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THE COMPINSKY TRIO

Manuel Compinsky

Interviewed by Thomas Bertonneau

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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Photograph courtesy of News Pictures, Ltd.

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FRONTISPIECE (left to right): Manuel Compinsky, Sara Compinsky, and Alec Compinsky about 1939.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: September 7, 1901, in Manchester, England.

Education: Trinity College of Music, under Leopold Auer, Emile Sauret, Eugène Ysaÿe.

PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC ASSOCIATIONS:

Compinsky Trio, c.1907-50

Compinsky Ensemble, 1950-present

Trinity College of Music, 1920-25

University of Southern California, 1933-34

Pacific Institute of Music and Fine Arts, 1934-37

California State University, Northridge, 1967-present

Los Angeles Pops Orchestra, 1940-42

NBC Symphony, 1937-40

Santa Monica Youth Symphony, 1976-84

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Thomas Bertonneau, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. General student of music history, particularly contemporary. B.A., Scandinavian Languages, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Compinsky's apartment in Sherman Oaks, California.

Date: November 24, 1981.

Persons present during interview: Compinsky and Bertonneau.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

The interview followed a chronological format. The interviewer began by asking Compinsky to discuss his musical training, his emigration to the United States, his work at the Pacific Institute of Music and Fine Arts and in the NBC Symphony. The interview concludes with Compinsky entering military service at the beginning of World War II.

EDITING:

Teresa Barnett, editorial assistant, edited the transcript. She checked the verbatim transcript against the original tape recordings and edited for punctuation, paragraphing, spelling, and verified proper nouns. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

In September 1985, the edited transcript was given to Compinsky along with a list of queries and names requiring identification. He returned the approved transcript in December of the same year.

Jacqueline Wester, editorial assistant, prepared the front matter and index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape is in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent, noncurrent records of the university. Interview records and research materials are on file in the office of the Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 24, 1981

BERTONNEAU: What we generally ask at the beginning of these interviews is for the respondent, that's you, to give a brief account of his or her origins so that we know culturally and chronologically where they are coming from. Maybe you will do that for me at this point.

COMPINSKY: Well, my name suggests Polish descent, it's actually a Polish name. I don't know how it was acquired in my family, but my parents come from Russia, Lithuania to be exact. And naturally, being of Jewish extraction, they were always maltreated in Russia, as you know, and they found it necessary to leave the country. The great realization of their dream was to come to America, the wonderful country of freedom and promise of success. America was prominent in opening up a pathway for people to be able to continue whatever profession they have and be successful, et cetera. So they came to England. My mother had a brother who was living in Scotland, Glasgow. So they came over there to see them. And from there, they came to Manchester, where I was born, and then to London.

BERTONNEAU: Can you tell me your father's name, your mother's name?

COMPINSKY: Louis, Louis Compinsky. My mother's name was Ada.

BERTONNEAU: And were they musicians?

COMPINSKY: Yes. My father was an imaginative man. A pedagogue, particularly teaching violin. I think he was way ahead of [Shin'ichi] Suzuki, way ahead. He was very ingenious. He invented little accessories to make it possible for young children to play the violin and cello, to enable them to have all the correct playing habits. When you teach a class, it's very difficult to watch everybody intently, like you do with a private student. You tell them, "Do this, do that," and so on. When you have a class, you can't give them all that personal attention. So to compensate for that, he invented little gadgets which he applied to the instruments. He attached colored strips to the finger board. He would say, for example, "Put your finger in the right place to play in tune." The music notation was in colors corresponding to the strips: green, yellow, and red. I'm giving you a rough idea of how imaginative this man was. He used a rubber band around the left wrist to hold the wrist out and hold the violin up. I could go into more details. He invented a bow guide so the bow would be drawn in a straight manner instead of sliding all over the strings. This gave them a clean sound. All of these things he invented, so he was way ahead of Suzuki. Unfortunately, he didn't get the publicity that Suzuki got, so he was not known except in certain circles in London.

BERTONNEAU: What we have here is a photograph showing an orchestra of children and the title--

COMPINSKY: All strings.

BERTONNEAU: All strings, and the title is "Louis Compinsky's Music Training College," for violin, cello, piano.

COMPINSKY: Here's another picture. It was done outside the town hall in London. The marvelous look of these little tiny kids about five or six years old and older.

BERTONNEAU: Were you--?

COMPINSKY: I'm not in it, no.

BERTONNEAU: But were you a pupil in your father's school?

COMPINSKY: In the beginning. Then he sought a very advanced teacher for me. He was not a performer, but he played very well and he knew how to impart his knowledge, especially to children. He had the patience of a fine teacher, which is very essential, especially with young children. He composed pretty melodies and created an interesting program of music, and helped to develop the young people from one grade to another. He made everything fun, as you see, all these little pianos besides the cellos and the violins. About how many are there?

BERTONNEAU: There must be ten, eight or ten pianos.

COMPINSKY: Ten little upright pianos. It was quite a sound.

BERTONNEAU: What kind of musical training had your father had?

COMPINSKY: I wouldn't know, because he came from Russia. I don't know what he had there. I'm sure it was not of the best, because at that particular time things were not so organized. He was not a public performer.

BERTONNEAU: Was your mother also a musician?

COMPINSKY: No. But the great ideal was that children would become great artists. That's all they thought about. And they could have benefitted financially from us. At that time, prodigies were shown around and were used commercially. Well, this was rather rare in our family. Because generally in a family of musicians, one is better than another, one is superior. In our case, we happened to be on equal terms.

BERTONNEAU: Tell me about your siblings. I know you had at least one sister and a brother.

COMPINSKY: Yes, my brother [Alec Compinsky] was the cellist, my sister [Sara Compinsky] the pianist, and I'm the violinist. As soon as we could play well, we were already starting to play trios. And we continued in that vein because it was so unusual. We were in one house, not like groups today where all people in all different parts of town have great difficulty trying to get together to rehearse. We were in one house, and we were playing all

the time together besides our own studies. So it also stimulated us to have fun, enjoy, and make music, as well as getting a command of our individual instruments.

So we developed to the point where we started to give concerts. We were educated in London, our scholastic studies took place in London obviously. We came to a point-- Well, I'll explain that. We gave a concert on one occasion. After having played two-thirds of our concert and were ready to go on the stage to play our third work to our consternation, we found the string parts were missing. There was the audience waiting. We had to go out, and we didn't have our music. The pianist had. We didn't have ours. What should we do? Well, we, being young I suppose, we say, "Well, let's go on the stage and see if we can play it by memory." [laughter] To our surprise, except for a few little mishaps that weren't too obvious, we got through the whole thing playing it by memory.

It gave us such a keen sense of freedom of not being handicapped by stands and music, that from then on we worked and trained ourselves to do our complete repertoire by memory, which was most unusual. In fact, nothing like that had happened before. From then on, we gave all our concerts by memory, which for chamber music, is a very complicated affair, you know. It's much easier to play a solo. You're only responsible for yourself. But when

you're playing with three people playing, each one's responsible for each other. That's the way we gave all our concerts, which was most unusual.

And then later on my father wanted to come to America, the land of opportunity. So he went on ahead, and then later on he wanted us to come and join him there. And after a year or so we did.

BERTONNEAU: What years are we talking about now?

COMPINSKY: That was after the First World War. As a matter of fact, during that world war, the trio was honored to play for the royal family at one of the concerts for a special benefit which they attended.

BERTONNEAU: Is that an experience you can recall?

COMPINSKY: I think we were too young to realize the importance of it. At that time we were studying at Trinity College of Music in London.

BERTONNEAU: Yes.

COMPINSKY: I gave my first debut concert with Sir Henry J. Wood.

BERTONNEAU: Who were some of your teachers at Trinity College?

COMPINSKY: Well, the famous violinist Emile Sauret, who was one of the virtuosos of his time. He was a French violinist, a great friend of Pablo Sarasate and Henri Wieniawski. My most special studies were with Emile

Sauret. Also, when Eugène Ysaÿe came, I studied with him for a little while.

BERTONNEAU: Can you tell me a little about Ysaÿe? He's an intriguing figure in the history of violin playing.

COMPINSKY: Well, I was always amazed at his prodigious and sonorous sound, the large sound that he had on the violin. His manner of playing was in the grand style of playing, big sound, you know. And Sauret was more of a technician, virtuoso kind. I learned from three different schools of thought, the virtuoso French school, and Ysaÿe, the Belgium school. I also studied with Professor Leopold Auer, the teacher of [Jascha] Heifetz, as you know. It was in his later years that I studied with him--he made trips to London and also New York. When I got to New York, I continued studying with him. His best students performed at Carnegie Hall during the season. I was one of them. I did the Elgar violin concerto on that occasion.

BERTONNEAU: A tremendous, tremendous work.

COMPINSKY: Oh, yes.

BERTONNEAU: And how old were you when you performed that concerto? I mean, that's a heroic feat for the maturest violinist.

COMPINSKY: Yes, I know. I was on in years. I was about twenty-five at that time. But we did concentrate mainly in chamber music. And although I gave solo recitals--I have

programs I can show you--I gave recitals in Wigmore Hall and so on in London, we concentrated in the world of chamber music. We felt this was unusual. It was more satisfying. So my solo repertoire diminished over a process of time. But in my early days, I covered a complete repertoire of all the great solo works. That's why as a teacher, as a professor in music--which, you know, I'm in California State University at Northridge, on the faculty there. I am able to impart not only musicality, but also virtuosity.

BERTONNEAU: What were your years at Trinity College?

COMPINSKY: Trinity College, I think, was 19-- See, when Sauret died, they asked me to fill his post, which was a great honor. And I did. And then, let's see, I left to go to America. I left Trinity College. It must have been 1918, I think. Yes.

BERTONNEAU: What was the effect of the war on English musical life?

COMPINSKY: I think it became more intense. I think under stress, music becomes much more important as a means of an outlet of human expression. Naturally, under war there's always a certain tension. And I think music has a very important significance because it's an outlet for all their mixed emotions and fear. I think that took place in London, too, in the Second World War.

BERTONNEAU: That decade of 1910 to 1920 was a fairly

extraordinary decade for British music. I mean, there are a great many compositions which we regard as outstanding today that were written in that time. Were you--?

COMPINSKY: As a matter of a fact, I remember in Queen's Hall [London], when they heard the first performance of Stravinsky's **Petrouchk**a, there was hissing going on. I mean, to us, it's old hat, it's very easy to absorb. But [at] that time, it was something new to them. That's progress for you. People are subject to habits. They listen to a certain kind of music, and when you bring forward something completely different, you're disturbing their status quo, and you confuse them and they won't accept it. It's always the avant-garde, the intellectuals, who come forward and accept something new with interest and continue from there on, whether it's in painting, sculpture, or music. In the end, it's always like that, always has been.

BERTONNEAU: Perhaps I should ask you this. Did you have any contact with that group of English musicians who were so intently cultivating folksong as a source of composition and as a national style? I'm thinking of Vaughan Williams and Holst. Were you aware of that?

COMPINSKY: At that time, I don't think I was aware of it. And I don't think it had its impact. It didn't develop so strongly at that time. I think it took place a little later on. I'm not sure. When you're young, you're not too aware

of the forces that are taking place. You take much for granted.

BERTONNEAU: What kind of music were you playing in those days? Brahms, chiefly?

COMPINSKY: Well, yes, the usual. The usual classic and the romantics and so on. And the baroque, of course, that goes without saying. Almost the same training that you might have here. And it's only in later years, as you go along, when you become curious about new music that you suddenly become aware of. I mean, I've played all kinds. I've played Bartók and Stravinsky and so on. And that's certainly a different language than what you were brought up with at the time.

BERTONNEAU: Let's talk about coming from London to America.

COMPINSKY: To America, yes. At that time, they didn't have the network of a country, the broadcasting network. They only had the broadcasting from each individual city. So the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] sent me from one city to another to perform over radio. And that's the way it worked. And that's the way it also was when we came to America. Anyhow, the BBC sent a very complimentary letter of introduction to the Columbia [CBS] Network Concert Management in New York, comparing me to some very prominent violinist, to see what they could do for me when I came over here.

We gave concerts of mixed repertoire. We did a trio, and then I gave a group of violin solos, my sister played a group of piano solos, my brother Alec played cello solos, then another trio at the end, which is very appealing to a mixed audience. At that time especially, with all the musical organizations of the time, they found it rather intriguing, such a gamut of styles and music. But the critics come along with their superior attitude and say, "Oh, we don't want that sort of thing. Either you play a soloist program or you play chamber music. We don't want this mixed--" So we thought to ourselves, "This trio is a very unusual combination. For us to break up like this and then have to cut a new career, each individually for ourselves, would be impossible. So we decided to remain as a trio. We concertized, and we were known as the Compinsky Trio from then on. But our background was as soloists, virtuosos. I still have programs, Wigmore Hall. At that time they used to give two concertos in a program, not one. I have a program where I did a Bach concerto and a Paganini concerto in the same program, two concertos and other things besides. Another program, I had the [Heinrich Wilhelm] Ernst concerto and-- Let's see, what was the other work? I forget now. But, anyhow, it was prodigious, quite a meal, you might say, because today we don't give such prodigious programs. It meant nothing in those days to give

a two-and-a-half-hour concert.

BERTONNEAU: And the audiences would also be willing to sit with you--

COMPINSKY: Well, yes.

BERTONNEAU: Why the change, do you think? Do you think a modern audience could stand that long of a concert?

COMPINSKY: As time goes, people get impatient. In that time, maybe the listening attitudes were different. You see, I find myself, when I listen to someone perform, I'm deeply involved in all the intricacies that they play. Now a person who's not a player enjoys the music in an overall aspect, you see. So if you enjoy music that way, you can take two or three hours with much more ease than concentrating so intently. Three hours, that's a lot of concentration. [laughter] So you'll find in most recitals with the finest of soloists, the actual playing time is about an hour and a half or an hour and forty minutes. And then there are spaces in between which take place, the on-and-off, coming on the stage, and intermission, et cetera. Rarely do you find it getting up to two hours. You time it sometime. You'll see what I mean. Even the best. I went to [Nathan] Milstein's concert last week, which was a prodigious performance, beautiful. He gave four encores at the end too. But that amounted to within the two-hour limit. So you see what I mean. It's a different attitude

completely today.

BERTONNEAU: Let's resume our story, as it were. Your father had gone ahead to America because it was his idea to emigrate.

COMPINSKY: Yes, right.

BERTONNEAU: And word of your trio's activities had been sent ahead to New York by the BBC.

COMPINSKY: The "Columbia Concerts."

BERTONNEAU: The "Columbia Concerts." So what was the year that you came to the United States?

COMPINSKY: I think it was 1925.

BERTONNEAU: And was it an exciting adventure for you?

COMPINSKY: Oh, well, yes. It was like a new world opening up to us. Everything was so different of course. It was a big world. Well, when you're young, you take everything in stride. But unfortunately, I wish I'd kept a diary where it would be much better for me to relay my experiences and impressions. It fades out with time as you live on.

BERTONNEAU: Of course. Do the best you can.

COMPINSKY: You get so crowded with new events all the time that unless you really document it, it's very hard to remember all the details, unless something might come up to refresh your memory or spark off an incident.

BERTONNEAU: Well, you must have come by boat and you came into New York City?

COMPINSKY: Yes, we came on a big liner. I don't know whether it was the **Lusitania** or some liner like the **Lusitania.**

BERTONNEAU: The **Mauretania,** perhaps.

COMPINSKY: **Mauretania,** that's right. I think that's what it was, the **Mauretania.**

BERTONNEAU: It was the sister ship of the **Lusitania.**

COMPINSKY: That's right, it was the **Mauretania,** I remember, yes.

BERTONNEAU: You came to New York. You knew that when you got here you would have concert engagements.

COMPINSKY: No, no, no. Nothing was established. We had to cut our way through.

BERTONNEAU: And how did you go about that?

COMPINSKY: We got hold of an agent, Richard Copley. I have some marvelous criticisms from Olin Downes from New York, the prominent critic of New York.

BERTONNEAU: Maybe we could stop a minute and look at those and talk about them.

COMPINSKY: Yes, if I can dig those out. [tape recorder off]

BERTONNEAU: You came to New York and acquired a manager.

COMPINSKY: We gave a performance in Carnegie Hall, and, as a matter of fact, we were the first to give a chamber concert in Carnegie Hall. Most times, they never would think

of Carnegie Hall for chamber music. We started the mode. So we gave our recital there, and from then on, I mean with reviews of this kind, as you saw--

BERTONNEAU: A glowing review from Olin Downes.

COMPINSKY: Yes, it gave us the propelling opportunity to get engagements all over the country.

BERTONNEAU: What do you remember as being the most startling difference between the musical atmosphere in New York and that from which you had just come in London?

COMPINSKY: I don't know. I think that the English people are naturally, with all the centuries back of them, inwardly, as an average sense, I would say more cultured. They love music a great deal. They will do everything they can, attend concerts and-- Even today, in London, there are five symphonies that are fully involved. You can imagine for yourself the need for these people to have so much music. America was a growing country, and it didn't quite have the response, yet. But where we did wonderful successful concerts, like in Baltimore, there was a big German element there, and they had a series of concerts, and we were welcomed, open arms, when we gave a concert over there. We were a great favorite. We had to perform there every year. We made quite an introduction all over the country. When it came to the time where they created the radio network, we gave regular chamber music concerts every

Sunday morning for many years which were heard all over the country. That brought our name into prominence, and then, after that, many organizations wanted us personally to come and give performances. So one thing led to the other.

BERTONNEAU: How did you react as an Englishman to American life?

COMPINSKY: You take everything in stride. We didn't question it. Obviously it has to be different. You can't be critical about it. I mean, at least we weren't. We took everything the way things came along. But sometimes we were a little unhappy. We come to give a concert, the piano's out of tune--in small towns, you know--it's an insufficient kind of a piano to do justice to the pianist. And many of the audiences were musical societies, composed of a great deal of these ladies who, if it's in the afternoon, it was a teatime affair. [laughter] But they enjoyed it. I suppose it was part of their education, as it were. They wanted to be cultured. There's always that desire to be cultured. And, of course, the great element in America, even today, of culture comes from the people who've come from Europe and which have affected the Americans. With the guidance of professors who, a good many of them have a European background and education, musical education was imparted to the new generations of young American students. So the standard keeps rising all the time. At one time, all the best

talents came from Europe. Today, many of the greatest talents come to Europe from here. It's changed around.

BERTONNEAU: Were you living in New York?

COMPINSKY: Yes, we were living in New York for over ten years. That's the hub of all artistic activity, at that time, anyhow. But today Los Angeles is a strong element filled with great talents here. In fact, I almost might say perhaps more so than in New York now. I know you have the Juilliard [School], and you have the Curtis [Institute of Music], Indiana [University at Bloomington] and so on. But they all are considered to have a great deal of prestige. I've had some very prominent pupils of mine, very advanced, who want to go to the Juilliard because there's a certain prestige attached to it. But actually, I don't think they get better training than what you can get over here.

BERTONNEAU: Tell me some more about the radio program that you did.

COMPINSKY: As I said, for one whole hour we gave a program every Sunday morning. And the letters that came in, expressing adoration about our performances. Sometimes we got letters with a very critical comment who disagreed with our interpretation. But that didn't matter. You expect that. You can't please everybody. You get a lot of purists in the musical world who will differ with you in one way or another. I suppose that takes place with every subject, for

that matter. But, anyhow, people looked forward with great interest. It was a big event. When we traveled to Los Angeles, they all came out in large numbers because they had heard us on the radio and they were anxious to see us personally perform. So we drew large audiences.

BERTONNEAU: What kind of programs did you do on your radio stuff?

COMPINSKY: Oh, we had a repertoire of about forty works. I have a printed copy. Maybe next time I'll dig it out for you. We've done all the, you name it, all the Brahms, all the Beethovens, all the Mozart; Saint-Saëns, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, César Franck, Smetana. Oh, I don't know, it's just impossible for me to enumerate all the trios that we've done. Schubert, of course, the two great Schubert trios. And sometimes we had someone join us with a viola and so we did piano quartets too, added in the program.

BERTONNEAU: And so all the time you were also traveling, going to various places.

COMPINSKY: Yes. At that time there were no flights, no aerial flights.

BERTONNEAU: So it was by train or--

COMPINSKY: By train or sometimes we decided we'll drive in a car to appointments if they were close enough to go. It was hard, very hard. Because many a time we drove all day just in time to get into a hotel, change, and get on the

stage. We had no time to rehearse before, get the feel of the acoustics. We had to get right on the stage and perform there. And then after the concert, we had to think about some dinner. [laughter] Before that, there was no time. Besides, we wouldn't eat anyhow before a concert. I never eat before a concert. I keep it light. But you get ravenous after a concert. [laughter]

BERTONNEAU: I can understand that.

COMPINSKY: Especially from the stimulus of playing, as well as not having a dinner. You really need it, and you deserve it and enjoy it.

BERTONNEAU: I suppose that people sitting in an audience often don't recognize how strenuous it is to play.

COMPINSKY: No, they don't. You see, they expect a performance with great inspiration. They don't even know what you go through before to get on that stage. Like, I mentioned this artist's name, Milstein. He played one concert on Thursday and another concert on Saturday night too. Well, frankly, I felt that he performed with much more drive, more spirit, on Saturday than he did on Thursday. Now, I don't know what he went through to be in that concert on Thursday. He might have just arrived in time and have to stand up there and perform. There's a great deal of hardships attached to it. People don't know what goes on.

BERTONNEAU: How far afield from New York were you going on these live tours?

COMPINSKY: Oh, right across the country. Everywhere. Oregon, oh, you name it. We went to Canada, Quebec, yes, all over, all over the place, yes. But it was hard, very hard.

BERTONNEAU: Where were audiences most appreciative?

COMPINSKY: I think the best audience that we loved was in Baltimore. It was a big strong German element there. And they love music, you know how they are, especially with the classics, Bach. It was called the Bach Club. They gave these series of concerts throughout the year, and we were engaged to come and play there.

BERTONNEAU: When did you first come to Los Angeles on one of these tours?

COMPINSKY: Well, my mother was inclined to be sickly. I think she had high blood pressure. We thought that perhaps the climate in California would be good for her. We came to L.A. to give a concert. And then we decided that perhaps we could make our home over here because of her, which we did. Since then, we toured from Los Angeles.

BERTONNEAU: So what was the year of that move? We're talking about the mid-thirties, perhaps?

COMPINSKY: Yes, it was about '30, I think it was about '30, yes, it must have been about '32, something like that.

BERTONNEAU: Nineteen thirty-two.

COMPINSKY: Something like that. I don't quite remember the

date. That's where the story starts with Allan Hancock, that's where it began. When we arrived here, USC [University of Southern California] heard of our arrival and asked whether we cared to join the faculty and teach chamber music and our individual instruments. So we did. And there was an amateur trio who came to study with us. Who should the cellist be but John Allan Hancock. He had a violinist with him and a pianist. They knew of the trio, and they wanted to have the artistic guidance to play their performance at a higher level. Allan Hancock was a poor player on the cello. Incidentally, he was also a cellist in the Los Angeles Philharmonic at that time. At that time, I think that Philharmonic was more of a community orchestra. They didn't have all professionals.

BERTONNEAU: Right. Well, they would have been under [Artur] Rodzinski at that--

COMPINSKY: No, before that. I forget his name. Before--

BERTONNEAU: [Walter Henry] Rothwell?

COMPINSKY: Yes, yes. That's right, yes. Rothwell.

BERTONNEAU: You were here at the time when Rothwell was still--?

COMPINSKY: No, no. That was after. But I know he was--

BERTONNEAU: Oh, I see what you're saying.

COMPINSKY: Yes. At that time, Rothwell was a conductor. So the Hancock group studied with us. A year later, after

studying with us, Mr. Hancock comes up to us and says, "How would you like to start a music conservatory in Los Angeles?" I said, "Well, that's a wonderful thought, but," I said, "we don't have the money to be able to start an establishment of that kind." He said, "I would like to offer my house and you could start your operations from there." Now, this house, which I have pictures I'll show you, is a replica of a Michelangelo palace. His mother, who is Hungarian, had that house built in imitation of those Michelangelo intimate little palaces at that time which they made. Marble, marble staircases, spiral staircases, statuary, murals that were on the ceiling, the canvas murals, they were put on the ceiling besides on the walls, and so on. She put a lot of thought into it and a lot of things were shipped from Europe which were put into the establishment. That's where they lived. I'll show you pictures of it. And what took place was, he was staying there, but he was not happy there anymore because his son was killed in the Santa Barbara earthquake and they were all living in that house. Now, to go back a little further, his father was a surveyor and bought this property--now visualize this amount of property--from Fairfax to Vermont. You know the stretch? From Franklin to Wilshire. Do you know that stretch?

BERTONNEAU: Immense.

COMPINSKY: Imagine that stretch of acreage. I don't know how many acres there are. He bought this for a dollar an acre at that time. And right on the corner of Wilshire and Vermont, the mother built this beautiful house. Outside there were stone lions, outside as you went up the steps into the building. The mother left in her will that it could not ever be destroyed. But it didn't say that it couldn't be removed. So he didn't want to live in this house. I don't know what his plans were for the future. Also, it became commercial. All the areas around there were starting to build up and it became a commercial area, so that the taxes on the land were getting higher and higher. And there was no longer the isolation that was there before. It was all acreage, you know, and country and so on at that time when they were there. So he felt probably like moving away. Anyway, so he offered this building as a conservatory for music, see. That's how it got started. And we got involved. We had visualized another Juilliard on the West Coast. But it didn't turn out that way because we were too early with such a project for Los Angeles.

BERTONNEAU: Just not enough--

COMPINSKY: It was not ready to accept. Yes, there was not enough activity, music and talent and all that sort of thing. Now, let me show you some pictures. [tape recorder off] This picture is the [Pacific Institute of] Music and

Fine Arts. That was the outside building. Here it is, and you see the stone lions right out over there on the front. This was the building. It's like a villa, but it's actually a little like a-- It was copied after Michelangelo. His mother had that copied. This was the living room, where there was a big organ. See the organ there? One can see the pictures in the Page Museum.

BERTONNEAU: Ah, yes.

COMPINSKY: We held about three hundred people there in concert form and gave our concerts there, as well as an orchestra. We gave an orchestra. Not only was [Hancock] involved with oil and all that sort of thing, but he also could fly a plane. He took me up for a flight. He also owned the Santa Maria Railroad. And he could engineer the steam engine, even going up an incline which is quite a feat, I understand. I don't know much about it. And he was a captain of a ship.

BERTONNEAU: The **Velero.**

COMPINSKY: The **Velero III.** That's his ship there.

BERTONNEAU: Beautiful yacht.

COMPINSKY: Yes. It's a two-hundred-foot-long yacht. Then we started to have a mixture of concerts, and then he had this trio. And I knew to cover him up--he was such a poor player--that I got other instruments to play along. I added a string quartet, added a violin, viola, piano, flute, harp,

and so on. And I made all the musical arrangements for him to play so they could perform. And here are some of the programs. For example, "Second Arabesque," by Debussy; "Tambourin Chinois," by Fritz Kreisler; et cetera. I arranged all of these. I think it's mentioned, isn't it?

BERTONNEAU: Yes. It says arrangements by Manuel Compinsky.

COMPINSKY: Where does it say? I can't see.

BERTONNEAU: It says right here.

COMPINSKY: Oh, yes, right. That's right.

BERTONNEAU: So were these public concerts then?

COMPINSKY: Oh, yes. All public concerts, yes. This is about the trio. Here're some of the criticisms. I didn't notice that. Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Toronto, there you have it. London, New York, all of those.

BERTONNEAU: Quite a journey, for one thing.

COMPINSKY: Oh, yes. I mean that's the trio, not--

BERTONNEAU: Not the ensemble.

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BERTONNEAU: Now, when you came here from New York, what kind of musical world did you find in Los Angeles? Was it again a matter of foreigners making up the main part of the musical community?

COMPINSKY: Yes, yes, Europeans. There was a great, strong European element, yes.

BERTONNEAU: Did you find Los Angeles to be a provincial place or a cosmopolitan place?

COMPINSKY: No, no. I wouldn't say it was elementary, but you might say it was more provincial. It was growing. We didn't have smog at that time when I came, always a beautiful sky all the time, a breeze, clear and lovely. The smog all happened since I came here.

BERTONNEAU: What opportunities were there for musicians when you came here in '32 or '33?

COMPINSKY: I think the best offering that they had was to be on the faculty of a college or university. They say you could function as a teacher and you could function as a performer, both. In fact, I still give concerts at the university of Northridge [California State University, Northridge].

BERTONNEAU: Give you a basis of operation, in other words.

COMPINSKY: Yes, that's right. Of course, at that time we

had to make up our mind, after being here for a while, that we couldn't keep traveling. So if you can't travel, that means you have to make a decision what do you wish to give your experience and talent and so on, for what purpose. And that's teaching. You pass on your life experience and your artistry to the next generation. That's what I'm doing right now. Fritz Kreisler never taught, the great artist, you know. And the fact that Heifetz wants [to teach] shows us that need to be in contact and give of his artistry. So that's what happened with us. We had to make up our minds. You can't do both; it's one or the other. And it was not very remunerative, unfortunately, at that time. By the time you break up a fee, three parts, including the agent, four parts, there isn't very much left.

BERTONNEAU: You're talking about recitals now, giving recitals.

COMPINSKY: Giving concerts, yes. What you get paid for, your fee that you get. Chamber music today is coming right to the fore. Even more than solo playing. It's in great demand. The audiences are getting larger and larger for chamber music.

BERTONNEAU: What opportunities were there? Where would you give a recital in Los Angeles in 1933?

COMPINSKY: Well, we gave it in the Philharmonic Auditorium before the Music Center came into place. I have programs.

We gave the first performance of the Shostakovitch trio. That was in manuscript, and we had rights to it for one complete year before it was published.

BERTONNEAU: That was in the late forties?

COMPINSKY: Yes, just after the war. I have the original manuscript copy in my library.

BERTONNEAU: I'd like to see it perhaps. [tape recorder off] What I would like to find out is what kind of professional arrangements you had when you first came to Los Angeles.

COMPINSKY: We were on the faculty at USC.

BERTONNEAU: Right. And how long were you on the faculty there?

COMPINSKY: About two years I think. And then Hancock, I think, got us involved, and that took about three years. You see, what he did was not only give us the place, but he did help us to run the place with a certain amount of money which we had to return. Now, why the thing broke up was we couldn't [make it] financially successful. We started adding whatever money we had to keep it running, which eventually evaporated. And it broke up when USC offered Hancock--and by the name he called himself, Captain J. Allan Hancock--a title of doctor of commerce or some title like that, you know. And he, in return, had the whole building moved to benefit the campus. They took that building apart,

brick by brick, put it on the property of USC, and built a new structure around the old building, where Hancock Hall now exists-- Have you been in it?

BERTONNEAU: Yes, many times.

COMPINSKY: And there's a tower, a broadcasting tower there. And the original building of what I showed you is inside, surrounded by the new structure. They're used as offices.

BERTONNEAU: In the early and mid-1930s, the film studios were attracting hundreds of musicians to Los Angeles. And that is probably one of the factors that put Los Angeles on the map musically.

COMPINSKY: That's right.

BERTONNEAU: Were you involved in the film music?

COMPINSKY: Yes, I was. As a matter of fact, here-- [tape recorder off]

BERTONNEAU: We have a picture here. Can you explain to me what this is?

COMPINSKY: Norma Shearer was in the picture **Romeo and Juliet.**

BERTONNEAU: All right.

COMPINSKY: You remember that picture?

BERTONNEAU: I've seen it.

COMPINSKY: We were asked to perform on these ancient instruments as part of a background for certain scenes. And

they used this as publicity, these pictures. I'm playing a viola d'amore, which is a fourteen-stringed instrument.

BERTONNEAU: Right.

COMPINSKY: There are seven strings underneath the fingerboard which vibrate when you play on the seven above. And here is my friend Warwick Evans, cellist of the London String Quartet.

BERTONNEAU: Right.

COMPINSKY: And there's Norma Shearer and myself. And there's a harpsichord there. These pictures were taken for publicity purposes and because we were participating. The music was a background of certain authentic scenes around **Romeo and Juliet**, the Shakespearean play.

BERTONNEAU: Were you also a studio player at the--?

COMPINSKY: Later on, being here, which was very remunerative, I got offers. So I started playing here and there. But after a few years, I resigned because I felt that it was very destructive, very destructive.

BERTONNEAU: How so?

COMPINSKY: Because the music was not particularly stimulating. I know of more quartets, great quartets, that were broken up by an offering to one particular player which he couldn't refuse, broke up many fine chamber groups. And then, after a while, you get into the routine of the thing, where there's no demand really made on your artistry.

You're just a little wheel in a big piece of machinery. And the music is not demanding at all, it's not stimulating. So as time goes on, you start to deteriorate. Now before this happened to me, I want to tell you that after the Institute of Music and Fine Arts broke up, I got an offer from New York to participate in a new symphony that was being formed in New York called the NBC Symphony. David Sarnoff, the president of RCA, for the first time managed to establish a network to do broadcasts from New York all over the country.

BERTONNEAU: Right.

COMPINSKY: What could be better than to have a symphony play at New York? So the NBC Symphony was formed. But we must have some big prestigious name to go with it. Who could we have? What is the conductor? And they persuaded Arturo Toscanini to come out of retirement, which he did, somehow or other. I was interested in conducting, and I thought what could be better for me than to be right in action close to the maestro, you know. So I accepted. I went to New York, I was given an opportunity to play with the symphony. I have-- Let me show you this. [tape recorder off] When I started working with the NBC and Toscanini, I thought that it would be kind of different values as a member of the orchestra. But to my surprise, I found that all the values that we as a chamber group worked hard for, all the subtleties, were just what Toscanini was

trying to achieve. Except, like a painter who paints on a small canvas, Toscanini was painting on a large mural, which is a big symphony orchestra. But the musical values were the same, except on a larger scale. This is what I learned from--

BERTONNEAU: There are a lot of legends about Toscanini. He's supposed to have been a tyrant.

COMPINSKY: Oh, well, that of course! Some of the things that took place-- Here's one incident. On one occasion-- He was accustomed, when he gets on the stage and rehearses a performance, it's not a rehearsal. It's a performance. He comes there, he expects complete quiet, let's get down to work, et cetera, et cetera. But the musicians did not have experience with a man of that caliber. They had other conductors, but always of a congenial nature. Sometimes a conductor would come and talk to some of the friends in the front about their families and so on before they get down to work. But not with him, that doesn't work that way with him. With him, it's a very serious thing. You get down to business. So, on one occasion some of them were talking while he was trying to correct something in a certain section, and some of them were looking over the passage, noodling around. There was a lot of turmoil going on. He got real mad and he smashed his stick over his music stand. You know, his Italian temperament, has no patience

or anything. He happened to have a very valuable watch in his hand which was a metronome and a watch all in one. Must have been a very expensive gift, someone had given him. He was so furious, he took this up and he threw it down and it smashed to pieces. He walked off the stage and wouldn't come back the rest of the day. Now, our rehearsals were three hours rehearsal in the morning and three hours rehearsal in the afternoon, six hours a day rehearsing. Because every week we had a different program.

BERTONNEAU: Right.

COMPINSKY: Not like that you have over here or any symphony concert, you know, you keep repeating. But a different program every week! So we rehearsed every day, with one day off. I think that it was Monday. And we gave a concert on Sunday. And that was broadcast all over the country, so people were waiting for that big event, you know. So a couple of months later, we were having intermission, fifteen minutes, and I was walking down the aisle at Studio 8, where they--part of that music center at that time they had built, RCA--and I happened to pass by the podium. And then, on the podium, I see one of those old-fashioned Ingersoll thick, it's almost like, I would say, about three-quarters of an inch thick, cheap dollar watches. So I thought, "What's a watch like that doing on his stand?" So, out of curiosity--he wasn't looking--I pick up the watch and look on the

back. And on the back was engraved, "From the son of the president of NBC. For rehearsals only." He could smash all he wanted, in other words.

BERTONNEAU: [laughter] That's a pretty funny story. We took a little break a minute ago. We went into another room in the house and we looked at some programs that had been printed for the NBC Symphony. There's something extraordinary about them. Will you tell me again?

COMPINSKY: Yes, yes. The early programs from the very beginning that were printed on silk, little piece of silk into the size of a regular program. You see, they did have microphones whenever a performance went on. When they wanted to record, they wanted complete silence. Today they go overboard with too much reverberation. At that time, they wanted none at all. And that's difficult, because in a concert hall, there's a certain amount of reverberation which is natural, right? So they wanted no reverberation at all for the very reason that they didn't want any rustling in the audience to disturb the performance, which was being broadcast live. And silk doesn't make any sound in your fingers. Well, so that was rather expensive, so they decided to find some other object they could print their programs on. They tried cork tablets. And that was expensive. And the third try was on flexible linoleum. But at the end, they settled for compressed cardboard, which is

noiseless and it's rather cheap. And that's why the early programs were printed on silk. Very interesting.

BERTONNEAU: And you spent three years with the NBC orchestra. That was '37 to '40?

COMPINSKY: Yes. I came back to Los Angeles.

BERTONNEAU: What did you come away from that orchestra with? What did you learn?

COMPINSKY: I learned a great deal. I was interested in symphonic conducting, and I learned a great deal about it. Naturally I was in touch with the great masterpieces of all literature, symphonies. I became familiar with them, playing in them, watching how the maestro handled certain problems, what his demands were, which didn't surprise me because, as I said, his requests were of a very artistic nature and corresponded to what the trio worked at in our particular repertoire. After all, sonatas and trios and all that are composed by composers on the same structural basis as a symphony, except in a symphony it's in a large form. And I found it fascinating because it was just like an artist that might paint on a small canvas to have the opportunity of doing all his artistry of painting in a large mural. That's the difference between what we accomplished as a chamber group and what Toscanini tried to accomplish with all these musicians involved like a big mural. But the same values were there, exactly the same musical values,

depth of penetration into the music, et cetera. And the remarkable part about what I noticed, as much as he conducted, for example, the Beethoven symphonies, time and time again, he must have done hundreds of performances: never satisfied. Why? Tempo can either make or break a fine piece of music. And he was always struggling with tempo. His conception of the music in his mind, as he went on to the stage, he wanted to grab that and hold it, to be able to impart it. What took place by imparting it-- There were differences there, there's a loss. And that's why from one performance to another, although we repeated, there were slight differences in tempos. What a great artist always struggles with is tempo, the right tempo. And that takes a lot of contact with that piece of music to feel the right tempo. I don't care whether it's a soloist or whether it's chamber music or whether it's a symphony. It's the same thing, to get the right tempo. It's more difficult with a symphony because you're involved with a hundred and ten players. So if you play alone, you only have yourself to combat, you might say. With a small ensemble, it's possible. A hundred and ten players, to get a quick reaction, all to react in a split second together, purely from the point of ensemble, or dynamics, to be able to, all to diminish, all to rise, all to slow down, all to push, to get faster, these are great values which are hard to do.

BERTONNEAU: So after your tenure year at the NBC Symphony, you came back to Los Angeles to be part of your trio again.
COMPINSKY: That's right. To continue with our concerts.
BERTONNEAU: Let me ask you this. You'd been here in Los Angeles by that time almost ten years. What were the changes that you had seen in the musical atmosphere of Los Angeles in that time? Were you aware of a growth, an increase in sophistication?
COMPINSKY: Oh, yes. The activities, all the concerts that were taking place helped develop an artistic atmosphere. And we, too, we made our contribution here. We performed over radio, concerts over here, and we traveled a certain amount of radius. We couldn't go too far. You have to make up your mind, either you teach or you play. You can do a certain amount of traveling but you can't do too much.
BERTONNEAU: You were going to Santa Barbara and San Diego?
COMPINSKY: Close by. We gave concerts in Pasadena at one time and so on.
BERTONNEAU: What were the main factors contributing to the growth of music in Los Angeles in the 1930s?
COMPINSKY: There were more players coming forward. The young ones were coming up. They were coming forward and giving concerts. And the more concerts, the more people, and, bit by bit, it raises the level of the cultural appreciation.

BERTONNEAU: You said that you thought that the influence of the film industry was in a sense a double-edged sword.

COMPINSKY: Yes.

BERTONNEAU: Do you think that there is an inevitable conflict between commercial and artistic values?

COMPINSKY: Well, let me tell you, for example--I can analyze that too--in the NBC Symphony we had three hours of rehearsal in the morning, three in the afternoon. Six hours. That's a lot of playing. Well, most of the players over there, they were through for the day. They took their instrument, put it in the case, they didn't see it until the next day. Not me. I rested up when I got home, and I practiced my personal repertoire to keep in touch. And also, as you may know, there's always little areas where you want more contact. And you look them over to get more perfection, if you're sincere. Some of the players are not. But that's what I did. About two years later-- Now mind you, all these men were picked out as extraordinary players with reputations, everyone individually, to make this symphony, because they promised Toscanini the greatest orchestra in the world. So every man had to be real top-notch with their reputation. So what was I going to say? Just a moment while I gather my thoughts. Oh, yes. Two years later, some of the colleagues of the symphony said, "Oh, let's have some fun, get together and we'll play some chamber music." "Oh,

great, I'd love that, sir." So we get together, we sit down to play. What do I hear? I was absolutely downcast. I couldn't believe my ears.

Now here is what takes place if you don't protect yourself privately. First of all, your vibrato slows down because you get lax. To vibrate is a certain tension in the arm like what this statue represents. I'll talk to you about that in a moment. That's lax, so your vibrato slows down. And you know what kind of a sound that is. Like a singer who has his aaooo-aaooo-aaooo. That's a dreadful sound, number one.

Secondly, your intonation suffers. Because with twenty violinists playing the same note, there's no guarantee you're right on the beam, except when you hear yourself alone. You try to match the sound around you, you know. And as a matter of a fact, why do little orchestras of kids not sound badly in a section? If each one sounds slightly off pitch, collectively it sounds like a vibrato. [laughter] So it doesn't sound bad. But, anyhow, so the pitch goes.

Your dynamic values change, because what's pianissimo in an orchestra, you can play with one hair, but it's amplified twenty times there, twenty violins. You get a sound, as soft as it is. You have that kind of a weight. When you play alone, it's nothing. You either sound timid

or there's no sound. So you've lost your sound, whether it's pianissimo or whether it's fortissimo. In an orchestra, you can lay in. You do that in an individual group, it sounds scratchy. It's ugly. It's not the same kind of sound at all. From the interpretive point of view, you have nothing to say. It's up to the conductor. So if you sit in a string quartet, there's no individuality at all in your playing. And what is more, you lose your sense of tempo, because you're so alert watching the conductor's stick, that to hold the tempo on your own account without a conductor, you lose that sense of rhythm.

Now, these are the things you lose when you play in an orchestra continuously, one year after another, if you don't protect yourself privately. And I tell that to my students. If you're going to play in an orchestra, fine. You're in touch with the greatest masterpieces, and you're in touch with the greatest geniuses, the men who wrote those masterworks. You're in their company. The composer left a legacy, his music. Actually, you're in his company, that's what's happening. And you better respect everything that is there because if he were present, you would be right on the alert to do everything that's required of you. So you can't let up just because you don't see him visually. But he's there, you know. And I tell them that all the time. But you must protect yourself in some other way, which I did

even after I left the NBC Symphony. We kept giving concerts, and then I used to get calls to the studios.

In the studios, the demand made upon the players, the musical demand, is so elementary, is almost nothing worth talking about, and the stature of the music is commercial. So after a while, they deteriorate, they fall apart. I saw that happening and I said, "I should give my whole life's work, dedication, hard work to reach a certain height of artistic stature, that I should throw that down the drain for [the] accumulation of checks? Not me." So I went back and concentrated and dedicated myself to teaching, giving of my art and my experience and my dedication to young people so they can proceed to a higher level. That's what my aim is today.

BERTONNEAU: I have seen documents relating to something called the Compinsky String Orchestra, or String Symphony perhaps.

COMPINSKY: That was a chamber group called the Compinsky Ensemble. Currently I conduct a symphony called the Santa Monica Youth Symphony.

BERTONNEAU: Right. No, what I'm referring to is something that existed in the 1940s. When you came back from Toscanini, you had the idea of establishing a pops orchestra here in Los Angeles. [The Los Angeles Pops Orchestra]

COMPINSKY: Right.

BERTONNEAU: And what happened? Did you indeed form such an orchestra?

COMPINSKY: Yes, yes, we gave concerts. I got all the members of the [Los Angeles] Philharmonic and said to them, "Look, between your season and the Hollywood Bowl, you have an empty season." (They had nothing to do.) "Why don't you work for yourselves?" So I gave them a proposition that we would have a cooperative orchestra. Whatever came in financially, everybody would share equally. That appealed to them. So I went to the musicians union, and they gave me permission to actually do it. I never thought I could be such a good salesman, but they actually agreed. Because that's not part of their union policy.

BERTONNEAU: The union rules are pretty strict.

COMPINSKY: No, you don't compete with business.

BERTONNEAU: And what technical arrangements had to be made in order to permit that?

COMPINSKY: They gave me their permission, and we gave many months of concerts. Then the war started. I was inducted, and the orchestra disbanded. And the union would not give any more permission for its continuance because there was not enough in the box office to share that made it worthwhile to each musician playing in the orchestra there. I have pictures. I'll show you that, too, next time.

BERTONNEAU: Would you say that, up to the interruption of the war, that it was a successful--?

COMPINSKY: Yes, it was filled, the place was filled. We gave it in the Los Angeles Breakfast Club because you had to have a straight floor. But what I did, I went beyond the Boston Pops concerts. You know what they do. You sit at tables, you can order drinks, a little sandwich if you want, and you listen to the symphony, right?

BERTONNEAU: Right.

COMPINSKY: Now, what did I do? I "gilded the lily," as the saying goes. I gave the familiar classics, all good Schubert and all that, the early works, that's easily acceptable to an average kind of an audience. Businessmen at the end of their day don't feel like sitting in a concert hall for two hours listening to music that's above their head. So the idea is if you give them something congenial, social, they'll come. They're common. And this way they get educated, bit by bit, to enjoy good music. So we played, say, for about twenty minutes. Then there was a little intermission that people could order or something and they can walk around their tables, talk to each other, then come back and sit down, and they have their drink and they have refreshments at their tables. Then we have another session. About three sessions in the program of twenty minutes each. At the end of the program, all the tables were cleared. The floor was completely cleared. And the part of the program that continued was an invitation to the

hall audience to waltz to the Strauss waltzes played by the symphony orchestra. Can you imagine what an appeal that had? Naturally the place was jammed.

But despite that, our overhead was too big to compensate for what came in. It wasn't enough. As much as it was sold out, we couldn't compete with the overhead. And that's why the union would not allow any more cooperative, for that reason. If I could have made it work, they might have let us go on. The musicians would have their own thing, they'd be in business for themselves instead of being told what to do and pushed around and all that. It would be their own business. Why shouldn't it be? They're musicians. Business people would get together and run a business. Well, musicians should get together and run a business. But they don't allow it.

BERTONNEAU: So the war came and--

COMPINSKY: Broke it up, broke it up.

BERTONNEAU: And you were inducted but managed to continue your music career.

COMPINSKY: For a while before I was inducted, yes.

BERTONNEAU: In uniform, you also were a musician, yes? Because you were assistant to this Methodist chaplain.

COMPINSKY: Yes, chaplain. And I took care of the library. It was one of my duties to take care of the library, et cetera. And many musicians still chuckle. When

they were inducted, they came to Fort MacArthur, where I was too. And they said, "You know, when I was inducted,"--Sunday morning there's a sermon, at the church, and every soldier has to go to the service--"who should meet us at the door? None other but Manuel Compinsky, handing out bibles." [laughter] They're still chuckling at that, some of the fellows that came from over here. Later I was invited to join the faculty of CSUN [California State University, Northridge], where I am still teaching.

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