

A Discussion in 12 Parts with Milton Babbitt at the Juilliard School of Music

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Videotaped and Transcribed by Amanda MacBlane

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1. Conservatories, New Music, and that term "Classical Music"

FRANK J. OTERI: You've taught here at Juilliard for many, many years...

MILTON BABBITT: I've been here a relatively short time compared with my stay at Princeton.

FRANK J. OTERI: But I figured since we're at Juilliard, I thought I'd begin talking about Juilliard. You've said a number of times over the years that we're forced to use the expression "classical music" to describe the music that we're creating now, which really doesn't fit and really kind of hurts our purpose in a way because it's an inaccurate term.

MILTON BABBITT: You know why. I don't have to tell you, I don't have to tell anyone why it's an inaccurate term; it's an historical term. It describes a certain chronological period at the end of the eighteenth century and so it defines something. Well, after that it becomes normative; it becomes a kind of music; it becomes qualitative, quantitative, and it's misleading. I rather like Wiley Hitchcock's term. It sounds elitist, so I won't offer it to you yet. I'll tell you my anecdote about this. Many, many years ago at the Smithsonian in September, there was a huge, huge, huge congregation on the subject of American music. We were there for three or four days (I've forgotten now) and the Smithsonian decided to recognize every kind of music. There was ethnic music; there was non-ethnic music; there was music from every little corner of every little forest in North Dakota and I'm not exaggerating. Little groups who had their own kind of music, which they invented on their own kinds of instruments were all there. And something they called classical music was assigned to a tiny corner. The three people involved were a historian, a music critic, and I was the composer. And then there were people in the audience and Wiley Hitchcock was one of those, I tell you, I mentioned him for a reason. So we were there, talking and immediately the historian, who was Richard Crawford from Michigan said "Look, I can't stand this being classical, we have to do something with the word. It just offends me as an historian." I said, "Fine. It offends me for other reasons. What are we going to use?" So then the discussion began—you can imagine what the discussion consisted of. It consisted of, first of all, the assumption that we were calling ourselves serious musicians. But then other musicians would say, "We're just as serious as you are." And of course, I don't take a composer seriously just because he takes himself seriously, but there was nothing I could do about this, so we can't call it serious. And then there people that would call it concert music, which is what the Performance Rights Societies were calling it and then saying, "Well, we can't call it a concert because every little rock group now gives concerts and they get 50,000 people and we're lucky to get 50. So who are we to use the term concert?" So it went on like that quite literally and tiresomely for a long time, then finally one of Hitchcock's terms, I said, "I don't mind one of Hitchcock's terms, which is cultivated music." Well, you can imagine what that induced: the scream of elitism and we just gave up. But the best example of that is a magazine that likes to consider itself (I hope I'm not offending everybody), likes to call itself sophisticated, *The New Yorker*, just did an issue on music, did you see it?

FRANK J. OTERI: I heard about it; I still need to get a copy.

MILTON BABBITT: It was called the music issue of *The New Yorker*, which takes itself very seriously. It had not even the lip service of a sentence to what we call our music, be it classical, be it serious, be it elitist. Not a word. It was rock and it was hip-hop and it was—not a word! So we're apparently not music anymore. The music issue of *The New Yorker*, which never would've done that with literature or with poetry, had not a single reference to not even serious contemporary music, but any, what I would call, serious music.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, the expression "classical music" does seem to make sense here at Juilliard. After all, the performers who study here in the music department are primarily concerned with older music.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah. That's certainly true.

FRANK J. OTERI: So-called classical music in the historical sense.

MILTON BABBITT: No doubt about it. They are so concerned with it almost to the exclusion of anything else and so are their teachers.

FRANK J. OTERI: So then the question becomes, how does a composer of living music...

MILTON BABBITT: If it's still alive!

FRANK J. OTERI: ...and of music of a progressive nature, exist in this environment here?

MILTON BABBITT: You know, that's a very good question and if we went into it in detail, it would be an unpleasant answer. The truth of the matter is that just today, a young composer came in with his piece; he's a student of mine, he's a new student, he's here for the first year and he found that when he wrote a new piece and tried to show it to some of his colleagues, who were already friends because they live in the dormitory together, they all said, "Look we're not interested in doing this music. We're just not interested." They said that. "We're not interested. It's too difficult but we're just not interested in this kind of music." And he got that response from everyone who happened to play and the instrument happened to be the harp, so you can imagine. He wrote it very knowingly. He knows the instrument; there was no question of incompetence of any kind. And that is typical because most of these players here are not here to study music; they're here to pursue careers. They're not interested in music; they're interested in careers in music. And therefore, how do they find a career in music. Well, first of all, most of their teachers (there are the exceptions, obviously, the members of the Juilliard Quartet who teach people of that kind, are not going to behave this way), but most of the teachers will say, "Look dear, I mean, you just have to be realistic about this. When you go out in the world, if you learn one of these new modern pieces maybe you'll have the chance to play it once. But if you learn all of the Paganini *Etudes*, you'll be able to play them on every recital and you'll be able to play them for the rest of your life." The only thing that's not quite true about that anymore is that nobody has very much of a career anymore of that type. Where do you have recitals in New York?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, that's the irony. You know, once upon a time, they would say, "Well, if you want to sell tickets to the concert, the general public knows the name Mozart, they might not know the name Andrew Imbrie."

MILTON BABBITT: How did you come up with Andrew?

FRANK J. OTERI: I tossed the name out of my head.

MILTON BABBITT: Andrew is an old student of mine and a friend of mine.

FRANK J. OTERI: They may not know his music, but chances are a lot of the general public may not be aware of the music of Mozart anymore.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, they saw the movie probably and they thought that Salieri was a terrible guy when he really was a very distinguished musician.

FRANK J. OTERI: Maybe Mozart's a bad example; maybe I should say Brahms.

MILTON BABBITT: No, no, of course, look, you're absolutely right. Look, I hate to play the old man, but why shouldn't I play the old man since I am the old man? When I came to New York as someone from the Deep South, the very Deep South—you can't get much deeper—there was every night five or six recitals from which to choose. Where are the solo piano recitals, the solo vocal recitals, the solo violin recitals? I decided that I had to hear all of this music that I hadn't had a chance to hear in Mississippi and I became a critic, God forgive me, for no money at all, for just the tickets. No, I say "God forgive me" because it was totally cynical: I wanted the tickets to the concerts. And sometimes I'd go to two or three concerts a night and review two or three concerts a night and review two or three concerts every night; and not dishonestly! You'd say I went only to the first half of the concert and so forth, for a magazine you've never even heard of called *A Musical Leader* or *Musical America*, it was something that came out of Chicago and that was the covering of New York concerts. I mean, one could hear the whole repertory in a year. Now, where do you go?

FRANK J. OTERI: Actually, you're becoming a critic to go to concerts is very laudable because there are a lot of critics that hate going to concerts!

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, of course, but I was young. I was all of nineteen years old and I hadn't had the opportunity to hear most of this music. I played a lot of it, but I really hadn't had the chance to hear it except on records and there weren't that many records in my day. Of course, one can say that it's because of recordings that there are no concerts anymore, but that's not true because people aren't buying the records anymore either. I think we have to face the fact that a paper that likes to think of itself as the national paper (I prefer not to mention it), said that, "Serious music is now a subculture." I quote.

FRANK J. OTERI: I remember that.

MILTON BABBITT: You remember that? A subculture! Well, I would think of it more as a super-culture, but it obviously is a subculture. There's no sense in kidding ourselves and no sense engaging in any kind false hopes in regard to it, so what do we do? It's true. This is the most artificial institution imaginable and the people in charge know it. I mean, they don't know what they're training. They're training for the one or two clarinet jobs there may be open next year. These kids don't know what to do. Most of them go into computers. (laughs)

FRANK J. OTERI: So, what role then does a composer have in a conservatory where the environment is really not about new music?

MILTON BABBITT: That is particularly interesting because mainly we are segregated here and we are self-segregated. We have our little meetings, the whole composing staff: usually a guest composer, student composers. We meet every other week. We have a guest as I said, and that's when we get together. Other than that they take their courses, which are not at a very high academic level, and they're here. They're here to be with each other and to hear what music—most of it you want to be honest about it and I think one can be honest about it—they're here to hear what music they can. These are people from out of New York. They go to the opera; they go to whatever they can find. There are still concerts around New York. They're very disappointed too to find out that there's no place where they can go and hear someone do a lieder recital. Where do you hear a lieder recital these days? I don't know. Sometimes

they're very disappointed about what they can get here. But many of them have come out of conservatories where they've heard a great deal of that music and they want to hear contemporary music and they're surprised to find that there is no longer a Group for Contemporary Music, there's no longer a Speculum Musicae that's really functioning or no longer any of the other groups that played highly rehearsed contemporary music, but that's what they do. They're very isolated here as a group. They find a few friends here who are willing to play their music. I'll say very frankly, there are two pianists in this place now—one of them is no longer a student but he stays around and he is already playing with a professional group who are only playing demanding contemporary music. I asked today, I said is there anybody else beyond these two? I know these two very well. No, there aren't.

FRANK J. OTERI: But, of course, what Joel Sachs does with the New Juilliard Ensemble and what he does with the Focus concerts. Apparently everybody has to play some of this music.

MILTON BABBITT: That's right. That's right. Joel manages to do this and Joel manages to get them to play this music but they do it under duress. Not all of them. Well, when we get to the instrumentalists, it's a little different than the pianists. There are some clarinetists who want to play and there are some others who do, but it's a very limited group. Well, it's a limited group anywhere.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you know, you can make this argument that they don't want to do it because it's not going to help their careers, which is what their teachers are saying, but is it because they don't like the music and if they don't like the music, why don't they like the music?

MILTON BABBITT: I don't know that they would say that they don't like the music. Some of them no doubt would. They would never say it to me, so I wouldn't really know first hand. Some of them say it's too difficult. Some of them say that they're not prepared for it. Well, now look, there are clarinetists here, there are a few violinists here who will play it and do play it. I say clarinetists because we have a clarinet teacher here who sees to it that they do and who himself plays in a number of groups. I'm trying to think of other instruments...not many others. I'm not going to go farther than that at the moment because I can't base it on first hand information. Most of them have very little knowledge of contemporary music; don't know the contemporary literature at all (and by contemporary, I'm not willing to go back a century).

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. Well, of course, for some instruments, your only option is to play contemporary music. If you're a percussionist...

MILTON BABBITT: The percussionists are the ones who always have their parts, you know, who have always practiced their parts. The percussionists first and then the brass and then the winds and last the strings. Yes, of course, the percussionists don't have a Tchaikovsky concerto. Absolutely.

2. The Lure of Technology

FRANK J. OTERI: It's very tempting for a composer in such a hostile environment to turn to technology. About 40 years ago you were the champion of the RCA synthesizer.

MILTON BABBITT: I was indeed.

FRANK J. OTERI: And wrote some fantastic stuff...

MILTON BABBITT: I wish I still had it.

FRANK J. OTERI: You wrote some fantastic music for that instrument...

MILTON BABBITT: You're very kind.

FRANK J. OTERI: And I particularly loved the interactions between the vocal writing and the electronic writing in some of those pieces.

MILTON BABBITT: I'd love to do it again.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you haven't done it for decades...

MILTON BABBITT: That's for very practical reasons. You know, the last thing that happened to me was tragic. I was commissioned to write a violin concerto. And the score is there. But the violinist wanted an electronic part and while I was in the midst of writing the electronic part, our studio was ravaged. People broke in and destroyed almost everything. The studio could be put back together again; the synthesizer couldn't. They didn't want the synthesizer, they just wanted to pull out the wires and get everything they could by way of electronic equipment. They didn't even know what the synthesizer was. It could've been repaired possibly, but it would've been too big of a job. I was getting a little older; I simply wasn't up to it. And it was the question of whether we could get replacements. Where do you get tubes for an instrument that requires 1800 tubes? So I just threw in the towel and I didn't turn to the computer because at that time I thought to learn a new technology was just a little too late. I was asked to get involved in the computer in 1957 when the people out at Bell Labs, my dear friends Max Mathews and John Pierce asked me to get involved. And I said, "Look, I can't do both. I'm starting out with the synthesizer; I'm very happy with it, but it's going to take years for me to learn how to use it. If I begin with the computer, it's just going to be too much." And furthermore, I got them a young man who understood the math. They wanted me, not because they gave a damn about my music, they themselves were writing *On a Bicycle Built for Two* for the computer...

FRANK J. OTERI: I remember that. I have that recording.

MILTON BABBITT: You do? My goodness.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I didn't hear at the time.

MILTON BABBITT: People wouldn't believe it. But they knew that I knew enough math to understand the literature. So I got someone who knew more math and was a wonderful musician, David Lewin, and he wrote the first piece for computer, which people forget, but he stopped composing. And then of course, it went into the hands of my colleagues like Paul Lansky and what not, so I just withdrew from it

and was very happy to go back at that time to instrumental music and to Bethany Beardslee and all my dear friends and I never went back to the computer. I don't even have a computer. I don't have e-mail; I'm not online in any respect. I am totally offline.

FRANK J. OTERI: I find that so strange.

MILTON BABBITT: I tell you, there's no principal involved. I'm not going to be a musical Luddite; it's just not that, I cannot start. You know, at this age, it's too late, I'm going to know how much is involved and the subtleties of programming a computer to get what I would get. I'll tell you this: There was an attempt by some bright young men to realize my electronic part for my violin concerto on the computer and they threw in the towel. It's too hard to do. Because you had controls on the synthesizer, people don't realize, that they don't know how to get on the computer yet. With regard to the dynamics of spectra and so-forth. And maybe they can do it now, they gave up about ten years ago.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'm sure they could do it now.

MILTON BABBITT: This is 1976 when I had to give it up.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, was the piece ever performed?

MILTON BABBITT: Oh no, it can't be performed, unless I did something. Paul Zukofsky's been trying to get me to transcribe the electronic part. No instrument, obviously, can play the part. It couldn't be played in real time and, you know, again, the people who have tried to realize it into what I had already done and tried to extrapolate from that were not successful and then that was the end of it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you know, it's very interesting because the American Composers Orchestra's Orchestra Tech seminars and concerts just happened...

MILTON BABBITT: I know. I was supposed to have been there as a matter of fact on a panel, but I can't because of my personal problems.

FRANK J. OTERI: I thought about you during a panel I was on with Mario Davidovsky who also stopped working in electronic music. The reason he gave was very different. He was talking about how we've moved away from humanity. And he's found that the electronic sounds he worked with in the past informs how he writes instrumental music today...

MILTON BABBITT: I'm sure that's true.

FRANK J. OTERI: But it raised a fundamental question for a composer. What can you do with live music and with live musicians that you can't do with a computer or with electronics, with prerecorded sound?

MILTON BABBITT: I've never given up writing for live musicians quite clearly. Look, when I turned to the electronic medium, not only was I fascinated by it—I'm gonna use that cliché—I had to work for years before I could manage that instrument in any way that I regarded as satisfactory. But the truth is that I did like the notion of walking into that studio with a piece in my head and walking out with a completely performed work in that little tape under my arm. I love to work in isolation, let me say that. I love to compose in isolation, though I've often composed, as Gunther Schuller has, on subways. I like the idea of being able to stand there and redo and redo and redo. If I had that kind of rehearsal time with

an orchestra, then I'd probably feel the same way. I think it was a real practical consideration there: Besides from a few friends, I never got the performances I wanted. And that certainly was one of the aspects of it. But I loved working with the synthesizer; I just liked it.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you definitely don't have to worry about only two pianists being willing to play your score.

MILTON BABBITT: That's right. No, I was very happy doing that kind of thing and I would have undoubtedly would've continued doing that kind of thing if I could have. You know, look, there were practical problems, you know, getting up there on 125th Street, even the Shanghai Restaurant closed around the corner. Life was getting tough around 125th Street. That was one aspect of it. And it was not in Princeton, which would've been much more convenient for me; it had always meant a lot of time on the subway. We still had an apartment in New York, from which we have just been evicted...

FRANK J. OTERI: Yikes!

MILTON BABBITT: Practically, as I got older and older, it was a little too much work. But I mean, I gave up before I got older and older and older. The fact is that I was delighted to go back to writing for, call them what you will, human beings, if that's what performers are. But again, I don't, for example, know how to copy with a computer. I don't know how to do it; I never bothered to learn. I still do my handwriting and let somebody else transcribe it on the computer. Every kid now comes in with his homework every week beautifully done, of course, now it's not *Finale*; that's beneath contempt.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes, I think it is too. *Sibelius* is much easier to use.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, *Sibelius* is what they're all using. Of course, my expert says that *Sibelius* is still not as good as *Score*. He's a young man here who really knows every program in and out; he says for a professional work, *Score*. And for a long time, you know, publishers would accept only *Score* and nothing else.

FRANK J. OTERI: Interesting.

MILTON BABBITT: Now a few of them may be accepting *Sibelius* and I think they probably are.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'm just so happy to have a system where I can enter in music, have it look nice, have it extract parts.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, of course.

FRANK J. OTERI: And be able to hear it play the music back...

MILTON BABBITT: Absolutely. It was unthinkable, and actually it was parts and everything else. Oh, absolutely.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you have no interest in...?

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, it's not that I don't have any interest. I'm not gonna sit down and learn how to do that now. I can't sit down and look at a computer screen with these trifocals and one eye? Uh-uh (shakes head).

3. Responding to Attacks on Serialism

FRANK J. OTERI: You mentioned being a music critic for a while and we mentioned the "national newspaper." Even though we didn't give it a name, I think everybody knows what we're talking about. Over the past couple of years, in addition to these diatribes that have run about the death of classical music or classical music being a subculture, or whatever we want to call this music, there have been particular diatribes against the area of music that you have been exploring your whole life: twelve-tone music, serial music. And there have been many vicious diatribes.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, mainly lies of course about the fact that people were denied tenure because they didn't write serial music. I can name two extremely well-known composers who were denied tenure because they did: Don Martino and Charles Wuorinen. The Charles Wuorinen thing became something of a local if not a national scandal. One was Columbia, the other was Yale and, when I was chair, there was a critic of a paper I shan't mention (it was not the national paper), who said this to me at a panel on a stage in Trenton. This critic again pulled out this old saw that if you weren't a serial composer, you couldn't get a job. And I challenged him. Where are the so-called serial composers at the prestigious universities? Not Harvard. Not Columbia, not Yale. Where? A couple of guys at Princeton, that's all it really amounted to. And this is preposterous nonsense. I mean, I just decided to pay no attention to it, frankly. Misunderstandings sometimes make me very sad because they show the depth of the misapprehensions and the lack of apprehension. There was an article and I wish I could remember his name, you would remember his name, the man who wrote in *Commentary* magazine for years. He was a friend of mine, so I wouldn't mind mentioning his name if I could remember it and therefore, this sounds insulting that I can't. He became much more interested in English literature of the 19th century than music. Once he had been a pianist and in *Commentary* magazine, don't ask me when, maybe ten years ago, he was reviewing a book of interviews with composers. One of the composers was a Dutch composer whose main claim to fame was he tried to burn down the opera house in Amsterdam and he said, "Serialism is dead, because socialism is dead." Serialism and socialism. Well, I mean, I think that's an equivocation worthy of a French structuralist, but the fact is that he then felt that, this is the author in *Commentary*, that for these basically literary, political people who read *Commentary*, he should explain serialism. You know what he said? "Serialism is a musical system where you're not allowed to repeat a note until you've sounded all twelve." Well, even in the most immediate sense, he could have seen that that was nonsense by looking at a piece that was written 70 years ago, but beyond that. Well, that's the equivalent of saying, you know, the tonal system is a system in which you're not permitted to write parallel fifths. The confusion there with type, the type token confusion; the complete lack of understanding of what went on in that conception that evolved with Schoenberg was so depressing that I told this to him and he said, "Well, gee," he said, "You know, I'm sorry but I thought that's really what it was." What can one say? If the idea of listening to music to listen to see whether a note is repeated in all twelve... is a very unpleasant way of listening to music, I would think. No, the misunderstandings were just so great and the worst part about it is that so much intelligent writing about the music is available to those who are willing to read it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, why do you think there have been all of these attacks? What's behind them?

MILTON BABBITT: Well, I could say all kinds of things about the resentment. I must tell you what upsets me about all of that. Journalism, the people that try to... who are not vicious... who do not, let's not even use the word vicious, the people who are basically unfriendly, who presume to be unfriendly from the very outset. It's just they make no effort to understand or are perhaps incapable of understanding, I don't know. I don't know, I really don't know the answer to this. I could say all kinds of pretentious things about it, which I really don't want to say because the music is there. If they think the

Schoenberg Fourth Quartet and the Violin Concerto—I just won't go beyond Schoenberg, because there's so much other music—or the Stravinsky *Movements for Piano and Orchestra*, all these pieces are to be damned, good, I'm glad to be among the damned. I can't say that without proof and I don't like to say things without something that approximates demonstration. They don't recognize the music. They don't recognize the beginning of the Schoenberg *Orchestral Variations*. Look, after all in my generation, no one was to the twelve-tone manner born. I mean, we suddenly encountered it, we were interested in learning the music, learning what was going on in the music, or we didn't. You know, so many different people came to it for so many different reasons. When Aaron Copland, I don't know how many people are even aware that now, ended up writing so-called serial—I'm saying so-called because the term is so misunderstood—but when he wrote serial music, I'll never forget, Aaron, and I'll call him Aaron, because I did call him Aaron, Aaron once said, you know, "twelve-tone music is this mathematical thing, no, it's not for me," and he said that. He said that publicly. And then, about ten years later, he began writing music, in fact to such an extent, I'll say in all lack of modesty, that he wanted me to write an article about his *Piano Fantasy*, which I did, but the magazine that asked for it went out of existence, the *IMA* magazine from England, which you probably never saw. But Aaron then said, "Oh my God, I discovered that by playing with these twelve-tone [whatever he called them, rows, probably], I found chords that I had never imagined before." Some people criticize, "What a superficial view of twelve-tone, he found chords he had never found before..." but I thought that was fine. For him, to satisfy the kind of interest that he would have. After all, he went to the Boulangerie, where you learn to slice and package and label chords, and here were chords that were not sliced and packaged and labeled in the Boulangerie! For him that was important; it wasn't important for some of us. So it has fulfilled all of these different needs for people as unlike as Copland and Sessions and Stravinsky. And that people could presume to be off-handed about anything that had this attraction for people of that caliber...don't ask.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, a general question then, which perhaps isn't even relevant to connect all of this music—you talk about all these music critics who can't hear this music, for some reason or maybe...

MILTON BABBITT: Well, you do have to learn how to hear it. You learn it informally as well as formally. I'm not saying you take ear-training courses, but when you grow into the music, I mean after all, all you have to hear are intervals—the fundamental building blocks of any music. Stravinsky showed tremendous insight in that respect. When somebody said, "How could you have deserted us? How could you be such an infidel?" Well, I shouldn't use that word. "How could you have done this? How could you desert us and become a twelve-tone, serial composer?" He said, "But I've always composed with intervals." And that was remarkable, because he recognized something that most people, even who regarded themselves as being quite friendly to twelve-tone music... We're not talking about notes, we're not talking about pitch class, we're talking mainly about the relationship between the two; that marvelous relation that we call an interval that is unique almost entirely to the perception of sound and nothing else. So that he certainly used them in a particularly singular and remarkable way.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, is it necessary to be able to hear the twelve-tone set in a piece of music...

MILTON BABBITT: No, I don't think it's necessary to hear that as such. But I do think it's necessary to be able to hear intervallic relationships for any musical structure. If you don't have a musical memory, music is random in a very realistic mental sense. If you can't hear the present event, when the preceding event has passed, which I mean if every event is not completely displaced by the next event, then of course you can't hear music. And that is what is essentially going on in randomization. If there is no structure, if there are no dependencies, no contingencies then, of course, what kind of music is this? The man who walks down the street whistling a tune is whistling intervals. He's not whistling it at the pitch

level he heard it; you can be damn sure that people walking down the street singing "God Bless America," which apparently they do these days, are whistling intervals. Who knows the key of "God Bless America"? I defy you. You remember when Irving Berlin put that piece away in his drawer in 1917?

FRANK J. OTERI: That's for F# piano, so he played it in any key he wanted!

MILTON BABBITT: As a matter of fact, you know, that's another interesting story. He really didn't play that F# piano. Irving Berlin's daughter is on the board of this organization here. I knew her when she was a student at Barnard and I finally asked her, because she was interested in Anton Webern believe it or not, and she wanted to study with a pianist who would teach her Anton Webern and I recommended Steuermann. And I asked about it, if he plays only on the black keys, he doesn't have a dominant or a subdominant, he can only play one chord! Which is apparently what he did, which got us on the subject of "God Bless America," which he didn't like and put away in his drawer in 1917. Well, let's not do that, that's unpatriotic. But, all I do mean, it's really important to remember that when people whistle a tune, they're whistling intervals, they're not whistling pitches. They're whistling pitches, if you wish, but they're not whistling it properly at the pitch level of the original.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's the relationship between them that they're actually whistling.

MILTON BABBITT: Right.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, in that sense though, they comprehend the relationship between the pitches and they comprehend the organization.

MILTON BABBITT: Absolutely, absolutely.

FRANK J. OTERI: And even if they don't know what the original tonal center was or the key it was in, they've replaced that hierarchy and they're hearing the hierarchy of the pitches.

MILTON BABBITT: Exactly. And that's what makes intervals so crucial because the transformations underlying the twelve-tone system were interval preserving.

FRANK J. OTERI: But could anyone who isn't a musician learn to hear the relationships between a retrograde inversion and an original set.

MILTON BABBITT: I'm not sure...I mean, it's the difference between hearing a triad and hearing that it is a triad. I don't think these people necessarily have to hear a retrograde inversion. Forgetting by the way, for a moment, that the retrograde inversion is much closer to the original than the inversion is because it repeats the intervals. Forgive me, but no, of course not that they should, but if they could remember those pitches, of course. They'd remember the intervals, if you wish. Of course. And they do and I know people that can do it and who do do it. Look, I'm not going to make the point about naturalists or anything of that sort. I mean, what it meant to us was a fascinating way of structuring music and structuring music in terms of the way it is to be heard and not the way it is to be seen. The notion of so-called paper was as uninteresting to us as it would be to the so-called people who criticized us.

FRANK J. OTERI: I know people who can hear twelve-tone sets, but I don't know anyone who isn't a musician who can. But, similarly, I can't think of a non-musician who could hear a piece and hum you what the tonic is.

MILTON BABBITT: That's a very good point.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, but the place where I get lost as a listener and as a composer and as a thinker about music, is when the notion of a twelve-tone set is extended beyond pitch to time points and to other aspects...

MILTON BABBITT: The only point there is that again, it's analogical. We do hear the rhythmic aspect, the temporal aspect of music in terms of durations. Durations are intervals. They're intervals between time points. If we didn't have intervals of time points, we couldn't play music—a half note wouldn't be the same as a half note here at a given tempo. So I don't see the problem there. Now, no one for even a moment suggested the serialization of timbre for instruments, for example. That's numerology already. You can do it by analogy with the numbers that come up when you're representing the series and numbers if it amuses you, it might... what it would do—and I say what it would do, because I've never done it—what it would do is provide a patterning and the patterning itself internally, contextually might be of value and use.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, what it could do perhaps if you associate specific instruments with specific pitches, is it could reinforce the perception of the set...

MILTON BABBITT: It could be that, it could be that the particular patterning that is the result of, let's say, an inversion would come up as a particular patterning when you apply it to the instruments, of course. I don't find that it's too outrageous. Not if it's satisfactory. It does give a kind of patterning to the total piece. I've actually never done that believe it or not. As far as dynamics are concerned—after all, dynamics are susceptible to what are called strictly serial relations. That is to say the relationships of louder and softer. No one pretends for a moment that the difference between *p* and *pp* is the same as the difference between *ff* and *f*, but one of them is softer and the other is louder, but if you associate it with a particular dimension of music, which is more projectable, then of course it can have that reinforcement effect. But it seems to me that this would be true of everything when you think of long range listening in music, long-range music. Let's just for the moment say in the Schenkerian sense, one is trained. One may be trained informally as well as formally. If one sits among that music—I've known people who have played music all their lives, from the age of four, played four-hand music all their lives who hear remarkable things. I've tried this one. I've tried this at Princeton because there were the days way back, you know those days in the '30s and '40s, when kids would come who had done nothing but heard chamber music or that kind of thing all their lives—some of it on records, there wasn't much of it on records—who had long range hearing that was remarkable, because I had to teach ear training. These people could not read music. They were never taught musical literacy, but they were able to remember and recall and have a sense of connection that I found remarkable.

FRANK J. OTERI: But now that tradition is gone. People aren't playing music in their home...

MILTON BABBITT: I'm afraid you're right. Exactly. You've said it. They're not being taught! You know, there was, in a book about Toscanini—you'll probably remember who wrote it...

FRANK J. OTERI: Joe Horowitz.

MILTON BABBITT: Exactly, Joe Horowitz. He pointed out the kind of thing I found most valuable to me about that book: all kinds of little facts that I would not have known. In the 1970s, the number of public school music teachers in New York City, within a decade, dropped from over 2000 to somewhere less than 700. If you're not instructed, if you're not being focused, if you're not being directed, if you're not being led, then what can you expect?

4. Rap Music

MILTON BABBITT: Now we have teachers, apparently, who think the way to get into serious music is by teaching them rock. And I'm told this is just not true. It just doesn't work. I mean, people who call *Pierrot Lunaire* a form of rap. You like that one? Have you heard that?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, that's interesting.

MILTON BABBITT: O.K. No, I mean, the point is it turns out that you don't go beyond that. As soon as they get to anything else, you know, they say, "That's boring." You know, it's a lot like Chinese water torture.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, but of course we're saturated with popular culture everywhere.

MILTON BABBITT: We certainly are.

FRANK J. OTERI: Those are our most universal reference points nowadays. So it could be worthwhile to connect *Pierre Lunaire* with rap because the people who are coming to it now have already heard rap, so they already have a context for a melody line of imprecise pitch. That's already in their immediate frame of reference.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, but...

FRANK J. OTERI: Why not use that context?

MILTON BABBITT: Because all those pitches and everything are very disturbing. It's like something I'll tell you. There was a marvelous, marvelous student of Schenker, a wonderful one named Jonas, Oswald Jonas, who wrote one of the first introductions to Schenker in German, then he moved to this country. Died in Riverside, California. And he hated all this contemporary music, just really loathed it; thought it was the devil incarnate. But we were very good friends. And one day he confessed to me that he had heard *Pierrot Lunaire* and all he could say to himself, "God...", he would love to have heard that poetry if only that stuff behind it would stop and I think that's very much the way. I know some people who have tried this, by the way. At the University of Michigan there was someone who did this with *Pierrot* and with students who were brought up entirely on rap and... I don't even know what hip-hop is, to be honest with you, do you understand hip-hop? What is all this scratching of records?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, they take recordings, they have different recordings and sample parts of them. Or you'll have two turntables going at once and you'll have a phrase and you'll loop that phrase.

MILTON BABBITT: But how do they repeat it from the one time? Do they record it then?

FRANK J. OTERI: Um, well, most sophisticated DJs are now using samplers, but originally they'd have turntables and they'd play a little snippet of music from a record, then go back, play it again, go back, play it again, go back, play it again and then bounce it off another recording and you'd have those two different patterns going off against each other.

MILTON BABBITT: Little did they realize that they are writing what is now called serious music. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you know, at this point, this gets into an interesting area because I find your music fascinating; I love your music.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, you're very kind. You may stay here. You may have this room because I think that you will have one fellow traveler that who will join you. Go ahead.

FRANK J. OTERI: But at the same time, there are things in hip-hop that I also find fascinating.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, I don't doubt that for a moment! I grew up with popular music.

5. Popular Standards

MILTON BABBITT: If you know anybody who knows more popular music of the '20s or '30s than I do, I want to know who it is. I'm serious. I mean, I grew up playing every kind of music in the world and I know more pop music from the '20s and '30s, it's because of where I grew up. We had to imitate Jan Garber one night; we had to imitate Jean Goldkette the next night. We heard everything from the radio; we had to do it all by ear. We took down their arrangements; we stole their arrangements; we transcribed them, approximately. We played them for a country club dance one night, and for a high school dance the next. They would be different tastes, of course.

FRANK J. OTERI: You even wrote a Broadway show.

MILTON BABBITT: Of course and I'm doing a pop tune now. I'm trying to do something which is such an anachronism for me that it's taking me more time than trying to write a string quartet. Robert White, the tenor that you undoubtedly know, is doing a concert next month and he wanted me to write a song for him. I am very fond of Bobby, because when he was a small child practically, Gunther Schuller discovered him and he did one of my most difficult pieces, my tenor and six instrument piece and he was the first person and one of the last persons to do it. So I thought for him, he really, I owe him something for this courageous act and I'd write him a little pop tune because he'd been recording Irving Berlin and some others you probably know. And I've written for him a real '30s, '40s pop tune. And let me tell you something, I have had a terrible time. It's so artificial what I'm doing is corny or what I'm doing is too complicated. I've just simply struggled with it. And I used to knock these things off all the time.

FRANK J. OTERI: So it's not twelve-tone?

MILTON BABBITT: Oh God no! No! It's in A flat. It's a sixteen bar, eight plus eight plus eight plus eight pop song. The kind of song you probably don't even know.

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, I know those songs. Those old Broadway show songs. I love DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson.

MILTON BABBITT: You love DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson? Oh my God. You know DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson? I mean, DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson is not what you're likely to hear. Alec Wilder, an old friend of mine, wrote a book on popular songs, you probably know the book. There isn't a single DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson song in it. And I called Alec and, you know, he was very taken aback that I'd be interested in the people who wrote "You're the Cream in My Coffee."

FRANK J. OTERI: That's wonderful stuff. "The Best Things in Life Are Free"...

MILTON BABBITT: "Button Up Your Overcoat"...

FRANK J. OTERI: "I'm a Dreamer, Aren't We All"...

MILTON BABBITT: "Birth of the Blues"...How do you know all of this, you're only a baby? Where did you...?

FRANK J. OTERI: I grew up in New York City.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, I know, but DeSylva...look, if you told me that you knew Richard Rodgers and Hart, I wouldn't be surprised, but DeSylva, Brown and Henderson. There was a movie about them called *The Best Things in Life Are Free*, where there are very strange people playing these people...

FRANK J. OTERI: And *Sunny Side Up* was the very first movie musical.

MILTON BABBITT: Great movie. Great movie. Who was in *Sunny Side Up*? Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. You remember the songs from *Sunny Side Up*?

FRANK J. OTERI: "Keep your sunny side up, up...?"

MILTON BABBITT: Right. "If you have nine kids in a row..."

FRANK J. OTERI: "...baseball teams make make money you know."

MILTON BABBITT: Exactly. "If I Had a Talking Picture of You" ...

FRANK J. OTERI: Did you ever see *Just Imagine*? It was shown very briefly in the 1930s. It was the first science fiction musical ever.

MILTON BABBITT: With El Brendel?

FRANK J. OTERI: I don't remember...they go into the future from the year 1930 to year 1980.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, El Brendel was the comic in it. Frankie Albertson, I think, was the girl lead who became very famous for marrying a famous orchestra leader, you know what I'm talking about. Remember the songs in it? "There's Something About an Old-Fashioned Girl," "Never Swat a Fly." All DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson. Of course, who doesn't know that? Any educated man. It was a terrible movie by the way.

FRANK J. OTERI: I thought it was great fun.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, it was, it was great fun. With those airplanes flying around and those jokes, I agree. "There's Something About an Old-Fashioned Girl" and the "old-fashioned girl" was this 1920s flapper. Sure. "Never swat a fly, he may love another fly, he may sit with her and sigh, the way I do with you." Of course. Kid, now you know you're talking my language.

6. On People's Attachments to Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Why are those old songs appealing to you?

MILTON BABBITT: Obviously, there's the old Proustian association—I'm not being pretentious or literary about this—but I mean, the temporal connotation, I mean, the temporal collocation. First of all, I grew up playing them all. I knew all of these songs. Look, if you want to be personal about all of this, it's very funny, I mean, this is a very funny association. I began playing the violin at about the age of four and indeed I now have a picture of me playing the violin at the age of six, which turned up when they were cleaning out our apartment which we had had for 50 years. I brought it with me today because I wanted to show it to Paul Zukofsky because I wanted to know what kind of a bow position this was that I had. And he could tell me. I held the bow in a very strange way, turned out to be the German way, the way I was instructed in Jackson. And I played the violin and from the very beginning I knew that kind of music and then I went to the clarinet because it was socially more acceptable and to saxophone because it got me further and then I went back to the violin again, the only instrument I never played was that [indicates piano] and these are associated with every aspect of my life, these songs, and they were as associated with my life as the Brooklyn Dodgers would be for someone from that part of the world. For me it was the Jackson Senators, the Yankee farm club in Jackson. Obviously we were children growing up with this music and it was the music we knew, the music we played and I mean, we never had any category mistakes here. I mean, when I went home to practice the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, I never confused that with "Never Swat a Fly." Don't ask me why not.

FRANK J. OTERI: But by the same token, there are people who have that same sort of sentimental association with standard repertoire classical music; most of your subscribers to concerts.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, well, so do I. So do I.

FRANK J. OTERI: But I get into these arguments with people who are not fans of new music and they say, "Nobody has that association with new music; new music doesn't do that for people. No matter what kind of new music it is, whether it's twelve-tone new music or if it's minimalist new music or if it's indeterminate new music, it doesn't do that." And they say to me, "Well, why not?" So I'm going to say to you, why not?

MILTON BABBITT: You tell me, why not?

FRANK J. OTERI: I don't know the answer to this. It does it for me. Every time I listen to Stockhausen's *Gesang der Junglinge*, I remember being a Columbia freshman.

MILTON BABBITT: Yup, I have associations with pieces of that type: the Schoenberg *Orchestral Variations*, the Violin Concerto certainly has that kind of association, but look, let us not engage in category mistakes. These are different animals. You have to learn eight bars of a tune with lyrics and sometimes they're clever and that's a very different kind of musical undertaking from listening even to the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. I say even because that's what most of us as violinists grew up with and I think it's a terrific piece. Um, you were a Columbia freshman, what year?

FRANK J. OTERI: 1981.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, that's after the Group for Contemporary Music. In the 1960s, you could go up to the McMillan Theater and you'd find 1200 people there for a concert of the Group—these

marvelously performed things that Charles and Harvey put on, beautifully rehearsed, marvelous programs. We have nothing comparable today. Nothing. And you'd have 1200 mainly Columbia students there, general students. I'll tell you very honestly and all in modesty, when Speculum decided to put on an all-Babbitt concert for my 60th birthday or the year before, I was really sure that there was not going to be anyone there and the place was packed.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, there are still new music events that can draw large crowds.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, but you know, this...but the quality was so remarkable, the quality of the performance, so there is new music today that can draw large crowds, no doubt, but the whole atmosphere of the Group for Contemporary Music, I should say, was so remarkable that we don't have anything comparable like that around Columbia, even at Miller Theater or anywhere else these days. And even there were so many other groups, there was Parnassus...oh, we don't have to go through this, you know about this.

7. The Economics of New Music

MILTON BABBITT: Look, what we don't have now, let's be very, I think the misused word is pragmatic—you as a Columbia man and John Dewey would object to that use of the word pragmatic as much as I do—we had support. We had the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment, which now won't commission individuals. It will commission only, may I use the word, bureaucrats. Do you know the programs that Ford had in those days?

FRANK J. OTERI: They commissioned orchestras, they had orchestra commissions for new music...

MILTON BABBITT: They had all kinds of commissions. They promoted the recording of music...

FRANK J. OTERI: The American Music Center was involved with that program.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, I mean, the amount of stuff. The Rockefeller Foundation put on those famous competitions—one doesn't like competitions, but it led to any number of people learning music that they never would've even looked at and other people hearing it. They paid for extra rehearsals. Did you know that the Rockefeller Foundation paid for an extra week of rehearsals for major orchestras to learn new works?

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow!

MILTON BABBITT: It was just incredible. It was a different kind of world. The Rockefeller Foundation paid for the founding of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, for the foundation of New World Records. And this was all individual people at these organizations, it was always the individual persons.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's precisely what it has to take: money that's allotted to a program that specifically goes to fund extra rehearsals. Because let's face it, you get two rehearsals of a piece—I don't care how accessible or inaccessible someone may wind up saying the piece is later—two rehearsals, you're not going to get a good performance of a new piece. You're just not... certainly not an orchestral piece.

MILTON BABBITT: No, no, no, I mean I couldn't agree with you more. In fact, when you consider... I mean, we go back to these historical things: How many rehearsals *Tristan* got before they cancelled it and said it wasn't ready yet? Ninety-eight, I think. How many rehearsals for the first performance of *Moses and Aron*? How many... when the *Orchestral Variations* of Schoenberg were first performed, I think Furtwängler gave it something like twelve rehearsals and Schoenberg heard that it was a very poor performance; he couldn't afford to go to Berlin to hear it. No, of course, it was taken for granted. Look at the rehearsals that Mahler spent on any concert that he gave, even in New York when he came to the Philharmonic. If you want to hear something remarkable, and this doesn't involve the music we're talking about, listen to Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony in the '20s, playing whatever, you name it, those Rossini overtures that we all know, with a kind of precision, with a kind of control, with a kind of ensemble we never hear because they rehearsed everyday, all day long, damn it.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what happened?

MILTON BABBITT: Well, we're not allowed to say unions are we?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, maybe that is the problem.

MILTON BABBITT: It is one of the problems. Look, when Jimmy Levine is kind enough and interested enough to perform my Second Piano Concerto and I don't have a single record of it, they wouldn't let us make a tape, a private tape. The Metropolitan tried, Carnegie Hall tried and I tried. We all tried just to get a tape for ourselves and they wouldn't permit anything. I have no record of that. I have no record of the Philharmonic playing my *Relata II*. To what end? And Jimmy wants to do the piece again when he can save up enough time so they can rehearse it.

FRANK J. OTERI: And that orchestra, the Met orchestra, sounds better than any orchestra.

MILTON BABBITT: I couldn't agree more. You're absolutely right.

FRANK J. OTERI: They're fantastic. I was at their *Wozzeck* a few weeks back and it was great.

MILTON BABBITT: Terrific. Oh, that orchestra can sound unbelievable. Absolutely, absolutely... So what do we do?

8. Baseball and New Music

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to take this to baseball because I know that you're a huge baseball fan.

MILTON BABBITT: I'm not as huge a baseball fan as I used to be. If we're going to go into that in detail, I'm going to offend a lot of people, probably including you and you probably couldn't care less. I'm talking because I don't think women, even my daughter who has learned a little about baseball because she has a son, they don't really take baseball seriously. We have a president of this institution who takes the New York Yankees more seriously than he takes me, I promise you (laughs). No, what about baseball? No, baseball has deteriorated like so many other things.

FRANK J. OTERI: I went to my first baseball game, I think, maybe three years ago...

MILTON BABBITT: Well, you're a native New Yorker, of course.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right, but even though we have the best team allegedly...

MILTON BABBITT: Well, yeah, you've had some great teams.

FRANK J. OTERI: But I went to the game and what thrilled me about it is I saw the analogy between sports and the concert hall. I thought, "Wow, here's something that's this public ritual, this, this secular ritual, just like a concert, yet there are so many more people here. So many more people are engaged, so many more people are involved." And I thought, "How can we make music more like sports?"

MILTON BABBITT: You've done it. It's badly played! I tell you, it's amazing, you see, to be an old man in this respect. My brother, who takes sports much more seriously than I, 'cuz he was an athlete. He played games. He played, well, he was a Columbia man by the way, an undergraduate. He came up from the South, he went to Columbia. In high school, he played football. He wouldn't play football at Columbia because he would've had to take that big subway ride all the way up to get all the way up to Baker Field, so he was on the wrestling team. And that's my brother. He was on the 26-mile relay team when he was 60 years old. My brother won't watch baseball now. It offends him because it's so inept. These people don't know how to play the game. I mean, when you think they call... I won't name names, but the current center fielder of the Yankees is called the second coming of Joe DiMaggio. He's not the second coming of Dom DiMaggio! I mean this guy, to think of these people, I mean the playing. I happened to have seen Ty Cobb, but at the end of his career so that isn't what I'm comparing him with... the Philadelphia Athletics in '29, '30, '31, with Lefty Grove and Mickey Cochrane and Jimmie Foxx, the incredible abilities of these people. Joe DiMaggio would be running after the ball to field it the moment it left the pitcher's arm.

FRANK J. OTERI: But these guys are batting higher batting averages, they just beat the record again.

MILTON BABBITT: Why? Because of lousy pitching. My God, they swing at bad balls, no, I mean, really the quality of play is way below... for a moment they haven't really had the training. The people who came into the major leagues in my day had been through minor leagues. Most of them hadn't gone to college, now they go to college, which is a bad idea. But they'd go to the minor leagues when they were sixteen, they'd play in the Cotton States League, which was a class D league when I was living in Jackson. It's now, of course, an A league, it's in the Texas league. They would go and they would spend at least six or seven years learning the craft. When they came up they knew how to play the game. Now they go through college, they go right to the major leagues, they go one or two years in the minor

leagues. Listen, there's an announcer who often announces the Mets—I won't mention his name because I don't have a right to mention these people's names, I'm no expert—who says they don't know the fundamentals. He said, and he always criticizes their base running, which is true; their inability to throw the ball to the right base; to know how to use a pitcher; to know how to react to a pitcher. He's right. Do you know who that is?

FRANK J. OTERI: No, I don't follow sports. I went to these games and as a composer and a musician I was interested.

MILTON BABBITT: He had been a catcher with the St. Louis Cardinals. I won't mention his name and he's willing to see these things, which are perfectly obvious to any of us who look at this. I think that baseball is the best game there is. It's the best structured game. I watch others. Football, but I mean football has this funny business: you're penalized for scoring, there's a time limit, now they have hash marks so every play is played from the same position on the field. Basketball I don't even regard as a game. But baseball is a wonderfully structured game. There is very little you can find...

FRANK J. OTERI: And it's wonderfully structured and it has a huge audience and a huge audience who understand the structure...

MILTON BABBITT: ...particularly in the National League where they don't have this ridiculous designated hitter...

FRANK J. OTERI: ...But they understand the structure! They're following with score cards and...

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, yes, some of them are great experts.

FRANK J. OTERI: You know following with score cards, it's like going to a concert and...

MILTON BABBITT: And following the score, yeah. Oh, yes. Some of them know a hell of a lot more about it than I do. A lot of them know the history of it much better than I do.

FRANK J. OTERI: So why are people so much more interested in sports than in contemporary music?

MILTON BABBITT: Well, I mean. This is a sociological question.

FRANK J. OTERI: Just posit a though, I mean, it's baffling to me.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, is it really?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, to me it is because I care about contemporary music, I don't really care about baseball.

MILTON BABBITT: I know, but let's face it, they were brought up with baseball. They know it. Many of them do and it also has other kinds of connotations. It has all kinds of nationalist.... How many people do you know in New York who are Boston Red Sox fans? I mean, there's tons of fanaticism.

FRANK J. OTERI: But there are a lot of people in New York who are Philadelphia Orchestra fans.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, they're wrong now, let me tell you. They're wrong now.

9. Beer and New Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Let's talk about beer...

MILTON BABBITT: Well, that, of course, you're right is one of my specialties. I'm not able to drink much of it now I find, I'm allergic to it, but I still drink it. You're right, I am a beer expert of a certain kind. What should we talk about? American beer has improved so that it's remarkable. There was very little decent American beer fifteen-twenty years ago. There was some beer from the West Coast, I shouldn't name particular brands, I guess.

FRANK J. OTERI: No, you can. By all means do.

MILTON BABBITT: There were one or two really good...then along comes something like, well, the beers from Boston that began and then all of a sudden we have all these tiny boutique breweries. There's a new one every other day. Some of them are very, very special and very good; some of them aren't. It's remarkable too what's happened to beer in this country. Next to England, I think we have the best collection of beers in the world. You want to talk about specific beers?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, what was interesting to me was the whole notion of a microbrewed beer...

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: ...is the beer equivalent, if you would, of specialized music making.

MILTON BABBITT: [laughs] Well, good, O.K.! I'll buy that and it's perfectly true because they're very different: some of them are done crudely and some of them are done very well indeed. It's extraordinary. That's one of the greatest cultural explosions in this country. Because before we had all of that terrible beer. You know, all of that mass-produced beer which is undrinkable.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yet, you know, some people drink Budweiser still.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, you're going to mention Budweiser? Bud Light?

FRANK J. OTERI: I hate it. Tons of people like it; just like tons of people listen to Britney Spears or the latest pop music sensation.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, I know.

FRANK J. OTERI: But there is a market for these alternative beers, these "new music" beers, if you would.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, but most of them don't last unfortunately. Very few of these new ones and some of the very, very best ones don't last. But that has to do with the whole commercial aspect of bringing out beer. The beer gets stale very quickly. For example, there's a colleague here who knows how to brew beer, who knows much more about beer than I do now, who won't buy beer anymore because he says you can never tell when it's stale. For example, one of the great beers of the West Coast is Pyramid Pale Ale. You know Pyramid Pale Ale?

FRANK J. OTERI: I've had it a couple of times.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, where can you get it fresh around here? You can't. Where can you get it at all? But to get it fresh is very, very, very different.

FRANK J. OTERI: I loved the Celis Brewery in Austin but they're now out of business.

MILTON BABBITT: Has it gone under? I didn't realize that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Miller bought it. They put it out of business!

MILTON BABBITT: Well, a lot of them have gone. I go for things that I once got and have gone now. What beer do you usually drink?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I love Guinness. I love Anchor Steam.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh good. Anchor Steam was the one beer that was there all through the years. A lot of people don't like Anchor Steam; they don't like the flowery aspect but that's a matter of taste, so it never really caught on. But Anchor Steam certainly was the old pioneer. And there's some amazing beers. I can't even remember their names from day-to-day. There's one that comes out of Virginia, if you like a hoppy beer not a malt. I like a very hoppy beer as opposed to a malty beer.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you like Pete's Wicked Ale?

MILTON BABBITT: Not really. It's a little too sweet.

FRANK J. OTERI: How about Catamount?

MILTON BABBITT: Well, Catamount is a little better. You're not getting to me where it really counts. Catamount, you know, there are a number of beers from up the New England way, which are very much alike but there's one that I really like better than Catamount, Long Trail...

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, Long Trail Ale.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah right. I like that. I still go back to Fuller's ESB.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's a nice beer too. I've had it on tap.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah.

10. Babbitt's Titles and Some Personal Favorite Compositions

FRANK J. OTERI: So many of your works have great titles. I'm thinking of *It Takes Twelve to Tango* or *Fourplay* or *Beaten Paths*...

MILTON BABBITT: I'm sorry. I regret *Fourplay* now because it's been used.

FRANK J. OTERI: My all time favorite though, is *The Joy of More Sextets*. The New World CD even replicates the graphics of *The Joy of Sex* on this thing. Why all the puns?

MILTON BABBITT: When I look for a title, I don't want anything impossible or pretentious. I don't want anything stale such as "Duo for Violin and Piano" or things such as that. It just amuses me to be very honest with you. It's no more profound than that. For example, Paul Zukofsky, that remarkable man who really contributed so much to contemporary music and who recorded more American music over his span as both a violinist and a conductor than anybody—people forget what he contributed, you know. He has nothing now. Typical of a situation as a conductor. He can't play anymore because he's got some problems.

FRANK J. OTERI: He had a wonderful record company too for a while...

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, he still does. Still does. But he can't get the stuff into any of these bankrupt organizations. Well, anyhow, Paul Zukofsky, who really, I mean when you think of the music for a 20th-century violinist that he recorded, all the things he did. People forget that he did it in so many different places: in Iceland, in some little town in New Jersey. Well, any case, Paul Zukofsky said to me, would I write him a very simple encore piece. Just something he could use, a short encore piece with respect for his inabilities now with regard to his... whatever the problems are with his arm. So I said sure. Well, his father, the poet, Louie Zukofsky, had written a book called *Little*, and if you've never read it, you should. Well, no, I don't know where you'd get a hold of a copy now; it's a collector's item.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, all of Louis Zukofsky's stuff has been reissued.

MILTON BABBITT: Not *Little*. All of the poetry has and so forth. *Little* may be eventually. *Little* was about a violin prodigy. Of course, it was Paul. It's one of the funniest books I've ever read. I had to have my wife help me because there's a lot of Yiddish in it, which I don't know. But she helped me with that. It's a hilarious book. His father was an extraordinary man and this book was about Paul and it's called *Little*. Well, I decided to call the piece that I was writing for Paul Zukofsky *A Little for Little*. But unfortunately, when I showed him the first four pages he said, "Look, you don't understand how bad things are. First of all, it's gonna be too long and second of all, you've already written in things that I can't manage." So I've now written it, so I extended the piece. It's now going to be played, I think, next month up at Harvard and in Mexico by Rolf Schulte.

FRANK J. OTERI: He's fantastic.

MILTON BABBITT: And I've called it *Little Goes a Long Way*.

FRANK J. OTERI: Ooooh!

MILTON BABBITT: Isn't that nice?

FRANK J. OTERI: It is nice.

MILTON BABBITT: No, but I just like to do that kind of thing with titles. It all began with *All Set*. That was I think the first time when I dared that. I think that is the first one I did. And that and I try to look for titles. I have failed on many occasions. I have thrown in the towel, and I offended people with a piece of mine that has never been played in New York called *Septet but Equal*. It was played twice in Boston of all things, but never played here. It's been recorded by Paul Zukofsky.

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh really?

MILTON BABBITT: It hasn't been released yet.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I think with these titles, you know, for all the people who think, who might think, assume that your music is off-putting for some reason who've never listened to it because you know there are a lot of associations that people have with your name not knowing a note of your music.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, I know.

FRANK J. OTERI: Because of that *High Fidelity* article, because of all of these other things over these years and in a way, I think these pun-like titles go a long way to showing how much fun this music really is.

MILTON BABBITT: Thank you.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'd like to talk more about specific pieces of your own music.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, it's my own music. It's my own, I must take responsibility for it. It's my very own.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you know, I have personal favorites, but I was wondering if you had a personal favorite?

MILTON BABBITT: I think many of my personal favorites have to do with their biography and very often more than their content. *Relata II* had such an unfortunate history. It was played four times by the Philharmonic and it was a great misunderstanding that Leonard Bernstein had cancelled it. He hadn't. Lenny behaved perfectly well with regard to it and you know, I don't have to defend Lenny Bernstein but I deeply resent the notion that Lenny wouldn't play the piece. It had to do with the copyist who delivered the parts the day of the first rehearsal and they were so badly done we couldn't have a rehearsal, so it was postponed and that's all. And he did it! Lenny conducted two of the performances and his assistant who had been very helpful, he gave him two of the performances. I don't have a record of a note of it. Why? Because the Philharmonic was not being broadcast in those days and the union wouldn't let them make a safety tape.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

MILTON BABBITT: So I have no part of that so therefore, I would love to hear *Relata II* again. There was talk about the ACO doing it, but they just don't have enough rehearsal time.

FRANK J. OTERI: Juilliard did *Relata II*.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, you know, Juilliard recorded *Relata I*, well *Relata II* is a bit harder and particular instruments, which Juilliard is not strong in...and I mean, I wrote *Relata II* for the Philharmonic many whose members, of course, I knew really well and I knew what they could do. They had no particular problem with it, but they were under-rehearsed. But I must say, I have to say something with regard to a man that just died. Isaac Stern was playing the Prokofiev first concerto on the same concert and he gave me a lot of his rehearsal time. I was very indebted to him for that. But they didn't have enough and Lenny, look we don't want to go into this. He fought and fought to get more rehearsal time, because well I was far from being Lenny's closest friend or favorite composer, he did it, we were old friends and he tried it, so that's one of the pieces that has a very particular place in my memory and still I would love to hear again. There was the thought of doing it here and this is a good orchestra but there are certain weaknesses and they unfortunately are weaknesses that would be revealed by *Relata II*. The other, well, there are other pieces of mine that, as I said, *Septet but Equal*, which is a very tough piece, which Gunther conducted first in Boston. No, he didn't, that's not true, he conducted the second performance in Boston, in which Paul Zukofsky recorded but did not perform in London, and there's a wonderful tape of it, it will be coming out on record, but it's never been done in New York. I have other pieces. I have a piece called *More Phonemena* for a cappella chorus, which was done only in San Francisco and was never done in New York. Where do you get a chorus here in New York that can do it? It's for twelve-part chorus. The French Radio Chorus could have done it; the BBC Chorus could have done it. It's for chorus using only phonemes and I have a recording of it, which I don't play for one very simple reason. Wiseguy students will think that they sing terribly. Well, they're not professional singers in most cases. The rhythm is impeccable, the dynamic marvelous, the ensemble is great—the sound is not because they're not very good singers. It's a group in San Francisco and don't ask me the name of the chorus, I don't remember it off-hand, conducted by a young composer. Of course, who else? I've got a lot of pieces like that. And my piano trio was never done in New York. It was written for the Kennedy Center, it was done in Princeton, but it's never been done in New York, because the people who learned it never could get together, and that was the end of it. I have pieces like that which mean a lot to me. Funny things happen and they don't get recorded.

FRANK J. OTERI: I love the First Piano Concerto a great deal.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, it isn't that great a recording. Gunther was just here talking about this; he gave a little seminar for the students. We had three hours of recording time and I don't have to tell you, out of every hour twenty minutes disappears for rest and relaxation. And the guys in the orchestra said, "Look, we don't need any rest now that we're stuck way up in the Bronx, you know, let's do it." And the union man wouldn't let 'em do it, so they had to take twenty minutes out of every hour to do nothing except sit there. So they're under-rehearsed. The strings are particularly under-rehearsed but at least I have a recording of it. I was trying to think of a piece that, well, I tell you, a funny one: There's a piece of mine called *Composition for Twelve Instruments*, which had a very checkered career because back in 1949 you couldn't find a guitarist who could read music. So Varèse scheduled it for one of his concerts and we had to cancel, so finally I just gave up and put a harp in and then it was played and it's been played a couple of times only. But the guitar at that time was an instrument played only by jazz boys and when Mitropoulos wanted to do the Schoenberg *Serenade* with guitar, we found a jazz boy for it, who couldn't really read music. We taught it to him by rote. But now just reach out and touch a guitarist who can play anything. That's one of the instruments that's changed the most.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, do you anticipate a recording of *Composition for Twelve Instruments* with guitar at this point?

MILTON BABBITT: No, if there's somebody that wants to do it...nobody has any money now for recording.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, let's talk about the future for a little bit.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, dear me. Well, I have a couple of years maybe.

FRANK J. OTERI: What pieces do you want to write that you haven't written yet?

MILTON BABBITT: Oh boy. Um, not an opera. I had an opera planned. I had a chamber opera planned for electronics and voices. I'll never do that, I needed the synthesizer for that. I don't want to write an opera of any other kind; I can't deal with the mechanisms there. When Herman Krawitz was general manager of the Met he suggested it, but he's no longer general manager of anything but New World Records, and they can't afford an opera. They can't afford a place to live. There are pieces that I have wanted to write. For example you would be amazed at how modest my desires are. I'd like to write a woodwind sextet.

FRANK J. OTERI: A sextet not a quintet? Because I know you wrote a quartet.

MILTON BABBITT: No, but I want to write it for oboe, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, and what have I forgot?

FRANK J. OTERI: Contrabassoon?

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, I forgot the flute. And nobody wants me to write it. For some strange reason there's no real desire on anybody's part to have me write it. Believe it or not, that's a medium that I've always wanted to write. I really can't think of anything that much. At the moment, I'm supposed to write, well, I'm gonna write a piece for the Cygnus Ensemble if I can do it on time, because they're wonderful kids and they play well and I feel very close to them.

FRANK J. OTERI: And two guitars.

MILTON BABBITT: I've never written anything for two guitars.

FRANK J. OTERI: No, but the Cygnus ensemble has two guitars.

MILTON BABBITT: I was going to write for guitar and mandolin actually.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wonderful.

MILTON BABBITT: And then I'm supposed to write a short orchestral piece but since I'm not sure if I'm actually going to do it or not, I won't say more about that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, to get back to the wind sextet. You said that nobody wants you to write it. Would you consider just writing it anyway?

MILTON BABBITT: I would if I was younger, but who the hell is going to copy it? Who the hell's gonna get the parts and who the hell's gonna play it?

11. Some Advice for Young Composers

FRANK J. OTERI: So, this is the future: You teach students here.

MILTON BABBITT: Not for much longer probably.

FRANK J. OTERI: You chair the BMI Young Composer Awards.

MILTON BABBITT: Yeah, I don't even know why I continue to do that except that it is so very nice.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, what do you say to these students about the music they want to write, the ideas they have.

MILTON BABBITT: You are asking now at the end the question that should have been asked first because it's the most difficult of all questions.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's why I saved it.

MILTON BABBITT: It's very, very tough. In my day, you could think about an academic job. You could think about, "Look, you know, I'll get a couple of pieces played, I'll write a couple of articles, and I'll get a good teaching job where I can do more or less what I want to do. There are no teaching jobs anymore. Maybe for a few computer specialists but not for anybody else.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what are you going to tell them?

MILTON BABBITT: I tell them the facts of life. Here they can look around and the facts of life confront them every moment of their lives. They know, first of all, most of these people are not going to get academic jobs because they don't have the academic qualifications, because the jobs are so few and far between. They want PhDs; they want things that these people don't have. Many of them go into computers; many of them do commercial work. They're still doing it already while they're students here. Many of them just drop out. Look, two of them (I'm not going to name names of course), two of the most remarkably gifted people I've ever known in music dropped out. One, you won't believe, he's a big, big, big shot at the technical end of IBM. Another one went off to Australia where he's teaching at a university, not teaching music. And these were remarkable talents. And everybody admitted that this was not just some quirk on my part. These are not idiosyncratic cases; these are kids that could do all kinds of things. And there's a third one who's here in New York whom I won't embarrass by naming, who was one of the most remarkable students that ever came here, who wrote an orchestral piece for a doctoral thesis that they wouldn't play, the conductor here wouldn't conduct it and Peter Mennin was then the president of the Juilliard School and he looked at the score and he said, "We must do it." And he brought in an outside conductor to do it. This man also was a terrific pianist and has an LP of difficult contemporary music and couldn't get a teaching job. He's now doing some kind of business. He's now writing occasional articles for the newspaper that remained nameless in our discussion.

FRANK J. OTERI: So in terms of the music they're writing, that the students are writing now...

MILTON BABBITT: They're all over the place.

FRANK J. OTERI: Is that good?

MILTON BABBITT: They're all over the place. It has to be; it reflects what's going on. There's certain kind of music that you will not see here; that people will not be writing, call it what you will—imitation rap or that kind of thing—which you do get in some universities now. You know, you won't find that. You won't find, I guess you won't find jazz composition, which you would find in some places, even though we have a jazz program here now, a very celebrated one in some terms. But they're writing everything. They're just doing every conceivable thing. Very much it depends upon the person with whom they choose to study.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, do you try to steer them toward twelve-tone music?

MILTON BABBITT: God no! I mean who am I to send these people to their death? No, absolutely not. I try to come to terms with what they want to do. And I usually do that not by sending them to scores that might be pertinent, sending them sometimes to articles—they're not given much to reading articles but some do. There are some great exceptions here. There are some intellectually very superior kids here. And they study a great many scores. They listen to an enormous amount of music and as I said, they write the music they would most like to hear. Some of them, most of them do, very much in the non-vulgar sense, their own thing.

12. The Future of Sophisticated Music

FRANK J. OTERI: What then is the future of, for lack of a better term, sophisticated music?

MILTON BABBITT: Good, I like that term. You know, many years ago, I was obliged to give a talk, which I think was printed called "The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music." I still think it's very unlikely.

FRANK J. OTERI: So it will not survive?

MILTON BABBITT: I don't think it will survive in any form that I would regard as serious, or that I would regard in any public sense. I have students now who write these very, very, very able pieces and very interesting pieces that don't get performed. Who's going to perform them? There's nobody to subsidize these performances. And sometimes they get played around here and sometimes they don't. And, I don't know what kind of hope one can have for this kind of situation. So I think probably the music will be changed as the result by the situation; I hate to think what it's going to be changed to

FRANK J. OTERI: In terms of the kind of directions that music can take beyond the direction you've taken it...

MILTON BABBITT: I don't know what direction it can take because if I could foresee that I'd probably try to do it! But at the moment, look, at the moment we have to face the fact that at the moment we don't have any real champion of demanding contemporary music. We don't have a Mitropoulos. And I mean, Mitropoulos changed the face of music in this town more than any single person. At least you could hear the music. You have to be courageous and committed the way Mitropoulos was. Where do we have a conductor with a major orchestra who is so committed and courageous?

FRANK J. OTERI: But now, we have the Internet; we have programs like *Sibelius*...

MILTON BABBITT: That's another matter.

FRANK J. OTERI: So composers can at least hear anything they write even if it's in a MIDI version and doesn't sound exactly natural...

MILTON BABBITT: Well, if they're satisfied with that, fine. That'll have to be the future. I don't see any other possibility. I mean, I don't know what else they can do. They're not even being recorded in the usual sense of the word. Where are the recordings one used to get from the small record companies? They're not surviving. Their records are not being sold. The people who sold the records are now going bankrupt, as you probably know. On that happy note...

FRANK J. OTERI: The Web seems to offer hope.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, I don't doubt that for a moment and I wouldn't presume to talk about it because I don't have a computer, as I said.

FRANK J. OTERI: The fact that more than a thousand people a day visit *NewMusicBox* to read about contemporary American music is very encouraging to me.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, of course. I accept that. I accept that because I am in no position to comment on that. And if it's true, I can only say that I hope that your hope is right.

FRANK J. OTERI: But perhaps the models we have, the structures we have, the economy that we have that attaches this music to things that it doesn't necessarily really need to be attached to, whether it's older music...

MILTON BABBITT: Or big orchestras.

FRANK J. OTERI: Whether it's the structures that are in place that don't serve this music. It's almost like we're banging on this door and they won't let us in, but in a way, you know, maybe we shouldn't want to be let in because the orchestras aren't doing well, you know...

MILTON BABBITT: They sure aren't.

FRANK J. OTERI: The radio stations that play so-called classical music aren't doing well.

MILTON BABBITT: They're going down the drain. And look at what they play.

FRANK J. OTERI: They're playing nothing but Boccherini...

MILTON BABBITT: No, you can hear Malcolm Arnold and you can hear Arnold Bax, but you can't hear Arnold Schoenberg.

FRANK J. OTERI: But maybe they'd do better if you could hear Arnold Schoenberg.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, I don't know. The public stations that we have in Princeton are preposterous with the exception of WKCR which we now can't get. Contemporary music is represented by, at best, Villa-Lobos or who's the other one they play all the time? Martinu.

FRANK J. OTERI: But of course, you know, KCR plays a lot of jazz.

MILTON BABBITT: That's alright. Fine.

FRANK J. OTERI: But maybe that's what it's all about. Maybe it's about connecting to the new ideas in other forms of music...

MILTON BABBITT: I mean it's fine with me if they play interesting jazz because they also play a lot of other interesting things. We do not get that on any other station around Princeton. Oh, the student Princeton radio station does a little bit, but not much. It's not as good as KCR.

FRANK J. OTERI: Exciting new music sonically has more in common with experimental jazz than it does with Stamitz.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, no doubt. Other stations, the big ones, the expensive ones. Gunther when he was here the other day was talking about what WNYC used to be and what WQXR used to be. WNYC used to have all this live music from every school in New York, from every concert in New York. Well, when I was on a WNYC program a few years ago, which we did from Tully Hall in celebration of something, I asked them about this. They said, "Well, we can't afford to broadcast live concerts. One

transmission line costs \$10,000 and you need a second one in case the first one collapses. We can't afford \$20,000 a concert for just transmission lines." These radio stations used to transmit—I can't tell you, you know, from every university in New York, from every college in New York, from every concert in New York you used to be able to get pick ups. Also, we were allowed to get tapes from abroad. You would hear a lot of records that you couldn't buy or that you never even encountered. Those days seem to have gone. And the program directors.... Who are the program directors of those radio stations? And the announcers who will tell you what is lovely, who will tell you what it great, they're also music critics.

FRANK J. OTERI: On that pleasant note...[laughs]

MILTON BABBITT: Go back to college. Go to Columbia. We beat you in football at least! Princeton beat Columbia. They can't beat anybody else, but they beat Columbia.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, Columbia has a terrible football team.

MILTON BABBITT: My brother's a Columbia man, I must tell you. In fact, he was even more Columbia than you because he went all the way through to the PhD.

FRANK J. OTERI: I got a master's from them.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, he was in math, so he got the PhD. No, my brother when he got out, when he got tossed out of the Navy—they were suddenly dumped out prematurely because the war ended before they expected it to, and I'm talking about World War II, one you may have heard of—and he went to Columbia. Columbia and Yale were the only two places that had mathematicians that interested him; doing the kind of work he was interested in doing and he went to Columbia rather than Yale because Columbia gave him a private room and he had been in the Navy, so for a private room he'd go anywhere. So he lived in John Jay Hall.

FRANK J. OTERI: I served people food in John Jay cafeteria as an undergrad.

MILTON BABBITT: Well, there you are.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's terrible food too.

MILTON BABBITT: Oh, I'm sure. Look all that food was terrible.

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