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Richard Winslow Oral History Interview

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Richard (Dick) Winslow Interview with Karl Scheibe and Peter Frenzel

Antrim, New Hampshire

October 25, 2016

Richard Winslow, Wesleyan class of 1940, is the John Spencer Camp Professor of Music, Emeritus, at Wesleyan University, and a composer, scholar, conductor, and teacher.

KS: Dick, the range of things you were involved with at Wesleyan was just extraordinary. One phrase that came up in your interview that I thought was remarkable was, someone must have asked you whether there was anybody you didn’t like and you replied, “Well, I liked all my colleagues—David McAllester and David McClelland and Carl Schorske and Carl Viggiani and so forth.

PF: So, we wanted to collect any memories you have of your association with Wesleyan, which was a long one and a productive one.

DW: Well, if I had any bad memories, I wouldn’t tell you.

KS: We don’t have to be very careful or systematic about this, but one thing I recall was one of the last memories you reported to me was that after graduation in 1940, you and Don Arnault were roommates at Chi Psi and one day Don came down to Sears and Roebuck where you were working, and you were carrying a toilet.

DW: It was part of my job. I was instructed to pick up a toilet in the back and carry it to the display window. Just as I was halfway down Don showed up and fell down laughing.

KS: As you told me, it has had an effect on you: as soon as you saw Don falling over laughing you quit your job and decided that working at Sears Roebuck was not the career for you.

DW: I quit immediately.

KS: You decided that this was not what you were meant to be on this Earth. In the story that Peter wrote, it was almost as if you had some sort of epiphany or moment when it became clear to you that you were meant to be a musician. You worked for a while in New York, I recall…as an agent or something…

DW: Selling concerts.

KS: But then you decided that you wanted to be a musician yourself, so you got in touch with Joe Daltry.

DW: He was a very important figure in my life.

PF: In the interview you called him a “basic” in your life, in music—that there were two basics. One was John Cage and the other was Joe Daltry.

DW: I’ll tell you a John Cage story. We were sitting in a wing that was tacked onto the old house. John was here and he let me know that Bob Rauschenberg was an important figure in the young
avant-garde in New York. He started looking at the house and started working his way across the house and said, “My God, it’s Bob.”

KS: Bob Rauschenberg?

DW: I have a lovely memory of Bill Snow, who at this point was governor of the state, who was skating down in the ravine and Bill was_______. He was very cheerful about it all.

PF: We skated there, too.

KS: One of the things that you remarked when Peter interviewed you was that when you decided to go to graduate school, somehow you went to Juilliard, or Joe Daltry arranged for you to go to Juilliard, and it seemed that it was a straightforward thing to do. Now it’s practically impossible to get into Juilliard. Was it that easy in those days?

DW: When I went down from Middletown and got on the line to register, the registrar was a crusty old lady, and she said that I had to take this, I had to take that, and so forth. Joe Daltry interrupted and said, “He doesn’t need to take that; he already knows it.” That was my entrance into Juilliard.

KS: What was it like for you as a student at Juilliard? Did you like it? Was it enjoyable?

DW: Oh, yes, I did.

PF: And you lived where?

DW: Out on Long Island. Baldwin, Long Island. It was on a side street. I remember to my horror picking up some of the junk furniture people were throwing out.

KS: When you were an undergraduate at Wesleyan, Dick, from 1936 to 1940, you were an English major, and you took some courses in music.

DW: There was no music major. [Reflects on a previous trip to Minneapolis and the Mississippi

DW: My grandmother, who was a Pratt, as I am, inherited this property, which was called Alabama Farm. It was discovered that it was an Indian word that meant “here we rest.” [Discussion about his family and where they came from.]

KS: There was a Richard Winslow who came over on the Mayflower.

DW: There was an Edward Winslow who was the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. My brother still owns Alabama House [Farm].

KS: Do you find yourself still thinking about Wesleyan a lot?

DW: I do, but it’s very selective. I only think about the good things.

KS: You started there as a student in 1936 and retired as a faculty member in 1983.

DW: Do either of you remember Emily Pendleton, Ralph’s wife?

[He spoke about a performance in the ’92 Theater on the floor of the theater, with the audience on the stage.]
Emily gave me [unintelligible]. Ralph declared he was gay and retired the first year the Arts Center was done. The first play that was done was a translation by Norman Shapiro. Ralph directed.

KS: I remember Ralph vividly. He directed everything, it seems. Phaedre [Phèdre] performed in the ’92 Theater with translation by Robert Lowell, who attended the performance but stormed out because he didn’t like the performance. Apocryphal, maybe not true. Ralph was the director of this production of Phaedre.

PF: I never knew that John Cage was gay. He lived with the dancer, Merce Cunningham.

KS: Was he openly gay when you knew him?

DW: I didn’t think he was openly gay early, but certainly later on.

PF: I know he was a big influence on your music.

DW: I’m a great admirer of John Cage.

KS: How did you first come into contact with him? How did you make the connection?

DW: I think it was in the mid-’50s. I discovered that he could be engaged for an appearance at Wesleyan.

KS: What was he when you first discovered him? Where was he living? Was it New York?

DW: Yes. Before that it was California.

KS: So, did you get in touch with him? How do you first meet him?

DW: I sought him out and he came and did.

PF: He did his prepared piano, I think.

KS: Peter read a notice about his performance in the Chapel in the early ’60s, and the image was that of undergraduates coming to this event because they needed to get Chapel credits.

DW: I thought it was about ’55. His prepared piano. The first half of the program involved a piano on the stage and then that music had been completely ______and then in a very quiet voice he said, “We will now re-prepare the piano for the next number and anybody who wishes to come up and watch is welcome to come up on stage.” The hall exploded. I looked around, and I was sitting right down near the stage and I looked back and I saw students running across the tops of the pews to get there to watch. When did you come to Wesleyan, Peter?


KS: Weren’t you able to invite him as a fellow in the CAS and then he stayed there for a whole year?

DW: He was invited to come for a semester, and in those days Vic Butterfield chose the artist who would hold forth at the Center.

KS: Did Vic react positively to John Cage?
DW: As the agreed-upon semester was coming to a close, I wanted him to stay another semester, as did a few others, so I went to Vic Butterfield and asked if we could have him for another semester. And I’m sure I’m not just making this up—I remember Vic blushing and stammering a little bit as he said, “Henry says—and that was Henry Allen Moe—that John Cage is gay.” And I

KS: Where did you grow up, Dick?

DW: Albany, New York. My dad was superintendent for music in the schools of Albany.

KS: So music was in your life early on.

DW: I had an aunt, Helen, my father’s sister, whose lifelong career was as the accompanist for a very well-known bass-baritone, Emilio de Gogorza.

KS: Did you take piano lessons when you were a child?

DW: My mother was a piano teacher. Aunt Helen, who had this professional career—I wanted to invite her to play a four-hand duet, and I asked her as we moved toward the piano, “Do you think you can play this?” She said, “Well, I think I can try.” Lovely lady.

KS: So you came to Wesleyan knowing a fair amount and already playing the piano? But, as a young student, did you perform? Were there groups? Were there ensembles?

DW: Choral music. We had a conductor named Robert Shaw who became my guide. That was before I went to Juilliard. I was in the Navy for four years and when I came out I went to Juilliard on the GI Bill.

Housekeeper: The MacDowell Colony is just 20 minutes down the road in Peterborough, and Dick, you went there twice.

DW: Two different years.

Housekeeper: And you met a lot of interesting people there, some of whom became very famous. They were also starting out but became well-known.

PF: Such as?

DW: Aaron Copland was one; he was already well-known. [There was one more, but DW couldn’t remember the name.]

KS: Where did you meet Robert Shaw?

DW: I forget.

Housekeeper: Where did you all meet?

KS: We were on the faculty at Wesleyan. We were saying that when Peter applied for a job, Dick interviewed him.

PF: I was very impressed!

DW: Was I boasting? Bob Shaw for one brief period did the chorus at Juilliard and he said once that he couldn’t stand being at Juilliard. I don’t know why. He grew up on the West Coast. When he came east he never went back. He lived in Manhattan.
KS: Would you say that for you choral conducting—well, you’ve done so many things—as a composer, as a director, choral music directing as well as orchestral music directing.

DW: Well, I’m not an orchestral director.

KS: What would you say was your most preferred medium? Choral conducting?

DW: Yes, for sure. I wrote a piece for a big chorus and Bob Shaw was conducting at Juilliard and he took the piece on to perform. The text—there was a verbal text for that piece—was by William Carlos Williams, a fine poet. And two days after the concert was given, I was called into the president’s office and he had a huge desk completely nude of anything except for one piece of paper, letter-size, and he handed me the paper. It was a letter from William Carlos Williams, who had heard the concert because, unbeknownst to him or anyone else, it was broadcast. I was called into the office and told that I’d better move fast on that one.

KS: Was it copyright infringement?

DW: Oh, yes. The letter that he had on his desk said in a curious tone, who gave anyone permission to do this, so the next day I found out where he lived, which was across the river in New Jersey. Because just then I had been offered to have the opportunity to have five songs with the text by William Carlos Williams performed. I told him that I wanted to get those performed but I didn’t want to infringe his rights. I got him on the telephone and told him that I had this opportunity to do these five songs by him and could I have permission to do it. His voice came back: “Whyyyy, sure. Go right ahead. I don’t like to cause any trouble for anybody.”

KS: What a sweet guy. Wasn’t William Carlos Williams also an M.D., a doctor?

DW: Yes, that’s right.

KS: Did you do a fair amount of setting poems to music?

DW: Oh, yes.

PF: You gave me, when I was last here, a CD of Job. I gave it to the Wesleyan Archives. It was wonderful. Each member of the chorus was asked to choose a word from the text of the Book of Job, and each person chose one word, maybe at random, and they all came together and meantime there was a wonderful drone going on underneath. I heard it a couple of times.

DW: I think Steve Crites sang the part of Job.

PF: He played the leading role in Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights.

KS: The image of Steve all dressed in red on Stage Right sticks in my memory. And Dick Donohue played Faustus. Dick Donohue was a wonderful tenor, solo singer. Jon Higgins was another wonderful singer. [Discussion about Rhea Higgins and her family.] Jon told me once, “One of the things that gives me the greatest pleasure is the feeling of singing, the sensation of singing, hearing the voice being produced out of my body.” Being a master of that column of air…

DW: What an insightful thing for a singer to say.

KS: Yes, I think you experience your own voice differently from the way others experience it. Not only is he giving others pleasure, but he himself is enjoying it. I can remember your own
singing—you would put together various faculty quartets. You had a countertenor that you used to contribute from time to time. It seemed like a comfortable range for you.

DW: Countertenor?

KS: Yes.

DW: Absolutely. That’s where I belong.

KS: Lovely. It’s a great sound. Is that your preferred range of singing?

DW: It’s easy.

KS: It’s not falsetto? It’s a genuine full voice?

DW: I’m never clear where falsetto ends and the other begins.

KS: It feels to me like there’s a break when you go falsetto.

PF: It does to me, too. That break is apparent in a yodeler. They capitalize on it.

KS: Would you say that for you Donohue was the prize student or voice of your career?

DW: He was one of them.

KS: There was a fellow named Cochran. Bud Cochran. Also a splendid voice. [Note: He was class of 1965.]

DW: Marvelous tenor.

DW: I can’t remember for sure where I got that Rauschenberg print, but I think I paid $2000 for it.

PF: Have we covered everybody?