

“Green Mountain Chronicles”
Oral History Transcriptions, 1981-1989 (bulk: 1987-1988)
MSA 199 & 200

Introduction

This transcription is one of approximately 42 transcriptions of interviews with individuals conducted primarily in 1987 and 1988 in preparation for a radio program sponsored by the Vermont Historical Society entitled “Green Mountain Chronicles.”

Scope and Content

The transcriptions in this collection represent interviews of approximately 42 individuals conducted primarily in 1987 and 1988 by Mark Greenberg, Mary Kasamatsu, Eleanor Ott, and Tom Davis in preparation for a radio series entitled “Green Mountain Chronicles.” The series of 52 five-minute programs was broadcast by commercial and public radio stations throughout the state in late 1988 and early 1989. The earliest interview in the collection was conducted in 1981; the latest was in 1989.

The interviewers spoke with well known Vermonters such as Governors Philip Hoff, Deane Davis, and Madeleine Kunin; lesser known personalities such as Catherine Robbins Clifford, one of the first women to hike the entire length of the Long Trail; and historians such as Weston Cate. The following inventory of the collection highlights the major theme(s) of each interview. The following list of program tapes gives the title of each radio program.

The goal of the radio series was to tell the history of Vermont in the twentieth century using archival sound recordings and recent interviews. The project was undertaken by the VHS in celebration of its 150th anniversary in 1988 and was funded by a \$14,000 grant from the Vermont Council on the Humanities and Public Issues with additional support from New England Telephone Company.

MSA 199, Folder 0 contains background information on the project. The VHS website at www.vermonthistory.org/gmchronicles contains a list of the Green Mountain Chronicles radio broadcasts and audio files of those broadcasts.

Morris Block
October 27, 1986

Mark Greenberg
Interviewer

MG Can you give me a condensed history of the Vermont Symphony.

MB Sure. Well first of all probably and foremost the most important thing about the symphony is that it is the oldest state symphony in the United States. We will be coming up on our 50th birthday next year. It is remarkable for a few things, but the reason we are the first state symphony is that in actually 1939 we were voted some money by the state legislature. Actually it was money to go down to the 1939 World's Fair and perform there as an orchestra. We were voted a \$1,000 to go down and from that time on, every year the state has annually supported the symphony. Actually their support has grown a great deal, but their commitment to the orchestra has made it possible for us to have our commitment to the whole state and we were performing.

MG So you actually received state funds?

MB Yes we do and it's actually essential for us. We are one of the few orchestras that exists only because we tour. Most orchestras have a wonderful home site or a 2,300 seat hall somewhere where they can sell a subscription series, 8 concerts, different concerts during the year and it's only recently that Burlington for instance has gotten big enough for us that we can have 3 or 4 concerts a year in a series here. I look at other symphonies even in the region in Portland with their beautiful hall there. They are able to do a lot and their touring is something that they do outside their real activity. We play in any gym or barn on the side of any mountain where they will have us here in the state. It costs a lot of money to do that. So this is why we needed that extra state support to keep that going.

MG How do the musicians and the conductor, how do they feel about having to play under those circumstances?

MB It is funny. It is a very different orchestra than any orchestra that I have heard about in quite awhile. When you consider the caliber and the kinds of musicians we are having and also the caliber of the conductor. Most of these orchestras, well for instance, this orchestra has about I would say 2/3's of the members of this orchestra are native Vermonters. Or not native Vermonters, but Vermonters who live here and make a living here. The whole orchestra are professional musicians now. They make their living from music. We have a few people who don't, but in any case they are professional; professional quality. This is something that the symphony has been trying to build over many years. We have to fill out the back of the string sections with people from outside of the state.

Many of our strings come from New England Conservatory in Boston for instance. They come and come up for the weekends when the orchestra is playing in an area. They stay with families in the area. They get to know...they go through every snow storm that we have to drive through and they keep coming back. Some of those people have come from that distance, a four hour drive, for 6 or 7 years now. These are students. There is a great feeling in this orchestra that we are really going somewhere. That we have gotten our act together in the last 8 years and each concert we can sense an improvement even in the playing quality of the orchestra. The musicians are all caught up in this also and feel this gradual rise in where the orchestra is going.

MG So they aren't bothered by the primitive, more primitive playing circumstances than if they were in the New York Philharmonic ??? or something?

MB I don't think so. The hardest part for them really is the financial aspect of it. We don't pay that much when it really comes down to it for what we ask. The amount of time they really spend here. They can spend 3 days here for instance and earn about \$110 or so on average. And these are good musicians we are getting now. It's not the run of the mill kind of thing. I think as I said, they sense the special nature of what we are trying to do here. They respond because the audience responds in such a warm way to them also. When a symphony comes to town once a year wherever in St. Johnsbury for instance, it is really quite an event for the people there. Well one of things is when musicians come up and they go into a town for instance, when we go to St. Johnsbury or we go to Arlington or any of these very small towns once a year, it is quite a big event. Both for the town and for us because a lot of time has been spent putting this concert together by the local volunteers. Just in terms of numbers. When you consider we go to Middlebury and get audiences of 1,700, 1,000 - 1,700, that's is really in essence 10% of the town right there. You try putting that into perspective with what the percentage of people going to New York Philharmonic concerts are for instance. We are really dominating the cultural scene in that town at least for that amount of time there. It is very special and we are very well appreciated and that makes a difference.

MG When you speak of being on the way up, as you did a few moments ago, are you talking in terms of developing audiences and getting more people to the concerts? It's not like the pop world where you want to get a record and be on the charts. You are still going to be the Vermont Symphony Orchestra.

MB You have to realize that 10 years ago that this orchestra I think was playing somewhere between I can't exactly figure it out, 3 - 6 concerts a year annually. Right now we are performing about 22 - 25 full orchestra concerts a year and also about another 70 small services with the ensembles and the youth orchestra. We are getting almost 100 performances now a year. We appear almost 100 times. So it is really a tremendous increase in activity we have had over the last few years and it has been really turbulent. I mean in terms of some of the...of course some people who are used to the old ways can't change in a sense with the orchestra, but almost everybody has been able to. In fact, a lot of those people who maybe were lost along the way a little bit are now coming back to the orchestra. Our audiences have grown tremendously all around, especially during the summer season when we are outdoors for those summer concerts. We have attracted upwards. We have had 3,500 people in Brattleboro for instance for a concert. That was just a massive mob scene. But it was a lot of fun. Our audiences are very well behaved. We never have a problem.

MG Has the orchestra always toured since as early as 30 or 50 years ago?

MB That was the whole point of having this orchestra. It was the first rural symphony. It was a funny thing. They used to have rehearsals at least once a week. Sometimes twice a week. Half the orchestra rehearsed in the north part of the state and the other half rehearsed in the southern part and on the days of the concert they got together and rehearsed with the whole orchestra. You can imagine what it was like driving up and down Rte. 5 in those days. I mean twice a week which they did sometimes to get to these things. I mean they drove for hours. We had postmen, we had mail clerks, we had bank presidents, everybody playing in this bank. I mean in this orchestra. We still have a little bit of that feeling. There is still that hardship that you don't have living in an urban situation. That tends to bind people together in the orchestra.

MG So there still must be a minimal of rehearsal time with people having to come from Boston?

MB A minimum! What's happened now is that with the orchestra being of a higher caliber, the kinds of musicians overall that we are getting right now, our rehearsal time has been able to be cut back to some degree and yet we are still seeing an increase in quality. There is no question that with more rehearsal time, this orchestra

could cleanup all the little details that just aren't there with a couple of quick run throughs in rehearsals. We are going to remain a weekend orchestra for a little while yet. We get together on weekends and we rehearse and then we give the concert. It adds a certain edge. I mean this orchestra is always running scared. We don't know what's going to happen sometimes in performances. But I think the audience senses that excitement also. It is a shame it has to be that way, but we aren't jaded like some of the bigger metropolitan orchestras for instance because we always have that sense of urgency in ??? in just making it through two hours and do it with some kind of style and some kind of dignity.

MG Back to the history. Tell me who began the orchestra and if you can, why he began it?

MB The man who started this orchestra was a remarkable person, Dr. Alan Carter. He moved up here to Middlebury in 1933 I think. And as soon as he got here; he was a professional musician in New York and had a string quartet; he settled in the Woodstock area and his first thing was to get people organized there in Woodstock to have a committee to start this state symphony, this dream of his. To think that he pulled it off is just; and that we lasted this long; is just beyond belief, that we would have existed for this long. He had friends in the music world. He would bring up people like Aral or Surkin or all of his friends who would come and play for the orchestra for free. Just because of his personality and the friendships that he had made while in New York. Not only did he have commitments not only to having an orchestra here, the education of youth in Vermont, he started a thing we have the Green Mountain Fiddlers which is still an ongoing program in Middlebury where young string players are trained on all the string instruments. As a result of having setup that program, some of those people are now playing in the orchestra. We are seeing some of the fruits of those labors 20 years ago. He also had a very strong commitment to contemporary music. He started the Composers Conference which was first in Bennington for many years and then in Johnson. It was actually a part of the Vermont Symphony. This last year because of money reasons it finally had to move to Wellsley. But the real roots of that whole thing were here and started by Carter who was the man who had the commitment to contemporary music and kept the thing going. It is one of the best operations of its kind anywhere. It is really unique in the kinds of things it is doing for young composers in the United States. This orchestra has only had two conductors in its whole history

for 50 years. Carter and there was Guigi's. So there is a very strong feeling of unity in terms of the musical vision that the orchestra has had over the years.

MG Why and when was it made to switch to try to become a professional orchestra what was essentially an amateur orchestra before?

MB Yea I would call it semi-professional orchestra. That is what it was at that point. We had a lot, even in those days, Carter would bring all his buddies up from New York to play in the orchestra and fill out the sections. I think what happened finally about 10 years ago was that we realized to have any kind of continuity or to be building audiences we had to be building also in terms of the quality of the orchestra. And I think Carter had that vision also and was building throughout his time. I think there has been a revival in the symphony orchestra field in the last 15 years and I think we caught a part of that also. The American Symphony Orchestra League which is a league of over 1,500 orchestras in the United States was started in the late '50's early '60's and it built up to the point where federal government and the National Endowment for the Arts; all of the different organizations, the Ford Foundation started giving money to symphony orchestras. We were a little behind on that. I guess we weren't quite in the thick of it, but we also started getting on the band wagon there and the orchestra naturally got better. We found that the audiences can hear the difference in quality. They can hear when an A is not an A or when a horn is not quite making here or there. The beautiful thing about our increase in quality is that we still have so many of those same musicians who were here when perhaps the orchestra wasn't the same quality. These people have grown with the orchestra and they were all brought into this dream or this effort to really make ourselves better. In fact they are our strongest critics. They are their own strongest critics. You know some people have not had the time to commit to keeping up with their instruments, practicing 3 hours a day or whatever it takes to get where we are today. They are no longer with the orchestra. But I think we have done that generally without much hard feeling. As I said before, people are starting to come back to the orchestra and realize that it is a little different. Constantly we got people coming up to us. I remember we were down in Manchester 2 or 3 years ago, a man came up to us and said you know I have been going to hear the Cleveland Orchestra all my life and I came here and I didn't know, they had to drag me to this concert. I had no idea what was going to be happening. It is just amazing to hear this

happening, to hear the Vermont Symphony for what it was. You know, playing the kind of music that it was. We are getting those kind of comments now from people.

MG When was Guigi brought in and why did Carter die? Is that why?

MB I think that it's the Board. Mr. Carter, Dr. Carter was getting old in the mid '70's. I think all organizations have to go through a time where they have to break away from the tradition or the founder. Not only become the vision of that person, but become owned by the other people in the organization. You know a lot of organizations don't make that transition. I think it was to Carter's credit that he saw that it was time for perhaps some new musical direction in the orchestra. He wholeheartedly endorsed Guigi's coming and taking over the conducting of the orchestra. Those were some hard years. There was a lot of bad feeling. I think a lot of misunderstanding. Mr. Carter died a couple of years later, but we survived. That's when it comes down to it, that's the most important thing. I mean we are a collection of individuals, but it is our organization that really makes us strong.

MG Can you say anything to the effect that the need or the importance for having a symphony orchestra in a rural state?

MB I think it's a very expensive and very difficult task having a cultural organization of this size here in this state. We are the largest single arts organization in the state with a budget of somewhere around \$400,000 at this point. I think there are a few things that are unique. First of all, the sense of having something as important as this being owned by the people of the state is really something that is very important. You know when we go to a town, the volunteers aren't only going to hear music, they are hearing to organize the whole event and to bring music into their town. To bring the arts into their town. It becomes...it's a very moving experience actually to see these people; to see the culmination of their work in this orchestra. The thing we are trying to do more than anything is to entice these musicians in the orchestra to come live in Vermont. That's really the mission I think to develop music in state and to have this for the children here in the state especially and to be developing appreciation for great music. You know I think symphony almost more than any other art form perhaps in opera is considered a leadest. I really think that that is something that is not true. I remember some of the

first people that went to this orchestra were farmers. There is no question about it. We used to play down at speedways and different places. It was completely a different mix of people who support this orchestra and give their money to this orchestra. We want to keep that broad mix. We want to keep serving a very broad population. We are going to be doing more pops concerts, especially in the summer for those people who enjoy that sort of thing. But that core of good music is just something that we all feel a commitment to and I think we would be doing rather or not there was a symphony orchestra. We would be organizing in some way to have the music of Beethoven and Bach and the masters who played. It is as important to us as owning a new car or doing anything which some people might think more necessary in their lives.

MG You have a program where you do things in the schools?

MB Yea, we have a few things we do in the schools. One is called musicians in the schools. This is where a small ensemble from the symphony, either a percussion trio or brass trio or whatever goes into the schools and spend a day there giving performances, lecture demonstrations and having a pretty close tie to the students there. Letting them ask questions, coming up touching the instruments, hearing the individual sounds of these instruments. We also have another thing which are youth concerts. We have about a 35-40 piece orchestra we take around the state and they play in schools. It's sort of the second half to this. It is the event. You get 700 - 800 kids in these halls sometimes. It is just the fact of attending a concert and being part of that event that is important for them to experience also. So we try to make the two go hand in hand whenever possible. Something which we ran for 2 years and unfortunately we just didn't have the money to keep it going over the last years, was a summer music school for students in Vermont. It was a great thing. It was a tremendous experience. I am glad we had the 2 good years that we had with that already. We hope to be bringing that back at some point. The Green Mountain Fiddlers as I mentioned before is just fantastic in the sense that it directly feeds into the orchestra and gets these people playing with us. So we are trying to create a whole broad range of educational activities that not only enhance the symphony but enhance audience goes and people who won't only be musicians but participants in the whole thing in the long run.

MG Aside from its greater degree in proficiency and professionalism, now is there some thing you can say to which would characterize the orchestras sound and perhaps

Guigi's sound. How would you describe the esthetic side of the Vermont Symphony?

MB The sound is not something I would focus on when I am thinking about our performances and what I could generally say about the performances. I think that the one thing you can say about the performances; I think it is a thing that most audiences connect with. I think you will rarely find an audience member who is bored at a Vermont Symphony Concert throughout the whole thing. I think that what Guigi's strives for more than anything else, I mean with our limited rehearsal time and our limited budgets and not having enough strings, not having enough this that is that from the beginning to the end of the piece there is an ark of some sort. There is a unity and a continuity within a piece. I think the audiences do sense that. Audiences often say that our performances are fast and that Guigi is a fast conductor. I thought that also. Then I finally realized I think often what happens are that the performances are more compact because there is a vision or musical sense that is carried throughout the pieces especially in the bigger symphonies. I think that is what is impressive about the Vermont Symphony.

MG Great. Well I think I have what I can use for these purposes except I need to record about a minute of just the ambience of the room with all the ???

MB Singing yea