FORREST TOBEE, M.M.'97, D.M.A.'97

March 21, 2000

Mame Warren, interviewer

Warren: This is Mame Warren. Today is the 21st of March, the year 2000. I’m in Alexandria, Virginia, with the famous Forrest Tobey, who has a lot to do with the year 2000. It wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you.

Tobey: It’s all my doing. [Laughter]

Warren: But we’ll get around to that eventually. Let’s start with your affiliation with the Peabody. How did you find out about the Peabody in the first place?

Tobey: Well, I was living, as it happened, in India, a good way to start. I lived in India from 1987 to 1990 with my wife at the time, and I taught at an international school in the foothills of the Himalayas. I taught music. It had a fantastic music program. So I taught music and choir and orchestra and some piano-teaching. It just so happened that the year I got there, the conductor of the Delhi Symphony, which is a kind of national symphony of India, passed away. He was quite elderly.

So they were looking for a music director and I was able to walk right into the conducting position of the Delhi Symphony. Now, that sounds like a great thing, but actually it was a chaotic, crazy Third World orchestra with a combination of Indian national players and some players like from the Western embassies, and it was very chaotic and it wasn’t a particularly good orchestra at all. We did two, three concerts a year, at the most. I didn’t conduct all of them; sometimes they had guest conductors from Europe that would come in. But, nevertheless, I was able to list myself...
as music director for the Delhi Symphony for three years and it gave me a lot of podium time.

So at some point I was really clear that I wanted to study conducting more seriously, and I knew from before I left for India, I’d come across Fred Prausnitz’s book, *Score and Podium* and I thought it was the most brilliant treatise on conducting I’d ever seen. There are a lot of books out there on conducting, but this one was so detailed and professional and erudite and just spoke to me in a really clear way. I had the book with me in India, so when I realized what I wanted to do was study conducting seriously, that basically there was nowhere else I wanted to go. I knew that I wanted to study with Fred Prausnitz, I liked the book so well.

**Warren:** And he was on the faculty at Peabody.

**Tobey:** Yes, he had been on the faculty at Peabody, I guess since maybe 1980 or something like that. I’m not sure when he started, but certainly his book, *Score and Podium*, came out of his experiences as a teacher at Peabody. He was one of the first, if not the first, to establish a conductor’s orchestra within an academic conducting program.

Typically—and this is, again, the reason I wanted to go to Peabody, was that typically in conducting at the advanced level, at the graduate level, you would go and study with a conductor, and if you were lucky, you would do a couple of rehearsals with the orchestra and you’d mark conductors’ scores and maybe you’d get to do one concert. You wouldn’t get all that much experience on the podium.

And what Fred Prausnitz did was he created a situation where the best players at the Peabody were paid a decent wage for undergraduate students to be an orchestra for the conductor, so that twice a week for two and a half hours the conductors will all get together and they would have an orchestra to practice on. And sometimes you were good and sometimes you
were just abysmally awful, but everything was taped, was videotaped, and so you’d have weekly lessons with Fred Prausnitz and he would rip you apart and deconstruct you and try to get you to become better at the art of conducting.

It’s one of the hardest things to learn to do, because if you’re mostly a pianist, then that’s not a problem, you get a piano and you practice it. If you’re a violinist, you get a good violin and you can practice all you want to. If you’re a conductor, how do you practice? How do you learn the art of conducting? So I thought that was a fantastic program, sure made sense to me.

So in 1989 I flew back from India specifically—flew all the way from Delhi to Baltimore just to audition for Peabody. It was kind of a risk, cost me a bunch of money to do that. But in the end I know that I’d been writing these letters to Fred Prausnitz from India, and they were very romantic. I was describing the mountains, you know, and what I was doing, and I think that helped kind of put a bit of an exotic image, I think, about myself.

I’m sure most students at Peabody would have stories to tell about audition week at Peabody as a frightening, overwhelming situation, because you’ve spent your whole life, especially at the graduate level, you’ve spent your whole life trying to be a musician, or even the younger kids that are coming in at eighteen or nineteen, still, they’ve worked really hard at their craft of being musicians and it’s on the line. You’re putting it right out there in front of all these professionals, and it’s like, are you good enough? Are you really good enough to handle it?

I knew that there were about, I don’t know, probably about thirty or forty people auditioning that year, and I knew they were going to choose four. They were open auditions; they weren’t closed. They were just held in Friedberg Hall, and you just showed up, and others could watch you conduct. So I was looking forward to being able to observe other people before I went
on. Well, hell, if I wasn't first, first one up. So I had no opportunity to sort of feel for it. It was just like, first one up.

It was Debussy's La Mer and some Mozart. I remember for the La Mer I felt pretty tight, kind of nervous about it, and I didn't realize that the orchestra had never played the piece before, so I was expecting sort of the sound right away, and it was kind of loose and not very good, because they were just reading it for the first time. And so I didn't feel like it went all that well.

But then I got into the Mozart, and that felt better. I remember there was a point, and Fred pointed it out later on after I had been accepted, that there was a point where I actually left my feet. I sort of—something you're not supposed to do as a conductor, I actually jumped up off the podium, like up and down for a little while. On one level you don't do that professionally, but he said that was a sign of real involvement in the music.

So I went back to India and got a telegram some weeks later that I had been not only accepted, but also given a piano-teaching assistantship, which ultimately would have been the only way for me to do it, because I could not have afforded just to go to Peabody and pay my way. I'd been working in India for three years, for rupes. This was an international school where you went—I went for the experience. I'd always been very attracted to Indian culture and Indian religion, so the experience of living in India was quite appealing to me.

I was offered a number of jobs. In '87, when I went to apply for international teaching, I wrote to eighty schools all over the world, looking for work. I just wanted to live overseas and I had a teaching certificate, high school, teaching music. I taught for a number of years outside of Bellingham, Washington. And I was offered some jobs in Portugal, in Saudi Arabia, Scotland, for good money, especially Saudi Arabia. You make tons of money, because who wants to live there?
But the position in India was the one that was the most appealing, even though it hardly paid anything, but I went.

**Warren:** Food’s great. [Laughter]

**Tobey:** Food was great. Food was great, yes. But literally I worked for rupes, so I was making like twenty dollars a month equivalent.

**Warren:** I’m really interested in your description of audition week. There’s a whole week? Is that just for the conducting?

**Tobey:** No, it’s for everyone coming in at all levels. The school basically shuts down. I’m not sure if all classes are canceled, but they certainly—no, I guess they’re not canceled, but there’s a big curtailment of activity because the whole faculty gets involved in audition week. So it’s very intensive. I’m sure the faculty members that have been there for a long time go, “Oh, my God, here we go, another audition week.” [Laughter]

Yes, so it’s at all levels to graduate level. Everyone from a pianist who’s a senior in high school wanting somehow to break into the piano department, which is the most competitive, I think, to the people coming in as conductors, which is purely a graduate-level situation.

**Warren:** Once you were part of Peabody, did you ever attend audition week and watch people playing various instruments?

**Tobey:** Yes, I was very involved with it because for three years I was the assistant in the piano pedagogy department, a teaching assistant. Basically I went for free tuition to Peabody and had this assistantship. They gave it to me for three years, which is nice. Usually you only get it for two. So during audition week, yes, I was involved in that. I was basically testing, helping to test all the students coming in on their basic piano skills, which for someone who’s only played the
bassoon all their life and they’re only eighteen, they know nothing about the piano. But you have to graduate at the undergraduate level from Peabody with piano proficiency.

Warren: Really? Everybody?

Tobey: Everybody. It doesn’t matter what instrument you play. It’s considered to be just a basic tool for any musician because harmony is laid out for you. You understand chord structure and chord progressions in a way you can’t on any other instrument, with the exception of guitar, I suppose. So it’s common. I think most any decent music school has this. Peabody is a little more rigorous, I think.

Warren: So what did it mean to be a piano—tell me again—piano pedagogy—

Tobey: Piano pedagogy teaching assistant, yes.

Warren: So tell me about that. What did that involve?

Tobey: I worked for Pat Graham, who is the head of that program. I think the reason—usually they don’t give it to anyone who isn’t a piano major, but since I went in, I’m a pianist, and when I went in I taught high school already for seven or eight years, I went into Peabody kind of at the older level of graduate student. I had an interesting life in my twenties that I don’t want to get into particularly. [Laughter] But it took me a while to get serious about music. It really took me till I was about twenty-three or twenty-four just to take my musical career seriously. I was just doing other things before then, kind of figuring out life, I guess. So I had always been kind of on the older edge of the student population.

So because of that, because I was experienced as a teacher, they figured they wanted me to do that because of my teaching experience. So I had two classes that were just my own classes in piano pedagogy, and then I would meet with pairs of students once a week for private lessons.
This is very natural. It wasn’t anything that was difficult.

Warren: I’m just fascinated that everybody, no matter what their normal instrument, has to learn piano.

Tobey: Yes.

Warren: So what was that like for somebody who played the bassoon? Was there any resistance, or they knew that this was part of the program?

Tobey: It would depend on the personality of the student. I can think of some who just—their goal was to, you know, if this was the line over which they had to pass, they wanted to go this far. They wanted to get just enough to get through the darn class and never look at the piano again. And there were others that really saw it as a useful tool and wanted to get good at it, worked hard at it, and became much better. So, like anything, it depended on the personality of the student.

The singers I would tend to push a little more, because for singers it’s more important to have some piano.

Warren: Tell me why.

Tobey: Because they work with pianists a lot. They kind of rely on pianists to accompany them. If they’re going to be in opera, they’re going to be in coaching situations. So, yes, it’s just a very important skill to have.

Warren: You mentioned the personality of the students. That’s something I’d really like to talk about. Who goes to Peabody? What kind of person? Take me to Peabody. Who’s there?

Tobey: Well, certainly it’s an unusual student. I mean, especially at the undergraduate level you’re getting people who are exceptionally gifted in high school on their instrument, and playing classical music, which is in itself a kind of rarified thing, to be at that age and to choose to become
that good at the piano or clarinet or whatever. It’s an unusual person to do that. There’s a certain amount of obsession and self-absorption to reach that level that soon. And just raw talent, just to be born with the talent for music. Not everybody has that. I always like to say that put a piece of paper in front of me and ask me to draw a circle, and it would look like a square. I have no skill in the visual arts whatsoever. So everyone has their particular propensities. I know musicians that can also draw. I find that incredible.

So, yes, the average Peabody student is very obsessed. I think musicians in general, especially as students, tend to be a little indrawn because it’s just so hard. The pressure is very intense, especially at the level of a Peabody Conservatory or a Juilliard or Oberlin or Eastman, whatever, Curtis, because you get into a school at that level because you want to be a professional. You don’t just want to study music and end up as a high school band teacher. There are other schools for that. So you’re getting into it because you want to be a professional. You want to make a living playing, conducting, composing music. And it’s not easy. It’s difficult. It’s a difficult choice to make.

I think that most people don’t make the choice; it just makes you. I reached the point at twenty-three where I realized I’d already gotten a college degree in comparative religion and philosophy and I thought I was going to go into an academic career in religious studies, especially studying Oriental religion.

I was almost on the verge of going to the University of Chicago and studying with [Mircea] Eliade, and I finally just realized, no, I’m a musician, I have to do music. And I just totally changed my life at about twenty-three and went back to school as an undergraduate at twenty-three and started studying music. So one reaches a point where you realize there’s nothing
else you want to do, as impractical as it may be. So I think it’s pretty typical, I think, of students at Peabody.

Warren: That’s a pretty vivid description. The place itself is pretty impressive, too, as well as the people who wander the halls. What was your impression when you first arrived, of the buildings, and as you spent time there—the library, the conservatory, Friedberg Hall.

Tobey: I don’t mean this to be in a negative way, but it’s just an observation, a pressure cooker, because it’s right there, right there in downtown Baltimore, and it’s just that little block.

Everything’s compressed into just these two little buildings. I can’t imagine it before the new building was built. The year I started, in 1990, was the first year or maybe the second year the building was open, the new wing opened. So before that—

Warren: Is that Leakin Hall?

Tobey: That would be—yes, Leakin Hall and this building that was attached to it, which I think was finished in ’90. More practice space, essentially, the library, which was a great resource. But, yes, it’s very intense. But on the positive level, it’s probably exciting because everyone is spurring everyone else on to be better. The musician that I became after my experience there was far more serious and focused and professional than when I came in, because I did my undergraduate at Western Washington University up north of Seattle. It was a good music school, a fine school, good faculty, and I learned a lot there, but there was just something about the level at Peabody that was just that you had to be this much better just to maintain, just to literally not drop out or be dropped out.

Warren: Did you have a sense of the history of the place, that it had been there quite a while?

Tobey: Yes, that was a good feeling, the sense of it being the oldest conservatory. I liked that. I
grew up in New Jersey, right outside of New York, and went out to the West Coast and spent most of my adult life on the West Coast, so coming back to the Eastern seaboard was comfortable for me. So the sense of history there was nice. The neighborhood of Mount Vernon in Baltimore is a great space with the Walters and Center Stage and all that right there. And, of course, the downtown by then had experienced their renaissance, so it was a good place to be.

Warren: Did you have a sense of being part of Johns Hopkins?

Tobey: Only marginally. Only kind of in name. I never took a class up there. I never went there. The undergraduate students are a little more involved. I think they have to take a few classes at Hopkins to get the degree. Yes, so I wouldn't say I was all that much—I became more aware of it really after—this is maybe getting ahead of the story, but after I graduated. I have to talk about the whole electronic music conduct that I had there.

Warren: Please, go right ahead.

Tobey: So just to answer that question, later on in '96–'97, I became involved with the Tech Transfer Office, Peabody's Tech Transfer Office, which is connected to Hopkins' Tech Transfer Office. Through Geoff Wright, I became much more involved in the sense of being a part of Hopkins.

Warren: It's just fine with me that you've zipped ahead a little bit. Go right ahead and talk about electronic music and all that.

Tobey: So I guess the reason that we're talking, the reason that we're having this conversation is that my experience at Peabody that became unique was the fact that I not only attended and survived and completed the program in conducting at Peabody, but I became involved from the very get-go in the electronic music program.
It was only after I got accepted into Peabody and I was still in India and they sent me the packet of information, including the listing of courses, I started to look through it and I said, "Wow, there's all these classes in computer music." And I'd always wanted to learn electronic music. I'd always been attracted to it. I think really from the 1970s, sort of the days of Emerson Lake and Palmer and those sort of artistic rock bands that really used synthesizers really, really well, really, really artistically, I'd always wanted to learn about it. So my very first semester, even as I was studying conducting and taking some of the history classes that one needed to take for the requirements for the degree, as an elective I took the introduction to computer music, and I was hooked from the very beginning. It's something I needed to learn, wanted to learn very much.

Geoff Wright had established a program there that was just really, I think, of great benefit to a motivated student. His philosophy is, "We're going to create the studio, we're going to give you time in there, unsupervised time, just to go in there and make music. Try not to break the computer and make music. Learn the technology." Because then the way you learn is hands on. Like anything, with computers you can't learn about it theoretically.

Geoff goes back to the days, he was telling me a little while ago, Geoff Wright goes back to the days when he would—I suppose this was the '70s, late '70s, when he would write a composition for computer music just in code, and then he would take it up to Hopkins, and Hopkins would process. It might have even been with punchcards. They would process it in some way and then send it off to Stanford [University], and when Stanford would get around to it, they would actually run the program on some computer at two in the morning, and eventually Geoff would get a reel-to-reel tape back and he would actually hear what the piece sounded like. That was how computer music used to be done in the old days, the ancient history.
Warren: Talk about delayed gratification. [Laughter]

Tobey: Ancient history of 1977 or whatever it was. So he’d been involved with computer music all from the get-go, and the 1990s were when I started, were a real kind of seminal time of personal computers. Macintoshs were just getting faster, more affordable, and there was starting to get to be this whole way of communicating with computer software with synthesizers, where things were just beginning to happen in real time, were just beginning to be able to do some things in real time.

So from early on, I became fascinated by the possibility of using gesture. Understanding that as a conductor, there’s an expressiveness to human gesture, that the conductor’s art is partially a way of communicating to musicians, but it’s also a way of showing the music. You’re gesturing with your arms and your facial expression in a way that is showing what the music is, communicating that to the players and, to a certain extent, communicating that to the audience, and communing on a certain level with the mind of the composer.

So at the end of my—I guess my second year there, after I’d taken an introduction class, I took a class. I decided if I was going to do this, I needed to learn computer programming. I have no skill in mathematics whatsoever. I’m very much a right-brain-thinking, more romantic-type thinker, humanities-type person. Nevertheless, I thought, well, I’m not dumb. [Laughter] I could probably learn enough programming to get into this. So I took a year, a whole year of programming, and at the end of that first year—I guess it was just a semester. It was a semester, an introduction.

Warren: You took the programming at Peabody?

Tobey: At Peabody. It was a class in PASCAL, nothing to do with music, just learning the art of
programming. You learn to do little simple programs, do calculations, or whatever. So at the end, for my final project for that, I wrote a little thing called *Mouse Music*, and it wasn't much of a program, but it just sort of showed where my predilections were. It was just a little thing where you move the mouse on the screen and it would scoot along certain little graphic things that I put on the screen, and music would happen as you move the mouse. Just through the speaker, little cracky sounds came out of the back of the speaker. I said this is what I was interested in, getting the computer to understand my gestures and respond musically. I don’t know where it came from, but it’s something I focused in on early on.

Then I guess a year later, we’re probably into ’93 now, I was reading in a journal about an instrument that had been invented by Don Buchla, called the Lightning, and I knew Buchla’s name. He became very famous in the 1960s because he invented these modular analog synthesizers. Everyone knows about the Moog synthesizer. It’s a famous—Moog was kind of a better businessman, he was able to market his thing better. But, if anything, Don Buchla was a little bit more on the creative edge, and he collaborated with Morton Subotnick in the 1960s on a couple of really important recordings that showed the possibility for using electronic synthesizers in a very creative, artistic way.

So anyway, so Buchla was always on the cutting edge of inventing these eccentric instruments, and he invented this thing called the Lightning, which even now, seven years after he’s invented it, it’s still a one-of-a-kind thing. It’s an amazing instrument. I knew it had something to do with being able to track gestures in space, that you could hold these wands in your hands that were very similar to what a conductor would do with holding a conductor’s baton, and that you could communicate to the computer just through gesture in space, without
any physical connection other than just where your hand is in space. It was so similar to what a conductor does in communicating with an orchestra, that it seemed like a natural thing.

So I remember reading that article and then going to Geoff Wright, asking if he’d be willing to drop fifteen hundred bucks to buy this instrument so we could explore it. I remember feeling very exhilarated as I was going to ask this question of him. There was a sense of rightness about it, like this is what I’m supposed to be doing. And he said, “It sounds great. Let’s get it.”

So shortly after that, the instrument showed up and I did some experimenting with it, but within a few weeks I’d gone out to a conference in San Jose, one of the international computer music conferences, and, as it happens, Don Buchla was performing there with his instrument. So there was a nice sort of synchronicity. So I was able to meet him and talk about his instrument and see some of the things that were being done with it.

I also met a man named Guy Garnett, who had been starting to look at using the Buchla Lightning as a conductor’s baton. This is all kind of happening at once. I also had come across an article called *Conducting with Midi [?] Orchestra*, again was addressing these issues. These people were really at the forefront of interactive computer music saying, “Can we interact with a computer as a conductor?” So all these things were coming down.

As I looked at what these people were doing, I thought, well, these people are all trying to learn how to work with the computer as a responsive instrument to a conductor, but they didn’t feel like they knew much about conducting. They knew sort of some intellectual things about it, but they hadn’t really had the training in it. So I saw this as kind of a niche, you might say, or an avenue for exploration.
I needed a dissertation topic. I had to write a dissertation for Peabody. So it just became this whole experience for me. I wasn’t satisfied—there was basically Guy Garnett out in California, in Berkeley, and there was a group in Italy, in Pisa, and there was a group in Japan at the Aseda [phonetic] University, a couple of groups that were experimenting with conductor tracking, and they had written some papers on it.

So I researched everything that they had done and then proceeded to write my own program for conductor following. I just took a whole other class in C, took all the advanced-level classes in computer music that Peabody had to offer, and started to learn to write. I got good enough at programming to write my own program, so I basically wrote a program that allowed me to conduct a computer, I taught it how kind of I conduct so that it understood my own particular gestures, and started performing with it. I mean, I just was kind of crazy. I just started to do stuff with it, kind of fearlessly. [Laughter] Or foolishly. I’m not sure which. And people began to notice it, began to notice what I was doing.

Geoff Wright was real supportive through all of this. He thought it was a cool project and was really helpful. Finally got through the academic part of it, actually writing the dissertation so they could give me the degree, and that happened. When I started in 1990, they said, “Oh, the doctorate takes seven years,” and I said, “Oh, no way. I’m going to get finished sooner.” It took seven years. Took seven years. [Laughter]

Then as I worked with the Lightning, I ended up evolving this composition that was called *Five Elements Embracing*, and it was very much not in the style of normal computer music. Much computer music tends to be very mathematically oriented. There’s a tendency towards people who write computer music to think in terms of algorithms and fractal equations and various things
that have a very intellectual orientation as well as an aesthetic one. I wasn't so interested in that, I guess because I'm not particularly mathematical.

So I wrote a piece that was really influenced by my time in India. I had very much a world music influence. I wanted it to be accessible to a listener. I wanted it to have a certain dynamic that would be expressive in a kind of simple way. I went about it thinking, I'm going to write some simple music for the computer and the Lightning that would communicate to an audience and not be threatening and not be distancing. And I guess it worked, because this piece, *Five Elements*, has led to all these things. I've played it a whole bunch of times and it always gets a good response.

One performance I did at the Maryland Science Center, which led to—I think Dr. [William] Brody at the time was in the audience, and he was really intrigued by that performance and asked if we could collaborate on something that next fall. I guess this would have been fall of '88 now, or '98. So this whole really fun thing happened when he gave a lecture at the—what was it called? The Tech—it was called Tech Night. It was like the businesses all over the Mid-Atlantic associated with high technology had this big conference and dinner, so the heads of corporations of all the high-tech companies in the entire Virginia, Delaware, Maryland area came for this big conference, and Dr. Brody was the keynote speaker.

Rather than just give a talk, we did this whole Lightning shtick, that he had Lightning in his hands, and yet I had a pair in mine at the side of the stage, and we did this whole interactive thing with a performance on the Lightning. We had a few gags worked in, and he did some playing and I did some playing. It worked really well. It was a really fun collaboration and an
honor that he would—and he singled out the work as being a really important thing that was going on at Hopkins. So that was very nice.

Warren: We’re talking about Dr. William Brody?

Tobey: Yes, the president of Hopkins.

Warren: But he wasn’t president then.

Tobey: Whenever his first year was. Maybe my timing is off. It would have been ’98.


Tobey: I did, and then I corrected myself.

Warren: Okay. ’98. I’m with you now.

Tobey: Right. ’98.

Warren: Just want to be sure I’ve got the right face up there.

Tobey: Right.

Warren: That’s very cool.

Tobey: So that was ’98. That was right around the time that Geoff Wright was interested in technology transfer, saying, “How can we take some of the stuff coming out of the computer music department and do what is happening in the medical fields and the engineering fields at Hopkins?” Those are natural things, where the research comes out of the programs, gets turned into sellable products. It happens, of course, a lot in the medical field.

So we explored this for a year. I can’t honestly say it met our expectations. Nevertheless, Hopkins did hire me for a year, full-time position, to see if we could look at some conducting program that I had made and see if it could become a commercial product. We were jokingly
calling it Bernstein in a Box, seeing if we could get an investment banker or—what’s the phrase? I can’t remember.

**Warren:** I know what you mean.

**Tobey:** Right.

**Warren:** The guys with the money who don’t really understand what they’re doing, they just throw at the money at it.

**Tobey:** Throw the money and see what happens. We were hoping that we could get someone to give us enough money to collaborate with the Hopkins Applied Physics Lab. We had all this set up in the infrastructure where we would actually invent another different hardware interface, the conductor’s baton. We would work with Peabody’s conducting students to come up with a whole conductor training module that we could sell to universities and on another level sell to the homes, so that someone could buy this thing and, in the home, conduct Beethoven and do their own versions of it and actually have a kind of interactive—someone called it ultra high-level Kareoke, you know, where you’re interacting with the computer, but you’re not just singing *Feelings* or something. [Laughter] You’re actually doing serious classical music with it.

So it didn’t pan out. Despite our best efforts, we were not able to get an investor interested in it at the time. But it is still floating. That is why I mentioned I still have this relationship with the Peabody. It’s like it’s on the list. Geoff’s always talking about it, and you never know, somebody may come through with it at some point.

So I did that for the year. That would have been ’98 to ’99, I guess. Yes. And then—it’s hard to remember. ’97 to ’98? Yes, ’97 to ’98. So ’97 was the performance with Brody. Then
that ended after the year. Hopkins couldn’t fund it past the year. There was some disappointment and a little bit of resentment, frankly, but nobody’s fault. It just sort of didn’t happen, you know.

So at that point I moved down here to Alexandria and I started to focus on my other thing that I do with the—that I’ve been focusing on with the Lightning and the conductor following, which is that I’ve been establishing an orchestra down here in Alexandria, called the 21st Century Ensemble. I direct a program here at the Unitarian Church, which has been a great opportunity for me. It’s been a way to sort of avoid or not do academic music. I would prefer, even though one gets a doctorate in order to teach college, usually, I find it’s my personality to try to become more of a freelancer and not so much tied into an academic position.

So over the last two years, I’ve been working at establishing this orchestra here that is a chamber orchestra that does standard repertoire, we play regular classical music, but there’s at least one piece in every concert that it uses the computer. So the way we’re marketing the orchestra is that the computer is a performing member. The computer literally is in the orchestra like an oboe player, and I use the Buchla Lightning as a conductor’s baton, and the orchestra follows my conducting and the computer follows my conducting, and they interact. The issues of timing and dynamics are all controlled and coordinated.

That’s been happening slowly. We’ve gotten some good reviews in the *Washington Post* and we’ve just sent out for Virginia State Arts Commission grant and NEA grant to support the orchestra, and we’re hoping we can get money for it.

*Warren:* And what kind of music are you playing?

*Tobey:* Well, the standard music we’re playing is just regular orchestra repertoire, Mozart and Brahms. So far the new music with the computer has been my own compositions.
Warren: And is the computer playing in that?

Tobey: No, they don’t. Not at all.

Warren: I’m trying to picture this.

Tobey: No, not at all. What we’re also trying to do, though, is establish a new repertoire. So, so far it’s been largely my own pieces that I’ve composed for it, but, for example, we have a competition now. We’re offering a two-thousand-dollar prize for someone to write for the ensemble, and in May we’re fortunate enough to be doing a “Meet the Composers” concert with Mort Subotnick, who is kind of one of the godfathers of interactive computer music. He’s been doing this kind of music since the ’60s and is very, very well known in his field. So his works are premiered in Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, and we’re premiering his next work right here in town. So it’s been a nice honor for us. So he’ll be on hand, and actually he and I are collaborating on using the Lightning and interacting with this new composition. So that’s very exciting and helps to put us on the map somewhat.

Warren: You’ve skipped over a very small event in your life.

Tobey: Yes.

Warren: You just danced right over it.

Tobey: So I guess that’s the next thing. So in the midst of all this, when the work with technology transfer ended in—

Warren: Since we’re at this point, let’s turn it over.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Tobey: I didn’t think I could blather so much.

Warren: You’re doing just great.
Tobey: Okay. So the work with the Tech Transfer Office ended in the summer of ’98. That sounds right. For a year I was just down here in Alexandria and working and running a piano studio and working at the church and getting the ensemble going and gigging on the side and being a freelance musician.

Then in the spring of ’99, a whole year later, I get this call from Geoff Wright, saying, “These people that are putting together the Times Square 2000 Millennium celebration found out about what you’re doing with the Lightning and they want to see it.” And I said, “Okay. Whatever.”

And so we met in—I guess it would have been March or April of ’99, and I did what I call my dog and pony show. I’ve presented my work now to so many corporate investors, trying to do this thing, I’ve done this presentation probably thirty, forty times, so I just did my normal presentation. I got up there and showed my thing and played my virtual orchestra and talked about some things that would be possible for Times Square, and really didn’t, frankly, expect that much to come from it, because I figured it was such a huge event, there were so many things going on with that, that it didn’t seem likely at the time that it would have not gotten derailed at some point along the way.

But there was just a real connection that was made. Geoff Puckett, who was the creative director of the whole show, the person who was envisioning the entire twenty-four-hour event, was real captivated by what I had done. And another man named John Kilgore, who was a Broadway sound guy, he was responsible for all the sound, all the music that was going to be piped into the speakers for twenty-four hours, put the wands in his hand and immediately got it.

There’s a thing at the beginning of my piece where you’re playing the rumbas and you’re hitting
bells along the side and you’re playing flutes, and there’s this whole kind of virtual space that
you’re performing in. I’ve never seen anyone pick up the wand and immediately get it, and he was
just immediately making music with it.

So they just loved the idea. And Geoff Wright is a very good negotiator, understands how
to talk to businessmen, because ultimately it was like the two creative guys were into it, but there
was a third guy who was a New York businessman and was ultimately the executive director of
the event, who was also there, and he needed to be a little bit more convinced. I think Geoff knew
how to speak the language well and was able to assure him that this could actually work and that
there wasn’t anyone doing exactly what we were doing in this field. They couldn’t get someone in
New York to do it. And it actually helped this guy, Peter Kohlman, that I was born in Brooklyn
and raised outside New York. This was a New York event, and when I told him that, I could
almost see him shift. It’s like, “Oh, so you’re actually a New Yorker.” I said, “Yeah. I left at
eighteen, never lived there again, but, yeah, I grew up in New York. I’m from there. You know,
it’s coming home.”

So by early July, contracts were signed. Well, actually they were—I don’t want to get into
that. Verbal contracts were made. [Laughter] The signed document, frankly, took until
December, and that’s a whole other story.

Warren: We don’t need to get into that.

Tobey: No, you can strike that. That’s a detail that doesn’t need to be mentioned, because, after
all, it did happen. And so, yes, I don’t think it’s necessary to go into all the details and the
background of what happened with Times Square. It was a huge, huge deal. What it was coming
out of it was not what we expected going into it just because there were so many people involved
in the event, so many people wanted to be a part of it. It was really high exposure. I wasn’t able
to do what I wanted to do with it artistically. I had expectations going into it that didn’t happen,
largely because I had to become a part of this twenty-four-hour sound track, and I was the only
live musician in the whole event. Everything else was on tape, with dancers. There were dancers
and pageantry and kind of this Disney—I don’t know if you saw any of the excerpts from that
night, but it was all highly choreographed in kind of a loose way, with these images that every
hour as they celebrated the different slice of the Earth’s pie, they would do different dances.

But I was the only live musician. The problem with that is that the entire show had to be
timed to the second, so it isn’t like I could be how a musician would normally be, which is you get
up and when you’re ready, you start playing, and when you’re done, you’re finished. And if it’s
off by five seconds or thirty seconds or a minute here on the side, it doesn’t matter. But for this
show, it had to be timed to the second, so that the first performance I did, which was coordinated
with the raising of the ball above Times Square at seven in the morning, had to be done at 6:59
and zero seconds.

So therefore, everything had to be locked tape, and I had to play in coordination with a
background tape, which was something that’s very difficult to do. It restricted the music, and I
ended up writing music that didn’t work for them, because I didn’t realize they were looking for
very commercial music. What they told me in August was, “We want something really creative
and different and exciting.” And I think what they didn’t say, they wanted something really
creative as long as it was sort of like Lion King, you know, as long as it was Broadway creative.

So I wrote some stuff that was pretty out there, and eventually they said, “Actually, we
don’t want this music.” So we had to do this huge switch, and we brought in Charles [Byungkyu]
Kim, who was experienced in doing kind of film score writing, and had a little bit more of a better idea of commercial music. So Charles very quickly wrote a couple of really nice pieces. That was more what they were looking for.

**Warren:** Who is Charles Kim?

**Tobey:** Charles Kim was a composer and electronic musician person at Peabody, also was involved in the Tech Transfer Office. He was just on hand. So we did this complete flip. The music totally changed and the style of performance totally changed. So it was an interesting collaboration. We just had to kind of go with it. It was collaborative. I didn’t have the usual kind of artistic freedom that I’m used to. Nevertheless, we got up there and performed three times in the middle of Times Square, in cold, with a sound system, with a monitoring system that got rained on and therefore didn’t work, and all these technical issues.

Don Buchla, the inventor of the Lightning, had to reinvent the Lightning totally to be able to cut through the interference, the signal interference in Times Square, so he invested a whole bunch of time, volunteer time, as it happened, to reinvent the instrument. And we pulled it off, and it was very gratifying, you know.

We were hoping for more pre-press, because what I do is unusual. People don’t get it at first. People don’t understand that when they hear the music coming through their ears and they see the gestures, that it isn’t taped music, that it’s actually happening in real time, and if I stop, the music stops. It needs explanation. Whenever I perform live, I always do five or six minutes of demonstrations so that people understand what’s going on. Without that, it went over the head of most people. The press from all over the world were there, and they carried it. It was broadcast nationally, but it didn’t make the impact we had hoped for, only because no one understood it.
Nevertheless, for my own work in the future, I’ve got videotape of ABC News carrying this live from Times Square, and these really good comments from Peter Jennings and the whole thing that I did, that I can use as a kind of calling card that no one else has it on a resumé.

Warren: That’s quite a thing, quite a claim to fame.

Tobey: And that’s where I am now. I’m right in the process of really trying to get funding for the orchestra and then using this experience as a springboard. So when this book comes out, it’s hard to say where things will be. Probably in a different space, I hope.

Warren: Now that you’re at this place in your career, how do you look back and see Peabody’s part in where you are now and what you’re doing?

Tobey: Peabody’s part was very significant and it was largely, for me, their willingness to allow me to explore these unique ideas that I had. They were just very, very supportive.

When I went into the conducting program and in my third year, for example, Fred Prausnitz saw me going in this direction and said, “Okay, we’re going to let you not be in the conducting class per se the third year, so that you can also pursue the electronics.” So he was very flexible and supportive.

As I was getting into this work, Steve Baxter, who was academic dean, I think, at that time—and who’s the woman? I forget her name, African-American woman who was part of the administration then.

Warren: Don’t know.

Tobey: I forget her name now. She’s not there anymore. Anyway, they were both very supportive. They gave me a third year of assistantship, for example. You’re only supposed to get two. I got a whole other year of free tuition and work in order to continue it.
Geoff Wright, again, was just supportive from the get-go in terms of space, resources, supporting, buying gear when I needed it. So essentially Peabody let me pursue these kind of crazy ideas I had and really got behind it.

Warren: I was amazed when you said that the average person takes seven years to get a doctorate. Do many people do that? Do many people get doctorates from Peabody? Seven years is a long time to invest.

Tobey: Yes. Well, they do. Yes, they do. Of course, it's seven years because during part of that time you're off doing your life. It's not seven years of nonstop study. Usually it's two or three years and then you're doing gigs and you're working and you're trying to finish the dissertation, trying to get work and that kind of thing.

Warren: I see. Okay.

Tobey: It's more just getting through the whole process of orals and exams. Very intensive stuff. It just takes that long. I guess it wouldn't if you were manifestly focused on it and had nothing else going in your life, if you had some sugar daddy supporting you all the way or something.

[Laughter]

Warren: Probably not too many people fit into that category.

Tobey: Exactly.

Warren: So you mentioned Charles Kim. One thing, what little I know about him is that he went to the Whiting School of Engineering first?

Tobey: I believe that's true, yes. Right.

Warren: And that, just when I read that and when I was reading about you, I was reading about him, and that connection really intrigued me. But you're saying you never had any interaction with
Homewood particularly.

**Tobey:** Yes. Charles is a brilliant man because he does have that ability that some people have to be both mathematically oriented and engineering oriented and musically oriented. I’m not afraid of technology, but I’m not any sort of mathematical in the way that some people are. And Peabody has that. The recording arts program has the same thing. Anyone who goes through their recording arts program has to study electrical engineering and circuits and physics and has to get to the level of calculus and differential equations in order to come, and be able to be as good on their instrument as anyone else at Peabody.

**Warren:** That’s a tall order.

**Tobey:** They’re remarkable people. A friend of mine, Sean Finn, is that way, who’s now teaching in the department, just has that skill at mathematics and yet he’s brilliant as a musician as well. So there are folks like that.

**Warren:** So it’s a wide mix of people at Peabody.

**Tobey:** Yes, absolutely.

**Warren:** That’s coming through loud and clear. So you have been amazingly succinct. What haven’t we talked about that we ought to?

**Tobey:** I don’t know.

**Warren:** How about social life? Is there much social life at Peabody? What goes on socially?

**Tobey:** I suppose there is more at the undergraduate level. When you come in as a doctoral student at the age of—what was I then? Thirty-five. You’re more apt to not be so much associated with Peabody as a social situation, so I really didn’t pay attention much. I made social contacts elsewhere.
Warren: Yes, probably a different perspective.

Tobey: Yes.

Warren: Again, is there anything we haven’t talked about that we ought to?

Tobey: I think I’ve touched based with most of it, really. Yes. Are there any other perspectives that you’re looking for?

Warren: Well, we’ve run through my list. You’ve done a terrific job.

Tobey: Thank you.

Warren: I thank you.

[End of interview]