Music, Brandeis University
Nicholas A. Brown, Music Specialist, Music Division

Date: July 14, 2013

Location: Boykan Residence, Watertown, Massachusetts

Description: Martin Boykan previously held the Irving G. Fine professorship of music at Brandeis University, and was a student at Harvard while Fine was on the faculty there.

>>From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: So I'm here with Martin Boykan who was a professor at Brandeis University for many years and held the Irving Fine Chair position and it's a great privilege to speak with you today regarding Irving Fine's legacy, his music, and the upcoming centennial in 2014. If we could just start off with some background on how you came to know Fine and his music.

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>> Martin Boykan: Actually, I figured that out while you were talking. I figured that would be the obvious question. I met him in my...he was teaching at Harvard my freshman year so that would have been 1947...that was a long, long time ago. And my first contact that I remember that year was I went to the music school and there was a chorus which Irving was conducting and there was the choral pieces which were absolutely wonderful I thought they just blew me away. And they were Stravinsky-esque so I knew of course that they were works of Stravinsky. What else could they possibly be? I was wrong. They were works of Irving Fine, which I found later. He was young then and they were in the Stravinsky style, but they really...I've heard them a lot since then and I've always felt they were very beautiful. So that was my first contact. The second one is weird and is very much at the center of the kind of guy Irving was. I was 16 so you could imagine I was totally obnoxious, and the end of the freshman year we had to go—he was the advisor—we had to go in order to become a major and I wanted to be a music major. So I told him I wanted to be a music major, but I didn't want to take any traditional courses in harmony and counterpoint because I wanted to be a modern composer [laughter]. So he sat me at the piano and gave me some things to do. I can't remember what they were and I did whatever, made up whatever I was supposed to do. And he told me I was...now, I didn't have to take any of the courses at all, excused from all of the courses. He was wrong. And in my senior year, now I had a little more musical experience, I realized there was an awful lot I needed to know that I'm not able to do. And I went to the then-chair, and I can't remember who that was but it wasn't Irving, and asked if I could take a counterpoint class. No...he was very offended that I was not [inaudible] that course to get a sure A. And what I did was, I was serious about it for the next

couple of years, I studied very hard myself with the books doing the exercises, studying music a lot because I realized. And I saw Irving do something similar actually with a student at...when we were colleagues at Brandeis. It was part of the neoclassic thing. He himself was a flawless musician though right and wrong. I'm sure I did a lot of wrong things. There was a lot I didn't know and I made it up as I went. But if he heard something that seemed a little different, he thought well, this could be sort of a new take on things. This is imaginative. In my case, it wasn't imaginative because I didn't know what I was doing. I know that in her case, it was pretty much the same, you know. So he tended to be much more generous with in technical matters with students than he should have been. But that...I'm not denying it or...I really mean there's no question that he knew what was right and what wasn't and what was in the tradition and what was made up on the spur of the moment. I don't think anybody can tell the difference between making something up on the spur of the moment imagination and making it up with not knowing anything else to do. You know, you can't tell what would become of something. You always erred on the side of hoping for the best. So, anyway that was how, that was how I met him.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What was the relationship like after you had left Harvard?

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>> Martin Boykan: We stayed close. Obviously I'd never had a course with him while I was at Harvard and...through the Harvard years, I showed him everything I did, everything I wrote. I mean he was very close for me and very helpful. Very...helpful and always encouraging, and I know that I owe the position at Brandeis to him.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Could you tell us a bit about how that process happened and when you arrived and Brandeis and...

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>> Martin Boykan: Well I was first hired actually...I was first hired to do a series of six contemporary concerts and after...I can't remember how long maybe just after one year of that there, then they asked me to teach. And I'm sure this was Irving. If only for the fact that, as Arthur Berger told me, it was obvious that Irving was absolutely the boss at Brandeis. And, even though it was, he had been chair, he was no longer doing that, but whatever he wanted gets done. Do you know, I mean I could...this is only a second-hand story, this is not first-hand, but the Brandeis Music Department actually owes something to the president of Julliard.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh, uh, Koff.

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>> Martin Boykan: What?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh, the present president of Julliard?

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>> Martin Boykan: No, no, no, no then. Uh, composer...shit, this is old age. Anyway, he was...he still is well known. He was a very well known composer. Maybe in the course of things it will occur to me. But anyway you can also look it up on Google. And, the story I heard—and I think it's probably accurate—the president...the first president of Brandeis, Sachar, who was not particularly an intellectual but whose heart was really in the right place and he we could turn to...to have a first class university that was not bad to educate gentleman—with a capital G. And so the president of Julliard said, “You know, you have Irving Fine on your faculty. You know that he is one of the very best musicians and composers.” And Sachar said, “Oh really?” And then he just poured the money in on Irving. He heard it was quality from somebody who had some status and who had nothing to gain by him and that was it. Those were the great years at Brandeis. That's how they built it so quickly into something because he was just quality. Both faculty and students and nothing else. So that's how I, that's how I came to Brandeis.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: So as someone who yourself here so much a part of the Brandeis music history now, how do you perceive Irving's legacy as it stands now and also maybe if it's changed throughout the years?

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>> Martin Boykan: Well, the...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Perhaps just looking at the history of Brandeis and sort of how that culture is there.

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>> Martin Boykan: As it started, as Irving started it, it was the big repository for the neoclassic movement in the United States. And so his first appointments, his first tenured appointments, were Arthur Berger and Howard Shapero. The fourth member of that group which was very tight was Leonard Bernstein who Brandeis now constantly advertises as one of their own, which is bullshit.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: I agree

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>> Martin Boykan: Among other things. Don't mention it. He was essentially a part of that group. And it, as Irving said to me once, and I grasped that, the neoclassic movement was actually rather on the sidelines. It wasn't the mainstream in the 30s and the 40s, because I can remember as a kid that the general and almost universal opinion about Stravinsky was that he wrote three great ballets and that he'd declined terribly, not worth looking at. It was apparently, I have this from Irving, it was apparently also who argued that the neoclassic was just as good and just as important. And it became a neoclassic school. And to some extent that had been true of Harvard as well. But the music world changed and Irving was very available for the changes. So his style began to change of course, as you know. His style began to change at the end of his short life. And I think there has never been a time from the beginning when the composition side of the music department was not really first class. After the neoclassic days, the other [inaudible] were really first class. It had that reputation and it held on to it so that... Seymour Shifrin I think had an offer from Harvard while he was teaching at Berklee he had an offer from Harvard and he chose to come to Brandeis.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's pretty spectacular.

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>> Martin Boykan: That where, that's where the music would be. So it's been a...on the composition side it's been a very distinguished...and to some extent on the musicology side too, though not completely. And from the beginning, Irving also took care of the musicology department so the first musicologists were brought in by him. He really invented the department. There's no question. And all the old guys there and then the young idiot me, we just said yeah yeah yeah.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: So to switch over to look at...think about his music more specifically, aside from the choral elements that were very Stravinsky-like that you discussed already, where do you see his greatest successes being? Is it in the orchestral music, is it in the neoclassical or is it in the 12 tone?

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>> Martin Boykan: Well the 12 tone was still tonal, I mean he was doing his own. Copland of course was a member of this whole circle. The strongest, I think almost anybody would agree

that the string quartet was an absolutely major, major moment and I would add the trio to that, and the symphony. But there are other pieces that are still very neoclassic that are...they're so expressive and so well made, you can say that they're unique but we don't have to have every tonic chord be unique. Life would be awful boring if you couldn't listen to nothing but...you know...uniqueness. And that was already there, the technique. And it's not just technique, for me. He was personally...very undogmatic...not trying to push neoclassicism and not trying to push anything, willing to listen to any kind of thing. I'm not going to go into this with stories except to say that there was times when he even seemed...not to be really sure of himself to be...[inaudible]...and about work which was, the rest of us would like to say well it's only me. But he was always available to students and anybody. And...so I found him, you know, he was probably the first really major influence on my life and I'm sure I'm just one of many.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: As someone who knew him in that period at Brandeis, how did you perceive his feelings of where his professional focusses were going, 'cause some people will say oh he wasn't necessarily happy where his career was, he wasn't composing as much. But to some, the fact that he was focusing so much on being an educator and administrator showed that he was happy doing that.

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>> Martin Boykan: My impression is, and this is not just an impression if you're talking about people, is that yeah, he complained about it. God forbid he didn't complain about it. We all complained about it. He wanted to write music. I would have loved to have just written music, all, anybody. You know, and...but he was a very responsible guy and he was in charge of this...I mean he built this department and this university really, and he wasn't about to say, "Well now do what you want, I'm going home." And...but you know...like most he had, "I wish I had nothing else to do."

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: One of the defining moments I think that is pretty obvious to anyone who looks into Fine and the history of Brandeis is that first festival of the creative arts in which *Trouble in Tahiti* happened and the Blitzstein and all sorts of things. And in my mind and in the mind of certain people with the last name Fine—and I agree with them—the way his role is perceived as slighted now days by some people. Certainly Brandeis seems to minimize his role in that first festival. Do you have any thoughts on that?

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>> Martin Boykan: I don't know whether I was at the first festival. I remember the festivals, they were extraordinary. I have a...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Off the record?

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>>No you can be on the record. You're not going to be interested in any of this...or for example, the Copland's opera was done with Copland conducting. I remember that because I was the rehearsal pianist.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh wow.

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>> Martin Boykan: So it was very major what was going on, very major. And there was, one of the concerts at one of the festivals was a jazz concert. I can't quite remember what it was. He was one of the top jazz...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: I know Miles Davis was at some point was there.

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>> Martin Boykan: That's who it was, it was Miles Davis. Exactly. And I wanted to hear that and unfortunately I had a rehearsal I was making money because my salary those days...so I was doing a lot of playing in the rehearsal. I called in sick, said I was very sick, and I went to the concert to hear that. And *The New York Times*, on the front page of the second section...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh no—A picture of you?

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>> Martin Boykan: A huge picture of me. And everybody said, "Oh congratulations." I said, "Thanks a lot." Now nobody's gonna hire me. I didn't mean it. It was silliness but...they were wonderful concerts. That was the time of Boston also was doing great stuff you know, on the Commons. And that's all in the distant past.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Unfortunately, yeah. So, going forward, anyone that's sort of connected to Fine and to Brandeis, how do you see our roles in terms of spreading the word about his

legacy and what are the important things to highlight to people who might not have the sort of direct emotional investment that we all have?

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>> Martin Boykan: Oh, well you know the music world changes, you know the world changes. And we heard composition faculty and musicology faculty, [inaudible]. That's a matter of time. It all has to do with time. The important thing is he was the founder of the department. There had been somebody before who was...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: The harpsichordist? Irwin...Bodky

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>> Martin Boykan: Yeah, he was a nice guy but he wasn't particularly [inaudible] for this institution. And then there was Irving and... one has to remember that he founded and laid the bases for the colony and that stayed. And in fact the Fine concerts...somewhere everybody realizes it because you wouldn't really expect it knowing academia after 15 years and they've collected all the money they needed, they would get rid of the Fine concerts, I mean...right? That would be normal, I think. And it has always always been... There is a sense that...you know...and I mean the legacy, his legacy was just "I want a department which has musical quality" and even though it was...of course, those are the people who knew him, Marty, [inaudible], it had a particular slant. Once the neoclassicism was sort of over, it was up for grabs. But the quality has remained. And I have to say...after his passing, the composition department became very split and there were really antagonizing and it was not nice. That was because it was the Fine crowd versus the [inaudible] people. And that's all gone now. And for the past ten, fifteen years, I don't know any other music department where the composers are all working, all friends of each other...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown I know, it's shocking

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>> Martin Boykan: This is shocking...[inaudible]...you know, the bullshit academia lives from. And that how it was at the beginning when they were close and that came back. And so if he's alive and looking at us, I think he'd be happy that's it's still that way.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: In terms of the curriculum for the music students, perhaps just the undergraduates in the time when he was there, what was your sense of the things that he really felt they could get at Brandeis that they couldn't get anywhere else?

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>> Martin Boykan: Oh, you're talking about the undergraduates?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Yup

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>> Martin Boykan: I don't know if he felt that...there was, there was really three years of theory which was very considerable of him and that got...unfortunate...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Cut down

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>> Martin Boykan: Cut down...I agree with his edition now but anyway, I lost that one. But it's a hard question because I don't really know what education was like outside. I only know what it was like at Harvard, and at Harvard it was worthless.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Even though that was perceived as the standard to a lot of people?

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>> Martin Boykan: The people there were unable to teach anything, and Harvard has generally been that way. I learned a great deal at Harvard, and I learned about music only from my fellow students because they were smart and they were into music. The courses were...I stopped going to them... In general in the arts...I won't say anything about the sciences but in the arts, and now I know—just by all these years when we get so many applications from all over the country, all over—that, with a few exceptions here and there, the music education in the United States is awful, absolutely awful. The same is true of Europe and I've asked some of my Italian students, I asked them about it and...they learn nothing there, useless. And of course there's nothing in the Middle East. Maybe a few teachers in Israel but... Where it's great is China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan. I mean, those kids come in and boy they know harmonies, they know their counterpoint. I mean, talent is whatever, that comes from any old place, but in terms of education. And Brandeis still does maintain the standards, I think the proper standards. There was the administration of a President of the past, until recently... 15 or so years...you can quote me as

much as you like, I think they should all go to hell. I say publicly that we were now teaching in East Germany. They were hopeless, and at one point they decided to completely cut the , you'll see why I'm telling you this story, to cut the graduate department.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh yeah, I heard about that.

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>> Martin Boykan: Well, my first...I wanted to get letters and my first, the first person I called was Milton Babbitt. And you know the first thing he said was...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What?

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>> Martin Boykan: The last bastion of serious musical education—that was Brandeis. The last bastion was Brandeis. You know, and in fact I subsequently found the letter he wrote course he had gotten his honorary doctorate, that began to change things. Not to those guys but to, you know, people in other fields who didn't know and they heard this they thought, wait a minute. You know, and it has maintained that. There are good people around the country. We refer to University of California Davis, Brandeis west, because they're all ours, in fact we just took one back. Which...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Worked out well

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>> Martin Boykan: I couldn't care less but she's wonderful. The other school that's very good is Utah in Salt Lake City, University of Utah. And we've had a lot of graduate students from them. So there are places and there are individuals here and there.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown One of the telling things for me is at the Library we have all of the Koussevitzky commissions, all the manuscripts, and everyone on the current faculty is in there which is just, you know...

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>> Martin Boykan: Yea...It's...you know it's a reduced faculty. There's three, there should be four. And that's true of musicology as well. And I hope...the new president I know slightly, I know he is...I'm sure he's great as president because he's really charismatic. You could get all of your money out of your pocket. But he is very interested in classical music and I think it will be fine. So I think it'll be ok. And the three composers there are really...I have enormous respect for all of them, I mean Yu-Hui [Chang] I knew as a student, but the other two I didn't and I got to know them only hearing pieces and of...you know it's a great department now. So uh...now that I have no connection with it, I can honestly say that I would recommend anybody. That's nothing for me, nothing for music [laughter]. They can give them an education there.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: With the graduate students that have come through Brandeis from the beginning, what have been sort of...what has really identified them as Brandeis graduates when they're out in the world after their education?

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>> Martin Boykan: That's a hard question. I don't know if they would want to be identified. We've had some...I very much enjoyed being there because we had some really very good students but you never know, when they finally go off in life.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown Life happens in between

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>> Martin Boykan: Life happens, you know it's different. And also, when you accept people you can't tell, my batting averages, quite low. And I think, although I spend much more time with, trying to decide whether I would vote for a student or not than in any other thing, because it's very hard to tell. And I don't think my batting average is lower than other peoples, but we're all low. So two of my absolute closest friends, I campaigned vigorously to keep out of the school because I thought they were hopeless and one year I realized, boy was I wrong. And then there was... I can remember another woman submitted a piece and I thought, now this is talent and she was immediately in my seminar and the first month I thought, oh no, this is hopeless and I was wrong. It's hard to say because students come with different backgrounds. You don't know, you're really predicting the future. So if there weren't problems, they wouldn't need to study. And only when I really saw that, it was...you know the name, the son of Columbia Records. He just died, cancer. Well...he had a big career in a lot of orchestras, they just...well...I mean I know him as well as I know my father's name, I don't know why I can't...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Well, it will come back to you

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>> Martin Boykan: Anyway...he already was a good...he knew exactly what he was doing. And I very much enjoyed looking at his music. I remember one time he came, you know this is the difference between levels of students. And he was writing a big piece for large chamber ensemble and I just read through and everything was absolutely fine. There was one place at the end of it, problem with some notes I thought and I'm mentioned them and you know what he said, I know, I just wanted to see if you'd find them too [laughter]. I said fine, you're on.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: That level.

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>> Martin Boykan: He was at that level and he was entitled to that because it was all there, perfectly there, nothing to say.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wonderful.

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>> Martin Boykan: Peter Lieberon. I knew it...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: One of the sentiments that, at least for me and I think some of the...my classmates from when I was at Brandeis that comes out of the Fine generation, with Shapero and Berger and that whole crowd, is the sense that the school of creative arts really was a start-up and they were fighting and they were very entrepreneurial in the way they put everything together, and the festival was the big splash in international news and such. And, for me, I feel that that's carried throughout the years and that students really sense that at Brandeis in terms of the undergraduate experience there's such a—and this goes across Brandeis—there's such an opportunity to make your own experience with the guidance of all the faculty. Is that sort of a happy side effect of the culture that was there from the beginning or do you think there's any intention to it?

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>> Martin Boykan: You're talking at the undergraduate level? I can't really...the only thing that comes to mind...in fact, I just had a visit from an old undergraduate from many, many years ago, was a member of the class we called the greats. There were five or six undergraduates who could

do better than any of the graduate students. They had all...they had everything. I had this guy who came to visit me, and he's gotten married and has a life... The piece he chose to write as a senior was a five part chorale prelude in Bach style with a canonic cantus firmus [laughter]. You know...and curiously, almost none of them have developed professionally in the U.S. but that's alright. Two or three years later there were some...there was a class that never heard of Mozart. I mean a class that was really so ignorant and stupid.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh dear.

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>> Martin Boykan: I mean, we had the great and then we had...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh my goodness. Yeah, it fluctuates.

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>> Martin Boykan: And of course, weren't involved in picking them at [inaudible] the admissions. They may have been bright in other things and wanted to major in music. You don't know. There was a time, I mean I have to say this, in the earlier years there was much more music-making. And there were many more concerts and even the student concerts were really very well attended. The general concerts, which were heavily modern but also with a tradition—but emphasis on the modern, you wouldn't believe the audiences. Slosberg was completely filled. The lobby was filled. Hundreds of people would come. I can remember faculty meetings when all we would talk about it how can we keep people away from our concerts.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Oh my god

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>> Martin Boykan: We can't handle this. From the whole neighborhood, from Boston. It wasn't just students, it's...everybody came. That was true apparently with Columbia true as a group, and we were sort of simultaneous with them and then the Vietnam War started and then, after that...it's coming back a little. It's a little better now, but on that we have no control over. And to some extent that will depend on circumstances. It's like...can't...I couldn't honestly say that I think in general, all the time the undergraduate body has been...let me put it this way...the undergraduates have been the victim of the situation in America and I had a, what for me was a very revealing moment when I was just retired, a girl who was a junior or senior wanted to interview me so we had lunch and this was right after the 2008 crash and so I said, I asked her

what her major was. She said, well I'm an economics major but I decided to switch...I want to go into comp. lit., and she said I was only an economics major because my parents insisted I had to take something to make money and now that there's no money to be made I'm going to do what I like. So, you know there was a time when these are kids and they didn't have...and there's nothing any university can do, you know, be fighting the country, the world. So that's where, very few people at the concerts. Yea...so...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Was Fine involved heavily in fundraising efforts when he was there?

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>> Martin Boykan: If he was, I didn't know it. But I wouldn't doubt it.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: In your own composing, what would you say are the sort of things that have stayed with you the most from Irving's tutelage?

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>> Martin Boykan: I can't answer that. This is a very personal matter. If you're asking what music has most influenced me, it wouldn't have been Irving's. It was Elliot Carter and then very much Seymour Shifrin, along with a lot of dead people. But Irving mattered to me, musically in a way that was very special. You don't realize—I don't think anybody except my age or up would realize—the extent to which the music would be divided stupidly so that when I was really young if you were a neoclassicist, you had nothing whatsoever to do with Viennese composers. And I remember my, I think it was my sophomore year at Harvard, course I had a year with Steuermann, so I got to know Schoenberg and that stuff and I played some of the pieces and my...the event had an enormous success for false reasons [laughter]. Not at all. But had an enormous success because I then realized none of those composers, including Irving, had ever heard a piece of Schoenberg's.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wow.

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>> Martin Boykan: Ever. They didn't know what to do. And I can remember Irving was oh...I mean he was...oh this is cool, you know? It...and it's not because I playing so marvelously but they had absolutely no connection to them. And if you talk to anybody, mention any composer who was not Viennese as I once did to the oldest of the old quartet at Brandeis...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Not Mary Ruth?

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>> Martin Boykan: No that's the second quartet, the first quartet. There's another famous...he was a violist in the BSO. Anyway, he knew Bartók, went to his performances and if you mention anybody who was not Bartók or Viennese...Excuse me, I don't discuss that.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wow.

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>> Martin Boykan: Now everything is much better because people are interested in sharp stuff which will sell for 50 million dollars and various other...interesting art experiments. But...but Irving was always...and even when, at the beginning, not much but I began to have some influence—some Schoenberg influence as an undergrad but not terribly much—and Irving was responsive to it. He was open to music. Which is why he was generally regarded in the group as the least important. Most important was of course Harold, and then Bernstein and then Arthur and I said from the beginning, I still feel strongly that...I don't want to judge but the most important of anybody was in fact Irving. And he was very, so he was very open and he had notions of music should do this and music should do that which is what a lot of people did including the other three members of the group in their various ways and he did...which is why when he started feeling a little 12-tone stuff, it was because it was leading to the kind of music he wanted to write. You know, for real reasons and...so not this is what music must be.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Which it sounds like that set him apart in a big way in that period when everything was so divided.

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>> Martin Boykan: It did. I mean he was, he was...you know I remember he was [inaudible], response to my playing Schoenberg then, he was, you know, he really had a good time. And it was from the music, not me, it was from the music it was...I just felt wonderful.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: It's so interesting for me personally and I can't speak for other people my age, Stravinsky and Schoenberg, they're equal.

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>> Martin Boykan: Absolutely, come on! They're both extraordinarily great period. They both wrote some dumb pieces too so who's to criticize?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: It's so interesting how, even sort of as fast as a decade at a time, the attitudes can change so drastically and then generational differences too.

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>> Martin Boykan: Well you know I wasn't happy some of the last years when I was teaching, this is graduate level analysis, 'til I decided, in the end I would study any piece they wanted to study, I didn't pick the pieces. More important, we study what interests you over interests me. But I would pick a couple of the Stravinsky later pieces and neoclassic pieces. They did the work but they couldn't see the music at all, could not understand his music. Ok, and I'm sort of...excuse me, am I on the right planet?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's hilarious.

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>> Martin Boykan: Things change. That would not have been when I was a student. I mean, then it was...I remember every note was so holy I was... "ooh" like a new piece...why is the bassoon playing F# in the 84th measure? Really holy written. And not anymore.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: I wonder if there's...did Irving have a sentiment about Elliot Carter? How did you feel about him?

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>> Martin Boykan: Positive

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: And of course it admits the later...

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>> Martin Boykan: What?

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Whatever reaction omits the later 60 years of Elliot's career.

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>> Martin Boykan: Well, what I remember of...I was blown away by Elliot for a year or two. I did nothing else, absolutely nothing else but Elliot Carter. And then I came on the music of Seymour's and they mentioned that and I said now I'm more interested in the music of Seymour's than Irving, than Elliot and I said oh no you can't be. What I did learn from Irving was that Elliot Carter, as a Harvard student, was least likely to succeed. It was hopeless. He was terrible. They all knew him from there and they were all astounded that he ever got to write anything. And this has nothing to do with things but I understand because I remember as an undergraduate I played a duo for something, I can't remember what it was now, at the piano, it was a piece of Elliot's, it was early. And I thought it was awful. And since I was 17 or 18, I decided he was in my box of bad composers. And then comes along the 50's and all that stuff and people tell me, you should look at Elliot Carter's music. And I said no he's bad. And one day, I was visiting Arthur Berger who lived in Cambridge and he lent me the score of the first quartet which was unpublished in Elliot's miserable handwriting, if anything, it rivals Beethoven's in horror. And I thought all right, you know, I'll... I'll waste a few minutes. So I went to a coffee shop to get a cup of coffee and was about ready to go home and I open the score and I won't forget that day, I stayed there for two, three hours. I could not stop! I suddenly...as soon as I got home I started playing it. And for the next two months I did nothing, nothing but that work. Morning to night. And I remember I was, at one point I was just fixing myself a quick dinner and turned the radio on. It was a late Beethoven quartet and I listened for a minute and then I shut it off, not interested.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: What? Wow that's great.

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>> Martin Boykan: It was totally...and that lasted for some years and, you know, one grows and so forth. So I don't know how Irving ultimately felt, but there was certain respect for him. And some surprise because, you know he was over 40 when he finally found... Apparently he could do nothing technically, he was nowhere until he started to write this four-part counterpoint.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Funny how that works.

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>> Martin Boykan: You never know. If you need it...my theory has always been if you need the technique, if you really need it, it will happen. And you'll enjoy taking the trouble because you need it. So I don't know...in general, Irving was very open to almost everything and I don't remember very much...[of] the general composer disease which is, this is terrible, that's terrible,

anything that isn't mine is awful. And he was the opposite. He was really interested in almost anything.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Fantastic.

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>> Martin Boykan: Which is why if you were a student around him, you know he could look at your music and it was music. Something that wasn't obvious garbage but...and he was interested.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: That's wonderful. So perhaps to wrap up, some thoughts on pure conjecture. Maybe 50 years from now when the 20th century is being looked at as a whole, in the way that we look at the 19th century now, aside from the importance with Brandeis, is Irving's musical legacy just as a prime example of neoclassicism in America or is there more to that? Or is that what it should be, and is that acceptable? Big question, sorry.

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>> Martin Boykan: There's no way to answer that. You could only say, I can only say what I feel now. The current state of music is actually rather like the Baroque which is that as soon as the composer is dead, it's done, it's over. I mean, if you think that there is no Roger Sessions being played, no Shifrin, there won't be any Carter after a few years. He's lasting because everybody is so thrilled that somebody is over a hundred, but that's all. That's all that's left... And some of that music I think first class is all that...and it was at one point and then even Stravinsky you know. There's *Petrushka* and the *Firebird*, and the *Rite* I guess and occasionally somebody would do a birthday celebration every 10 years, every 20 years...there is...so music's not in a good way but it wasn't in the...you know, everybody was forgotten in the Baroque too. They'd never heard of Monteverdi or Purcell.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Hey but they came back

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>> Martin Boykan: That's the point. That's the point. I'm not...I'm not hopeless about it because it can come back, it can come back. And there are always people there you know and I...you never know, with no background. We had a...here's a relatively recent Brandeis graduate student. I was on sabbatical so I didn't see how he got in to Brandeis but when I got back he was in one of my seminar and I was very taken by this guy. He was very rare, this age, to see somebody who can even see a kind of original voice and I mean, there was a point where I thought, I'd

better stop complaining or talking because he's into something and I'm not quite sure what. It's real. It's real. So I asked him, he was English, so I asked him what his background was. Well, he grew up as a poor family outside of London, and growing up the only music he knew was popular music. So he decided he wanted to go into music and he wanted to be in pop, a pop player. So he, he came to the states and he went to the Berklee School and he got a degree and then he got interested in Jazz. Then he went to the conservatory and got a degree in Jazz, at which point in the meantime, he's into classical music. And by the time we knew him, he knew the repertoire. The 20th century repertoire, he had it all. So it comes from nowhere and in his case it also went nowhere because, at one point he decided to become a Buddhist monk and I took the trouble of, myself, taking the bus to this place where he was staying to meet with him and I said to him I'm delighted you're becoming a Buddhist monk, just do me one thing, please continue. That's all. Everything else is fine. And apparently he hasn't. So it wasn't meant to be. But there's no question he was responding to music and that won't go away. He won't be in the millions of people but it will happen. So these people will all be forgotten ultimately, but who knows, you know.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: It's an interesting thing to ponder.

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>> Martin Boykan: So I can't answer...I couldn't predict the future.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: No, no. But that was a very wonderful insight so to think about. Well thank you so much for taking the time. This has been a lot of fun for me.

^58:57

>> Martin Boykan: I have to tell you, I looked forward to it and I have thoroughly enjoyed talking about Irving, 'cause there aren't many guys that I...and I was very young so I [inaudible] awful...there aren't many guys I really remember with such pleasure. He mattered a lot to me and I really cared about him, even though I could be sort of my nasty self but I always really cared. I'm sure he meant a lot in my growing up, just to be next to somebody who was the real thing in music. You know, he came to Brandeis because he didn't get tenure at Harvard and I was one of the people who was protesting violently in my senior year, how can you let this guy go? And suggesting anti-Semitism and all kinds of blah blah blah, and of course what I didn't know is Harvard never does that. They have this rule, whatever, it's not worth anything but that's their rule, can't get tenure from assistant professorship unless you've gotten tenure somewhere else. Then, Harvard may give you...so it was no different from anybody else.

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Well it certainly worked out to Brandeis's benefit for sure. There would be no Brandeis without him.

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>> Martin Boykan: And I think it worked out for his benefit too, because was now in a group that was real and there they were people, the people there were...

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>> Nicholas A. Brown: Wonderful.

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