

**Michael Tilson Thomas talks with Frank J. Oteri  
@ The New World Symphony, Miami Beach FL**

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Transcribed by Julia Lu**

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## 1. American Music and Welcoming in the Vernacular

FRANK J. OTERI: You have done so much on so many different levels as a conductor, as a composer, as somebody who is really exemplary for introducing new music to audiences, and for introducing younger audiences to music in general. But I thought it would be good to begin with talking about what general traits being an American can bring to being a conductor in America.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Being an American musician means being adventurous. The whole path of American music has been so much about the recognition of stylistic diversity, and the recognition of the importance of music which was from one of the vernacular traditions. You know, music which at one time was considered primitive, uncultivated, savage, whatever it may have been... Dangerous above all... And recognizing that in this music, lots was being said. Perhaps some of the most important, cutting edge things were being said. Perhaps we're not unique in this sense, I mean composers in Russia in the course of the 19th century, late 19th century, were coming to grips more and more with their own national music in the same way that in the 20th century America really has and in the same way, we've learned to "prettify" the music far less and to accept it as Ives, a great pioneer always understood, to accept the music much more closely to its origins with all of its strange rhythmic incongruities and de-tunings and all the rest.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you feel that being an American makes you more open to understanding our music and more interested in performing the work of contemporary American composers?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well, of course when I initially burst onto the American scene, it had a lot to do with contemporary music, particularly music by European composers because as a late teenager and in my early 20s I was playing a lot of music by Berio, Stockhausen, and Boulez. But I also played some of the more extreme Americans like Cage, Feldman, and some Carter at that point.

FRANK J. OTERI: And Lukas Foss...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Yeah, that's kind of what I was known for doing. I was that kid on the West Coast who played *Kontakte*.

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughter]

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: or *Points on the Curve to Find...* or whatever it was. But from the very beginning, I had a very deep involvement with Ives and his whole circle: Ruggles, Cowell, Varèse, that whole side of it... And that was a feature of the programming that I did. In American music, there's always been that curious balance between absolutely uninhibited, wildly experimental abstract work and on the other hand, a sort of more folk-oriented work, which definitely had very strong political implications for the composers who wrote this kind of music. You know, they were returning to the language of the people and trying to use musical language, particularly as Copland did to create a musical language in which all Americans would feel that they had a stake.

FRANK J. OTERI: And of course many of our greatest composers balanced both. Ives combined folk influences and experimentation, and so did Copland and Cowell...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: And the idealization of music from vernacular traditions is an important thing. Perhaps it's occurred too much. It concerns me a little bit that we live in society now in which the term "genius" or "master" is thrown around over all categories. And actually, in the books he

wrote about music in the 30s and 40sm Copland was quite observant about this to say "Yes, of course jazz is an amazing thing and folk music is an amazing thing and all of these art forms have profound things to say, in their way." But those musics do not address the larger kind of architecture in time that classical music does, whatever each one of us knows that classical music must mean. Aaron would say: "Well, when you hear a great pop tune you really love hearing a great pop tune and it gives the irresistible urging to hear another pop tune and another pop tune." But it doesn't have that sense of completion just within that tune, within that work, this kind of closed whole, the kind of big interior psychological landscape that the big songwriters, you know people like Mahler, Schubert, the realms to which they are a capable of taking song composition is somehow another dimension... Now, of course, a piece like "Sophisticated Lady" is absolutely as perfect as any of Schubert's great songs. But of course, Schubert was able to use these songs as a means of moving into these much larger forms which are not just about the emotion of that particular song, but which are somehow about the emotions of all songs and the way in a larger sense particular harmonies, particular moves in harmony and melody are related to you know the whole idea of what we imagine life is. And so Aaron was saying that the great folk songs, the great blues tunes, the great jazz tunes, are primarily about this one mood. And what classical music does best and must always do more, is to show this kind of transformation of moods, to show a very wide psychological voyage. And I think that's something that we as classical musicians have underestimated. We've been too deprecating.

## 2. Orchestras as Repertory Companies

FRANK J. OTERI: You've said in a number of interviews over the years that in order to create music with an orchestra you have to transmogrify yourself. An orchestra plays standard repertoire originating from several different countries. An orchestra also plays contemporary music. Mahler one week, Debussy another week, and these are totally different worlds of sound...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Conductors are performers. Being a conductor is kind of a hybrid profession because most fundamentally, it is being someone who is a coach, a trainer, an editor, a director... And at the same time, you are of course a performer, but it's very important that you understand that your role as a performer is to get the best performance from those wonderful colleagues that you have the chance to work with. So most of your work really is done in the rehearsal process. But a large symphony orchestra basically is a repertory company and it has a very enormous repertoire and it is important for the performers to be able to know how to shift focus so that they instantly become part of the sound world that a particular repertoire demands. And the conductor's job is very much to say: "OK, last week, we played this Mozart-Schubert experience. That was a certain type of sound, a certain type of articulation, a certain conception of sustaining... Now we're into this Stravinsky-Ligeti concert." That's a whole different series of assumptions. Just the very fundamental making of the sound, let alone all of the shaping of the phrases, the quality of the breaths, of the accents, of everything else that must go into that.

FRANK J. OTERI: And of course nowadays, we have a double-edged problem because we simultaneously live in an era of information overload and in a society where classical music is marginalized. There are all these other stimuli that the musicians are getting separate and apart from when they're working within the orchestra. How much time do you need to work with them and how much time do you actually have to work with them given limited rehearsal schedules? And, how much time does any conductor have to work with an orchestra, given the intense touring schedules of many conductors today?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well, some pieces of course require much more rehearsal because they are unknown, and they involve very specific, complicated problems. But it is amazing what the great orchestras can accomplish in the amount of rehearsal time that they have if the conductor is really *en forme* and if he has done his work properly with the librarians, the concertmasters, and the section leaders, long before the week those rehearsals take place. That is a very essentially part of it, thinking ahead and seeing the whole shape of the season well before it happens. But what I want to get to is that little extra thing that performers do, that kind of ectoplasmic inhabiting of the space that is suggested by the notation on the paper that returns people to hopefully the moment of inspiration when someone thought of those wonderful ideas and was convinced enough about them to go through the fearful wrestling match that involves taking an idea that's someplace up here in the world of poetry and getting it down onto the paper. The performers have to look at that code on the paper and make it come alive again. And to really, at the moment they play it, be that music. At the moment they play it, it has to be just as much, just as urgently about them, who they are, the people who are playing it, as about Beethoven or Debussy or John Adams or Charles Wuorinen. That is the quality that I believe is most essential. Of course, all the attention to balances, tuning, order, you know all the very hyper-technical issues which must be very satisfactorily dealt with, those must happen, but if beyond that there isn't that extra drive that causes the whole thing to be animated, as I say whether it's Beethoven or Stockhausen, they both have to have that. And that is what I feel is one of my greatest strengths as a musician. As a performer I'm sure it comes a lot from my grandparents' background in the theater. That ability in a repertory situation to say "Right." Ok, this week, it's all Hungarian music, you know Liszt, Bartók, and

Ligeti, and then next week we're suddenly moving into this whole Strauss world and to be able to immediately from the most moment of the rehearsal, in what I'm asking for and even in somehow amazingly just in what I'm showing in my arms and in my eyes, to make that really different. That is an essential part for the audience to truly get the message.

FRANK J. OTERI: You've worked with a number of American orchestras and you've also worked with the London Symphony Orchestra on an ongoing basis. How do you choose repertoire specific to those orchestras? Would you say a particular orchestra is much better at doing Hungarian stuff, so let's do more Hungarians there... I'm being totally hypothetical here. But, for arguments sake, could Buffalo be better at doing Hungarians, and San Francisco be better at doing Romanians?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: [laughter]

FRANK J. OTERI: You know, how do you determine or does that even become an issue?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: I think the choice has more to do with music that I love that obsesses me and that I feel would be very nice to do in that particular city because it represents a process of making the music come alive with the musicians that I like very, very much and also bringing that to the audiences which I like very much. It's all about that kind of partnership. If we are able to get inside the music and inhabit it convincingly enough, it will cause everyone to find each other in this new psychological space. And that's most exciting. The other night here in Miami, I did a piece of Scelsi's. A composer I've been performing lots more of these years. And that was fascinating because it was an audience consisting I'm sure of three people who had ever heard a piece by Scelsi before.

FRANK J. OTERI: Was it one of those one-note pieces...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well, it's not just one note. It's very microtonal, trance music. And they went nuts. They absolutely loved it.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's great.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: So that was very exciting that something as completely unknown should become something that they thought: "Oh, I've got to get to know this better; I've got to understand what this man was witnessing in his music." But from this standpoint I would say that it's essential for me now that I feel that the music does have something of this sort to say. Earlier in my life, I performed a lot of music. Some of it because I felt it was a demonstration, or a representation of certain intellectual concepts that were very exciting and important. But over the years, I feel that what remains in the end is whether the pieces have some kind of urgent and convincing emotional message in sound. I can't do pieces I only admire technically. I have to feel some direct contact with them. And the emotions that are expressed can of course sometimes be very perplexing, disturbing, violent, whatever they may be. But if I can be convinced and then through the work that we do together, the orchestra can really be convinced of the big sweep of that communication that the piece suggests, then the audience will get it and it will be a good experience for all of us.

### 3. Advocating American Repertoire

FRANK J. OTERI: When you're thinking of playing music with an orchestra, how much do you feel toward American repertoire, specifically the work of living composers?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well, a lot. The first year I started in San Francisco, there was an American work on every program and there's been a lot of music by living composers and gradually that was part of the process of getting the audience really to trust me. They would know that the kind of pieces I was going to program would be pieces they would find either fascinating or provoking, challenging, perhaps infuriating, but not boring. I was not going to present a piece in which they would think: "Oh, right, uh-huh, OK what's next." They would have to take notice of these pieces that would cause them to talk about them. They would go to a symphony concert and for the next several weeks would say: "I heard the damndest thing at that concert, it was so loud, it was so odd, it was so exhilarating, it was so mystical, it was so..." But something about it, even if they didn't like it, would make them feel they should share that with some of the people who hadn't been there.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now you said it began that way, but it's no longer the case. You don't always do an American work.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: No, I think it's more mixed up now. And of course, over these last years the Mavericks Festivals have come in so that there's a specific time period devoted to an exploration of just that kind of music. But still as compared to many, many orchestras in the world, I think you find a lot more new music and living composers on our programs than many other places.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's fantastic in fact. I wonder, judging from the audiences when you go to these concerts, do you notice a different audience for the American Mavericks series than for the regular season?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Yes, it's a younger, more adventurous audience. I remember a program we did where we did a Beethoven Mass and John Adams's *Century Rolls* and there a quite a large audience which appeared for the Beethoven and then split before John's piece. But there were an equally large number of people who didn't come for the Beethoven and came specifically to hear *Century Rolls*. Now of course, both of these kinds of behavior annoy and disturb me in different ways because I love all that music and it's not even a question that these musics both have a lot of very wonderful, powerful things to say. In some ways, I actually think it's more difficult in the long-term to get younger audience members who are fascinated with contemporary music because of the sort of musical language, the kind of hooks, the kinds of bells and whistles which are in that music many of which they also can hear in contemporary pop music, or film music or some other kind of musical experience in their lives. It can be more difficult to introduce these younger members of the audience to something as incredible as Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* or *Winterreise* or something like this where there are no sound gimmicks in it. It's just the pure subtle sophistication of harmony and melody basically. It really takes time to get them to slow down enough to hear this. It's partially because they, in their lives, have not had the kind of experience with music that people of former generations did. In earlier times, so many people sang much more. You know as a kid you'd go to some kind of religious training and or summer camp or whatever it was and you'd learn to sing a lot of songs. And these songs were in major keys and minor keys and had various notes associated with those particular harmonies. Melodic moves. Various words that you'd say: "Oh right, this is a sad move, this is sardonic move, this is an irreverent move." Different sorts of perception of what the notes themselves were saying. And therefore when you heard these same moves--you knew from songs you sang--occur in a Haydn string

quartet or a Brahms overture, or a Mahler symphony or whatever, you had a very clear idea of what the composer was saying, even though it was being said in the process of a much bigger musical design. Today I think it's a problem that many young people have not had those kinds of experiences either in school or in any of their social or religious organizations. They just don't know those things. They sort of know them from whatever music they happen to have heard. But without the experience of actually singing or playing these things yourself, you don't have the same kind of involvement or understanding of what these musical moves mean. And that is a very big problem in addressing the future of music.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well it's interesting in terms of audience development because the classic model for years has been to sneak in a contemporary piece of music. You know, you'd have a contemporary piece hidden in with a famous symphony and a concerto performed by a famous soloist. But now, if you really want to bring in a younger audience, you might be better off sneaking in the older repertoire. The selling point for orchestras really can be the new piece of music. And then, through showing up for the new piece of music, they'll hear the older piece of music and get enriched by that as well.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: It's possible. Repertory suggests to me that there are many different audiences and that even as in the theater, it's possible to put on a very important season which includes plays by Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Genet, Neil Simon, as well as a group of young avant-garde playwrights. All of that would be perfectly fine in the course of a theatrical season. And I think such things could also take place in the symphonic world.

#### 4. Difference in the Reception of Music and Art

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting taking it out of the music ghetto because in so many other worlds, in the art world, there's a healthier dialogue between old and new. There are museums where you can see the great work of the past all over the world, and there are very lively gallery scenes in many communities where you can see the most cutting edge things. And in the publishing world, you can always buy the classic novels and classic poetry, but also the newest thing. But with our music culture, we lump old masterpieces and "oh we're scared of that" new music together in a ghetto, and then there's pop music which doesn't connect to at all.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well, musical civilization is certainly under attack partially because of the economics and commercialism associated with it. I have a terrible fear that ultimately, all musical moves will be gobbled up by the voracious maw of backbeat, and that's all that will be left of music. *DUMM, da-DUMM kuta DUMM...* Which will be a very sad thing. But you know in the contemporary art world, you pose a very interesting conundrum. All sorts of people collect very contemporary art, yet when it comes to the music which is analogous to that sort of art, they are not interested, or perhaps even hostile.

FRANK J. OTERI: Um-hmm...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Why is that? Is it because, fine if you buy a very avant-garde picture of some sort, first of all, you have a sense that it's worth something and it will become worth more. So that a lot of people have this oh wow, a lot must be good. Surely it must also partially be because the picture's there and you can look at it, but you can also decide not to look at it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well you know that's interesting.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: But music is totally enveloping. That's one of the things music does. It surrounds you, it comes right through all of your sound receptors into your neurons. It's the closest thing to actual experience, actual emotional experience of some sort, which perhaps a lot of people don't want. And it's a very curious thing you know that I can sometimes be dining with people who are interested in music and interested in art and they will be talking about their Rauschenbergs and Twomblys, and whoever, whoever. And then when they talk about their musical likes, they'll say they really like Andrea Bocelli...

FRANK J. OTERI: [chuckling]

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: ...and they like Kenny G...

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh no!

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: They mention these things. And I'm somewhat taken aback because I don't know how I could tell them that the visual equivalent of this sort of music that they like would be something like portraits of Elvis painted on velvet.

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughter]

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: There's a tremendous disparity and discontinuity between where they are in their art taste and where they are in their musical taste and they don't perhaps realize that it's time for them to get past this.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you've now made me think about this in another way. Years ago, I got into a huge argument with somebody at a music management firm when there was the big Mondrian exhibition at MoMA in New York City. There were lines around the block to see Mondrian. And I said, why not produce a concert at Carnegie Hall of the complete music of Varèse. You'd have a line around the block, too. And she went off. "Music doesn't work that way." Because you have to sit there and listen to it; whereas, with art you can look at it and walk away. But, if you're buying a painting, you have to live with that painting in your home for the rest of your life. But a piece of music that's distasteful on first listening will probably only last about 25 minutes. If you've got a painting that is the visual equivalent of something very disturbing in music and you have it in your home--and I never thought about this before--you're looking at it for the rest of your life. But of course the more you look at something, the more you can explore the exciting things that are in there that you might not see initially. And I imagine if somebody were to hear a piece of music by Varèse fifteen times that was off-putting the first time, by the fifteenth time I think most people would find it beautiful.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Yes, but, you know, a painting by Mondrian, particularly a middle or late work of Mondrian, is a kind of design and it is there and you can look at it and appreciate it, but as I say, you can look away from it. And even if you are living with it, it is an element of the picture of the entire room. It's more like sound design or something. It's there. It's a kind of an environmental element. Now, on the other hand, if you were living in a room with a picture, a more representational picture that showed, some very emotionally bared side of human nature, like for example *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, I think a lot of people, as much as they admire that picture would find it tough to be in the room with that. And there are tough pictures lots of great artists.

FRANK J. OTERI: certainly Lucien Freud...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: ...Francis Bacon... Great stuff, but even as much as I admire his work, I'm not sure I could exist with it all the time. Something in that maybe tells us something about what goes on with music. Yes, *Arcana*, *Hyperprism*, whatever Varèse pieces, are these amazing statements, but they are very much in your face. They really kind of get into your nerve fiber and wrench it apart. That's the ecstatic and violent nature of what they do. That's not necessarily the experience that people want to live with at home. Moreover, it doesn't do what certain aspects of pop music do because pop music does the same thing over and over and over again so that you know each song is kind of a particular place. But, of course, with pop music as indeed with a lot of contemporary music, I mean there's the issue also of how loud it is.

FRANK J. OTERI: True.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Extreme volume in music very often disguises a lack of actually important content. So a lot of music is listened to at such a high volume level you're just aware of hearing these big assaults of sound. If suddenly you heard that without the amplification, in most cases, you'd say, oh, but it's just one chord, not even one chord, one sort-of detuned chord. There's no real melody; there's no real harmony; there's no real anything and if someone's not screaming at the top of their voice "BACK OFF AND GET AGAINST THE WALL" whatever and you say "back off and get against the wall" Wait a minute what are we really listening to? And, although many of my friends in the art world disagree with this, I say that the same thing is really true in contemporary art with scale.

We go to exhibitions and we see these huge room-sized metal rectangles with one corner slightly shaved down and we're supposed to stand in awe of this thing because it's the size of a freight train. Where if we saw that same piece you know on top of the desk we'd say "Uh, oh, yeah, uh-huh, fine, onward."

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: You know that's the equivalent of hearing somebody playing an out of tune g-minor chord at such a level that it would threaten to shatter the features of the presidents of Mount Rushmore.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you have people who are weaned on music that's like this. And you bring them into the concert hall and you've certainly done a better job at bringing these folks into the concert than almost anybody. How does the experience translate? You did a concert with the members of the Grateful Dead at one point, which was great in terms of outreach. But, ultimately, what is the lure? How do you bring in this audience and what do you do to keep them there once they've shown up for a concert?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: The mixture of music is provoking, I mean, it's highly contrasted, but there's always at least one piece on the program which is an uncontested masterpiece. That is to say that the piece pays off big in all departments in its intellectual and emotional power. And in it's witnessing to a very gripping personal vision. The presence of that piece and then the presence of the other pieces on the program--if all of them, as I say animated by really convincing performances--takes people on a kind of journey even within that concert and now people are accustomed to that idea that the experience will be of that kind of level of intensity and that's what they seem to like.

FRANK J. OTERI: And have you noticed, I mean it's hard to look out from the stage when you're conducting, but have you noticed people coming to more standard programs who are younger people...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: The audience is getting younger and more people are there. We have a 2700-seat house, we do four programs a week. I think the average attendance is you know 93% or 94%.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's fantastic.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: It's really very gratifying. But some people will say you just did these programs. Well, yes, the programs are important and I'm proud of the programs, but mostly I'm proud of the way the San Francisco Symphony plays these programs. Because those programs, if not played with that kind of conviction, would never be able to attract the audience's attention in the way that they do.

## 5. American Music and Adventurous Programming Abroad

FRANK J. OTERI: So let's take this abroad for a bit.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: You've conducted in London for years and years. What is your experience in conducting new music, specifically American repertoire abroad in terms of audience reactions, musicians' reactions?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: It's changed over the years. When I first was conducting as guest conductor in Europe 25 years ago, I would propose doing American pieces and grudgingly it would be accepted from time to time. Now nearly I'm always asked if I will do an American piece. So the attitude of the public, particularly in countries like Holland, and in France, a few places in Germany, not all, the attitude has changed. There's much more interest in that. London of course is a special case because it has so much music taking place. And, at the drop of a hat, the BBC will decide to do a complete retrospective of Henry Cowell, or Fibich...

FRANK J. OTERI: And these concerts are well attended too! I remember going to a Proms concert and there was a piece by a contemporary composer named John Casken--which was fantastic--and it was a full, enthusiastic audience. And it was a varied audience too. There was even a guy with a mohawk walking around, which you'd almost never see here, and he seemed to be really enjoying it.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well, the Proms is a very special phenomenon. They've established a concert series around the idea of diversity and surprise and that there will be a lot of new music done is an essential part of it and that there are young people who come to those concerts knowing that they're going to hear something entirely different to what they've ever heard is a major point of the series. And that's what gives it so much excitement. During the actual concert year, there's nothing quite equivalent to that and you really have to balance novelty with works of the past. But I think also, it's always an economic question, too. When concert tickets are as expensive as they are, it means that only people of a certain economic milieu can buy them. And also people are inclined to say: "Oh well, I really only want to hear something that I like." If the price of the tickets can be brought down to the point that these things can become more spontaneous, it was like, then "Why the hell not?"

FRANK J. OTERI: I totally agree.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: It's just 10 pounds. I'll go hear that. Then you have a much greater chance of opening peoples' worlds to new and unusual music.

## 6. Education and Nurturing Musical Values

FRANK J. OTERI: Now in terms of hearing music for the first time and how you learn to think something is beautiful and something else is ugly and off-putting, and not pleasant to listen to. In the book that you did with Edward Seckerson, *Viva Voce*, you talked about your father banging your toy dog Toodles on the piano and making tone clusters and how much you enjoyed that as a child. When I was in Budapest last year for a conference, I experienced something similar when I saw these little girls at the conservatory playing these wild pedagogical pieces by Kurtag. They were great. They were filled with tone clusters and they were at times quite dissonant. They were wacky, really raucous pieces and these girls were banging their fists on the piano and were loving it. We don't necessarily have it in us genetically to hear a major triad as beautiful and that a tone cluster is ugly. These are things that we learn through cultural training. And, you know, when you went to Bali, people didn't know Copland or Beethoven. So they could rate one over the other. It was all new.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Right.

FRANK J. OTERI: So then the question becomes, how do we introduce people to music and what repertoire do we introduce them to from a younger age to guarantee a real wide-ranging appreciation for music?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: I think music needs to be presented in a way so that kids can grasp songs, dances, simple music that's associated with some particular defining moment in human experience. I think Bartók was very wise when he wrote the *Mikrokosmos* pieces and he had pieces which were called things like "Jeering Song" or "Sad Dance," very direct titles that kids could relate to. It's kind of scary sometimes, I've seen this a lot in Asia. Children are given music lessons, very intensively I might add and involving great technical expertise sometimes, but you can tell that they have been told only to play happy pleasant music. They're encouraged to only exhibit those kinds of music because if "Oh my God," if you have a child showing angry emotion, what kind of reflection would that be on the family. They have to get past that. It's really important for kids to discover that music can be a refuge for them, but that it also can be in the music a way of getting rid of a lot of hostility and also of doing things that are fun like crashing on the piano in those Kurtag pieces you described. So, I think it is a mixture of those things. I mean, something always puzzled me. I don't understand why the first note that everyone learns is C. I know it's because of the C Major scale, but why start with the C Major scale. Why not just start with A? Fine, that's the A Aeolian scale, sort of a minor sounding scale, but so what? I mean if kids hear that scale, there's no reason that they can't start with that? The letters of the notes are in the proper order and it makes total sense. And it's also all white notes. It's right there, easy to play. I feel it would be really good to get past this cultural bias that we have that somehow major is the way things are always supposed work out. Major is just one of the many flavors of music.

FRANK J. OTERI: And, certainly in other cultures, like India, there are thousands of ragas which prove that there are so many different possible ways to organize a group of pitches in a scale. But to get back to education and nurturing musical values, we're down here in Miami Beach where you do this tremendous work with the New World Symphony. How did that whole thing begin? And why Miami?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: It happened because of Ted Arison, a remarkable patron who had read some interviews in which I had been talking about the need for there to be a national orchestra like this, really an academy like this. And I met with him, and we discussed this idea of creation of the academy and it was really just a very general idea in my own mind at that point. He said great, let's do it and we

immediately started up and now over the 12 or 13 years we've been in existence, we've been trying to refine this more and more to deal with the specific issues that are there for young performers, to give them real facility in playing baroque music, classical music, very contemporary music, and all of the different nationalities and stylistic eras of music so they really have a sense of the personality of that music and they as performers can really be leaders in having a sense of appropriateness, that conviction in presenting each kind of music, both as performers and also as spokespersons for it.

FRANK J. OTERI: And as these people leave this program and go on to major orchestras around the country, they'll be the model for orchestral musicians of the future.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: It's very exciting to see what is happening. I tend to be very low key about this because our profession has a certain kind of tough guy aspect about some of it. Yeah, yeah, well, you know everybody comes along and of course most people are very enthusiastic about doing what they do when they're in their 20s or 30s. The real challenge in music is going the distance and still being as devoted and enthusiastic you know after 20 or 30 or 40 years in the profession, but yet there are people who do make that happen. And what we're trying to do here is to focus on those issues from the very beginning. You know what is it about music that is so wonderful? Where can you find the sense of fulfillment in doing something really at the highest level of excellence and accept the idea that for your entire life you will need to be in training continuously, studying continuously, in order to expand you horizons, so it becomes ever new and ever fresh? That is your greatest responsibility. That's a lot of what we're dedicated to creating here.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, the repertoire that you choose to do here is so interesting and diverse. To return to what you were saying earlier in this conversation, a lot of the great masterpieces don't need as many rehearsals as a new piece of music because the players in the orchestras have played the great masterpieces under other conductors for years and are familiar with the pieces. But here you're dealing with a level playing field. All the baggage is gone, but so are all of the past experiences. And perhaps you'd want to rehearse a Brahms symphony as much as you'd rehearse a piece like *Connotations* by Aaron Copland.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Yes, there is a lot to do in all the repertoire to establish the underlying principles of the sort of moves that need to be made by performers in that repertoire. But, it's amazing how quick the learning curve can be for something like that. Even in professional orchestras, like I'm thinking back to years ago when I started doing the Ives Symphonies in San Francisco. It was a very intricate process of rehearsing things, very intensive, took a lot of time, mini-sectional rehearsals, everything... Whatever we needed to do to really make it happen. But just this last year at the Mavericks Festival, we did Ives Four. There was very little rehearsal for it. But the orchestra had played it before, and moreover although they hadn't played it in many, many years, they, in the intervening time had done a number of other Ives pieces so that the style of it was clear in their collective consciousness.

FRANK J. OTERI: So something like the Ives Fourth had become standard repertoire.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Almost in that they knew what the sound should be, and what the rhythmic feel should be, and we were able to just work it out together very, very quickly. And that same thing can happen in a wide variety of pieces, providing that at some point in time, you've had the experience of working out what the basic assumptions are. And that is a very important experience for conductors and orchestra members alike to have, this experience where they together kind of reach a common understanding of what is going to happen. And I believe very much that it is very much a

collaborative process. That the members of the orchestra have as much to contribute to it as the conductor because they have a life experience of this music which is quite relevant and important.

## 7. Composing

FRANK J. OTERI: I wanted to talk a bit about your work as a composer and how that informs your conducting and how your conducting informs your composition. Now you're obviously so super busy, it's very hard to find time to compose music. But I really enjoy your *Whitman Songs* a lot and I really enjoy *Agnegram*. I believe that being a composer has informed a lot of the decisions you've made about repertoire. A lot of your advocacy comes from being someone who understands this music from the other side of the composer...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: I hope so, I mean of course my whole history as a composer was really as a child, that's what I mostly did. I improvised and played my own music. Then as I got involved with the whole avant-garde world, I tried to create music which was in that sort of musical language. I did create some musical pieces in that sort of musical language, but that really is not me. My music is a continuation of the whole Yiddishkite-American Broadway intelligentsia sort of way of thinking about things. And finally, I've been able to get back to a place in my life that it's clear to me what my music is about. So therefore, in these last years, I've been doing more pieces again and I'm now in the process of changing my life quite radically. I'm not going to work in the summer. I'm not going to perform in the summer anymore and see if I can get myself into a schedule of every year having a block of time to turn out one or two new pieces.

FRANK J. OTERI: Great.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: So, that's a commitment on my part, but all the way along, I would say that as I was looking at pieces by new composers, or by dead composer or premiers, whatever, that certainly I had a sense of looking at the piece and seeing a certain design in the piece and seeing the decisions that were happening and being very aware of focusing the performance in such a way as to make those issues clear and in some cases, perhaps avoid some of the pitfalls that were inherent in the piece. Many composers with whom I've worked with the most happily, Steve Reich, Steve Mackey, just to name two, David Del Tredici, I mean I keep thinking of others, were composers with whom I talked about these pieces as they were being created. And I wouldn't say that I unduly influenced the creation of those pieces, but I was enthusiastic. I was a kind of spirited cheerleader, saying: "That's wonderful; that's a great idea..." or something like that. Certainly if they asked questions about if something would be better in this meter or that meter or you know which way would you like to cope with these problems and I was of course very happy to be a part of the process, but I think just that I was interested in the pieces even before they came into existence was an important thing 'cuz gosh knows, I know my own writing. You get to this point and you're not sure which way to turn or how economically or extravagant the solution should be. There are always so many possibilities and it can help very much to have the ear and the advice of a colleague whose instincts you trust.

FRANK J. OTERI: And certainly as a composer, you've done things that have grown out of your experience as a performer. You know what works with an audience. And I thought it was wonderful how you were saying at the end of *Viva Voce* that we often forget that music is entertainment, that it is show business in part. And what I thought was so wonderful, to get to a detail in *Agnegram*, the whole piece is based on this notion that I love to call "pitchtalk," where you have the letters of pitches on the staff spell out something, so in a way, it's very formulaic and very structured and very mathematical, but it's a very audience friendly piece!

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: It's a romp basically.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what kind of projects are you working on? Are you writing that trombone concerto you mentioned?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: That will happen, but I think this summer I'm going to be completing a cycle of songs I'm writing for Renée Fleming and then working on also a kind of keyboard and winds and percussion thing that has strangely come into existence. [laughter] Sometimes these things have a way of just appearing. I can't control it.

FRANK J. OTERI: After the hearing the Whitman cycle, I'm very curious to hear you do an even larger scale work, like an opera. Is that something that you might consider at some point?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: I would consider writing an opera, but my God, I'd have to really take, that's sort of like a taking a year or two off to write something like that. I have certain ideas about how a piece like that would need to look. There are many things about opera I love and many things about it that make me very impassionate and I need to try to figure out a way to solve some of those things. But, singable music, even if it's written for instruments, is a very big part of my way of thinking. As a pianist, I can get all the help over the keyboard at producing very virtuoso, abstract gestures. But finally what's interesting for me is what sticks with you. I think there is a gestural sense in music whether it's connected with the melody or harmony or whatever it is, rhythm certainly, that can stick with you. In the old days, Olly Knussen and I used to amuse each other by singing late Stravinsky pieces. You know, you could sing through the *Huxley Variations* or *The Flood*. Because as abstract as they are, they have a very clear profile of what the large gesture of the piece is. That's very important to me for music to have that or for my own music to have the possibility of being able to sing it, by which I mean singing or making your way through the musical gestures of the piece from beginning to end is very important. And I give my music this sort of trial by bathtub. I mean, I sing the music in the bathtub or the shower or as I'm walking and if I can sing it, if I can follow its contours straight through, then I know that I'm on the track that I need to be. And if I come to a point that I say "ah, er, um, what happens there, how do I," if I can't find it anywhere in my voice, or in my ability to snap my fingers, or whatever, then I think "uhhh, well, that's gotta be revisited; that's not quite right."

FRANK J. OTERI: This is something that I think the best music of anytime has, the ability to be singable and to be memorable, to flow naturally. Somebody may hear it and maybe somebody who isn't very adept musically can't hum it back precisely, but there's some kind of reminiscence of it.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Right, something sticks in you.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: For me it's very important what remains after the music has stopped. When the silence returns, something happened to the listener because of hearing that music. And there is some residue of the music somewhere in them. In their hearts or in their minds and certainly in their memories is a very good place for it to be. I still remember hearing the Berg Violin Concerto for the first time and even from that first performance, I of course remembered that ländler tune that is the end of the first and the last movement. And the haunted mood of it. Much of the rest of the piece was of course beyond my ability to appreciate or take in, but nonetheless, those few little moments that even that first time I can think "Ahh, wow" that's beautiful brought me back to that piece and made me recognize that the composer was saying something which was enormously relevant...

FRANK J. OTERI: Well yeah, the Berg Violin Concerto, a perfect example of a piece that operates on so many levels. I remember the first time I heard the Berg Violin Concerto and the opening violin melody stuck in my head. That was a 12-tone row and voilà and there it was, but it was singable. And, it's very difficult to be able to succeed on that level, to write something that has that intellectual rigor, but at the same time is so emotional. I remember it and you remember it because it's heart wrenching.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Sure, now of course you're talking somebody who is to me one of the great masters of music of all time. In what I'm doing, I'm trying to write this music that is a kind of reflection of the way life feels to me and the way I'm mostly going to do it is by writing something which on the surface doesn't seem to be that big a deal, doesn't seem to be that serious, but perhaps inside of its ingenuousness has a bit more to say than people would at first suspect. That's the kind of piece I'm trying to create.

## 8. Discovering New Repertoire

FRANK J. OTERI: So, how do you get turned onto new repertoire?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Oh, very often I hear it, you know, people send stuff to me. Other performers tell me about some new composer, some newly discovered something. It's a serious commitment as I was saying, because I am a performer. I can make things work. I can make nearly anything work. As a boy, I was on the fringes of the émigré circle in Los Angeles. I used to be taken sometimes when I was a very small lad to some amazing parties and poetry readings and things like this done by some extraordinary people. And I remember hearing Charles Laughton on one occasion read the telephone book. That was one of his great stunts. He would just open the telephone book and read peoples' names and as he read them, he could make you laugh or cry or any other possible emotion. And he just did that as an example of what, as a total performer-actor-technician, he could do. And I realize that to an extent, I can also do that. I can take a piece of music and I can find something in it that will make it work, that will make it go over the footlights. But I am respectful of that ability and also really kind of looking at the music to say, is there something here that is worth bring out, that is essential for me to do this.

FRANK J. OTERI: You're made tons of recordings over the years, some of which are among my favorite recordings. There are a number of recordings that I still have on LP that haven't even made it to CD yet that really should. I hope someone would reissue that complete Carl Ruggles set on Columbia Masterworks...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: I would want to do it over again.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, do it over again, but all that music needs to be out there because it was a definitive set. And this is a major composer of our last century.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: But that's a perfect example. That music I've lived with for so long now that its expressive intention is much clearer to me than it was at that time. That's what happens with life. [laughter]

FRANK J. OTERI: Are there any other projects, any other composers that you feel you want to do more with or that you haven't done work with that you would like to work with?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Steve Mackey, Berio, Busoni, Kurtag, Aaron Kernis, Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach, Rimsky-Korsakov...

FRANK J. OTERI: Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach is sort of an odd person in that list!

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Oh, he's always been one of my big favorites. Very important composer...

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, we talked about Cowell in passing, both of us mentioned him from time to time. Here's a guy who wrote a tremendous body of symphonies that nobody does. Most of them haven't even been recorded. A good many of them have never had performances in most of the major cities. It seems like a body of repertoire that's just waiting for somebody to unleash it.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Yes, I mean Cowell is a very interesting case. There's so much music by Cowell. That's part of the problem. People can't get a grip on it because there's so much of it. It's hard to take in all of it and see what it really is. And it includes of course the inspired little piano miniatures and expansions of those pieces. Very often they exist also orchestrated. But then there are also sprawling experimental pieces from the early years. And some of those pieces are just that. They're experiments. I actually read through quite a number of his symphonic works sometimes down here with the New World Symphony. And you understand their importance as a moment in 20th century music, but the ongoing search for pieces which hold up is a wider issue and there are still some pieces that are just in manuscript which need to be known. But a few years ago for example, Wayne Shirley and I worked on reconstructing a piece by Cowell called *Atlantis*, a ballet with voices that he had done quite early which has some outrageously irreverent things in it. But it is a kind of curiosity. I kind of like some of the music that Cowell did in his later years which was a combination of some very folksy, homespun American things with some of this still out there.

FRANK J. OTERI: Like the Hymn and Fuguing Tunes. Then there's his Icelandic Symphony which is very accessible. There's a piece for chorus and orchestra that I really like called *if He Please*.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: I don't know that work.

FRANK J. OTERI: It features tone clusters done with voices a decade before Penderecki. But the thing with a lot of these pieces is that they only exist on recordings of varying quality. Some were done by some little known orchestra somewhere. They sound like they were just read through once. They're not ideal performances. And the only way we can hear this music is through these people who were just sort of sight reading these scores and there's nobody who has lived with his music.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well that is a provocative issue because learning to play these pieces and to do the best thing is part of it. You can hear archival recordings of the first performance of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra* or other pieces and you can tell with the musicians playing this that they don't yet understand the music. And the whole gestural panache with which it needs to be played is not yet there. And that has a lot to do with the effect of the music. And it's also very true in early performances of Janacek. It took people a long while to get past the notation to where they could most effectively play that music. So that is an issue. But there are composers like that who wrote so much music. I mean Cowell, Krenek is another composer who wrote so much music in so many different styles. It's very difficult to get a grasp of which are the most essential pieces of different periods of his life. But there certainly is some excellent music there.

FRANK J. OTERI: Hovhaness as well. And Lou Harrison has written a great deal of music in a variety of styles.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Absolutely.

FRANK J. OTERI: You hear a piece like the Fourth Symphony. And then you go back to a piece like Symphony on G and after awhile, the longer you live with both of those pieces, you realize it's from the same person. But initially it's another whole universe.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Correct.

FRANK J. OTERI: And it would be great for somebody to do, on that level, a complete cycle of Lou Harrison. But I'm just tossing out ideas here...



## 9. Listening Habits

FRANK J. OTERI: In all your time traveling, conducting various orchestras and composing, do you have time to listen to music? Do you spend time listening to recordings? I know that you've said that you believe that a recording should be listened to five times and then self-destruct.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Well I think like everybody, there are a few CDs which become a part of one's life. And for me, most of those are chamber music, early music, some vocal music. Because since everyday I'm rehearsing a lot of music, and I also study a lot of music so that there are so many musical ideas that it's not my idea of relaxation to go home and listen to music.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you certainly wouldn't listen to a piece that you're working on...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: No, I wouldn't do that. I might late in the evening listen to something like the Tallis *Lamentations of Jeremiah* or the Josquin *Pange Lingua*, or something from the *Libre Vermel*, or some recordings of Balinese bamboo gamelan or something like that. Something that's completely outside of what I've done. Of course I have certain heroes in American pop music, like Joni Mitchell and Laura Nyro particularly, whose humanity still means a great, great deal to me.

FRANK J. OTERI: I know you were once an avid record collector and would bring records to Leonard Bernstein of various rock bands, and soul groups...

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Folkloric things too. Lot of things from other musical cultures. We enjoyed listening to those things.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you listen to any recent rock bands at all? Do you keep up with that world at all?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: When I'm driving I do. I tend to just sort of sweep through the different FM rock and roll channels when I'm in the car. I don't tend to listen to it at home so much. And I listen to some of the hip-hop channels. There are some groups, incredible groups that are so much more interesting, that are really kind of out there that I have this problem of trying to find "What are those groups?" Because of course especially in San Francisco there are amazing radio stations playing VERY obscure, wonderful stuff. It's hard to say that between 4:17 and 4:23, there was something on-- what was it? But, it's exciting, it's, it's still fun and interesting. I think, with respect to pop music, it's a little sad that elements of melody and harmony have kind of declined. You know maybe sometime in the 70s, maybe into the early 80s it sort of peaked, and that now that this music is about all kinds of invention, but the invention seems to be more in other areas. You know very, very complex production. The whole rap thing. It will be interesting to see in the course of time whether that music actually will sustain, because the great old pop tunes became standards because a lot people could do them. They didn't have to be done in just that arrangement.

FRANK J. OTERI: Does anybody do cover versions of other people's raps?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Undoubtedly, there are a few isolated examples, but also does it become something that people sing at home? Or are they ever going to get back to that point... There are certain songs that mean so much to me, that are so perfect and some of those are by people like Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, Carole King, a lot of the rhythm and blues songwriters.



## 10. Crossover

FRANK J. OTERI: So to tie all these loose ends sort of together, that dreaded word crossover. You certainly made what I think is one of the greatest musical theater recordings when you did Gershwin's pair of musicals *Of Thee I Sing* and *Let 'em Eat Cake*.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: Thank you.

FRANK J. OTERI: Is there room in the world of the orchestra to open the door to other styles and how far do you go before it no longer is that style and no longer is the orchestra?

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: I don't know that that's really an important issue. I mean, obviously, the question of putting orchestra and classical music together with pop music in some ways has been done forever. Mostly done badly. Because it's just been kind of two different styles dumped on top of one another and not really a very discrete or interesting sense of selecting just those sounds which would be appropriate or necessary. But there are some composers who have explored that territory. John Adams of course... Steve Mackey has recently been VERY effective at selecting most unusually chosen sounds from the classical and pop sides of things and deftly putting them juxtaposed one to another. And I think work like that suggests that there's a lot more still there.

FRANK J. OTERI: And certainly it becomes just like the orchestra gets to be Hungarian for a week. You would take on, you know it's, it's once again, a set of vernaculars that you then impose upon a repertory.

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: But the staying power of it for me comes back to the central question. After that music is finished playing, is there something about it that has stuck with you enough that will still be with you a week a later. A year later? A decade later? That is the true measure of the importance and excellence of the music we love.