

AVERY FISHER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Mary Lou Falcone

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Lou Falcone conducted by Gerry Albarelli on April 2, 2019. This interview is part of the Avery Fisher 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.

ATC

Session #1

Interviewee: Mary Lou Falcone

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Gerry Albarelli

Date: April 2, 2019

Albarelli: Great. So, would you start by saying your name and tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

Falcone: [00:00:19] Okay. I'm Mary Lou Falcone, and I was born in Orange, New Jersey, in 1945, and had a pretty normal childhood until the age of nine when my father had a massive stroke that was misdiagnosed. And, although he lived, he never spoke again. And the reason I reference this is because, as a nine-year-old, I realized how important communication was. And so, it led me on a path to communicate and to be the best communicator I could be. In the early days—nine, ten, eleven years old—I discovered that I had a voice, not a speaking voice but a singing voice. And so, I would sing, and the adults in the audience would weep. And so, I realized I had something that was a little bit unique. And, I was encouraged to sing.

I was also a very good student, so I liked academics. But I found out in my high school days that I was something of an oddity in that I didn't sound like a child when I sang. I sounded like an adult. So, someone told me about the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. I'd never heard of it. But what intrigued me about it was that if you could ever get into it, which I knew was a real long shot, but that your entire education would be paid for. And needing that as something to move forward, I applied. I was seventeen. And they said I was too young, too young for the

vocal program. But, the people who had been my champions, specifically my high school music teacher, Leroy Lenox, a magnificent human being and a wonderful teacher and mentor.

And, he basically wrote back and said, “You don’t understand the history of this young woman. And, when you hear her, you’ll understand what we’re talking about. Give her a chance to at least audition.” And they did. And, came to pass that that year they were admitting two vocal students, that they had two spaces, and I was one of the two. So, at that point, when I entered, I was eighteen. And, I found out years later that nobody wanted me in the school. The voice teachers chose who they wanted. Nobody wanted me. They wanted others, but Efrem Zimbalist Sr., the father of the actor Efrem Zimbalist Jr., Efrem Zimbalist Sr. was a very famous violinist, Russian violinist, who was the director of the Curtis Institute in those days and married to its founder, Mary Louise Curtis Bok.

And, Efrem Zimbalist, I was told long after he died, said, “I want her in this school, and I want her to study with Euphemia Giannini Gregory. So, that’s how it came to pass that I got my education. Fast forward, sang. I had a wonderful time for about eight years singing. That’s how I made my living, singing and teaching and opera companies and WNET Opera Theater and lovely, lovely, lovely, wonderful forums in which to communicate. But I knew that that wasn’t enough for me. It would have been a perfect life for practically anybody else who loved to sing. But, I knew there was something else, so I kept searching. And, I was with the St. Paul Opera Company in St. Paul, Minnesota. We did summer repertory there. I was into my third season or whatever of being hired, which was all very nice.

And, I was at a cocktail party, and somebody said to me, “Well, how would you describe the image of this company?” And I said, “Well, very poor. What I would do, if I were handling the company—” and I had a litany of things which, of course, you can be such a wiseacre when you don’t have anything at stake and when it’s not your profession and you’re just cocktail chattering. Someone said to me, “Are you serious?” And I said, “No, of course not.” And then I went home. And it’s like the light bulb, proverbial light bulb, goes off over your head. And I said, my goodness, you could have a profession talking about what you love. I can do that.

So I went to the general manager and said, “Would you mind if I gave my time, my spare time—when I’m with the company I’ll take the roles, thank you very much. I appreciate it. But in my spare time, could I give you a pair of hands in the PR department so I could learn what it’s all about?” He said, “I’m coming to New York. I think I have a better idea.” We sat over dinner in November of 1973 and talked about the company and what needed to be done. At the end of a six-hour dinner, George Schaefer, the then-director of the company, looked at me and said, “I want you to be the national and international press rep for this company.”

When I got my jaw off the floor, there were two things that I had to ask. One was, Minnesota? I don’t want to live in Minnesota. I want to live in New York. That’s why I’ve just moved. “No, no problem. All the contacts are in New York. Fine. And, besides which, remember, Mary Lou, this is not a full-time job. This is a freelance job. So you’d have to get other clients to support.” Okay, got it. I said the second problem, or challenge, is I don’t know a thing about PR. And George just looked at me, and he smiled, and he said, “I have watched you repeatedly over a three-year period take challenges and thrive on challenges. Just say yes and go figure it out.”

And that was the beginning of my PR career. So, in January of 1974, I started a public relations business, and I've never looked back. So, that's forty-five years ago.

On the path, many wonderful people crossed. The first client was Frank Corsaro, the director, opera and theater. Why Frank? Because he was married to my college roommate. And, I knew him socially. I was godmother to his son. So, he trusted me, and he was my first client. And, of course, when you have somebody like Frank, other people are attracted to you, and it grew. A year later, Van Cliburn came and said, "You're my person." And, for the rest of his life, we worked together.

In 1981, I was at a concert, and it was Pinchas Zukerman. And I gave a little party in my apartment afterwards for him. Pinchas Zukerman was a client. And, one of the people that Pinchas Zukerman invited was Avery Fisher. And Avery came with his daughter, Barbara, who was visiting from Paris, and chatting—you know, how do you do, just general chatter. But on the way out, he said something about, "I really want to talk to you about the Avery Fisher Artist Program," or something akin to that. And I said, "I'd be delighted any time." And so, very shortly thereafter, I was invited to come and talk to Mark Schubart, who then ran the Avery Fisher Artist Program. He and Avery were the originators. It was Avery's idea to start this program in 1974.

And, to give of his gift to Lincoln Center, two million dollars of that gift was given to establish the Avery Fisher Artist Program. That two million was segregated and couldn't be touched by Lincoln Center for anything else. It could be invested with the entire portfolio, but it couldn't be

touched, which turns out to be a brilliant move because the Avery Fisher Artist Program always maintained its independence and its sovereignty. And Avery was a genius in this way, in setting these things up.

And so, Mark Schubart, who had been dean at Juilliard, and who had also started the education program at Lincoln Center, was appointed by Avery to be the director of this new program. So, together, they fashioned it over a six-year period until I came into the picture. And, in '81, seventh year into it, they hired me to do public relations. But, as is my kind of bent, I sort of became involved in all aspects of it, not just in promoting it but in actually helping to shape it. And, Avery was a brilliant mentor. And, in turn, he would then very often turn to me for advice. So, we had this wonderful symbiotic relationship.

He was a man of great principle. He was a man of great intelligence. He was a man of extraordinary principle. And, he loved music beyond measure. He had begun as a book designer, so it was the graphic arts that kind of drew him. And typography was something that was incredible for him. He just loved any kind of typeface or facetype, whichever way it goes. And, he then, as a book designer, became interested in stereo and figured that he could do kind of a stereo system, as was in the theaters, for his apartment. And so, he developed a system for his apartment. Friends came and saw what he was doing, asked him, well, could he do it for them.

So, somewhere on 25th Street he had a little office where he would assemble these things and do all of this. And, that became a sideline for him. And, of course, sideline became Fisher, the big electronics company, which in turn was sold to, I believe, Emerson when he retired. But he made

an empire out of a passion, and a passion for music, hearing music. He also used to have a string quartet. He played violin himself. And, he loved Friday nights. He had, I think, a fourth- or fifth-floor walkup apartment where three other players would come and join him. And, as he said, he served Lorna Doones and ginger ale. And, they would play string quartets. So, he was an amateur musician himself, never professed to be a great musician but did profess to adore the art form.

He wanted to give back. He had gotten such pleasure. He had derived such pleasure from his years of listening and being totally immersed in music that his give-back was to Lincoln Center, and specifically to the Avery Fisher Artist Program, where he could give back to young artists to give them a leg up if they had this excellence and this passion and this promise for the future. And, he could also then honor somebody who was established and who was a beacon in the world of classical music. All instrumental; voice was not his thing. He loved Broadway. His favorite musical was *Guys and Dolls*. But opera was not his thing, so singers were not where he lived. It was all instrumentalists. And that's how the program got fashioned—for instrumentalists. It has been probably called—I think, realistically, it's like the Pulitzer or the Nobel of the classical music world for instrumentalists. And I think it's become widely known in that regard.

In the very early years there was confusion about what this was called. It was called a prize. It was called a grant. It was called an award. So, what we did first was to streamline it and to actually clarify the career grant and the prize. The career grant was for young emerging talent that had excellence at its base and promise to go into the big leagues and contribute. The prize

was for someone who had established themselves and distinguished themselves and had contributed in a really significant way to the classical music world. So, those distinctions were made. Before '81, those lines were kind of blurred and went all over the place. And it wasn't distinctive. And, one of the things that I saw was that it needed clarity. So, that was the first thing, to define it in two categories and to have a very clear understanding of what each category was.

The prize money in the early days, I think, was \$25,000. It's now \$100,000. The career grants, I think, started at 2,500. They are now 25,000. So, the career grants, up to five of them are given each year. And that is yearly and has been throughout the duration of the program. And then, the prize is given as someone emerges that fits the criteria. And that could be yearly—rarely is. We've, I think, gone as many as four or five years without giving one. So, it is just really contingent on who emerges and not on any formula.

I think Avery, in his lifetime, derived enormous pleasure from this program. He sat on the advisory committee, the advisory committee in those days of one—him. And then, the executive committee was based on people from Lincoln Center as well as a few outside people—somebody from Carnegie Hall, West Coast people, et cetera—who joined the executive committee. I happily now sit on the executive committee, which makes me very, very happy. I did run the program from '81 to 2016. So, for thirty-five years I shaped with Avery and ran the program.

When he died, in 1994, my commitment became even stronger to make sure that his wishes, that his tenets, that everything he believed in stayed sovereign. And, happily, we've been able to do

that over the years. When I stepped down from the program in 2016, I had been grooming Veronique Firkusny to take over. Why Veronique? Because she worked for me at the time in my public relations company, because I saw her passion for this program, that it wasn't part of a job for her. It was part of a living, breathing entity that needed to be nurtured. And she saw that, and she did that. And she's very talented as well. So, the combination of all of that kind of fit together, I think, quite brilliantly.

Over that five-year period when I knew I was going to phase out at a certain point, and I gave her more and more responsibility, the executive committee and the Fisher family saw the wisdom in having Veronique take over, because she earned it. And that's a really wonderful thing to be able to do, to have it passed almost generationally so that the tenets of what it stands for remain steadfast. And that's the goal of all of this. For Avery, there was never interference. He was the kind of philanthropist that you dream of and rarely find. He gave generously, and he watched. He never interfered. He never ventured an opinion. I never in any meeting that I sat in heard him say, "Yes, I think that's the person you should choose," or "I've heard this young person you should pay attention to." Never, absolutely never.

He was also a person who sought advice when he needed things. I will tell one story without names, but it illustrates. I worked for an organization when I first began in public relations. And about three years into it, they determined that it wasn't working, which is fine. That's everybody's right. But they owed me several thousand dollars, or a thousand dollars, or whatever it was, when we parted ways, which they never paid. We fast-forward ten years, and the year now is 1984. And the phone rings one day, and it's Avery. And Avery says, in his very Avery

tone, “Mary Lou?” Yes, Avery? I have a question to ask you. I said, “Fine, and shoot.” He said, “What do you know about X organization?” I said, “I know that they’re great musicians. I know that they have a wonderful track record in performance, everything positive.”

He said, “Yes, but what about their fiscal responsibility”—direct question. I wouldn’t have volunteered it, but he asked. So I said, “Well, I could only tell you my story. I know there are others that parallel mine, but my story is we parted ways. They owed me money. They never paid the money they owed me. I did all my due diligence for a year. It didn’t work. I let it go, and I wrote it off. Fine. “Thank you very much,” said he. End of conversation.

The next day, the phone rang, and it was the head of this organization saying, “Don’t you realize that you have single-handedly prevented us from getting an enormous gift?” To which I said, “I’m very sorry that that’s the case. However, the next time you determine that someone is not worthy of being paid for their efforts and what they’ve earned, I hope you’ll remember this moment. Goodbye.” So, that was Avery. He trusted. He asked the right question, he got his answer, and he made his decision. That’s a pretty extraordinary person behind that. And, we remained very close friends until the day he died. And also his wife Janet was very much part of this. One can’t say Avery without saying Janet. Janet supported everything that he wanted to do in this realm. She was also a champion of the young artists. She was crazy about this program.

And, I think the two of them derived enormous pleasure from seeing the good that it did. They never spoke of it. They never bragged about it. They never did anything but champion the incredible work that was being done. Is this someone that kind of silently did things? The answer

is yes. This was not a man who called attention to himself. This was not a man who bragged about anything. It was like pulling teeth to get any history out of him because he just didn't go there. He didn't talk about it. He didn't dwell on it. It's not, well, I did this, and I did that. On the contrary. He just was. He was a presence. He walked into a room, and you felt the presence. He was a very handsome man. He was a very tall and stately man. But he was also a very practical man.

He rode the buses and the subways. And although I was very familiar with the east side subway system, I didn't know the west—sorry. I was familiar with the west side subway system. I didn't know the east side subway system. And it was Avery who taught me the east side subway system. He said, "You don't want to take cabs when you can take the subway or the buses." So, he taught me the routes on the east side—always been grateful for that because he was right. Why take cabs when you can get there so much faster via public transportation? He always carried this little canvas bag with his—not a briefcase, a leather briefcase—a little canvas bag with all his papers that he'd need for the day in that little canvas pouch. I think it had some bank initials on it or something. And, very, very modest—elegant, stately, modest.

Albarelli: I loved hearing his voice come out of you. And that tells me that there are many anecdotes you could tell. But maybe tell about your early interactions; any anecdotes that come from the early days.

Falcone: [00:24:12] In the early days, Avery and I would sit down and confer about all kinds of things to do with the program. And, one of his most joyous times was actually calling the career

grant recipients. So, we had this system worked out where he would come over to my office, and I would make the telephone call and say—do you remember the show *The Millionaire*, where there was a character by the name of John Beresford Tipton or something like that, who would call and say that he was giving somebody a million dollars? Well, that's what this felt like. It was a cold call that went to this young person, and I would say, so-and-so, this is who I am. But I'm here with someone who wishes to speak with you. Will you please hold the line for Mr. Avery Fisher?

And Avery would get on the line with his, "Hello, I'm very happy to tell you that," and the reaction on the other end of the line was always this gasp that they were talking to the real person whose name was on the hall at the time, and that this real person was telling them that they were chosen by the Avery Fisher Artist Program to be a recipient. And every single time, you could hear the blow over the phone from these young people who were receiving this call. And you could watch Avery. I had this wonderful advantageous position. I could watch Avery just lighting up, being able to give good news to somebody who was worthy of receiving this.

He was always very organized. He would have a list of what he would want to go over. He also was very thoughtful. He would write handwritten notes. He carried a fountain pen at all times. I never saw him use a ballpoint pen. It was always a fountain pen. And, he would write beautiful letters. After an occasion, after a career grant event, or after a prize event, he would write the most beautiful thank-you notes. I still have a collection of them, first of all because the penmanship was so beautiful—it was almost like calligraphy—and also because the content of these notes was so full of gratitude. And, notes like this, one doesn't get in one's career very

often. From Avery, I have a collection over a 15-year period, the life of the relationship that I had with him, that are treasures, absolute treasures.

But, I wasn't the only one for whom he did this. This was his way of life, to say thank you through a written, handwritten, mailed letter, and not happening today, but certainly he kept that tradition alive. When he would get hurt by something, he would talk it out. There was an occasion when someone actually turned down a grant, for whatever their reasons were. And, I know that hurt him very, very deeply that someone would say no thank you to something like that. I think it was ill-advised. I'm not sure whether it was the person or the manager of the person. It doesn't matter. The fact is, it was, thank you but no thank you.

And, I know that bothered him for a very, very long time. He would reference it just with being perplexed, not with any judgment, just perplexed that somebody would say no thank you to a generous thought. But, it happened only once in the entire entity of this program. But, it did happen once. He was involved in the Bobst Library down at NYU. He didn't join a lot of things. The Century Club was very much part of his life. He loved being part of that. He was a very private man. His family life was separate. He didn't really talk very much about it. He and Janet were absolutely joined in their love for music. And, they had, I think it was M1 and 3 were the seats at Avery Fisher Hall, then known as Avery Fisher Hall.

When he came to Lincoln Center, he came unsolicited with this gift. And, he came in and basically, I think the amount was 12 million or 12.5 million, whatever it was. And he just gave it to improve the acoustics of the hall, which were a passion of his also. And, as the story goes,

whoever was heading Lincoln Center at the time said, “We would like to put your name on the hall.” And his answer was, “Well, I have to make a phone call.” And he called his wife, Janet. And he said, “How would you feel about the family name being on the hall?” And she said, “Fine with me if it’s all right with you.” And that’s how the name got on the hall, Avery Fisher Hall. So, that kind of modesty—he would never ask for it. He didn’t want to be singled out, didn’t want to be fêted in any way, just wanted to see the joy that was created in people when something was given to them. That was his joy.

Anecdotes along the way? Gosh, that’s a hard one because a lot of it is personal interaction. And that’s something that I’m very private about also. I think that, talking about his family, he was very, very proud of his children. His son, Chip, was the youngest, is the youngest, of his three children. And Chip joined after Avery died. And Janet came on the advisory board of the Avery Fisher Artist Program. Chip joined as well. And then Nancy joined in—I think it was 2004 she came on board. So, the family has always had a very strong presence, not interference but just presence of being there. They care. They’re interested. They follow it. They often will suggest they’ve heard somebody and absolutely, we’ll go and hear that person.

But, it’s never been for the family to decide or strong-arm in any way. None of them have ever done that. They’ve been wonderful advisors, as the saying on the masthead goes. Avery, in the early days, with the graphics of the program, we used to actually design beautiful booklets. Now everything’s online. But in the early days, the booklets were designed, and he always had a huge part in that. The book designer never left the man, and the love for typography never left, so he

was always very much a part of that. The color scheme of blue was his favorite color because of its purity, what it signified in terms of honesty, purity, all of those things.

He owned a Stradivarius violin. I think Nancy asked me, “Why do you think he bought it, his daughter asked. And I said, “I think he bought it because it was something that he wanted to own. It’s something that he wanted to play. It wasn’t for resale value or anything like that. He wound up giving it, donating it, to the Juilliard School for young talent to be able to use a great instrument. But, for him I think it was simply, this is something that I can have, that I would like to have, that I would like to use, and that I would like to pass on, and as simple as complex as that.

I didn’t know him as a young man. I understand that he loved cars and things like that. His children can tell you more about that because I wasn’t there. I didn’t know that part of him. By the time I met him, in ’81, he would have been, what, in his seventies, in his later seventies, not so far from the age I am now. And so, what one got is, he must have been an extraordinary captain of industry in his day, because you don’t build an empire as he did without being very smart and very strong, both. I like to think that there was also a lot of benevolence in there because that’s what I knew in the later years. But I can tell you that, by the time I met him, he was a very mellow, very happy, extremely fulfilled human being. And, it was music that fulfilled him most. That was where the passion was. And he was able now, in retirement, whatever that meant, to really indulge, if you will.

For him it wasn't indulges. It was like breathing. So, for him it was part of his fabric. But he was able to do more of it. I do remember once visiting his, or their, home, Janet's and Avery's home, in Connecticut. And, he wanted to show me the original stereo system that he had built, which he still had and which he still used. And it was a very big system but pristine, absolutely pristine. Everything he did was pristine. That was the trademark, I think, of his way of walking. Why is it important to keep this memory alive and fresh and for others to be able to experience? I think in a lifetime there are very few people that one meets that truly have embraced a lifetime of hard work, great accomplishment and passion and have melded it all into a lifestyle.

And I think that's what Avery Fisher did. He worked very hard. He didn't come from a grand background. He came from a humble background. He built the grand empire. But in building it, I don't think he ever lost the memory of the fifth-floor walkup and serving Lorna Doones and ginger ale because that's all they could afford. And that's sort of nice to know that in later life, when probably he could have anything in the world he wanted, it wasn't about things. It was about helping other people. It was about sharing a passion. It was about actually—this is my thinking. I'm sure he didn't think about it. It was about setting a standard in philanthropy without strings.

And that's what I would love to have remembered about Avery Fisher, that he was a giver, but he was a giver without strings. And, in our day and age today, when you want your name on the hall, you want your name on a plaque, you want your name on a seat, that's not who this man was. This man gave in order to better something. And I love that. I love that concept. I think there are few people who have done that that I've known in my lifetime. One is Avery Fisher.

Another is Gerry Lenfest. And the third is Ann Ziff. These are three very well-off people, only one of whom is still alive—Ann Ziff—but who were givers in the truest sense of the word. They gave because it was their passion to do it, and they could do it, and they realized that, in doing so, something would be bettered.

Albarelli: Talk a little bit about Janet, if you could sort of conjure her up the way you've been conjuring up Avery.

Falcone: [00:39:12] Janet Fisher was one of the most physically beautiful women you'd ever meet, inside and out. She was once stopped on the street by Mario Testino, the photographer, who was doing a campaign for GAP. He had no idea who she was, saw this beautiful woman who, at that time, must have been in her late seventies, maybe even early eighties, and said basically, "We're doing this GAP campaign of all ages. Would you be part of it?" And she became part of it because Janet was game for anything that was intriguing. She was a life partner. She had gone to Goucher College in Maryland. She was very close to the college and very generous to them.

She had met a woman who became her lifelong friend, Delia Gottlieb, at Goucher. And they remained friends for life. Delia married a photographer who was very famous for his jazz photography and had an interesting life. And Janet and Avery married, and they had an interesting life, very different lives, but they were always close. So that tells you something about Janet as a friend. And Janet was a very generous spirit also. She was always prone to giving compliments to people. She didn't stint on anything if she saw something she liked. She

was very outspoken also. If she liked it, you knew it. If she didn't like it, you also knew it. But she was vivacious, and she was a partner to Avery in every respect. I think they had a very happy marriage. I think they had a very fulfilled marriage. I think that, in their later years, you rarely saw them apart. You always saw them together. They supported each other.

Janet loved gardening. She was an avid gardener. And so, her home in Connecticut was a treasure for her because she could garden. She could have her hands in the soil. She loved jewelry. I remember a particular ring that I had that she adored and just wanted to know where she could get one just like it, that kind of thing. She sparkled. She just sparkled. She had beautiful white hair and just this gorgeous face. And, she had some health issues that she'd battled valiantly and stoically and didn't let them stop her for one minute. She just went right through them. Let's deal and come out the other side. And indeed that's what she did, which I always admired. I never knew what was going on until after the fact. She was a sharer in many ways, but when it came to something that was an adversity, it was a private thing for her.

She was very proud of Avery. You could see it on her face. She just glowed. She glowed with what he did and how he did it. I think she was thrilled to be a part of it, and he'd always included her in everything, which is why she then joined the advisory committee after he died, because it was a continuation of what he loved and what she loved, too. She loved the young artists. Among their favorites who would perform in their home were Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma. They remained very close to the Fishers throughout their entire lives. When Avery was memorialized at Avery Fisher Hall, when he died at age ninety-four—no, sorry, it was 1994. He was, I think,

eighty-seven. Yo-Yo and Manny played a Rachmaninoff duo, a sonata, which was a favorite of Avery's.

So, paying homage was a two-way street. Avery paid homage to them with his love of what they did. They paid homage to him by the ultimate homage of actually respecting and playing at his memorial. But they were guests in his home and played there many, many times, as did many other artists. But those two were particular favorites and particular friends. They weren't just wonderful musicians with a mutual respect. They were genuine friends to the Fishers.

Albarelli: Can you remember or think of any anecdotes having to do with the way they interacted, Yo-Yo Ma and the Fishers?

Falcone: [00:44:33] Yes. There was a dinner for Avery's—gosh, it must have been eightieth birthday, at Avery Fisher Hall. So, for his eightieth birthday, we determined that we would announce the prize. We'd do a special concert that Bill Lockwood, who was heading the Great Performances division of Lincoln Center at the time, and did presentations, decided that, yes, we could do this presentation of all of the Avery Fisher Prize recipients. And I believe at the time there were nine of them. And this would be now the tenth one. And the person who was announced that day was Richard Stoltzman, the clarinetist, from the stage. But there was a wonderful celebration of every single prize recipient coming to play for this occasion. And, at the end, all of them coming on with a special Happy Birthday salute, and the announcement of the prize.

And then afterwards there was a dinner, a very small dinner, in the hall, up in one of the rooms, one of the boardrooms, I think it was. And, so Yo-Yo and Manny, of course, were there, as was everyone else. Yo-Yo and Manny felt so free and so—I guess just the word “free” says it all—that somewhere along the line, they wanted each other’s attention. And they began throwing dinner rolls at each other. Avery and Janet, you’d think that they would sort of go—no. On the contrary, they thought it was hysterical. They thought it was such fun that these guys were so free and so relaxed that they could just let their hair down and decide to communicate with each other tossing dinner rolls. That’s the kind of ease that the Fishers generated with people. They weren’t stuffy. They weren’t formal, although there was an air of appropriateness, but I wouldn’t say formality.

Their dining room, for instance, the furniture was very specifically beautifully carved. I don’t know where it came from, but there was a specific artisan who obviously carved the furniture. This was very important, a very large dining room table, but cozy in its grandeur because it was a big room and it was a big table. But it never felt that way. It always felt like you went there for lunch, you’d sit down, and it was a very lovely lunch that was very easy and flowing, not formal.

Albarelli: Say more about their appropriateness. What do you mean by that?

Falcone: [00:47:39] The Fishers were appropriate in that they didn’t interfere with things. They saw what was going on. They contributed in the way that they could contribute best, whether it was by their presence at something which would enhance the occasion, whether it was philanthropic, which would enhance the situation. I think that even in being outspoken, because

Janet was very outspoken, it was always with the intent of a positive outcome. It wasn't with the intent of hurting or putting someone down. That was never the case. It was always open, free, honest, appropriate. That's the way I saw it.

Albarelli: I'm glad you mentioned her outspokenness because I was going to ask you to give some examples of that.

Falcone: [00:48:55] Yeah. Gosh, nothing comes to mind about how Janet was outspoken. Just, if she felt it, she said it. I can't remember any remark ever being cruel or in bad taste. But if she didn't like something, you knew it. Flowers in particular, we go back to flowers because I was always very careful about the flowers that we would choose for the events that we ran. We were sort of a one-person shop, if you will, with my office, in that in the old days, meaning '81 to 2016, we did all the publicity. We did all the notification of the artists. We did all the corralling of the artists. We put the programs together. We did the flowers. We got the caterers, chose exactly what kind of flowers we wanted because that was so important to Janet, to have beautiful flowers. And so, it was very meticulously handled. Attention to detail was primary. And that Janet appreciated always.

She would always take flowers home with her, especially when she loved them, which was happily, I can say, most of the time. Those were very special occasions for her. Let's see.

Outspokenness, if something wasn't up to par, didn't hit the mark, I think she would have no problem letting you know it but in a way that was constructive, always constructive. Avery

didn't comment on things in the way Janet did. Janet was kind of the more ebullient. Avery was the more reserved of the two.

Albarelli: And did you socialize with them?

Falcone: [00:51:17] Yes. Did I socialize? Yes and no. Yes to go to concerts. I remember a particular evening where it was a big event, and I was having a little bit of difficulty. I was running the event, and there were some sharp edges, let's say, that were involved. And Avery and Janet were guests at this event. And they recognized. They must have sensed that I was having a little bit of problem with certain areas. They embraced me and said simply, "Come sit with us. We want you to be with us." It was the nicest way of saying we see what's going on. We see that there are some prickly things here. And, we're going to be protective of you, our friend. I considered them both friends. I think they considered me a friend. To Avery, I was a friend. I was an advisor. I was a person who worked with him and learned so much from him.

He once said to me—we were dealing with a particularly difficult situation. And he said, "Mary Lou"—that's the way he would address. He would say, "Keep notes. Always keep a notebook of what was said, who said it, the date, et cetera. You may never use it, and that's fine. Or you may need it. And you'll never be able to remember the detailing if you don't jot it down immediately." To this day, I do that. I have countless notebooks of thorny situations which will probably never see the light of day and probably never should. But, it's there in case of necessity. And so, he was a mentor. I would say that unequivocally. He was a mentor, and I was able to reciprocate by being a confidant, which is a very wonderful position to have been in.

Janet always respected the relationship that Avery and I had. She understood it. She understood the complexity of it. She understood, I think, the need that he had for that relationship. It was completely platonic, which I think is important to say because sometimes in these situations people get too close for all the wrong reasons. That wasn't the case. She knew it. She knew that this was a real friendship. And she respected it. She honored it. And she also stated it, how grateful she was that he had a friend that he could trust in this way—pretty nice from both of them. And that's why I treasure both of their friendships completely.

Albarelli: I guess I would like to ask you to go back to the early days. You just mentioned the early days, and I was thinking on my way over about how public relations, along with everything else, has changed, the doing of it, right? So maybe you can sort of talk about it from this vantage point and maybe walk me through some of what you did in the beginning.

Falcone: [00:55:19] Yeah. In the beginning, 1981, it was very heavily centered on public relations. It's a function that the program had never had. We are an entity of Lincoln Center. We are actually under the Lincoln Center umbrella. But, that said, it stops very much with the finances. They keep the corpus. They invest it. We have a very nice cushion, luxury, of never having to fundraise, period. Avery didn't believe in having to fundraise. He believed in you set it up, and it generates its own revenue, which is exactly what it does. And that was his genius that set that up.

So, in the early days, it was determined in '81 that they wanted more of a spotlight on what was going on, of the young talent. And, there were more outlets. We always had the component of radio as part of this. Since the very first career grants, WQXR was our partner in presenting this. You'll talk to Bob Sherman, Robert Sherman, who used to run something called The Listening Room on WQXR. And, we were guaranteed a program, The Listening Room, for the career grant announcements. So, we would announce the career grants, and the young talent would play on-air, which was wonderful.

And then, we changed the venue. It was down in the studios first. And then they used to do it from Merkin Hall, all QXR. And then we started doing the programs at the Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center. So, QXR would come in with its equipment, and we'd broadcast from Lincoln Center. And then we found that it was probably more practical when they built their new studios down on Houston Street that if we went to The Greene Space, which is their studio space, that we could do it much more efficiently. We could do it much more economically. We could do it much more effectively. And so, I think it's the last five or six years we've been going down to The Greene Space. And they then can broadcast. They can archive it. They can stream it, all of these wonderful things.

So, it evolved over the years, but always with QXR as a partner. And then we added WNET, their New York City Arts program. And they came on board several years ago as an entity that really enjoys having the young talent to showcase. So, we do segments with each of the recipients who go and be interviewed by Paula Zahn or Montebello. And, they then air not only the interview but the performance that that person did at QXR that then serves as the centerpiece

for the televised piece. So, it's just been just a gift. And then, of course, now we have our own YouTube channel so you can go and see what has gone on. We have the archives, which are at Juilliard. Juilliard has housed not only the Avery Fisher Artist Program archives, but also Avery's personal archives are there, which is a nice wonderful central location.

In terms of print media and all of that good stuff, that has shrunk and shrunk and shrunk. So, we really do depend a lot on the live performance being streamed and aired on TV and on radio. It's now a more of a go-to and hear for yourself rather than read about. Every now and again if we have a good story connected with what's going on, the New York Times will pick it up. In the olden days, we could almost guarantee that every batch of career grant recipients would get a mention in the New York Times. There's no guarantee of that anymore. Musical America, our sort of house organ for classical music, will pick it up and will use the item. But, it's a lot less of a print phenomenon now. It's more of a social media, electronic media way of walking. It changed dramatically over the years.

Some things, I think, are stronger and terrific. Other things take enormous planning like making an announcement, for instance. It used to be that you could give it to the New York Times at five o'clock or three o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon for the paper the next morning. If it's now at three o'clock in the afternoon, it goes online at three o'clock. That's when it goes live. And, you want to make it into the next morning's paper, it's changed how announcements are made in general. You have to think about all the layers and all of the people that are going to be affected by an announcement and who needs to know in what order. It is quite complex. It's like laddering. You have to ladder it in order to get the desired effect.

And exclusivity is a thing of the past. There is no such thing as exclusivity anymore, not really. And that was a big selling factor in yesteryear, that you could promise exclusivity, and you could deliver that exclusivity. If you promise it today, better be really careful because chances are you can't deliver because something is going to preempt it. That's just the way it goes.

Albarelli: Is there a story around exclusivity that you could tell relevant to this?

Falcone: [01:02:24] Actually not, because sometimes things just worked out exclusively, but they weren't given as exclusives. I'm thinking about a story on Jeremy Denk, for instance, when he got the prize. It made sense to go to the Times with a Jeremy Denk story, not just because he was getting the Avery Fisher Prize, but because he had just gotten the MacArthur Grant. And he was, I think, if I remember correctly, writing a book at the same time. There were a confluence of things that all came together and made for a good story. And therefore we got a wonderful story pegged to the Avery Fisher Prize. But it wasn't exclusively about that, although it became the major story. But I wouldn't say that it was given as an exclusive because it didn't need to be. That's the other thing. I don't think that there is a need. News is news, and it's going to break all over the place simultaneously because that's what our internet capability has provided for us, for better or for worse.

For me, in some ways it's more of a challenge, and in other ways it's less of a challenge. It's more of a challenge because you have to strategize and get it absolutely right and make sure every ingredient is there. It's less of a challenge in that it's not as creative. It just – creating

things, which will sound silly in today's context, like in the early 80s I created a press release that was on a postcard, like an oversized postcard. Why? Because I'd never met a person who didn't read a postcard. It comes in the mail. You don't have to open an envelope. You don't have to pull out a piece of paper. You just turn it over and see what it's about.

I remember that the artists thought that that was horrendous. What was I doing, doing this? It was kind of denigrating the art of putting out information about them. And I said, "You do your work. You go onstage and do what you do. Let me do what I do." Well, it became a very popular thing to do. It got copied all over the place because it was efficient. Press releases that went on for five pages, truly, can you tell me somebody really reads those five pages? I think the answer is no. But if you send a couple of paragraphs, poignant paragraphs, that say, "This is what it's all about, and if you want more, call me or write to me," and it worked.

Now, you listen to that today and you say, well, what a simple idea. How ridiculous that anybody would get exercised about it? But they did, and it was a simple idea. But sometimes the simplest things are the most effective. You don't need to get fancy. You just need to be direct. The other thing that I have created with the press releases—and I'm sure other people did, too—but, were bullet points. Instead of writing in paragraphs, I wrote in bullet points because, again, do you have time? If you're getting a hundred of these a day, do you have time to sit and read through all that prose? The answer is no. But, do you have time to look at a bullet point? Yeah, you get the gist.

So, it was minimizing, kind of Philip Glass-style, if you will, simplicity, just minimizing so you got it on the first shot. But those were the kinds of things that you could do, and they were, in their own way—I don't want to say “revolutionary.” That's much too strong. But they were innovative. They were novel, but they worked.

Albarelli: You mentioned that Avery was a mentor and then that you were an advisor, right?

Falcone: Yes.

Albarelli: Do you have some examples of advice occasions?

Falcone: [01:07:29] Yeah. I think that advice about, for instance, certain music organizations, their fiscal responsibility, the story that I referenced before, that kind of thing. He would probe. If he didn't have the answers firsthand, he would go and ask if I had the answers firsthand. Advice on what? On the program? For sure. On certain aspects of the program? Absolutely. On developing the format, how we were going to present, things like that. I would always try to come up with a new way of presenting, not the career grants, because that's almost formulaic. It works. Don't try to fix something that is working really well.

But, on the prize, what I always tried to do was to do a different kind of presentation that was based on the personality of the person getting the prize. For instance, when we did Midori, we did a “This Is Your Life” kind of thing where we had people from her past come and talk about her as well as do video snips from different walks of life for her. When we did Elmar Oliveira, I

remember we announced it on The Today Show live. Gene Shalit actually announced it. Avery was there to announce it, and Elmar was there. And then we did a big luncheon to follow and played the clip from The Today Show at the luncheon. What are some of the other ones? Gosh, I'm just drawing blanks on some of them.

For Claire Chase, we did it—not in the Kaplan Penthouse, in the Rose Studio of Lincoln Center where we took over chamber music society's beautiful room and did a presentation from people whose works she championed and also had Room Full of Teeth, which is a contemporary vocal ensemble, come and honor her with a piece that they had written for that occasion. So, it was a world premiere, things like this. We tried very hard to make each situation tailored to the individual so that it didn't become a show for the Avery Fisher Artist Program. It became a meaningful evening for the recipient. Again, it's the spirit of Avery. It's not about us. It's about you. And I think that that's what inspired me to come up with these different kinds of events that really honor what the individual has done, which is what the prize honors.

And, as I said, for the career grants, there is a wonderful format that works, which is equal because there are anywhere from three to five of them. And, so you want equality. You don't want to showcase one more than the other. So, the format works for that and stays. But again, for the prize, it's like how stimulating can this event be? And how much fun can we have with it? And how much fun will they have, they the recipient, in being fêted in this way? When Avery was alive, it was always an occasion because he was there. And to have the man whose name was on the hall, in the hall actually presiding was a gift that anybody who was part of it will

never forget. It was also meaningful when Janet would preside after Avery's death because it was the continuation of the duo.

Now, I think it's not so much about who presides. It's more about the memory. And that's why every event we make sure his photo is in some way connected to the event, that that beautiful tribute that used to be on the wall to him is also incorporated in all of the events, because it's meaningful. And also, I made sure that Mark Schubart was always remembered in the credits posthumously. Why? Because I think it's extraordinarily important to remember who shaped this, how it came about, and what those original tenets were and the pillars. And he was a pillar of this. And I don't think he should be forgotten.

Albarelli: Talk more about him.

Falcone: Mark?

Albarelli: Yeah.

Falcone: [01:13:06] Mark was a bon vivant. Mark was a dapper gentleman who was brilliant. He had been the dean of the Juilliard School. He had written for the New York Times. He was a writer. He had then, under William Schuman, started the education department for Lincoln Center. And, Mark was a gourmet. He loved food. I remember when we wanted to honor Mark. I forget what the occasion was. But, I was in Paris. And so, I went to Ducasse and bought a gift

certificate for a dinner for two as the celebratory gift, whatever the occasion was, from the program, from the Avery Fisher Artist Program.

You would have thought that we had given mark a brick of gold because, for him, this was a brick of gold. He loved music. He loved food. He loved theater. He was a gentleman of the first order. When you think of that era, you think of people like Amyas Ames, Mark Schubart, Carlos Moseley. Those were the names of the 50s, 60s and 70s that conjured up real brilliance, artistry in their own right, and being the consummate gentleman. And that was Mark. He was brilliant. And also, Mark was a wonderful partner for me because he just gave me free reign and just said, “We trust you. Do it.”

I never sat in, interestingly enough, in the early days when they deliberated. I never sat in on those meetings. It wasn't until—until when? I guess until the reins switched from Mark Schubart. Mark died, and Nat Leventhal took over as chairman of the Avery Fisher Artist Program. And at that point, Nat felt it was wiser to sit in so that I'd have everything firsthand and then could fashion it accordingly. And so that's when I started sitting in on those. But, in the early days I would just get the call from Mark saying, “Here are the recipients. Run with it,” sort of thing. And then, we would take over and do everything.

The person who would be able to actually illuminate most of this is Polly Kahn, with whom you'll be speaking, who was Mark's assistant associate at the time. Lincoln Center Institute, that was the name of the umbrella organization at Lincoln Center. And Polly worked very closely

with Mark on all of this. And so, she was there in '74 through the '81 period, so she would be able to fill in all of those gaps, which I wasn't there, so I can't do firsthand.

Albarelli: Right. What's your understanding of the purpose of this project? You said a little bit about preserving the memory of Avery and this type of philanthropist.

Falcone: Oh, this project that we're doing?

Albarelli: Yes, this particular project.

Falcone: [01:16:44] I think that behind this project is remembering that there is always a visionary who comes up with something worthwhile that lasts a lifetime. Sometimes the project continues and is well-known. But how it got started and why it got started is very often forgotten. And it's just a name, Avery Fisher. It may connect with a product—although Fisher is no longer really the name it was in Avery's day—or it may not. I think it's important to tie him in to creating not just the stereo system for the home, for which I am sure most people don't credit him because they don't know that a man did this, a singular man. But I think that's important, to credit it to a person, to a vision.

And then, taking the spoils, if you will, from all of what was created and fashioning that into something of legacy. I think it's all about legacy. And, I think legacy is something that, in our disposable society, we don't often get a chance to ruminate about and to remember with thoughtfulness. My great fear was that, after I'm gone, who is going to remember all this detail

of thirty-five years, forty years? It has been passed down. Very often, in a meeting, someone will say, “Well, what was the intention of this?” And I’m able to articulate it because I was there. But if I weren’t sitting there, who’s going to say it? Nobody knows. So, I think that it’s very important that Avery’s intentions are noted. The intention was to honor musicians for the incredible dedication and work and perseverance that they have shown over their short careers or their long careers.

I think also he felt—and these are his words—that competitions were barbaric. He hated the idea of a parade of people, one after the other, sawing away and then being judged for that moment in time, which is why he created this. He created it because he wanted to assess a body of work, not a single occasion, and in assessing that body of work to reward without anybody knowing that they were being considered. That’s the other beauty part of his genius behind this, that nobody was a winner. Nobody was a loser. There was a recipient. And you never knew that you were being watched or courted behind the scenes. You had no idea. It came out of nowhere, seemingly, and that nowhere was very careful watching progress over a period of time, not in a single instant.

And that’s the philosophy behind this. That’s what needs to be remembered, that this was someone who loved musicians probably more than any entity in the universe, who was the amateur musician himself but never, ever put himself in the category of the people that he was honoring, and wanted to make sure that these lives could be made a little bit easier with a leg up. That’s the career grants. And that the prize recipients would be honored for jobs well done at a substantial point in their career, not at the end of their career but at a substantial point.

Albarelli: What about the last few years would you like to say?

Falcone: Avery's last few years?

Albarelli: Yeah.

Falcone: [01:21:49] I know Avery was active right until the end. He had a very short illness. He died in February of 1994. And, I think, let's see, he would have been present at the ceremony that would have taken place the year before that. So, up until he died, he had been present at every single ceremony for the career grants and for the prize. So he had been active right until the end. Toward the end, I know that his legs were not supporting him in the way that he would have wished. He was an avid walker. Avery walked everywhere. If you could walk it, he'd walk it. And, toward the end, he had to rely a little bit on transportation rather than his own legs. But, he still was walking in. He was there. He was part of it.

I think that the passion of being a part of this, of being the creator of it, of being the symbol of the grants in particular, I think that's what he liked the best. I think he loved the career grants the best because they were the younger ones. They were the ones with the hope of the future and that he could then watch as they progressed. He went to their recitals. He went to their concerts. He made sure he knew where they were. If they were in New York, he was there, which is a lovely thing not just saying, "Here's your money, and have a good life." It's, "Here's an opportunity, and I'm going to support you. I'm going to support you by being there." And he did right until

the end. So, happily, the last few months were short. It wasn't a long illness. And, I think that he did everything he wanted to do for himself, for the program, as an involved and completely present person.

[END OF INTERVIEW]