

# Marilyn Thompson Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives  
50 Oak Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted June 29, 2016  
Tessa Updike, Interviewer

## **San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project**

The Conservatory's Oral History Project has the goal of seeking out and collecting memories of historical significance to the Conservatory through recorded interviews with members of the Conservatory's community, which will then be preserved, transcribed, and made available to the public.

Among the narrators will be former administrators, faculty members, trustees, alumni, and family of former Conservatory luminaries. Through this diverse group, we will explore the growth and expansion of the Conservatory, including its departments, organization, finances and curriculum. We will capture personal memories before they are lost, fill in gaps in our understanding of the Conservatory's history, and will uncover how the Conservatory helped to shape San Francisco's musical culture through the past century.

### **Marilyn Thompson Interview**

This interview was conducted at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on June 29, 2016 by Tessa Updike.

### **Tessa Updike**

Tessa Updike is the archivist for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Tessa holds a B.A. in visual arts and has her Masters in Library and Information Science with a concentration in Archives Management from Simmons College in Boston. Previously she has worked for the Harvard University Botany Libraries and Archives and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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## Marilyn Thompson



Pianist Marilyn Thompson received her Bachelor's Degree from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where she was a student of Adolph Baller. She was awarded a Fulbright grant to the Vienna Academy of Music, and subsequently received her Master's Degree from Stanford University, where she studied under the Helen Evans Memorial Scholarship - a full-tuition grant. While at Stanford, she gave the West Coast Premiere of Roger Sessions' Piano Concerto. She has given countless recitals in the United States and abroad, and has been the featured soloist in concerti of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, Gershwin, Martinu, Hindemith, Barber and others. She has performed virtually the entire standard chamber music repertoire. Her recordings include performances of the Thomas Beversdorf Cello sonata, the Brahms Trio Op.87, and Ravel's Violin-Piano Sonate. Miss Thompson has performed in chamber music concerts in Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center; the 92nd Street "Y" in New York City; the Philip's Gallery, Washington D.C.; Boston's Symphony Hall; Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco; and most recently in the Teatro Nacional, San Jose, Costa Rica. In the 1980's she was the pianist member of the Chamber Soloists of San Francisco and the San Francisco Trio. In 2010 she toured China with the American Philharmonic Orchestra, performing Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F. At the present time Miss Thompson is the pianist of the Navarro Trio, a group which performs frequently throughout the Bay Area. Marilyn Thompson has taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music; the College of Holy Names, Oakland, California; at the University of California at Santa Cruz; and is presently on the faculty of Sonoma State University where she has taught since 1976.

*Wednesday, June 29, 2016*

**UPDIKE** I think we'll just start at the beginning. Could you tell me where and when you were born, and where you grew up?

**THOMPSON** I was born in Petaluma in 1942, and that's where I grew up.

**UPDIKE** What was Petaluma like at that time?

**THOMPSON** I think the population was 8,000 – and now it's 50,000.

**UPDIKE** My goodness. Did you grow up in a musical household?

**THOMPSON** Yes. My mother and father were both amateur musicians. My father was a singer, and my mother was an organist and a pianist.

**UPDIKE** Did you have a piano in the home growing up?

**THOMPSON** Yes, we had a Chickering that my mother bought before she was married in the 1920s. She just walked into Sherman & Clay one day and plunked down \$700 and bought a Chickering – which was a lot of money in those days.

**UPDIKE** Did your mother teach you piano? Was she your first piano teacher?

**THOMPSON** Yes, my mother was my teacher until I went to Mr. Baller when I was fifteen.

**UPDIKE** What sort of music did you listen to in your home? Did you have a radio when you were growing up?

**THOMPSON** We had a radio, but of course there was no classical music. We had 78s, and later 33RPM. I remember when I was very, very young, wearing out the recording of Ravel's *Boléro*! It was a 78. And then of course we listened to *Peter and the Wolf*, and I think on the same recording as the Ravel was Ippolitov-Ivanov's *Caucasian Sketches*, and that also got worn out. There wasn't a lot to choose from in those days.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember going to any musical performances? Or was there music in the church that you liked to listen to?

**THOMPSON** There was a community concert series that came to Petaluma – that was the Columbia Artists. They would bring in a lot of different artists, and a lot of people who later became famous played in Petaluma. We listened to quite a bit of organ music because my mother was an organist – but that wasn't in church, it was just recordings.

**UPDIKE** What was it that drew you to the piano?

**THOMPSON** I just never remember not wanting to play the piano. My mother was teaching all those years, and as a child I used to stay underneath the piano while she was teaching, and watch the keys go down. So when I started to play, I pretty much knew how to do it!

**UPDIKE** That's wonderful. You had all those sounds in your mind. So you were fifteen when you started studying with Adolph Baller. Could you talk a little about your first impressions of him?

**THOMPSON** Well, he was one of the people that came through Petaluma as a Columbia Artist, with the Alma Trio that he was in. I actually turned pages for him at that concert. He played Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* – he played as a solo. I think prior to that I had heard one of his students play who lived in Santa Rosa, and was impressed with the velvety sound that she had, and that beautiful legato touch that he had. When I met him, he was very nice. He didn't have an ego that he was showing off at all. He always had lots of jokes to tell.

**UPDIKE** Where did you have your lessons with him?

**THOMPSON** At the Conservatory.

**UPDIKE** So you started at the Conservatory when you were fifteen.

**THOMPSON** Yes, I was just able to get my driver's license. They made allowances – my mother was teaching at home always, so she couldn't drive me – so I got my driver's license at fifteen and a half.

**UPDIKE** Oh, my goodness! How far of a drive is it from Petaluma?

**THOMPSON** It's about 40 miles.

**UPDIKE** Would you come in once a week to study with him?

**THOMPSON** Yes.

**UPDIKE**                    Could you talk a little about the building on Ortega Street?

**THOMPSON**            Oh, sure! It had been an orphanage. Upstairs were the bedrooms, and they still had sinks in them – all of the sinks didn't work. Downstairs were the studios. There was a patio – it was a circular building with a patio in the center. Mr. Baller's studio looked out on the patio. Of course, being San Francisco you could never open the doors because it was so cold! But he had two pianos in his studio. The one we played the most was probably a Steinway A.

**UPDIKE**                    Could you talk a little bit about his teaching style, and the lessons that you had?

**THOMPSON**            Yes. When I went to the Conservatory and auditioned for him, I had my choice of Egon Petri or Baller. I sat in on a Petri lesson, and then I sat in on a Baller lesson. Petri was a wonderful teacher, I'm sure, but it just didn't resonate with what I wanted for a teacher. He talked a lot and intellectualized a lot. It may have been because of the student he was working with, but then Baller – and I don't think this is different from any of his students – he would sing along, and kind of conduct you. So you electrically got what he wanted you to do. And he was incredibly musical – I don't think he even had to think much about it. He would just indicate what he wanted you to do, physically and vocally, and it just worked. He didn't teach technique that much. I remember my first lesson he started out with scales – “Oh, let's do these scales.” By the second lesson he said, “Oh, forget that.” And then he gave me some of the Brahms exercises to do. But within the first six months those had flown out the window, too. His way of teaching was to isolate certain passages from pieces of music, and use that as a technical exercise. A good example was the octave exercises in the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto – that was the octave exercise we did.

**UPDIKE**                    At the Conservatory at that time, did you give public recitals?

**THOMPSON**            Yes, I think I gave two full recitals every year. So I learned a lot of repertoire. A little bit more about the building – we lived in a house behind the Conservatory. Did you know about this?

**UPDIKE**                    I didn't.

**THOMPSON**            Because it was an orphanage, there was a house behind the Conservatory which faced out to 20th Avenue. There were six girls living upstairs in this house, and downstairs was the house matron, who was Winifred Jones. Two of us shared a room, and the rest had their own room. There was one shower room, which had maybe three shower stalls, and

toilets, etc. And then there was a tiny Pullman kitchen about three feet long which had a refrigerator, a stove, and was always filthy!

**UPDIKE** I can imagine!

**THOMPSON** So that's where we lived, and the upstairs of the Conservatory building was where we practiced. There were upright pianos upstairs. There were two uprights that were better than the others, so in order to get to that practice room I had to get up at 7:00, and get there at 7:30, which is not my style! But that's how we had to do it, to get the practicing in.

**UPDIKE** I had never heard of that house before. There were only female students living in it?

**THOMPSON** Yes, and they tore it down when they built Hellman Hall.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything that you'd like to say about Winifred Jones?

**THOMPSON** She was just a very sweet woman. She had rules, but not house marm rules. If we came in late, she usually knew about it. I think the door locked at 10:00, so you had to be sure to have a friend who was aware! But she was a pretty good pianist, and she taught piano there too. She had sort of an English air about her – she and Claire James were quite friendly.

**UPDIKE** Did you all have chores to do in the house? Did you cook for yourselves?

**THOMPSON** We cooked for ourselves. Usually what would happen, was – you know, there's always somebody who's not going to want to do the work. In San Francisco, the buildup of dirt on the windows is just incredible! Usually we waited until the bathroom got pretty moldy, to clean it up. We sort of just did it on our own – I don't remember there being any tasks allotted.

**UPDIKE** What years did you live in that house?

**THOMPSON** 1960 to '63. And then I moved into a house with a friend in my final year. I used to go home to Petaluma every weekend, because I had an organ job.

My roommate was Janet White. She married Milton Williams, a singer, and I don't know what happened to them. Roger Torres is a trumpet player, I think he's still around. Theodora Carras – I just saw her sister's picture in one of those catalogs. And Jeananne Albee was a pianist. At that time there just weren't that many serious students at the Conservatory. I believe the whole student body was 40 to 50 students, and when I graduated in 1964 there were four of us in the

graduating class. I believe one name I left out was Henry Melendres – he was also a piano student.

**UPDIKE** So you were able to do your practicing at the house?

**THOMPSON** There were no pianos in the house – upstairs in the Conservatory.

**UPDIKE** Oh, I'm sorry – in the Conservatory.

**THOMPSON** We would practice in the mornings, and in-between classes when there was a piano available. Then I think at night they closed it at 10:00.

**UPDIKE** OK. And that's also the space that you had your lessons in?

**THOMPSON** Yes, but downstairs. The downstairs pianos were not available for practice. There was a little Japanese man, Jimmy (I don't remember his last name) who was the custodian there. Everybody was really friendly with Jimmy, and he lived at the end of the Conservatory hall. He was the one that would open and close the doors for you.

**UPDIKE** Ramon Sender [Composition, '62] told a story about Jimmy the janitor. Did you have any interaction with composers at the Conservatory – or composition students while you were a student there?

**THOMPSON** Robert Erickson was the teacher of new music. There was one person who was an amazing composer there that nobody knew about because he was so self-effacing, and that was Robert Sheldon. He was a fabulous pianist, and he wrote this unbelievable music. His wife was a soprano and he wrote most of the songs for her. He would come up with poetry, and write down the most amazing songs, with incredible accompaniment. He sometimes would just rattle them off in 45 minutes, when a student had canceled a lesson or something. I now have all of that manuscript, which is in pencil. Part of my job is to get that music out to people, but the problem is that a lot of it is poetry that the copyright has not run out on, so you can't really publish them.

Also, there was another composer whose music I played and actually recorded. That composer was Kirke Mechem, a friend of Mr. Baller's. I recorded Mechem's *Whims*, a series of miniatures for upper intermediate piano students. I have also performed Kirke's Piano Trio many times with both the San Francisco Trio and the Navarro Trio.

**UPDIKE** Have you played the Sheldon pieces for yourself?

**THOMPSON** Yes, I have done a recording, actually, with a local soprano, Carol Menke. But it wasn't the best recording, it was done in somebody's house. The recording engineer was more anxious to get the words across, so the piano part kind of got garbled in the background.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember any other teachers from the Conservatory at that time?

**THOMPSON** Sol Joseph was an amazing theory teacher. He loved what he was doing so much – he loved music. He taught all five species of counterpoint, and made us write things in counterpoint – harmonize chorale melodies, and write music from the era that we were studying. But the most important thing was the way he taught theory – the Schenkerian method. It teaches not vertical harmonies – this is a I, V, I chord progression, etc. – but the overall effect of the music. You would have to graph the notes to find out where you were going in the music – the high point of the music. It's always very helpful for a performer to know the destinations of musical lines.

**UPDIKE** Was there a chorus at that time?

**THOMPSON** Yes, and the conductor was Byron Graber.

**UPDIKE** Was it a chamber chorus?

**THOMPSON** It was a chamber chorus, we did some Randall Thompson pieces. Nothing memorable. But we did have physical education classes. We had a man by the name of Mr. [Anatol] Joukowsky, and he taught dancing. He would choreograph minuets from Mozart symphonies for us to dance to – that was our physical education.

**UPDIKE** Wow! Would you perform those?

**THOMPSON** Oh gosh, no! We looked like little elephants trying to dance.

**UPDIKE** Before the Hellman Hall days, I heard that there was a long, skinny room that was used for a performance hall. Do you have any memories of playing in there?

**THOMPSON** I do. There was a funky organ in there, and I took organ lessons while I was there too. And there was a Bösendorfer piano on stage – I believe it was about a seven foot Bösendorfer. It was my first encounter with a European piano, and I thought it was just like butter, it just melted as you played it, it was wonderful. While I was still there it was in Robin Laufer's office [SFCM President 1957-1966]. I do remember one thing – the hall had radiators, and right in the middle of a performance they would start popping. It was very loud, and there was no way to turn them off because it was water heating. It wasn't very pretty. And the concerts

were not well attended. I remember giving a concert once and there were five people in the audience.

**UPDIKE**                    You mentioned Robin Laufer. Is there anything that you could say about him?

**THOMPSON**                He was very kind to me. I know a lot of people were not happy with him, but he bent over backwards to help me out. When I was applying for the Fulbright Scholarship in Vienna he allowed me to make the tapes in his office, where the Bösendorfer was. So I spent hours in there making reel-to-reel tapes.

**UPDIKE**                    I would love to hear about Vienna, but before we get there, is there anything that you could say about Adolph Baller's life? I've heard little bits and pieces, but not a full story.

**THOMPSON**                He was born in Poland to a very poor family. His mother realized that he was very, very gifted. I believe he was about ten years old when she sent him off to Vienna to study. After that, it's kind of a blank – I don't know what happened. We all called him Usiu – I think it means "sweetheart" in Polish. His wife Edith would tell me about how brave his mother was to send her child off to Vienna because she knew she couldn't help him out musically. Somewhere along the line, I guess it was about 1938 when the Nazis came to power, Mr. Baller was Jewish, and they captured him. They broke a finger. He said the worst part of it was they tortured him with cigarettes – putting them out on him – and I think he had a kidney rupture. He told me this, because he said when they broke his finger they realized he was a pianist somehow, and somebody took heart. They put him in a Catholic hospital, and rather than putting his finger in a cast, the nuns that massaged his finger, which was good because otherwise it would have gotten stiff. And then how he escaped to America I'm not sure, but by then he had married Edith and they arrived in Vienna with five dollars in their pocket. I think he played in nightclubs to earn more money, which was something that he just hated. Somehow he met Yehudi Menuhin, and they partnered up. That was the beginning of it. Yehudi had an estate in Menlo Park called the Alma Estate, and that's how the Alma Trio evolved.

**UPDIKE**                    Who was the other member of the Alma Trio?

**THOMPSON**                The first cellist was Gáber Rejtö, and the first violinist was Maurice Wilks. After him, I think the next person was Andor Toth – I can't remember if there was somebody in-between.

**UPDIKE**                    And you heard them when they came to Petaluma.

**THOMPSON** Yes, that would have been with Maurice Wilks.

**UPDIKE** Could you describe their sound, and their technique?

**THOMPSON** It was always that non-percussive style (I was listening to the pianist of course, mostly). That beautiful, mellifluous sound that he had. It matched the string sound so much better – there was never any percussion to his playing. When he was teaching, the way he would achieve that with the student was to say, “Close to the keys.” He was funny, he never remembered our names. I was always “girl” and the fellows were always “boy.” It’s not that he didn’t remember names, it was just easier for him.

**UPDIKE** It sounds endearing.

**THOMPSON** It was. He would teach all day long. He came on Mondays, and that was “the day of the week” for me. I was always looking forward to Mondays. He never stopped teaching – his wife would bring him delicatessen food and he would eat during the lesson.

**UPDIKE** Did you ever go to his home for lessons?

**THOMPSON** Yes, later on I did – in Palo Alto. I think he originally had a wonderful Steinway C, which was an older instrument, and then Yamaha came and decided that they’d take that and give him a Yamaha, which now ironically is in Santa Rosa. He also had a Bösendorfer Imperial, which he kept locked in his own house – no one was to touch, unless you were giving a recital! He used to talk about the community concerts – they used to go to all these little towns with very unsophisticated audiences, and he used to say, “When they land on the moon, they’re going to have community concerts on the moon!” He just hated them.

**UPDIKE** How many years did you study with Adolph?

**THOMPSON** Besides my Mother, he was the only teacher that I had. (Of course, I spent a year of study in Vienna.) After I finished at the Conservatory I went to Vienna, and then I went to Stanford. Baller was teaching at Stanford, and that’s why I went there.

**UPDIKE** Do you want to talk a little bit about your year in Vienna?

**THOMPSON** Sure. It was on a Fulbright Scholarship. I lived alone, and had a stipend. I rented a Czechoslovakian piano for seven dollars a month. There was no heat in the building so we had to carry coal up to a coal stove – up three flights of circular stairs. So you always had to go and buy the coal and carry it home. The first place I arrived in Vienna was with an old opera singer. She had told me that I would be sleeping in the living room, and had a couch that dipped

in the middle. It was a couch that also opened out into a bed, and had this dip in the middle. I couldn't sleep at all. In that same place I was allowed one hot bath a week. If I wanted, I could have a cold bath, but this was Vienna in the winter! So I didn't last very long there. When I went to my other house – it was an apartment that I rented – I could choose between a refrigerator or hot water, so I choose hot water. In Vienna there were always double windows, so you could use that space in-between the windows as a refrigerator because it was so cold.

**UPDIKE** Oh, my goodness.

**THOMPSON** I studied with Josef Dichler, and after Mr. Baller, we just didn't resonate at all. I spent most of my time just practicing. He was a teacher who had to have everything exactly his way, and Baller wasn't that way at all. Baller was a very curvy conductor, whereas this man was very angular. He was nice, but....

**UPDIKE** It just didn't work out. So when you came back to the United States you started studying with Baller again. Would he play for you during the lessons?

**THOMPSON** Very rarely, but he did play, and it was always just amazing. I don't think he practiced very much – he used to tell me that he couldn't start to practice until 10:00 at night because he was teaching all the time. He also loved to cook, and he was always making soups. So he would practice after he had his soup.

**UPDIKE** Do you remember what kind of soups they were?

**THOMPSON** No, I don't think he told me what they were – but he was making soups.

**UPDIKE** You were with him for how many years at Stanford?

**THOMPSON** That was maybe for two years, and then I got several jobs. I was teaching at U.C. Santa Cruz, and at Concordia Lutheran College in Oakland, and also Holy Names. Then I got married and moved back to Petaluma. I was teaching at three different colleges – one was U.C. Santa Cruz, Holy Names, and Sonoma State – all at once. I was driving about 500 miles a week!

**UPDIKE** And did you come back to the Conservatory as a staff pianist?

**THOMPSON** Not as a staff pianist, but there was a teacher here by the name of Beatrice Beauregard, and she was on sabbatical for a while and I think it was six months I taught for her.

**UPDIKE** OK, I thought I saw your name on some programs past your time here as a student.

**THOMPSON** I did perform here quite a bit with other students. I was a member of the San Francisco Trio in the early '70s – that was with Roy Milan and David Kadarauch. Roy was principal and concertmaster of the Ballet orchestra, and David is principal cellist of the Opera orchestra. We had a trio we called the San Francisco Trio for maybe five or six years, and then I played with the Chamber Soloists of San Francisco, which was organized by a cellist by the name of Gilberto Munguia. He would bring in aspiring young artists, and they would be part of the group for one concert. One of those people was Jean Ives Thibaudet when I believe he was seventeen.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything else that you'd like to say about student life at the Conservatory, or your time there?

**THOMPSON** I was pretty focused, and practicing, so I didn't have a lot of social activities. And I went home on the weekends, so that was when any parties might have happened. We did go to Symphony concerts, but that was long before Davies was built. I was trying to remember – the Opera, and the Ballet, and the Symphony shared the Opera House. I don't remember whether their seasons went on simultaneously....

**UPDIKE** I don't remember what the schedule was like before 1980 when Davies opened. Is there anything that you could say about the musical culture of the Bay Area over the years? Different institutions, and the character through the years.

**THOMPSON** I think the same groups still exist. U.C. Berkeley has their concert series. It's pretty much the same. I would comment on the fact that I think, as a pianist, it's much easier for a woman to be a pianist now than when I was growing up. It used to be that the only woman pianist who was allowed to play Brahms was Gina Bachauer and it was because of her build – she was a big woman. I once played the first Brahms Concerto for Josef Krips – Baller had set that up for me, because Krips was from Vienna and they knew each other. Krips said, "Yes, that's a very fine performance, but women shouldn't play Brahms." And that was it – that was the end of it. I don't think that happens anymore. I just heard a recording of Yuja Wang playing Brahms, and she's a tiny little thing.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything else that you'd like to say about being a woman musician? Some of the challenges along the way?

**THOMPSON** That's the only one that I was aware of, because it was so blatant. If there were others, I just didn't acknowledge them. People used to tell me, "You play like a man," and I guess I should have been offended, but I wasn't. I took it as a compliment.

**UPDIKE** Did you know Albert Elkus?

**THOMPSON** Yes, he was a teacher. He taught music appreciation. He was a man who adored music, and a good teacher.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything that you could say about Egon Petri?

**THOMPSON** No, I just met him that once. He had been Claire James's teacher – she was his biggest advocate.

**UPDIKE** And Margaret Rowell?

**THOMPSON** Oh yes, I used to go with some of her students to lessons. One of my colleagues at Stanford was Neal LoMonaco, and he was a student of hers. Neal had a wonderful sense of humor, and he and Margaret just got along so famously. He would always want to take me to her lessons because he loved her so much. She was incredible. She always fixed dinners for him.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything you'd like to say about how your performance style has changed over the years?

**THOMPSON** I of course have just gotten better. I think that year in Vienna was really great for me, because I was on my own. I didn't like the way my teacher there had me playing, so I had to more or less teach myself. It's always just been that style of having that mellifluous playing – very legato, non-percussive. Treating the piano more like an orchestral instrument rather than a percussion instrument, and having it blend in that way. I notice now with younger pianists that there's a lot more attention to different color, and a lot of different voicings. I think it's a wonderful thing that's happening. I'm not all that excited about the new pianos that are being built, because they seem to be awfully bright to me. But there are still some older ones around.

**UPDIKE** And the preference of the type of music you've played over the years – has that changed?

**THOMPSON** No, not at all. If I were on an island and had to choose, it would be Brahms. I love impressionistic music. I listen to modern music, but it just doesn't move me the way older music does.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything you'd like to say about your own teaching style, and what influenced it?

**THOMPSON** Definitely from Baller! I teach at Sonoma State, and I've been there since 1976. We're trying to upgrade the program – it's not a conservatory, it's a California state college. The general level of students is not particularly high, so we're trying to figure out what to do with that. Everybody decided – “We're going to have everybody play scales.” Well ... I said, “I don't think I want to do that,” and then harkened back to Baller's day, when maybe you had a page of a Chopin etude, which in my opinion would be far more beneficial to a pianist than playing a scale – and of course the Brahms exercises, and things of that nature. But basically, I spend a lot of time teaching them proper pedaling techniques so you get that sound. I know when I was growing up people would always say, “You can always tell a Baller student.” I always try to impart that same effect to my students. It takes a while, because they don't always hear that. You're so used to hearing so much noise in society now – to try to get that pastoral feeling with piano playing is very difficult.

**UPDIKE** Have you played much with local orchestras?

**THOMPSON** Yes, I've played quite a bit with the Santa Rosa Symphony, and when I was living in Palo Alto I would play frequently with the Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra. Now I play with the Russian Chamber Orchestra, which plays in Mill Valley. Our trio recently played with the Diablo County Orchestra – we did the Beethoven Triple.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything you'd like to say about different conductors that you've worked with over the years?

**THOMPSON** A conductor I first worked with was Corrick Brown in the Santa Rosa Symphony. He was also a Baller student, so that was nice. And I once played the Beethoven Fourth Concerto with the Santa Rosa Symphony with Baller conducting, which was really fun. The orchestra was complaining because he really wasn't a bona fide conductor, and he wouldn't cue everybody. He conducted the orchestra the way he conducted piano lessons! It didn't quite work for a big body – but it worked out beautifully, because they all loved him so much it didn't really matter. Arthur Fiedler used to come to San Francisco in the summers, and do a pops concert series. I played the Tchaikovsky Concerto with him with the San Francisco Symphony with him conducting. He was a very funny guy. He would keep a flask of whiskey in his coat, and didn't try to hide it! Offstage, of course.

**UPDIKE** Are there any recordings that you'd like to talk about – or maybe how the recording industry has changed?

**THOMPSON** I didn't do that many recordings. I did some with Andy Toth Jr. – it was a Thomas Beversdorf piece. He was a friend of the composer, and then a trio with Dave Kadarrauch, and the violinist was James Carter – we did the Brahms *C Major Piano Trio*. It had to be done with no splicing, which was interesting. We did it in a home in San Francisco in Russian Hill, I believe. It was a foggy night, so you can still hear the fog horns on the recording. Later, Jim and I did the Ravel Violin Sonata. That's about it with recordings – I've never pushed that.

**UPDIKE** I know you've talked a bit about some of the other instrumentalists you've worked with. Are there chamber groups you would like to mention?

**THOMPSON** I've been with the Navarro Trio since the early '90s. The founding members were myself, Jill Brindel, and Jeremy Constant. Now the violinist is Victor Romasevich. We will have been the trio in residence at Sonoma State this year for 25 years. We give three concerts a year there, and sometimes we have visiting people perform with us.

**UPDIKE** Do you ever find it difficult to balance your teaching with your performing?

**THOMPSON** It is difficult, because I teach all day long at Sonoma State. I teach piano classes, chamber music, a class called Instrumental Repertoire, and then I teach some private piano students there too. By the end of the day when it's time to practice, I'm pretty done in. But you revitalize yourself – music has a way to do that. It's just leading yourself to the piano and actually sitting there to get it started.

**UPDIKE** Could you estimate how many hours you practice?

**THOMPSON** I try to get in at least two hours a day – hopefully three.

**UPDIKE** And has that changed significantly from when you were a student?

**THOMPSON** No, I think that was the time limit that Baller stipulated when I was fifteen, and it's kind of stuck with me.

**UPDIKE** So you were never an all-night practicer.

**THOMPSON** I think I practiced eight hours one day, and I had the worst lesson of my life.

**UPDIKE** You thought about it too much.

**THOMPSON** I think so.

**UPDIKE** We're almost at the end of our questions here. Do you have advice that you would give to music students or young musicians today?

**THOMPSON** Always keep the glory of music as your guide. Give a lot of heartfelt thought to the music you are playing. Develop your own signature interpretation, and stick to it. It then becomes your personal story.

**UPDIKE** That's lovely. Thank you so much.