

VDC Interview Transcript

Subject: Cincinnati Ballet

Informant: Carmon Deleone, Cincinnati Ballet Maestro/Music Director

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Cincinnati Ballet

1555 Central Parkway, Cincinnati, OH 45214

Key:

Green highlighting: indicates (other) organizations and individuals that might be useful in mapping connections within and outside of the state.

Blue highlighting: titles of works referenced in interview

CF: Candace Feck

CD: Carmon Deleone

JD: Jane D'Angelo

JC: Jessica Cavender: videographer and media manager

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway: videographer

CF: Scott Altman said that I should ask you How you are *so* charming, and I see why he said to ask.

CD: Well, that's nice. I thought he was going to ask for other sordid details...

CF: Wait, I'd be happy to hear those. Oh, well, really, I have to pause and say that I'm Candace Feck and I'm interviewing Carmon Deleone, at Cincinnati Ballet and it's August 18th, 2020. So you did grow up in Ravenna. Do you want to talk a little bit about your early life and maybe... I think I saw that you had an uncle who had a piano and that you fiddled around on it, but it didn't sound like you had a lot of musical training as a child. Would you care to talk about that?

CD: Wow. How did you find out all this stuff?

CF: Oh, I don't know. I found some interviews. I watched Barbara Keller, is that her name? interviewing you, for example..

CD: Keller, you mean Barbara?

CF: Yes.

CD: Well, there's not much musical background, I think because my parents were not so... we had a piano in the house. My mother, I think, knew one tune, but that was nice. But I had an uncle, her brother, Bart Clyde who played violin in the Akron Symphony way back when, I think before it was really any kind of a professional group, but there are some photographs of him with his violin. And at his home, he had a piano and I plunked around on that a little bit. And he had a daughter, Donna

Jean, who was quite a good musician, at least I thought she was, and she played piano and other woodwind instruments. So I think early on maybe I had a little bit of knowledge of how to plunk the piano a bit, but that — that's about it.

Later on, my dad actually worked at Akron University. And the music school there was founded by Francesco DeLeone, and there seemed to be a natural connection there. He wrote some operas and a bunch of songs, and he was a pretty well-known piano teacher in the Northeastern Ohio area. I've met some ladies years back that took lessons from him and said he was really good, but I've checked on it and I don't think... it might've been another DeLeone era, but I'm not quite sure about that connection. I would hope that there would be, because he founded the music school at Akron and I've looked through some of his music there when my dad was working there.

CF: So no training at all until... I mean, how did you pick up the French horn, for goodness sake?

CD: Well, I remember one day when suddenly I was in grade school at West Main School, and you heard this huge sound of a band playing downstairs, where our classes were upstairs. And it was to promote and to get kids interested in playing instruments. And the director of the band at that time was Edwin Marini, who later figures very importantly in my training. So, that's how he got recruits into his band. I think I did speak with him at that time and I said I was interested in playing piccolo. And he said, no you can't play piccolo, you have to play flute first. And I wasn't interested in flute; I was just interested in piccolo. So it wasn't until about, how many years later — would've been six years or seven years later that I got to junior high school and decided that I would like to play in band. And I chose the French horn mainly because I saw posters... we studied orchestral instruments and I was smart enough to look and see, well, it's in a typical symphony orchestra. I wasn't particularly interested in strings because that seemed like too much trouble, and you have to buy all that equipment. You might break a string; woodwind instruments, the same thing — you have to deal with reeds and so on. So I figured, well, I play a brass instrument and I noticed in the photograph of a symphony orchestra, there were more French horn players in the French horn section than any other brass section. So I thought maybe there was a chance there to play more frequently. And it proved to be right. The first instrument I was handed was a mellophone, it's the opposite of a French horn. You play it with your right hand instead of the left hand. And it used like, kind of like a trumpet mouthpiece, but then pretty soon after that, French horn became available. And that was it, I fell in love with that instrument.

CF: That was in junior high?

CD: Yes. That would have been like, seventh grade, sixth grade.

CF: Now I know that you came to CCM maybe on a scholarship. Can you talk about that a little bit? How that all happened?

CD: That's a nice story. This Edwin Marini that I'm talking about is still alive today. In his mid-nineties, he looks better than I do; he's an amazing guy. And he was also interested in jazz. He was a jazz accordion player, piano player. The choral director, Dave Mask was a wonderful jazz bass player. And for some reason I started playing drums. I played drums in the marching band, so I wouldn't get my French horn nicked up. So I played in a pep band and played drum set, and I became a part of the Ed Marini Trio. We played around Kent, Ohio, and so on, for a couple jobs. And, when you ask about how I got to CCM, I was just... I had applied to various Ohio schools: Oberlin for one, Kent State, Ohio State. I had some scholarships to those schools and I was thinking of choosing

one of them and got called into the principal's office. And they said "There's someone over in Canton, Ohio, and they're looking for talented musicians. Would you be interested in auditioning for them? And I said, well, sure. And I went over to Canton to the academy of music, I forget the name of the building. And there was this lady there by the name of Eleanor Allen from CCM college conservatory of Cincinnati, who was auditioning people, and she was so charming!

She's the reason I'm in Cincinnati. She was just the sweetest, kindest person, and convinced me to come to Cincinnati. She also offered a full scholarship plus a meal ticket and the whole nine yards. So it looked really attractive. And I came here then to play French horn. I wanted just to be the world's greatest French horn player. And along with that, I was also the assistant to the brass choir director who happened to be a trombone player in the Cincinnati symphony. Ernest Glover was his name, a wonderful Australian gentlemen. So I didn't get any real *conducting* experience — maybe just a taste from that, but that's where it all came from.

CF: A charming woman got you all the way here and then look what happened!

CD: Later on, Eleanor became the assistant to the artistic director of the Cincinnati Ballet. So I saw her frequently until her passing, but she was a *wonderful* lady.

CF: So it's interesting that you had the sort of... I mean, I know I'm not a musician, but I think of a French horn being a classical instrument. Probably it's more than that, but then you had this jazz drumming, so you kind of had two things, at least, going on... Right?

CD: Still do. I think that's sort of kept me sane throughout the years to have both of those two sides of my music, both of which I enjoy a great deal. So when I got to Cincinnati, one of the first people I associated with was another French horn player, Dave Matthews — not *that* Dave Matthews — but another David Matthews. And he had come from Louisville, Kentucky, and he had some really fine training in jazz. He was a *wonderful* jazz piano player, even though he only had the use of his left hand. He had had a disease as a youngster, and so he could only play a few notes with the right hand, but he was a terrific jazz player. I'm using past tense, but he *still* is. He lives in Japan, and records for record companies. And I think you mentioned in the notes that he's a fabulous arranger who's worked for everybody — Paul McCartney and Frank Sinatra and everybody.

So that was my college roommate, and we kept on the jazz with him. And our other roommate was Michael Moore, who eventually was a David Brubeck bass player. So we had a sort of a built-in rhythm section, piano bass, and drums, and we played *a lot* and I also played some jazz French horn at the same time. And so did Dave and that's how all that sort of got going. That's the jazz side of it.

CF: Well, it's really interesting and amazing. And I can't believe you had this trio in your dorm room!

CD: I can't believe it either, I'm so proud of those two guys. It's wonderful.

CF: I imagine they're proud of you too.

Let's see, I really want to get to Juliet Prowse but I'm going to try to discipline myself to stay here on my path. I know you got a masters at CCM. Was that also in horn or what was your focus?

CD: Let's see, that was still in applied music. My undergraduate degrees were bachelor of music, with major in French horn, minor in piano, and I was in a five-year program. And I also had my

teaching degree as well. I did my student teaching here with some wonderful teachers in the Cincinnati public schools, who sort of taught me that side of it. So that was good. And then a few years later, I did stay on for the master's degree. And that was an applied degree, also in French horn. And I have most of — the PhD is just a tiny bit away — and that's when I got a job with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra so that went by the wayside.

CF: Somewhere along the line, you met your wife, Kathy, right? Cincinnati person or?

CD: Yes. Originally from Maud, Ohio. a little town, a suburb, which is not so much of a suburb anymore, it's grown up. But that came after Juliet Prowse actually, so...

CF: Okay, so we'll get back in line here, then. I'm curious, though, your young self with your trio writing built into your dorm room and these sort of multiple interests — I won't even say twin interests because *multiple* is the word for you — I know that, by now. But you started assisting at CCM, is that what happened? Oh! (remembering) The Mummers Guild! Didn't you meet Leroy Reams and...would you...

CD: I think I can explain that without being too wordy. Let's see, I mentioned that I was assistant to Ernie Glover and then Erich Kunzel came to town and part of his... he took a job at the college conservatory of music and conducted our orchestra there. And I was his assistant with the orchestra. So that's where I really started to conducting some orchestral things — not all that much. I also had a wonderful conducting teacher by the name of John Lacey, who did preliminary conducting lessons. He was a choral man. So I hope I got little choral experience in first and then came the orchestral work with Erich. And, during those years, I was still playing French horn, principal horn and also playing a principal horn with the Dayton Symphony Orchestra, I got that job for a while, and also playing jazz gigs at night.

So it was a great combination, wonderful times. Now I was also playing in the pit for the Mummers Guild, which was a student group that put on plays and musicals. Paul Rutledge was the guy who headed that. And so I would play the various musicals and he really enjoyed either French horn. I played some drums also, in the pit. And then one time the conductor that wasn't available — Gordon was his name. And, I think Leroy Reams said, well the kid over there, he plays drums; he's got good rhythm — let's give him a try. And I said, well, sure, I can do that. And it was... Bye Bye Birdie was the first production — and that's the first time I really conducted, was for Bye Bye Birdie on the campus of Cincinnati, University of Cincinnati.

And that was marvelous. And in the cast were two people who eventually were Tony Award-nominated folks, Leroy Reams, and Marcia Lewis, who stole the show, and later became a real star on Broadway. So that's how that began. Then I conducted a bunch of musicals after that with Pamela Myers, who did... Pam came in soon after that, she was my *Funny Girl*, and other musicals that we did together. She took off, went to New York, and the first job she got was in the cast of *Company* with Stephen Sondheim. So there was a lot of good experience there. And Leroy graduated and went off to dance with Mitzi Gaynor and other wonderful dance ladies. And one of those was Juliet Prowse and they were on tour. And she didn't care for the guy who was conducting for, I guess...

There is an interruptive sound...

CF: Do we have to wait? I'm sorry.

CD: Air conditioning?

JC: It lasts, maybe about five minutes, but once it goes off, it won't come back on again.

CF: Okay. Are you okay to take a little pause?

CD: Sure, feels good.

CF: —because it ruins the sound.

CD: You probably need a pause from *me* — I'm just talky-talky-talky...

CF: Not at all! Are you kidding? I've been waiting for this for days!
And Juliet Prowse was a household name in my home. My mother had a dance studio here in Cincinnati, and so I knew who Juliet Prowse was when I was growing up.

CD: Oh yes? What was her name?

CF: My mother? Oh, I don't think you would have known her. Her name was Joan Feck.

CD: Feck?

CF: Uh-huh. It was just a small local studio in the Mt. Washington area.

CD: Oh! So many people — you mention Juliet Prowse and nobody knows who she was...

CF: Oh, I remember her very well. My mother just adored her!

CD: She had the best legs in the business. Legs forever.

CF: I think that's a quote from someone, isn't it?

CD: I...I think so. Leroy Reams always said that. He was very close to Juliet and she trusted him.

CF: Okay, let's carry on.

CD: So I guess for some reason, Juliet was not all that thrilled with the person who was conducting for her on that particular tour. And Leroy said, well, I know this kid back in Cincinnati and let's see if he can come do the show. I got the call and took off. It was my first plane ride, and out to Los Angeles to the studio. First door I opened and Ann Miller was... I was in the wrong room, and Ann Miller was tap dancing, and it was terrific. And I even went to the Brown Derby one time, there was Mitzi Gaynor. I went over to her booth, and not wanting to bother a star but I said, "Well, I'm working with Leroy Reams." As soon as I said Leroy Reams, she lit up, "Oh, wonderful!"

CD: So, at any rate, that was fantastic. And that was maybe the most fun I've ever had in my life, was working with those characters, a whole slew of male dancers and Juliet on that tour. And that was my first *professional* experience.

CF: And you were around twenty, right?

CD: I was a little bit older... I think I turned twenty-three by the time, right in the middle of that tour. So twenty-two I guess, is when I started with her.

CF: And could you talk about how long that tour was, and where it went?

CD: Oh boy! My memory isn't that great — it was a few months, that's all. It was not a year long, maybe three or four months. It started in Vancouver and played Vegas and Reno and San Francisco and then the final stop, oddly enough, was in Boston. The whole troupe went to Boston for the final performance.

CF: Well, could I circle back for a second, because it sounds like — I might have this wrong, but it sounds like your first opportunity to conduct came unexpectedly. You weren't *looking* to be a conductor. You were just playing... or you were?

CD: No, you're right. I wasn't.

CF: So talk about that. Did something just click, or was it a process?

CD: It was just an opportunity that I said yes to. I do that a *lot* — when somebody at the Ballet asked me to write a ballet for them, I said yes and I had never composed anything before that. And so I guess I just don't say no. So that's how the conducting started. Although, I have to say, even before I did that Bye Bye Birdie performance, I gathered together musicians at school to play a Bach Brandenburg concerto, and so on... I was interested in doing serious conducting as well, and the only opportunities I saw were for me to go ahead and gather together players and play these pieces that I love. And that's also what I recommend to young conductors nowadays, because there are so few opportunities and so many conductors, so I suggest “Well, go out and grab your friends and wave your arms at them, get as much experience as you can.”

And that's sort of what I did even before Juliet Prowse and the musicals. Dave Matthews was a composition major, and we studied very carefully all of the great composers of the past; we had good training at the conservatory to recognize all those folks. Dave studied with Felix Labunski,¹ a brilliant composer. And Jenó Takács was on the faculty there, a Hungarian composer who was also terrific.

CF: Well, let's move to Cincinnati Ballet. I mean, it came through CCM and Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. How did that happen?

CD: It really came through the symphony orchestra. I started with the symphony in 1968. I was assisting Erich at the conservatory and I think the load for him and Max Rudolph at the time was getting pretty large and they wanted an assistant they could brush some of the work on to. The “bath of fire” was when Max came to the conservatory of music to conduct an opera there, *The Secret Marriage*, *Matrimonio Segreto*, and I was his assistant for that performance. He got to see a little bit of my work, I think, from that, and so it was okay with the two guys to bring me on to the

¹ Labunski emigrated to the United States from Poland in 1936 and became an American citizen in 1941. He taught at Marymount Manhattan College from 1940 until 1941, at the Cincinnati College Conservatory between 1945 and 1955 and at the University of Cincinnati from 1955 until 1964 when he retired.

symphony. I was being paid less money than the last chair violin player, and I was an extra percussionist in the percussion section, I was an extra French horn player, and I was the assistant conductor. So they got a three-for-one for a while. Then later on, I became resident conductor and did less of the playing work — but I always enjoyed playing French horn in the orchestra — still do. So, the ballet was a guest of the symphony usually around Christmas time for kinder concerts and so on; they performed in the winter and Eric had decided that he didn't wish to do that particular program. So I was assigned the ballet. And as soon as I did that program, I don't know whether it was the night *of*, or a day later, David McLain, who was really a forward-thinking gentlemen who had this vision of what the company could be in the future asked me if I would like to be the music director.

And that's why now it totals up fifty-two years because in 1969, he *made* me the music director of the company, even though there wasn't that *much* work to be done with orchestra — although even at CCM, there were performances with the university orchestra. A lot of *great* memories about those first days at CCM when the ballet company was still there as a part of the school.

CF: I was thinking that, reading the kind of crazy history of artistic directors here after David McLain passed that it was just two years of this one and two years of that one and kind of really choppy — and now *you* were the three-line for all that. You were hired by David McLain and here you are with Victoria Morgan. So you're the keeper of the history. I wonder what you would say about any of that.

CD: Well, I do give a visual history of the company, and I have all of those faces and I talk about each of the guys and how they happen to come into the job at the time — many of them unsuspecting, really. When David McLain passed away, there was really a hullabaloo at that moment in time, because it was announced in Cincinnati that someone would be artistic director, but New Orleans where we were performing at the time, said “No, no, no. Read the small print — we have to okay this,” and they preferred somebody else. And that was Ivan Nagy, and that was a *wonderful* period of time. That's when the company really became an international company. He had such a pull internationally that suddenly we had dancers from all over the world wanting to come to Cincinnati to dance with us. And we did many great works of Ben Stevenson at that time.

CD: You probably know the history, but Ivan left and he had just called in a friend of his to be his assistant, or to be ballet master. Richard Collins — a beautiful gentleman, poetic gentleman. And he was here only a short time because he died in an automobile accident going to Knoxville where — we were a three-city company at that time — which was glory days, when we could perform not only in Cincinnati, but also New Orleans and Knoxville — repeat those programs for the experience of the dancers. Richard called in a friend of *his*, Nigel Burgoyne to be his ballet master and suddenly Nigel was made artistic director after Richard's death. And then Nigel went back to Britain to head an educational company, a British ballet organization. And that's when Peter Anastos came to the company, who was the *original* choice of Cincinnati when David McLain passed away. So it sort of circled around to him.

CF: And he was with the Ballets Trockadero at that time?

CD: He had founded that company, yes. Let's see, I think he had some other experiences other than Trockadero, leading some other companies, but he was only here for two or three years. There was a negative ending to that period of time, which is documented in our 50-year anniversary book. And then there was the current search for Victoria — or for a new artistic director, and it was Victoria. At the time, I thought this would be another one of those transitional sorts of things. We hadn't lasted very long with *any* artistic director, and now it serves me right for questioning all of that,

because she has eclipsed the number of years that David McLain was here, which I thought would never happen. [I thought] that he was sort of the *root* from which we all sort of grew, but now Victoria has really been here longer and *very* successfully so.

CF: Well, before I get onto your work with Victoria — and I would love to hear you talk about the writing of *Peter Pan*, if you don't mind... But, I just am still trying to wrap my head around this young man who's in his twenties and suddenly he's on a podium conducting Bye Bye Birdie. And pretty soon after that... I mean, something just *clicked* with you, right? I mean, what was it? Was it the fun of... what was it?

CD: You're right. Well, *first* of all, I had come to Cincinnati in 1960, and then in 1964, I'm conducting, like you say, and then I have a professional job... I actually went on tour with Allan Sherman playing French horn ("Hello, Muddah, Hello Fadduh"). And that was my first sort of job outside of the city only because the French horn player that they had hired in Chicago didn't make the trip with them, so this was their first stop, Cincinnati. All kinds of *fortuitous* things have happened to me, and all of this — to answer your question — it's just that there was a baseball player in Cincinnati — one of my favorites — Tony Perez and he would say "Cincinnati been very, very good to me." And like Tony Perez, it all sort of came out of Cincinnati with Leroy inviting me to that first job, and Erich Kunzel inviting me to the symphony — and I had to be *ready* for each of those things, so I don't think I let anybody down. That was one of my goals, and the other was to just seek perfection in whatever we did, whether it was playing drums or horn or conducting. And it's true, I was very fortunate, because when I came to the Cincinnati symphony — nowadays, assistant conductors rarely get a chance to get in front of the orchestra for a serious subscription concert. Within my first couple of years, I was conducting a subscription concert. Jeanne-Marie Darré was my first piano soloist, and then a wonderful soloist after that, Andre Watts, Jorge Bolet — the list of soloists that I was *allowed* to work with was just incredible. I've gotten such experience here, in Cincinnati. And then when Thomas Shippers, who I assisted during his entire tenure here, when he passed away prematurely — during his sickness, there were many times when I had to substitute, and gained a lot of experience for that. So that's sort of how it happened. It's a *little* bit unexplainable, except I hope that I was talented, and talented enough to not let anybody down.

CF: Well, clearly you were, and I think that it's also something about your openness. As you said, things are fortuitous. It's like, you just have to show up for that moment and decide, yes, I'm going to take this on and...

CD: Yes, you made me think of something that my roommate Dave Matthews — not *that* Dave Matthews — he would tell stories about when he was first playing jazz and his teacher in Louisville, Kentucky said "Never turn down a job." He said, "If somebody calls you and they need a bass player, tell them, "Yeah, yeah, sure. I'll do that." "Even if you've never played bass before, get a bass, learn some fundamentals and take the job." And, I guess I took that to heart, to say yes and make it work somehow.

CF: Well, I'm curious if you can recall your thoughts about ending up conducting for the ballet. I mean, that wasn't anything you had imagined doing, but it was one of those fortuitous opportunities. And look at now, you've been here fifty-two years. So, I think it would be interesting to maybe hear what it is about conducting for dance that is specific — and I know it's challenging, but with all of your other interests and pursuits, it has to be exciting or you wouldn't have kept doing it.

CD: Well, it's a very, very good question. What led me into it? That first job with Juliet, she was very happy with me and the thing that she would say was that "You have a great tempo memory. You have a great memory for tempo." Okay, fine... And likewise, that first time I conducted Bye Bye Birdie, a lady by the name of Peggy Kahn came up to me. She was the first person that came up to the pit when I was done. And she said, "Oh, I really enjoyed your *pacing* of the show" — and her husband was the person who recorded all the Broadway shows in New York. And she said, "I thought you even did a better job with this than... I think it was Elliot Lawrence, who conducted it first on Broadway. And I didn't know what she was *talking* about! Pacing, what was pacing? And tempo memory, but evidently there's maybe something natural there with me. Pretty good sense of rhythm. I guess, very good. And I think that was recognized by David McLain in that first performance that we did. So, I built on that and have tried to do the best I can throughout all of these years. But to answer your question about... well, I don't know if you asked the question, but the necessity of attentiveness for dance. So I've conducted in all the areas of conducting pretty much. I can't think of anything I haven't. Basically symphonic conducting, pops programming — with symphony orchestra, opera, and many, many opera performances here and elsewhere, and with dance. In all of these experiences, dance, in fact, is the most restrictive of all. You have less choice than in any of the other cases. You are certainly in charge as long as you are observant to what the composer has asked in his music. In a symphonic performance, you are sort of what dictates what's going to happen between the orchestra and the audience. Likewise, for opera it's a little more flexible — you certainly have to be aware of the breathing process of the singers and the pacing of the show, but you can sort of feel that naturally, if you do it correctly. Dance is something else. We don't get to choose the repertoire, necessarily, for dance. We can *advise* about what might be appropriate, but it's the choreographer, or the artistic director who decides on what music is played and the choreographer also determines the tempo of the pieces.

That's why so many symphonic conductors never conduct for ballet because they don't like those restrictions. *I do*. I like those parameters, because it gives me an opportunity to know how to *gauge* how well I'm doing. After every performance, it doesn't matter whether it's another *Nutcracker* — after forty years or so of doing *Nutcrackers*, Victoria will still have a note or two for this particular dancer: "Maybe it'd be best if we sped up the middle section," or whatever it might be. There's always a note. In every bit of art, you're always seeking perfection, and you're never going to get there anyway, but here in the world of dance, I get some little bit of feedback that tells me how close I was to getting it right. And I really enjoy that. I happen to like that. Not all conductors do.

CF: Great! I'm not a conductor, but I could imagine that it's very enlivening in a way to see... I mean, what you're doing is creating a synergy between you and the dancers that is *particular* — it's never the same way twice. It keeps you on your toes, so to speak. And that could be either intimidating or exciting — and for you, it's exciting.

CD: Well, the dancers have their needs; the choreographers have their needs, which might not always jive with what the dancers want. There have been many times when the dancers felt that, well, "Please be careful, I can't do this that quickly." And the choreographer will say, "Oh no, no, push them.... go ahead and push them here. Don't listen to what they have to say. It's best that we cause the adrenaline to flow a little bit — it'll be a better performance." And, that's many times the situation — often, for an opening night, for instance, after you've rehearsed something over and over again, it's good to sort of push things a little bit, because it keeps everybody on edge.

And if I'm too slow, it can *dull* a performance. It's funny, because David McLain used to not allow the dancers to speak with me at all. He would say, "If you have a request as far as the music goes,"

come to *him* first and then he will translate it to me — which was pretty smart, I think. That avoids all the differing opinions that you might get if it filters through the man in charge or the woman in charge. Nowadays we're more democratic, and Victoria and others have encouraged me to check with the dancers before — maybe at intermission before they do a *pas de deux* or something like that, just to see how they felt about the rehearsals and so on. So, you're *right*, it's challenging and fun to get it right.

And by the way, even though the choreographers and the dancers may wish to do something, it's sometimes difficult to get a seventy-piece orchestra to do exactly what the dancers want to do! (He laughs) It's sometimes like, what can I say — a rhinoceros, a hippopotamus — getting everybody to *move* (he exaggerates the “oo” sound here for emphasis) at the same time. Fortunately, I'll say quickly that for years and years, we worked with a ballet orchestra here, made up of wonderful musicians in town — most cooperative and flexible. And now in the years when we've reestablished our relationship with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, they too are a world-class group and respond very well to whatever we happen to need.

CF: How about that *Peter Pan*? Wait, you said that you've never composed anything. I don't know if that's an exaggeration, but you were asked to... it was Peter, wasn't it?

CD: Yes, Peter Anastos.

CF: Yes.

CD: Well that wasn't my first composition for the ballet, fortunately. The first thing I wrote was for Jimmy Truitte. David McLain was also wise in projecting what would happen in the future by inviting a contemporary choreographer to be with this company, in Jimmy Truitte, who was trained by Lester Horton; Alvin Ailey, of course, came out of that school as well — and Carmen de Lavallade, Geoffrey Holder, all of these stars, from Horton and the Horton technique. So for some reason, Jimmy asked me to write a piece — I think based on a little bit of something that Horton had done, and it was *Guernica*, a depiction of the terrible bombing of the Spanish city. And, again, I said, yes. I don't know why, but the first thing I did was to take the painting of *Guernica*. And I took a manuscript paper that I could see through, and any of the important points in the painting, like the horse's open mouth, the lantern, various elements of the painting, I would put a dot, and that became the music that I wove together into the score for *Guernica*. It was for three percussion, actually. So there wasn't that much melodic design, but Thomas Schippers came to see it one night. It was a double bill with *The Firebird* and all he talked about afterwards was the *Guernica*. So that, I thought, was kind of sweet. But I did several pieces for Jimmy in between, and also a piece called *Billy Sunday* for Ruth Page. I don't know if you want to hear about that project, but it was unusual.

CF: Nodding in the affirmative.

CD: ...I just told you how I wrote the music for that [*Guernica*]. Ruth Page had done a ballet called *Billy Sunday* based on a guy who used to be a baseball player and then turned into a preacher, the famous Billy Sunday. So she had the choreography done, but she had a composer from Chicago do the score back in the 1940s. She let the piece die because she hated the music, somehow; she didn't care for the music. Well, Freddie Franklin was her very good friend who is our... What do I call Freddie Franklin? Just, yes, the heart beats for Freddie Franklin. So he was here and invited all of his good friends from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo to come and work for our company and one of those was Ruth Page, another was Alicia Markova and we had all these connections through Freddy.

They were talking one day, Ruth and Freddie, and Freddie said, and he had starred in the *Billy Sunday*; he *was* Billy Sunday in some of the productions and then,

“Ruth, why don't we *do* that piece?”

"Oh no, Freddie, I just don't like the music."

And Freddie said, "Well, you know, we have a kid here that can write some music for you." So again, I should have said no, probably, but I said yes. And here's how that got written: Ruth was one of the very first people to document her works on film. And so from the 1940s, she had this film that someone had snuck in — it wasn't really allowed. So there was all this jumpy, black and white film with stops and starts and bips and boops. And I had a copy of the original score, which I never used; instead, I just used the black and white film and somehow put punctuation marks on a score and wrote new music based on those accents — you know, lifts of the dancers. I could see the dancers and where the ensemble was dancing, the steps that they were taking, and wrote music all based on hymn tunes because Billy Sunday had a trombone player by the name of Rodeheaver who led his tent gatherings when he preached.

He would use old hymn tunes, so that's what I used for that score. So that's the story of *Billy Sunday* and Ruth. But that all came before, when we were trying to lead into *Peter Pan*, here. So then Peter Anastos came to town and this was an idea that I think he had had for some time of mounting a ballet on *Peter Pan* at the time. I think there was only one other version from Europe which I saw black and white video of. It was not a very impressive show; he wanted something show-bizzy. And so, again, I said yes (he laughs), and the Corbett Foundation here in Cincinnati funded that. I think I always said that Pat Corbett wanted something to keep me busy, keep me off the streets. So, I said yes. And that was a good project because Peter and I worked very closely together, mapping out *every* second of the score. The time it would take for the lost boys to go from this side of the stage to that, and that kind of thing...

And, so from that, then I wrote the score, and that was the first full-length ballet, whole evening of ballet that I had written. And it was the first thing that really I was really proud of. And it worked out very well. And, at the end of your little page for me, you asked for the sort of highlights of my career. I have to list the *Peter Pan* as being one of them. To write some music — and I'd written music for jazz groups and for symphony orchestra, quite a few arrangements, actually, for pops programs that I'd given in Dallas and in Chicago with my orchestra there — but being able to write a piece of music and *suddenly* — not so suddenly, but — then eventually on stage, there are all these bodies moving around to *your* melodies and *your* harmonies and *your* rhythm, there's something magical about that. That was really special. That was a big-deal moment.

CF: Was it nominated for a Pulitzer Prize or something, did I see?

CD: Yes. Yeah, I believe it was. I didn't win, but a very fine composer did, that particular year. *Peter Pan* has had a real life of its own. We were fortunate. It was a collaboration financially with the Ballet West in Salt Lake City. So I went there and conducted some of the performances, and their conductor, Terry Kern, did some of the performances as well. And we recorded it there with the Utah Chamber Orchestra. And because that recording existed, I was able to proliferate around the world really, and there are still performances done every year, all over the place. And so that's really wonderful that that occurs. And occasionally I get to go and conduct some of those places with my music. Most recently, Kansas City and Reno. It's been done in Hong Kong and in Spain recently, in Mexico. So it gets around.

CF: Wonderful. But you didn't go on to do a lot... I mean, you say it was a highlight, but you haven't done many full-length ballets after that. Is it a matter of funding, or what is it that...

CD: Funding is an important factor. It was *a lot* of hard work. Doing a score is *a lot* of hard work and a *full length ballet score*, because there's no moment when the singers are singing, and you kind of cool it with the accompaniment, and you don't — everything *has* to be meaningful. And, so funding was also important, but I didn't really get any offers between that, really, and *Princess and the Pea*. So I geared up again with that for awhile. (He laughs): I thought maybe I wasn't allowed to write anything unless it had a P in the title.

CF: That's right! That was with Victoria.

CD: That was a collaboration with Victoria. And we worked in the same sort of way. It was not a full evening; it was thirty minutes. So it's a half of an evening. So it's been done less often than *Peter Pan*. We have a nice recording of it, but the problem is figuring out what to couple with it [on the program]. But, there have been — I'm encouraging folks to look at *Princess and the Pea*, because I think it's a little bit of a jewel; I *love* the score for *Princess and the Pea*. It has something extra special to it. I don't *mean* to make this comparison, but in the case of Tchaikovsky, you know, *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* are *huge*, monstrous... if you played all the music, it's hours and hours of music, whereas *Nutcracker* is a little gem of a piece: you can play it from beginning to end. You don't need to really *cut* anything. And that's sort of how I felt about *Princess and the Pea* — I liked *all* of it. So I'm hoping that we can get some more performances of that piece.

CF: Well, I'd love to see it. I understand it's humorous and cartoon-like, and...

CD: It's *very* funny. There are four princesses in it who try to get the attention of the prince. Princess Presto — she's kind of the fast one, and then there's a clumsy one, and the final one is Princess Pat. Her sexuality is not so closely determined, so that's performed by a guy dressed up as Princess Pat and it's *lots* of fun, too.

CF: And isn't there a march of the mattresses or something...

CD: Yes, we have eight mattresses on stage, big mattresses, and that's a takeoff on... well, to show you where my mind goes, it's basically Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Well — the little piccolo thing in the middle of it, and alternating that with the theme from *The Godfather*, because if you remember, in *The Godfather*, there's a scene where they “go to the mattresses.” So that's how that happens.

CF: I can't remember that scene, but now I'm going to have to think about that...

CD: When the two families are about to fight, they “go to the mattresses,” which means they're, they're really into it. The same thing in *Peter Pan*, there's... I can't go very many bars without making some kind of musical joke. And so, for the theme for Captain Hook, I use some of Prokofiev's *March from the Love for Three Oranges*, is what it's called. So I always ask anybody, “Where do you find three oranges?” Well, in those days you saw three oranges on a slot machine in Vegas, and what's another name for a slot machine? It's a one-armed bandit.

CF: Oh, I love it!

CD: It takes a while to explain...

CF: No, I am trying suppress my laughter because my voice isn't supposed to be in this recording.

CD: So, there are hidden secrets all through these pieces that make me chuckle when I'm writing.

CF: It was really interesting, for me, to hear about the process for *Guernica*, that laying the score sheet, the paper, the manuscript, whatever it was on top of the image of the painting. And then how did you and Victoria work on *Princess and the Pea* — anything interesting to relate about that process?

CD: Well, the timing of each section was done beforehand. The scenario is very important and to actually time *exactly*, because sometimes you think, well, you'd like to write a thirty-minute ballet. This happened with our most recent experience with *Dancing to Oz*, you want a certain length of a ballet — roughly forty minutes is what we were shooting for in that piece. So we would get together several times and time things... "Victoria, how long do you think you would like to have that classroom scene — and the transition, do you think that will be a minute; will it be forty-five seconds?" And once you get it all mapped-out and you add it all together, do you have an hour and a half or do you have twenty minutes? It's very good to make that kind of planning, also to know what her *spirit* is, what she expects from it. And also, we would ask, "So, if this is a ballroom scene, is it sort of like *Cinderella* or more angular" — or whatever it may be, you throw around ideas like that leading into it, and then hope you come out with something that *works*.

CF: Well, I think an obvious question, and I think I had it actually jotted down on that preliminary protocol I sent you: *How do you juggle all of this?* I mean, you have done... you're everywhere, you're in Middletown, you're in Illinois, you're here, you're there, you're touring, you're playing in — is it called the... I forget the name of the jazz group..

CD: The New Studio Big Band?

CF: Yes, yes! I mean, so many things all the time. A *family* — I mean that *alone*, how do you that?

CD: Well, again, when I was a young guy, I just didn't want to say no. So I took on all those things and yes, there was a time when I was conducting the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra, traveling to Chicago, like twice a month or so, and the Middletown Symphony Orchestra, and I had a radio show that was on every Sunday morning. And my work here at the Ballet, which is really my *home*. My desk is here and the rest of it is sort of, well, that's fitted in where the Ballet isn't — and at the same time, then I'd be playing a job maybe in the Oregon district of Dayton with a jazz fusion group that I love — *About Time* was the name of that group. And then, if I could, work in any of the Studio Big Band, which doesn't happen that often because it's a big group and most places can't really afford it.

They don't have room to house a large band, but whenever I got the chance, I *loved* doing that, because the arrangements were done by my buddy, Dave Matthews — right, not *that* Dave Mathews — and I *love* playing his arrangements. He's just one of the world's best. But over the years, that's peeled away. After twenty-six years with the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra, I stopped that activity, which really helped, because that travel was really... I was surprised that only one time did the snow ever stop me from getting there for rehearsal. The Middletown Orchestra, about three years ago, also decided for financial reasons to end their existence, which was sad... Another group has grown out of the ashes of that group, called the Southwest Ohio Philharmonic. I'm *advising* them and conducting a little bit, but they're not *that* active. So, those major things are through. So I can pretty much stay home a little bit more often now.

CD: So, it's the Ballet and whatever jazz opportunities present themselves — I'm happy to take those, but that doesn't happen so frequently now. So, I'm kind of easing into the pasture out there, the "north 40" (laughing).

CF: I wonder, what advice might you give to a young conductor who wants to work with a dance company? What would you suggest? I mean, there's no really direct path for that.

CD: No, there isn't, and my experience doesn't tell very much, because I sort of came through the back door, as I've said. It's certainly helpful — which I am not skilled at — to be able to be a fine piano player and not only in the classical sense, but in an improvisatory sense and to try, if you can, to learn *how* to play for ballet class. And, if you have *those* skills, if you're able to play for ballet class and also able to play the repertoire of the ballet, which is very difficult. Many of those pieces are some of the most difficult to play at the piano. Even *Nutcracker* is a very difficult work to play from beginning to end. It's tiring, but if someone has those skills already, you've got a little bit of a door open, then you can play for a ballet company and eventually beg for the opportunity to do some conducting and you'll have experienced the tempos that are necessary by playing for class.

But other than that, it's just a love for the... I guess you could watch as many videos as you possibly can, listen to as many recordings as you can, to learn the repertoire. And that's another thing: As a ballet conductor, you get to play all of the *best* music. I mean, it just seems that the composers who are able to, force themselves to write some of their best works for ballet — or certainly worthy works like Prokofiev — the *Cinderella*, the *Romeo and Juliet*, and the *Prodigal Son*, and all those wonderful pieces. Also from Stravinsky as well, the major three works; what more could you *want*? And I've gotten a chance to do all of those. And then the Balanchine repertoire, the fact that so many companies base some of their repertoire on Balanchine. He was such a good musician himself, a fine piano player — and always chose works that were *worthwhile* to perform: Hindemith's *Four Temperaments* and those kinds of pieces that might have gone by the wayside if he had not choreographed them. Did I answer the question?

CF: More or less — yes, you did. I mean, there's not a simple answer.

CD: Or advice to the young conductors. And frequently I'm asked, and I always invite them to come and observe anything that we do here, and I'm always happy to go and observe their work as well, but it's not very often that they get to conduct for ballet, unless sometimes at the College Conservatory, there are ballet performances, and they use the orchestra and sometimes use the student conductors. And I'm very pleased to go up and put my two cents in, if they want any advice as to what to do. But primarily it's just paying attention to what's onstage. Just try to learn the music *so well* that your eyes can focus on the stage primarily, to see whether the dancers are comfortable, uncomfortable, looking good, or not. We want them to look their *very best*.

CF: Well, I'm not the first person to say this and I won't be the last, but you are a treasure to this city.

CD: Well, thank you. (He laughs)

CF: Thank you!

CD: Thank you. This 50th anniversary thing that happened to me two years ago— they wanted to do a big gala at the beginning of the year, and I didn't want to sit around like this and have

everybody come up and tell me... what *you* just said. So I insisted that if we were going to do that, that I wanted to have my big band as the entertainment for the evening. So I was able to get up on the drums and just play that evening and everybody danced, and it was *really* fun; we had a great time. But at the same time, they forced me — no they didn't force me: I said yes again to writing a ballet with Victoria for that season. So I was *really* occupied throughout the entire summer and the next few months writing *Dancing to O_z*, which I'm pleased with. I don't know if it'll have any sort of future. At the same time, a full-length *Wizard of O_z* was being created, which we have also performed — and it's a wonderful piece! So we'll see if there's any life in that. But a highlight, an embarrassing, humble highlight for me was the fact that they did commission a portrait to be done that now hangs in that place where I spent twelve years, initially as an assistant resident conductor. Now, if you go on in there, you'll see my [cloning](#).

CF: I've seen it! Not having been in there, but I've seen it online. It's quite a *lovely* painting!

CD: It's *really* good. I was so thrilled with it. My wife picked out the pose and we are so fortunate to be coupled with the artist, who has now become a close friend and who was so willing to just ask what I might want to have done. I like sort of unfinished kind of stuff, rather than the other. And he was happy to do that. And everything else, wonderful guy, Carl Samson. So I'm thinking as a highlight — that has to be one that my might last even longer than *Peter Pan*.

CF: Yes. Maybe. I mean, it's not lost on me that conducting is a dance in itself. I mean, I always love to watch conductors move. And so there is a kind of “dance of the conductor” that goes along with the music.

CD: Well, we don't *think* about that. I don't think about — but I am definitely influenced by conductors from the past... like, I was on tour with the New York State Theater of Lincoln Center for a while and the conductor of that was Dobbs Franks, who then went to Tasmania, to Australia to conduct for ballet companies there. And Dobbs really taught me a very strict technique of conducting. So I got to watch him in various cities, how he handled the orchestras there. It was more or less a lesson in psychology of orchestras, rather than technique. So that was very important, but then most importantly, I think were the years that Thomas Schippers was here.

If you were ever to be able to see him conducting — I don't think you can do that, because there's nothing, there's no films, there are very little... he was there at the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera, and you saw very little of him conducting, but he was a real... *He was music*. His body just interpreted music so beautifully. And from that point on, I disregarded anything I knew about conducting, and tried to copy what he was doing. That's the most of that is gone away now, but he was a *huge* influence.

CF: Thank you so much... or do you have another thought...

CD: Oh, I was just going to say that *New York* magazine called him obscenely handsome. He was this amazing gentlemen, that's too bad that he had to die so early. So thank you.

CF: Yes! Thank you *so* much.

CD: You would probably have three hours of material now.

CF: We have plenty of material, but really, it all just sparks more things to talk about then you have to end, unfortunately.

CD: And the final result is... this will be a combination of various organizations throughout the state...

CF: It already is. It's an existing website, and each year we get to add five new sites...so Cincinnati Ballet is on the schedule for this year.

CD: Five!

CF: Five, yes.

CD: So five dance groups?

JD: We've highlighted twenty, so we're adding another five this year: Thiossanne West African Dance, Ohio Ballet, Richens Timms Irish Academy and Karamu...

CD: Oh, I see. See, I was thinking in terms of major ballet companies, but it can be the finer small groups, too...

CF: We've done it all! We've been trying to include Cincinnati Ballet for years!

CD: Have you done Dayton Contemporary Dance Company?

CF: Oh yes.

JD: And Jefferson James, CDT.

CD: Oh, yes. Sure.

CF: You probably know her husband!

CD: They live, not across the street from me, but around the corner from me. Yeah, her husband was in the orchestra she I was conducting. And I've known Jeff for ages...

CF: OH, me, too. I studied with her when I lived here, *long* ago...

JD: She's on the OhioDance board...

CD: Well, you know Dayton Contemporary Company did a lot of repertoire from Jimmy Truitte, from the Horton School. They even used, I think, my music to Frevo, as one of their pieces.

Oh, and they also did *With Timbral and Dance, Praise His Name*. That was a highlight of my career!

CF: Keep talking! (We are packing up...) This (gesturing to phone recorder) is still on!

CD: No, no, that was another one of those projects...Jimmy Truitte, again, had thought of doing something that Later Horton had done. And it was a gospel piece, so we used a gospel chorus and a solo singer, and it turned out to be Odetta, the famous folk singer, and she actually went on tour with to upstate New York — she did the premieres here, and that was wonderful. That was terrific! I

transcribed a lot of gospel tunes for the gospel chorus. Also there's Duke Ellington's *Come Sunday* in the middle of it. I copied Duke's arrangement exactly, a violin solo. That was terrific, to tour with that piece upstate New York with a chorus from Newburg, New York, which is primarily an African American town...

CF: I got to take a master class with Jimmy Truitte...I don't remember if it was when I lived here, or when I lived up north. I lived for a while in Youngstown — not far from your birthplace of Ravenna. I don't know if I came down and took that or...

CD: Oh, good. Did you like him?

CF: Oh, definitely!

We continue exchanging Cincinnati stories...