

INCITE PROJECT
The Reminiscences of
Emanuel Ax

Columbia Center for Oral History
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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Interviewee Full Name conducted by Gerry Albarelli on October 29, 2019. This interview is part of the INCITE Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

3PM

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Emanuel Ax

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Gerry Albarelli

Date: October 29, 2019

Q: I'm just going to say this is Gerry Albarelli interviewing Manny, or Emanuel Ax. And today's date is October 29. So, we are in recorded mode.

Ax: [00:00:21] Yes, got it. Okay

Q: All right, so the introduction is already there. So, why don't you just start by telling me about your early life? I know you were born in Poland. And just a story or two to sort of—because we put it on a timeline. And we can leap—fast forward.

Ax: [00:00:37] All right. I was born in a city which is now called Lviv, in the Ukraine. When I was born it was the Soviet Union. My father is from the same city from Austria, my mother is from the same city from Poland. So, we're actually from three different countries, and it's now a fourth country. And we moved from there to Warsaw when I was seven. We moved from Warsaw to Winnipeg, Canada, when I was ten. We came to New York when I was twelve, and I haven't moved since.

Q: Okay. Just any, talk a little bit about music, and your childhood. Your father, and some—

Ax: [00:01:25] My father was someone who loved music very much. Was an amateur singer, basically. And I started studying at the age of seven or so, but just like most kids do, study music, especially in the Soviet Union everybody did a little bit. And we had a little piano in the house. I think a hand-me-down from somebody. And I liked it, stuck to it.

Q: Let's talk about Avery Fisher, and the Avery Fisher Prize, and grant, and so on, your first interaction I think with Avery Fisher.

Ax: [00:02:09] With Avery? Oh gosh. That would have been probably after I was at [The] Julliard [School] already. Because I studied at Julliard, I studied chamber music while I was a student there with a remarkable and wonderful violinist named Felix Galimir, G-A-L-I-M-I-R. He had three sisters, they had a quartet together before the Second World War in Austria. And they premiered I believe the [Alban] Berg *Lyric Suite*, and also I believe they premiered, or did the first Austrian performance of the [Béla] Bartók *6 Quartet*. So, very illustrious career, a friend of [Arnold] Schonberg, a friend of Berg I guess from before the war. The whole Second Viennese School he was very involved with those people.

I was about twelve or thirteen when I started at Julliard in the pre-college division, the Saturday program, for kids who were studying and not in college. And I wanted to do chamber music. He didn't find the violinist for me. He couldn't find anybody, there wasn't anybody available. So, he actually wound up playing at lessons with me. And I played through a lot of the Beethoven sonatas, and Mozart sonatas with him. It was very inspiring, and he was a great, great teacher. He knew Avery very well. And later on in the '70s, I guess it would have been '71, '72 when Yo-Yo

and I already had met. Avery used to have evenings at his house at 1185 Park Avenue. He had a beautiful piano, and he would invite some friends, and he would have various young people sometimes combined with old people just reading some chamber music. And a couple of times Felix Galimir, and Yo-Yo, and I, and a couple of other people played quartets and quintets there. And we always got served—this was Felix’s. He had been there for a long time, he had gone often. And he said, “I will make you a bet that we’re going to have chicken curry for dinner.” I said, “How do you know?” And we always had chicken curry, which was incredibly delicious. But it’s true, every time it was the same menu [Laughs]. It was wonderful.

So, that’s how I first met him. And it was fascinating to talk to him because he of course had started Fisher Electronics. So, he was very knowledgeable, aside from having played the violin, and studied the violin for many years, he also was very knowledgeable about acoustics. He talked a lot about speakers, about the right way things should sound, about what a hall should do. So these were all things that he was fascinated by, and it’s no accident that he got involved with the Hall of course. And with many other developments in the audio field. And I guess then that must have been six or seven years before I actually was involved with the Prize.

Q: Maybe I’ll ask you to back up just a little bit because there is so much that you just said that I kind of want to hear a little bit more about. Being so young, and studying the Saturday Program at Julliard, and then meeting Yo-Yo. Cause I asked him about you.

Ax: [00:06:21] Yes, we met when I think I must have been nineteen or so. Nineteen or twenty, and he would have been fifteen, studying with Leonard Rose, who I kind of worked for. One of

the ways if you were a pianist at Julliard, a student at the school, which by then I was, one of the ways to get money to get spending money or any kind of, you know, to make some money on the side, one of the job—you could work for a violin teacher, or a cello teacher by the hour accompanying lessons. And so, I worked for Dorothy DeLay, and for Leonard Rose. And Leonard Rose was a very kind wonderful man, I thought. [He] certainly was to me. And he would tell me between lessons, he would say, “I have this remarkable boy, remarkable, he’s thirteen now or something like that.” So, I would have been, I don’t know, seventeen. “Wonderful, wonderful, Yo-Yo Ma is his name.” I didn’t believe him. I thought he was joking. Because at the time, there were very few Asian students at Julliard. It wasn’t like now. There weren’t these same connections where the world was so small. And no one was named Yo-Yo. That was crazy.

So, I thought it was just a little joke of his. And then I think, I guess he was—just before I met him, we saw at the Little Carnegie Hall, which is called the Carnegie Recital Hall, which is now Weill Hall, an announcement: “Yo-Yo Ma, Debut Recital”. I thought, no, this is real [Laughs] And I went to the recital. It was one of my first dates with my wife. And it was unforgettable. A truly—well for me a life-changing experience [Laughs]. And from then on, I had always hoped that I would meet him, have some contact with him, and we’ve been playing together for forty-seven years now. So, it worked out I guess [Laughs]. But that was my initial introduction to Yo-Yo. So, I knew him long before either of us met Avery, I think.

Q: So, you had some experiences, I mean, quite a few together with Avery, right?

Ax: [00:09:02] Oh, yes, yes. I was at his house oh, at least twenty times, twenty-five times over the years. Yes, sure. And he even, I think he [Laughs] more or less forced Yo-Yo and me to join the Century Association. I think they were looking for more musicians. And he was quite active there. And so, he was, “Oh, you’ve got to join, you’ve got join.” So, we both wound up joining. But this would have been already in ’80, or ’81, something like that.

Q: I heard a little bit about that from Yo-Yo’s point of view. Maybe you could describe it.

Ax: [00:09:47] From Century?

Q: Yes.

Ax: [00:09:48] Well, I’m ashamed to say I haven’t been there in years. Just terrible. It’s a wonderful place, but I get home from a lot of traveling, and I just want to sit at home basically. So, I’m ashamed I haven’t been for a long time. Yo-Yo’s probably been much more often than me. But, you see all kinds of people there. First of all, the building is fabulous. It’s an incredible—I’m sure you’ve been. You’ve probably seen it. It’s incredibly beautiful. And Stanford White I think was the designer. I don’t know if he was shot there or someplace else. But he was shot in one of his buildings by a jealous husband.

Q: The Thaw case.

Ax: [00:10:40] Yes. And I don't remember whether it was the Century or not [Laughs]. And I saw various people there. Once Avery, we had lunch there, the two of us, and he pointed out there was a very elderly man who was walking out of the restaurant. And he said, "Do you know the law firm Webster and Sheffield?" Which was, I guess, one of the very first major law firms in New York. That's Mr. Webster. And I think he was maybe twenty years old than Avery at the time. So, we saw *that*. But we also see a lot of young people there. Now there's a—the newest member that I know is a lady named Kelly Hall-Tompkins who does something called Music Kitchen [—Food for the Soul]. Fabulous lady. She used to play in the New Jersey Symphony. She does Fiddler on the Roof, she's in the orchestra, she plays the solos. And Music Kitchen is an organization that does stuff for shelters, women's shelters. So, I've done a number of concerts for her with that. She's a remarkable lady, and she's a member now. There are all sorts.

Anyways, that was our Century Association connection. And other than that, I guess, I saw Avery of course at Fisher Hall many, many times. I played there very frequently, and he came to all the concerts. And that was very nice.

Q: Talk about a memorable evening, I guess, at Avery and Janet's, and maybe talk a little bit about Janet. I asked Yo-Yo yesterday about dinner rolls. Somebody said there was a dinner, you and Yo-Yo were throwing dinner rolls at each other.

Ax: [00:12:47] Yes, we misbehaved a lot.

Q: So, fun stories like that.

Ax: [00:12:50] Well, just, you know, I think when we do these chamber music evenings, it was often several generations. So, you'd have someone like Felix Galimir, who was by then seventy-five. We would have been in our twenties. And Felix was a great mainstay of Marlboro [Music Festival]. I don't know if you know that festival. He was one of the original people at Marlboro from the fifties. And we all went, I went there, Yo-Yo went there, a lot of musicians went there. And they had kind of a habit that I think Rudolf Serkin actually started, of throwing napkins, you know, from one table to the other sort of being funny. And I think some time it had graduated to maybe dinner rolls. I think a couple of times we were the cut-ups, so we decided to transplant Marlboro to Avery's apartment.

He didn't seem to mind. He was okay with that. He was—I think he had a terrific sense of humor actually. He found a lot of things funny. And he liked puncturing balloons. He liked when people were a little pompous, and a little full of themselves. He liked, we played with a conductor who's now long gone, Erich Leinsdorf, a very big name with the Philharmonic and so forth, and a very impressive conductor. Very great German maestro. But he could be quite stentorian, and pompous [Laughs]. And I would see sometimes after a concert Avery would come and see us, "Erich, it's so wonderful how an orchestra with you always ends together." You know, that kind of thing. It was always just puncture the balloon a little bit. Yes, great sense of humor.

He and Janet were I think a very powerful couple. Powerful not—just in the sense of profile. First of all, if you saw them, I think without knowing anything, without knowing who he was, or who she was, I think your head would turn, and say [Grunts], these people are, there's a kind of presence there. I don't know, probably the way Leonard Bernstein would have been, a hundred

times of that, more than anybody. But I think Avery and Janet both had some of that. They were very dramatic and good-looking people. Tall. And it was quite a sight to see them at Avery Fisher Hall. I think he used to like to say “Avery Fisher Hall”. He didn’t really like to say Fisher Hall. He liked the full name, you know [Laughs]. I think he deeply loved music really very, very much. It wasn’t so much only about acoustics, it wasn’t so much only about the hall, and his name, and so forth, I think he just loved listening to music. That’s a good thing, you know [Laughter]. Not everyone’s like that. Very often you like music, but you like things around it as well. I don’t think he cared so much. Yes, he liked that part of it, but he liked music very, very much.

What else can I tell you about? Well, Janet, of course, we saw Janet many times after Avery passed away also. She was very active in a lot of places. I think Yo-Yo was very connected to her with the Lotos Club [New York City], I believe. And she was involved with a lot of things in New York, as well as the hall. The kids were—I don’t know any of them very well, but I’ve seen them for a long time over the years. And I guess I’m involved to some degree with Chip [Charles Fisher] with the Avery Fisher Program. And he’s starting up something new now. I think he’s going to be doing—he’s got a foundation that is going to work with elementary schools. And I’ll probably be involved with some of that.

Q: Let’s stay in the—I mean, I would like for you to tell stories about Janet, including stories after Avery passed away, but let’s just stick with Avery for a minute. Because I’m sure that you have so many stories about him.

Ax: [00:18:22] I don't know that there's so much I can tell you. One of the great events in his life as connected to the hall, and the program, was his eightieth birthday. They had had, I think they had had seven winners by then of the Avery Fisher Prize. And this was I think before the career grants. This was only—there was Lynn Harrell, Murray Perahia, Yo-Yo, me, I believe Elmar Oliveira, and Horacio Gutiérrez. And then the seventh one was going to happen on his eightieth birthday, and that was Dick Stoltzman. And they organized a concert where all seven of us would do something. Sorry, it wasn't Horacio then. I think it was Richard Goode. My mistake. I'm sorry. But I remember the program very well, because I heard some things that were so fabulous. Yo-Yo and I played together, we played the [Sergei V.] Rachmaninoff *Sonata*. But Murray played with Richard Goode, *Two Pianos*, the Brahms-Haydn variations. And with Lynn some Beethoven variations on a Mozart theme. I think Richard and Dick played some [Robert] Schumann. I think Elmar and Richard played something. So, it was kind of a mixed bag.

But it was a really special concert with all of us. And I think Avery was deliriously happy, because he really felt that he was leaving a kind of musicians legacy. Not only the building, but that there were going to be people who would influence other people. I think maybe that's when the career grant started. I could be wrong, but maybe around that time. And so, it was a very special event. And I think that's also the time when the prize changed its focus a little bit. Because when the prize was starting, I think they were identifying people who had already had a certain amount of success, but who were young, and who could continue in that way. So, the prize was not so much money, but it involved performances with every organization in Lincoln Center. So, when I got the prize, I think it was five thousand dollars, which at that time for us

was a lot. Especially for my wife and me, that was a lot of money. But there were concerts within New York Philharmonic, a whole series of concerts for Great Performers at Lincoln Center, some things with the Chamber Music Society, some things with Mostly Mozart. So that was the design of the Prize. Same way for Yo-Yo the year before. And I think that's how it went.

And then when the career grants started, I think they decided that the prize would be really a matter of waiting for older people. So, that was kind of a transformation. But it's still, you know, it's an incredible honor to be on that list with all these fabulous musicians.

Q: Tell me your memories of being told that you had been awarded the Prize. Take me through that.

Ax: [00:22:34] Well, nobody—it was not a competition in any way. You didn't know who was talking about it, and who was involved, and so forth. There was a committee, but nobody knew who was on it basically. And various people listened, I suppose, people from New York Philharmonic who listened, people from—well Bill [William W.] Lockwood [Jr.] from the Great Performers, various musicians from—various distinguished musicians probably, I suppose, older people that Avery had asked, [Pierre L.J.] Boulez maybe, I don't know. I actually don't know quite honestly. So, there was a series of recommendations. And I was home, we had just, we had had a kid about four months earlier, our son, maybe six months earlier. And I was home, and we got a call from a man named Mark Schubart, who was then I guess he was the—he was high up in Lincoln Center. I'm sorry, I'm hopeless with hierarchy. He was not the top man, but maybe the second or something [Laughs]. But I knew him because he had been the Dean at Julliard. So I

knew the name. Never had any contact with him, thank God. Because it would probably have been disciplinary action or something.

But he called, and he said, “I would just like to tell you that you have won, or have gotten, the Avery Fisher Prize.” And it was, you know, it was incredible surprise first of all, and very exciting. It was a very big, *very* big deal for me. I know Yo-Yo had gotten it the year before, and of course, he would get something like that. But it was a big deal. I guess I hung up and told my wife [Laughs]. There was some interview, and I said something silly like how did you react, and I said, “Oh, I was so stunned I almost dropped the baby.” Or something like that. It was a silly thing. But that was my reaction. And then the following year I did a number of these concerts. Which also involved Yo-Yo actually. I put together some programs for this Great Performers series at Tully Hall. Excuse me, at Alice Tully Hall. Because she also was a great stickler for saying it’s always Alice Tully Hall. She was a remarkable lady. You would never have known her.

Q: No, you should talk about her for a minute.

Ax: [00:25:46] She was an amazing lady. She knew everybody. She lived in Paris in the ’30s. I believe she was a great beauty. She studied voice in France, and she knew everybody. She knew all the musicians in Paris. She knew [Juliette] Nadia Boulanger very well. She probably—she may well have met [Joseph Maurice] Ravel. You know, she moved in those circles. She was very much like, do you remember the name Rosalind [Solomon]—see, I’m losing it. An artist and art lecturer. Isn’t this frightful?

Q: We can look it up.

Ax: [00:26:36] I will eventually remember and call you. But she did a lot of stuff at the Met Museum [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. She did a whole series of lectures there. You don't remember the name?

Q: It's not ringing a bell yet, no.

Ax: [00:26:49] Okay, I can probably look it up. Anyway, not now anyway. It's fine. She knew everyone, and she funded this hall. One of the reasons, I don't know if you've been to Tully Hall at all.

Q: Yes.

Ax: [00:27:12] Do you notice how comfortable the seats are? She had a great friend who was six feet, seven [inches], and she asked him to say how much room he needed. So, that's why the rows are very comfortable, very spacious. It's a large hall that seats a thousand. So, there's no squeeze. And I used to play concerts at that hall. Again, that's where Great Performers at Lincoln Center did a number of their concerts. And so, I did a series of three. And I think Yo-Yo participated in two of them. So, it was all very much a family. Yes, so that was my Avery Fisher Prize story. I guess they used to do the announcement live on WQXR, and you had to actually play, and it was very nerve wracking. You'd have to play a couple of pieces at this thing, there

were all kinds of people there, and it was scary. Now they don't make you play anymore, they just announce it. Which is nice.

Q: Do you remember that? The playing on WQXR?

Ax: [00:28:33] Yes.

Q: Bob [Robert] Sherman?

Ax: [00:28:36] Bob Sherman was the host. Yes, I did a lot of shows with Bob Sherman. He let me read some of the ads. I always wanted to do those, and he let me do that. But he was the host. And it was at Avery Fisher Hall in one of the rooms. And there were a bunch of invited people. Nice occasion.

Q: Tell other stories. I mean, a story maybe that would illustrate Janet's character if you can think of one.

Ax: [00:29:16] I'm trying to think. I think she was very, well, to us personally, to Yoko and me personally, she was incredibly generous. We moved into an apartment. We changed apartments when I guess it was probably ten years or so, or fifteen years after we had met the Fishers. And they gave us housewarming gifts of two photographs by a Polish photographer named Roman Vishniac. So, these are absolute treasures signed by him. Very generous of them. Much more than needed to be done. And we still have some wonderful glasses that she gave us when we

moved into our first apartment. She was very—I think in the last years, I think Avery slowed down a bit after his eighty-fifth birthday. You could notice a big change. And until he was eighty-five I think he was incredibly vigorous, and very much on top of things. And probably, if I had to guess, between the two of them, sort of ruled the roost. He was the, we'll do this, we'll do this, we'll do this. And then when he faded a bit, just got—not that he lost it or anything. He was just slower, quieter, and not as positive. I think she very much took over. And she became the positive one.

And so, all of the sudden you saw that side of her character coming out. I would say not at all in a bad way, not that she made life difficult for anybody, but all of the sudden she was like Avery used to be. That same kind of positive and active attitude. And I think she became much more active in various places like the—she was in a club called the Cosmopolitan Club, and also the Lotos Club. She became much more active in the, I guess the side of the clubs that were doing philanthropy. I think she became much more involved, and more positive about that side of things. And maybe with the family a bit too. I think maybe a bit more involved with Chip. I'm not entirely sure. But she stayed very active.

And then unfortunately I think she wound up suffering from Alzheimer's, I think. And she would have been already in her late eighties. So, at that age it's actually hard to know whether it's one thing or another. It could be dementia, it could be Alzheimer's. It doesn't matter to the person, or to her family, it doesn't matter what you call it. But I think she didn't know it. So, she wasn't unhappy about it, I don't think. I think she still was okay. And that's a good thing. If you suffer from something like that, but you don't know it, it's okay for you at least. I think she didn't have,

as far as I know, these panic attacks and so forth. But that was my impression. Again, I think Yo-Yo and Jill knew her a lot better than I did. They were much more involved in those things, I think. That's my impression. Yo-Yo generally knows much more than I do about *most* things [Laughter]. Except things like, you know, looking at scores and finding dots or dashes. I tend to do more of that. But as far as the world is concerned, I think he's much more—

Q: What's interesting is he said to me yesterday that you're the verbal one.

Ax: [00:34:06] Oh no. He's very, very—he's my goodness.

Q: But he's, he'll tell you everything, you'll have a good time.

Ax: [00:34:15] [laughs] Well, I think I like to talk. But I'm certainly not more verbal than him, and he has much more to say.

Q: Why don't I just ask you to say a little bit about Avery's death, I mean, what you remember of that? Or the period leading up to it.

Ax: [00:34:39] I would say I didn't directly know much about it. My general feeling was that as he got weaker and weaker, it was probably the time. It's hard to say, you know. I'm seventy now, so, I'm starting to have to think about those things. I think everyone wishes, or if you start to think about it, what you really wish is to have something, to have a life like George Schulte. Because George Schulte, my impression is, I didn't know him especially, but my friend Murray

Perahia knew him very well. He conducted every piece he wanted to, he met everybody he wanted to, he had every possible success in life that he wanted. Everything was perfect. He wrote his book, he finished it, sent it off to the publishers when he was eighty-five, and the next day he didn't wake up. That, I think, everyone wishes for that. You know? I don't think Avery had it, I don't think Janet had it.

My feeling is that it came probably—it was time. I don't know how to—I don't mean that in a cruel way at all. No. But I think when I saw him he really was—you know, and he was very unhappy about it. He did not, as far as I know, have issues with mental health. But he did have issues with walking, with a lot of things, and I think he was very unhappy about it. He had been such a vigorous man. You never knew him probably.

Q: No.

Ax: [00:36:57] He was incredibly—he really was, as I said, when these two people walked into a room, and this was they were in their eighties, you just felt wow, this is real. And that he lost. And I think he was very unhappy about it. He knew that he lost it. And he hated it. That was my impression. But it's not, I certainly wasn't there every day or anything like that. I had friends whom I saw, whom I knew very well, who I saw very frequently just before they died. He was not one of them.

Q: What about the memorial service for him?

Ax: [00:37:52] I wasn't there. Was Yo-Yo there? I don't know.

Q: He was.

Ax: [00:38:00] I was not there.

Q: Say something about Mary Lou [Falcone], because I interviewed Mary Lou and all these interviews overlap in interesting ways.

Ax: [00:38:07] Well, Mary Lou is someone I know purely socially. I've never dealt—I've never had a P.R. person. It's never been part of my life. She's a delightful lady. I've met her with other people a lot. And of course, we are incredible opera buffs, and she worked for Renée Fleming for a long time. That was like, you know. And she knows a lot of opera people. I think she's had lots of contact with that. With the Met I guess. I don't know how she got started with the program. But I think it must have been through Avery. I'm sure they just hit it off personally. These things are—well, why wouldn't they? Both lovely people. I don't know if he had any feeling about the whole idea of having a P.R. person. But I think he wanted someone to keep the program going, and to have it, well, to have it out there I guess. To have people aware of it. And I think he felt that Mary Lou was the person. And I guess she has been. She's been great for the career grants, and just generally. It's gone very well I think.

Q: Yes, it is really interesting to hear you talk about how the focus of the prize shifted. So maybe you could say more about that, and your involvement.

Ax: [00:40:07] Well, simply that I think before I was ever on the committee. I think, for example, one of the people that they chose, I think the first great change was when André Watts got the Avery Fisher Prize. Now André Watts was someone who I grew up worshipping basically. He was seventeen when I was fifteen, or something like that. And he played with Bernstein and the Philharmonic. And of course, had a major, major, major career starting then, and all the way through. So, when André Watts got the prize it was obviously not someone who was going to be hired by the New York Philharmonic because he got the Avery Fisher Prize. As it happens, I also played with them once before I got the prize. The point was, when André Watts got it you said, okay, so the prize now is something that you get like, if you want to say, like the [Ernst Von] Siemens [Music] Prize in Europe. Something that you get for a lifetime of accomplishment, and given to someone who's an important influence in the music profession. And that's André.

And of course, after Andre, people like Garrick [O.] Ohlsson, who got it a number of years after Yo-Yo and I did. So, again, Garrick Ohlsson was someone who was by then a major figure. And I think that was the change. And it makes a lot of sense because of course the career grants, when we got the prize it didn't exist, the career grants were not part of the program, it was strictly the prize. It seems to have worked out very well. And it's nice to have a number of career grants. That's one of the things I think is wonderful about the program, the fact that it's not just one person every year or every two years, because the level of talent today is so phenomenal that you want to be able to spread it a bit, and to have a number of people considered and get a push. And

of course, the career grant now is in terms of money about five times what Yo-Yo and I got for the prize ten years ago [Laughs] Again, that's not really the point of it. But it's still nice.

Q: And your involvement, you became part of the committee, will you talk a little bit about that? Because this is really meant to sort of document behind the scenes.

Ax: [00:43:12] I think they, at some point, since I had gotten this, and Yo-Yo had as well, and we continued to be part of the music world, and to have concerts and so forth, they thought, well, we should add these people to the Executive Committee. And more important to the Recommendation Committee so that we could actually when we see people, this is someone who should go on the list for a career grant. And, of course, where we could once a name comes up, you know, so someone like Leila [B.] Josefowicz, saying yes, that's great. Yes, do that. So, it's nice to be able to say this is a wonderful choice, and this is someone who should get it. And even to put names forward. I mean, I allow myself to say, look, this is someone who should get the Avery Fisher Prize after all these years, you know, this is someone who should get it. It's nice to be able to have a little voice in it. Of course, the Recommendation Committee is very large, as it should be.

Because again, the idea being you have someone with the Boston Symphony, here's a young person, says this is someone who deserves a career grant. And then he puts the name there, he or she will put the name there. And other people might hear that person at a school, or at a small chamber concert or something like that. And when you get that kind of thing that—and of course, one of the things that the program does, which is very much part of what Véronique does,

and Mary Lou, and by extension Véronique, they will send us the names and say, look, this is somebody that's been highly recommended, can you find a way to hear them. And these days it's very easy cause you can go on YouTube, and most people who are enterprising, which they all are, you'll see something. So, it's a kind of network, and very useful. And I think being on the sort of Executive Committee, I guess there's an Executive Committee, it's nice to be able to just second ideas like yes, this person should get the Avery Fisher Prize. I feel very important when I can say that. It's not my choice, but at least I get to second it.

Q: Right. So, these days it's easy to go on YouTube. In the early days, then you would go out and listen to—

Ax: [00:46:07] Well, at the time when, if you're talking about the prize in the late '70s, I guess people had to go and listen. I guess when I played the first time with the Philharmonic, I guess whoever was there would have had a voice in saying this person should get the prize. And I played in other places. And I guess they would try to—and again, now it's a much bigger thing. Again, the prize is not something that you would need to, nobody would need to call me and say, you should hear André Watts play. Yes, it's—or the Emerson Quartet who got it. They don't need to call and say, you need to hear this quartet, they're very good. Yes, I know [Laughs]. But for the career grants it's a great thing. Yes. Very useful.

Q: Maybe talk a little bit about the name change from your point of view.

Ax: [00:47:18] You mean from Fisher to Geffen?

Q: Yes, how it's unfolded.

Ax: [00:47:21] You know, that was a difficult issue I think for the family because I think it didn't come up until Avery was gone already. And even until Janet was a little bit mentally gone. I think Yo-Yo and I were asked by some people at Lincoln Center many years, thirty years ago, would have been something like that, to see if we could sound out the Fisher family about what they could do in terms of, I think Yo-Yo and I even came up with the idea of what if they had they had the Avery Fisher Auditorium in whatever hall, the way they did at Carnegie, for example. Now they have the Isaac Stern Auditorium at Carnegie Hall. I think our idea came a lot early—you know, but to keep the name somehow because I think the family wanted to keep the name. And I remember at that time it was really a non-starter. I think we talked to Nancy, and we talked to Chip, and they just didn't want to go there. It wasn't part of their thinking at all. And I guess everyone at Lincoln Center felt they want to do something to change the sound of the hall. Because everyone complained. To this day, I have to say I'm no expert in acoustics. I don't know, so I really can't say much about it. Did Yo-Yo talk about the acoustics of the hall at all?

Q: Not much.

Ax: [00:49:11] Yes, because I never feel that I have anything to say about it. I just, I don't feel I know enough. I know that you have to adjust when you play in certain halls, but I also think you have to adjust in every hall. So, I don't know to what degree [Laughs]. It's a matter of adjusting to the hall, and to what degree you just have to do something. I couldn't say. The general

consensus is that things need to be done. I don't know how they got the change to be done, but obviously the only way to collect that kind of money, I suppose was to get a name change. I guess. It would have been wonderful if someone had said, you know what, let me give you 250 million dollars and keep [the name] Avery Fisher Hall. But I guess no one seemed to be willing to do that [Laughs].

So, the actual fact of the change, and the events around the change, I know what you know from the New York Times. That's the extent of my knowledge. And when they changed the name I gave a little speech at the name change. They asked me to say a couple of words, so I did. And I talked a little bit about how wonderful it was to have the Avery Fisher Program continue in the new hall. So, in a way, I guess that program is in some ways more important than the building. If you continue that, is it more important that the [Weiner] Musikverein in Vienna is a beautiful hall, or is it more important that [Johannes] Brahms was a member of the Musikverein? Hard to say. But I think there's something to be said for the name continuing through generations of musicians. I think that is a very important and wonderful thing. And to someone like me, who of course cares about performance more than buildings, to me it would be more important. But that's just me. Probably Liz Diller would rather talk about the building. She's a wonderful lady, by the way. Do you know her?

Q: No.

Ax: [00:52:07] Fabulous lady. That whole office is amazing. They did the 65th Street, Diller Scofidio + Renfro. Fabulous people.

Q: Well, I think that this—is there anything you feel that you’ve left out that you should say?

Ax: No, not a thing.

Q: I think you just gave me a wonderful ending.

Ax: [00:52:31] Not a thing. I wouldn’t know what to say. So, that’s fine.

Q: Yes, that’s great. That’s wonderful.

Ax: [00:52:36] All right, good. So, we didn’t need five hours, we didn’t need three hours, that’s fine.

Q: Listen, if you are willing to stay a little bit longer. If you would be willing to say, I didn’t know that, I mean, we could go for another hour.

Ax: [00:52:53] No, it’s fine [Laughs]. What do you need?

Q: One of the reasons I think we wanted originally to have

[Break in Audio]

Ax: [00:53:01] He was at Columbia [University] for a year. At a very early age. I think he was sixteen. And he started college. And I was at Columbia then. And I think he didn't want to live at home. So, he went to Harvard. I had to live at home because we were strapped. And of course, I loved being at Columbia, but I lived at home. Wonderful place. I still have friends from there.

Q: What year were you there?

Ax: [00:53:39] '66 to '70. I ran between the two schools. And Julliard moved in 1969. So, then I had run [to] Lincoln Center to 116th. In the old days it was just a walk because it was 122nd Street. And of course, I lived through the—the only reason I managed to pass my calculus course was because of the '68 riots. I did extremely well until the final. And then in the final, the final was all on integrals. And I think I got forty-eight on the final. So, I don't know that I would have passed the course [Laughs]. But the guy gave me a pass because there were no classes in the last three weeks. Crazy time.

Q: What do you remember of the '68—?

Ax: [00:54:39] Well, we were out in the Quad. There were people all over between Low [Memorial] Library and Butler Library. Huge crowds of people. And Mark [W.] Rudd and SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] occupied Low Library. Do you remember that?

Q: Yes.

Ax: [00:54:58] May of '68. And of all things, I think it must have been in the late '90s, I was playing at Tanglewood. We go there every summer. I work there and I was playing a Sunday afternoon concert. And afterwards a guy came and he said, "Do you remember Columbia in the '60s because you went there?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Well, I'm sitting on the lawn with Mark Rudd. Come over and say hi." So, that's when I met Mark Rudd. He's had an interesting life. Amazing, crazy. He teaches in New Mexico now I think at one of the universities. But you should find him, you should talk to him sometime. That was an incredible shock to meet him. Just a regular guy.

Q: Did you participate in the demonstrations?

Ax: [00:56:05] You know, not really. I was so out to lunch, and I was practicing the piano. I didn't know much. I had a friend who was very active, he was in the engineering school. A guy named Yen Chin who now works—well, he's probably retired now. But he worked for the Water Board in Seattle. That's where we met a couple of times. And just two years ago, three years ago. He was very active. And very political at the time. And so, he got me out to one of the things.

[INTERRUPTION]

That was the only time really, it was sort of a demonstration against Grayson [L.] Kirk, who at the time was the President of the university. And the other thing that I remember about that time was in '68, the spring of '68, there was at Barnard [College] they were doing a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, *Princess Ida*. I don't know if you know that piece at all. But I didn't know it of course. But they needed a rehearsal pianist. Of course, I volunteered. I wanted to meet girls at Barnard. So, I said, oh, yes, sure sure, I'd love to do it. So, I used to go there and there were

signs all over on that walk from Columbia to Barnard, all the rehearsals were at night and I would walk there. And there were all these signs, “Stop Ida”. And I thought, I didn’t know what. Institute of Defense Analyses, they were doing work at Columbia for this government thing. So, to that point I was totally confused. I didn’t know anything; Stop Ida. That was a, it was a nice time. I played some rehearsals. Didn’t meet any girls.

Q: Could we continue to sort of fill in a little bit of your autobiography? We kind of think of these as spoken autobiographies in a way?

Ax: [00:58:43] Well, not much more to say. I mean, the trips were a little bit weird I think in retrospect to go from Lviv [Ukraine] to Warsaw [Poland] when I was seven.

Q: Do you have memories?

Ax: [00:58:53] Well, of Warsaw very much. Yes, Warsaw I know, and I’ve been back. And I actually went back to Lviv for the first time last year. Long crazy story. There’s a man who wrote a book, a man named Philippe Sands. He is a human rights lawyer. He wrote a book called East West Street about his great-grandfather [who] knew two people who lived on this one street in Lviv five minutes apart called East West Street. And they both wound up being instrumental to some degree in the Nuremburg Trials. One was in the legal team for the British, and one wrote stuff for, he was at Duke University, he wrote some stuff for the Americans. A book worth reading if you have time. East West Street it’s called. I went back to Lviv. That I didn’t remember really. But we have a picture of my father and me standing in front of the Lviv Opera

House, which is a copy of the Vienna Opera House, because it was Austria-Hungary. But I have memories of Warsaw.

Q: Tell me some of your memories of Warsaw when you were a child.

Ax: [01:00:18] Well, it was for me a very nice life, perfectly fine. For my parents probably it was horrible. I didn't feel it when I was seven. The big change for me was coming at the age of ten from Warsaw to Winnipeg, Canada. Because for a ten-year old in 1960 to see tailfins on cars, to see television, to see a toaster, and these were all, it was unbelievable. The technology, it was miraculous. That I remember very well. And the language I had to learn. But at ten it was very quick. So, I managed to get back to my grade after four months or so. If you're thrown into it you learn right away. And then my father still couldn't find work in his field, which was speech and voice therapy, which is why he went looking in a big city like New York. So, that's why we wound up there when I was twelve.

Q: Tell me about that transition. Or just tell me where exactly you wound up.

Ax: [01:01:40] Well, in Winnipeg basically the job we had—or my father and my mother were hired to run a little grocery store, like a mom and pop grocery. And I helped out behind the counter sometimes. When we moved to New York, my dad still couldn't find work in his field, but he got a job while working for a kind of, I don't know what you'd call it, sort of a valet or houseman for a guy who had a beautiful apartment in the penthouse of the building directly facing Carnegie Hall. I don't know how he found that job. It was just off a bulletin board I think.

But somehow he got the job, and we lived, you know, the buildings in New York, the older ones have water towers, and under the water towers there are sometimes little apartments called servant's quarters. So, there was a two-room servant's quarter and we lived there for a couple of years, until my dad got work. And my mother and father eventually got an apartment, rented an apartment in that same building on the third floor. Which at the time, again, was affordable. Now it's probably totally unaffordable. But I lived most of my life before I got married across from Carnegie Hall. It's very nice. Nice spot.

Q: And what was New York like in those years?

Ax: [01:03:24] Some parts were dangerous. I went to public school from junior high school, seventh and eighth, ninth grade. At—very close to Lincoln Center, 77th and Columbus. And I think there's still a school there but now it's an elementary school. But it was scary. It was a tough neighborhood to go from 57th to there. The only shooting I've ever seen was on 76th Street close to that school. It was scary. Two cops. I've never seen anything like that again, but I remember that. It was a tough neighborhood. I don't mean 70, 65th or 66th. Right by Lincoln Center. When we first came to New York the only thing there was a hole in the ground for Philharmonic Hall. Because the groundbreaking was in '62. We came just at the end of '62 I think. And that's when they started digging for that building. That was a tough neighborhood. I haunted Carnegie of course. That for me was the—there was a way to get in for free on the third floor of the building next door, which was the Carnegie Recital Hall. There was always a fire door that was slightly open that would lead to the dress circle at Carnegie Hall. Which is the first

balcony. You have the balcony, and then the so-called dress circle, then the boxes. You could sneak into the dress circle. I heard a lot of concerts in the dress circle.

Q: What were some of them?

Ax: [01:05:28] I heard Rubenstein maybe at least a dozen times, maybe more. [Joseph] Horowitz I heard live at least five, six times. [Sviatoslav] Richter, [Emil] Gilels, [Rudolf] Serkin many times, [Eugene] Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, [Georg] Solti and Chicago. If you look at what went on in the '60s, the late '60s until '72, I was at most of those concerts, I would say [Laughs]. I went to pretty much—when there was a great pianist in town. Yes, a few friends and I. We haunted that place. That's where you learn. When you go to hear these people, the next morning you sit down, you try to imitate. Of course, you can't do it. But something stays. That's how you learn.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your mother. And maybe did they talk about their experiences?

Ax: [01:06:41] Not so much, no. I've met two kinds of people who survived that period. I met Elie Wiesel a number of times, who of course not only talked about, but wrote about it so much. And other people who just didn't want to discuss it. And I think my father and mother were more like that. My mother finally wound up—my son had a high school—they said you have to do a project, a senior project. He wanted to interview her about that time. And so, we have a transcript and a tape of her interviewing at the time. Not very specific, but it must have been—it's unimaginable. In fact, it's unimaginable. Even if she talks about it, it's unimaginable. And

somehow my mother lost his entire family, everybody. My father lost his wife and family. They married after the war. Yes, it was a—how people made a life after that I don't know. Well, when you read Elie Wiesel the people that survived must have been, it's like people who survived slavery. It's just unimaginable.

Q: We should probably say for the record where they were.

Ax: [01:08:18] They were in Lviv. They spent the war in Lviv. My mother was for a little while in a labor camp, not an extermination camp, but a labor camp. And then I think kind of passed, I think for women it was maybe easier. My father was hidden for two years by a priest in the city, in Lviv, he was in a basement hidden. It was a miracle that they survived one of those things. But I think you had to be probably very strong to survive. And my mother was—my father died very young. Died at sixty-four. And I think the war, and then going through the Communist Era in the '50s, that took a lot of—he was very choleric. He had a very hard life. A very hard psychic life. And physical, but very hard psychic life. He died at the age of sixty-four. My mother died at the age of almost 101. She was a tough lady. Extraordinary.

Q: Tell me an anecdote that would illustrate that?

Ax: [01:09:48] My mother?

Q: Yes.

Ax: [01:09:53] Just the way she, she first of all had a job working for someone who was not— had a lot of emotional problems. She found this job, worked with this lady every day, and still was able to come home and cook a meal. From nothing she was able to save money, don't ask me how. Eventually it all went cause we had to get a nurse for her for pretty much twenty-four hours the last couple of years. Anyway, not important. But until she was ninety-five or so, she still lived on her own, and would take the bus to our apartment, taxi never, bus or walk. We're talking 57th Street to 90th Street. And the grandchildren, always there, loved going to Carnegie. Loved it. I don't know if she liked the music so much, but loved being sort of oh, you're his mother. When Yo-Yo and I would play she'd always be in one of the boxes, just having a great time. And she was very wonderful about meeting young people, and always trying to support the—I got so many calls from her, “Can't you do something for this person, I don't know?” So, I got a lot of those calls. She was always very involved with that. She would meet a young person on the bus or something, she'd see a violin, and she would always say, oh, you play the violin, with her accent, you play violin. My son is a pianist, Ax, you know. She liked that very much. Very Jewish mother. But just very strong. I've talked enough. That's fine.

Q: It's sort of wonderful. Just a tiny bit more.

Ax: [01:12:14] Not much more to say. Not much more to tell you. Anyway, it was fine. Nice to see you.

Q: Okay, well, thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]