

1-2016

Stephanie Ho - Interview with Mark Slobin

Stephanie Ho

Follow this and additional works at: http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist

Recommended Citation

Ho, Stephanie. "Interview with Mark Slobin." Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music - Oral History of International Graduate Students. (January 2016) http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist/20

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the World Music Archives at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music – Oral History of International Graduate Students by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Mark Slobin: All right.

Stephanie Ho: All right.

MS: All right, I'm with Stephanie Ho and this is January of 2016. So, uh, how did you hear about Wesleyan?

SH: Um, my senior year I was looking at grad schools in ethnomusicology, with ethnomusicology programs. I was talking to my professor at Sarah Lawrence, Toby King, and he gave me this chart, which I don't have with me, but it had all of the bigger ethnomusicology programs from the very beginning of the discipline, and I just looked at the bigger names. And he said, "You know, Wesleyan, it's a smaller school but it's really important in the history of ethnomusicology," and my sister goes there too, she's finishing up her undergrad there, so I ended up applying to Wesleyan.

MS: So you were very familiar with the American system.

SH: Yeah.

MS: So how long had you been in America when you started graduate studies?

SH: When I started?

MS: So you were in Peru—

SH: So yeah I was born in Taiwan and then my family was stationed in different parts of the States for my early childhood, in Miami and Atlanta, then we moved to Taipei for a little bit, then we moved to Lima, I went to New York for college, then I went to Middletown!

MS: Ok. So you're real, right, you know America was no surprise to you. Some people, they arrive in Middletown and it's such a shock, everything is so strange.

SH: Yeah.

MS: But you were quite used to a small college, liberal arts—

SH: Yeah, Sarah Lawrence—

MS: —atmosphere. You didn't have much of a transition to here.

SH: No, um, and I went to an American school in Lima, so I'm used to taking courses in English. [laughs] Basically I've only done my schoolwork in English. Yeah.

MS: So, well, so what was it like arriving?

SH: I think I have less of a hard time adjusting because I came straight from college, it was just suddenly I was in a town that, and I don't have a car, and I don't really drive in the States, so that was a little bit difficult. But yeah, I'm used to the smaller classes. And I expected that, so it wasn't much of an adjustment to go from a 13 person seminar in college to like, five people in

your class! [both laugh] It was like 5 or 6, it was very small. And of course I like smaller classes, so. I don't remember being, it was just all of a sudden, "I'm in grad school!"

MS: So it was more about the transition from undergraduate to graduate life, which is different.

SH: Yeah. And it was nice because now, like, when I first got there I only have to focus on ethnomusicology classes and maybe some out of department, instead of trying to scramble around and take math and science or other humanities classes for college. Yeah, I just felt like my focus, I was more focused once I got to Wesleyan.

MS: So how did you get into ethnomusicology to begin with, and why did you want to go to graduate school?

SH: I felt like, I studied violin as a young child, so music was always very important to me. Of course before I went to college I didn't even know that ethnomusicology was a subject that I could study. And actually I stumbled across ethnomusicology by chance. At Sarah Lawrence we have to interview for classes—

MS: Uh huh.

SH:—so my first round, I didn't get any of my classes and ethnomusicology happened to be, that one course happened to be open during second round, and when I was interviewing with the professor I realized, coming from a multicultural background, and ethnomusicology's focus on music, I was like, "Oh, this is perfect!" I never thought that I could study about music and culture and the communities around music. So that's how I got into it. And my year abroad in Oxford really made me more interested in doing research, ethnomusicological research. When I was there I joined a ceili band.

MS: Oh, ok.

SH: I was playing with them, and I was also writing about my experiences with them, so it made sense for me to continue doing that. Yeah.

MS: So then, how did your thinking change when you started graduate seminars?

SH: Um. [pause] How did my thinking change? I felt like people were, it was not just a superficial survey course of all the music from the regions of the world! [laughs]

MS: Right!

SH: And people had their specialties and areas of expertise, and it was interesting to pick at their brains, like Sean and his jazz world and Gabrielle and her Bahamian music. Their passion made me feel like, "It doesn't matter that I don't know everything about every single field of music and every single culture." And just, being more detailed, like in my research of K-pop, for example.

MS: Right.

SH: I just became less superficial.

MS: Right, right.

SH: And of course being in a class with people of different ages, also, makes you mature a little, be more—for me, like to be more conscious of when I was talking or what I was saying. By the end of Sarah Lawrence, I felt that a lot of my seminars were just people who wanted to talk to hear themselves talk.

MS: Right.

SH: [laughs] Yeah. I mean, it sometimes happened at Wesleyan, but! Yeah it was more focused and more professional.

MS: Yeah, yeah, that's what it's supposed to be. [laughs]

SH: Yeah. Well, yeah. Proseminar was interesting because it was of course like a formal class but also we had moments—the moments that I liked the most were when we just used videos on YouTube and brought those in to our discussion and made it a little less formal but still, that was when our discussions were the most lively. I liked to connect to these people that I just met, instead of just talking about these handouts that we were reading.

MS: Right. Huh. Yeah. So this is the moment when the sun gets serious in this part of the room. [Sound of window being covered.] This time of the year it only lasts a few minutes before it's gone!

SH: [laughs] Yeah!

MS: In the summer it goes on and on. So there's these people from different places—did it change your sense of who you are, and your position, so to speak, in the world? That all these people came from these other backgrounds.

SH: Hmm. In proseminar, I definitely felt that Gabrielle and I were called upon to represent ethnomusicology, which was a huge responsibility!

MS: Right, because of the composers.

SH: But I was like, "I'm not ready!" It was also the first time I was really exposed to composers. I never really interacted with composition students, or these people who are just already established as composers and perform a lot and, um, they already had a little bit of a career before they came back to school. Like Dina Maccabee, she was already established as a violinist and viola player. Yeah, it was really, it was interesting to have discussions in seminars with composers who think a little [laughs] out of the box sometimes. Or they just brought opinions and perspectives to a seminar discussion that I would never have encountered. And I discovered about myself that I was very, that I did have opinions about certain issues. I remember having a disagreement about using the word gamelan. Of course, I took it very personally because I'm in a gamelan ensemble right now in New York and I've always been involved in gamelan. And he was saying, "Oh, I have a piece, and I'm gonna call it this 'Sidrazzi Gamelan'." And I said, "Oh,

what instruments are you using” and he was like, “I just want to use the word gamelan because it sounds cool and it means, ‘orchestra’.” And I remember being visibly upset, and arguing with him in class! I was like [feigned anger] “That’s not –,” I think I said something like, “That just doesn’t feel right to me! You can’t just decide you want to use a word because you like it! There’s this cultural significance behind a word!” Anyway. I surprised myself that I felt so strongly about that.

MS: Oh, that’s interesting.

SH: And I think that was one of the first times I started being more assertive in academic contexts. I was still kind of like, meek and shy, in college, even in my senior year, but all of a sudden I had a voice! I’m like, “You can do that, but I just wanted to point out that gamelan isn’t just a word you can just put in any other context.”

MS: I remember, I had a campaign, a long campaign, which I gave up, to get people to not say GAM [rhymes with "clam"] elan, you know.

SH: Really!

MS: When you know, normally everyone says GAMelan. you know. [both laugh] But I just gave up, it’s so widely used. But you actually say gamelan.

SH: What do you mean?

MS: GAM elan instead of gamelan [rhymes with “llama”-lan].

SH: I’ve heard all sorts of pronunciations! Like “game lan”! [laughs] And people don’t usually know it means, like the ensemble, and Carnegie Hall said, “We have a gamelan!” and I thought they had the ensemble, but it was one instrument!

MS: Oh really!

SH: Yeah! [both laugh!] And people at Sarah Lawrence would say, “I have a gamelan at home that I practice on!” and the teacher was like, “Oh, you have the whole ensemble, and you practice all of the instruments at once?” and called her out on it. But there’s funny misunderstandings. Yeah, so, that’s how I became more assertive about certain things that I felt that—oh, there was a divide between composers and ethnomusicologists that I didn’t really like. But I felt like I had to defend ethnomusicology and gamelan.

MS: It’s interesting, talking to people over all these decades, that just shifts all the time. There are these periods when everybody felt they were all just in the same thing, and they were all just doing the same kind of stuff, and there are periods when it feels like there’s a separation. And the program never changes!

SH: Right!

MS: So it’s like a cohort of people that take a certain tack or there’s some trend for a while, and then it shifts over time. So that’s interesting that this period there was more separation, seemed to

be more separation, than even a few years earlier, there was a lot of interaction.

SH: Yeah. I don't know. I don't think there was a moment—or maybe there was a moment when we just went our separate ways.

MS: Really!

SH: I think, in the first year, there wasn't as much of a divide because of proseminar.

MS: Right, that's the idea of proseminar.

SH: Yeah, but then it didn't hold.

MS: It didn't last, right.

SH: I wish there wasn't, but it just, it's there.

MS: Huh.

SH: That's not to say that if I encountered them, we had, we were like hostile towards each other!

MS: Right! [both laugh]

SH: But it was just that, that just happened to be the way it was.

MS: Yeah, such a small group that you want everyone to be, you know. Mutually engaged all the time, and collaborating. You can't really make it happen.

SH: I think that that was also what was different coming to grad school. Being part of a cohort and just being in this small community of *music grad students at Wesleyan*.

MS: Right.

SH: And I just remember, even now, I would be on the campus but I wouldn't see people. There were just the undergrads! On one hand it was a little liberating to not know everybody, but it was also very strange. Like, narrow. I just know these ten people who are here, the music grad students.

MS: So you didn't engage with the undergrads, although you were in the gamelan together with them and things like that?

SH: Um, well..

MS: I mean, they probably thought you were an undergrad, right?

SH: They did. I TAed in the second year, they were like, "What?! We thought you were a freshman." But once they found out I was the TA it was like, they were very cautious of me! [both laugh] Especially because I was the one enforcing attendance, rules, cell phone usage, for

Pak Sumarsam. So maybe they just saw me as the enemy. [laughs] But in advanced gamelan I had some interactions with undergrads, and through my sister, talking to her friends.

MS: Oh, right.

SH: I started going to the second floor dining hall sometimes, and that was also interesting! Because I didn't feel like—I wasn't that much older than the seniors.

MS: No.

SH: But I had—it was actually a little bit strange.

MS: Yeah, it's a funny social situation.

SH: Yeah.

MS: So you did gamelan, and what other ensembles did you do?

SH: Chinese Music Ensemble, Sam Dickey's Mande Music Ensemble—was that it?

MS: That was still there when you came?

SH: Yeah.

MS: It's hard for me to get straight the coordination of who's who.

SH: Yeah, he was a second year when I showed up. I think that was it.

MS: So did the Chinese ensemble have any sort of heritage component for you, or was it just a sort of music you didn't know?

SH: Joy [Lu] had to convince me to join. Because she knew I played violin and she always wants people with musical background, especially violin, for the erhu section. But I don't know. At first I kind of resisted it, but then I did join. I actually really enjoyed it both semesters I was there. And then that's a whole different section of the undergrad population!

MS: Right, right!

SH: It's strange because, of course most of the students are Chinese-speaking, but you do get a handful of non-Chinese-speakers, who, all of a sudden they were feeling like the outsiders and Ellen [Lueck] was one of them, so she was like, "Wow, everyone speaks Chinese and I don't understand anything!" And I don't, I've never been one to, like, gravitate towards the Chinese-speakers, maybe because I don't feel, I feel more like a Westerner.

MS: Right, because you've lived so many places.

SH: Yeah. And so, even then I felt like, just like how I described, walking around campus, feeling like I don't see people. I was just only talking to graduate students in the ensemble, to Joy. Yeah.

MS: Huh. But you speak Chinese, right.

SH: Yeah, so I understood them.

MS: You didn't go to any of the Chinese student events?

SH: Um, I do with my sister a couple times, they were called "late nights," they were these food events in Exley. Those are fun. They had some organized trips to the Asian supermarket.

MS: Oh, ok.

SH: Yeah.

MS: So there's some connection.

SH: Yeah! Always the food. [both laugh]

MS: Food and music.

SH: Food and music. Yeah. It was actually nice to feel a little bit engaged, now that I remember. Like going to those trips to the supermarket, or late night. And the concert for Chinese music ensemble is always really fun. Oh! I played in Nadya's orchestra for a semester.

MS: Whose orchestra?

SH: Nadya, in the orchestra.

MS: Oh, in the orchestra!

SH: [laughs] Yeah.

MS: So, back in your classical mode.

SH: Yeah, just helping her out with the second violins—and that was fun too. That's what I liked most about the Wesleyan program. I feel like, I talked to a couple of my Sarah Lawrence friends, one of them is at Berkeley for ethnomusicology and she doesn't do as much performance. Like she, I think she was in Midiyanto's gamelan ensemble for like a semester, but not as much engagement with performance ensembles.

MS: Yeah, that's the Wesleyan brand.

SH: Which is great!

MS: Yeah.

SH: Yeah, I don't see other programs—

MS: Yeah, we really, that's part of the original, you know, the whole thing.

SH: Yeah.

MS: Yeah, so did you find any connection between research and—not really, because your research wasn't connected to any of the performance things at all—

SH: No—

MS: So it's like two different worlds that you—

SH: Right.

MS: —were in.

SH: Yeah, because—yeah, K-pop didn't have anything to do with Korean drumming or anything, so—although that looked like a really cool ensemble. They always did really impressive performances.

MS: Is there K-pop on campus? I'm sure there were kids, I had a couple papers from undergrads working on K-pop, so it seemed to be something that was in the air.

SH: Uh, yeah, Su [Zheng] asked me to talk about it to her Music and Modernity class in my first year, and of course a lot of undergrads are familiar with K-pop and showed interest in it. Other than that—I think there may have been a dance ensemble or two, that I heard about—but yeah. There wasn't much opportunity for like other ways of connecting my research with the campus.

MS: Particularly because it's on Peru! [both laugh]

SH: Yeah!

MS: If you had been working on K-pop in New York or something it might have been different.

SH: Yeah.

MS: So, did you take courses outside the department?

SH: Yeah, I took Ann Wightman's Latin American history class.

MS: Right.

SH: That was great.

MS: Yeah. You got her before she retired.

SH: Yeah!

MS: That was good.

SH: I think that was my only out-of-department class. I took Liz Lindau's musicology class. Which I had never been exposed to before, actually. A lot of tough reading in there for me!

MS: Yeah!

SH: That was one of the harder classes for me, I think. But no other—I wanted to take Korean, just because there was like a, seems like a pretty good language program there, but I think either I approached the teacher too late, or she didn't have an opening in class, I think, but it didn't actually work out.

MS: Uh huh.

SH: Actually I think because of coming from a liberal arts background and having flexibility in choosing what I wanted to take, just like, "I want to explore this," and I could do that, that was sort of how I went about my studies at Sarah Lawrence, but I wasn't, I think I got tired of it by the time I got to Wesleyan! [laughs] There were all these amazing classes, especially in anthropology—

MS: Yeah, you didn't get into anthropology—

SH: Yeah—

MS: Well, it's pretty short, four semesters—

SH: Yeah, and I wanted to focus on other, like, the requirements I did need to do for the degree! [laughs] I was like, "I'm not gonna do the whole exploring thing anymore, I think I've gotten my fill of that at Sarah Lawrence."

MS: Right, right.

SH: Yeah.

MS: So, the people, your classmates, the people—well, there weren't that many. You were a really small class, just you and Gabrielle.

SH: Right, for the ethnomusicologists.

MS: Yeah.

SH: Yeah.

MS: And the older people.

SH: The composers.

MS: I mean the older ethnomusicologists.

SH: Oh, yeah. Hallie [Blejewski], Sean [Sonderegger], Joy [Lu], yeah. There were some people around. Yeah, but actually, I feel like there were divides even there, by class year, by degree.

MS: Oh, the M.A.s and the Ph.D.s.

SH: Yeah. Which is surprising that there are so many divides in such a small group! (laughs)

MS: Yeah! It's a funny place.

SH: Like, what, what is the point of creating these divisive—

MS: Wow, yeah, I don't think we try to do that, but—

SH: No no, I don't think it's anything with the faculty—

MS: It's not really bureaucratic, like it is some places. And then people don't speak across their little group, you know.

SH: Yeah.

MS: It just happens that way, people with different interests—

SH: And they go through different things. Like, Ender [Terwilliger] and Christine [Wong] had comps, and that's not something I ever had to worry about.

MS: Right, right.

SH: They had to worry about finding funding, and—so I think that becomes like a bonding thing.

MS: Right.

SH: For classmates, of course. And when you don't, you can't relate, then you just, yeah, it just becomes part of the things that divides you.

MS: Right. So, well, I don't know, are there other things about Wesleyan that occur to you, as an experience?

SH: It was really cool once I got to SEM to see all the former Wesleyan people that I never knew, or, like they did their M.A. there or Ph.D. there or went to undergrad, and they all come back, like, I don't see that with Sarah Lawrence students! They don't, like, display that they're from Sarah Lawrence. Not the same way that Wesleyan students do, like across all of the undergrads and grad students—

MS: Yeah, Sarah Lawrence doesn't have that networking feel to it—

SH: Not really, it's very individualistic.

MS: Yeah, it's built that way.

SH: Yeah.

MS: Yeah, the Wesleyan people, they tend to always sniff each other out anywhere in the world.

SH: It's friendlier.

MS: Yeah.

SH: Which is really nice. Once you find that, “Oh, you went to Wesleyan too?” That just happened to me at Carnegie Hall! I ran into this guy in the kitchen, and he’s like, “I know you!” and I said, “No, I don’t—“ and then I realized his name is Jeff Berman and he was a senior in the music department and we were in the same ensemble, I think, so I was like, “Oh, I do know you!” and that’s really cool that there was someone from Wesleyan who was there when I was there, here in the same building with me.

MS: Yeah, it tends to be, if you’re in certain communities, you run into Wesleyan—non-profits, you know—

SH: The New Music scene—

MS: Or the film people—there’s this pretty serious networking that goes on in some of those worlds with the Wesleyan types, right.

SH: Yeah.

MS: Funny. So, well, of course, it’s too early to say what will happen with this background in the rest of your life—I’ve been talking to people who’ve been out 20 or 30 years, they look back and talk about the outcome of this experience, in a way, but you know, you’re just starting out.

SH: Yeah.

MS: So you have this in your pocket somewhere, and you’ll see what you do with it.

SH: Yeah, um, Wesleyan has a really good reputation though. Just having it on my resume, just for where I went to grad school, even if they’re not familiar with the ethnomusicology program, they’re like, “Oh, Wesleyan, we know, that’s a good school.”

MS: Oh, ok.

SH: [laughs] You don’t always get that with, like, no one really knows Sarah Lawrence, even though—

MS: Well that’s, yeah, that’s of course nice, and having any kind of graduate degree is a little step up.

SH: And especially at SEM.

MS: Well, at SEM.

SH: People see your name tag and they’re like, “Oh, you’re from Wesleyan!” Yeah. (laughs)

MS: We’ve maintained a very strong presence over the past 50 years, building up in that little society [both laugh] I mean, it’s a small group so of course there’s going to be a lot of—and of course a lot of our people stay in academia or, you know, want to be at conventions. It’s a very significant number that continued on in same way using this program.

SH: Is the program going to remain as, continue to be small, in terms of how many people they bring in?

MS: Yeah, it'll be what it is, right—as people retire, well, hopefully we get to replace everybody who retires but that's not guaranteed, so, you know, you have to argue for all the replacements now. So who knows, but, I mean, it's not going to get any bigger, that's for sure.

SH: Yeah. Oh! I got an internship at Afropop.org, which I didn't end up doing, but there's another Wesleyan connection!

MS: Right, yeah, Banning and Sean.

SH: Everyone I approach says, “Oh, I know someone who knows Banning,” yeah, so that's really cool.

MS: Yeah, they've been very celebrated lately for their program.

SH: They have a new project called Hip Deep.

MS: Right, they got to places for “deep” stuff.

SH: [laughs] Yeah.

MS: So you were interest in that, but it wasn't—

SH: Yeah, I was, the thing is, I applied to that internship and the Carnegie Hall internship at the same time, and then Carnegie Hall just got back to me way faster. But I would have been working in their editorial department, which is something that really interests me.

MS: Yeah. Well, maybe—

SH: But yeah, I'm trying to think about anything else about my time there—yeah, even though it was just Gabrielle, it was like, we became a support system for each other! Which is nice, to have that person in your cohort.

MS: That's good.

SH: And it's cool to become part of a community where past students are always talked about, like, or like, the people who are still doing their dissertations were always brought up. I knew about Andrew Colwell a year and a half before I actually met him.

MS: Oh, ok, yeah, right.

SH: So like, people talk fondly about each other.

MS: The word is out. People who are out there, and then they come back.

SH: Yeah, I even heard about Dustin, I heard about—I don't remember anymore [laughs] but I just, and then I met these people, and it's really cool that they're held in such high regard by their

peers.

MS: Uh huh.

SH: Yeah, that's like a really nice sense of community there. I mean, I don't know that much about other grad programs, but—

MS: Well, you know, they tend to be bigger and more tracked in some way—

SH: Yeah, I know CUNY, my friend is at CUNY, she said that she can't do anything without departmental approval—

MS: Oh, it's very bureaucratic and it's very dispersed. You don't see people in the halls every day, exactly. And then you have to go out and do all this work for the program—

SH: And then a lot of my smaller classes ended up being the same people, and once you get to your fourth class together, you're pretty comfortable with each other! So—yeah. You see that many new faces for a while in your courses.

MS: Well, ok, that's basically the kind of thing, you know, I'm talking about. It's nice to get your angle on it. Everybody's angle is a little different, you know. So that's good. (pause) Let's see.