

This memoir is the result of a tape-recorded interview conducted for Oral History, American Music at Yale University School of Music

by Janice Fournier
in Concord, Mass.

with Elizabeth Vercoe
on March 5, 1985

The accessibility to and use of the tape and transcript of this memoir are governed in one of the following ways:

OPEN: This material may be consulted in such place as is made available for purpose of research by Yale University. All readers must be accredited as serious scholars. Quotation of the material for use in publication requires permission, but citing and paraphrasing in moderation may be done without this formality.

PERMISSION REQUIRED TO CITE OR QUOTE: This material is equally accessible to the reader as that in the OPEN category. However, permission to cite and quote it must be obtained from the interviewee or his designate. All readers must pledge to observe this requirement.

PERMISSION REQUIRED: This material is accessible to the reader upon receipt of written permission from the interviewee or his designate. The reader must submit to the archivist in writing his reasons for wanting to consult the material. Once written permission has been received by the archivist, access will be granted.

CLOSED: This material may not be read or quoted. It is closed to research until the archivist has been instructed otherwise.

No reproduction of the memoir, either in whole or in part, may be made.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that this is a transcription of the spoken word and is not meant for publication in its present state.

Interviewee: Elizabeth Vercoe
(signature)

Date: 11/12/87

Elizabeth Vercoe
with Janice Fournier
Concord, Massachusetts
March 4, 1985

F. [This is Jan] Fournier and I'm talking today with Elizabeth Vercoe at her home in Concord, Massachusetts. And she was just telling me about a piece that she was inspired to write. Go ahead Elizabeth.

V. O.K. I wrote a piece called Persona for solo piano. It was a commissioned work for Vivian Taylor, who was doing a project of women's music for the First International Congress on Women in Music that was in New York several years ago. And a friend of mine had done a dissertation on Louise Nevelson and I was down visiting her and had read an article that she wrote, a kind of psycho-biography only a much shorter work than a biography, about Nevelson. And at the time, coincidentally, there was a retrospective show at the Whitney Museum of Nevelson's work, and I went to the museum to see it and it just so happened that the weekday that I chose to go, there was no one else in the exhibition, and I walked around the exhibition all alone in this quite atmospheric display ~~of~~ --some of the rooms were all black ~~with~~ --with light that simulated moonlight, for example, and then there was an all-white room and an all-gold room, and then her final work, which ~~is~~ --was on show at this particular exhibition, *and* is called Mrs. N's palace, and it's like a--it's really like a tomb that you walk into--a last place with all her favorite things in it. It's sort of like that, and one is asked to remove shoes and to walk barefoot through this rather small

space but intricately decorated. I found it an extremely moving experience, especially being alone like that--and I was working on the piece already but seeing that exhibition and reading the article about Nevelson, and also seeing a work of hers entitled First Personage in which my ~~friend~~^{she} felt that she herself had had a very pivotal experience in mounting another exhibition and then being very, very exhausted and tired, and seeing this work when she was tired, and seeing it seem to move, and suddenly all kinds of personal things, evidently came up for her and she began, suddenly, to do what is now her trademark kind of work, that is, work that's enclosed in boxes as though trying to contain something. And I felt that in my piece--I was quoting composers from other eras whose work ^{had} had a very particular and subjective meaning, not as an artist so much but a very personal meaning for me--and I felt that this work was maybe doing that kind of thing for me, that as I was searching for my voice as an artist and my means of expressing personal things that I felt a contact with her and her work, which was really quite inspiring to me.

F. What composers were you influenced by in this--in the writing of this?

[background noise]

V. Can we stop just a second?

[pause in tape]

V. O.K. You were asking me what composers maybe I was influenced by, and I always find that an extremely difficult question to answer. I think it's much easier for somebody else to listen to my music and see what they think, because I think today composers study music from the middle ages right on up to the present and

there is bound to be some kind of spillover into their own work from all of this, and it's hard to pinpoint it. In Persona I quoted the work of Vivaldi but for a special reason not so much for an artistic reason, but for the reason that I had played this particular violin concerto myself as a young person and my daughter was then playing it and I felt this very personal connection. There is a quotation from the Beethoven Violin Concerto, there's a quotation from the Mozart G Minor Symphony, and there's a quotation that comes back several times from a work of my husband's that I performed when I first met him, also a quotation from an earlier piano piece of my own, so that in a way they were not so much musical influences as other kinds of influences. Musically, I-- I can't even begin to answer that question. I don't even know how to answer that question. I don't know myself. I can't even say who my favorite composers are. I find it very difficult. I think, perhaps, I have a rather catholic taste.

F. Uh-huh. I was interested to hear your--saying that you had quoted a piece of your husband's. I was wondering how it is being married to a composer, someone who shares your vocation. Do you find that you influence each other?

V. I think we share a common aesthetic to a fairly large degree. For example, it's highly likely that in going to a concert of all-contemporary music that Barry and I would come out of the concert comparing notes and find that we had generally liked the same pieces. And I think that we have a great respect for each others work. I don't see musical influences back and forth. Also we find that we are each, well, in a sense, partic--well not specialists exactly but--well he is in electronic music, but I'm also very interested in promoting women's music in various ways,

and so we have our own particular interests, that means that we are going off on--in separate directions to some extent.

F. Let's talk a little bit about your interest in promoting women's music, and how exactly you're doing this.

V. I became interested in this quite a while back actually, when the International League of Women Composers was first founded by Nancy Van de Vate. I joined early on and I also joined American Women Composers when--early on when that was founded in 1976. In more recent years not only have I been involved myself in--as a member of the organizations, but I've also been board member and chair and that kind of--taken that kind of responsibility in the organizations, helped with finding articles for the newsletters and putting together concerts. I ran the--what they call the Search for New Music, which is a competition for student composers, for the League of Women Composers for several years. At the moment I'm chair of the Massachusetts chapter of American Women Composers and this small local chapter has already done a national conference at Tufts University and during my chairmanship we're planning to do a festival of women's music at Boston University including two orchestra concerts, two of Boston's major performing contemporary ensembles giving concerts, a dance concert, and we're hoping--we have applied for funds at least--to commission a new dance work and also a new musical piece. Both on the conference and on this festival we have had children performing women's music, which we think is a very good way to, perhaps, bring future audiences to women's music, to get kids to start playing music by women and realize that there are lots of women writing music. And this

time instead of just having solo performers, we're inviting a children's chorus to perform women's choral music.

F. Oh, that's exciting.

V. So there will be a panel discussion, things like that as well but I think it sounds like a--quite an interesting program. There will be a number of premieres and--as well as older music being played, by Clara Schumann, Alma Mahler, such composers.

F. Will any of your works be--be performed?

V. I don't know just yet. The programs are not fully decided at this--at this point. I expect there'll probably be something.

F. Yes. Were you involved in the conferences that were held at the University of Michigan on Women's Music.

V. Yes indeed. The first one, Opus One I think they called it, yes I had a piece performed. The second one, I was somewhat more actively involved. I came over from Paris--in fact we were living in Paris at the time. I came back for the conference and on that one someone whom I had met at the first conference, performed a piece of mine called Irreveries from Sappho and also I wrote a piece for the occasion for a harpist by the name of Susan Allen. [phone rings] Maybe I should get that.

[pause in tape]

F. I think we were talking about Michigan and--

V. Oh, yes. Oh yes, so I wrote a piece called Par^oadia that was based on the Monteverdi madrigal called Lasciatemi morire and that piece then was premiered at the conference and she's played it since then as well on the Piccolo Spoleto Festival, for example, which is nice.

F. You have often in your work chosen texts by women writers--

V. That's right.

F. --to set to music. Is it something you feel very strongly about, giving voice in music to women's thoughts and--

V. Exactly. Exactly. I--I didn't start out intending to do that and rather found myself doing that. It seemed to be something that was less intentional than just natural, that just evolved all by itself. For example, with Herstory I which is a song cycle for piano, vibraphone and soprano, I spent a great deal of time collecting poetry that I liked, going to the library, reading through volumes and volumes of poetry, and--and copying out the things that I liked. And it wasn't until I had gotten my various assorted pages collected together that I realized that the bulk of them were by women and furthermore, that most of them had to do with women expressing something about their lives as women, referring to their children, their spouses, or their lovers, or to their relationship to themselves as growing older, their views of life that seem to reflect a women's point of view more than a man's point of view. And that was very interesting to me. I continued^{that} more consciously but again not totally consciously with Herstory II which is based on Japanese poetry from the eighth to the twelfth century by Japanese women poets, translated by Kenneth Rexroth. And initially I had given the book of poetry to my husband as a gift and he had set one of the poems in the book as a birthday present for me, and then he had continued-- he had expected to round out a cycle and finish (which he never did. And I loved the book so much that I went and was reading it and looking at it and finally decided--I thought I would do a cycle based on poetry from the book. Well again, when I

copied out the poems I liked, I found that—surprise, surprise—many of them, most of them, were by women and in this case they turned out to be what you might loosely call love poems--and I say loosely because they are not full--all uniformly full of admiration. Some of them reflect fear, some of them reflect amusement, some of them reflect anger. There's--there are thirteen different ways of looking at the subject but again from a women's point of view.

F. Yes.

V. And--I found that an interesting experience to--to work with it--more than an interesting--a very moving experience to work with those--those poems and those different voices from the past. They seemed absolutely up to date.

F. And contemporary. Yes.

V. Yes.

F. Yes, your range, going from Sappho up to contemporary women poets, and yet there's certainly a thread that--that--

V. Well, the Sappho picks up the same thread. These three--three little poems, written so many hundreds of years ago but in a translation by Mary Barnard that is completely contemporary language, and I think^d that ^sat the skill of the--the translator, who is a true poet herself—makes it work in English. If you're wanting people to really understand the text and you want to write in the language of your audience then it has to be in English but--but those voices from the past and other countries and so on are so fascinating. And again, the more things change the more they stay the same.

F. Yeah. They have something to say to us.

V. Absolutely.

F. Yes. What do you feel is the status of the--the woman composer today in our own country? Has it--have you seen an evolution since you started writing? Are there many more women who are writing and getting performed?

V. I think so. I think that there has been enormous change even in just the last six or eight years.

F. Uh-huh.

V. I don't think it's just my own development but I think that beyond that there are more women going through the music schools in composition. There are beginning to be women conductors. There are beginning to be women in fields that have not heretofore had lots of women in them.

F. Yes.

V. I was--initially at the University of Michigan in the sixties-- I was usually the only woman around in the composition department, and people made comments about that, and I remember Persichetti coming to the seminar and saying something to me, "Oh, I'd like to hear something by the woman composer." and his wife upbraiding him and saying, "She's not a woman composer. She's a composer."

F. Yeah. Who just happens to be.

V. Yes--

F. Yes.

V. --but--but the novelty is beginning to wear off. I think that there's not so much focus on the fact that--oh my goodness this is just--this is a woman who's writing music but really an expectation that women are writing and that their music should and deserve--their music deserves performance. And I think it

is beginning. I think the ~~the~~ fact that Ellen Zwilich won a Pulitzer Prize is ~~is~~ a major accomplishment for all women in a certain sense. I know that she thinks of herself as a composer but she, interestingly enough, belongs to the two major women composers organizations, so she feels part of that as well.

F. In terms of programming do you feel that works by women composers should somehow be performed separately or would you rather see an integration with all kinds of music.

V. I guess I like to see it in lots of contexts, and I'm not sure, exactly, where the best place is. Maybe there isn't a best place. It ~~is~~'s interesting to me to contemplate the possibility that women have something different to say and I think we're more likely to notice that if we hear a lot of women's work all together, as we might on a conference or a festival, or something like that. More likely there will be the occasional work that speaks particularly of or to women and, in general, women's work will just join the variety of ~~of~~ men's work and not stand out in that particular way. So I ~~am~~ really like myself to see it in both contexts.

F. Yes.

V. I very much, in general, like to hear contemporary music programmed with traditional music.

F. Yes. I was going to ask you about that old versus new.

V. Yes, so that whether it's a man's or a woman's work performed on a program, it stands out and--and gets special attention if it's the only new work. Much more than if there are a whole series of new works--

F. Yes.

V. --on a program.

F. Yes. What about your composing techniques? Maybe you could just explain a little bit how you compose. Do you hear a piece entirely before you begin to write, or is it more a process of working it out, reworking, trial and error?

V. I once had a lovely experience of waking up one morning and having a piece in my mind that I had never thought of, and the beginning of it from--almost like from a dream or something, but, in general that sort of thing doesn't happen. Often there is some germinal idea, whether it's musical or extra-musical. I have a piece ~~that was~~ that is based on bird calls, for example, that I transcribed literally from listening to either recordings or live birds or remembering experiences of birds in the wilderness and that sort of thing. And it was that idea and the rhythmic aspects of the calls as well as the melodic that got me started on the piece, but I had very little sense of the actual content that was likely to transpire, or the length, or anything like that--and of course I initially had to decide the instrumentation and so on, which was flute and percussion in that case, but in general I think ~~there~~ for me there's some idea--some central idea, and then I always work at the piano, for example. A lot of composers don't, but I always work at the piano. ~~I--I~~ my own training is mostly as a pianist, practical training that is, and so I feel very comfortable doing that and I like hearing immediately what I'm doing.

F. Uh-huh.

V. I like improvizing as I work, trying things out. I work extremely slowly. I don't produce a whole lot of work every

year maybe one or two pieces, maybe only one if it's a really major piece, and ~~I don't~~ I wouldn't say I had--all my music in the last ten years has one particular style, or one particular compositional technique. I have written using Hauer tropes and twelve-tone technique and so on, though I don't do that very much any more. ~~It's~~ when I write vocal music the text determines an enormous amount of what happens structurally and even the fine details of things. Like many other composers today I have quoted other composers as I mentioned, in Persona and in the Paradia, the Monteverdi that I quoted exact--it was ~~as~~ literally a parody in the technical sense of that word, in which ~~the~~ the texture, ~~the~~ the madrigal--entire madrigal texture is interwoven into my piece, so that there are moments when you actually hear exactly what Monteverdi wrote. At times that just comes out quite clearly and then moves away from that, but every note in Monteverdi's piece is somehow incorporated into mine, though of course it sounds very different--

F. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

V. --but there are times that it's really even recognizable, which was not true in Persona in which I really carefully buried the exact sound of the quotation in the texture of the piano part though I was trying to capture the quality, the effect--certain effect from that particular piece that I was quoting.

F. When did you first start composing?

V. I would say at the end of my senior year in college. I took a course--there had been nothing--I went to Wellesley. There was nothing offered that explored the creative side of music at all, which I found rather disappointing. I had really

expected and hoped that there would be more, both practical music and the creative aspect of music, in the course structure and at that time there was not. That's changed now. For example, when I studied the piano there it was always as an extracurricular activity. It was never given credit. When I played recitals and so on, it was always considered a very nice thing to do but irrelevant basically to the general--

F. Academic programming.

V. --the academic program, yes. That has changed also and it was not until--I don't remember what they called it, an honors--senior honors project, or special studies, or something of that nature in which a group of us were allowed to take a course ostensibly called instrumentation. It really wasn't that at all, it was really composition, although we were invited to compose for particular instrumental groups, and the teacher saw to it that those groups actually came in and played our little things that we were working on.

F. Uh-huh.

V. And that affected me in a way that none of the other courses had, and although I was already planning to go to ~~the~~ graduate school, and went off to the University of Michigan, I had planned and did go off as a beginning graduate student in music theory but within the first summer that I was there, I switched over into composition. And I was in no way prepared to do a Master's in composition. I had hardly written anything, but somehow I did one in that first year ~~and~~ concluding with the required orchestra piece for which I was also not really prepared. And then in the intervening years--quite a long time really before I went to

Boston University to do a doctorate--the real practical experience that I should have had years before began to take place as I began to write small pieces for voice, or for solo instruments, or whatever--and then there was a period of about eight years in which I wrote nothing at all.

F. Oh.

V. Again, before I did my doctorate. I was teaching, my children were born. There was just really no time. And finally, after teaching for a while, I felt that I needed to get back to ~~to~~ where I had wanted to be and went back and did a DMA in composition at Boston University, which was ^a very stimulating experience for me and really got me back on track.

F. How does the--or did the teaching relate to your composing? Did you find that it was not productive in terms of composing?

V. It depended. When I was teaching at Westminster Choir College the teaching itself really was not related or did not help me in any way, but the contacts with other musicians--being in a school of music where there were many performers and so on was very nice, because I found that people would be then interested in performing my music and that right away is stimulating for you to write more. People will ask for things or "do you have this" or "do you have that" and so on, and had I stayed there I think that I probably would've written for many of the faculty members there. There were some very good performers--but when I taught at Framingham State ~~it was~~--it was not a good place for me at all. It was not a music school. There were not very good music students studying there and it was really time for me to go back and reorder priorities.

F. Yes. Yes. Had you thought of composing as a career when you

were studying music as a child or did this come only much later?

V. Much later.

F. Much later. Had you thought of--of performing? Well, maybe we can talk about your--your early musical training. You began studying piano as a--as a child?

V. Yes. I started at five or so. I'd already had a little instruction from my mother and studied--

F. Were your parents musical?

V. Yes, they were. My mother had a--they were not professional musicians but they were quite serious about their music--very serious amateurs I would say. My mother, a pianist, and my father had been a violinist--

F. Oh.

V. --and then took up cello when he retired and when I began violin, so that we could have a family trio.

F. Oh, how wonderful.

V. And that was more or less successful, I suppose, but at least everybody was playing something. My brother and I played duets and things like that together--and a cousin, with whom I grew up, also played the piano, and we played sometimes together. There was a lot of music around in the family. And I had some very excellent teaching in Washington, D.C., a teacher who believed in a good deal of repertoire, in recitals every month, and in the National Piano Auditions ~~which~~--for which you have to prepare a whole set program and so on. So I was used--by the time I was in high school--I was used to performing and I also was accustomed to preparing an entire program in a year, just on the basis of maybe an hour's practice a day. It was not--it

was not strenuous. Nothing like the involvement that my own daughter has in which she practices several hours a day and she's in three orchestras and a string quartet and so on. It's much more than I had, so that I think it was seen always by my family as an avocation not as a vocation for me. So it was quite a major decision for me to major in music in college.

F. How did your family react to that?

V. Well, they preferred it to philosophy. [laugh]

F. Equally useless.

V. I think so.

F. Oh, gosh. Your training then was first at Wellesley and then you studied with Ross Lee Finney at the University of Michigan.

V. Yes, I did my Master's thesis with him.

F. And then you studied with Gardner Read at Boston University.

V. He was a very fine teacher--Ross Lee Finney was--was an excellent teacher, particularly in the classroom--a very stimulating person. I don't think he thought too highly of the idea of women being composers. I think his ideas on that have changed, because we've since discussed it, but at the time he was not too keen on the notion. And I was told that it would be very good for me to marry and settle down. Gardner Read was quite a different teacher. He, himself, works very intuitively and I found that ~~I was~~--I responded to his criticism. He didn't say very much but what he said was not only just practical but intuitively right. It--it struck a chord for me, and ~~he~~^{it} was a very good teacher-student relationship, I think. Also he was very good to me. He arranged that I--I give a solo concert of my music at the Brookline Library, which is a very nice place

to give concerts, the year that I finished my degree--and has generally been very helpful to me. He wrote the program notes for a piece of mine that's coming out on Northeastern Records, Herstory II, and seems very happy to do such things and has been very supportive in that manner. He's retired now and I think enjoys seeing what his students are doing and--

F. Yes.

V. That was a very nice experience. I also studied at Boston University with Joyce ~~McKeel~~^{Mekeel} and was very excited at the notion of studying with a woman composer and thought that that was going to be a very important thing for me. What I learned from that experience was that it made no difference at all and that I was actually very much more comfortable as a musician with Gardner Read's approach, and that was I think an important discovery for me.

F. Uh-huh.

V. In other words, you don't have to have a woman as a teacher if you're a woman composer any more than a man needs to have a man for a teacher.

F. You also did writing of music programs for a radio station. When was that, when you were in Michigan? Or was that after?

V. That was at the University of Michigan, yes.

F. While you were there, uh-huh. What exactly did you do, do programming?

V. Yes. I was responsible for, oh, a third to a half of the music programs that were on--a station like WBUR here, in Boston. A university station that was not student operated but was a public relations station with paid staff and so on, and it

was a way of having income for me at the time. It was a necessity really, but it was a way to do something in my field while I was a student. They allowed me, for example, to come in at seven A.M. in order to get started on my work so that I could take off time later in the day to go to classes, and so I worked rather peculiar hours--but yes, I did certain programs, program notes that would then be read on the air for live concerts, for faculty recitals that were rebroadcast, there was a new music program that was on on Saturday mornings, I believe, and then the usual fare, the daily afternoon music program that went on from--I don't know, one to five or something like that, and it was a matter of selecting music that seemed to work together, pieces that worked together and trying to say something sensible and illuminating about them in not too long a space.

F. Was your husband a student at Michigan when you met him?

V. Yes.

F. You were both students there.

V. Yes, he was a doctoral student in composition at the same time.

F. And he's from New Zealand, is that correct?

V. He's from New Zealand, that's right. Yes.

F. And were you married at the end of your stay in Michigan or--

V. Yes, and then we went to--his first job was teaching at Oberlin Conservatory and so we went there--

F. Uh-huh.

V. --after that, and then to the West Coast, and then to Princeton, and then we came here to Boston.

F. I see. I had been listening to part of the interview that's in our collection and--

V. With my husband?

F. Yes, and he had ~~talked~~ ^{taught at} Oberlin and then--he was sort of a composer-in-residence in Seattle with the school system?

V. With the Ford Foundation Project that was in existence then--

F. Uh-huh.

V. --and it was--he was on a special project that involved five different school systems.

F. I see.

V. And so the great finale of his stay was to write a piece that involved all-- all of those districts at the same time. And--that was a nice experience for him. It made him write a lot of music.

F. And he is now at M.I.T., is that correct?

V. That's right. He's head of the Studio for Experimental Music.

F. I see. I wanted to ask you, too, about your experience at the Cité Internationale des Arts. What is that exactly and what did you do there?

V. Well, we were in Paris during two of the last--parts of the last two years and initially we went over when Barry had a Guggenheim to work at IRCAM at the Centre Pompidou.

F. Oh, yes. Yes.

V. And at the time I thought, well, I will be abandoning all my projects here in the U.S. and I really shouldn't go, and maybe he should go by himself and so on, but eventually we decided that it would be a very good experience for the entire family.

F. And you brought your children?

V. And so the children went and went to French schools.

F. Oh, that must have been quite--

V. Which was a shock for them of course.

F. Yes.

V. And through an artist friend of ours I was put into touch with the Cité, which is a large building not too far from Notre Dame in the Marais which is a very old section of the city--

F. Yes, yes.

V. --which is a place for--for mostly young artists to live. It provides studios which means a studio apartment--a studio apartment which is also a studio space so that the musicians may have a piano in that large room or the artist will do their actual work in that room. Occasionally a family will live there. We had friends--a woman, who is a composer, and her filmmaker husband and their young son lived in one of these one-room studios, somehow or other. We did not live there but I worked there every day and was able to rent studio space--very inexpensively. It's government supported, not just the French government but other countries, other nationalities, and there are people from all over the world living and working there and they are artists from all different disciplines: dancers, composers, performers. I suppose poets as well although I didn't meet any of those, but a lot of visual artists: printmakers, and painters, and sculptors and so on.

F. What an environment to be in.

V. It is, although everybody sort of goes into their own little studios and--and works, but it's also a place, not only to work, but a place to exhibit that work. There's a large exhibition space in the building and there is also a small concert hall which is a very lovely little hall--

F. For performances.

V. --for performances, and each person who has a residency there, which is limited to a maximum of two years, is invited during that time to have one, either exhibition or concert. And so I requested some time to do a program and in fact shared a program. I--the musicians are not allowed to give a whole program by themselves. They have to share one, but it works out very well. I shared one with a Hungarian pianist, a young man who was studying in Paris for a couple of years, and we put together a rather interesting program of old music and new music ~~which the--~~ which was a lovely experience. His French wasn't very fluent nor was mine and we had no other language in common so we had to manage all of our--our efforts in French but we managed to fill up the concert hall and the audience seemed to be very enthusiastic, and I was also invited to have^a performance of a piece at IRCAM a few days later, ^a piece that was performed at the Cité concert, Persona was performed at IRCAM then ⁱ on March about a year ago. I also had a piece done on the French radio while I was there. It was simply a--a broadcast of a recording of my piano Fantasy but since then I understand that the French radio has agreed to do my Herstory II, which means that they will do a live performance of the piece, and since it's about a twenty-minute piece, I'm very pleased about that because that's a major commitment. I'm also planning to go back to France this summer with my family. Through the pianist who performed on my concert at the Cité, I've been invited to do a recording in Belgium of my work, and so she and I will begin to make the arrangements for that and make the plans for doing that recording. She will record Persona and most likely perform in a new piano trio of mine as well, and the rest of the recording ~~is~~ has yet to be determined.

F. Uh-huh. Well that's an exciting prospect.

V. That's right, and so I feel as though that year--it was a year altogether, we spent seven months the first year and six months--five months the second year--was very expanding. I feel much less parochial, much less tied to just New England or just the United States, and I think it's--it's been a very important experience for me. I very much like having contact with other artists and other disciplines. I like having contact with other artists in other countries, going to concerts of music in other countries and hearing what kinds of things are being done there. Often you go in and it seems very strange and you don't like anything you hear, perhaps, but nonetheless it's--it's interesting. It's interesting to see the reactions of French audiences. They seem to be very much more vocal, and express their approval and disapproval much more openly. I come back here and find everybody awfully polite--

F. Uh-huh.

V. --with perhaps less obvious enthusiasm as well as less obvious disapproval. And that was kind of nice to see. People felt strongly about what they were hearing.

F. What is the musical climate like in Boston right now?

V. I think about every other person is a composer here. There are many, many composers. There are quite a few women composers. There are an awful lot of performers interested in doing contemporary music. There are a number of very good contemporary music groups--Alea III, the Boston Musica Viva, Dinosaur Annex and Collage~~r~~ and those groups have regular concert seasons and perform new music all the time. Also the Pro Arte Orchestra generally puts on one new piece on every program. So I think

there's a lot of activity. Also, there's^{re} all kind of things going on with solo recitalists and that sort of thing. A certain amount of new music on our three good-music stations, and a little bit of attention on the television but not very much, just whatever the Boston Symphony is doing.

F. Uh-huh. Is John Harbison back at M.I.T. this year?

V. Yes. Yes.

F. He is. I guess he was in Pittsburgh for--for a while as composer in residence but--but he's back. Vivian had interviewed him not too long ago.

V. I knew him in college actually when I was at Wellesley.

F. Oh really.

V. He was at Harvard at the same time.

F. Oh. So he--both he and your husband then are on the same faculty.

V. That's right.

F. Yeah. Yeah. He had a--what I thought was kind of an interesting definition for composing, learning to distinguish between a live idea and a dead idea and seeing where something would go or if it would and distinguishing that and the one that had no possibilities. Would you agree with that?

V. I'm thinking it over. I don't know if I would characterize what I do as that but I suppose that is the process.

F. Uh-huh.

V. That you find what works and what doesn't, and what leads you somewhere and what doesn't--or what's stimulating and what isn't.

F. It's interesting to hear different composers describe the

process. I was recently watching a video tape that we have of Leo Ornstein and he describes just hearing, you know, complete pieces of music and then having to write it down quickly. It just sounded like, I guess, the kind of inspiration that laymen always think that musicians or composers are struck by. I know it doesn't always happen that way but I guess that sometimes and with some people--

V. I suppose so. For me it's more of an evolution.

F. Yeah. Yeah. I'm sure that's the way it is for most.

V. There's a point at which you know that it's right.

F. Yes.

V. And there sometimes is a time when you feel as though you've made a discovery--

F. Uh-huh.

V. --when something special does happen, and you're absolutely delighted and have no idea where it came from, but for me, no, I don't hear a whole piece in my mind.

F. Uh-huh. Do you write for specific performers?

V. Quite often.

F. Yes.

V. I mentioned that I did Persona for a particular pianist. I also did the piano Fantasy for a very fine pianist, Evelyn Zuckerman, who was the pianist for the Boston Musica Viva and also one of the pianists for the Boston Symphony at the time.

F. Uh-huh. Do you write towards their talent or their particular--

V. I think so, yes. I don't know whether I'm always--whether my notion of what they do is necessarily what their notion is of what they do. I found, for example, that Vivian Taylor

actually preferred the piano Fantasy to the piece that I wrote for her, which I found very curious because I found--I thought that I was writing a piece that capitalized on her fascination with sound and her interest in --in various kinds of sounds that can be made by the instrument. And in fact in a piece that did that she was less interested than in a piece that was much more of a technical working out, and I was very surprised. I didn't quite understand that. I found other pianists responding to the piece. I don't know why that is. When I wrote for harpist, Susan Allen, however, I think it was--since it was my first piece for the harp--it was rather more for the particular interesting sounds that I thought the instrument--those sonoric possibilities rather than for her particular technique.

F. Uh-huh.

V. She has a great variety of technique but she also is very open to new ideas and different kinds of things. So I did not feel--it was her as a musician rather than a particular quality about her that I was writing for. I have a new commission, that I'm beginning to think about now, for another vocal work. The commission is coming from a university in Tennessee and mezzo-soprano, who has just recorded my Irreveries from Sappho and she wants another vocal work for voice and piano and would like it to be a particular duration, about fifteen minutes, and so or--I'm thinking again--now of texts and what the nature--

[End of Side a]

[Beginning of Side B]

F. --to focus on what you want to do or do you find that limiting in any way? For instance, you said you have a--a time frame, say fifteen minutes, does that constrict you in any way or does it help you to--to know what you want to do?

V. I had been wanting to do another vocal work.

F. Uh-huh.

V. It's been a while since I have and it's something I like to do a lot. I feel very drawn to working with words and music, so that it really opens up the possibilities rather than closing off others. I think certain kinds of commissions might close off the possibilities for you. For example, I was commissioned by Wellesley to do a fanfare for the inauguration of their president a few years ago and they specified that it should be a brass fanfare of one and a half minutes length, and that was such a rigid guideline that I--I initially was rather put off although in the end it was--it was rather interesting to do it but it was quite hard. A minute and a half is such a limitation that you--you have to have a very specific idea in order to accomplish anything at all in that--that small amount of time. So I found that rather difficult but the--I'm not particularly concerned about the fifteen minute vocal piece. First of all, I don't think that the time limit is terribly rigid and I can go a little bit either way, and secondly, I'm so drawn to the project anyway. [background noise and pause in tape]

F. Elizabeth, you are currently the music critic for the Concord Journal?

V. I was for about three years. I'm no longer writing for them,

at least not regularly.

F. I see.

V. For a while I volunteered my services--I was paid for it, but volunteered to do the job because something needed to be done. We have a lot of activity for a town our size, musically, and it wasn't being given very much attention and not very serious attention when it was given any. And so I like to write about music and thought that maybe that would be a service I could render to my community. So I did that for a few years and it was-- it was really a nice experience to follow the three major musical groups in our town: the orchestra, which is a very fine orchestra conducted by the--by Richard Pittman who is conductor of the Boston Musica Viva which does all new music, to follow the Concord Chorus, and then also to follow the Symphonic Band. There are other groups that come in from time to time but those are the three major groups--and to follow their concert series for a few years and watch their development and so on, it was a nice experience, but I also found that after having done it for a while, I felt I was getting a bit stale, that it was not easy to look at those same groups year after year and have something fresh to say. It was nice to see, for example, Pittman putting new music on his programs on a regular basis and the audience tolerating the situation pretty well. I think he was--he was really broadening the audience for new music by doing that and educating his orchestra as well. That's not an easy thing, to get amateurs or semi-professionals to do new music, and he has done that very well and has also commissioned works for the orchestra. The band has also commissioned works and the chorus, during the time

that I was reviewing them, was also beginning to commission, so that there was a lot that was happening here that had some relevance to me as a composer too. I was hearing works by other living composers and so on. It wasn't totally "music by dead people," as my husband calls it.

F. Do you have any input at all into the music curriculum of the local school system?

V. I had very little contact with the schools in a musical way. I complained for a while about the low level of regard given to music, and as I found that there was so much musical activity for children in the Boston area outside of the schools I began to feel that serious musical activity was really just never going to be happening in the schools. There was too much outside already for the schools to feel that it was a very important part of their activities.

F. And both of your children are studying music?

V. Yes, my daughter's studied violin for a long time now and my son is studying piano.

[Pause in Tape]

F. Elizabeth, will you describe the work of Arsis Press.

V. Yes. Arsis Press was founded by Clara Lyle Boone about ten years ago in Washington D.C. at the point of her retirement from teaching. She herself is a composer and had lived through many years of struggle to get her own work performed, and published and available to the public in general, and she vowed that she was going to see to it that the next generation of women composers didn't suffer through the same difficulties that she did--and founded a press that's devoted primarily, but

not exclusively, to the publication of women's music. She has published a great deal of--about fifty works I would say at this point including choral works--small choral works, art songs, small chamber ensemble works, trios, that kind of thing, solo instrumental works, violin, piano, and so forth by maybe a dozen or so composers. She's published five or six of my pieces including Herstory II, the Fantasy for Piano; Sonoria for Cello was just about to come out. She's published Irreveries from Sappho in the solo vocal version and she is going to be publishing the choral version of that as well and--the point at which she accepted the first three works of mine, that she wanted to publish, the Fantasy, a Duo for Violin and Cello and Three Studies for Piano, was a really pivotal one for me. I was only the second composer that she elected to publish and she has continued to both encourage me and to choose the works that I find are generally the most important of my music that she has decided to put out and her choices have been very important to me. The fact that she is very devoted to women's music is important to me and the fact that at least two of the pieces of mine that she's published have been the two vocal works setting texts by women. She is a source of encouragement not only to all the women that she publishes but, I think, represents a possibility for that many more women as well because everybody knows that there is that press there that may publish their work--and it's a press that will publish, definitely, women's music for some time. It's been, I think, marginally successful financially. She has managed to keep going for ten years (which is no small achievement for a business of that sort), and I think now that she has a distributor who is attempting to make things more successful

and more business-like and so on, she will probably flourish to a greater degree and I think she's beginning to get a certain amount of notice in the press. I know that she was interviewed for National Public Radio for All Things Considered a year or so ago and they performed one or two pieces that she has published, short little things, so that people are beginning to notice--but what she represents is something that is unique, as far as I know, in the United States. I know that there are other kinds of things in poetry and that kind of thing but in music I don't think there is anything else of that sort at all. There is one recording company, Leonarda Records, that pub--records women's music but there is no other press that I know of.

F. Well, that is encouraging. I'm glad you remembered to include that and I want to thank you, Elizabeth, for this interview. You've been most generous in sharing your thoughts and ideas.

V. Thank you.

[End of Side b]

Signature Elizabeth Verece

Date 11/12/87