University of Houston, Center for Public History
Course Project: Oral History, Course # 6384

In cooperation with the Houston Symphony Archives.

Interviewee:	Ulyesse LeGrange, Houston Symphony Board Trustee
Interviewer:	Kelly M. Ray, graduate student
Interview Date:	October, 26, 2004
Interview Time:	10:00 a.m.
Location:	Mr. LeGrange's residence at Bayou Bend Tower, 101 Westcott, Houston, TX 77007

HLIGHTED ITEMS -CHECK FOR SPELLING

TAPE 1, SIDE A

KR: Please state your full name.

UL: I'm Ulyesse LeGrange.

KR: Tell me a little about your background very early in your youth, your family, parents and siblings.

UL: I grew up in a large family. I have three brothers and three sisters in Louisiana. I was raised mainly in Baton Rouge. I went to all my schooling basically in Baton Rouge including LSU. I have a degree from LSU, a bachelor's degree in accounting and I'm a CPA in the state of Louisiana.

KR: What was it like growing up in your family?

UL: Hectic with all the people around and everything. We didn't have a lot of money so it was basically a very low income family with lots of kids and lots of mouths to feed. We didn't know any better so we enjoyed it.

KR: Was there an early interest in music, growing up as a kid?

UL: My music came from listening to the radio which was my basic form of entertainment. This is back in the 1930s and we listened to the Hit Parade every Saturday night. The whole family did. We all gathered around the radio listening to the Hit Parade. So my music and my appreciation of music basically, the big band sound and the popular music of the '30s and '40s.

KR: Was anyone in your family particularly musical? Anyone play an instrument?

UL: Nobody played an instrument. Nobody took any musical lessons, none of us. We just enjoyed music, that's why we listened to it.

KR: You were talking about your college education. Tell me about your elementary and secondary education.

UL: My elementary and secondary were private school, catholic schools, so went through the Catholic school system and the high school was an all-boys high school. It was a different thing than the high school experience than most kids get, I guess, in that no girls around. [laughs]

KR: No distractions.

UL: That's right. But I look back, though; I think I got a fine education.

KR: A lot of those programs are exceptional.

UL: Yes.

KR: It's wonderful that your parents were able to provide that.

UL: We were lucky, because I basically had scholarships. Our parents paid very little tuition even though we were going through the private schools so they could afford to send me so that's where I went.

KR: So you went to LSU. Was that a given when you were getting ready to graduate from high school?

UL: I didn't have much choice. I had to live at home to go to college because we didn't have a lot of money and I had a scholarship to LSU so it cost me practically nothing to go to LSU. So that's what I did.

KR: Was this an academic scholarship?

UL: Academic scholarship, so I think my tuition at LSU was $30 a semester. So, that's what we scraped together, started me off. I married very young, after my freshman year in college. I was married and my wife worked so basically she sent me through college. I went through in three years because had to get out, get on earning a living and all. So I finished very early. I actually hadn't reached my 20th birthday yet when I graduated from college.

KR: You did have an accelerated education. How did you develop an interest in accounting? Was your Dad in accounting?

UL: No, I just liked math, I liked science, but I just happened to go…basically I thought when started I going to take business and go on to law school. That was a personal interest I had at the time. So I started in business and when I got into business I saw accounting and got more interested in accounting so then I dropped

over and majored in accounting. By the time I finished we'd been married a couple of years by that time, just squeaking by, I had no interest in staying in school for another three years, fighting that battle so I decided that, no, I was going to go on and start work.

KR: What type of work was Mrs. LeGrange doing?

UL She worked for a finance company. She was a postal machine operator.

KR: You started out your life as a couple so young.

UL Yes, we've been together for 55 years. We just celebrated our 55th anniversary.

KR: Congratulations! [irrelevant extraneous conversation]

UL: This is our whole life. I don't remember life when we weren't together.

KR: Now, tell me a little bit about your professional career.

UL: Started work for Exxon at the refinery in Baton Rouge when I finished college.

KR: What was your first job?

UL: I was an accounting clerk. So I worked for only a short time and I had to go into the army during the Korean War. Served two years in the Army in the Korean War, and then came back and went right back to work for Exxon at the refinery and in the mid 1950s the refinery started hiring MBAs. I had been with them... well, I had been there about 4- 5 years but 2 of them I was gone in the Army. So I had been around working for a couple of years as a clerk, and they gave me a chance to compete against the MBAs and so I moved into the same program with the MBAs they were hiring and went from there. I spent a number of years at the refinery, then moved to Houston, and then moved to the headquarters in New York, then overseas, spent time in London, some more time in New York then back here and all. All in all in ended up spending about forty years with Exxon before I retired.

KR: That's nice to be able to work for one company for an entire career.

UL: I had a great time, interesting work.

KR: I'm trying to get a handle on how your professional career ties you into your work in board on the Houston Symphony.

UL: I'll give you the link. Being with Exxon for forty years, you grew up the Exxon way and Exxon was a believer in all of the employees giving back to the community where we were. So I started into charitable work at the refinery

actually. I was associated with the Boy Scouts there. I was associated with the United Way program there. I moved over to Houston I was associated with some other non-profits and then actually in New York and I was associated with non profits where I lived, not in New York City but in the suburbs where I lived.

KR: Which suburb?

UL: I lived in Short Hills, New Jersey and another little town, Milburn, New Jersey. And, I actually served on the budget committee for the little township we had. Overseas, of course, you don't do any of that sort of stuff, but I wasn't overseas very long. When I came back to Houston in 1983 for the last time I became Chairman of the business arts committee, which is an organization that raised money for the small arts organizations, not the biggies, and when I had a lot of contacts in the arts world. So the Symphony came to me and said 'we need an Exxon representative on the Symphony Board'. So my boss at the time, I knew he was interested in the Symphony, he went to the Symphony, I did not.

KR: Who was that?

UL That was Chuck Sitter. So I went to Chuck, I said, 'Chuck, the Symphony is looking for an Exxon person, would you serve? And he said 'sure'. So he went on the Symphony Board and he served for about a year. The Symphony had one of their normal financial crises at the time so he helped them raise a lot of money and Exxon gave them a special contribution of$250,000 at the time to help bale them out of the trouble they were going through. Anyway, Chuck after about a year on the Board, Chuck was transferred. And so when he was transferred he said, 'why don't you take my place on the Symphony Board. They need financial help. That's where you can help us.' 'Ok, fine. I don't have any interest in the Symphony or classical music or anything, but I'd be glad to help them out financially.' So I went on the Symphony Board at that time.

KR: What year was this?

UL: 1984. I've been there ever since.

KR: You must be doing something right.

UL I don't know. I brought a different viewpoint. I got on the finance committee and gradually work throughout. Then after a few years I was chairman of the finance committee for many years and we've had these ups and downs. The financial history of the Symphony is, they get into a crises, they have a panic fundraising effort, and we raise money and it keeps us going another 4 or 5 years. But every year they have to go out and raise most of their money because it's…that's half of their funds. They raise half of their fund from ticket sales.

KR: I'm curious about that trend of ups and downs, is that fairly common with symphonies across the United States?

UL It's fairly common with a lot of symphonies. Many of the larger symphonies- New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburg, have sizable endowments and so those endowments carry through…kick off a lot of extra money to cover operations. So they raise money, take some money from their endowment earnings, and then they manage to keep going. When I started the Symphony had an endowment of only about $5 million. It's earnings from that were very small amount; basically they had to raise all their funds from fundraising year after year. In the mid to late 80s we had a campaign to raise more money for the endowment and we did. We got the endowment up to about $50 million by the late 1980s. At that level, then the endowment started kicking off about $2to $ 3 million a year of its earnings to cover operations. And that in conjunction with the normal fundraising would help get the Symphony by. We're still in the same cycle about every five years, we're having a crunch, having a crunch, having a crunch. During the mid to late 1980s in conjunction with that program to raise more funds for the endowment, we brought in Christoph Eschenbach. The decision was made by the Board, I was on the Board but I've had little input either way. That we were going to try to build the Houston Symphony into a world class orchestra, which meant touring, European trips, trying to gain world renown for the Houston Symphony. We thought we had the conductor that could do that. So we stuck our necks out on a limb financially to do that, because it costs a lot of money to do all that. We thought, at least the Board thought, that if we built the world class orchestra we would solve the attendance problem and people would flock to the Houston Symphony once it gained its reputation.

KR: What was attendance at that time?

UL: It was very low. Of all the seats we were probably selling about 60 to 65% of the seats. So we had a lot of room for income from tickets sales if we could fill all the seats. And so we started off down that path. We had two paths going. We were going to build a classical orchestra, world renown, and we were going to solve the financial problem. We accomplished one of those. We think we built a classy orchestra and it was recognized in lots of places as a classy orchestra. We didn't come up with all the funds to pay for that classy orchestra.

KR: How close did you come?

UL: We were starting to do reasonably well, when along came the flood [1] in Houston and wiped us out, all of our offices, all of our computers, all of our records, all of our library, wiped us out. And then following right behind that was 9/11[2] . And

[1] Tropical Storm Allison on June 8-9, 2001 caused widespread flooding to metro-Houston. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki!fropical_Storm_Allison as one source for information.
[2] September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center Towers in New York City, NY. See http://www.septemberllnews.com/ as one source for information.

what 9/11 did was just siphon off a huge chunk of contributions that we would normally have gotten. They got siphoned off to national. So a lot of people were contributing to the 9/11 fund for the victims. And then third blow to come along about that time was the demise of major companies in Houston, Enron and all the companies that went down with them. And then not just companies disappearing because they were going bankrupt but companies having to merge with one another to survive and so instead of having two companies contributing to whatever, including the Houston Symphony. Certainly now there were many twos put into ones and the contribution was not maintained at the same level. So as a result of those three major things, we took a huge blow at that time. And, the only possible way we could survive was to reduce our costs and so we, I had been trying to get the costs reduced since I'd been there. It was obvious to me we had our costs were too high for our revenue stream. And that's why every few years we had to have a massive input of new funds from a big fundraising campaign to keep us going. We'd never balance our income with our outgo. We were always spending more than we were taking in so we were fighting a losing battle. After these three blows hit, I wasn't the only one thinking that way. The Board realized that there was no way to keep going the way we were going.

KR: How many of the Board members have financial backgrounds or are on the finance committee?

UL: Quite a few, you know. Probably I'd say, of the trustees…we have a lot of trustees, a hundred trustees... ten, fifteen, twenty of us, probably have a strong financial background. And then on the finance committee, the finance committee, it varied in size 3, 4, 5, up to as many as eight, and everyone on the finance committee had a strong finance background. But most of the people on the finance committee also have a strong interest in classical music. I had to take a different viewpoint. It's great to have a world class orchestra if you can afford it. If you can't afford it, you can't have it. And so I was always the one fighting, saying we've got to cut costs. The big cost we have is the orchestra cost. Sixty percent of our cost is the orchestra salaries so if you're going to cut costs. We cut the staff; we whacked the devil out of the staff The staff is very small to start with. So you take 3, 4, 5 people out of the staff that's a huge blow to the staff but that's not a lot of money. And you have to do it in orchestra costs. Anyway as a group, we became convinced we had to reduce orchestra costs at least $1.1 million. So we had this big hassle with the orchestra and finally they went out on strike. This was about 18 months ago, they went out on strike. The strike lasted about 6 weeks, something like that. Then we made this arrangement. They came back, they gave up the $1.1 million in the end, we didn't have any choice but to hold firm because we weren't going to meet the payroll anyway. Anyway, they came back. But I look back at that event that happened. I really believe that the orchestra shot themselves in the foot by going out on strike.

KR: What was their perspective?

UL: Their perspective is, 'look we did our part, and we went out, achieved this world-wide status for you. You need to go out and raise more money and pay us what we're due.' And they always had this idea in mind that they ought to be paid equal to the other great orchestras in the country.

KR: What's the difference in the salaries?

UL: Salary here is probably two-thirds of the salary in New York, Philadelphia and places like that. My counter argument was, 'yes, if you live here versus New York your cost of living is about two-thirds, too'. So in a cost of living adjusted basis you're doing very well. In fact, you're doing more than we can afford even at the salaries that we're paying. Of course, that didn't bare much fruit make that argument. They went out on strike and the hope was, we get the strike behind us, we get our costs down, and we'd start coming out of this mess, this hole that we've dug ourselves into and when you look at what's happening since then…other orchestras have had strikes too. In the time I've been here Atlanta's was on strike, I think, Detroit was on strike, San Francisco was on strike, a lot of them. And that the history of their's was that when the strike was over it took maybe 6 months or so and then things to picked back up to where they were before.

KR: After the strike were there really strained relations?

UL: There's some strained relations with the orchestra, within the symphony. There's strained relationship between the Symphony and its core of supporters on the outside. And a lot of people are mad. They're mad at the Symphony, they're mad at the institution for letting all this happen and not seeing our way around it. There are a lot of people mad at the orchestra because when I look at the supporters of the symphony you don't find, I don't think, a lot of enthusiasm for union type organizations. A strike is terrible. People tend to think of a strike as terrible. I think we alienated a lot of our supporters out there simply because we had the strike.

KR: Have those supporters disappeared or possibly coming back?

UL: Our attendance is way down. Way down from where we expected…our sales this year. We thought we'd really suffer the rest of last year. April, May, June of 2003. By the time we got around to this year it happened just as we were about to go out and sell tickets for the season, the strike did. And we actually had to get the strike behind us before we could solicit tickets for this year and so we had some fall-off in ticket sales for the 2003-2004 Season, which ended in May of this past year. We expected that and we saw that in all the other orchestras that had gone out on strike. They had a drop in attendance and by the time they got around to the next season after that people tended to forget and they came back and you knew you were back on the trend in attendance and ticket sales that you had had

before, did not happen for us. We went out for sales for the 2004-2005 season and our sales were way down from where we expected them to be.

KR: Do you think that is still an affect from the strike or are there economic pressures in the community?

UL: Well, when I look around and see other things for example attendance at baseball, attendance at football, attendance at lots of things around, I don't see attendance way down at all those kinds of things. I don't read-in economic distress when you look around the city. The city hadn't been in any economic stress. Some companies have some problems. Companies all buy a lot of tickets, I'm relating this to ticket sales. There are plenty of tickets sales out there. Seems to me a lot of people get up on us for either the strike... we even found comments about the repertoire that they're playing. People don't necessarily like what they've been playing, some people. Whether that's an excuse why they didn't renew their subscription at all I can't tell. You get all these varying degrees, the end result is sales are down and we're really hurting financially right now. We're into another capital campaign kicked off about a year ago, trying to raise another chunk of money for the endowment so we could have an endowment of about $100 million which would kick off a substantial amount of earnings every year for current operations and we also need to raise some operating funds to get us by until all that additional earnings starts coming out of the endowment. So we're trying to raise around... I think the goal is to raise about $50 to $60 million for the endowment and another $15 (million) or so for current operations to sustain us through that time frame. And, it's gotten off to a reasonable start but I don't think we're as far along as we had hoped to be by this time, one year into the program, and we didn't need another financial blow right in the middle of this with ticket sales falling off[inaudible]. We continue to struggle. We're in the operating mode where we have to look ahead three, four, six, eight weeks and wonder if we're going to make the payroll or not. It's been that tight for a long time now. It's not a happy situation financially.

KR: Tell me about the relationship between the Board Trustees, the Society, and the Symphony and how they're interrelated.

UL: What I see is a kind of a three-pronged approach. You have the musicians, you have the Society, which is the volunteers, and you have the staff It takes all that together to make it all work. Relations have been strained between the staff and the orchestra as you might imagine. And, relations have been strained between the Society and the orchestra as you might imagine because of all the financial problems.

KR: How's the relationship between the staff and the Society.

UL: It's been fine. We've put some stress on them because when we start cutting costs, the first thing we could cut right away was the staff and we cut the staff. So

we put an extra burden on them and we recognize that. But we wanted to put some of the burden on the orchestra, and we had to take the strike to get it. So that didn't lead to happy conclusion either. But if you look at the Society, it's a large group of people, devout supporters of the orchestra, of their music, they love the musicians, they love to be with the musicians. That's their basic interest. It's a large group of people devoted to that sort of thing. They spent a lot of their time trying to keep this thing afloat, trying to keep it going. But in the end when you have a large group of trustees, which gets down to a smaller group of governing directors and even smaller group of executive committee which is the month to month group that actually runs the Symphony and somewhere in that hierarchy you can be lovey-dovey with the players only so far, but in the end you got to meet the payroll, so somebody's got to make the tough decisions, to say we absolutely have to do this or we're not going to survive. And that basically gets down initially to the executive committee which recommends the course of action to the governing directors, who actually set the policy and the course of the Symphony. That's the business side of all this. The cultural side has been warm and fuzzy and that's easy.

TAPE 1, SIDE **B**

KR: You were just talking about the financial side of the Houston Symphony. Let's talk about the cultural side of the Symphony.

UL: We pleased a lot of people and we built that world class orchestra and they started being recognized and critics started praising their work. We please a lot of people. We pleased a lot of members in this Society of ours. They had a lot of worries, too. Because it was clear that we weren't affording it. We built that thing. A lot of people were convinced that if we built it, they would come. We built it and they didn't come. We built it, they didn't come, but a lot of other things happened, too. So you can't point specifically to that because of all these other things I talked about. They came along, too, and really hammered us hard. I mean, we took some terrible blows.

KR: Yes, you can't plan for acts of God.

UL: Yes, but it was obvious we were heading for a downfall. It was obvious to me we were heading for a downfall. Because all the praise going onto the orchestra only heightened their interest in getting the kind of pay they thought they ought to have, getting more parity with the big orchestras. It pushed their expectations up well beyond what was happening on the financial side that we'd ever be able to afford to do. That ultimately is what led to the strike, the expectations being way beyond our means.

KR: I was curious because their expectations were higher but the financial side of it couldn't support that, are there certain members of the orchestra that are involved

in some of the financial parts of what the board is doing? Are there any Board members that are also musicians or on a committee?

UL: The orchestra has representatives on the executive committee. They have representatives on the finance committee. They have representatives on many of the Society's committees.

KR: So they should be aware.

UL: So they're there. They should be aware. But we've had through the years a lot of distrust between the orchestra and the Society. Basically it comes from...we're in dire straits, we're about to go under, and so we have a big push, and we go out and raise some more money and keep it going a while longer then we start, [inaudible] we're coming out of it and then all of a sudden, well, we're getting in dire straits again, we got to have another big push to raise some more money. And we go out and struggle and struggle and get some more money, and we keep going a few more years. Eventually you tum back down again so we've been through these cycles...I've been through at least four of them since I've been with them since the mid 1980s. Everything is way like you're going to make it, then all of a sudden it start sloughing off again. So this is what the orchestra has heard from time to time. We're in dire straits we've got to do something drastic, we've got to go out and raise money. Ok, we're ok for awhile, oh, we're in dire straits. Not being financial people and don't see. I can look ahead through all this and see it's not going to work; it's not going to work. You're just buying a little time, a little time. Every time you do it you're digging the hole a deeper, and deeper, and deeper, and sooner or later things going to crash on you. But being on the other side well, they hear we're in dire straits, we're ok now, we're in dire straits, we' o.k. now. Kind of hard to believe the next time we cry wolf and we say we're in dire straits. I can see their viewpoint even though they have representatives sitting at all these meetings and they're hearing this stuff as it goes bad, as it goes good, as it goes bad, as it goes good. Their understanding of what's happening may not be all there. I can understand it because it's kind of complicated, the kind of financial twists that are going on for the Houston Symphony. They're not trained that way. They're trained in an entirely different fashion.

KR: Good for the cultural side.

UL: It's good from the cultural side, but I think there's some distrust that's been built up over the years. I don't see very much of the artists. Basically I'm not a classical music person. I go to the Houston Pops, it's what I go to.

KR: I saw that Exxon sponsored the Exxon Pops Series.

UL: I told you about Chuck Sitter sitting for about a year on the Board. Chuck and I got a $250,000 contribution to the Symphony at that time. Help bail them out,

keep them going for awhile. As a result of that extra contribution, after Chuck left they came to me, the Symphony came to me, I was on the Board at the time, hey said, 'because of this special contribution, we'd like to recognize Exxon so what would you like to do. We'd like to put your name on something.' So I looked at all they had. Well, what I like is the Pops. [laughs] I want to put the Exxon name. I was only in charge of the local contributions committee.

KR: So you could have your pick.

UL: Yeah, I got our Public Affairs guy in at the time and worked with me on all these contributions and we looked it over and everything, well, why don't we name it the Exxon Pops Series, so that's what they did. And that's where it began back in 1980. And Exxon continues to support the Symphony and they keep their name on the Pops Series as a result of that.

KR: Is that an annual contribution or was it a one time?

UL: Oh, no, they had been making five-year ahead promises, 'we'll give you $755, 000 over the next five years and you keep putting our name on the Pops'. I think it's gotten down now where it's kind of an annual or two -year at a time deal, where we give you so much money and you keep our name on it.

KR: So it has a fiscal cycle to it?

UL: Yeah, but that's how it got all started. That matched my interests in the Symphony. I stayed with the Symphony not because in any interest in classical music or world class orchestra. I think we need a symphony. My belief has always been I think we need a symphony that we can afford in Houston, Texas, whatever that is. If that's world class, fine. That's super-duper. To me it's like the baseball team or the football team, you need a winner but somebody got to pay for it and if you can't pay for it then if you don't have that kind of money you'll have to settle for something else. So this has always a bit of a difference between me and..., when you talk to Walter....Walter is wrapped into the classical side of it. He loves the classical music and all. He wanted a world class orchestra and he was real pleased when we did and I'm happy for him and we were able to do it. And I was hoping that once we built it we could solve these problems and keep it but I had my lingering doubts that that's what's in store for the future for this organization. There's always a bailout from my viewpoint. If you can afford only about 80% of the costs that you have then you cut back to that level and you live financially fine, but it means a smaller orchestra, and it won't have the distinction of this orchestra. It may be a fine orchestra for Houston, Texas, if that's all Houston wants to pay for that's what we'll have.

KR: How does the conductor fit into all of this? I'm sure he's concerned about the fiscal stability of the organization.

UL: Not as much as I am, for sure.

KR: Of course not, but he also has to look at the cultural side. If he doesn't have performers who do their job, and do it extremely well, you're not going have your ticket sales. No one wants to hear an orchestra that is not performing well.

UL: [inaudible] Remember the conductor is personally involved this. His reputation goes with all of that. The conductor is always leaning, as he should, on the artistic side. He's pushing the artistic as high as he can get it. He wants the recognition as high as he can get it. He wants the recognition as high as he can get it because a lot of the recognition comes to the conductor as an individual. Eschenbach made his name in Houston, Texas when went through this grueling process, that's when he became well known. That made his reputation.

KR: How about the different conductors you've had the chance to work with? Have you had to grapple over the issue of finances with…?

UL: I particularly remember one executive committee meeting when we were in dire straits financially. Eschenbach was there and he was pushing for a European tour. I got up and told the Executive Committee in my opinion we should only do a European tour if we had it paid for in advance. In other words, we had commitments from whoever was going to pay for this thing in advance before we set it up and he chewed me out.

KR: What did he say?

UL: He said 'this was nonsense', 'this was an artistic organization', 'we can't put financial constraints', 'there's a road-block', 'I must have this tour', 'we're building a reputation with this orchestra', 'this is going to do it'. He won the argument. We went ahead and committed to the European Tour. A European tour at that time, it cost about a million and a half bucks to do which we didn't have.

KR: How were the ticket sales for the European tour?

UL: We didn't get any of that. We were on tour in Europe, they don't pay us. They don't pay us anything. We got to pay our way when we go on a European tour.

KR: You don't get any income from the ticket sales?

UL: Basically out of pocket it was costing us about a million and a half for a European tour. I think we went out and raised half of it.

KR: How long was the tour?

UL: About a two to three week tour. You're taking a hundred and twenty five people.

KR: How many places did they perform in?

UL: That particular one, I think, they went to three or four. They started around Cologne, went to Hamburg, ended up, I think, in Vienna. It cost a lot of money and we had to come up with the money, but it's what you had to do if you want to build a reputation, you've got to tour big Europeans, but you've got to have the money to afford it. Anyway, I'll never forget that Executive Committee meeting. I made my speech and the conductor didn't appreciate it.

KR: So you're side of story was voted down?

UL: Yeah, at that time, there was still a strong leaning in the Board. We could do this, we could do both of these, we could do this thing, we could spend this kind of money, we'll go out and get it. We did. We did it because we could, partially and because of all these dire things that happened to us along the way.

KR: Help me get straight the timing of the European tours.

UL: There were two European tours in this time frame since I've been on the Board. One was about, I don't know when it was, about 1990, I guess. One later on, Christoph took us on a European tour right before he left. And that has a funny side to it.

KR: What was that?

UL: He was insistent on another European tour and we were still struggling financially. Anyway, we managed to piece together a European tour but we were trimming costs as much as we could. The president at the time went to Christoph and said if we're doing this we really don't have the money and we're trying to hold the costs down how about cutting your fee that you're charging for conducting in every one of those places, to help us.

KR: What was his response?

UL: He refused. He refused to trim his fee.

KR: What was his fee at that time?

UL: I don't remember the number but anyway, it wouldn't have paid for the tour by any means by cutting his fee, but we're trying to get every little bit we could because we were spending money we didn't have to take them on that tour.

KR: Was he insulted being asked to cut his fee?

UL: I don't think he took it all that well. His excuse was that was his normal European fee, that he couldn't cut that fee or else it would undercut when he'd wanted to conduct other things in Europe, it would undercut his ability to get that fee. I didn't understand that because the fee we were paying him was between us and him anyway. If he didn't talk about it, we weren't going to talk about it; nobody would have known the difference. Anyway, that was my last memory of Christoph. Like I said he left shortly after that.

KR: Did he leave because of the financial issues?

UL: I don't know why he left. Obviously he didn't say publicly he left because of the financial issues. He just wanted to move on in his career. But looking back, some of the problems we had, that had to have a huge bearing in his mind.

KR: I would imagine so, but in his time with the Symphony he developed the Symphony the way he wanted to and it does reflect back on him, so he could move on.

UL: Oh, yes. He was proud to move on. That clash of cultural and financial.

KR: We've covered so many of the questions that I was going to pose to you. I was going to ask you, when I spoke to Terry Brown at the Symphony archives she said you were involved in some of the contract negotiations. Is that correct?

UL: Well, not directly, indirectly.

KR: Indirectly.

UL: Each time we'd go into a negotiation with the union the executive committee appoints a committee to keep up with what's going on. Everybody can't keep up with everything's that's going on. You need some reaction. Basically it's the staff that negotiates with the orchestra's union, volunteers stay out of it. The staff is taking their direction from the volunteers so the executive committee appoints a negotiating committee, not to negotiate but to be the backup to the staff, and say, 'o.k., you can give this much', 'why don't you try and get them to agree to this', 'we'll trade this for this', and 'we can act on behalf of.... See, in the end the executive committee and the governing directors have to approve whatever we agree to with the union. But you have to have day-to day-decisions going on, so you have this little volunteer committee working with the staff as the negotiations are on-going. One year I was the chair of that negotiating committee for the executive committee so I went through one of the negotiations spending a lot of time with the staff. A couple of other times I was on that committee for the executive committee so I've been through three of the negotiations on that committee.

KR: What years were you involved on the committee?

UL: I don't remember. It was not this last one. I was not on that committee this last one. It was the three prior and goes all the way back to [inaudible]

KR: How often are the contracts renegotiated?

UL: We were going every three years for a while. And then some were in, must have been about the mid '90s, I guess, none of those. We went to a 4 ½ year term on the thing. What we were trying to do. The contracts were ending up just when we were opening a season. So we were vulnerable as could be. We'd get all ready to go to kick-off the brand new season with all the enthusiasm and that's when the contract ended, and the orchestra was free to strike so we were trying to get that moved. We wanted the negotiations…we moved it, I think it was, to November to November. And that's when we went to four and a half years, we moved to the November time frame so we wouldn't hit us when we were kicking off the new season. It would have to hit us sometime during mid season.

KR: How large a time frame was the devoted to the negotiations? Was it two to three months or six months in advance?

UL: What happens is it that you usually start preliminary negotiations about a year prior to the time. They're working on nitty-gritty things. It gets serious about a month or two before the end of the contract and most of the time I've been involved we've never met the deadline. In other words, the contract expired, we kept negotiating and then within four weeks, six weeks or so after that we would agree on a contract, then the contract would be back dated from when the last one expired.

KR: The musicians were willing to work in good faith?

UL: They continued playing without a contract, under the terms of the old contract were still in place. In fact, that took place this last time. In fact we went from I think the contract was due to expire the first of November, something like that. We actually went on around into February or so, February almost March before they went on strike. So, they were playing several months under the old contract before they went on strike. That's the way it works. The hard negotiations generally would take two to three months with lots of meetings and discussions, back and forth, give and take.

KR: Is that really hard for the staff to negotiate or do they rely on your expertise?

UL: Well, the staff has more expertise in the nitty-gritty of the union contract. The big aspects of any union contract- what's going to be the base pay? What is going to be the Symphony's contribution to their pension? What is going to be the Symphony's contribution to their medical benefits? Basically, we decided that,

the volunteers decided those kinds of parameters. Well, the orchestra got a fifteen minute break if they played for so long and so forth, that was worked out between the staff and the orchestra, give and take. 'Ok, we'll give you a rest break here but you've got to give us this'. They were trading all those kinds of things all the time. We heard about those things, we didn't know.

KR: It didn't matter?

UL: It didn't matter. The staff people knew the ends and outs of how an orchestra functioned. How many hours can they play, before it's reasonable that they got to have a break. They got to do this, or they've got to be paid overtime, what's reasonable. We didn't know. But they did. Most of staff people were musicians at one time. They spent a lot of time working in that area so they were familiar with it, the tricks of the business. But the broad aspects of it actually we had to control because those are the ones that are huge financial impact in the end.

[irrelevant extraneous conversation about health insurance cost in general in U.S.]

KR: Talk about the conductors and the relationship to the Society.

UL: I've been through three. (Sergiu) Comissiona was here when I started. I barely knew him. I was just getting on the Board when he was kind of phasing out. Not long after I came on the Board they went through the search committee. That's when they brought in (Christoph) Eschenbach. That's when we reached the decision to build the big orchestra. The relationship with Christoph in those days were wonderful. We were doing things he wanted, his interest. .. we doing the tours and as we got down that process then the finances were not improving. I sensed, I don't know what the other people sensed, I sensed a kind of a cooling of the enthusiasm of Christoph for Houston and the Houston Symphony. That's when we were starting to clash. Some of us were raising questions about these tours and these expensive things he wanted to do. He was not at all happy when we started questioning [inaudible] the artistic, the finance people meddling in the artistic aspirations of the orchestra. So I think we had a cooling affect. Later, eventually he did the right thing. He went on with his career. [inaudible] we were left to settle.... When we brought Hans Graff in here, Hans is a wonderful person, much more adept at fitting into the community and helping to raise money. Christoph was, to me anyway, he didn't seem to be that kind of person where he could relate much in the Houston community.

KR: He was really just into his craft?

UL: He was tuned into his music and that aspect of it. He did some things in the community. He attended dinners to help us out but the personality wasn't there and the fit wasn't there. But I see in Hans Graff, he goes to these things, he fits right in. You want that guy to relate to the people you're asking money from. [laughs] This is a non-profit organization. [laughs] He's more of that kind of

person. He's a big help. But he has his ambitions, too, artistically. He wants to do things. He even raised the question about the tours and he wanted to take on tour. We've had to put out our necks and say we can't afford it right now. That's bound to hurt his aspirations after putting these clamps on these things that he'd like to do too. But he's a very warm and personable…

KR: Has he outlined his vision for the Symphony?

UL: Yes, and he actually went out and he had a European tour kind of planned out. 'We can go there and I can get us into here and there' and 'we need to do it such and such a time. Then we had to say we don't have the money to do it. So we've been kind of holding him down.

KR: Is he understanding or supportive?

UL: It's kind of hard for me to read him because I'm not around him enough. But just thinking about what he came here wanting to do and his ambitions and how he went out on his own and put this European Tour together. He had some great places lined up. It would have been a wonderful tour but we didn't have the money. So it's bound to dampen his enthusiasm some but he hadn't let it shown outwardly. I don't know.

KR: That aspect of fundraising. I wasn't that familiar with the funding of the orchestra being able to go on these tours. I assumed the ticket sales would cover for the cost.

UL: No they're doing you a favor by letting you come over there and into their historical venues and perform for the European crowd. We get very little money from it.

TAPE 2, SIDE A

KR: I'd like to ask on behalf of the Symphony Archives your memories of guest conductors & artists. You mentioned your interest is the Pops Series, can you talk about some of the wonderful guests artists?

UL: Let me talk about the classical side, because I have some good memories on the classical side. Way back, this is the mid '80s. Comissiona was still conducting, the orchestra went on a tour and they ended up at Carnegie Hall in New York. Comissiona got sick during the tour and Christoph was just performing there as a guest conductor and since Comissiona couldn't make the Carnegie Hall performance. They got a hold of Christoph and he was available. So he came in at the last minute and conducted the orchestra in Carnegie Hall. My wife and I happened to be going to New York at that time so went to the concert. I don't go to a lot of classical concerts but we went there. I was there. So I saw

Christoph with the Orchestra so they got wonderful reviews. I enjoyed the program and it was a lot of fun.

KR: Do you even remember what they played?

UL: No.. I think what they did was they practiced and played something from when he was here. He just stepped right in and they just fine tuned it with a couple of rehearsals then they were off and running. It turned out to be great and I think that's what set-up Christoph when Comissiona left shortly thereafter. The search committee, they didn't signal what they were doing but they must have been aiming at Christoph all the way through that process, because he came out of that process pretty quickly. So I remember that moment. The other moment I remember from the classical side, I think it was opening night. They always have some big ta-doo at opening night. We always go to the opening night because it's fun. They have a big party afterward so we go. The opening night I really remember was…the night they had four or six grand pianos across the front of the stage. They brought in...this must have been Christoph's 50th birthday about that time. They had a whole bunch of big names, solo pianists came and they all played that night.

KR: At once?

UL: All of them. The stage was practically filled with pianos. I remember that night. That makes an impression on you. That was a great night.

KR: What were they playing?

UL: I don't know. I can't name any of that stuff The other one I can remember, one time Yo-Yo Ma came down so we went to the classics that night. He did his thing, playing his cello. When he finished, he and all the cello players pulled out these t-shirts and put them on. I forget what they called themselves. He took his cello and went over and sat down with them in the cello section. They did some cello thing together. That was the kind of moment. It was great. Those moments really stick with you. Those are my memories of great moments.

KR: That's great. Now that's the classical side, what about the Pops side?

UL: Well, the Pops side I've had a lot of fun with because when I was still working at Exxon we were sponsoring the Pops. Some of the time during the year we'd have these dinner parties after the concert with the guest artist.

KR: I saw that you had Marvin Hamlisch over.

UL: We went to dinner with a lot of the big name Pop stars-Marvin Hamlisch, he's an interesting guy.

KR: You'll have to tell me about him.

UL: Let's see, we had dinner with Marvin. I think we had dinner with Marvin once. He was supposed to go another time and he didn't show up for something and so we had a fun time when his agent came. He related Marvin's stories to us. We've had a lot of things. I shouldn't say that. Marvin was here one night. We throw a lot of parties for the Symphony here and so one time when Marvin was in town. It was a Sunday brunch kind of thing. About 30-40 people and Marvin sat down at my piano and he gave us a 30-40 minute show. He played some of his songs. So that was fun.

KR: Was he singing and playing or just playing?

UL: I think he sang a couple of them. But he was mostly playing. He was fun. We had Skitch Henderson here one night. We had a small dinner party for about 12. We sat around our dinner table there. Skitch told us all these funny stories about television. He was on the tonight show and he was talking about all that kind of stuff. That was kind of funny. A number of these people... Doc Severinson is an interesting character. We had dinner with him one night.

KR: (inaudible) those personalities.

UL: He's one fun guy. He jokes and kids and carries on and that sort of stuff. The one that really made an impression was Shirley Jones. I had heard of Shirley Jones from way back and we had dinner with her one night. She had no put-on whatsoever. She was just a person. The guy I dearly loved... we saw him several times. A plaque on the wall, he signed a lot of my music, I fiddle around on the piano.

KR: So you do play an instrument.

UL: Not classical. He was in town, I brought my copy of Moon River, stuff like that and he autographed it. He went over, autographed it, "To Ulyesse, practice, practice, practice, Henry Mancini." He's my favorite guy. We had dinner with him a couple of times. Joked and kidded with him. He was another one that was so down to earth.

KR: Did he play for you?

UL No, he was not here. We had dinner at a restaurant. He laughed at my piano playing. I took one of my pieces into him and it was an arrangement he had made of love story. He didn't write it but he had a fine arrangement so when I got to playing the piano, I decided I was going to tackle that thing. So I tackled it with my music teacher and the first thing she did was going through it, she struck out a lot of the notes because I wasn't up to that yet. So we went through and I worked and worked and worked to simplify it and I'd get it down then she'd start putting

them back in where I could play the full thing. But I took that to Henry to sign. He looked at it and he saw all those things, you took out all my notes. No, just temporarily. [laughs] I remember asking him, you wrote all this stuff and all, what's the one that brought you the most money and he said 'you'll never believe it.' 'Why won't I?' The Pink Panther, because they use it in a lot of things but the one I remember was the pink...the things you lay in the attic…insulation.

KR: Yes, insulation.

UL: He was making music for the Panther and all, for that commercial. That got him the most money.

KR: I remember those commercials. I think they still run them periodically. Are there any other memorable experiences in your work with the Symphony?

UL: Yes, the ones that stick out more than anything are the real tough times. We really get clipped because we've got such huge problems. The flood was a really bad period. What those people went through down there trying to put together an office, trying to keep things going.

KR: How long did it take to recover from the flood?

UL: We were out of the office in the hall there for a year. And they were in 3 different locations during that year because we were getting free space from people and when they'd have to move us, we'd have to move and set it up it again, all this kind of stuff. And, those were some very difficult times for everybody in association with the Symphony. Those tend to stick out, special problems. I remember a year Mike Studee was the chairman back then and he and Rodney Margolis decided because of the special nature of the problem they formed just a little committee 4 or 5 of us on the committee and we would meet basically once a week with Ann Kennedy and say ok, Ann, hat's the problem this week? And she got files to move, this or that, back and forth, and we would try to take some of the blow off of her. We know a guy who can do this and we can do this or she's puzzling over something and we'd say don't spend any more time on it and we'll do and we'll do that. Because she had a terrific load on her shoulders at that time to keep fundraising going and ticket sales going and the artists are operating and rebuilding the office and moving the office and getting all that going and everything else. So we operated a year and they were out in special quarters and all, we'd meet very often. It was an unusual operating experience. The five of us got the...to office operations and orchestra operations and everything else.

KR: How many staff members did Ann have available?

UL: What's she down to now? Forty, I guess. I think she had it as high as 48 or 50 or so, but I think she's got it down to 40 now. It's not a big staff and they rely on a lot of volunteer activity. We're lucky, we have a lot of volunteers.

KR: How many volunteers do you have in the organization?

UL: Oh, it's well over a hundred, several hundred volunteers. A lot of the volunteers are women and they spend a lot of time on fundraising activities, putting on the dog, putting on this or that. They kicked a lot of money into the Symphony every year but there are a lot of business people, too, that spend quite a bit of time.

KR: How much does the ball bring into the Symphony?

UL: The biggest net that I can remember is $750,000.

KR: That's a chunk of change.

UL: That's a chunk of change. That's a lot of change.

KR: I know that fundraising is the thing when it comes to non-profit organizations.

UL: Got to have it. It's always fundraising. Annual ritual. We get all this money in and then as soon as you finish you have to start all over.

KR: It's never ending. I want to ask you a little bit more how the Symphony has changed since you joined the organization.

UL: What I remember the swing up in spirit went through this early ESchenbach period when I came in. Things didn't seem to be too happy when Comissiona left. I don't know since I didn't know him very well, I didn't know the people in the Board very well. But the sensing thing, they seemed to be kind of flat. Then Christoph came in and we got behind this program, we were going to build a great orchestra and all, and the enthusiasm, then all of a sudden realized, I didn't realize, all I could do was hear, I couldn't tell the difference. I think I hear people saying all they play so much better, but everyone was enthusiastic. Of course the critics were enthusiastic about the orchestra. So we went through that whole period with some... along the way. Every three years, tough labor negotiations, I could see the to and fro going on behind the scenes and everything else. That was behind the scenes, a lot of people didn't see it but I did see it. I could see both sides. I also see that if we wanted to make any financial, all this enthusiasm, everybody was just delighted with what was going on in the Houston Symphony it kept me probably because I could see we weren't making it and then it looked like we were going to make. Then, we got to a kind of boiling point toward the end of Christoph's reign and then he decided to leave. It seemed to be a big blow to the orchestra since they loved him and all. Look what he brought to them, what he had taken them to. It seemed to dampen their

enthusiasm a little bit. I could only sense that, but I could tell it. But then Hans came in and took over he seemed to get off to a terrific start, picking up the orchestra and going and everything else. Shortly thereafter all these other things happened and the whole thing kind of started to fall apart. That's when he was …he had all these ideas that he wanted to do, we had to cool him because we were fighting all these other trials we were going on and everything else. Then we're coming into the conclusion we are today, the costs, and had to talk to the orchestra about costs and tough negotiations, the strike. I've seen it go from fairly aloft to really slight fall off to a real dramatic fall off with the strike and all.
That's where we are right now. I don't see a lot of happy people around. I know we're got some tough financial problems ahead of us. So we're down in the valley but it was a nice surge while it lasted.

KR: In your perspective on the Symphony, do you have a vision of where you think it's may be headed?

UL: I have a personal viewpoint. If we have some good people working on this major capital campaign, right now, if they can find the money out there. It's out there in Houston, because I see people give a lot of money to the Medical Center, to the Museums. There's lots of places, lots of big dollars going out. If we can find the big money for the Symphony and get our endowment up to the $100 plus million range I can see starting up that ramp again with all the enthusiasm in the things that it promises. Hans is probably in place to take them that way if we can get it. He's already shown that if we can tum him loose he'll to set up European Tour. I'm assuming he'll get them all ready, go over and get the kind of critic response that they want, we can tum it around again. Walter is a good friend of mine. We've been riding this thing together. He's been there as long as I have, been riding this thing as along as I have. We joke from time to time. I told him, I said, 'Walter, you know my position is we ought to have the best dad-gum orchestra we can afford but no more, [laughs] and he laughed. [inaudible] We built a great orchestra, I'll agree with you on that. We built one that we couldn't afford, but we built it with Eschenbach in four or five years. We'll be coming up to this terrible period we were talking and everything he said, 'you know, we might have to take a step back and kind of start all over again but look we've demonstrated that if we take a step back that it isn't the end of the road. It's not saying we can't get back there again because if we ever solve these financial problems of ours we'll set out on the same course again. If we could do it in 4-5 years with Christoph, why can't we do it in 4-5 years again with another conductor? I don't know. Maybe the circumstances will never permit it to happen again. I can't believe that. But I think it would happen again But we've got to have some real success in this current campaign and build that endowment. We've got to survive in the meantime until we raise all that money. It's still in my mind it's still a big question whether we'll have to take a drastic reduction. We only have one fall back position. We can set back about an 85 person orchestra, play within our means for awhile. And that's not the end of the line

either but if that had to happen you build a solid foundation there and then you can take off from there whenever you can afford it.

KR: How would you compare the Symphony with other major Symphonies in the United States?

UL: I have no idea. I have only heard one or two major symphonies. I can't tell the difference in them. I have no way of judging.

KR: Is there any kind of communication between Board of Trustees of different Symphonies?

UL: There's a lot of communications, yes. There's a lot of communication from staff to staff [extraneous conversation] What's interesting is I've been through a long period with the Houston Symphony, during much of that period the big major orchestras, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, just cruising along. In fact they were killing us because they were cruising along so well they kept jacking up the pay of their orchestra members which in tum put back pressure on us to try and keep up with them. They were cruising along. Well, a few around the periphery that I saw like San Antonio went out of business, New Orleans went out of business, San Jose went out of business, San Diego filed for bankruptcy. So I could see those, and we're right there several times ourselves. Atlanta took a strike, Detroit took at strike, San Francisco took a strike. So I could see, 'o.k., they're having labor negotiation problems, too, like we are.' Then lo and behold just in the last couple of years, Chicago's running a deficit, Philadelphia's running a deficit, New York's running a deficit. So it's catching up with all of them. So what's going to happen here in the not too distant future I think, not just the Houston Symphony's problems and whatever the solution to those are, the industry has to do something. I don't know what they're going to do but the industry has to do something because when the biggies start getting in trouble you know that something basically is happening in the whole industry. There's got to be a structural change coming in the industry probably.

KR: It is a change of the interest in symphonic music or is something culturally happening? Or are people concerned after 9/11 about being in crowded places?

UL: I may be wrong, but I don't relate it to 9/11 type fears or anything else. What I relate it to is audiences seem to be shrinking for this kind of entertainment. There's a heck of a lot of competition out there. There's a lot of money is being spent by much younger people, many of whom have absolutely no interest in this kind of music. What's going to happen? I don't know what's going to happen. But it's got to be some kind of structural change in the symphonic industry. I don't know where it's going. I put my financial hat on and say the whole industry has overspent during this rush that we've been under. The thing that normally happens in an industry, the regular business industry when that happens, they have a bunch of good years and they start paying people well, and when hard

times come they back all that down. Now whether this industry is willing to take that job on and say that 'well, we've paid beyond our means and somebody going to have to start hampering somewhat. It could be freezing salaries for a period of time. Not cutting back necessarily but freezing them, holding them, stopping this upward soar, until everybody starts kind of getting bailed out of this thing, because the industry does hang together. I mean, our musicians look to see what other musicians are making. There's not a lot of movement in the industry that I see. What people worried about was "oh, gosh, we can't have a strike.' We've been talking this way for fifteen years, "we can't have a strike. We've got all these good players now, they could all leave us". And you look around the industry and say 'where are they going?' Are there 50 openings somewhere in New York or Boston and Philadelphia? Of course, no. There may be one or two or three.

KR: And they don't want to uproot their families.

UL: Some of them will. You may lose your best player. You'll probably going to lose your best player whether you're in financial problems or not because they have ambitions and they want to go and do as well as they can do. Whether you're playing here and you get a chance to play in New York we know that financially it looks good at first but when you make the move. I know I've lived there. It's not all that lucrative. But prestige-wise, career-wise, maybe that's the thing to do. That's what I did. I moved to New York and I think took a financial beating for awhile.

KR: It was a stepping stone.

UL: It enhanced my career it's what it did and I was willing to do it. There's some people here that would be willing to do that, too. But there's not a lot of movement in the industry because the orchestras aren't growing and expanding and adding players. There's some openings that come open from time to time but I'll see what happens here. When we have a violinist opening 100 people apply to the job. It's a huge competition for these jobs. When you see that kind of situation you say that the industry has been set to get the costs down in that situation because the labor force is so highly competitive you should be able to make that kind of move without shutting down the whole industry. You should be able to do it, whether that's going to be the solution or be some other solution. I don't know. All these orchestras, I've been reading all these articles, I get this monthly in Symphony Magazine, which is a magazine of all the trade organizations in the symphony orchestras. There's always an article in there about building future audiences. I don't think anybody has found the magic bullet yet to do that because I don't see it happening anywhere, yet.

KR: There's a lot of talk about music education. Is there a potential helping to make sure there's more music education so younger kids grow up to be future audiences or future musicians?

UL: That's a great idea but when you look around, look in Houston half the schools are going the other way. They're cutting out the music education. We're trying to back fill a little of that with some of our kiddie programs. Trying to put a little music education out there but I'm afraid they're going to grow up like I did. I had no music education whatever.

KR: I've never seen that broad of a perspective on an entire industry and how that is changing. What that might look like in 12 years.

UL: For the longest time when I look around, it seemed like just little, not little, but smaller orchestras like ours, less renown orchestras like ours, were the ones with problems. You could see that 'ok, you could understand that Atlanta could have a problem, San Antonio could have a problem.' You never hear of Chicago and New York and Philadelphia [inaudible] like I said, they were backfeeding the problems to us by what they were doing with their pay. This continuing... so what I was groping with is 'well, maybe we can never be like that, something different in the makeup. We can't be like that. We can't compete with them. We can't do tours like they do, because it's something totally different.' And then all of a sudden in the last few couple of years or so, Whammo! They're having the same kind of problems all of a sudden. It's going to be interesting to see what they do if it's something different than what we've tried. Maybe one of them is doing to find the magic way around all this and if they do it'll benefit everybody, something they can do.

TAPE 2, SIDE B

KR: Let's talk about how popular culture has affected symphonies, in general, the Houston Symphony or symphonic music. Looking back to the 1950s, we had the move to suburbia, but also issues of segregation, then the Civil Rights Movement that went into the 1960s. Do you see an impact of these events in our culture affecting the symphonies of the United States? Or musicians, Boards or audiences?

UL: I'd have to make my suppositions more current. I think it still relates. All the sweeping changes we've seen in pop culture I take it from the 1960s to date.

KR: The coming influence of Rock & Roll music, the Beetles.

UL: Going from what used to be concerts, orchestra, popular music, sitting there playing music. Now, God if they're not jumping up and down and dancing, fifteen dancers behind them, nobody wants to see them. So what used to be a listening across the music scene, classical – you listen, even Broadway – you listen, all the way to -no, if it isn't 90% visual with a lot of screaming and everything else kids won't go to it today. We've come to a generational shift from people who could very easily be moved into classical music to listen and

participate that way. The kids are so far removed from the calm relaxes listening experience that they've got to be up and jumping themselves and all this movement. It's become, in my mind it's not even music anymore, what I see here. It's more of a physical experience that the kids go to. How you cut through that to get back to what a classical concert is I have no idea. I've just seen it happen. And what it says to me is we've got a much, much tougher job today trying to building an audience for the future than say what we'd have had thirty, forty years ago, before this step change happened in the music is presented and received. So that's the dilemma. What I do know to the big orchestras…they've had Pop…I'm talking about New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, they've had a population they could draw on, and they only needed a very small piece of their population to keep this thing going. In fact, this could be kept going within a certain level of society. The old money and the wealth that was there, the generations that grew up under that, would naturally took to that culture. So all those years, they've kept it going because they had enough feeding system to keep it going. Now I contrast that to Houston, which is came up out of the old Wild West without any of that stuff and the money that developed in Houston is not that kind of money at all. Some guy who was probably a wildcatter out in a field.

KR: They're not highly educated.

UL: No, not at all. Their interest is to. So there wasn't that nucleus in society here to feed on, when I think through it. I kind think, maybe some of our problems are is that difference, the kinds of societies that we had to feed off of all this time. And what I have to wonder is these recent changes we're seeing in the big money areas the old societies, the feed is starting to run out. There's been enough of a cultural change in those populations, too, including some of the more wealthy. But maybe they're losing the advantages that they had. And it's going to be interesting to see how they cope with it. Maybe they can come up with some good solutions to this and if they can't they very well may apply to markets like this and Atlanta and Dallas. That don't have the same kind of background that they have so it's going to be an interesting thing to watch I think to see it happen. Now we've done some nit-picking things here to try to react to that, you see the screens up down there now trying to make it more a visual thing and everything else. My initial reaction is that a little bit of that, I wish they'd turn it off half the time anyway, we're over doing it…it's never going to become that much of a visual thing. A little bit tossed in every now and then is fine but that is what that attempt is trying to bring some of that atmosphere into the classical audiences. It may not belong in a classical audience. Maybe you need to do other things to get the people there than to see the players on the screen. But anyway, it's a test, we'll see, we'll see. It's an experiment. I hope we're smart enough to read the experiment and interpret it the experiment correctly and we don't spoil something else by trying to shove this down people's throat. There's a lot of the old time classical people goers, and enjoyers who won't appreciate that and if we go too far with it we're going to make our attendance problems worse. They'll start giving up on us, too. It may be easier to do without that and keep the base audience that we have and try and

find ways to add to it. We don't have to add huge numbers to it, if we'd increase it ten percent or something like that, which isn't a lot of people. You know, what does the hall seat?...about maybe 2700 people, something like that. And we have three performances on a weekend, so you're talking about 6-8,000 people. To increase that ten percent you only need 600 people out of 4 million people why can't we find something to get 600 people out there that are interested in classical music. There ought to be a way to do that. The statistics are not overwhelming. In fact, they're only overwhelming in your favor, if you only use a small piece of that. But I don't know what that link is. It's got to be in there somewhere.

KR: Houston is so diverse. How are you connecting to that huge diverse population?

UL: You went back to the '50s and Civil Rights and the impact. The impact that I've seen the impact of the Hispanics in our town, all of a sudden when you think of Houston it's a huge Hispanic population and a huge Asian population in Houston. How do you relate to that? I don't know but when you think in term of that big Asian population for example. When you look at a lot of the star performers coming up, they're Asians. Can you tie that in some kind of way? Can we get that 600 people we need from the Asian community? The Asian stars that are performing. We'd have a pretty good shot at it. On the Hispanic side, we're doing more nitty-gritty kinds of things. The associate conductor is a Mexican. Wonderful guy, I met him the other day, had lunch with him. It's going to take somebody like that and it's bound to be of some help there's some Brazilian artists and so forth in the classics. Tie those to a conductor from that part of the world, get your 6 or 800 you need out of the Hispanic community. You can't do it. We've got some possibilities here if we're smart enough to figure out. .. you need to hook them in, once you hook them in with you forever. We've got to get it in. We've got to some how or another get those diversified audiences in because if you look at the population growth, the population growth is typical symphony orchestra audience our population growth is going down. So if you need to build your audience you're not going to build it from the old crew. You've got to build it from ….it's got to be Asian, you've got to ....stars, the Asians will really tell you…classical music and playing and all that. The Hispanics to a lesser degree but there are some artists and conductors. You've got to get your link there. We'll see.

KR: Is your Board diverse as far as representing different ethnic groups?

UL: Not very.

KR: Is that something you've looked at?

UL We've tried. And I've seen a lot of blacks come and go. They come in for a little while then they seem to lose interest and go do something else. We basically don't have anything to offer ongoing to attract. Maybe every now and then some black themed presentation or something like that but there are few and far

between. But basically so you're trying to bring them in... bring them in to your old-timey what you're trying to do and maybe they're not comfortable in there. What we need to do it reach out to what they are comfortable with and bring those people over a bit and ...them, instead of them joining you the old group towards the end, toward the Hispanic culture and that sort of stuff. It's probably the way its going to have to be to link up but you know when you do sort of Hispanics and all you have to have something to keep them there and keep reaching into the community which means the old cadre has to move towards them, instead of them moving towards the old. I think we have to move towards them.

KR: Do you see the Board in general having a similar kind of philosophy or are they assuming the same old standard, if we build it they will come? Or does the Board really want to do more?

UL: You see some of both. I don't understand why out of 4 million people we can't attract 10,000 people a few weekends out of the year to come listen to us. I just don't understand that. There's something wrong there. That's one attitude, you'll hear that. I like it. I don't know why we can't find 10,000 people like me that like it but well, maybe they're not there. I don't know but anyway, we'll ….we hear a lot of conversation and we do talk about it. We've got to capitalize on how Houston is moving. Houston is moving away from predominant white to Hispanic and Asian. How do we do it? We're making a few feeble attempts. They may not be the right moves. They may not be enough of a move but at least we're trying to move in that direction. And I think we've got to learn how to do that. That's what's here. We got to do with what's here, not with what's in Philadelphia and New York.

KR: Houston is unique. It's not like one of the northern cities.

UL: That's it. And we don't want it to be. [laughs]

KR: In the larger context about things happening in our time, jumping back into the '60s, I was curious about the draft with the Vietnam War. Do you happen to have any knowledge from Board members who happened to have been on the Board back to that time period how that might have impacted the Houston Symphony?

UL: I've never heard anybody discuss it. In fact, you can't go back too much further than me. I'm think I'm the oldest reigning Board member between Walt and I. the two reigning Board members with this whole period.

KR: When Tiffany and I were preparing for this oral history project, we were looking at things that might have impacted the symphony and we were wondering if the draft created a huge hole in the orchestra if they (the musicians) were drafted.

UL: It must have.

KR: I was just curious if you had ever heard of such a thing.

UL: No, never have.

KR: Culturally we've had the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement and more women in the work force, has that changed the makeup of the symphony overtime.

UL: The orchestra has changed dramatically. You look up there now and all the females you see and all the Asians you're starting to see in the orchestra. I think we have only one black player in the orchestra. The Asians are really cropping up now. The thing that strikes me is you see a picture of the Vienna Symphony orchestra or whatever they call it, it's all guys. You see a picture of the Houston Symphony orchestra and there's all these women all over the place. It must look strange to the Viennese when they go to see an orchestra like the Houston Symphony versus their symphony. There's all these women in there and Asians sitting there. [laughs]

KR: I wonder what their perspective is.

UL: It'd be interesting to know, what their reaction is.

KR: Or maybe they're not very impressed about it. Or maybe they'll say, well, they don't play as well.

UL: I'm sure that's the attitude of the orchestra.... They can't possibly be as good as we are.

KR: You wonder, but you hate to put those kinds of attitudes on somebody you don't even know. It is kind of curious.

UL It is a change. This is a change to the real influx of women that's come in the fifteen years I've been with them. A lot of them are young, right out of these schools. All of a sudden they can compete. You've got to win your job, you don't just hire on. You've got to win your job. And they're good, apparently because they win their jobs, by golly.

KR: I was hearing about the auditioning process. Have you ever been involved?

UL: No, but I heard about it. Oh, God, I'd hate to try to get a job that way.

KR: From what you've heard can you give me some insight on that whole process?

UL: We get an opening. We advertise it nationally. Anybody can come but they've got to pay their own way. Anybody can come and compete. We have a panel of judges, the maestro and some orchestra members with a blank wall there and they

don't know who's on the other side and they come in and the play for them. They rate them and so forth.

KR: Do they all play the same piece?

UL: I don't know. I'm sure [inaudible] some of this they've got to have them playing the same. They may have a selection. I know when I went to the Opera, they have this thing every spring a concert of arias, it's a competition. They select a piece, and then the judges select a piece. So they sing two pieces, one of their own, and one the judges pick. Anyway, I image it's probably something like that. They tell me they have one opening and people paying their own way and they still have 100 people show up and try out for this job. It's astounding! I'd never heard of anything like that. And then, I've heard of auditions where 100 people show up and the group didn't think any of them were any good.

KR: Really?

UL: They turn them all down.

KR: And you have to re-announce the position?

UL: They re-announce, stir up some more interest. Out of those they narrow it down to two or three, I mean, that's the majority whatever they hear, they don't like, discard them pretty quick.

KR: When they get down to the finalists what do they do?

UL: I don't know. I don't know what the next step is when they narrow it down like that. Because they don't really talk about it too much, but you hear, 'well we had a hundred turn out for this one'. I've heard "weren't any of the any good', 'had to reject them all'. So it's a tough thing. And, I'm talking about an ordinary position, you can imagine when something like first violin in one of these big orchestras opens up. Gosh, the tension.

KR: Imagine the two or three people, fighting it out over that job.

UL: I do like the concept of blind audition. You don't get the reaction, "oh, I don't like that person's looks", when they sit down and play beautifully. 'Well, they play good but I still don't like them.' Whether they're black or white or Asian or male or female, you don't know nothing. All you can do is listen and what they do. It's how it ought to be, by talent, strictly on talent.

KR: I wonder at what point they actually see the person playing.

UL: I guess when they say, 'number 36' is the one we want. Then they see who number 36 is. They may have been from another big orchestra; they may be fresh out of school somewhere. But they're good.

KR: That basically covers all the questions I have. Is there anything else you might want to add or expand on that we've already talked about? I know we've talked about a lot.

UL: No, the only thing I hope is that a lot of people do what I did. Support a non-profit with their talent and skill, whatever that might be, regardless whether they're interested in what the non profit does. You don't have to be right in the middle of what they're doing. That's it. I've been around a long time but I still rarely go to any classical concerts. [laughs] I never will. I'll never develop that kind of taste.

[extraneous conversation]

KR: Thank you so much for your time and contributing to a part of Houston history.

University of Houston, Center for Public History
Course Project: Oral History, Course # 6384

In cooperation with the Houston Symphony Archives.

Interviewee: Ulyesse LeGrange, Houston Symphony Board Trustee
Interviewer: Kelly M. Ray, graduate student

Interview Date: October, 26, 2004
Interview Time: 10:00 a.m.

Biography

Mr. Ulyesse LeGrange is a member of the Board of Trustees for the Houston Symphony Society. Mr. LeGrange is a retired Senior Vice President of Exxon USA, Inc. and joined the Houston Symphony Society Board in 1984 as Exxon's corporate representative. Exxon has been a major benefactor for the Houston Symphony. With his background in accounting and being a C.P.A., Mr. LeGrange has used his financials skills to assist the Houston Symphony on budgetary matters including fundraising and advising management during labor negotiations with the musicians. His personal interest musically is the Houston Symphony's Pops Series.

Mr. LeGrange is married to his wife Barbara and is a grandfather. He is on the Advisory Board of the Moores School of Music at the University of Houston; was on the Advisory Forum Chair of Beta Alpha Psi (an accounting honor society) during1982-1984; was Board Treasurer of the Taping for the Blind, Inc. (2003); and his philanthropic activities include underwriting four professorships in Accounting at Louisiana State University's College of Business Administration, his alma mater. He has hosted social events for guest performers of the Houston Symphony's Exxon Pops Series including Shirley Jones, Marvin Hamlisch, Doc Severinson, Skitch Henderson, and Henry Mancini.

Interview

The interview focuses on Mr. LeGrange's involvement on the Houston Symphony Board as a Trustee in advising the Board on budgetary matters and the Symphony's management in contract negotiations with the musicians. At the time this interview was conducted the Houston Symphony had experienced its first labor strike by the musicians approximately 15 months prior and the organization is struggling financially but is stable for the short-term.

The interview was conducted in Mr. LeGrange's residence, a condominium at Bayou Bend Tower near Memorial Park in Houston, Texas. The interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. Mr. LeGrange was very candid and personable during the interview, recalling the majority of details- events, people, conversations, and dates- with excellent clarity. He is willing to have a second interview and provide photographs from his personal collection of the various Pops Series guest artists he has entertained.

November 10, 2004

Mr. Ulyesse LeGrange
101 Westcott
Houston, TX 77007

Dear Mr. LeGrange,

Thank you so much for participating in my oral history project. It was a great pleasure to have the opportunity to meet you and conduct the oral history interview! Enclosed is the transcript (first draft) of your interview of October 26, 2004 for your review. Before I submit a final version of the transcript, along with the tapes to the Center for Public History and the Houston Symphony archives, I want to be sure that it is accurate and meets with your approval.

Attached are proofreading guidelines to assist you while reading through the transcript. If you have any additional questions about proofreading that are not addressed in the guidelines, feel free to contact me at any time.

Depending upon your preference you can return the transcript by mail in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope or contact me so I can pick it up. However, I will be leaving town on Thursday, November 18 and returning on Sunday, November 28th. As I mentioned during our meeting, my timeline for this project requires that I receive your transcript with changes no later than Monday, November 29, 2004 so it can be submitted to my professor.

Thank you again for your time in assisting me with this project. Have a wonderful Thanksgiving holiday!

Warmest Regards,

Ray

GOOD LUCK ON YOUR PROJECT

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