

**Oral History Interview of
Kurt Frederick**

**Interviewed by: David Gracy
September 16, 1968
Albuquerque, New Mexico**

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Interviewer: David Gracy

Audio Editor: Elissa Stroman and David Rauch

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Interview Series Background:

In the process of conservation and digitization, our Audio/Visual department transcribes existing interviews in the Southwest Collection's holdings for a new generation of listeners to rediscover. Such interviews frequently cover topics relating to the founding of Texas Tech and the settlement of Lubbock but can also encompass a wide range of subjects.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Kurt Frederick, a European refugee and conductor of the Albuquerque Civic Symphony Orchestra. Frederick talks about hearing Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* and then corresponding with the composer in order to perform the work in New Mexico. Furthermore, this interview discusses his introduction to the piece, his correspondences with Schoenberg, the premiere of the work, and also background information on Frederick's life.

Length of Interview: 00:35:38

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
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Letters from Schoenberg and around the world	5	00:03:23
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Frederick moves west from New York	9	00:24:27
Arriving in Albuquerque	11	00:31:06
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Keywords

Albuquerque, New Mexico, Arnold Schoenberg, classical music, University of New Mexico

David Gracy (DG):

Go right ahead. It's all right, right there—

Kurt Frederick (KF):

I was always a great admirer of the music of Arnold Schoenberg and of his students, and one Sunday I read in the *New York Times* that Arnold Schoenberg had just completed a work, *A Survivor from Warsaw*. I was very interested in seeing the score—the title already intrigued me because I was a refugee. And the fact that it was a new work by Arnold Schoenberg interested me very much, and so I thought I would write to Arnold Schoenberg and ask him whether I could get a score, where the score was printed. Well, first I got in correspondence with a secretary and I think it was also a student, a friend of Arnold Schoenberg and Mr. **[Richard] Hoffmann [student/secretary]** who told me that I could have a photostat copy of this score, and I was surprised of course to learn later on that the work had never been performed. At this time, I was conductor of the Albuquerque Civic Symphony Orchestra, and also the orchestra was in these days of course very far from being a good orchestra. I thought that we could make up by very intensive practicing what lacked us in technique, and so I wrote again to Schoenberg and asked him whether we could perform this work. Well, the answer came that the parts had not yet been written out. I had asked him also what the performance fee was and so on. The answer came that the parts had not been written out, but if I would write out the parts, he would allow me to perform this work without any performance fee. I recall also, well that in these days—it was I think in 1948 or '49—in these days, the Board of Directors consisted of very few people, I think three people or so, four people—and we had a meeting, the president of the Board of Directors and president of the orchestra and I. And I presented them this project and asked them whether I could spend some money to have the string parts photostatted it, so that I would have to write out only one string part—and they were very generous, I think I was allowed to spend \$10 or \$15 to have the string parts photostatted. The rest had to be written out by hand, and then came a very interesting period, and I own a number—am in possession of a number of letters and correspondence with a Mr. Erwin Stein who was a composer and was a student of Schoenberg and who obviously took care of a part of the correspondence with Schoenberg, and a number of letters by Arnold Schoenberg himself. Now the correspondence refers to such items as misprints. The score was copied by the well-known composer and conductor and theorist **[Rene] Leibowitz** who was probably the most outstanding theorist in the field of twelve-tone of the serial technique—who was a student of Schoenberg. And there were many mistakes, and I was in correspondence to find out whether I was correct in assuming that—whereas some mistakes were very obvious, but there were some notes where I was not quite sure whether Schoenberg really meant it or not. There is also another letter which is quite interesting referring to my suggestion to improve the accentuation in the text—you'll notice this composition ends with a Hebrew prayer. But the accentuation was not correct, and the funny answer came then that Mr. Schoenberg was very astonished that I thought the accentuation wasn't correct because he had consulted a rabbi in Los Angeles who had advised him concerning the accentuation. I don't

know whether the accentuation was corrected before the score was finally printed. Well, we had intended to perform the work at a certain time, and we ran into difficulties. In these days, we had only one rehearsal—one two hour rehearsal a week with the Civic Symphony Orchestra, and many people didn't even come to this one rehearsal, and when we had an extra rehearsal called, we could be sure that a great part of the orchestra wouldn't appear, and it was very, very difficult to do this work.

DG:

How many were in the orchestra?

KF:

I couldn't tell you that, but I know that I have a program that we could find out from the program. But this work was also for a men's chorus—of great help was mayor of—was teacher from the university, Mr. Furley [?] who started the men's chorus of the university, but this men's chorus was too small. And so we had also people from a chorus from a small community near Albuquerque, from Estancia, a community of about 4,000 farmers or so sing in this composition—in this performance—and the reason that this happened was that a public school music teacher in Estancia had just arrived who was a former graduate from the Westminster Chorus.

Break in Recording

KF:

So these farmers and young students from Estancia were studying this Hebrew prayer, and a little girl, a high school girl, was playing the melody of this prayer, so that they would—learn it—learn the pitch of the various notes. The piano score or something of that kind—did not exist—I made another piano score later on for the rehearsals with the narrator—the narrator incidentally was Dr. Sherman Smith—is at this time the vice-president of the university. At that time, he was the head of the chemistry department. He had a marvelous baritone voice and a wonderful speaking voice, and this part of the narrator needed a musical person because as in some of the composition in which Schoenberg uses *Sprechstimme*—this composition, it was indicated very outwardly what the rhythm should be and also the approximate pitch and so on. Well, we had set a date of this performance, but we had to postpone it because we ran into so many difficulties. And the very peculiar is a thing happened that we—where we saw it actually, completely conscious of it, we were ahead by only three days or so, a few days with our performance—the performance which took place I think in England under Leibowitz. And Albuquerque was the first community to perform this work. Now the people of Albuquerque, the Board of Directors, were obviously not aware of the importance of this performance. The name Schoenberg didn't mean anything to them, it was—when I mentioned that it was an unusual performance and that

big orchestras would be—normally should be very eager to perform such a composition, they took this with a grain of salt and thought probably that I was a fantastic.

Well, there was of course a great surprise when on the day of the performance, a telegram arrived from the Koussevitzky Foundation asking for information about this performance. What had happened was that Koussevitzky, the Koussevitzky Foundation, had commissioned this work, but the Boston Symphony Orchestra never performed this work until a very short while ago. Well, still a greater surprise came when on the next day the *Time* magazine asked for some information and various other magazines and newspapers asked for information, and of course it was a great surprise that this performance was written up in newspapers in South America and then in Europe and all parts of the world. We received then from Schoenberg a very wonderful letter, and I would like to show you this letter. Unfortunately my photostat copy has been mutilated when the studio was flooded, and that one belonged to the letters which were—but you will still be able to read it. Schoenberg wrote also a very enthusiastic letter—personal letter to me, and he seemed to be very, very pleased. And there were—I have various letters which might be very interesting for somebody who writes someday an explicit Schoenberg biography. For instance, in one letter, he asked—and to this very interesting position which Schoenberg had in—at that time in Los Angeles where he was teaching, he asked whether we do not have some rich people in Albuquerque who could sponsor a trip of the orchestra to Los Angeles to perform the *Survivor from Warsaw* and another work which I had intended to perform, namely the *Pierrot Lunaire*.

In another letter, he sends me a transcript of a very peculiar broadcast. This little girl who had played in Estancia, the melody of this Hebrew prayer was suggested to appear at a broadcast of the Philharmonic Orchestra. In these years, there was some broadcasts of some young people, interviews of some young people, and she, on the grounds that she had participated at this performance, was invited to come to New York to participate at this broadcast. I forget now who the music critic was who interviewed her, that is authoring one of the letters which I have, but this music critic started out what a terrible shock it was for him to hear the first Schoenberg composition. And then he asked the girl what her impression was, and this girl expressed herself very awkwardly. She reported that the performance had been a tremendous success, such a success that the composition had to be repeated, but she said about the performance that it was disjunct, so various—not very careful use—not very careful expression. And Arnold Schoenberg wrote, and he said, how can this girl—if it is true what you say, that the audience was so enthusiastic, and if she worked, my work, how could she say something like that? Was she perhaps influenced by this man who interviewed her? And I thought it was quite interesting because it shows that this great man who had suffered so much, being constantly persecuted, must have always felt that he was persecuted as in this case. I have also a very cute birthday letter which was sent to all the people who congratulated Schoenberg to his seventy-years' birthday, and I will show it to you afterwards. I think one cute and well-known anecdote mentioned in this letter is how Schoenberg, when he was in the Austrian Army during the First World War, was called by his lieutenant or sergeant and was asked whether he is this fellow

Arnold Schoenberg, and Schoenberg's answer was, "Well, yes sir. Somebody had to be it, so nobody wanted to be it, and so I volunteered." (laughs)

There was also some correspondence about getting the material for the *Pierrot Lunaire*, which in these days was unavailable in America. And Schoenberg gave me then some advice, how I could get it from certain people, but I should ask him first before they sell me a copy, and he complains also that the music dealers are selling the music so expensively and so on.

About the performance, I wanted to say that it was one of the most peculiar experiences of my life. It was after all twenty years ago when the Albuquerque audience had never heard any music as—oh if I can call it modern—as this. And the reaction was very interesting. There was—it reminds me of the reaction of the audience in Santa Fe at the recent premier of *Jacob's Ladder* by Schoenberg. I'm sure that nobody understood it. The people obviously didn't even understand the text of *Jacob's Ladder*. But they felt the impact of this music, and it was a tremendous success, and it was so with this work; it was an amazing success, and so I thought it would help the people to hear it a second time, and as they continued to applaud, we performed this work for the second time. *A Survivor From Warsaw* wasn't performed then for a number of years, and it was very late actually that [Dimitri] Mitropoulos performed this work for the first time in New York with the Philharmonic Orchestra, and we were all very proud that on the program of the Philharmonic Orchestra was mentioned that the Albuquerque Civic Symphony Orchestra had performed this work for the first time. As a matter of fact, matter of fact, it was quite an experience in these days to see the name Albuquerque Civic Symphony Orchestra, University of New Mexico mentioned in *The New York Times*, this was in *Newsweek*, and the *Time* magazine, and all kinds of journals.

Break in Recording

DG:

—sir, first, when were you born and where?

KF:

Don't let's talk about when I was born, but let's talk about where I was born (laughs). I was born in Vienna, and I graduated from the state academy and from the state college of music. I always wanted to be a conductor. I came to this country in 1938, and I had a job as a violist, as first violist, with the New Friends of Music Orchestra in New York, and I played for two years with the Kolisch Quartet. And this playing with the Kolisch Quartet was one of the most important experiences of my life because Rudolf Kolisch is a general music player who knows the chamber music and particularly modern chamber music better than anybody in the world.

I should mention also one other experience which I had, or some experiences which I had in Vienna in connection with music of the twentieth century. When I was a student at the state academy, my teacher Franz Schmidt, who was a very conservative composer, decided to perform the *Pierrot Lunaire* by Arnold Schoenberg. Now that was about 1928 or so, and in these days, it

was an unbelievable thing to perform such a work with students. Except for the conductor who was Franz Schmidt, all the performers were students. And I remember that Arnold Schoenberg, who lived at that time in Berlin, considered coming to Vienna to hear this performance. It was a very interesting experience, the greatest experience of my youth because we—I got very well acquainted with this music. I remember at the beginning, it was for me completely incomprehensible, this music, and it ended up that I was so familiar with the piece as if it would be for me a composition by Mozart. We had about oh fifty rehearsals or so, and we would leave some of the rehearsals whistling some melodies from the *Pierrot Lunaire*. It came to the point where we instrumentalists knew if somebody was playing the wrong note or if somebody was not in good form and so on. And of course that taught me quite a lot. It taught me that in order to have some understanding for something that is new, you have just—to get some understanding—you have to just to become acquainted with it, and so well acquainted that you have to learn the new vocabulary. It was a very, very valuable experience, and to talk about the performance, it was very interesting because all the students of Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Alban Berg, who are still alive these days and many more, Erwin Stein and so on. They came all to the performance, and it was a tremendous success. I've played since the *Pierrot Lunaire* at various other occasions, but that was probably the most interesting performance I experienced.

After this performance of the *Pierrot Lunaire*, I was frequently called to play in the *Gesellschaft für Zeitkunst und Musik* [?], the Society for Contemporary Music. I'm not quite sure who the president at that time was, but I think for a while it was Anton Webern, for a while it was Alban Berg, and I had the privilege to have some contact with Anton Webern and played sometimes before a performance the composition for him, and I played also under his direction orchestra performances and chamber music performances. After I came to this country, as I said, I became first violist for the New Friends of Music, and perhaps because I had some interest in modern music, Kolisch called me, and asked me to a member of his string quartet which had to be reorganized in these days.

After—you know I did not feel happy in New York. The constant pressure made me feel very harassed, and my wife was afraid for my health, and we decided to leave New York. I had no idea where I would land, and just by accident, I landed in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And I wondered—was contemplating to give up music, and I wanted to study something else at the university. So I started to study chemistry at the University of New Mexico, and I was teaching at the same time music. I think it was due to the fact that I found again an opportunity to conduct which I've wanted always more than anything else that I stayed in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and that I gave up the idea of becoming a chemist, and that I stayed with my profession. I have my bachelor's degree with a major in chemistry from the University of New Mexico, and I have a master's and PhD from the University of Rochester, and one of the great honors I consider I received was to become an honorary member of the Bruckner Society, and I'm now for a number of years professor of music at the university. And I'm conducting the orchestra, and we have just recently started a little chamber orchestra in the hopes that both groups will become very good groups which can perform anything of the music literature. I have various other stations that I

have conducted the Civic Symphony Orchestra for a few years, that I founded the Civic Chorus many years ago when there didn't exist any such group that I started at the university was a mixed choral group because we had in the days when I came only a women's chorus—that I organized what is now called the Youth Orchestra of high school students, and I was very proud that this orchestra became a group with which I could perform also the *Carmina Burana*—we performed that with the high school orchestra and with the high school chorus, and we performed also with this group and high school chorus, the *Symphony of Psalms* by [Igor] Stravinsky.

DG:

Why did you come to this country?

KF:

It was due to the invasion of Austria by Adolf Hitler, came to this country in 1938; I came to Albuquerque in 1942.

DG:

When you left New York, did you know anything about Albuquerque, I mean—

KF:

No.

DG:

—it was just a complete accident that you ended up here?

KF:

Yes, yes. I had intended to go to the west coast, places which I had in mind without knowing actually what they were like, but my wife knew it. She's American, and she had more experience than I had. Places which we were considering were Berkeley, or going to Oregon, going to Washington State to Seattle, and when we came to Wyoming, people told us that there was great dangers, it was in 1942, there was great dangers that the west coast would be bombarded by the Japanese. My wife was pregnant, and we had to stop our trip, and we decided then to change our route and to go to the Southwest—my wife had a relative in Taos, and I remember we came to Taos, and my wife asked her aunt whether there wasn't a university in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and she said, "Yes there's a university, but what can you do in Albuquerque?" since there was no music life in Albuquerque. The Civic Symphony Orchestra existed, but it was a group which was much, much worse than most of our high school orchestras now. And I came to Albuquerque and I tried to get a job as a German teacher, and I couldn't find a job, need a German teacher. Before I came to New Mexico, I had visited the University of Colorado in Boulder. I loved Boulder, would have loved to stay in Boulder. I loved this country, but the dean wasn't interested, he wasn't even interested in whether I play the saxophone or the [inaudible

30:48]. And so I went on. Then I heard, I was told at the university that a piano teacher was needed at a school in Albuquerque, at the Tom Fritz [?] School of Music, and so I went to Tom Fritz [?] School of Music, and Mr. Tom Fritz [?], the owner of the school told me that only his wife could engage me but she was sick, she had a tonsillectomy, and I knew that I had to leave on the next morning if I wouldn't find a job here because my wife was expecting a baby, I had to start. And so I told him that, and just in this moment, there was a teacher who had a master class at the school came out, Mr. Coors [?], and he could read my credentials, which were written in another language. And as he afterward told me, he suggested to Mr. Tom Fritz [?] to engage me, which he did, and he promised me various jobs and he was very, very kind. And he did all he could so that I would make enough money to stay in Albuquerque, and I was organist at one of the churches in Albuquerque, and I was also asked to teach as part-time instructor at the University of New Mexico, and finally I thought that I would stay in Albuquerque only for one year, but as it happened, I am now in Albuquerque for twenty-six years.

DG:

Was you father a musician or—?

KF:

No, but he was very much interested in music, and so my mother who plays the piano quite well, my father was singing, enjoyed singing, a musician in this family was the brother of my father who was a well-known singer and was teacher and was owner of two theatres in Berlin and whose first wife was a very outstanding dramatic soprano, she was singing in Pierrot, Brünnhilde, and Isolde in Munich at the Prinzregententheater [**Prince Regent Theatre**], won her parts, and as a matter of fact, she was the first Elektra in Berlin, a woman by the name of Tilla Plashina [?], and my uncle suggested that I would become a musician was how it started.

DG:

Have you ever wished to go back to Vienna?

KF:

I could not imagine that I would feel happy to leave this country for good. I could not imagine that I could live anywhere else. I would not mind to—or actually I did go back to Vienna twice I think or three times for a short while, and it was quite nice, but I couldn't leave this country. This country has given me very, very much, and I had often very hard times, was often very frustrated, but I'm most, most grateful that I found here refuge, most grateful for what the country offered me. I think there are very few people who came to this country who wanted to go back. I don't know anybody.

End of Recording