Vernon Sutton

Interview with Vernon Sutton

Interviewed by Professor Clarke A. Chambers
University of Minnesota

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University of Minnesota Campus

Vernon Sutton - VS
Clarke A. Chambers - CAC

CAC: This is Clarke Chambers. I'm interviewing Vern Sutton, a long time member of the School of Music and that's the least of what he's given to us, the joy of a beautiful voice in many, many different settings. The date is June 6. It is the afternoon and the interview is being conducted in my office in the Social Science Building.

Vern, as I suggested, in the way of preliminary logistics, it's kind of fun to find out where people came from, how they got interested in what came to be not only their career but their lives. Why don't you give a little short academic intellectual voice autobiography.

VS: All right. I was born and raised in Oklahoma City, recently famous for bad reasons. I went to school in Texas at Austin College in Sherman, Texas, a very fine Liberal Arts College, which we sort of like to think of as the Carleton of the South. Then, I came here in 1960 to do graduate work in music. I came here, actually, because this is choral country and, at that point, I thought I wanted to be a choral director; but once I got here, I got very interested in musicology mainly because of Johannes Riedel who was on the faculty. I got very into musicology; so, I decided to be a musicologist. My degrees, both my master's and my Ph.D., are from this institution in musicology.

CAC: But you were singing all the time?

VS: Sure, all the time I was a singer. In fact, I had sung professionally in show business before I came to school here.

CAC: Say something about that briefly.

VS: I sang in Equity Musical Comedy. I was a chorus boy in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *South Pacific*, and all kinds of summer stock shows.

CAC: What stage?

VS: At the Casa Mañana Theater in Fort Worth, Texas. It was my real introduction to show business. But then, I decided this was not the life for me. Show business was fun but it was intellectually very dull. I needed to be around intelligent people. The people in show business were dear, sweet people. I loved them but they were, most of them, just really dumb. I didn't enjoy being around dumb people that much.

CAC: You hadn't been in serious music then . . . church music or . . . ?

VS: I had done church music all my life, yes, and I had done music in college.

CAC: How early in your life did you know that you had this gift of a beautiful tenor voice?

VS: I was a boy soprano and sang a lot as a child.

CAC: In choir?

VS: In choirs and solos. I did a lot of solo work. In fact, once my voice changed, I sang an awful lot of weddings and funerals even in high school, professionally.

CAC: And across denominational lines?

VS: Yes. Actually, I did a lot of funerals at funeral homes as one of the paid singers. I did that when I came to the Twin Cities, too. It's the way I put myself through graduate school partly.

CAC: Sure. How early, once your voice changed, did you know that you had this wonderful instrument?

VS: After my voice first changed, I didn't sing for awhile and I played instruments. I played the bassoon and the clarinet. By the time I was about seventeen, my voice started developing again and I knew that I really liked to sing; so, I continued to sing and did a lot of solo work through college and then into show business. One of the attractions, not only because this was choral country, was to study voice with Roy Schuessler, who's a very famous voice teacher, nationally famous. I really specifically wanted to study with him. I'm glad I did because he actually freed my voice.

CAC: What does that mean?

VS: If I had continued singing the way I was singing when I came here in 1960, I wouldn't be singing anymore. I was singing incorrectly. It was exciting and people liked it but it was damaging. He taught me how to sing and enables me still to sing because he taught me the correct way. I remember my first lesson with him when he just sort of literally pulled the rug out from under me and said, "We have to start from scratch. [laughter] I spent a whole year with him singing just single notes and scales and learning to breathe. My first year with him, I didn't sing a single song. We just worked on the technique. It's just very rare. I find a lot of teachers don't do that anymore and there are very few real technicians anymore. He was a great technician, just to tell you technically how to do it.

CAC: I can't imagine that to be the case . . .

VS: It is though.

CAC: . . . when the level of teaching of instruments of all sorts has really become more sophisticated?

VS: Yes, well, I think in voice teaching there's an awful lot of charlatanism. [laughter] I think a lot of people teach who really don't know anything about it. They just say, "Try this." Roy had a wonderful ear and he could hear what needed to be done. He, as I say, saved my voice.

CAC: Why aren't there more teachers of that sort [unclear]?

VS: I just think that that's unique. The main thing is the ear. He had the ear. He could hear what was actually happening in a person's voice. He could hear exactly where every sound was and figure out what to do in order to make that sound go somewhere else. He was a great diagnostician in that way. He put many people's voices back together. He was well-known for this also. People who had lost their voice entirely could come to him, and he could train them, and put their voice back together. I don't think people in Minnesota realize how famous he was, actually, nationally.

CAC: I think that's true. We knew him mostly as singing our wonderful *Minnesota*, . . .

VS: *Minnesota, Hail* . . . [laughter]

CAC: *Hail to Thee* on all state occasions, which he did very nicely.

VS: Yes, he did. It was a wonderful voice.

CAC: I'm sure we just went blithely . . . had no idea that that was a unique talent. I always assumed that there were all kinds of able voice teachers as there were violin or clarinet teachers.

VS: No. I think there are able teachers but he was a master teacher.

CAC: Okay.

VS: There are not that many master teachers.

CAC: Say something more about choral country. Would that be because of St. Olaf's tradition?

VS: And Concordia and Augsburg. At that point, in the 1950s . . .

CAC: So, it is really the Lutheran choir tradition?

VS: Oh, yes . . . and Gustavus Adolphus. In the 1950s, I knew all those choirs. They all toured nationally. I had heard all of those choirs. I had heard the Augsburg choir. I heard the Concordia choir, actually, in Dallas when I was in college. I had heard the St. Olaf choir. I had heard the Gustavus Adolphus choir. I had heard four choirs from Minnesota and I was in Oklahoma and Texas; so, I just assumed that all you had to do up here was to just announce you were going to start a choir and people would line up at your door . . .

CAC: [laughter]

VS: . . . which is sort of true, actually. This is still, nationally, considered choral country. There are more choruses here and more good choruses here. I think that's another thing Minnesotans just take for granted that you've got good choruses everywhere. That's not true in other parts of the country. You don't get the quality of level and the abundance of choral singing that we have in this state.

CAC: You mentioned four or five private, religious colleges but not the University of Minnesota.

VS: We had a big chorus here. James Oliveros was well-known but he left the year before I came. In fact, the year I came they didn't have a choir director. David Zinman was a fellow graduate student of mine—we were classmates that year—and he conducted the university chorus that year; so, I sang my first year in the university chorus with David conducting.

CAC: [unclear] early as a real talent.

VS: Yes, he was a great talent then.

CAC: He was attracted here for the same reason?

VS: He came here to study composition with Paul Fetler and Dominick Argento. His degree from us is a master's degree in composition; but as soon as he finished that degree, he went off to France and studied with [Ernest] Ansermet, and became apprentice conductors to various European conductors, and started his climb to fame at that point.

CAC: It's a terrible temptation, being a Minnesota patriot, to think of those good Scandinavian Lutherans as the home of such great music?

VS: Yes, it is. [laughter]

CAC: Is that a stereotype? Is that unfair, inaccurate?

VS: No. I think the Lutheran tradition particularly does value music so much, and Luther himself valued it so much, that it's built into that heritage. A strong value and good quality of music is an important part of Minnesota heritage. It's, once again, something that Minnesotans take for granted but it's not true in other parts of the country. I was just amazed when I came here at the kind of choral singing that goes on here.

CAC: I'm a Carleton College alumnus and being just two miles from St. Olaf, we thought that was really it . . . F. Melius Christiansen, right?

VS: Oh, yes.

CAC: What we were taught was a non-vibrato style of choral singing?

VS: Yes.

CAC: And that's accurate? Not as full a tone?

VS: Yes, that was the tradition. They've all gone away from that now. Concordia and St. Olaf both moved away from that.

CAC: What was it's attraction at that time?

VS: It was a way, supposedly, of making sounds really blend without hearing individuals. It was sort of doing away with the stamp of individuality.

CAC: Which vibrato [unclear]?

VS: Yes, if you've got vibrato, you've got individual voice print.

CAC: I see.

VS: With the straight sound, you have less chance of an individual standing out.

CAC: People can really be taught to sing straight, so to speak?

VS: They can be. It's not healthy but they can and that's one of the reasons most choirs have moved away from it because in the long run it isn't healthy. Young voices . . . you can do that and they can survive but older voices won't take that because it actually is a kind of vocal abuse. It's forcing the voice to do something it doesn't do naturally and it will eventually fight back. So. most of them have moved away from that but that was a part of the Concordia and St. Olaf tradition. Leland Sateren did it at Augsburg, too, somewhat but not nearly as much as the other two big schools did. This was a mecca of Lutheran music when I first came here. Fred Hillary was at Central Lutheran and Edith Norberg was at Mt. Olivet. These were just gods of Lutheran music. [laughter]

CAC: And better music than one would find in Roman Catholic parishes?

VS: Yes.

CAC: [unclear]

VS: Yes. I think that was certainly true. There were certain big churches here in the metropolitan area outside the Lutheran tradition that have had strong music programs: House of Hope Presbyterian, and Westminster Presbyterian, and, of course, Hennepin Avenue Methodist, and St. Mark's Cathedral, and, even at that point, Central Presbyterian in downtown St. Paul also had a strong music program. The suburbs were just beginning their strong programs . . . the Westwood Lutheran and those churches.

CAC: In the meantime, you gave up the bassoon and the clarinet?

VS: I did, I did and I was a singer. I came up here, I thought, to be a choral director but I ended up singing opera and music theater. I was a theater minor. In my master's, I was a musicology major but I had a theater history minor and that's where I met Bob Moulton.

CAC: I want to talk about that relationship in a bit. We can do it right now.

VS: It was my first quarter here, fall of 1960. I took theater history which was Ken Graham's course but Ken Graham was on quarter leave in New York working on *Look Homeward, Angel.* He was observing *Look Homeward, Angel* which was going in production that fall; so, Bob Moulton taught the course for one quarter. He was outrageous, just outrageous. And David Zinman and I had that course and also Michael Price. I just saw him . . . he got a Tony because he's the managing director of the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut. He got a Tony on Monday night and I said, "There's Michael Price." I'll never forget Michael Price. [laughter] We did a seminar and we all had various topics we had to talk on. Michael Price talked on liturgical drama but had not done any research, not being a Roman Catholic himself, he had done no research on Roman Catholicism and Bob just crucified him. [laughter] He got up and tried to talk about liturgical drama without knowing anything about liturgy. Of course, it didn't work.

CAC: Where did Bob get these talents? I'm sure it was an absurd thing to have a dancer teaching this course?

VS: And he was, of course, the university costumer at that point. I think he was just assigned it.

CAC: He was a very versatile person.

VS: Oh, he was extremely versatile, yes. We hit it off immediately. My lecture was on Japanese puppet theater, bunraku. I did this elaborate research on it. He loved it. That got me sort of into the theater crowd. I think it is one of the reasons that I still have good rapport with the Theater Department, much more so than . . . At that point, the rapport between the Theatre Department and the Music Department was really strained, to say the least, because they both occupied Scott Hall. The cohabitation in Scott Hall was not a happy thing. There was real tension in the early 1960s when I came here between the Theatre Department and the Music Department.

CAC: It can't come just from living close?

VS: No, there were all kinds of things. Aliferos had gone and he had been a good link. James Aliferos was a conductor who had done several productions with the Theatre Department. They had done operas. They did *The Beggar's Opera.* They did *The Rape of Lucrece.* They did, evidently, a wonderful performance of *Oedipus Rex*, of Stravinsky.

CAC: That would be ambitious.

VS: Evidently, those were good days where the Theatre Department and the Music Department were working together; but by the time I got here in 1960, there was some real bad blood. They didn't even talk to one another. They sort of tolerated one another because they had to.

CAC: A fight for space to use [unclear]?

VS: Fight for space. Because they were in there with their season which was six or eight shows a year but we had to use it for our recitals. So, every set they built, every set on the stage right side had to be hinged, the bottom half had to be hinged so they could wheel the piano out of that storage place on the stage right onto the stage. All of our recitals were given on sets. I will never forget singing a recital on the set of *Rose Tattoo.*

CAC: [laughter]

VS: Here was this grand piano on the set of *Rose Tattoo.*

CAC: This must have been a certain disenchantment because in Scott Hall, the acoustics were not good. It was a crowded little rectangle of a cracker box.

VS: Yes, tiny little stage.

CAC: That must have been a terrible place to learn and produce these things?

VS: I didn't think so at the time. I thought it was quite fun myself. I didn't feel that we were disadvantaged. I just realized as a student that there was this sort of tension between the two departments but I had [unclear] in both departments. For many years, I was a major link. Even when I was a student, I became a link between the departments. Now, that I'm head of the department, it's very helpful; although, the faculty members that I studied with are all gone now, have all retired, the ones that have come since . . . it was always understood that I was okay then with the Theater Department.

CAC: Roy Schuessler was not only this great vocal teacher but he was also chair of the program . . . for a long time?

VS: Yes, for ten years.

CAC: While you were there?

VS: Yes.

CAC: What was its administrative structure and to whom did it report? It was part of CLA [College of Liberal Arts]?

VS: It's always been a part of CLA, yes.

CAC: It wasn't free-standing in any way?

VS: It never has been. It's always been a CLA department. It was a department of Music until Lloyd Ultan came. He's the one that led the campaign to change the nomenclature to the School of Music.

CAC: This was so that other degrees could be offered, or better students attracted, or what?

VS: Mainly, it's a recruitment thing. It didn't change anything about the structure except for the names of the offices.

CAC: Or the courses were being . . . ?

VS: The courses were the same. Degrees were the same. We still are a Music department but because of our size . . . Generally, when a music department in the National Association of Schools of Music becomes as large as we are, they become Schools of Music and rather than having chairs . . .

CAC: Well, at that point, usually drift off into a semi-autonomous [unclear].

VS: Some of them do. There are some schools in the United States . . . most of the really big music schools are autonomous and have their own deans . . . they're free-standing schools: Michigan, USC, Eastman, North Texas; but a lot of the Big Ten are now part of Colleges of Fine Arts rather than College of Liberal Arts. That's been the main move away. There are a few of us that are still parts of College Liberal Arts. Madison and Iowa, I think they're still Liberal Arts.

CAC: Does it make a difference that this Music Department, now a School, is imbedded in the Liberal Arts College? Does that do something with the training of undergraduates and graduate students or doesn't it make that much difference?

VS: It doesn't really make that much difference. I think the people in Liberal Arts like to think it does and in a way it does . . .

CAC: They say it so often, I assume there must be some truth to it.

VS: I know. Even if we were to become autonomous, even if someone were to wave a wand and suddenly make us an autonomous school of music, which is not going to happen, our students would still have to take liberal arts courses. It's required by our national accrediting association. We will never be a conservatory and now, what's curious, is even the conservatories are requiring liberal arts courses of their majors.

CAC: I hope so.

VS: Joe Polisi, the president of Juilliard, recently said, "We've got to train these people to do something besides music because they get out into the world."

CAC: They will know music better by knowing something else.

VS: Sure. The liberal arts requirements would be there whether we were a part of Liberal Arts or not. We would still be enrolling our students in their courses.

CAC: Typically, an undergraduate would take what kind of linkage, what kind of minors in supporting fields then? Would it be in the other arts' fields or not?

VS: Mostly in the other arts. They would still have to take their math, and science, and English, and all of those. We still are required to do that even if we were autonomous. Our students would still have to do that because we're considered a comprehensive school of music rather than a conservatory, which means that in our national accreditation, which happens every ten years, we have to prove that our students are enrolled in . . . we have to show them degree programs that show our students are taking all of these other courses.

CAC: I'm going to back up into the 1960s again now and talk about the mission of the department as Roy Schuessler managed it at that time. How much of it is training of music teachers, how much of it is training performers, how much of it is recreational, etcetera? What's the balance up to the 1960s.?

VS: In the 1960s it was mainly the training of academics, of musicologists, composers and music theorists.

CAC: This would be the graduate level?

VS: Even at the undergraduate level. The degrees that people were taking were actually academic degrees. You got a degree in music. You didn't get a degree in piano even at the undergraduate level. You might be a pianist but you had a liberal arts degree. You didn't have a performance degree which meant that you took a lot more liberal arts courses. It was a much broader education. It was a more academic education than we have now for most of our students; so, there were no performance degrees in the 1960s when I came. There were no performance degrees at all. That's the innovation that Schuessler, during his ten years, actually was able to introduce, the acknowledgement of the Bachelor of Music, Master of Music, and at that point, eventually then, the Doctor of Music, the D.M.A.

CAC: This was with the encouragement of the college. or the resistance. or reluctance? What's that relationship?

VS: It took a long time.

CAC: The nature of the resistance then or reluctance would have been what?

VS: That we didn't want to become a conservatory. We're to train people in the academic world rather than in the professional world. It was that pull between professionalism and academicism.

CAC: But in fact, an instrumentalist or a pianist could get good training in her instrument here?

VS: Sure, because at that point we had a good core of faculty on certain things but the Minneapolis Symphony was in residence at the Northrop Auditorium all the time.

CAC: All through the 1960s, through the 1970s?

VS: Yes, that was through 1960s.

CAC: Okay.

VS: And had been . . .

CAC: Oh, my. We used to come up from Carleton before the war.

VS: . . . since Mrs. Scott got it all arranged that they would sort of become the orchestra in residence here. Mrs. Carlyle Scott was a great pusher and shaker there. Having them in residence meant that those guys just walked across the street to teach lessons for our kids. It still happens. We still have members of the Minnesota Orchestra, and now the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra [SPCO], who teach for us.

CAC: This is an adjunct status?

VS: It's an affiliate status. They are called affiliate faculty members.

CAC: It's like clinical professor of medicine?

VS: Yes. The adjunct . . . it's curious. We've been trying to get them a title like adjunct and evidently at the university you can't be called an adjunct unless you donate your services.

CAC: [laughter] I'm glad to hear that because I was an adjunct member of the School of Social Work for a number of years.

VS: [laughter]

CAC: And that's true. I donated my services, too. I didn't know that was why I had such a nice title.

VS: These men provided world-class, and still do, instruction for us at a fairly good rate, at a bargain rate for us. It's an advantage that we have.

CAC: The student pays the instructor or the student pays the university?

VS: The university.

CAC: Then you'll pay the instructor?

VS: Right. The student gets a real bargain. At that point, in the 1960s, you paid something like ten dollars an hour for your lesson and your teacher probably got paid twenty dollars an hour.

CAC: One has to triple that in current dollars?

VS: Yes.

CAC: That's not a bad hourly take . . . fifty, sixty dollars in current terms?

VS: No. What it is now though is the students still only pay ten dollars an hour but their teachers make up to fifty dollars an hour; so, the School of Music subsidizes that kind of instruction with other instructional money.

CAC: What's the screening process for accepting? At what level does the undergraduate student have to be to get a member of the symphony to instruct her?

VS: They have to be music majors first of all, which means there's a certain screening there. What we do is we have certain instruments that are taught by those people. We have full time violinists. We have a full time viola teacher, a full time cello teacher . . .

CAC: On full time staff?

VS: . . . on full time staff. It's the instruments that we don't have full time that we rely on these guys to teach for us. Now, this is an advantage we have that we are in the midst of a metropolitan area that has this pool of players. If we were in Iowa City, or Madison, or even in Ann Arbor, you don't have that pool of players available to you . . . or Bloomington, Indiana. They have to hire a separate person full time to teach flute; whereas, we have our choice of all kinds of wonderful flute players in town to teach flute for us. This has been a comparative advantage that we have . . . world-class instruction at a very small price actually. Fifty dollars an hour for these guys is very cheap. They mostly make eighty or ninety dollars an hour when they teach privately. They cut their rates to come and teach for us just because they want to be associated with us.

CAC: Do many of your performers have an opportunity to play in chamber music groups?

VS: Yes.

CAC: Outside of the Department of Music?

VS: Yes. Many people say this is a great advantage. Some people see it as a disadvantage. Having the wonderful musical climate that we have in the Twin Cities area with all kinds of opportunities means that our students have really a number of chances for employment. They can go out and play in orchestras. They can play in all kinds of groups. They can play for theaters. They can play gigs for weddings, all kinds of receptions, whatever, which is a great advantage for them but it also is distracting because it means they don't spend as much time

doing their school work, or not as much time playing for us, or performing with us. So, we have to be careful what kinds of things we allow students to do.

CAC: That's not monitored work for the most part?

VS: Yes, for the most part it's their private life. If they were going to school in Bloomington, Indiana, they certainly would just be doing their school work. There wouldn't be anything else for them to do. It's an advantage but it is a distraction.

CAC: Do you think it makes for more versatility for those musicians having the diverse opportunities there?

VS: I hope so. If they're taking advantage of it, yes, it will. There are some people though that think that it also cuts down on their quality because they're so dispersed at this point in their development. They're doing too many things. They should be concentrating on this or that. There are two sides to the coin.

CAC: But your career would suggest that if it's disciplined there is an asset in versatility?

VS: I think the more tricks you have in your bag, the better off you are nowadays.

CAC: [laughter] I'm going to go back to the 1960s again.

VS: Okay.

CAC: How many of those undergraduates are being prepared to be directors of high school musical programs?

VS: That was the other thing. If you didn't get a B.A. in Music, an academic degree, you were getting a B.S. in Music Education . . . the undergraduates. I would say, at least half of the student body, at that point, both graduate and undergraduate, were Music Education.

CAC: That falls off terribly later . . . I mean sharply?

VS: It does. Well, it still is about the same size as it was; it's just that everything else has gotten bigger.

CAC: I see.

VS: Once we introduced the Performance degrees in the 1970s, that opened up a whole new market for young people to come and get a degree if they were really interested in being a professional performer and wanted a Performance degree. So that now, our student body is largely Performance degrees. We have 300 undergraduate majors and a little over 200 graduate

majors and I would say at least 80 percent of those degrees are Performance degrees. The rest are Music Education and then we still have academics who still have musicologists, and theorists, and composers.

CAC: I would imagine that these Lutheran schools that you talked about earlier that they were big on music education?

VS: Yes.

CAC: And there was a great reservoir of talent of persons going out into secondary teaching from those schools?

VS: Right.

CAC: But also from the University of Minnesota?

VS: Yes. That's right.

CAC: Okay. I'll bet those small colleges had an employment advantage?

VS: I'm not sure. It would be interesting to ask about that. As I look around the music educators now, we have an awful lot of graduates out there. When I go to the convention every year, when we have our reception, we have hundreds of people come to our reception. I think part of it is our graduate program. A lot of people who maybe did their undergraduate work in music education at St. Olaf, or at Mankato, or St. Cloud, or Bemidji, or wherever, will come here to do a graduate degree because they can't do that elsewhere. So, we do have some St. Olaf graduates who are also our graduates.

CAC: I push on the point just a bit because your original statement was that this was choral country.

VS: Yes.

CAC: I have a sense that in Iowa, in Minnesota, and perhaps part of Wisconsin, that it was thought in the country that our secondary School of Music was better here. . . .

VS: It is.

CAC: . . . than almost any other region?

VS: It still is.

CAC: I'm trying to determine whether there's some kind of link in the things you've been talking about.

VS: It still is. I think that we still have better music here than most parts of the country in K[indergarten] through 12.

CAC: So it goes back to tradition?

VS: It goes back to tradition.

CAC: And what your [unclear] in a broader cultural sense?

VS: It's not just because of the graduates who are out there teaching. I think it has to do with the culture of the towns.

CAC: How do you perceive that in this region?

VS: There are still a lot of church choirs. There are more church choirs here. The church choirs in this part of the country are so much better than churches elsewhere. You might go to Raleigh, North Carolina, and one of the big churches will have a good choir. But you can't go to some of the small churches as you can here and hear the kind of choral singing elsewhere in the country. I just think that more people are used to singing here and whether it's the Lutheran heritage or what it is, I don't know, but more people sing here.

CAC: Once it persists and then you hear it, then it's like eating good food when you're a kid. You know what good food is.

VS: Yes. Yes.

CAC: Partly my reasons are personal . . . I was born and reared in a prairie town of southern Minnesota, Blue Earth.

VS: Oh, Blue Earth, sure.

CAC: A young, beautiful Scandinavian woman came from your department, I suppose in 1937, and said, "What we'll work on is the *Messiah*"—and we did! That first year she was there, we worked up the *Messiah* with solo voices from the churches.

VS: Yes.

CAC: For this high school choir—we didn't sing the whole thing . . . no one sings the whole thing—what an experience!

VS: Yes.

CAC: What I'm asking is—you're agreeing—that doesn't happen in many other regions?

VS: No, but it still happens here. It still happens. We just went up to Staples a year ago and did the Beethoven ninth with the community chorus and the high school choir.

CAC: Good heavens! And what's the size of that community?

VS: It's less than 5,000 people but they have this choral tradition. They have this men's choir that's been there over fifty years in this town, a community men's choir. They also now have, for the past twenty or twenty-five years, a community women's choir. Hundreds sing in this choir plus some of the church choirs joined in, several of the church choirs, and then the high school choir. They all learned the Beethoven ninth. We took our orchestra up there and did the Beethoven ninth with them.

CAC: There you are. We could handle Handel in 1937 and Beethoven in 1995.

VS: I've wanted to do this ever since we took the operas to the farms. When we took *The Tender Land* out to the farms, I've wanted to go back to those and do the *Messiah*. I've wanted to take an orchestra down to some of those towns, to Pipestone or . . .

CAC: Or to supplement [unclear]?

VS: Yes, to supplement the orchestra there and maybe take our chamber singers and get together with their high school choir, and church choirs, and community chorus and do a *Messiah* with orchestra.

CAC: Make a little check in your mind . . . I want to come back about the continuing outreach . . .

VS: Sure.

CAC: . . . of a department to the region because that's so often ignored in official stories of universities, which is kind of the end product of this.

VS: Yes.

CAC: We think of the extension of Agriculture and the extension of the Institute of Technology. That story I want to come back to.

VS: Okay.

CAC: So, it's the 1960s and Roy Schuessler is that decade. He's the chair or director . . .

VS: Actually, Paul Oberg was the chair then.

CAC: I see.

VS: Schuessler took over in the 1970s. Paul Oberg stepped down and Schuessler was in for ten years. Paul Oberg was, I think, the one who set the tone for the sort of status quo. He was sort of satisfied with the way things were. In fact, there is a letter in the university archives in which he wrote somebody in the administration and told them that he didn't think there was a need for a new music building because Scott Hall would be sufficient for our needs to the year 2000.

CAC: And of course, it wasn't even sufficient at the time?

VS: No, it wasn't even sufficient at the time. He was also well-known in administration, I'm told now, because he actually returned money at the end of the year. [laughter]

CAC: [laughter]

VS: He was bargain basement, saved money, and returned it thinking that was a good thing.

CAC: That he'd earn brownie points?

VS: [laughter]

CAC: So those were years of drift?

VS: Things were okay but nothing really interesting and exciting was happening.

CAC: What were you doing as faculty at that time then? What was your assignment?

VS: Actually, I didn't join the faculty until 1967.

CAC: Okay.

VS: I was a graduate student from 1960 to 1966 and then I went away to Rome. I had a Fulbright [Scholarship] and I studied at the Rome opera for a year.

CAC: I see. What did you study there?

VS: I studied singing. I studied opera. I studied with the main coach of the Rome opera on my Fulbright and I also did research for my dissertation.

CAC: Which was what, just incidentally?

VS: On Nicholas Popura, the music of Nicola Porpora, who was one of the great Italian composers in the Eighteenth Century, the teacher of Farinelli, the great castrato. I did research on his music and decided what I wanted to do . . . I finally did my dissertation on his chamber cantatas. I never intended to come back here, actually. I was going to finish my dissertation and get a job somewhere.

CAC: Were there lots of jobs for people in music?

VS: Yes, at that point, there were quite a few jobs.

CAC: So, that the job market was good across the board? I ask that question. Everybody says, "Oh, yes . . . in the mid 1960s . . . hey, you could get a job anywhere."

VS: Sure. I had several job offers. Once I finally did come on the faculty here, I got several other job offers but I turned them down to stay here.

CAC: What was your assignment when you came back?

VS: I was musicologist. I was hired as a musicologist and my major assignment was Music Appreciation, Introduction to Music for the non-majors, which I adored.

CAC: So, there was another mission of the school we haven't talked about.

VS: Yes. I taught that for twenty-five years. In fact, that's why I won the [unclear] [unclear] . . . because of that. I loved it because I had 500 students in a class every quarter.

CAC: And the [unclear] better and better?

VS: Oh, yes. Yes. I've taught it on KUOM [radio] three times. There are three different recorded versions of me teaching it for independent study. I taught that and I taught several of their musicology courses, Music History, Music Literature courses, for my first year. Then at the end of my first year, in the spring of 1968, Roy called me in—Roy had become the chair just the year before—and said, "We need someone to direct the opera for next year." This was June, about this time of year, during finals week. Paul Knowles was the opera director at that point. [He said,] "Paul Knowles has just gotten a job offer to become the head voice teacher at Louisiana State and he's going; so, I need someone to direct the opera program for next year." I said, "Pfff, I've never directed an opera." He said, "Well but you've sung in a lot of them," which is true. So, I said, "Okay." I was one year on the faculty. I was an instructor. He asked me if I would do that and I said, "Okay." I would do it, not knowing that that's like saying, "You've read a lot of books so write one." [laughter] I knew nothing about directing an opera.

CAC: I should think there would be a limited number of voices up to opera in a good department.

VS: Yes. Paul Knowles had several good students actually. He did several good productions and several students went on to become professional singers that he trained in the 1950s and in the early 1960s. But, no, in my first quarter, I had two students. I had two sopranos. The opera program was two sopranos. By the next quarter, by winter quarter, we had about fifteen but I started with two.

CAC: So, did you do an opera?

VS: Yes! I did scenes that first year but the quarter I did *Dido and Aeneas* and several of the Monteverdi madrigal ballets. I staged those with singers and I used a couple of instruments on *Dido and Aeneas.* After that, we did and opera virtually every quarter then.

CAC: Every quarter?

VS: Yes.

CAC: That's ambitious.

VS: Yes, it was too ambitious but I didn't know that. I didn't know I shouldn't be doing that.

CAC: All the better, sure. What a wonderful experience for lots of young people.

VS: I was an interim though. They were going to do, supposedly, a search and find someone to do the opera program. I was going to do it for one year. It came the end of that year and they hadn't mounted a search; so, he asked me to do it again. Then, it finally became part of my job description. That was in 1968 and I've been directing the opera since 1968. [laughter] It was the longest sort of interim . . .

CAC: In the meantime, you're doing some things in the theater also?

VS: I did occasional things in the theater.

CAC: Now, lets talk about Bob Moulton and that partnership because so many of us perceive that you did things together, not only Showboat but a lot of other things.

VS: Actually, I was never on the Showboat. I wanted to be on the Showboat but I was never on the Showboat. I was at the Stagecoach. Wendel Josal and Bob Moulton started the Stagecoach in the summer of 1962.

CAC: And you mean mostly of their own students?

VS: A lot of university students; although, there were also other community people, older people. The Stagecoach Company never really looked like the Showboat because there were some adults. They weren't just all fresh kids from the Theater Department. I had done one production here in the basement of Scott Hall. I had been in a production of an original play called *Tell Me No Lies* in which I played a loud mouthed southern sheriff. It was a very funny role. Josal had seen me do that and he liked that; so, when they came around to putting together a company for the Stagecoach, they wanted somebody who could act and sing, and they asked me to join their company. I was their villain for the first year. I got to do all kinds of musical numbers but in the plays, I was the villain.

CAC: They used the olio technique [unclear]?

VS: It was melodrama with olios, yes; so, I got a real training in early theater. Bob was a master at this style, and I understood what he meant because I had done a lot of theater, and I guess I'd been exposed to a lot more theater than I realized I had and musical styles, and I'd always been interested in those things; so, he and I hit it off really well.

CAC: Well, you could do parodies of those [unclear]?

VS: Yes. But the secret to Bob's—I'm dealing with this right now because I'm creating some olios for the Showboat for this year and they've deliberately asked me to try to recreate the kinds of things that Bob and I did at the Stagecoach—style as we developed it was that you really never make fun of the style. You yourself do it as if it is great art.

CAC: Okay.

VS: And you let the audience laugh at it if they think it's funny.

CAC: It's funnier if it has that tone of authenticity?

VS: Yes, and if you're really serious about this and you really look like you think you're doing something really terrific, that is really great art when you're really destroying, basically, the piece of music as you do it because you are too serious, that becomes an important part of the style of letting the audience laugh at that era rather than you as a performer laughing at that era. I got to have a really great appreciation for that material. That material is really very good. It stands on its own. It's just that in our sophistication, later sophistication, we somehow think those sentiments are somehow not sophisticated.

CAC: We have the *Bridges of Madison County* after all.

VS: Yes, we do. [laughter] But taking seriously that material is very difficult for these students I'm working with now.

CAC: Why I'm just sure because irony comes very late. You have to have been around the block a couple times to get . . .

VS: They keep wanting to do a little subtext with their face and comment on this. Forget that. Don't show us that you think this is funny.

CAC: It's a hard [unclear] for kids to add.

VS: Yes. You treat this as if it's great art and you are a great artist doing it. That was a part of the style.

CAC: It wasn't originally [unclear]. I mean there wasn't a lot of people that would do it this way?

VS: No, but I think that was a secret that he had latched on to that a lot of people don't. A lot of people who do that style of theater try to do campy things with it and as performers make fun of it; so, the audience knows that it's supposed to be silly. Well, you don't have to. The material itself if done seriously is exquisitely silly.

CAC: A better joke?

VS: It's really a much better joke. If you let the audience discover it . . . that that's their reaction to it rather than leading them and winking at the audience and saying, "This really isn't this silly. We'll enjoy this, all the silliness." I find that audiences remember it more. They remember the fact that I took it so seriously and that I sang it as if I thought I was singing Verdi or Mozart . . . that it was great art.

CAC: There was a variation on that. I had a mentor in graduate school who was a great lecturer and as a T.A. [teaching assistant], I sat under him, and then he let me give lectures, and then he would criticize them, and so forth. You know, that was a point that he made, too, that if you're going to inject humor into a history lecture, you have to let the audience make the joke; that is, the students have to construct the humor.

VS: Yes.

CAC: If you lay it on thick, you may get a laugh but it's a sophomoric laugh. He said, "That isn't what we want here. We want real humor."

VS: [laughter]

CAC: "Let the student do it," or in this case the audience.

VS: Yes, let the audience do it.

CAC: See, it's the same thing.

VS: Yes.

CAC: That's interesting. Well! we're talking mostly about the first ten, fifteen years of your career?

VS: Yes.

CAC: Then, there were years—let's date them somehow—that are kind of years of drift and status quo and . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

CAC: We're back to this period which is from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s, roughly, that we're talking about now?

VS: Yes. The 1960s were pretty much status quo with some good people. Argento had come in 1958 and [Frank] Bencriscutto came in 1960. Fetler was already here and Riedel was here. [Robert] Laudon came in the early 1960s.

CAC: What was Laudon?

VS: He's a musicologist.

CAC: Okay . . . because the other names are nationally renowned?

VS: Yes.

CAC: Maybe, Laudon, too?

VS: Not nearly as much as the others.

CAC: That's remarkable to have that cluster of folks here.

VS: Yes, and it was not a large department. That's what's been interesting about music here is that we've always had a cluster of people who are nationally well-known. I think that was quite exceptional in those days to have that many. Heinrich Fleischer was the university organist and he was internationally known. Bernard Weiser was a . . .

CAC: Great pianist.

VS: . . . a great pianist . . . a well-known Rachmaninoff interpreter. So, it was really quite an illustrious crowd.

CAC: You were all doing your jobs well?

VS: I think so.

CAC: But there weren't a lot of new things happening?

VS: No. There wasn't a lot of vision as to what could happen, where the department could go, where it would go. It was just sort of a service organization at that point for the rest of the university and it did things but it didn't do them in the kind of way that we did later. When Lloyd Ultan joined the faculty as the director, one of the things that he did is he changed . . .

CAC: He came in what year?

VS: He was here for ten years, too. He was here from about 1975 to 1985, I'd say.

CAC: Okay. Well, people doing serious history can look that up.

VS: Yes. It was mid 1970s, early 1980s that he was here. He actually accomplished a great deal.

CAC: What was he brought here to accomplish? He would have been brought by Frank Sorauf?

VS: Yes, he was.

CAC: Frank was an opera buff?

VS: Yes. Frank was a great supporter. Well, [E.W.] Ziebarth had been a great supporter of us, too. We had been very fortunate to have deans and associate deans that were . . . Gerhardt was associate dean.

CAC: Gerhardt Weiss?

VS: Yes, Gerhardt Weiss was associate dean for awhile and we grew a lot while Gerhardt was that associate dean, as a matter of fact. We got some really good people in. He was a supporter. Some of the other associate deans have not been that supportive. That's when there was an associate dean for the Arts and the Humanities. Ultan was brought, I think mainly . . . It was the first time a national search had been done for a director of the CLA department. We brought in a separate line. A line was created to run the school because, at that point, I think Sorauf thought we needed to gain stature, that the Department of Music, if it was going to be anything, needed some vision. I think that was the general feeling about that, that some of the outsiders,

some of our external supporters, community people like Judson Bemis and Eleanor Bell, and various other community supporters who have always been very staunch believers in the Music Department, wanted to go somewhere.

CAC: And supporters with funds?

VS: Yes, some of them had funds. Those who didn't have a lot of funds had a lot of clout in the community.

CAC: Should we pause here? At that time, the Minnesota Foundation was not yet really all that strong . . .

VS: No, it wasn't.

CAC: . . . so that you had to develop your own philanthropic funding?

VS: Right. At that point, we had several people who had supported us and we had several scholarship funds.

CAC: How broad was it? You say Judson Bemis . . . does he have a network that he brings with him?

VS: Yes, he does. He has a huge network because of his association with the Minnesota Orchestra and with, at that point what was called, the Center Opera, which became the Minnesota Opera. He had been president of the Board of the Minnesota Orchestra and Walker Art Center. There were all kinds of tie-ins that he had. Eleanor Bell was also, as a pianist, was very interested in what was going on here. So, the two of them actually helped establish this advisory committee which still goes. I still have this advisory committee. I met with them this morning and today was Sandy Bemis's last meeting. He had been on the advisory committee from the very beginning.

CAC: Heavens!

VS: And he stepped down today. This was his last meeting. It's a very strong board now of some really powerful people in the Twin Cities who are interested in the university, and interested in music, and meet with me every other month, mainly to give me advice.

CAC: What kind of advice do they give?

VS: Oh! it's just wonderful. Everything from advice of names I can go to, or the Foundation can go to, to help get some funding for this or that and just some practical advice, even business. Several of these, like Sandy Bemis is a wonderful business man or Burt[on] Cohen with the *Minneapolis/St. Paul Magazine*, are really savvy businessmen who will give me all kinds of

business advice on things that are going on. They say, "What? They're doing what to you? This is not good business. You can't do this. You can't allow them to do this." [laughter] It's been very helpful also just to bounce ideas off of them and get ideas of what could I do for this or that or could you help me do this or that?

CAC: Do you know of any other unit in the university that has that kind of an advisory? The Graduate School does, came to, but do you know of any others?

VS: The Carlson School [of Management] does.

CAC: Ah.

VS: The Carlson School has a very strong external board but you would expect them to, I think, more than anybody else.

CAC: Theater?

VS: Theater is just starting one. They've had a lot of supporters but they've never gotten some of the people with clout together. We wouldn't have the Ferguson Hall if it weren't for Sandy Bemis. He helped get that building through the legislature. We wouldn't have the Ted Mann Concert Hall without Sandy. He went over there with Karen Wolff and sat until three o'clock in the morning to testify at a hearing in order to get that building.

CAC: He brought along Ted Mann, too?

VS: Yes. He and Curt Carlson flew out to California and convinced Ted Mann to give the $2½ million for that building. It's very important to have these people.

CAC: So, these connections begin in the mid 1970s?

VS: In the mid 1970s, yes.

CAC: And with Lloyd Ultan?

VS: With Lloyd Ultan. Roy had wonderful connections, too. He and his wife, Elaine, had wonderful connections to the society in the Twin Cities and there were several very fine, and still very well established, scholarship funds that were begun during Roy's time because of the development work that did . . . the Pond Scholarships, for instance, and the Mary Ann Wilson Scholarships. There are various scholarships that are associated with people that were a part of Roy's circle that he was able to bring in.

CAC: Mary Ann Wilson, the president's wife?

VS: Yes.

CAC: She was musical but I didn't realize there had been a scholarship . . .

VS: Yes, we still give a Mary Ann Wilson Scholarship.

CAC: Good.

VS: Lloyd was brought in specifically to build the program. The first thing he did was change the nomenclature to a School of Music and he became not the chair of the department but the director of the School of Music. He started building a staff with an assistant director and so on.

CAC: Ah, administrative staff.

VS: He started building the sort of support staff, the administrative staff you have to have for a thing like this. Eventually, we hired a piano technician. We've had all these pianos and no one to take care of them. He convinced them that we needed a piano technician, which is still a civil service position. I have one of the largest civil service staffs in CLA.

CAC: What else do they do?

VS: I have a woman who just runs facilities, takes care of facilities scheduling, in Ted Mann Hall. I have a P & A [Professional and Administrative] person called the assistant director but he does recruitment, and admissions, and oversees advising; but mainly he does recruitment all over the country for us. I have fifteen.

CAC: Do you offer fellowships for undergraduates or mostly graduates?

VS: Mostly graduates. Our biggest . . .

CAC: How do you scout them?

VS: Auditions.

CAC: I know what baseball scouts do.

VS: Same thing. Mainly, he goes off to career fairs and to special musical events. There is one he goes to in Chicago and I think one in Seattle. There are places where you go where groups of high school kids get together and perform. They become sort of fairs for recruiters to go around to and visit.

CAC: Heavens.

VS: Or you go to contests. You hear contests. We always go . . .

CAC: The Schubert Club contest?

VS: Schubert Club. We always go to the WAMSO [Women's Association of the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra] contest, too, because there are instrumentalists from all over the country that come for that. We offer a scholarship every year to some winner of that. He's been very helpful. That kind of thing began with him. It got stronger with Karen Wolff who increased the staff even more and I've added a few as a part of my tenure, a few other people that we need; so, we have a strong administrative staff that we have to have.

CAC: These are in times of retrenchment, my friend.

VS: Right.

CAC: So, the funding comes substantially from the outside to make this whole thing work? Are these regularly salaried [unclear]?

VS: These are regularly salaried positions that have been added over the years. Believe me when we look at cutting, we look at cutting some of those but it's like most of the civil service staff at this university, they run the place. Once we get rid of those people, there's no one to do an awful lot of grunt work that has to be done. Every year we look at that as a possible . . . We have to sacrifice so much money. Most of my faculty is more willing to give up a faculty line than they are any of the civil service jobs, simply because they know the consequences of giving up . . . I have a person who is half time in PR [Public Relations]. I have a person full time who does nothing but programs, brochures, calendars, and informational publications because we have over 200 concerts a year and I have to have somebody . . .

CAC: A lot of them are open to the public at no charge?

VS: Yes, most of them are, as a matter of fact, but we have to have programs. We have to have posters. We have to have brochures. We have to have postcards people send out. Because we intersect with the public so much, we have to make an investment in public relations that most units in the college don't have to do. I have a half time person who does public relations, does press releases, media contacts, places stories, takes critics to lunch.

CAC: Oh, you have to do that?

VS: Of course, we do.

CAC: Now, you make a market analysis . . . what kind of overlap is there in the audiences for all this music? Florence [Mrs. Chambers] and I get . . . you know, you could go to something twice a day throughout the Twin Cities.

VS: Easily.

CAC: There must be an overlapping of audiences?

VS: Of course, there is.

CAC: Your audience is drawn primarily from what segment, subsection, of those audiences?

VS: Mostly, we have a faithful audience who just are regulars.

CAC: Do they go to the Minnesota Orchestra?

VS: Oh, yes. They pick and choose what they go to but that's another one of the great advantages of living in a community like this, that there is so much available to do. It also becomes, as you can see though, a disadvantage for us. We're not the only show in town. If we were the opera program at Bloomington, Indiana, we're the only opera in town or we're the only orchestra in town; so, of course if you do an orchestra performance, people are going to come. Here, every night we do something, there are at least twenty other things going on that people could go to. The one advantage that we have is, as you've already mentioned, is that most of the things we do are free; so, we can give high quality performances to people who can't afford to go to hear the Beethoven ninth downtown but they can actually bring their kids and their neighbor's kids even for a chance to hear the Beethoven ninth, which they wouldn't be able to hear.

CAC: So, your market research establishes that this is your audience? It's lower income . . . ?

VS: Lower income and the university community.

CAC: Lower age?

VS: We have been getting more high school kids to certain ones of our concerts.

CAC: I'm sure you're sensitive to the audience problems that the established orchestral groups, at least, have?

VS: Oh, yes.

CAC: Boy! I'll tell you it's a white audience.

VS: It is. It's one of the great worries that everybody has.

CAC: I'm sure.

VS: It's one of the great concerns as to how we make an inroad into that other market. Believe me, a lot of people are trying. It's not a happy prospect for the most part but I keep hoping that our being free will help. As fiscal crises happen, one of the things they keep coming back to us is, Why don't you charge for all your performances? You could have some revenue that way. Once we start doing that, we're going to restrict the people who can come and if they're going to pay for it, why would they pay to see us when they can go downtown and see a so-called professional performance? I personally believe that there are some opera performances in town that you pay money for that are not nearly as good as what you would pay for at a much cheaper price that we have but, nevertheless, that becomes a problem. If we were to add a ticket price to ours, we would greatly reduce our audiences, I'm sure.

CAC: Lloyd started some of these things that we've been talking about the last eight minutes?

VS: Yes, he did. By that time we had the Performance degrees and he came up with a plan to hire more full time Performance teachers; so, under him we hired a full time cellist, for instance, and a full time trumpet teacher, and a full time clarinet teacher. Up to this point, we didn't have any of these people. They were all Minnesota Orchestra. He felt that we needed, in some of the standard instruments, to have a full time person in order to build the program. And he was absolutely right. I found in the archives a . . .

CAC: Now, that took new money?

VS: It did.

CAC: He was doing it in the 1970s when every year we faced retrenchment?

VS: Right. We were coming off that high of the 1960s but things got harder and harder in the 1970s. There is an interesting plan that he and Nils [Hasselmo] had worked out. Nils was the associate dean of the college at this point. He and Nils had worked out this thing, a plan, to step in some beginning assistant professors in all these instruments over a certain number of years and this would mean that, eventually, the money that Central Administration was paying for these affiliate teachers from the orchestra would be, finally, diverted into these other lines. You would no longer need all these people from the orchestra. While it was a great plan on paper, it didn't work though because of the retrenchments. It was a plan that Central Administration bought and said they would fund but I cannot find . . . I've done a thorough archives study of all the budgets of all those years, the printed budgets in the archives, and that money never really came . . . It was really never converted. It was just dwindled from place and it was never funneled into new positions. We got a few new positions. Lloyd started his plan but he wasn't able to finish it. I think one of the reasons that is my analysis of—I've never discussed this with Lloyd—what happened was that his attention got diverted to the building. He was at first coming in to build the faculty but then it was obvious that we had to have a better facility. The Theater Department had moved out to Rarig [Center] so that we now had Scott Hall all our own but it was not what we needed. The orchestra had to perform in Northrop. There wasn't any place for the orchestra,

or the band, or the chorus to perform. So, he began the campaign to build Ferguson Hall or to plan Ferguson Hall. Actually, he eventually lost credibility with university administration. I don't know if anybody has ever said this out loud but I think this is true. He sacrificed his professional credibility with university administration to get that building.

CAC: Now, why did it require a sacrifice to do it?

VS: Because it was not on the recommended list from Central Administration as a building that was going to built.

CAC: So, he had to force it upon them?

VS: He did an end run. He went directly to the legislature.

CAC: I didn't know that.

VS: He took students, alumni, and supporters directly to the legislature and Central Administration was furious.

CAC: That was under [Peter] Magrath?

VS: Yes. The legislature though listened because . . . We've got K through 12 teachers out there who are alums.

CAC: You're like the Medical School. You're well networked out there.

VS: Yes. We had all kinds of people supporting us, grass roots people supporting us. The legislature wondered why the university hadn't paid any attention to this. Well, the university had said, "No," because they had other priorities. This priority was forced upon them by the legislature. We got the building but Lloyd stepped down two years later.

CAC: Hmm.

VS: Because by the point, they didn't trust him. I've always thought it was a great personal sacrifice for him to do that because we wouldn't have had the building.

CAC: This was with the knowing support of his colleagues?

VS: Yes. I don't think any of us realized—I didn't anyway—the price. That taught me a great lesson though about doing end runs in this particular institution. You do it at your peril.

CAC: But it's not an end run to have an advisory board that brings in money, and support, and good advice?

VS: No, no, they're not an end run. They were saying, "Can't you go to Nils and tell him these things today?" I said, "Not really." Nils is a friend of mine and I will say things to him personally but officially, I can't go to him. I can't use my friendship with him to do an run around Julia [Davis]. If my needs need to be met, Julia has to present our needs in a context of the needs for the whole college; otherwise, I look like I'm trying to be autonomous. I could do that but the same thing would happen to me that happened to Lloyd.

CAC: As you say, "Good luck."

VS: Yes. I value my relationship with Julia too much to do that.

CAC: Okay. We do flick up to the present . . . that's fine.

VS: We flipped, yes.

CAC: That's great but I want to flip back again because I am an historian. I want to know something about the marching band.

VS: Okay.

CAC: I am told by any number of people that of all the student organizations that has the most enthusiastic membership.

VS: It's true.

CAC: People love being with it. They have a good time. When people inquire of former students, "What did you . . . ?" "The band!" [sound of a clap] "That was the marching band!" Say something about that . . . if that's true.

VS: Oh, it's absolutely true, absolutely true.

CAC: And Ben[criscutto] brought this?

VS: No, it had been before him. The marching band goes way back.

CAC: Oh, I know there's a long . . .

VS: A hundred years.

CAC: I have a sense that Ben is the real mythic figure.

VS: Yes, he's the one of the mythic figures . . . I think probably one of the biggest of the mythic figures but [Michael] Jalma and a few other people before him were . . . A couple of years that we had the centennial banquet, we had people from every decade get up and talk.

CAC: [laughter]

VS: It was very interesting to hear them talk about the legend in their time.

CAC: I see.

VS: Mike Jalma in the early days and so on. Bencriscutto, I think, brought it to a general consciousness because he's such a showman.

CAC: Oh.

VS: He's a consummate showman. He knew how to get to the public. He also built his own empire and he also did end runs around his chairs. He went directly to deans and presidents himself. He was a real loose cannon, if I can say so, even though this is . . . [laughter] I've told Ben to his face. He was an historic a loose . . .

CAC: Does he still live?

VS: Yes, he's still here. He's retired but he's here in the Twin Cities. He was a loose cannon. He was hard to control because if he wanted money and Lloyd couldn't give it to him, he'd just go call the president. Sometimes, he would get it.

CAC: Well, one might be tempted to say, "Why not?"

VS: Yes.

CAC: But it was good music, too.

VS: Oh, sure.

CAC: I mean, it wasn't only marching around at football games but it was a loose style of playing that was very disciplined?

VS: Yes.

CAC: Is that right?

VS: He had a real showman's style about him. He really knew how to please audiences. Now, as far as musical standards, there are people who don't believe his musical standards were very

high. For marching band, he was fine. He came as the marching band director in 1960 and took over the marching band but he, eventually, wanted to establish the wind ensemble, which is separate from the marching band, and make that a strong program and he did. Eventually, we hired a separate marching band director. They created a separate line for someone just to take care of the marching band; but in the early days, when he first came in the early 1960s, he did both.

CAC: And a concert band, too, or just this woodwind?

VS: Well, it was a concert band and then it became what was known as the wind ensemble. There had always been a concert band but not of the quality that Ben wanted and that he finally created. He built that program and he negotiated with Men's Athletics to get them, eventually, to pay for it.

CAC: Ah!

VS: That's still true. Men's Athletics pays for the marching band.

CAC: I see.

VS: The college supplies the director, secretarial support but the Men's Athletics, and now Women's Athletics, too, chips in and pays for the marching band and the pep bands that play at the basketball, and hockey, and soccer, and so on. Frank helped negotiate all of that. The marching band is a cult unto itself.

CAC: Good wording.

VS: It is the largest sub-organization within the Minnesota Alumni Association. Thousands and thousands of people belong to the Minnesota Marching Band Alumni Association.

CAC: [laughter]

VS: They are a group that is so powerful that they are listened to by anybody at the university. When there was a question as to whether we were going to replace the marching band director right away, there was no question once a few of those alums got on the phone, and talked to the dean, and threatened to bring a whole group of trombones to sit in the front yard all night. [laughter]

CAC: [laughter]

VS: This is a powerful group of people and in size, too.

CAC: It's powerful because they had a good time.

VS: Absolutely and they still do.

CAC: And they had a sense of belonging to something.

VS: Yes. It's the place where school spirit still exists. It's the only place I find school spirit still exists. If you go to the football games, I find it best to sit near the band because that's where school spirit really is.

CAC: What an anachronism, right?

VS: Yes, complete anachronism. But this whole cult of the marching band is something . . . There are certain people though who really lock into this in their four or five years here and it means so much to them that they will still get up fifty years later and cry while they're talking about the experience they had as a part of this group.

CAC: Our kids used to like to come hear the concerts by the marching band.

VS: Yes. Oh, the annual fall concert is still a big event. It is a powerful group that we tap into a lot. They have their own account, their own scholarship account, at the Foundation. They raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for scholarship funds.

CAC: For general fellowship funds?

VS: For marching band scholarship funds.

CAC: I see.

VS: They go to band students.

CAC: But some of those kids are good musicians so then they do other things?

VS: Oh, yes. In fact, most of the people in the marching band are not Music majors.

CAC: Okay.

VS: Very few are Music majors. Some of them are Music Education majors. So, this is another place that they're really important to cultivate because they're not the people who are going to make music professionally. They are the people who are going to go out make money and then give their money back to the university because of the great experience they've had in the marching band and 80 percent of them are College of Liberal Arts non-music majors; so, they really are important to the college.

CAC: Well, I'm glad I asked the question.

VS: Yes. The dean really sits up and listens anytime a band alum talks to her. [laughter] Those are important people.

CAC: I'll bet for Julia Davis that must have come as a surprise coming from Florida and from speech therapy?

VS: Yes. But one of the first things she did—in fact, we still talk about it—was to sign the papers to hire the marching band director. Our first negotiations were about band. The first few weeks she was here, I was in her office practically every day talking about the band program because Bencriscutto was getting ready to retire. We had lost the marching band director and needed to hire one. Well, do we hire the marching band director before Ben retires or do we wait? There was a question. What we did is we decided to wait. We hired an interim until Ben retired, and then when he retired, we replaced him, and then we hired the marching band director.

CAC: That's the kind of elbow room that most of us don't have in the line departments.

VS: No. Well, I don't think I would have except it was marching band. She was new on the block, of course, but at that point also, she just realized that there are certain priorities around here. She also likes the band, the band for the football games. She's always praising the band. Even if the game is terrible, she thinks the band is good. She always tell the story of when she went back to Iowa for a game down there, and our band was there, and our band, even though it was freezing rain, or whatever it was, our band stayed to the end. The Iowa band left.

CAC: [laughter]

VS: Our band played enthusiastically all the way to the end.

CAC: [unclear] Minnesota morale. All right! We're going to go back historically and pick up. Lloyd Ultan left but he left to another job which was . . .

VS: He just stepped into the faculty. He just went into the faculty in Composition . . . our faculty.

CAC: I see.

VS: He had a tenured line all along in Composition and he taught a few students but he just became a part of our Composition faculty.

CAC: Then, you had another national search?

VS: We had another national search. That was the mid 1980s and Karen Wolff came.

CAC: What was her background?

VS: She's in Music Education, actually. Her Ph.D. is in Music Education from Michigan but she had been an administrator at the Cincinnati College Conservatory, one of the bigger Schools of Music, actually. She'd been the associate dean there. She had been acting dean for one year and she was passed over as a possibility for the full time job, which was a mistake on their part. So, she then came here as the director of the school and she was here for four years but was an amazing [unclear].

CAC: Four years only?

VS: Only four years. But she accomplished incredible . . . mainly because she came in with guarantees.

CAC: You mean she was clever enough to ask those guarantees before she came?

VS: Oh boy! she got Fred Lukermann to promise her so much stuff and Craig Swan was just wringing his hands for four years because . . .

CAC: Like what? Give some for instances.

VS: Six new positions . . . six brand new positions.

CAC: All right. That's a good start.

VS: One brand new administrative P&A [Professional and Administrative] line added to what was already there . . . several of the civil service lines but mainly it was the six positions in Performance that she was promised that were not anywhere in the college plan. It was great for us. It enabled us to hire some of the world-class people that we have but I still don't know how the college did it. Eventually, she left—she got the job offer from Oberlin—because she could not be promised autonomy. She wanted out of the College of Liberal Arts.

CAC: I see. She wanted really the School . . .

VS: She wanted to be the dean of the School of Music and she wanted direct access to Central Administration rather than going through another person. At most of the big schools of music, that's the way it works, and that's what she had envisioned here, and Nils had promised her that. But at the very time that she was demanding that he deliver on that promise, he was closing the Waseca campus . . . the very same months and he said, "I can't create a whole college on the Twin Cities campus and close the Waseca campus at the same time."

CAC: Gosh.

VS: It would have been an expense, another whole administrative system and so on. It was exactly at that time, of course, they created the College of Architecture and Landscape Design.

They got cut loose from IT [Institute of Technology] and became their own college. Well, she saw that happening and she wanted the same thing. She didn't see why it couldn't happen.

CAC: What kind of support did she have within the faculty for that?

VS: Complete support.

CAC: All of you folks would like that, too, but you see that it's not in the books?

VS: Yes. I think there were some of the academicians did not want it. Some of the musicologists, music theorists didn't want to cut their ties with the Liberal Arts. We kept saying, "We're still here. They'll still be supplying courses for our students. Their students will still be taking distribution courses from us. They'll still have to have arts courses. We'll teach them. There's still is a relationship and it would be even more interdisciplinary because it will be across college now if you work with some of these other people in doing interdisciplinary work." But most of the faculty, and virtually all of the advisory board, all the community people wanted it because they saw it, at that point, as a way of having our own development people. Mary Hicks as the development officer for CLA has thirty some units to develop for? Here, we're the largest college in the whole university and we have the smallest development staff. No wonder we can't do the fund raising we really need to do. They saw the various advantages of having autonomy but it wasn't in the books at that point, and of course, since that time, fiscally things have gotten even worse and autonomy is simply not . . . I don't know that I, as the director at this point, would want to be autonomous. I don't want to be left flapping out there in the breeze. The one thing that we have going for us is that we are so public. We intersect with the public probably more than any other unit in the college; so, the college needs us, in a way, to be one of their important public arms. If we were cut away from the College of Liberal Arts, they wouldn't have as much public exposure as they do with us. In a way, I like to use that still as a bargaining tool with the college, that we're still here, and we're still a part of you, and we need to be supported because we're very visible.

CAC: And you're still able . . . I'm wondering when this began to attract really national performers or performers from the Minnesota Symphony here to play in the Mann Theater under your auspices. Is that done with philanthropic funds . . . ?

VS: No.

CAC: . . . or is it volunteered by them? How do you do that?

VS: Actually, we lost our orchestra conductor. Murray Sidlin went to the Portland Symphony and left us; so, I needed to cover this year. They gave me a portion of his salary back. They didn't give me all of his salary but they gave me a portion of his salary back for interims. Rather than hiring just a single person—they gave me enough money that I could have hired a junior

person to come in—I decided what I would do is I would try to go after some famous conductors who were accessible to see if they would come in and do it.

CAC: Eiji Oue to come in?

VS: Yes. I had [Stanislav] Skrowaczewski in February, and Bill Eddins in the fall, and Philip Brunelle came in and did the opera. I did call on some personal favors to do this. I mean they came for less money than they do on the regular market. I was just honest with them and said, "I don't have very much money but the kids would really profit from this and I think it would be a really great opportunity for them."

CAC: How many rehearsals did Oue do?

VS: He had two weeks. He was here for two weeks, every day for two weeks.

CAC: Every day for two weeks? That's an enormous commitment.

VS: Yes. Skrowaczewski was here for only one week. He rehearsed every day for one week.

CAC: What a wonderful experience. Gosh!

VS: Yes, it was a great experience for them. They all want to come back. Skrowaczewski will come back anytime he said and Oue wants to come back at least once a year, if not twice a year. Even after we get a regular orchestra conductor, he still wants to be over here regularly. The relationship with the community has grown a lot. I think part of it began, probably, in the 1980s because people were interested . . . A lot of non-profits needed educational affiliation in order to get grant money and so hooking into the university became a good thing to do because you could say, "We do have this joint program with the university." I think there's still a certain coinage to that but most of them now believe that what we're doing is of high quality and they want to help support that. The development of our orchestral conducting apprentice program is unique. It's the only program like it anywhere. It actually gives podium time on a regular concert to our students with these professional organizations.

CAC: Explain that in a bit more detail.

VS: For instance, they're apprenticed to the Minnesota Orchestra, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Minnesota Opera, Dale Warland Singers. These are doctoral candidates in orchestral conducting. It's a special program. They take their class work here but during their time, they spend a quarter with the Minnesota Orchestra going to all of the rehearsals, meeting with the conductor, talking to the players, and so on. During that time, they will actually be given some kind of podium time, to actually be on the podium to rehearse and perform. Everyone of them at the Minnesota Orchestra has gotten to perform on a subscription series

concert and be personally introduced by Edo deWaart to the audience. Here's Jan Wagoner and Jan went out and conducted. He got to do the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of Mendelssohn. Alexander Platt got to do the *Peter Grimes C* interludes of Benjamin Britten with the orchestra. William Intriligator got to do a matinee performance of *The Barber of Seville* this year. Alex Platt got to do a matinee performance of *Madame Butterfly* with the Minnesota Opera. They actually give them an entire performance. SPCO gives them some time.

CAC: Now, who worked out that?

VS: Karen Wolff and I worked on this for a long time and then when Murray Sidlin came as our orchestra conductor, then we formulated it and worked it out as an actual plan. It was an idea which Karen and I had to tie in with the organizations to create a unique conducting program where they would get their academic work here and conduct here, conduct on campus as well, but actually be given time with the professional organizations. They actually go on tour. Three of our conductors have gotten to go on tours with the Minnesota Orchestra when they go out across the country. George and Jevne Pennock gave money to the Minnesota Orchestra in their last campaign, gave them $1 million, to be used for us. It's to pay the expenses of our conducting students while they're there, when they're on tour, for their parking, for all kinds of things; but also, it pays to bring Minnesota Orchestra guest conductors to our campus to conduct a reading session with our orchestra or to pay the fee for a guest performer, soloist, with the Minnesota Orchestra, to come to our campus to read through their concerto with our orchestra and our conductor. So, more and more we're trying to hook up with as many of the organizations . . . and I think organizations are as interested as we are in survival, of sort of combining our efforts and our resources in order to do these things.

CAC: Do you think these great institutions really are facing survival [unclear] it?

VS: Oh, my, yes. I don't think the Minnesota Orchestra is but I think some of the others. The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra almost went under last year.

CAC: Yes, I guess that's true.

VS: Minnesota Public Radio has cut way back. I think a lot of the Minnesota Opera is . . . they're solvent at the moment but they've been shaky in the last couple years, too.

CAC: With the withdrawal of national funds generally, the competition for local foundation funds or philanthropic dollars would just be fierce.

VS: Yes. The worst thing that happens to us also happened in the first years of the Reagan Administration, too, to the arts is that not only are they cutting funds to arts but they're cutting social services at the same time. Those philanthropic organizations who give to both are eventually going to put more of their dollars in social services because people just have to

survive. I think that's what happened in the early days of the Reagan Administration when the arts were cut and I think that's what's going to happen again here.

CAC: Has there been much NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] money in your school?

VS: Not much in our school, no. Mostly, we're not eligible for NEA money. Most educational institutions are not eligible for NEA money. Mostly, it's professional non-profit organizations that get the NEA funding. You'd have to have a special project. Even my project of the opera on the farms didn't get NEA money. It was funded mainly by external and internal money. Gene [C. Eugene] Allen and the College of Agriculture gave quite a lot actually to get us out to the farms.

CAC: Now is a good time to tell that story because I think for outreach to Greater Minnesota, as we call it, that's an exciting story.

VS: Yes, it is. In the summer of 1993, we took Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* to seven working farms . . . five in Minnesota, one in North Dakota, and one in South Dakota. It's an opera that takes place on a farm. It takes place in the front yard of a farm, on the front porch. When I first saw it years ago on the stage, I thought, How silly! It was over at St. Catherine. I saw it at St. Catherine. They built this farm up on the stage. I thought, How silly! Here we sit surrounded by farms and they've built a farm. I got the idea at that point, I wonder why we don't just take this out and do it on a farm. Well, then when I first saw the Gibbs Farm Museum, I've always wanted to do it there.

CAC: Ahhh.

VS: In fact, that's where I did it here in the Twin Cities. We did three performances of it there before we took it on tour. The Gibbs Farm was ideal for it.

CAC: How could you work out acoustics? I should think that would just be extraordinarily difficult.

VS: It's possible now. When I first had the idea, it was impossible because body mikes had not been developed at that point. But now with body mikes it is possible for each singer to have a body mike—that's what we did—and their own little battery packs. Then, at the back of the audience, you've got a person on the board who is running all the mikes.

CAC: To mix the sound?

VS: To mix them. The orchestra was sitting over at the end of the porch. There were twelve players and there were about four microphones placed among them on booms, and that was mixed in, and fed through large speakers that were on either side of the audience.

CAC: That equipment was not available ten or fifteen years ago?

VS: No, it wasn't available. It's only been available recently, the kind of sophistication and the kind of . . .

CAC: You're still going out into the great prairie here with the voices.

VS: Yes. Audiences heard it fine. We were able, with directional speakers to . . .

CAC: How many people would come?

VS: The smallest audience we played to was 600. That was in Staples, our opening night.

CAC: How did you arrange the seating? Just the logistics of this is heroic.

VS: First of all the site was very important. The farm house was very important. The choice of the farm house . . .

CAC: Who helped you select the farm?

VS: The people at each of the towns. This was not a tour. This was a community project. It took over two years to plan. We worked directly, for over a year and a half, with each one of the communities and the committee within this community that put together all of the logistics of it. I only took the orchestra and the soloists. We used a community chorus in each town who sang the chorus in the second act and danced the things.

CAC: And danced?

VS: Yes.

CAC: You had amateurs dancing?

VS: Oh, sure. It was a square dance kind of number.

CAC: Okay.

VS: I had to go out early and train them to do this. In fact, I was out the first two weeks. It was these two weeks in June. I was out one week and I was in a different place every night on the seven farms. I drove from farm to farm each day. I'd arrive in the night, work with the chorus, block them, and then I'd move on to the next town.

CAC: How many core performers did you have from here with you?

VS: On that one, I just went by myself. I was just training.

CAC: I mean for the performances.

VS: For the performances, I took nine singers, nine students actually, who were singers and technicians, and twelve players, and one conductor. We went out in a truck and a bus. We stayed in the communities with the farm people or with other people in the community. The students got a real education out of this.

CAC: Oh!

VS: It smashed every stereotype anybody ever had about farm life. There is no such thing as a stereotypic farmer, we discovered. The levels of sophistication out there, the education level of these people . . . we didn't have to tell anybody what an opera was. Everybody knew what an opera was and they knew when it was good. People would come and say, "You know, I thought this was going to be like a high school spring musical but these kids are really good. This is really good." They knew that this was . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Tape 2, Side 1]

CAC: As I talk around, Vern, talking about the outreach of the university, this is rarely told. You may have good public relations folks on your staff but that's a story that's deserving of a larger . . . and I don't know how to do that.

VS: Yes. It actually got the biggest coverage of anything we've ever done. It was on CBS *Sunday Morning*, of course. Eugenia Zukerman did a thing.

CAC: But I mean you have to build a continuing . . . ?

VS: Sure.

CAC: There are people going out to talk to alumni groups . . . they're still talking about taconite.

VS: I know. I've given this information. Nils is the one who's used it. He used it in practically every speech he did for a whole year afterwards. He still thinks it's probably the ideal Land-Grant institution project because of the way it connected with the people.

CAC: I'm going to interrupt. You folks are aware of the Land-Grant?

VS: Oh, sure.

CAC: Consciously, explicitly this moves you? That's a consideration in your philosophy and management?

VS: It is in mine. It is in mine.

CAC: And it must have support of your close colleagues?

VS: I guess so. I just think it's part of our mission. We say it's part of our mission.

CAC: Oh, but we say it but not that many people act on it, Vern.

VS: I know. We deal with the public so much; we have to have the public. The product that we turn out has got to have a public; whereas, I think a lot of other units in the college or in the university don't rely on the public feedback that we do. If we don't have people there listening to what we're doing, there's really not much sense in doing what we're doing.

CAC: Sure.

VS: I've always thought that it was an important part to reach an audience. I love audiences. As a performer, I like to reach audiences and I guess that's translated into my administrative style, in that I really want to get what we're doing out to the public. We did residencies. I had this idea of doing residencies with the orchestra, which we got Blandin and U.S. West to fund completely. The university didn't pay anything for it. We took our orchestra to these towns for a whole day. Our orchestra takes over a small town for a whole day and does workshops in the schools. Our percussionists will get together with the high school percussionists, the junior high percussionists, and do a little workshop. They do a little concert in the grade schools in the afternoon. They do a high school concert in the afternoon. At noontime, a string quartet goes to the local nursing home, a woodwind quintet goes to the Rotary Club. We take over the town for a day. Then that night, we give a big concert and the entire town comes.

CAC: What towns typically were used?

VS: We did Olivia. We did Little Falls. We did Staples. We did Hibbing.

CAC: These are small and bigger?

VS: Yes. It's mainly the 5,000 and less and maybe the 15,000; but we concentrated mainly on the 5,000 and less as with Olivia, and Red Lake Falls, and places like that. That's what we did with the farm . . .

CAC: How many years have you done that?

VS: We did that for about three years. We haven't done it now for the last year. We didn't do it last year because we didn't have a regular conductor.

CAC: You will pick that up again?

VS: We will. It was a good project and Blandin liked it. I think I can go back to Blandin and get that funded. I got $10,000 from Blandin and $5,000 from U.S. West. All we have to do is pay for the buses and a couple of meals.

CAC: As an historian, I'm thinking back to the impact that WPA [Works Progress Administration] orchestras had in the 1930s.

VS: Sure.

CAC: The first orchestra, Vern, I ever heard . . . we had to go to Fairmont . . . a WPA orchestra from the Twin Cities was there. They did this same thing. They gave workshops and then they had that afternoon concert and then they had it repeated in the evening . . . well, several times. What a democratic or Land-Grant mission to do.

VS: Yes. I had wanted to do this kind of thing. The opera grew sort of out of this. I'd always wanted to do this with the opera and when I finally found that we could do it (1) because Murray Sidlin had been the person who made the chamber orchestra version of *The Tender Land* for Copland. Copland had written it for a big orchestra but Murry's the one who got the permission from Copland to do the chamber version, which is what we took, the small orchestra version.

CAC: Yes.

VS: We worked with those people in those communities to plan. As far as seating is concerned, they came up with the ideas for the seating. They helped me pick the site. I went to every site and they drove me around. They said, "What about this farm?" Then, they helped me deal with the farmers because we moved into a farm for two days. We took over a farm for two days and during June, this is not . . .

CAC: It's a busy season.

VS: It's a busy season. They would come up with all kinds of things that we wouldn't even think of, like the parking. What do you do with parking? I remember when we were in Olivia planning. Olivia was the first town to sign on and, actually, I think it's because Mary Page wanted us. Mary Page sort of talked this up. She was a regent at that time. I first talked about this at, I think it was, a social event at Eastcliff for the regents. I was there singing or something and afterwards I was just talking about this idea, and Mary Page thought this was a great idea, and she said, "If you ever do this, let me know. We'll bring you to Olivia." When I was there planning with Olivia, they said, "What kind of house?" I said, "I'd like a frame house with a

porch." Now, this is unusual. Very few houses now have porches that aren't screened in. I said, "Ideally, I'd like a front porch and I'd like a two-story frame, if that's possible." They would drive around and they found places. I said, "It's got to have a yard large enough to seat the audience and if they're seated, somehow we'll have to arrange ways for them to be able to see." They got to thinking, well, this is in June, you're going to want a farm that's away from the highway because you don't want a lot of noise but that means there's not going to be any place to park. It's June so the fields are already planted. At that point, they didn't know that the fields were going to be under water. That was the June two years ago with all the rains. We won't be able to park in the fields; so, we're probably going to have to bus. It means we'll have to have people park at the school, and use the school buses, and bring the audience in in shifts. It means we'll have to have a lot of activities for the kids once they're there; so, we probably better have a pig roast and—they started planning this whole event—a petting farm, or whatever. They had all kinds of events for the kids and maybe some of the local artists can show their ceramics. Each place was so different. They planned a social event that went along with it. They got the Rotary Club to park the cars or to drive the buses and they had the Lions Club in charge of cleanup. They got the local 4-H kids to come in and work as a project. Each place had it's own . . .

CAC: At each place you creating community or building upon created communities?

VS: That's exactly what happened. In two of the communities, it revitalized community spirit, which had been lost for years. Red Lake Falls is now in a project to revitalize their whole two block downtown because the opera project got them together to talk to one another about some common ideas and they then after that stayed together as a committee. In fact, I'm still in communication with them. They want me to come and sing a recital. I've proposed to them an ongoing project that I want Blandin to fund that we would to what I call the town and gown concert series. This is us taking our programs, on a regular basis, to Red Lake Falls, maybe six to eight concerts a year and we'd plan it right now. They plan this and advertise it like a concert series. It'd be an orchestra concert, a jazz concert, a string quartet, a voice recital, like a regular concert series but we give it to them for free, just let Blandin pay the expenses of the kids going there to do it. They can charge tickets, charge prices . . .

CAC: Ahhh.

VS: . . . sell tickets . . . do it as a regular concert series. All they have to do is get Blandin to pay the expenses of it; therefore, they can use the money for ongoing projects for whatever they want to do. It becomes a chance for our kids to have another opportunity to sing or to perform and, as far as I'm concerned, it really gives an opportunity for the sort of outreach mission, the Land-Grant mission, here . . . the university once again going into community, taking what it is that we do but helping benefit the community with that.

[telephone rings - break in the interview]

CAC: Vern, you have six minutes to get to your appointment.

VS: Okay. He'll probably be late in this rain anyway. He's usually late.

CAC: All right.

VS: That's another interesting connection. That's another thing about the connections . . .

CAC: Okay, go ahead.

VS: . . . just from my own career. The other strands of my career come from the university or they go back to the university. The Minnesota Opera Company, which was the Center Opera Company, started in 1963 when I was a student here but I had, the year before, premiered in Argento opera in Scott Hall; so, Dominick knew me as a singer not just as a student. He knew I was a singer; so, when they put the Center Opera Company together that Arnold Walker and Norton Hintz . . . They were called the Center Council for the Arts. The Walker Art Center had a special committee called the Center Council for the Arts and they're the ones who started the Center Opera Company at the Walker Art Center and we performed in the Guthrie. If I hadn't sung in that Argento opera the year before . . . I got in on the ground floor of that opera company because Dominick was on that board or that committee. I used to go over, when I was a student in the early 1960s, and do radio dramas every Saturday on KUOM in Eddy Hall. We did *Hedda Gabler.* I remember that we did *The Tempest.* David Jones, who was in the English Department, did these on the radio. He did these scripts and we would do them on the radio and that's where I met Garrison [Keillor] who was an undergraduate announcer at KUOM. So, once again when he started doing his show, he called me up from our association all those days and said, "Would you like to come on? I've got this idea for a radio show which is a cross between the *Grand Old Opera* and the *Bell Telephone Hour.* I'd like you to put your career on the line, and come on, and do the show with me." I thought that sounded like fun; so, I was on the very first *Prairie Home Companion.* Once again, it went back to my connection . . .

CAC: And a recurring guest?

VS: Yes, I'm a recurring guest. That connection goes all the way back to my associations here at the university. That's just a little side line.

CAC: It's a wonderful side line. The whole story has been engaging and I just have to have a little reflection from you here at the end.

VS: Okay.

CAC: I've interviewed seventy people, plus or minus. I won't say that everyone has a down side but frequently, the last ten or fifteen years for most departments, most programs, most units, has not been fun.

VS: No.

CAC: It's not been successful. It's not been rewarding . . . as they perceive it. Objectively, an historian may put together another story but one professor referred to it as what he thought was a sense of the melancholy of the professoriate.

VS: Yes.

CAC: I've heard that kind of tone. I've heard none of that this afternoon.

VS: No. I have to be very careful about this, Clarke, because I know that's the tenor of the times but that's not what we have experienced. We have to be very careful about it because I think we've been favored. We have two new buildings in the past ten years. In 1985, we moved into Ferguson and then . . .

CAC: But you benefitted because you've been doing something?

VS: Yes. When necessary, we've made do with what we have. I think there's been a real effort on our part to try to do what needed to be done and we haven't complained a lot. I hear an awful lot of people complaining a lot.

CAC: All the time—but legitimate complaints.

VS: Absolutely legitimate complaints but, at least, I've discovered . . . I was the associate director under Karen Wolff for four years; so, I was a part of that building that she did. I was her instant history, by the way. Oh! she was clever. When she interviewed, before she even accepted the job, she called me over for breakfast over at the Radisson; and she said, "I won't take this job unless you will agree to be the associate director with me." And I found out why.

CAC: She's smoked that out pretty fast?

VS: Well, I was history. I had been here so long. I knew everybody. I knew why—all the arcane stuff that went on—we did what we did, the weird Byzantine procedures we might have, or I knew why we had made up this particular rule, or whatever. All she had to do was call me in and say, "Who is this person?" or "Why do we do this?"

CAC: [laughter]

VS: I could give her an instant answer. She hit the ground running because I could introduce her to all the famous important, rich people in town because I knew them from my years with the opera company. She was very, very smart. I've made up my mind if I ever leave here and do a job like she's doing, I'm going to do the same thing. I'm going to find *the* person that I think I can work with but also who has been here for a very long time and can be my historian

because institutions, as we know, do not have memories. It's only people who have memories.

CAC: The word is used, institutional memory.

VS: Oh . . . no such thing. [laughter] Only people have memories.

CAC: You see, this is why I'm doing this.

VS: Yes.

CAC: You get seventy people telling seventy different stories from 1950 to 1995 . . . boy! I'll tell you, that's the story of higher education.

VS: Yes. Well, we're still in a favored position; although, we're beginning to face the reality. In fact, I have a meeting with my executive committee, of division heads of the faculty, tomorrow to really bite the bullet and realize that we're probably going to lose three faculty lines within the next five years—and which three are those going to be? We've got four retirements and probably three of them will not be replaced.

CAC: Dominick this year will be retirement age?

VS: Yes, he's one of the ones.

CAC: Well, and of course you can't replace Dominick Argento?

VS: No, no. That is a prestige line that is sort of important for us as far as image is concerned. It would be our decision . . . Composition has historically been one of our strongest suits because of Fetler, and [Eric] Stokes, and Argento . . .

CAC: That's right, Stokes was here, too.

VS: Yes. Those are names that have built an image for us nationally.

CAC: Oh, yes.

VS: Do we now decide that we are going to go in a different direction and that's not going to be one of our strong suits? In that case, maybe we don't need to replace Dominick with someone of his stature.

CAC: Does Libby Larson work with you at all?

VS: She is, of course, one of our alums and she's come over and done some stuff. This year, I brought Steve [Stephen] Paulus back, this quarter, to teach for Dominick. Dominick is taking phased retirement for three years.

CAC: Good.

VS: So, the next two springs after this, he'll also be off and there's a chance for us to bring in some guests. Steve was wonderful. Libby would be a very good choice, for a guest, to bring in. They could either one be a possible candidate.

CAC: Well, I'll tell you, Vern, that's a nice story.

VS: Thank you.

CAC: Good words and well pronounced!

VS: [laughter] Well, thank you.

CAC: [laughter]

VS: But as you can imagine . . .

CAC: It's a story that I've not heard.

VS: I have to be careful with my sort of optimism around here . . .

CAC: I wouldn't call it optimism. I'd just say that's a real entrepreneurial . . .

VS: I feel it's important to be entrepreneurial.

CAC: I think this connection with the larger community, and then within the artistic community locally, and the larger community outstate . . . that's just a wonderful balance to keep.

VS: It's the only way to actually do some of the things you want to do. The things you can't afford to do otherwise, you've got to subsidize by doing something else.

CAC: Yes.

VS: We've got to do jazz concerts that sell tickets in order to subsidize some of the other things that we do.

CAC: Yes. You've got a winning team, which is more than [unclear].

VS: Oh, dear! [laughter]

CAC: Keep up the band [unclear].

VS: As long as we keep that band going, we're fine.

CAC: Vern, thank you very, very much.

VS: Thank you. I've enjoyed it.

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

[End of the Interview]

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