

**INTERVIEWER:** We're speaking today with Institute Professor John Harbison, who is among America's most distinguished figures in contemporary music. He's the recipient of many awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship, the Pulitzer Prize for Music composition, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities. Composer, conductor, violinist, and pianist, Professor Harbison's compositions include five string quartets, six symphonies, a ballet, three operas, five song cycles, and numerous solo, chamber, and choral works. As a conductor, he has led orchestras and chamber groups around the world and has had long-term residencies with top national music festivals.

John, you've been a faculty member at the MIT Department of Music since 1969. And here, you're also the founder, and coach, and arranger of MIT's vocal jazz ensemble, a pianist with the faculty jazz group Strength in Numbers, you coach a variety of other chamber music ensembles, and you've composed and performed original music for special Institute events. We have a lot to talk about. Thank you for taking the time to contribute to MIT's *Infinite History* series.

**HARBISON:** I'm very happy to be here.

**INTERVIEWER:** Great. What we've been doing is starting with the early days, we do a chronological look at then and now. So if you could just tell us a bit about growing up in a musical family and how you came to decide that-- discover that music would be your life's work.

**HARBISON:** Yes, my parents were both quite musically adept. My father had wanted to be a composer, I think, when he was young. His family disapproved of that. They thought that that was not a way to make a living. And basically, they were right. But he became a renaissance and reformation historian. But he did teach me a lot of my fundamental musical basics.

Well, my parents had a lot of phonograph records and I listened to a lot of music, learned pretty early to pick things out of the shelves myself. I was interested and asked to start studying pretty young on violin and piano. And soon as I could, I switched to viola, which was the instrument that interested me most, I guess, at least for concert music. For jazz, I was always a piano player and sort of kept those two strands quite separate.

My sister also went into music. She was a cellist, a very excellent one. And there were a lot of good teachers in town. My first teachers were mostly coming in from New York to teach in Princeton, but eventually, also some local folks. And I was taught in a, what I now take to be a very fundamentalist way, on the violin. I think I was not allowed to do anything but bow for a year, no fingers. I don't think anyone does that anymore. I think all the modern pedagogy is about much more instant gratification. And that was really how--

**INTERVIEWER:** In terms of career, did you have family approval of your direction towards music?

**HARBISON:** I think my parents were okay with that. My father had wanted to be a composer, but he had been sort of dissuaded. But, no, I think my parents didn't see me interested very much in anything else and I think they thought that I would eventually be purely a teacher, a university person like my father was. My biggest problem explaining myself to my parents later on was that I didn't, for instance, I didn't want to do a PhD. I didn't want, I wasn't interested in what we would call studies and that aspect of the profession.

**INTERVIEWER:** You said your father was a professor, was he at--

**HARBISON:** Yeah, he was a professor of history and I think from him, I might have inherited a lot of the interest in church music. Because I've been at least all the way really all the way through, along with MIT, active as a church musician across town at Emmanuel Music. And the big heroes in my family's portrait gallery were Luther, and Calvin, and, I suppose, Bach, which is really the region my dear father both taught and thought a lot.

**INTERVIEWER:** And what were you exploring, yourself, musically, through your high school years, say?

**HARBISON:** Well, I was improvising my own pieces on piano and--

**INTERVIEWER:** Was that classical?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, well, I'm not quite sure what they were and I know that my mother was annoyed by it. Because when you're doing that, you do the same thing over and over, trying to get it a certain way. And she was, unfortunately, was around, probably listening to that.

**INTERVIEWER:** You also have to practice whatever you're doing.

**HARBISON:** Yeah, I would think. And I wasn't too interested in learning to play my instruments. That was actually a deficiency that I've regretted, that I wasn't-- the instruments were really just a means of being around music and being a participant. So the basic day-to-day that I see really high-skilled professional musicians have, I didn't have the temperament for it. I wanted to improvise my own things.

And I really, really fooled my teachers into thinking I was practicing, I'm sorry to say. Sometimes they'd say, oh, you really worked this week. And I would feel bad because I didn't. That was not where I was engaged. The one time I made progress in the conventional way on an instrument was in high school. I studied the tuba because I wanted to learn about brass. And the format was that you were signed up every day to practice, and that was just the deal.

And I zoomed ahead on the tuba. I became as close to being a real player on that instrument as I was on any instrument in my entire life. And it's what I go back to to empathize with or understand what the really great players that I'd sometimes write for experience. That high-wire act of being really able to play the instrument almost on an unconscious level. But that's--

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you continue that?

**INTERVIEWER:** No, I dropped as soon as I was out of high school, really. And my high school teacher, soon after I got married, went to my wife and he said, could she be talked into getting me back on the tuba? That he had planned a virtuosic career for me. He was a brass specialist, a very good high school teacher. So I look back on that as the experience of what it was like to submit to the discipline, to really play an instrument.

Later on, on the viola, my wife was a violinist, she took me through a fairly strict more than refresher course, basic course, which improved my playing. But I think it was too late for me to be able to be the kind of player that I write for. That sort of player for whom it really is like pick it up, it's part of your body. And that was the tuba for me.

Of course, I was also very interested in singing in school because that was one of the things my high school offered at a very high level, choir singing. We were so devoted to it, we would come one hour early for school. Our teacher had to climb in through the men's room window to open up the school for us. And we were very good. We were kind of an elite group. We were sent out to give concerts all around the state, which meant getting out of classes, which we always loved. And really that singing interest, I think, developed around the chance to participate in such a high level of ensemble.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you've kept your work with choral--

**HARBISON:** Sure, I've certainly remained interested in singing. I was never, myself, a truly high professional singer, but I sure feel that discipline as very close to what interests me about music.

**INTERVIEWER:** To continue the education arc, you were an undergraduate at Harvard?

**HARBISON:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you did-- what was the pursuit of music there?

**HARBISON:** Well, I was pushed ahead because I had studied, at home, a lot of fundamental musical studies in Princeton with a very good teacher, Mathilde McKinney, who was a tough teacher and--

**INTERVIEWER:** Princeton, where you did your master's?

**HARBISON:** No, this was down while I was still in high school.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, I see, sorry.

**HARBISON:** I had essentially gone through basic college courses, harmony and counterpoint. And so I came in at about a third or fourth year level in college. I think I was well-taught. She was supposed to be my piano teacher. And I came in one day to play the Beethoven 1st, F Minor Sonata for her that I was learning. And she stopped me, and she said, "I think I don't ever want to listen to that anymore."

**INTERVIEWER:** Meaning?

**HARBISON:** Well, I had become a full-time jazz player and apparently I just couldn't play even eighth notes. I was swinging everything and she just was bothered. She just didn't think that was anything she wanted to go any further with, so she said, "You're writing these pieces. Just bring me your pieces and we'll look at those."

**INTERVIEWER:** So you were going towards composition at that point?

**HARBISON:** She seemed to think that was what was happening. And she was right. She was a composer, fortunately. And so from then on, through high school, I brought in my pieces to her. And she put them on her piano recitals at the end, and I had two good results. I got to hear my pieces, but also I didn't have to play on the recitals.

**INTERVIEWER:** She liberated you.

**HARBISON:** Well because I wasn't really equipped to do that. That's, again, a regret because these days when I do want to play concert music on the piano, I look back to Mathilde McKinney in that day and think, oh, well I wish she'd said, "I want to correct your horrible piano playing."

**INTERVIEWER:** So sounds like the high school was a very important time. Did college, the college instruction, add to your composition?

**HARBISON:** College instruction was maybe more predominately involved with playing with groups, orchestras there, eventually becoming a conductor of Bach Society Orchestra. Because my coursework started fairly far on, and I was in graduate courses, actually, towards the end, which were way over my head. My greatest achievement in the history of music came as a complete fluke because I wasn't doing well in the course, and it was mostly very, very devoted graduate students. And I gave up the night before. I said, "I'm just going to just going to be hopeless. I can't do this exam." And I strolled up to the library and wandered through and I saw a bunch of the real graduate students studying masses by Cristobal Morales. And I thought, I don't even know who he was.

And on the exam, we had five pieces to identify and write about. And one of the five pieces was one of the Cristobal Morales masses that I looked at as I walked by the table in the library. And so by, I'd say, staging my identification of that piece I dazzled the history of music teacher into feeling that I was a truly qualified historian. And in fact, that part of my education, which was really shaky, I wound up curiously developing a certain bent towards at least understanding in the historical context certain composers and a side light that's really developed into a very front light in recent times.

Studying Bach not only from the standpoint of learning a lot of his cantatas very thoroughly, but also for him to figure out what his world was and how he related to his students, and his culture, and the changes that were going on in music at the time. And this has been useful to me as a composer.

**INTERVIEWER:** And was that partly inspired by your father's work in history of that--

**HARBISON:** I think probably, and also that the best part of my college experience was being commanded, essentially, to get a thorough background in music history.

**INTERVIEWER:** Weren't you an English major? Or--

**HARBISON:** I was for a couple years. But Harvard College was one of the few places then, and certainly-- or any time in recent history, that insisted on an extremely thorough grounding in early music. There were two history courses. The first one stopped in 1600. So that for me was all territory that I essentially knew nothing about, and I was very excited by that. I really burrowed into it. And then the next course was 1600 to the present, but the teacher never got much beyond 1700. He got through about a hundred of the 300 years he was supposed to cover.

**INTERVIEWER:** That always happens with history, doesn't it? People rush the end.

**HARBISON:** And that was perfect because, of course, that was the part I wouldn't have known anything about. And so as I look back on Harvard as that undergraduate experience, of course it was the opportunity to conduct the Bach Society Orchestra, which was remarkable. But it was the history, the idea of all this music that preceded Bach and the music that I would have had some experience of, which really has continued to open up and reveal. And I had already developed an interest in German 17th century music, just by browsing around in the recording world. Heinrich Schutz, who became, throughout the rest of my life, a very important composer for me, but I'm grateful that we didn't just speed through and talk about the pieces that we already knew. And I don't know whether Harvard still does that, I'm not that much in touch with it. It always pleases me to see that at least at MIT, we don't neglect earlier music.

**INTERVIEWER:** And then at Princeton, you did your master's of fine arts. What did you work on there, mostly?

**HARBISON:** Well, I first I went on a fellowship to Berlin, and I studied with an interesting gentleman, Boris Blacher. He had eight students and he taught only one half hour Monday morning. He explained that was the deal. And he'd already had a couple glasses of schnapps before he started, and his secretary would come and just grab a score. And he would follow her into the room and he would do five minutes, and--

**INTERVIEWER:** The half hour was for everybody?

**HARBISON:** Yes. It was five. He said, "I've told you, I warned you, five minute lessons." And of course, when he told me that, when I went to him at the beginning of the year, I'd thought that can't be serious. But of course, it turned out to be exactly true. And that the interesting useful year, because sometimes, the five minute, he would have time for about one sentence. And sometimes it was a really interesting sentence, about three or four of those weeks. And so I was really glad, eventually, that I had experienced his unusual approach.

And then I found out right away, I think the first week, that there was a Bach cantata group going on way out in Zehlendorf, which is a long ride on the overhead railway, about an hour plus. And I went there once a week, and sometimes twice, to work with this religious school choir that was performing a Bach cantata. No, it wasn't in Zehlendorf, it was in Kustendorf, for the performances, which were another hour in the other direction. It was the Johannesstift out by the Spandau Prison. And it wasn't that long, cause it was 1960, 15 years after the end of the war. So Berlin was still a pretty bombed out city. I had some very interesting other students that I met during that year that I kept up with.

But that choir was really my main, perhaps, my focus, because every week there was a new Bach cantata that I would get from the library, and study, and sing in that choir, and learned maybe 20 Bach cantatas quite well with a very, very unusual conductor, Hanns-Martin Schneidt, who I now realized--I thought of him as very experienced, but he was probably 30, young guy. And this beautiful bunch of students who really thought of the pieces, really in the old way, very much like the original Bach choir that is the text, because they were theology students who were kind of where their connection was.

**INTERVIEWER:** So a year in Germany, then? And then you went to graduate school at Princeton?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, I went in the summer to a conducting school. Because I was still very interested in conducting, as I had been at Tanglewood in the summer during my college years.

**INTERVIEWER:** Doing what?

**HARBISON:** As a conductor.

**INTERVIEWER:** During your college years?

**HARBISON:** Yeah. I was a fellow in conducting and I was the youngest fellow and I was not too experienced- I did one year of, maybe, Bach Society Orchestra. But I learned some things about it. I certainly learned about Tanglewood. And certainly it's been useful to me, as a longtime teacher there, to have been a fellow and sort of remember how daunting it is to be with that many good musicians trying to figure out how you get along. So I went to this conducting school in Salzburg and to my really great surprise, I did really well. I mean, Leopold Hager, who was the day-to-day teacher, a very fine conductor, he liked my work and he gave me a lot of chances. And I think they came out well.

And then Herbert von Karajan, who was our guest teacher, was also very encouraging. It was one of those experiences where I thought I would go, kind of get lost in the flock, but both of those teachers were very helpful to me, and liked my approach. I wasn't too interested in the choreography or even the career issues of conducting, but I was interested in how to study.

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you mean by the choreography?

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, a lot of conducting teaching, particularly nowadays, is, if you do this, in this situation, you shouldn't. You should have done that. And they were much more, at least Hager was more about how well do you know the piece? Have you studied the detail? And I think--

**INTERVIEWER:** So what did, it was more loose?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, and I felt that I had done that part of it well. And so I came back to school at Princeton, and went right away to the university orchestra and said, "I just came from Salzburg and I think I know how to conduct." And I became an assistant conductor of the orchestra. So I got chances to conduct a lot of rehearsals, the conductor wasn't there quite often. And I met my future wife in the orchestra. And it was really a kind of dual identity for quite a while. I thought of conducting as probably the best way to make a living, for a while. I'm not sure I was right about that, but that moment seemed plausible. I had been through a kind of crucial decision about jazz during college, because I was playing with a couple of bands. I felt like I was really going somewhere, as a jazz musician, that felt very purposeful and--

**INTERVIEWER:** As a composer of jazz music?

**HARBISON:** As a player.

**INTERVIEWER:** As a player.

**HARBISON:** And it's kind of a fluky set of circumstances where I was trying to decide whether to go to Tanglewood as a conductor or to the Lenox School Jazz, which was a new school, turned out to be a very distinguished one. And it's a long, complicated story why I didn't, but having almost to do with a case of mistaken identity. And, in any case, I wound up in Tanglewood in conducting, right down the road from the Lenox School of Jazz. Occasionally went over to hear something they were doing, and it was a very interesting year at that school with some extremely unusual players. Ornette Coleman showed up. I mean, people doing some stuff I didn't really understand. And I thought, well, this is for the best. I don't think as a jazzer I was ready to take certain kinds of steps. And I was a conductor at Tanglewood, though, I wasn't very active. I was learning. And I felt that almost accidental, very decisive moment probably was the right choice.

**INTERVIEWER:** So the fork in the road was between conducting and playing jazz. What about composer--

**HARBISON:** Well, it was more between concert music and jazz music. And I perceived that jazz, they were both hard livings. They were both hard choices in the sense that I wasn't looking at anybody, from a career path, having anything easy going on. And my very great friend from high school that I played with in our little [INAUDIBLE] septet band in school, who has been a jazz musician through his career, and with whom I've been playing in recent years, Tom Artin, as great as he plays, and as incredibly, totally gifted he is as a musician, it's not an easy-- as I thought it wouldn't be-- not an easy life.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you have cited Bach, Stravinsky and jazz as essential sources of inspiration for your own music. Could you tell us how these disparate sources inform your compositions?

**HARBISON:** Well they were the early preoccupations of-- that was the music I was listening to and trying to put together in my head. Schoenberg was also a force because, of course, both Stravinsky and Schoenberg were in the US of A, when I was a young kid, and I was aware of them. My father went to Schoenberg's lectures a couple times and Stravinsky I saw conduct. And, of course, I was sent out to Santa Fe from Princeton graduate school to be one of a very few composers who were supposed to hang around Stravinsky and watch him coach his operas. I would say Charles [? Warden ?] and I were the most devoted Stravinsky-ites in that group of 10 or 12 composers. We really knew a lot of his music well. And I must say, hearing all the operatic pieces in one summer, some of them him conducting, was just so much more Stravinsky into the bloodstream. And then they forgot to cover all of his rides to the opera house, and I had this, actually Rosie was with me, and I had her--

**INTERVIEWER:** That's your wife?

**HARBISON:** --her can convertible and I drove Vera Stravinsky, and Stravinsky, and Robert Craft out to the opera house quite often. I think they didn't regard me as anything but a driver, except that we did, all of us composers, we did present did present a piece to Stravinsky, a variation on one of his marches from Rernard.

**INTERVIEWER:** But the point is you also, you do have the classical and the jazz influences throughout your work.

**HARBISON:** Yeah, I wasn't as conscious at the time of what was going to be a problem, which is what, how to fit things together. And it took a long time to get the sense that my ear, which had been formed by years of teenage jazz playing and improvising and following certain kinds of chordal thinking, I had to be fitted into what I call more concert music discourses. And not just as a dialogue or a kind of a shock discontinuity, but it had to become a continuity. And that took many, many years.

But at that time, I was just really interested in all of these disciplines as being the place that I wanted to spend time on. And I didn't really try, for instance, the music that I learned as a fundamental book, sort of in my head, concert music, were the 200 Bach cantatas. I was very motivated to learn them because I got this job quite early in my life actually. Really after I'd come back here, just to study and compose for the Harvard Junior Fellowship, I got a job as conductor of cantata singers.

**INTERVIEWER:** This is at Tanglewood?

**HARBISON:** No, this was up here in Boston. And I thought well what do they do. Well, they perform Bach cantatas. So I spent one summer just studying every Bach cantata. So some people I guess would choose Beethoven quartets or some basic text. But that turned out to be my reference point, having just spent the days for three months or two months, just turning the page and okay next.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you do-- a portion of your work does combine music and text. And how do you select text for your music? And sometimes you compose the text. And when do you choose to write? Like you did the libretto for the opera the Great Gatsby. So what is-- how would you describe your working with text?

**HARBISON:** Well in high school and in college I was for a while thinking of myself as combining writing words and writing music. And I was in the kind of poetry world at Harvard. And I was actually, I think I seemed to be doing well there. I mean I won some big poetry prizes. And I went to this convention, I can't remember, it was some college. There were all kinds of college poets there. I represented my own college.

And it was tempting to think I was actually good at it. But I didn't think so. I thought the reason that I was doing this must have been to have some way of evaluating poetic texts. And which is really what I've then done. I continue to read poetry a lot. I've certainly always been friendly with poets. And I always enjoyed the process of even getting permissions from poets to set their poems. But the choice really doesn't come out as a choice for me. It's really just I've read a bunch of stuff, and stuff starts to be kind of distracting. And I can get haunted by it. And then I decide well it's time to try to work with it.

**INTERVIEWER:** So what was the process with the Great Gatsby? Were you commissioned to do an opera, and then you decided to do the libretto as well? Or was it all a piece? How did that work?

**HARBISON:** With opera, the reason I've done my text for the opera has nothing really to do with thinking of myself as a poet or a writer. It's that the practical issue of making an opera has always seemed to me to have to do with the difficulty of negotiating with a writer who has a great pride in their skill. And I'd heard enough and known enough, studied enough, about the process of making operas to know that I didn't feel that aspect of the collaboration would work for me. So I became the librettist with whom I can negotiate, and change anything that I wanted. And that was the biggest reason for each time fitting together my own libretto.

The Gatsby, I did look around for a while because I thought the advantage of a librettist is to have someone else who goes out and takes the heat. But I couldn't quite find anyone who was going to buy into my idea that their text was in some ways always temporary. Whereas when I work with myself, anything I wanted to cross out and start over on textually, that was easy to do.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you had that freedom? You were commissioned to do whatever it was whether-- that was your decision in other words?

**HARBISON:** Well it was not the-- in the case of The Great Gatsby, my commissioner didn't like that at all. They kept trying to-- they said "Please don't write the libretto." And they kept suggesting people. And I went. I talked to very profitably and interestingly to some really great people. Ruth Jhabvala, who was a great screenwriter and great novelist and we discussed the Gatsby libretto for a long time, the very specific problem with her was that she had no background in opera. And had to start thinking about opera from square one, and that looked difficult to me.

But I talked to other really wonderful people. The problem also was that with each time I've written an opera, the music has moved ahead. I heard what I wanted in certain scenes, and I needed the words fast because I felt like I was progressing into the piece, and really didn't want to wait. So I could think that was another factor.

**INTERVIEWER:** I could see that as an organic process, yeah.

**HARBISON:** So you could get too far advanced on the writing side. I know that's happened to other composers in the past. I've actually, I did a lot of sort of background study about composers and librettists. I was very interested in the case of Aida for instance, where Verdi actually sent his version of the text and just said, "Do this better," to the librettist.

I could see doing that. I actually tried to interest a poet friend of mine in doing exactly that piece I'd been sort of thinking about trying to do. And she turned it down. She said "I don't want to do that."

**INTERVIEWER:** You've talked a little bit about the sacred mu-- the religious music that you've also, has been part of your repertoire. And you were involved in several important ecumenical music events at the Vatican. Could you tell us just a bit more about your inspiration on religious themes, and the way that ecumenical message is transmitted through your music?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, I've had some amazing opportunities to do something that doesn't feel at all uncomfortable for me, which is to represent some message which is I take to be quite a broad message, that say not restricted to any particular interest or faith. So when I got the commission to write the piece for the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, which was a committee in Chicago of the consulate, and they went-- the way they chose me was they just went through a bunch of stuff and offered me the commission. So I thought well they've done that thinking about whether I should do this.

And I know there were lots of people who thought, particularly back in Israel, that why was a Protestant quasi-Lutheran composer doing this. But I was-- I felt the subject matter was of incredibly powerful interest. And everything about that project-- I took it on when I was very strapped for time. I had almost no window for it. And I just thought I had to, just had to make this piece. Because first of all, the study part of it, the background work was going to be so interesting and rewarding.

And as the piece evolved, first of all, I wanted to learn a lot about Israel. One of the things they offered was that I would come for quite a long time, and meet anyone I wanted to talk to and so forth, which I found irresistible. Which did happen. I thought that I would probably use Israeli poets. And I had a big collection of poems which I thought would work with the piece. And I asked to meet them, among others. I met many politicians. But as I spent the time in Israel, the whole thing shifted, and it became a kind of more journalistic kind of piece.

I found that I wasn't going to use the poems. But I might use things that those people, or the people, anyone I met, was saying to me about the situation of Israel at that moment.

**INTERVIEWER:** So contemporary? You're saying contemporary--

**HARBISON:** So what the piece eventually consisted of is my settings of very ancient texts, psalms in Hebrew, which took a lot of work for me because I had to just listen to the accent. And I had tapes of four or five readers of every text, trying to get the stresses in the right place. And trying not to get the wrong words liturgically next to each other and so forth. But also the rest of the piece is, I think it's 10 or 12 people that I just met. And then because I'd never taken diary notes in my life. But every day there, I had some kind of encounter I thought I have to write down what these people said.

And that's the rest of the piece. And a lot of my friends said, "Don't do that because it will be not relevant in 10 years because that's now." Well it turns out it is.

**INTERVIEWER:** Unfortunately it's still.

**HARBISON:** Yeah, and the piece for me, I measure a lot of my projects in sort of what does it take to get there? Does something interesting have to be done to get into position to really have a hold of it? And in the case of that piece, that was very high on that level. Amazingly interesting trip and met-- I just sent this list of like 30 people I wanted to meet. And since it's a small country, and since I was the guest of the State Department of Israel, everyone turned up. And so that little brief period as sort of this journalist hyphen composer, it was a piece that I-- it was even more essential to do it than I thought.

With the papal thing, that was very different. But also the same kind of idea that I would learn a lot, that I'd be working for an institution, which was extremely complicated. Most of my communication with them was so formal, and by couriers, and sending documents in a certain form. And it was very-- everything was completely unusual.

And the pope, this was the Polish pope, was planning this event in which it would be a reconciliation of the faiths conference. And he had invited a whole bunch of rabbis and mullahs and priests. And they were to be discussing a whole bunch of really big issues, and among them the recent recognition of the guilt for the Shoah and the part of the Catholics and so forth. And so the whole-- for me the real dramatic part was trying to come up with a text which would be accepted. And I had my dealings with that Vatican committee were very interesting. They sent me a full account of their meetings. They listened to a whole bunch of my music.

And I sent them the text I decided on. Looked at lots of poetry and lots of passages. And eventually, the passage about Abraham was the father of many nations, which they made me take a certain part out, which I stuck in just instrumentally anyway. So if you know the version I used, you would recognize it. But I sent them the King James version, and they had a big discussion. They said, "No we do not use the King James version. It represents a version which is inimical to us. But we'll try to find another." And they discussed this at great length. And apparently they deadlocked, had a terrible time. And at the end of the meeting they were very tired and they said, "Well look, let's just use the version that the composer sent."

**INTERVIEWER:** So had--

**HARBISON:** So that was the King James version. So I just took that, okay. And I did set that version. It's the first time that the King James version has ever been sung. I guess yeah, at the Vatican. And it was a very interesting event. Leading with an interesting statement by that pope about a few days before as the encyclical saying that they had neglected their great tradition of liturgical music. That in the reforms, which were mostly the folksong guitar tradition, which they had embraced since John the 22nd, that that Palestrina and [INAUDIBLE] and Lassus and the great composers that they had employed, creating the greatest music of their time, needed to be brought back into the consciousness of the church. Which actually has been since being put into place, where the music directors are interested, it's happening.

So this was in connection to this event. This was directly connected.

**INTERVIEWER:** Incredible, it's like your--

**HARBISON:** And of course I-- just out of curiosity, I was just very interested in various things that pope was doing. Now clearly there were things he wasn't doing. We're finding out more and more about that. But there were things I admired about him, particularly in the direction of this conference.

So I wrote the piece based on a communication from the committee, telling me which of my motets they approved of. And you would think that's a restriction. But that seemed to be fascinating because it spoke to my sense of music history, which is that the pope had sent a letter like that to Palestrina, very specific about what kind of music he should be writing for their purposes. And it was almost the same letter. I mean, I thought okay. I embrace it.

So I wrote a piece which was quite tricky to do, which really used only the harmonic content that they seemed to want to approve of.

**INTERVIEWER:** Seems like a delicate, diplomatic, historical, cultural--

**HARBISON:** It was an age-old composer's problem, as an employee, which I was I guess. So that was again, as a run-up, deeply educational. I came out on the other side of that having really learned a lot. And of course the event itself was fascinating. It was like a huge, I think the largest indoor audience I'd ever heard my music played for.

**INTERVIEWER:** And then in '87, you won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished music composition for the sacred *ricercar* piece "Flight from Egypt." Could you tell me about the experience of writing that piece, and how it came to be considered for a Pulitzer Prize? Was that a commission? Was that--

**HARBISON:** No, it wasn't. I was working very closely with-- oh wait a minute. I think it-- I think there might have been a commission, a small commission. This involved cantata singers, the group I'd been a music director for previously. But it came out of a conversation with Craig Smith, who was the music director at Emmanuel Church, where I was much more engaged at that time. And he said no one-- everyone writes joyful, Christmas pieces. But the story of the slaughter of the innocents, this really kind of quite horrifying story, of Herod trying to kill all the firstborn, is there's not very much represented musically. Not a big surprise about that. But that's true. And the only one we could think of was a piece by Henry Schutz, of course a great, favorite composer of mine.

He was saying as a music director in a church, what you found around Christmas season was a lot of darkness, particularly people who don't have much family or who are alone. And you know that there should be some music which takes on that subject. And that the flight into Egypt was a very haunted, dangerous story. It's a homeless couple who is just on the run and somehow. And Herod is out there trying to kill every firstborn. Great text for setting, and almost no precedent in the literature which has always appealed to me. So that's why I decided not to go with that direction in the piece.

Then I had a policy with my publisher that she would write to me every year, Susan Fader, and say do I-- is there anything she should submit for the Pulitzer. And I would say usually no, I don't-- I had sort of an aversion to that whole kind of process. But she just took it on herself. She said, "Well I like this piece, and I'm going to send it in anyway." So the surprise to me was that we had agreed nothing was going to be submitted. And she had just herself sent that piece in.

And it was a little off the beaten track for such an award. But in the long run, I can't think of any piece I would rather be represented by, because that's an aspect of the work I do that's probably the most unfashionable.

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you mean?

**HARBISON:** Liturgical music is like total backwater. And much of what goes on in that field is extremely undemanding entertainment. Kind of megachurch music, you know? And this piece is in the tradition of liturgical music that goes back through Palestrina, and Lassus and Schutz and Bach and on into Beethoven. Where the purpose was extremely integral to the life of the community that it's written for. The Bach cantatas for instance were the big focal event of the week for most of that population. And those stories were the stories they were trying to understand. And that's the tradition that this piece wants to attach to. So that's a very, very at this point, become a very rare rarely cultivated.

Ironically, some of the composers, in spite of the fact that in the early mid 20th century this tradition was always already quite atrophied...

**INTERVIEWER:** The liturgical tradition?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, and we had Stravinsky and Messiaen and Schoenberg all deeply engaged in writing that. So some of the greatest figures of concert music who against the grain, were writing major efforts in that field.

**INTERVIEWER:** Interesting what you said about being an employee. So I'm interested in commissions versus those that are not, for the-- what you compose that it is just because you are moved to do it. And so what is your process for composing in general? Do you have a routine? How do you... how do you...

**HARBISON:** No, I wish I did. I--

**INTERVIEWER:** Maybe it's different answer for whether they're commissioned or not.

**HARBISON:** It's pretty much the same. I've been fortunate to occasionally or quite often get commissions that are pieces I wanted to do. Very much had sort of already hoped to do. But I also have done things, big pieces, without commission, a lot. The first two operas. Big song cycle, hour-long songs like a [INAUDIBLE] went away. Just you're lucky, I always feel I'm lucky to get those pieces performed because there's nobody at the other end that wants to take care of them. But the process seems to be, I don't have a very good schedule or work process. And I think that's sort of it.

I noticed that some of the fellows that I teach at Tanglewood are very organized about how they go about it. And very purposeful about what things they're going to do in what order. And I just never have gotten into that phase. And what I look for is what we've been talking about. I'm looking for pieces where I will have to in the sort of study or run-up period, encounter some problems or some issues that I don't-- that I haven't done or had an experience with.

**INTERVIEWER:** And then, so then you've been so prolific. So obviously you're getting them done. You might put the long-- the ones that are not commissioned-- might be working on several at once? Or--

**HARBISON:** Yeah, almost always, yeah. Yeah and the virtue of that is that it takes some of the pressure off. Often one or another of them is very hard to do, and you want to be able to get away from it.

**INTERVIEWER:** And I guess I've read that your wife has inspired a lot of your violin music compositions.

**HARBISON:** Yeah, she's a very astute musician. And I love the violin. It's probably my favorite instrument. It's first instrument that I wanted-- remember wanting to play. And I think I switched to viola because I wanted to be-- I didn't want to be in front of the texture. I wanted to be in the middle. But it's still the instrument probably I would find the sound I most want to hear.

I think it's also interesting to me that we have some instruments that have been with us such a long time. Concert music has a real devotion to this sort of criteria. Now I did find that historic, electric guitars exist.

**INTERVIEWER:** How old?

**HARBISON:** Well, 50 years. But they get huge prices, certain vintages. That is there is something about the mystery of an instrument. And the handcraftedness. even clarinet players feel that though they're machine-made instruments, that they have a personality. I feel a closeness to that issue of the instrument. It sort of talks back to us. That's one of the things that helps me get through these pieces, that I hear someone specific playing a very specific sound.

**INTERVIEWER:** Even if it's an instrument you don't play.

**HARBISON:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** And what you pick up, personally, is viola and piano these days. That's what you actually play.

**HARBISON:** I'm sort of being forbidden to play the viola. I'd rather keep playing, but--

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you mean?

**HARBISON:** We do a chamber festival out in Wisconsin in which I almost always do some playing. And my colleagues there feel like my services as a what we call a continuo, a Baroque fill-in player or pianist, are more valuable than viola. So I'm being definitely dissuaded from the viola.

**INTERVIEWER:** In your composing work, what's important to you in terms of engaging with the audience? What do you hope to get back? What do you hope their experience might be or do you care?

**HARBISON:** Well, yeah, sure, I care. But it's all-- it has to do with what the intent of the piece is. And it's sort of what-- every piece seems to have a kind of relationship to the audience. One of the reasons I like writing for church music is that the audience follows the musical action closely but there's no applause and you don't-- and what they take away is following a different track. And that's a big tradition of liturgical music going all the way back to pagan ritual or people beating on drums in pageants and stuff.

It's not-- the response is, in a certain way, more participation and less demonstration, you know? But I've written a lot of music that is-- string quartets for instance-- which is a rather specialized audience. One of my friends used to say "That's the Beethoven audience." He says, "I'm happy to have the Beethoven audience." There are people who have heard quite a lot and have quite a lot of ability to compare what they're listening to, subconsciously at least, to what you've given them. And I like that, but I would be unhappy if I was the only audience.

In my jazz coaching, of course, we've been cultivating another esoteric audience which is the people who really love jazz and would choose that over anything. And there you're reaching at them in a different way. There's a little bit more. You want to get them kind of more physically stirred up. I'm not sure how to describe that.

But I do, yeah. I think about the audience. I think about them not as much when I'm working, as just in between-- just how important it is that there's another end to it. I get very nervous if pieces are having trouble finding their way to the listeners.

**INTERVIEWER:** But how do you assess that in your process?

**HARBISON:** If you're listening and you're in the room with them, you assess it by the coughing and fidgeting.

**INTERVIEWER:** I guess I meant, in other words, once it's complete, yes. But, in other words, not during the writing of it do you-- does that enter--

**HARBISON:** Well you don't know.

**INTERVIEWER:** You couldn't.

**HARBISON:** You have no idea what the effect of it is going to be, which is why I mentioned the coughing and fidgeting. I mean, that's tremendously interesting. Do people seem to be engrossed? Are they horrified and dismayed to the point that they look horrified and dismayed? That's interesting, too. But I think you can't know too much, exactly, what to expect about what's going to happen or you're working in too familiar terms.

But I think that the idea is always that you hope people will be grabbed by it, or if not be grabbed on the moment-- I think sometimes I've written pieces where people walk away a little baffled, but if they still remember hearing the piece or something about it a long time later, that, to me, that's probably the most important thing. I think often, now, these days a standing ovation is saying, "We don't wish to insult this performance." It's something so automatic.

**INTERVIEWER:** So it feels meaningless.

**HARBISON:** Yeah. I think it's ritualistic. I would say a sitting ovation with enthusiasm or controversy is probably of some value.

**INTERVIEWER:** More honest.

**HARBISON:** Yeah. Thoughtful or puzzlement. Yeah, that's all. I like that. And the crouching ovation, which is when people don't know what to do, is also of its own significance. And I observe that carefully, too.

**INTERVIEWER:** And don't dislike it.

**HARBISON:** No. That has its own interest. But I think we composers, really what we're just hoping for always is that, either in the form of an audience or a commissioner or a patron or other, that somebody wants us to keep working.

**INTERVIEWER:** In 1989 you were honored with a MacArthur Award celebrating your career as a composer and a conductor and for your music. What were your first reactions to hearing about that fellowship, that award, and how did it affect you-- what did you do with it, your daily life, your career?

**HARBISON:** What it made possible was to get a few half years to do a couple of really large pieces that would have been very hard to write otherwise. And I took very direct advantage of it for that purpose.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you taught less at that time.

**HARBISON:** Yeah, I did. I taught some half years. And I didn't have any other way of financing them at that time, so it was a really fortunate thing. And the pieces I wrote were of a dimension that I probably wouldn't have been able to launch.

**INTERVIEWER:** These are not commissioned. These are things you wanted to create.

**HARBISON:** In one instance, yes. In another, no. One was the piece that was my official obligatory piece for being a composer in residence for the L.A. Philharmonic for a couple years. And I wrote a very, very hard to write a piece, a concerto for the entire brass section. And that took me quite a few passes at it to get right. And really, it was a full-time job, that's all I can say, to do that piece.

**INTERVIEWER:** So let's talk about your teaching at MIT. Obviously, you've been here a number of years. And just looking at the department, there's a great enrollment of MIT undergraduates in music or theater, I suppose, at MIT. But from the professor's perspective, what are the essential qualities that a musician would need to have in order to succeed at MIT in a faculty career and get tenure? What is that path?

**HARBISON:** I would answer that question about tenure at MIT and the arts in general. It seems to me to all come back to the search. Search processes for us in the arts are incredibly complicated and serious. I say that as somebody who was hired at MIT by Klaus Liepmann, whose title here was Director of Music, in a structure-- a very European structure of top-down, complete jurisdictional power. There was no search. He came to a couple concerts. He heard my pieces. He said, "Come and teach at MIT."

Since then, of course, I've participated in many, many searches. And I feel like the diligence of the search, and the imagination of the people who are doing it, and the sense of such people of what MIT is as an institution, that the decision to bring someone here is the key one. And one of the things I feel that we've done in music and theater-- theater, obviously, is being mostly carried forward by the practitioners, but we help them out in a lot of cases because we need a critical mass. One of the things both music and theater have done has been to have a clear idea of where they want to go and of the creative abilities of the people they've decided to bring.

And I feel in our own instance that when we look at, say, our composition staff that, really from the day that we decided to bring them in, we felt that it was going to work out because we put together what their qualities were and what we were like. And I think we always tried to hire people unlike ourselves, who were not aesthetically on our page or who were not even close to us in terms of basic artistic proclivities, so that we would have a number of options for the students. And so we would not be taking-- preserving a viewpoint, but trying to have a lively institution.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wonderful.

**HARBISON:** And so I think that that's why, when we look at arts, particularly music and theater, the roster is so diverse and so extremely self-sufficient. I mean, we haven't had to do any heavy lifting to keep the people around that we've brought. And I feel that very strongly about theatre as well. The danger is that we will lose people because we function here with marvelous, astonishing students, but our facilities do not compare with any of the parallel institutions that you can think of.

We don't work in very wonderful music theatres and we don't produce our work in venues that are in any way up to what we would call par. We're like a very great-- we're like a great football institution that's playing with tiny little dressing rooms in a small stadium.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, I was going to get that later, but if you want to talk about that now-- is there some movement in that regard, do you think?

**HARBISON:** Well, it's been a long and complicated story. And it has a lot to do with changing attitudes in the administration, but it is a fact that when any of us go out to present our work, you name it, anywhere else-- we're in an art center, we're in a very impressive auditorium. We go up the road to Tufts. We go we go out to Rensselaer which has got one of the great art centers, very new. It's just a striking difference.

And, of course, a lot of our people stay with us-- these high quality people that we hire stay here because of the city that we're located in, and do a lot of their work, as I have, in other venues around the city. I mean, for me to go over and conduct a cantata in the beautifully appropriate environment of Emmanuel Church is like a glorious holiday compared to the places where we would work here, which are usually spaces not by any means appropriate to what we're trying to perform.

**INTERVIEWER:** I mean, I know way back when there was discussion of the acoustical shortcomings of both Kresge Auditorium and the MIT chapel. Is that right?

**HARBISON:** Very much so. And Killian Hall, which is a very, very small venue. When we do-- a lot of my coaching has been in vocal chamber music of the great magical period of Monteverdi and Schutz. So desperate have we been for an appropriate space for that music that we've done those concerts in corridors where people have to walk through while we're performing, and so forth. We've done them in the main dome which is actually too far in the other direction. We've done them, desperately, trying to find a place where that music sounds, which is where a certain amount of carry is necessary to comprehend the music. So that's just one instance of a whole genre of music that we never have been able to find a place to perform it here.

The chapel is a curious case because it's an architectural marvel but the very thing that makes it a unique architectural piece, the circular construction, means that the overtone production is so weird, that, really, performers can't really survive it. I've had some of my groups perform there just because, well, we've got to try, but it's really like putting them in a mixmaster.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is there being research here, perhaps with the School of Architecture to create, somehow, acoustically better spaces, or that's moot since there's--

**HARBISON:** Well, that would mean money, and space, and time. We were very close to a solution and we had found the one missing piece, which was the one big donor that would put it through. And that donor was diverted by the administration to a more pressing cause. So we know that we need to live very alertly, here, just to be able to keep doing what we do. We have nevertheless-- as you can imagine, we've attracted amazing people.

The kind of theater folks that we have, now, working here are astonishing, brilliant people. They've been performing in Rinaldi. Have you ever been there? That's a garage. It's like a, basically, a large, one-story garage.

**INTERVIEWER:** Like a black box theater kind of thing?

**HARBISON:** Well, that's what they've made it. It is their design space, it's their meeting space, and it's their performance space. And it's, like, about 75 people you can get in there. They've done some fabulous work there. That's scheduled for demolition so they're being sent out to a building out on Vassar street down by the river, which is pretty far away. Hopefully it can be developed. But it's part of the saga of, if you give these wonderful, theatrical minds even an old garage, they'll do something. But that's not like saying--

**INTERVIEWER:** That it's ideal.

**HARBISON:** Yeah. Right.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, the other aspect of music at MIT is the relationship between music and STEM subjects. And can you talk about that, and why there's such a large role given to music and arts at MIT?

**HARBISON:** Well, it's almost like a tautology to say that the people who are at MIT with their kinds of abilities, particularly the mathematical and hard science people, are traditionally and logically very, very good at music. We don't know all the reasons, the way their brains and senses work so well, but that is just simply the case. We always have had, ever since I've been here, extremely high talent level coming in to sing and play in the groups and take the courses. And it's like a natural fit.

That part of it has never been hard to figure out. That is, enrollments really are as large as we can handle in any era simply because there are just so many. And of course, there's been other cultural things that are kind of tied into it, surprisingly-- this big explosion around all the campuses about the acapella groups, which develop a lot of musical skills. I used to be kind of resentful about how much more time they rehearsed than our regular ensembles but it's all great because there were just kids making music and having to put together a lot of ingenuity and basic hard work to make it come off.

And all of that fits together into a kind of an environment in which music has a natural drive to it. I mean, people want to put the time in. And many people at MIT will save whatever shards of time they have away from studying for something musical or theatrical. It's really amazing.

**INTERVIEWER:** What is it like to conduct and coach MIT students? Are they different from other students in your opinion?

**HARBISON:** Yeah. It's a lot easier. Because at Tanglewood, for instance, I worked with professional to-be musicians and that's more difficult because they're looking at music as a profession. So they're making a judgment in each situation of what their path is and what's the most important thing to do. Whereas MIT, if someone signs up for any activity, the tradition is to follow through. And it's not being assessed on the grounds of how it fits into their audition pattern, or what role they're being prepared for. In spite of the fact, we do have some professional musicians out there in the field who have come through here. And their grounding's pretty good partly because our program is undergraduate. So they get attention.

**INTERVIEWER:** And in fact, in this citation for the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities that you received in 1998-- it was cited how you integrate your professional roles as composer, conductor with your role as a teacher, in the sense that you're giving your students particular opportunities to get involved in the artistic process, rehearsals with visiting performers, and the like.

**HARBISON:** Oh yeah, we do a lot of that. We did a lot of that with vocal jazz, too, and performing around town. We performed with the Pops and so forth. They get a kind of dividend of sort of looking out into the community more, which I think is really good for them. But I think that the one thing I would say about MIT's socially-- well, two things. They don't see enough of each other, which I think music helps them with. But also, they don't look at the city much. So if we can get them to cross the river and do something, go to the symphony or a jazz club or something, I think that's often, in many cases, a big achievement.

**INTERVIEWER:** But still, you're attracting music luminaries to MIT in spite of the physical limitations.

**HARBISON:** Oh, yeah. They come.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how do you-- why? Why do they come?

**HARBISON:** Well, MIT is a very-- thing people are curious about and our reputation in arts and humanities is strong. The old thing about, I didn't know there was music at MIT. We hear that always, constantly, but we don't hear it from professionals in our field. They know the names of our faculty. And they know if they're really into, say, concert music composing, they know that we have, say, three composers who are now prominent young composers in the field that just came through as undergraduates here.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow. In fact, yeah. You've been praised for that, your commitment to young composers. And you can provide support through your various board memberships on music foundations such as the American Academy in Rome, to the Bogliasco Foundation, the Copland Fund for Music, and others. So tell us about that aspect of your work and your mission with these organizations in helping young composers.

**HARBISON:** Well, all those organizations have-- some form of their activity involves getting young composers opportunities. The Academy of Arts and Letters does a fabulous job in nurturing young talent because they have a lot of money, which oddly enough comes from the bequest mainly from Charles Ives-- a composer who made his big fortune in insurance and left it all to the American Academy of Arts and Letters because he had no heirs.

So we give lots of awards in the arts at the Academy in poetry, in writing, in composition, visual arts. And those of us who serve on those panels and so forth, it's a pleasure because you really do help at the point that's most difficult for young artists, which is when they're just out of school and trying to kind of figure out how they are going to get to the next stage.

**INTERVIEWER:** What are some of the music courses you've particularly enjoyed teaching at MIT?

**HARBISON:** Well, I think, obviously for me, coaching is the most is the most rewarding because coaching is the most practical and immediate. And I've loved, particularly--

**INTERVIEWER:** Is that towards composition or conducting or both?

**HARBISON:** No. This would mean groups that are playing music that I have particular connections to.

**INTERVIEWER:** I see.

**HARBISON:** I love working. For years I worked with this magical group that has been here. We say it's the most long-standing vocal chamber music ensemble in New England. It goes back, overlapping members, for about 30 years. And I loved coaching that even though we always have trouble finding where to perform one. Coaching-- occasionally I've put myself into the groups as player-coach which we don't do often. But I played in a group that performed the Bach Musical Offering a few years ago. That was a great experience.

And I've had, occasionally, very enterprising groups that were just so ambitious-- take on, almost, things that you'd never think they should try to do-- Pierrot Lunaire, Schoenberg, which was great. It was a great experience. I've done, occasionally, a Bach cantata with them. I did teach a Bach course one year, just a senior seminar, and we did orchestrations of organ pieces which was a very adventurous project. And some of them have been performed really quite successfully.

And then the jazz-- the last five years I was over on the jazz side.

**INTERVIEWER:** I was just going to get to that.

**HARBISON:** And coached some combos and did some writing for and playing with the Festival Jazz and then played in the backup group for Vocal Jazz Ensemble. And sort of--

**INTERVIEWER:** Which you founded.

**HARBISON:** Yeah. Sort of sculpted the group in that direction. My successor is also a player as well as a singer. So she's also playing. I think that's a very efficient way to work with a group like that. And of course, for me, it was also really interesting-- it was a time when I think I needed to be improvising and dealing with what I think are specific jazz issues for a while. And that group really was, I'd have to say about the fastest learning experience I've ever been around. I had-- the biggest challenge was to keep enough material ready for them, because their pace of progress was so much faster than I would predict.

And I-- that's something you meet at MIT often, but this was an intense form of it. I never ceased being surprised, And I would think I had enough to occupy them for a term, and they would be done with it about four weeks in.

**INTERVIEWER:** You're also a pianist in the faculty jazz group Strength in Numbers. So all in all, how do you--

**HARBISON:** That continues. I'm saying, we're staying with that. We don't find that we all have the same date free in common too often, but it's been very enjoyable. And we found a number of places where it's appropriate for us to play. And it's fun to discover, playing with one's colleagues, that I've known them all in other ways. And I think this that's been a great experience. We also brag about the fact that we think we're the only institution locally, even including all these conservatories, that actually can put a faculty jazz ensemble on.

**INTERVIEWER:** Including Berkeley?

**HARBISON:** Well, I would imagine, Berkeley could. Maybe they don't.

**INTERVIEWER:** Interesting.

**HARBISON:** Yeah, there sure are a lot of great players in that faculty.

**INTERVIEWER:** So 20 years ago, you were promoted to the position of Institute professor at MIT, the highest faculty honor at the Institute. And also, the first time a faculty member from the Music and Theater Arts departments has been elected. Part of the privilege, I guess, of that, is that you're free from some departmental commitments and to pursue your intellectual pursuits and to work across departmental boundaries. How has your career evolved since that freedom?

**HARBISON:** Well, I think it's probably changed the areas of teaching somewhat.

**INTERVIEWER:** A little less teaching?

**HARBISON:** Well, a little less lately. At first, I just really kept on basically the same schedule, but I think yeah. I don't think I would have tried out five years in a jazz program if I hadn't just had the-- of course, I also had a suggestion from one of my colleagues to come over, because I'd already begun to be interested in writing for those ensembles and just sort of wandered in that direction. But I think the other thing about the Institute professorship is that you find out more about the Institute in general. It's--

**INTERVIEWER:** What way?

**HARBISON:** Well, we meet as a group and we hear from the President and the Provost, sort of, what their problems are. And I don't-- I suppose that if you're a provost or if you're in the high administration, you get that sort of information, but I think that professors probably don't usually. We don't really hear about what the long-range concerns are of the administration. And some of that is very, very interesting to understand.

**INTERVIEWER:** So there are more-- do you get more involved in collaborations at MIT now that you have that?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, well I got more interested in this problem of student life and student crisis, because of course, a couple of groups I was coaching had some really nice people in difficulty. But the whole complex issue of how to form a faculty network that deals with students in trouble, which, of course, music and theater play a particular role, because we meet the student on a somewhat different basis than someone who is just a teaching sort of fellow, say, of a section. And we might tend to have a better idea of what's going on.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's really interesting. And you've taught at some other places-- Boston University, Cal Art, and Duke University. What have those experiences been like?

**HARBISON:** Those were pretty brief. Cal Arts was interesting because I gave courses that they've never had. The things that I was interested in, they were surprised that I wanted to offer. Most of my non-MIT teaching has been at Tanglewood, which is pretty intensive, and where I teach a very broad variety of things. Not so much directly one to one with the composers, though I plan their program. But I find more of what I do there is coaching ensembles, and particularly, Bach cantatas, and overseeing perhaps one project with the composers. So we like to have them work with as many different people as they can when they come in.

And then, of course, I always do the same thing about searches. I think the most important thing about a responsible position like that is admissions. I put a lot of time and energy into the yearly sifting through 120 very, very good applications. I mean, Tanglewood applications are international and extremely high quality. And particularly when James Levine was music director, when he was involved in so many departments at Tanglewood, we were, I think, functioning at a very high level of selection for who was coming.

**INTERVIEWER:** I can imagine. Now, composing at MIT, composing music you've been commissioned for many events and celebrations and commemorations, over the past few decades-- do you have some favorite MIT commissions that you've done?

**HARBISON:** Well, I think my only actual commission was the-- when Marcus Thompson asked me to write my wind piece for the MIT Chamber Society. That's back in 1982 or 1983. Because the rest were invitations, but not--

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. I should be careful with my words.

**HARBISON:** We composers are quite exact about that. So in a sense, when you're invited, you become a volunteer. And I would say quite a few of these events are because my friend Clarice Snyder has a way of thinking of me for odd ideas. Like, it was really her idea that the school song ought to have a jazz arrangement. And I liked it a lot, because I like-- the song was very suitable, I thought.

**INTERVIEWER:** The initial song--

**HARBISON:** The old song.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah.

**HARBISON:** Yeah. Everything depended on what kind of song it was, and--

**INTERVIEWER:** And it wasn't a total break to do what you did?

**HARBISON:** Well, it was-- I think it-- I like the way [? Rollet ?] played in the sesquicentennial. And I think it's come back for other iterations on other occasions we've done it. I did an orchestra arrangement of it for the Pops, and it's been around now. And we have it on our CD. It leads off our CD, in fact. And then, Fred Harris and I kind of came up-- I came up with the idea, I think, of the Raphael Rumba, which the funniest part of that--

**INTERVIEWER:** This is about President Reif?

**HARBISON:** Yeah. The funniest part of that was when it was played, we performed at the inaugural, and then they made a video of the inaugural, and the producer of the video had the really wild idea of just continuing the rumba as a kind of a soundtrack for the whole inaugural. So you see the President of Harvard is solemnly presenting some kind of plaque or something, and the rumba is just percolating in the background. That was a total delight. A very comic effect.

**INTERVIEWER:** I'll have to see that.

**HARBISON:** So that was-- that piece has also had a couple revivals, and we also put that on our CD. It is sung by the vocal jazz group. So those were both fun occasions to get in on. And I've written some shorter pieces for occasions where a lot of us are representing ourselves as composers. I've just written a new one for the Ed Cohen Memorial Concert that we're doing this winter.

And that's always fun to do. I think one of the pleasures of those concerts is that we have so many good composers. They are very strong concerts. And some of our nicest occasions, we're sort of hearing each other's pieces. We had a couple of times-- such a concert has occurred in London recently. A whole bunch of us all having pieces on the same program. But yeah, that's really fun to do.

And of course, I've volunteered further to do a great deal of writing for vocal jazz. It's quite a catalogue. I'm trying to figure out now what to do with it. But I wrote some of my own tunes for them. We had one event in which my reject pop tunes, the ones I was going to throw out, I handed out as a project for them to write words and they did. And so we had eight songs of my rejects, all sung with and words by members of vocal jazz, which was a fascinating, kind of lunatic idea.

**INTERVIEWER:** Nice to know nothing's going in the trash, right?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, nothing goes in the trash. And we had SIN play that, the Strength in Numbers. So that was yeah... and I've written, now, standards, real sort of pop song standards. I think there's something like 20 of those for vocal jazz, which I would like to get into good shape and maybe print as a volume.

**INTERVIEWER:** You received the Killian Award in 1994. In the citation the committee cites MIT's institutional flexibility, that it could provide a matrix within which a talent such as yours could flourish. So looking back, what drew you to MIT in the first place, and you know, was there a reputation of music department and offerings in the '60s that drew you here? And how has that changed in this almost half century?

**HARBISON:** Well, Klaus Leibmann was a big factor for me in just being delighted to come here, because he had such an idealistic thought about how to teach the arts in an institution like this. I remember him saying to me, his goal-- he says, we should teach it the way they are teaching physics. This should not be an embroidery or a kind of recreational presentation. The only way we will get a foothold here, he says, is to teach our subject as seriously as we regard it. So that appealed to me tremendously.

And then his textbook was used for all the introduction sections, and I love the textbook. It was one of the few in existence which was so much not a reductionist idea. I mean, it was extremely ambitious about what it wanted to teach about music. So Klaus had a big imprint on how this got started, because he came from Germany, he was at the Black Mountain group in the summers. And he was a very distinguished gentleman indeed. And he studied with Paul Hindemith.

And his idea was, if we are going to be in a technical Institution, the only way that it works is that we, however we have to do it, convince whoever is running the place that our subject's going to be taught rigorously and with a lot of imagination. So I felt very comfortable in what he asked me to do. What was hard as a young faculty member, which has changed a lot since then, was teaching three different courses every term for a number of years. Because just keeping one's brain streamer in so many different directions-- The upside for me was we had no historians, so my propensity for liking history got a chance to-- they said, "We don't have anybody, you teach the Bach and Mozart." That was great. I enjoyed that a lot.

**INTERVIEWER:** So, music resources at MIT includes the Lewis Music Library, the Archives, the Listening Room, the online collection, et cetera. Noteworthy is the beautiful staircase in the Lewis Music Library, and it's decorated with a piece of music, a canon that you wrote for the library's inauguration in 1996. Do you want to tell us about that specific piece, and how you like having it as such a visually significant and permanent part of the library?

**HARBISON:** Yeah, I really was grateful to be involved in that. The architect came to me and said that she had the idea of a bunch of panels which were being-- it would be of pretty much uniform size on a curve. And then a gap for the stairway to go up, and then a continuation of those panels. She said she would like to have a piece of music incised, that is, sandblasted into the glass, that would be legible from the floor.

And so this was an intricate tailoring issue, which appealed to me a lot, I could see this would need to be full of a number of different elements. I would try to come up with a visual idea such that the panels related to each other. Even if you knew nothing about music, you could see a pattern changing but repeating a certain element all the way across, which is the nature of the canon. And I found a clef, old clef version of the canon, which would allow this kind of graphic to be quite elegantly visible. Then I practiced looking at it from down below, about 10 feet, because it had to be read from a certain distance effectively.

Then I decided to use as a cantus firmus an appropriate biblical passage about artistic creation. A very old one. Then I decided to plan the phrasing such that the gap was a natural pause, which meant at the very exact tailoring of the phrase, I think, 13 a panel, length. Which is not-- it didn't turn out to be an easy musical pause to motivate. And then I needed to kind of form a coda, of completing the piece, this much shorter passage at the end.

Then I had the opportunity to record the piece with the Emmanuel Choir, which is actually-- you can get it on the website from the library and listen to it. So many, many factors, not least the plan of needing to make sure this is legible visually, which meant that the content of the music, that is, the busyness of the music, also had to be a part of the control. So having that many factors, I occasionally enjoy some sort of a musical proposition which involves arbitrary and multiple restrictions. So every time I see it, I get, probably, an inordinate amount of kick from thinking of all the stuff that had to be thought about. And they gave me, as a souvenir, the trial panel incised by the sandblaster, which I have in my own home, which is actually a nice keepsake from the whole project.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you said it had to be visible because sometimes performers in the space--

**HARBISON:** No.

**INTERVIEWER:** Or, why-- I mean, just--

**HARBISON:** It had to be-- for the patron of the library who comes to the library is going to be seeing it from certain vantages. And the few that can read old clefs could actually probably hear something about how the piece sounds. And then of course, the nice idea that Peter, the chief librarian, had of having an audible sample available, which, if anybody is curious to hear how the piece sounds, can hear it.

**INTERVIEWER:** I'm curious about-- just looking back at the arc of how music at MIT has evolved over the past, well, longer than you've been here, but even during your time-- do you think music instruction and music creation at MIT is headed in any new direction? Are you doing cutting edge work with Media Lab, for example? Are there any things that are being explored?

**HARBISON:** Well, music at MIT is much more aware now, I think, of trying to work with various aspects of technology. The newest appointment of Eran Egozy, who was one of our students some time ago-- who is coming to us, actually, as a very good practicing musician, but also from the technology game world-- is an example, I think, of a new awareness that's important for our students who are lucky to get such a very fine musician to be this kind of bridge.

But of course, the way I think of MIT arts, is also that we need to be extremely convincing to the students in a non-technology direction. Because the easy part for them is to figure out how to use the latest electrical device. The hard part for them, I think, is to understand all these very, very uncodifiable, mysterious things that go on in the production of an art down through centuries. So we need to be able to do both. And I think that that's the idea.

But from the very start, the first search I was involved in, just after being hired, Klaus Leibmann's conviction that we had to be involved in computer music. And the search that that brought Barry Vercoe was the one that occurred within that first year I was here. So it was-- certainly Klaus was aware from his extremely traditional grounding in music that MIT needed to be completely at the lead in the area of technology.

**INTERVIEWER:** Too many other thoughts about the future? Or do you want to talk about any of your other outside work? At festivals, or--

**HARBISON:** One of the things I've noticed about the changing face of MIT-- MIT arts were for a long time regarded by a number of people, particularly the non-participant ones, as being recreational, as being a way to relax after studying. And one of the things that we had to convey is that when playing in an orchestra or playing in a string quartet, there were a lot of extremely precise skills and extremely powerful habits that needed to be cultivated. So that there was a gradual move from what I would call the club system, with no entrance requirements for participation in a musical group, to one that's guided by professional coaches. And the last vestige of that would be probably the wind ensemble, the most recent professionalized under our own tutelage institution, which continues to run parallel to the last vestige of the club system, which is the concert band, which is a non-audition, show up without requirement group.

Two different philosophies, representing, I would say, MIT past and MIT present. Obviously, there's lots of room at MIT for unsupervised, un-faculty infested activities. I mentioned, of course, the acapella groups are a prime example, but also the many music theater groups and Gilbert and Sullivan. All of that exists on the you-do-it-on-your-own-time as students.

But we have made the point over the years that it is necessary for a certain standard of inquiry to exist in the arts for professional guidance and contact with great professionals from outside. All this has to really be part of it to be really deeply enough engaged with what these disciplines are. And that's where MIT is in the process still of going, but has been going, I think, consistently, over 50 years is towards-- this is the scary word-- but towards the professionalization of the discipline.

**INTERVIEWER:** And what about you? Are you working on something now? I guess you're always working on something.

**HARBISON:** Yeah. I'm working on something. As it happens, I'm writing a piece for the gentleman who turns out to be our newest faculty member, who, when I began the piece, wasn't. Eran Egozy, who was one of our students back in the day, who's created Harmonics, along with Alex Rigopoulos, this very successful computer games firm, and is now going to be teaching music technology for us. And he's going to play my new trio, which I wrote for him at the end of this season. He still keeps his clarinet playing in very good shape, which, of course, I approve of beyond belief. And I love hearing him play. And he's played a lot of my music down through the years. So he will be the kind of performer I'm most happy to write for.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you're going to continue working in festivals, working for-- you do a lot of your composition, is it not, at the Token Creek Chamber Music Festival?

**HARBISON:** Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** In Madison? Will that be ongoing?

**HARBISON:** I would hope Token Creek is ongoing. Tanglewood will probably be less. I think this summer, I'm going to reduce my Tanglewood activity to just the Bach coaching side of it. And I think that probably will be the future there. I'd like to have a little bit more time to do things like a festival I used to do quite a bit, Songfest, where I work exclusively with singers quite a bit on my music and some of it on Bach. And that's been a very fruitful place for me to be in the past. And I'm interested in going back there, even though it's no longer on Malibu Beach. It's moved to downtown L.A. but nevertheless, I believe in them.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, thank you. If you have any other things you'd like--

**HARBISON:** No. That seems fine.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. Thank you so much, Professor John Harbison for taking the time.

**HARBISON:** You're welcome.

**INTERVIEWER:** It's been great. Thank you.