

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CELLO MUSIC COLLECTIONS

INTERVIEWEES: Laszlo Varga (LV)

INTERVIEWERS: William (Mac) Nelson (MN), and Joanna Hay (JH)

DATES: May 27-28, 2011

[Begin Tape 1 – May 27, 2011]

[At the home of Laszlo Varga, Sarasota, Florida. The interview begins with Laszlo Varga speaking at the dining room table just after the arrival of interviewer William (Mac) Nelson and videographer Joanna Hay.]

LV: —holes in between.

MN: Sure. Sure.

LV: Which I would like to—

MN: Yes. Right.

LV: —fill up with.

MN: Now, do you think there are holes in your early life, or are the holes—

LV: I think my early years are very well covered.

MN: Ok.

LV: I would like to concentrate on my American life, and my marriage and so on.

MN: Sure. We'll do that.

LV: Oh yeah.

MN: But I think I—

[Film skips to an autographed photograph of Itzhak Perlman and Laszlo Varga]

LV: [unclear]

MN: Oh, that's alright. That's alright. We'll get you from the front. You still have quite a very full head of hair.

LV: I'm turning gray.

MN: Yeah.

LV: And it's not all white yet.

MN: Oh, no.

LV: [unclear]

MN: Well, I've got a bit of salt and pepper, as they say.

LV: Oh, yes. That's very nice.

MN: [chuckles]

[Film skips to Laszlo Varga]

LV: Oh, we're on. And the arrangement is there that the children—the three children—spent every alternate week with their father, and then other weeks, back with the mother. So every other week the house is full, with the three children and the fourth, our grandchild. But they're away for school.

MN: And that's your son, Michael, who lives in London? Right?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes. And what's your grandchild's name?

LV: Isabella.

MN: Isabella.

LV: And is she a Bella!

MN: [chuckles] And she's—What? —one and a half now? Something like that?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LV: Just about. Just about. She was born on December 9th, so it's almost half.

MN: So she was born a week after I was visiting you in '09, I think. I think she was on the way—any time—and she was born shortly afterward.

LV: But you had nothing to do with it.

MN: No! I was—I was across the water. [both laugh]

LV: Alright.

MN: Yes.

LV: Listen, if I—if I don't make dumb jokes, I am not happy. Everybody else is unhappy, but—[laughter]but I like to keep—

MN: Well, Laszlo, I love your jokes. I remember when we were—we were sitting together in Greensboro, and the speaker—we were listening to a lecture—

[Recording Interruption]

MN: Hard. I'd better stick with my guitar.

LV: Well, I have a parallel story, because I started guitar along with the cello, and I used to play quite—well, not perfectly, but I really enjoyed it very much. And it—The tuning is so different—

MN: Right.

LV: —from the fifths-apart cello—

MN: Right.

LV: —that it's—that it was a problem for me, but I got used to it. Just now, I—I was working on the 5th Suite of [Johann Sebastian] Bach which has a—Bach wrote it with a lower A string to G, so there's only a fourth between the D string and the—and the upper G. And that's very hard for me to get used to that, because I'm so imbedded with the fifths-apart tuning. But I—Bach was such a genius that that's the only piece where he requires this tuning, and when you play it that way, everything just falls in place.

MN: Yes.

LV: If it was played on the normal tuning, that's a very artificial building of chords and so it's difficult. But that way, if you can do it—and I couldn't because I have perfect pitch, and you know, when I—when I see a note that looks like an A, and it sounds a G, it makes me wild. [both chuckle] I don't believe it. But that's the only way to use it. And most people play it in the regular tuning—

MN: Yes.

LV: —and chords cannot be played as naturally on the cello, but there are other versions to do it. But the ideal is what Bach thought. So lately, after playing the cello for seventy years, I came back to the realization that Bach was right, writing it that way. But then I'm going back and forth because the regular tuning is still more natural for me.

MN: Well, you can have a friend come over and you can play the arrangement you made for two cellos.

[Recording Interruption]

LV: That requires the two low strings to be tuned down a half step each. So the cello is tuned low B, F sharp, D; it's already a B minor chord [unclear].

MN: Yes.

LV: And—Have you ever heard it?

MN: Yes. We have—We have your recording on LP [Long Play vinyl record].

LV: Yes. Right. Right.

MN: Yeah. Oh yeah. It's fabulous.

LV: [unclear]

MN: We made you copies because we're not sure we can trust you with the originals, sir.
[laughs]

LV: I know; I got copies. I know. I understand. I'll forgive you.

MN: I'm kidding you. Well, you know I'm working on my ability to transfer the LPs onto CD [compact disc]; preservation copies.

LV: Oh, God bless you.

MN: Yes. Yes.

LV: I have some tapes of certain works that—

[Recording Interruption]

MN: In fact—Now, do you have, you know, your—your—your tin CDs, that you have. Do you have copies here?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes. Good because I'm going to buy another set from you.

LV: Oh, God bless you!

MN: Yes. I am. I'm going—Yeah, there's one—we've made sure that we have one in the—

[Camera pans to a piano; Unclear conversation in background]

JH: Do you want to say hi?

MARKITA: Hi, camera! I'm Markita. [chuckles]

MN: And Markita, you help—you help Laszlo, don't you?

MARKITA: Yes, I do.

MN: And Lillian?

MARKITA: Yes, I do.

MN: Great.

MARKITA: Yeah, I've been helping him for the last month. It's been good.

VARGA: Markita, [unclear] in the movies.

MARKITA: I know. I love to been in the film. [all chuckle] I don't mind.

LV: Ok. See you.

MARKITA: Ok. I'll see you when you come down.

LV: Yes.

MN: You're wired now, Laszlo. [chuckles]

LV: Don't tape me on this slow walk. I am not too happy about this. You are welcome here too.

[Recording Interruption]

MN: Yes.

LV: And there are my [unclear] gallery, and I can translate every one of them.

MN: What a great picture, Laszlo.

[Telephone rings]

LV: Oh, excuse me.

[Personal telephone conversation redacted]

LV: See, this is how a worrier sounds.

MN: [laughs]

LV: But listen, do you want to have lights?

JH: Yes.

[Recording Interruption]

MN: —made this portrait of you?

LV: Yes.

MN: The gentleman who used to—

LV: Yes.

MN: —illustrate at Tanglewood?

[Tanglewood is a music venue located in Lenox, MA, and has been home to the Boston Symphony Orchestra since 1937.]

LV: Right, and he lives in Tanglewood, up nearby Lenox.

MN: Lenox.

LV: Yes, he's there now. But he made the drawing, yes. But that's not really me, by the way. My smile is missing.

MN: Yes.

LV: Just one second.

[Film skips to CDs]

LV: I'll do this later.

MN: Ok. Yeah. We can do that. We can do that. Absolutely.

LV: Oh, here is my copy of things.

MN: Yes, and we're going to make it—we're going to make it fatter, Laszlo.

LV: Is this a copy of yours?

MN: That's a copy of mine, yes.

LV: Yeah. That's what I thought. And—

MN: It looks like you've been marking it with your red pen.

LV: Oh, just little corrections.

MN: Yes.

LV: But I didn't really go through everything.

MN: Well, you already know the story.

LV: Yeah, so I don't know why—why I should correct it. [Chuckle] Oh!

JH: Hello.

LV: Well, that's an interesting—

JH: Light.

LV: Are you moving the end of that little protrusion? [something falls in background] Oops!

MN: I'll get that.

JH: Oops! Sorry about that.

MN: But now we'll have the smile. [chuckles]

LV: Oh, I have to put on my smile. Alright, so you have to tell me a joke.

JH/MN: [chuckling]

LV: Shall I ensconce myself comfortably?

JH: Can you tell me—Can you tell me about some of these pictures on the walls?

LV: Well, I'll be glad to if you—if you want to. All those things, mainly the big conductors that I experienced in the Philharmonic, with the point of ex—exclusion of [George] Szell. Are you—You don't want to point [to] them?

JH: Yes. I'll go over there now.

[Camera pans to photographs on wall]

LV: Alright.

JH: And then I'll listen to you.

LV: Alright. Well, I can tell you most of those are inscribed to me. Starting on the upper left is Heitor Villa-Lobos. You've heard of him? And next—next to it is Barbirolli. What's his first name?

MN: Sir John.

LV: Sir John. Thank you. And under it is Pablo Casals and two other famous cellists; one of them are me.

JH: Oh, there you are together; the three of you.

LV: Yes, actually, we accompanied Casals as an encore with twelve cellos, and I forget what it was. And then—Oh, there it is, The Borodin Trio, of which I was a member the last seven years. This is a married couple; the violinist [Rostislav] Dubinsky and Luba [Edlina-Dubinsky], the pianist. This is André Cluytens, a French conductor who was conducting us. And I have no idea who this is. [pointing to a picture of himself]

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Here is Casals accompanied by us—my wife—and he called me: “A un gran violonchelista y amigo, Laszlo Varga!” signed Pablo Casals. Pretty good. Here's another famous friend, Itzhak Perlman, with me, playing *Kodály: Duo* in Aspen [Colorado]. And let's see, here's Bruno Walter. Here is Erika Morini. Have you heard of her? She was a very famous violinist who played every year with the New York Philharmonic, beautifully. And I used to play string quartets with her at her home. This is Arthur Rubinstein. And this is nobody. [chuckles] This is not inscribed. This is my cello, backwards. Here is the front. Looks better.

JH: Beautiful.

LV: By the way, this is the artwork of a very close friend of ours. It's a lovely, little Italian scene; village scene. Can you see it?

JH: The blue and white?

LV: Yes.

JH: Is it embroidery?

LV: Yes. Take a close look at it. It's stitchery. She died a long time ago.

Now, who do we have here? You've heard of Pierre Monteux, with the mustache? And here was my first boss, Dimitri Mitropoulos, who engaged me to the Philharmonic, and he was the director for seven years. And after that came this young man, Leonard Bernstein. This also has an inscription but I don't think it will show up on your machine. This—Bernstein. And this is Casals again. Are you trying to avoid the reflection?

JH: Yes.

LV: I see. This is Guido—Guido Cantelli, a young protégé of Arturo Toscanini who came to conduct the Philharmonic, and I was soloist with him several times until, at age thirty-two, he was in an air crash in Paris, coming to New York to conduct us. He died at the age of thirty-two. Very, very excellent, talented, wonderful guy. Now, here is another great conductor, conducting 247 cellists.

JH: Oh!

LV: Can you imagine? It happens to be me.

MN: He must be one of the immortals. That's what I was thinking.

LV: Mortals. One of the mortals.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But this was a Cello Congress which I always, very frequently attended, and here, 247 of them. Can you imagine? Here is Paul Paray from Paris. Are you with me?

JH: No, hold on. I'm still on the Cello Congress.

MN: Yeah. That's a lot of cellists to get into one picture.

JH: Ok.

LV: Don't forget, 247, even though some doesn't show. So this is Paul Paray from Paris; a very nice gentleman; good conductor. Here is Bernstein again, and it happens to be me sitting there right behind him. He was giving one of his famous lectures, usually to young people, and he always made us—laughing, and the photographer caught me laughing at

my colleagues. Talking about Bernstein, he had the New York Philharmonic South American Tour. Getting in the plane here is Bernstein and his wife, and I'm here—oh, here—here I am too. So it's valid. We talked about Paul Paray. This is in Aspen. Aaron Copland is conducting, and I played the *Schubert: Concerto*. And this was one of my trios. We played a lot in California.

MN: Nice hat.

LV: Yeah. Fun. Oh, by the way, if you thought this was an immense amount of cellists—247—here is a thousand cellists in Japan someplace. I don't know whether you can see it sufficiently. But the conductor had to be ten foot high, standing on an elevator so that people would see him. Can you imagine? A thousand cellists in Japan.

JH: Wow.

LV: I think it's—I told you this was—And this is my Michael.

MN: And his dog.

LV: Yes, the dog is not my child.

MN: [laughs]

LV: I think we've [got] another picture on this side. But if you have some film—Oh, that's right, it doesn't go with film.

JH: I do actually. This does have tape.

LV: Alright, I don't know whether you—Well, let's continue with our musical friends. Do you have enough light here?

MN: Do you want me to move this?

JH: Yes.

MN: I'm going to move your chair, Laszlo.

LV: Alright. Listen, I don't think—No bulb. No bulb. So here, why don't you position yourself so I am not in your way. Tell me when you need some rest.

JH: [chuckles] I'm alright. Ok. So—

LV: So let's start here. This is Fritz Reiner, fellow Hungarian, but don't hold it against him.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Interestingly, when I was in New York, the most famous conductors were George Shuly, Fritz Reiner, George Szell, and I think a few other Hungarians.

JH: A lot of Hungarians.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LV: There was a Hungarian invasion. And then I became a conductor too. I was already a conductor in Hungary, but I had my own New York Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble. Yeah, I always formed the groups. Now, let's see. Here is Gregor Piatigorsky.

JH: Piatigorsky.

LV: And that's the Vorgers[?]; Vorger and Mrs. Vorger.

MN: Aren't they lovely?

LV: And under it there's our trio. Again, I think you saw the trio over there in different—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JH: Same three.

MN: Is that Borodin Trio?

LV: No. No. No. That was just David Abel, Sylvia Jenkins and me, and that was our permanent trio.

MN: Yes.

LV: But this was another trio with Daniel Kobialka and—and Paul Hersh. I don't know whether you came across the Hersh family of musicians. This is Paul—This is Ralph—No, Paul Hersh, the son of Ralph Hersh. Both of them are violists, and famous ones. He—this one—is not only a violist, who was in many quartets and sort, but he's a brilliant pianist.

MN: Oh.

LV: And here, this trio was the only one that was both string trio and piano trio.

JH: Oh.

MN: Oh.

LV: Because he was the switch-hitter.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And excellent on both instruments.

MN: Wow, that's an accomplishment.

LV: And now, here is the Borodin Trio.

MN: Ok. Gotcha.

LV: Did you run out of film?

JH: No, not yet.

LV: Oh, are you focusing on that?

JH: I was looking at the Borodin.

LV: Yes.

JH: And now above. Who's above, to the right?

LV: Oh! That's Isaac Stern. An old friend. And here is the New York Philharmonic Cello Quartet.

MN: Oh, yes! Do I remember correctly that you got your start with Puccini?

LV: Not Puccini.

MN: I was thinking there was a quartet in Taska. A cello—

LV: Oh! That's true, but that's—that's original.

MN: k Ah, yes.

LV: That doesn't need any translation.

MN: [chuckling] Ok.

LV: Oh, yes. It's a famous—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MN: It's lovely.

LV: Oh, yes. I used to play—

[Recording Interruption]

LV: Let's see, who else is here? Did I say Thomas Schippers? And I don't know whether you can possibly photograph this, but this ballerina is Mstislav Rostropovich. [Laughter] Take a—Take a close look at it.

MN: [laughing]

LV: He dressed as a ballerina.

JH: Oh, no!

LV: He came—I think it was Isaac Stern was playing an outdoor concert and he came to take a bow with him.

JH: That is hysterical.

LV: It is.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Does it come through?

JH: A little bit. Yeah, it does. I think I have it enough.

LV: Alright.

MN: But the idea of Rostropovich as ballerina—[laughing]

JH: That's very funny.

LV: By the way, if you will remind me, I have several stories with Rostropovich and me.

JH: Okay. Okay.

LV: We skipped just one, whose Elliott Carter with me.

JH: Which is this? Which is that? Oh! Here.

LV: Up there.

JH: Yep. This—This colored—

LV: Yes. That's—I don't know whether you can really see it. Elliott Carter, because I played his Cello Sonata and he was very grateful to me. Am I giving you trouble?

JH: No, it's alright. I just need to adjust here. I just want to make sure I have this.

[Noise in background]

LV: Is that your machine?

MN: No, it's the yardman.

LV: Oh, the yardman.

JH: It doesn't want to give me a good—

LV: Thank you. We don't need any yard.

JH: There we are.

LV: Oh, yes. That's nice.

JH: Now, tell me again—I'm not sure I got—Tell me about this picture of Isaac Stern. The black and white one.

LV: Well, there's no story. He just handed it to me. You know, I didn't take it, or—

JH: And you've played with him?

LV: Oh, yes, many times. Chamber music. Mostly at that place that I mentioned, and his name was—it will come to me. By the way, just above—if you can take a picture—that's the original Borodin Quartet.

JH: Hang on.

LV: Next to that—Yes, that one.

JH: Here we are.

LV: That's—That's the Borodin Quartet without me. But Mr. Dubinsky, here, after that quartet disbanded, then he formed the trio with me. But I wasn't a member of the quar—Oh, yes, wait a second. I did play with the quartet sometimes to substitute the cellist who, after one concert, drove a very nice, young woman home, and while pawing[?] her, he got into an accident and injured three fingers. So they called me suddenly just to substitute with them the next day in the mid-west someplace. So I had to fly out and I played with them for three weeks. Is my text being recorded?

JH: Yes, that's the important part.

LV: This is later on. For the last seven years of his life, I was the cellist of the Borodin Trio. And that last picture is—is—Who the hell is it? [chuckles]

MN: Elmar.

LV: Elmar! Elmar Oliveira. Yes, a very fine, young violinist; Elmar. And here's another trio of mine.

JH: Which one?

MN: She's behind you, Laszlo.

JH: I'm behind you now.

LV: Here. This one.

JH: This one.

LV: Yes. And this is my Cali—California Cello Quartet. And this was the New York Cello Quartet. And—Oh, we didn't talk about these pictures. Can you see? Am I in your way?

JH: No, you're just right.

LV: This is Josef Krips, a conductor who was conducting us playing the *Beethoven: Triple Concerto*. Here is me, John Colianno, and in the background—it's hardly visible—is Leonard Bernstein playing the piano. And Krips was conducting it, but he is not on this picture. And this is—I am with János Starker who is a childhood colleague and friend ever since. Here, this was a New York Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble. This is all instruments—violins and winds and so on—with Mitropoulos in here in the center. And here is the Léner Quartet with which I started my career. And if you're here, this is one of my pianist colleagues with whom I've made many of the recordings, called Zoya Shuhatovich; Shuhatovich; a Russian girl—woman. And this is my granddaughter!

MN: [chuckles]

JH: Is it Isabella?

LV: Isabella. Isn't she Bella? You know what Bella means?

JH: Beautiful.

LV: Beautiful.

JH: Can you kiss it—Can you kiss her picture again? I missed it. [chuckles]

LV: Back or this way.

MN: [chuckles]

JH: Front. Just like you did.

LV: Hi! [Kisses picture] She is lovely. This is an old picture. Fairly old. And this is the father, but an old picture. This is my—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

JH: Who is that?

LV: —my youngest son, Michael. I have better pictures of him. Ok, well.

JH: Well done.

LV: Here's my sister, but I don't know whether you want to see those.

JH: This is your sister?

LV: Yes.

MN: Klari.

LV: Clara or Klari.

JH: Is this her as well?

LV: Yes, all of these are her.

JH: Nice.

LV: Including those. Yeah. She lived till eighty-nine, and she died in '89.

JH: Oh.

LV: Wait a second, that doesn't work. She died in—

MN: She died in '09.

LV: '09, yes, of course.

MN: '09? Ok.

JH: So she was—

LV: She was—

JH: Nineteen twenty.

LV: Yes, born in 1920, correct.

JH: What year were you born?

LV: '24, A.D. [all chuckle] Make a note. Ok, well. Here's my daughter, Robin, with a baby. See, she went to London to see the baby. I couldn't.

JH: Mmmmm.

LV: And my wife couldn't, but [unclear] happen. This is my wife, and there are some others there.

JH: That's a nice picture.

LV: Your machine must be tired taking all these pictures.

JH: [chuckles] Oops! Sorry Mac.

MN: That's ok.

LV: Just to show you, this is Michael again, and some *old* pictures of family, youngsters, and we when we were young. And there are lots of others. I love to be sur—surrounded with pictures.

JH: And what about these?

LV: Well, here, this is my wife, my daughter Robin, and Michael. And this is—this is my oldest son, Peter, and Robin; Peter, but a long time ago. And here is Peter now; he's fifty-eight. And other—This is my Robin and also Peter, my oldest son. This one is the same, and he was about six or seven, I don't know. And here is my wife doing her best art: sculpture. She was a ceramic sculptor, and painter and—and fashion designer.

JH: Well, who is this?

[Camera pans to photograph of Laszlo Varga]

LV: I wonder.

MN: He's got a great smile.

LV: They caught me mid-word—mid-sentence, I think. Or else, maybe I'm singing, I don't know. I can't hear a thing.

JH: [chuckles]

LV: This is—This is Michael and this is Peter and Robin. But this is not a good picture of them.

MN: I see.

LV: And that's my unruly desk. Now, I was going to put your—your records together. One, three, four, five, six, seven, and ten. [Varga going through boxes of CDs] So mixed up. Six, seven, three, four; those [unclear] are there. Eight, nine.

MN: Well, you know, once you get all ten of them—at your leisure—I must have a greeting from you on—on one of the—the—

LV: Oh!

MN: Yes, just a—a smiling signature.

LV: If I remember how to spell it.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Here, I think it's correct except two, which is here. Alright, here is a complete set. We'll find a bag for this somewhere, but please—

MN: I can put them in my bag, Laszlo.

LV: Can you?

MN: I've got a bag. And as I say, at our leisure, I'll have you inscribe one to me with a note if that's ok.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LV: Oh, yes. I'll be glad to.

MN: We have—We have bigger fish to fry right now.

LV: Right, but we won't forget it.

MN: No. No.

LV: And I would like to present you with a couple of them, at least.

JH: I would love that, but I can buy them. Either way.

MN: Yes.

LV: Oh, are you rich?

MN/JH: [both laugh]

MN: Maybe she'll take us to dinner.

LV: Oh, Boy! Alright, now what?

[Recording Interruption]

JH: Can you tell me a little bit about the cello?

LV: Yes. It's made by Claude Victor Rambaux. Like Rambo.

MN: [chuckles]

JH: Like Rambo. Rambo with an i.

LV: Yeah. R-A-M-B-A-U-X. You know, the French loved to use extra letters for everything. R-A-M-B-A-U-X. That's it, Rambaux. Almost like rainbow, but not quite.

JH: So how old is the cello?

LV: Older than you.

JH: [chuckles]

LV: Two hundred years.

JH: Two hundred years.

LV: Almost. 1846. That's a good vintage for cellos. I can, you know—I can turn it around so you can see the front. But it is good to sit down for a little while.

JH: Yes, I think we should. Look at the grain.

LV: I don't think it shows enough because not enough light. It might be better when you have your lights.

JH: Yes, it will.

[Recording Interruption]

MN: When did we eat?

LV: Alright.

MN: All day long. When did we eat? It was so good.

LV: You know, I will be very happy to invite you for that special Hungarian dish.

MN: So you say a friend—a friend brought it?

LV: No, we have a Hungarian lady here who makes a living, you know, providing good food to many people here, and it happens to be Hungarian.

MN: You know, Laszlo, when I first met you in 2005, one of the very first things you told me—we were going out to dinner—and you said how much you liked good, plain food, and that your wife prepared it very beautifully. You were bragging about your wife's cooking first thing.

LV: She was an excellent cook, but lately—you know, we are the same age; eighty-six plus. Don't listen.

MN: A fine vintage.

[Recording Interruption]

HA: Oh, this instrument itself is—

LV: It has an extra high string. I don't know whether you are familiar with the four cello strings?

JH: Yes.

LV: You are? Alright. So in addition to the C, G, D, A, which is normal, another fifth higher, E string, but I don't have any more of my five string cellos. I had two actually. I sold them. And—But that enables me to play all kind of things.

JH: So is the instrument itself smaller as well?

LV: Yes. Yes. It's about a three-quarter sized cello.

JH: I see. So you have that higher tone—

LV: Yes.

JH: —to go with the higher string.

LV: You want to hear it?

JH: Sure.

LV: Let's see.

LV: I will play a beautiful Bach piece that's originally written for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord. We played it—Instead of a Gamba, I played it on a five-string cello with cembalo/harpsichord. And I'll put this on.

JH: Lovely.

[Music begins playing]

LV: This is a cello piccolo. This is about the range of the Gamba. The Gamba has a high D string, and this has a high E string, so just one. Are you—Are you videotaping this sound? [chuckles]

JH: And you.

LV: And me. Shall I sing?

MN: That's right. It's a newly discovered manuscript for Viola da Gamba, cembalo, and narrator.

LV: [chuckles] By the way, this is the first of the ten series record. The first four is only Bach. But I would like to give you the tenth of the series, which is something special. May I have this dance?

JH: [chuckles]

LV: Alright. I won't play any more of this.

JH: Tell me which—Tell me the track—CD and track number.

LV: What? This is track seven.

JH: On CD one?

LV: Yes. Okay. But I want to play—Oh, I want to present you with number ten.

MN: Shall I move?

LV: No, you can stay where you are. If I find it. Ten; bullseye. This is something very special. This is the Beethoven Violin Concerto played on the five-string cello, which nobody in their right mind—or his right mind—could do. Or would do. I just want to play—This is for cello and piano; this version. Not with orchestra, but I just want to put this—

JH: Ok.

[Music begins playing]

LV: This is the tutti and the—No. Do you happen to notice the concerto? It's the only Beethoven Violin Concerto. I—Would you believe it that I played on the little cello, but I played it also with orchestra, which nobody in his right mind would. I wasn't in my right mind either. [chuckles] Soon comes the cello.

MN: You're still having your coffee.

LV: [all chuckle] Right. Now, this really utilizes the little cello—oh, way to the heavens. Oh, you know it well. See, the range is much bigger. Are you a musician too? Violin? Oh! Then this is—Do you play this?

JH: I [try to?].

LV: See, the whole thing is an octave lower. That is impossible on the regular cello, but a fifth string enables it. Of course, I have to think of every interval is a little bit smaller on the— on the little cello, and one has to adjust and it's very difficult. Alright. We don't have to listen to it. I will give this to you. Okay.

JH: And that was disc ten?

LV: Yes.

JH: And that's the Beethoven?

LV: Beethoven and Andante Movement Of The Piano Concerto in C Major by [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart.

MN: Ah, yes!

LV: Which is great!

MN: I think you played that one at—

LV: I did.

MN: I remember. Laszlo came out and he said, "The program says—" something like—you said it was five easy pieces.

LV: [chuckles]

MN: But then you said—

LV: It's really only four.

MN: There are only four and none of them are easy. [MN and LV chuckle] And you also—you finished with the Kodály at that concert—

LV: Oh, the Garante dances?

MN: Yes. And I have a friend in Greensboro who was on the front row, cheering and standing, and he insists to this day that you are a gypsy.

LV: Oh! I must be.

MN: [laughs]

JH: Hungarian. He's a Hungarian gypsy.

LV: Well, I grew up with that piece, you know, because we always played it with the Budapest Symphony [Orchestra], and really played it in a Hungarian style. And my arrangement is very close to it. I grew up with this, and Kodály was my teacher; one of them. So it's—Lady, this is yours.

JH: Oh! Thank you so much. Oh, what a treat! Thank you.

LV: And I'll give you this one.

[Recording Interruption; Camera skips to Varga]

JH: So you have to present it to me.

LV: Alright.

JH: Hang on. Wait. Wait. Ok.

LV: My pleasure to present you with my—two of my recordings. I hope you'll enjoy it. And we just tried each of them and I think—

[End Tape 1—Beginning Tape 2]

[Extraneous conversation redacted]

MN: Okay. I'm Mac Nelson. I'm here with Laszlo Varga at his home in Sarasota, Florida. Videographer Joanna Hay is with us too. And it's Friday, the twenty-seventh of May 2011. And Laszlo, we were just talking over lunch about your arrival here in the United States, and after the Léner Quartet had to disband because of John Léner's death—

LV: Right.

MN: —you were here in the U.S. and you weren't yet a member of the Union. And you told me a great story.

LV: Well, if you want to hear it again. Let's see. I arrived and right away I settled down. I took an apartment in—I took a room in a big apartment on Broadway in Manhattan. And a nice Jewish family, the grandmother who happened to have some on and off springs[?], and just going [unclear], thinking ahead a little bit, I—she invited her little granddaughter over, and soon I married her.

MN: Yes. So that was your first marriage?

LV: That was my first marriage. She was very lovely, young, naïve girl with musical talents; she was a good singer. She used to appear in high school productions as a lead in Gilbert and Sullivan.

MN: Yes.

LV: I don't know which one.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And anyway, I was—we were married for about a year and a half, but we broke up because just—we really weren't meant for each other.

MN: Right. And how long was that after you—was that as soon—very soon after you arrived here in the U.S.?

LV: Well, I—I think our marriage was about a year later.

MN: Okay.

LV: But that was my first Manhattan place, and it was—

MN: Yes. What year would that have been?

LV: '48, Fall. I arrived in September '48.

MN: Okay.

LV: And I got this apartment—I mean, just—I rent a room there, and they considered me family right away. Very nice people.

MN: Yes.

LV: And you know, I was—I got married without too much thinking. I was too young, and she was even younger. So we were both inexperienced, and eventually it had to break up.

MN: Yes.

LV: But soon after—You asked me for a certain reason?

MN: Oh, right. I was interested in the—your experience as a house cellist and all the musicians that you met.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LV: Oh, that's right.

MN: Yes.

LV: Yes. Well, that was a long season of absolutely no—for nothing for me to do professionally because I wasn't allowed to do anything because I wasn't a member of the New York Union. You had to establish six months residence in New York for qualifying, and that was the whole season, so I was just yawning and doing nothing. But a friend of mine who I met heard about this very rich man who was the main protector, or—

MN: Patron?

LV: —patron—Thank you—of Isaac Stern, has weekly session of Chamber music, and through Isaac Stern inviting the greatest visiting or living artists—musicians—in New York every week to come and practice. And the boss—the—the patron—was the usual second violinist for everybody.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: So he played. And they needed a house cellist, and I, with my experience, qualified.

MN: Yes.

LV: And so, he was welcoming me, and I welcomed the situation because I had a chance to meet the greatest of the world; like Nathan [Mironovich] Milstein, [Jascha] Heifetz, and Franchiscati, and every one of the famous visiting artists. And violist [William] Primrose was there.

MN: Primrose, yes.

LV: And Piatigorsky occasionally. And Leonard Bernstein played the piano with—in quartets and quintets. I had an introduction like no other could have.

MN: Wow.

LV: I met everybody, and—There is one funny part of it. I was to go there at eight o'clock, in this beautiful, palatial apartment in Central Park West. And it happened on a certain day. And people began to filter in from eight o'clock on. Many guests to listen, but with many players, but nobody wanted to play because there was a big television show on between 8:00 and 9:00, and everybody was packed there in front of the television set watching and laughing. They were—you know.

MN: Yes.

LV: I think it was Sid Caesar, *[Your] Show of Shows*.

[Your Show of Shows was a live 90-minute variety show airing from 1950-1954, featuring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca.]

MN: Oh.

LV: It was the big thing. And I didn't understand any English. [both chuckle] So I was angry at everybody because—"Come on! Let's play!" All this high—high uh—high-level, high-priced musicians are here and all they watched was television. And I wanted to play!

MN: [laughs]

- LV: But by nine o'clock they began to un—unfold their instruments, and then we began to play until two o'clock in the morning and—you know, with different groups—different combinations. And I ended up, usually, the only cellist, so—
- MN: Yes. It was mostly violinists, I think you said.
- LV: Yes. Those were the ones who were Isaac Stern's colleagues and friends.
- MN: Sure.
- LV: It was mainly for the famous violinists, and pianists.
- MN: Was that when you first met Isaac Stern?
- LV: Yes.
- MN: Right.
- LV: And then I played many times with him and with others, and even afterwards, you know, we remained quite—quite friendly. So those were memorable evenings.
- MN: Right.
- LV: And—
- JH: I have a question. How old—
- LV: Yeah?
- JH: How old were you when you came to America, and why did you come?
- LV: Good questions. I was twenty-four. And why did I come? Well, that's already written. I— I was invited to be the cellist of the most famous Hungarian quartet. They were together since 1920 or so, and they were already Americans and settled in New York. And their cellist had to leave suddenly—well, not sudden—but they were touring quite a bit, and the cellist's wife threatened with divorce if he went on another tour, and they were facing a big European tour and South American tour. And so, on the recommendation of our common chamber music teacher, Leo Weiner—who's famous all over—recommended me. I already saw in Budapest, the advertisement of The Léner Quartet concert; they were coming in 1946, Fall. And I was very glad that finally I'd have a chance to hear The

Léner Quartet. And as it turned out, I was the cellist who came to play that concert, because I was invited, and like I said, recommended. And when I heard about the invitation, I fell through the floor because I was—you know, that was the highest thing I would ever have think [*sic*], in music. And they were famous all over the world, and it was just something from heaven. And had great difficulty, because already Communist government, and I had great difficulty getting even a passport, let alone a permit to leave. I had to pull all kinds of—you know, try to pull some—

MN: Strings?

LV: —patrons who'd help me. And even that was—

MN: Sure.

LV: They—We agreed on the phone, from New York to Budapest, that they wanted me to be in Switzerland by September 1st of '46 to rehearse for about three months in Switzerland before we started the tour in the middle of November. And I tried everything to get the permits and everything that's necessary, but I was unsuccessful. September 1st passed. Nothing. October 1st. November 1st passed. Finally, working desperately, I got the permit, necessary things like passport, on November 3rd of '46. And our first concert in Switzerland was scheduled on November—Did I say November 3rd?

MN: Yes.

LV: Yes. So the first concert was scheduled in Switzerland in Lausanne, November 15th. So I took the Arlbergexpress that went through Budapest to Zurich. It's a two-day drive. Right. And finally, I was able to go on a trip and go through border crossings through Austria. Well, first I passed the Hungarian border and then I managed, because I had the papers. But then, within Austria, there were four sections; one American zone, a British zone, French Zone, and even Austrian zone. Can you imagine?

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And that means four border examinations. And in the middle of the night I was woken up. So—But I—I was worried about—That was totally the first trip outside of Hungary for me, and I was a greenhorn. And my language capability was limited to German, which I spoke because I studied that, and I studied in school. And I studied Latin, too, but that wasn't used; it wasn't usable. [LV and MN chuckle] Nobody spoke Latin; on the border especially.

So finally I arrived to Switzerland—Zurich—on the evening of the 5th of November, and the quartet was crossing over from Europe after I telegraphed them that finally I was able to leave. And they crossed over and they were waiting for me in Lausanne, and Léner telegraphed that they always stayed at the Hotel—Hotel—I forget the name.

MN: Yes. That's alright.

LV: A certain hotel—

MN: Yes.

LV: —before the war, but they were not there for several years. So I—I didn't—Tthe evening, I called up the manager in Zurich, and he was out gallivanting, partying someplace.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: His wife told me that he comes home about one o'clock. So I had to take a hotel in Zurich, and with a cello and heavy luggage, and—and I was totally inexperienced in traveling and hotels; I never stayed in a hotel. But I found a hotel nearby the station and I slept. And at eight o'clock I called up the manager—woke him up—and, “Oh yes!” He said—Oh, I tried to call the quartet at this hotel, and the telephone operator told me in impeccable German that that hotel went out of business four years ago. And Léner didn't know this because they weren't in Europe for those four years, during the war.

MN: Right.

LV: And he would[?] make sure that he took it for granted that that would be the hotel. But no. But the manager knew and said, “Oh, yes. They are in the Hotel Royale.”

So I didn't even call them from Zurich. I took the next train, and three hours later I arrived to Lausanne, took a taxi, and showed up at the Hotel Royale. And I go to the manager at the desk, “Excuse me. I'm looking for The Léner Quartet.”

“Oh, sorry sir. They are not here anymore.”

I said, “What do you mean? I just found out that they were staying here.”

He said, “They did till yesterday, but they left.”

And that means four customers, at least. Five, because Léner had a wife too. And I was on my last—I was ready to faint—tiring—and after two days of train travel, and taxi, and carrying—and he felt—he felt sorry for me because I looked like I was ready to drop.

So he said, “Oh, sir. I don't know where they are, really, but if I were you, you could start—you could try the hotel across the street; The Hotel Beau-Rivage.”

So I went there. Sure enough, they were there. As it happened, Léner always traveled with a little, cute fox terrier—or Welsh Terrier. And he was barking, I suppose, and somebody must have complained. And the manager mentioned it to them, and they said, “Well, if they don't want my dog, they don't want me!” And they up and left, angry.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Arguments. And so, that's why they ended up at the Hotel Beau-Rivage, which was the most gorgeous, luxury hotel right on the shore of Lake Lemman, or Lake of Geneva, I think is along—And I fell into this luxury and hotel. I had—My room was about four times as big as this, and with a balcony overlooking the lake, and you know, I felt like I was in the Queen's Palace. And that's how it started.

MN: Yes!

LV: And the Léner's were glad that finally I made it because the first concert was nine days away, and they didn't know whether I could hold the bow, let alone play.

MN: They had never—never heard you, had they?

LV: No.

MN: No.

LV: I was honored. So we began to rehearse very much; eight hours every day. And went through thirty different quartets, because in Switzerland we were scheduled for twenty-seven concerts in thirty-five days.

MN: Wow!

LV: Only in Switzerland. And the places are so close together that, you know, we cannot play the same program because, you know, the towns are ten kilometers apart sometimes, and people come from here or there. So it had to be thirty quartets of many different programs, and the first question was, “Which ones do you know?”

Well, I knew about twenty-six out of the thirty so there was no problem with that. But there was still others that I had never played. So we started playing the concerts, and everything went swimmingly. And—But about three weeks later we head out back to

Lausanne and there was a radio—radio broadcast scheduled the next day, and I happened to ask Léner, “Well, what is the program tomorrow?”

He said, “Well, Haydn *Quartet* and *The Ravel*.”

I said, “*The Ravel*! I've never played it in my life!”

He said, “But you said you did!”

I said, “I played the Debussy *Quartet*. I know it very well. But not *The Ravel*.”

You know, they are going together.

MN: Right.

0:21:44—0:40:02

LV: And it is a difficult [unclear]. You have to know everybody's part, because it's not something like just to play it through. It's very complicated. So we started rehearsing as much as we could, and I think I slept with the score under my pillow, and I studied that. We rehearsed till, seemingly, five minutes before the broadcast. And—But I learned it. I memorized it in that twenty-four hours.

MN: In twenty-four hours?

LV: Yes, because, you know, we were concentrating so much. I still remember it by heart.

MN: Wow!

LV: Even now.

MN: Wow!

LV: Because it was just rammed into my mind. And ever since, I love that work.

MN: Yes..

LV: And my favorite. But—So we went on those thirty quartets in those thirty-five days, and it was a concentrated beginning.

MN: Wow!

LV: And then we began to travel through Italy, all the way to the boot; Sicily. I had many interesting experiences, saw the greatest sites, even though we didn't have too much time to site-see.

MN: Yes.

LV: And then we went [on a] big tour of France, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Denmark, part of Germany. No, I didn't—I did not go to Germany at that time. But—And then in December, we found ourselves back in Budapest for that very date that I was going to hear The Léner Quartet. And I never heard The Léner Quartet ever since, because I was a member of it. [LV and MN chuckle]

MN: Laszlo, on that tour, I can only imagine that you were going through war-torn Europe.

LV: Yes.

MN: You must have seen the ravages of war all around you.

LV: Oh, yes. Well, first, Budapest was ravaged.

MN: Yes.

LV: But so were many other Italian towns. In Sicily, we played in Teatro Massimo, in—What is the big city in Sicily? The largest.

[The Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele is an opera house and opera company located on the Piazza Verdi in Palermo, Sicily]

JH: Par—

LV: Torino!

JH: Torino.

LV: No. Sorry. Torino is Italy.

JH: Par—Parma. Parma? No.

LV: Parma? No, no, no.

MN: I can't call it up. Do you see Mount Aetna from there? I'm trying to think.

LV: Well, we saw an Aetna—Aetna—

MN: Yes.

LV: Aetna. But we've played in several places in Sicily, but the first was in this big town—Palermo!

MN: Palermo!

LV: Palermo! We played in the opera house. It was filled. You know, this was right after the end of the war and the opera house was bombed, and the stage roof was bombed through and had a gaping hole. So the rest of the theatre was okay, but we had to play in front of an iron curtain; you know, that curtain that lowered to separate the stage?

MN: Yes.

LV: And we played in front of it, because this was winter, and the wind sometimes blow—blew through the roof and so on. And as we were playing some soft movements, pianissimo, all of a sudden a wind storm started and tipped off the scenery that was behind there against this metal curtain, and it was the biggest racket, while we were trying to play soft. Can you imagine? If the metal curtain weren't down, we would have died, possibly, or—

MN: Been injured. Right.

LV: Yes, been injured. It was such a big—Can you imagine the sound of this big scenery for the opera house and so on [unclear] tip off?

MN: And you kept right on?

LV: Oh, yes. We're not supposed to stop in the middle of a movement afterwards.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: So that was just to describe the war conditions.

MN: Yes.

LV: Then—From then, our next stop was Trapani, which is a seaside, little town where we had our next concert. And to get there from Par—Palermo, was best to take a taxi. It's a good two—two-hour ride. And we rented a big taxi—hired one—and it took five of us plus—not all the instruments fit in it, so my cello was lashed onto the top of the taxi—in a hard case but still lashed—and along with one of the double violin cases, which had a Stradivarius. And—A double case; a big, well-padded case.

MN: Yes.

LV: And it was securely fastened, so I thought—or so we thought. And we're going on hilly roads with this creepy taxi, through areas which were riddled with gangsters—or we called them—you know—on the road—a road gangster. What is the English word for it? Those who—

MN: Highwaymen?

LV: Highwaymen. Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: Who, on certain points, they rob cars. Well, nothing like that happened, luckily. However, as we were bumping in a mountainous territory, all of a sudden we hear a bump. The violin case fell off from the taxi. And with shaken—shaken up—Léner, whose violin it was, and all—we ran down, picked up the double case and luckily nothing happened to it. And luckily, the cello remained on the top. If the cello falls down, it would be in a hundred and fifty pieces.

MN: Yes.

LV: But it stayed lashed. But the violin; we were worried about the violin. It's the Stradivarius among them. But luckily, nothing happened because it was so well padded.

MN: Yes.

LV: So that was a heart-stopping moment.

MN: Yeah.

LV: But that's what I remember about that trip. Never mind the concert; it was forgettable. [all chuckle] But we played in several other places in Sicily and all over Italy. I would say we must've played twenty-five, thirty concerts in Italy alone.

MN: Yes.

LV: And then—

JH: I'm just going to fix this. It's rubbing.

[JH adjusts Varga's microphone]

LV: Now it won't?

JH: You're fine.

LV: You heard it?

JH: I could hear it rubbing on your shirt.

LV: Oh! So I shouldn't—Maybe I shouldn't breathe?

JH: It was just I had it—

MN: [laughs]

LV: Alright. Thanks for letting me breathe. Then we went through France. Interesting things happened. For instance, this was in 1946 or '7, and we played all through France, in many places. Then, our next concert was Spain, and this was the Franco-time, and France and Spain had closed borders. You couldn't go through. But we had special permissions that they didn't have a problem. We arrived to the end of the French train line on an overnight train from Paris, and we went through the passport exchange and so on for the French, and they let us through. But then came the Spanish exam, and Léner, the second violinist, Michael Kuttner, and the violist, Nicki Harschyni, they were all already American citizens with American passports. I was traveling with a Hungarian passport. And—Oh, this was at the French control. They stopped me and said, “You need an exit permit from France.” Have you heard of such a thing?

MN: Yes.

LV: But during the war it was for certain nationals, like, you know, the third-rate citizens; Hungarians. Yuck!

MN: [chuckles]

LV: So I said, “Nobody told me that I need this, so I—”

“Sorry, we cannot let you out of France without an exit permit.”

And this happened to be a Sunday. And the next day we had a concert in San Sebastián, which was the first stop in Spain. And as I said, Léner and the two others, Americans, were let through without any problems. They were already in Spain. They had to walk through a bridge to take the Spanish train, which had a different measurement.

MN: Yes.

LV: They cannot have—couldn't have it—the same train going through, because at that time the Spanish width of the track was different than the French and the European. So they were in Spain and they were incommunicado. There was no telephone or telegraph connection between France and Spain. So they didn't know that I got stuck. Correction. The second violinist, who happened to be my cousin—first cousin—stayed with me to help me through with languages and so on. So only the two of them, Léner and Harschyni, the violist, went through in a hat, and they had no idea where we were. Just didn't show up. With Michael Kuttner, with—Oh, we found out from the French that maybe the police—Monsieur de Sous-préfecture[?] of the police—will be able to give me the permit. But it happened to be a Sunday—Dimanche—nothing is open.

So we were stuck in this little border town, which was called—My memory is very bad. Sorry. I forget the name. Anyway, we were told that if we take a train to Bjorn, fifty kilometers, there will be the police headquarters and there they can give me an exit permit. So we went to there, but on the way was Biarritz, and it was too close—too good to let it go. We stayed in Biarritz overnight in a hotel that happened to have a beautiful casino. Casino. Casino?

MN: Yes.

LV: And we ended up—I never gambled in my life, but my cousin liked gambling and he attracted me to it. So we went to the casino, and I took a twenty-dollar bill and I said, “Alright, I'm ready to lose this, but no more.” And I began to play roulette and I bought jetons [German reference to "casino token"] for twenty dollars and I began to play. And I

was—beginner's luck—I was up to three hundred dollars at one point, and I played for three or four hours, and of course I lost it all.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But I had fun. So the next morning, early, we went to the police headquarters, and the Monsieur de préfecture, he showed me the passport—stamped the passport, and we went through this time without a problem. Took the train and arrived to San Sebastian by noon. And then we found out that they almost cancelled the concert and the tour. We had about thirty concerts in Sw—in Spain alone, and they didn't know what happened to us because there was no communication; we couldn't telephone or anything. Nothing. It seems that Léner rented a taxi to drive over to—Hendaye[?] is the French—

MN: Hendaye.

LV: Hendaye. And the Spanish equivalent is Irun[?]. [unclear] They rented this taxi and engaged him to drive over the Pyrenees Mountains on secondary roads where there was no passport control—

MN: Yes.

LV: —and look for us in Hendaye. Hendaye is a one-street city; you cannot go anyplace else. And they couldn't find me because we were in Biarritz gambling. [LV and MN laugh]

MN: Playing roulette.

LV: And the next morning—So we—Finally, we met and—Alright, good bye.

[Extraneous conversation redacted]

LV: So we played the concert without any problem because we already were experienced. And went through Spain all over, and good success from Barcelona, or San Sebastian, which is in the north part—

MN: Yes.

LV: —all the way to Cadiz and Seville and Aragon and Valencia and, of course, Madrid.

MN: Yes.

LV: And many other places. In Madrid, we played three concerts alone. So we had a very successful tour, and we found out that—we made a lot of pesetas—Spanish money—But we weren't allowed to take out any of it from Spain. So we had to spend it in Spain. So we bought ourselves all kind of things; clothing and—The beautiful clothes were dirt cheap in pesetas because the currencies under the Franco-regime were not convertible.

MN: Yes.

LV: So—But we found out that if we bought gold for all the pesetas, it was very well priced—gold jewelry—we can smuggle it across the border. So you know what we did? With our combined earnings, we bought seventeen gold bracelets. Yes, bracelets mainly. And the only wife with long-sleeved dress who volunteered to take all seventeen bracelets across the border—one after the other, after the other—

[Varga indicates bracelets were worn up the arm]

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And we got along—got away with it because nobody knew that—You know, there were courtiers and women; they wouldn't think of asking, "What's under the sleeve?" And we went back to Paris and we sold it with a big increase—profit. Because in Spain, because there was no import/export, it was dirt cheap to buy gold jewelry, and we could almost double our money in Paris by selling it. And that's what we did. But we also bought beautiful outfits, suits and shirts, and we made a lot of money. At least, it seemed like millions to me.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But that was our Spanish experience, and we were in Spain for more than a month.

MN: Yes.

LV: Then we went to Britain and to Holland, Belgium, and Budapest as I said. And played in Vienna. So we went around, back and forth in many ways. And so, we toured in Europe for two years. In Paris, we were such a success in the famous Salle Gaveau, playing six concerts of only Beethoven; you know, the whole Beethoven Cycle.

MN: Yes.

LV: We played in January in '47 and we were such a success that they reengaged us to play again the whole Beethoven Cycle—six concerts—in November in the same place.

MN: Wow!

LV: So we played that Beethoven Quartet twice in Paris within the same year. And we played the Beethoven series—the Beethoven concert—that series—in many other places, and so that gave us a little rest from traveling.

MN: Yes.

LV: But otherwise, we were constantly on trains and buses and taxis. Yeah. Lots of these little details come up.

MN: Oh, but they're terrific. And you eventually came to South America, right?

LV: Oh, that was on the—end of the second year.

MN: I see.

LV: Yes, well, so we—we played in Budapest. I think we played six different concerts—different programs. And of course, there they welcomed all of us very—very warmly and heartily. And I came—You know, I finished the academy. I graduated in 1946, and this happened—the invitation came a month later. And we came back that same December '46, and all my teachers were in the box listening to The Léner Quartet, including Kodály and Weiner, and many of my violin teachers and cello teachers were listening to me, and they couldn't believe that the youngster is playing cello, but they liked it so that was an incredible moment.

MN: You liked it, too, didn't you?

LV: I did too.

MN: Yes. [chuckles]

LV: And all my colleagues, students—fellow students were listening, and my relatives. It was an unforgettable time. And as I said, we played six full programs, so we were there for a

while. We didn't go to play anyplace else in Budapest—in Hungary, but that was it. The next day, we had to travel away because we had dates in Italy; I forget where we went. So that was—

MN: Wow.

LV: —that was the tour. And then, finally, we finished the European trip, and—and we crossed the ocean to Buenos Aires [Argentina] from Genoa, Italy. And the night—We arrived to Genoa the night before, stayed over, and had a great dinner. We were invited to the ship-line owner's palace because Léner knew him. And he invited the whole quartet for a fabulous dinner, and we already had our cabin-class tickets for his ship, which was an eighteen days crossing at that time. But that ship happened to be one of the first that was air-conditioned, which was—at that time it was very rare, and so we were lucky. During the dinner, the ship owner surprised us and converted our cabin-class cabins into first-class, because, I suppose, they were unsold. And so, we crossed across the ocean for eighteen days like luxury. First-class, it's really—they [put it down?]. And it was an unforgettable travel. By the way, that was my first ocean crossing. I never knew that water was H₂O.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But I [went a smooth crossing?], including a big festivity when crossing the Equator. All the boats had a celebration. And by the time we met an awful lot of friends on the boat, and we had a great time. Lots of young, Italian people on the boat, because many Italians emigrated to Argentina—

MN: Yes.

LV: —because they didn't have enough jobs to do, and so Argentina was an opening country. So we had a great time. And the only time when we ran into heavy water—weather—was on the Brazil coast as we passed, and that was something. I mean, a real big storm, and Atlantic storms can really shake you up. Everybody was sick on the boat, and the whole quartet was puking their head off. And guess who was showing up at the dinner table, alone? Me. I wasn't affected.

MN: Really?

LV: I'm a crazy Hungarian.

MN: [laughs]

LV: Let's face it. I ate meals. Yes.

MN: And I bet you had a sufficiency, didn't you?

LV: Oh, I had a choice of dishes, anything. Well, I didn't eat that much, but I ate. The others are just—were white, yellow, and a variety of colors.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Anyway, we survived it, and two days later we arrived to Buenos Aires, and there we stayed, basically, in Argentina alone. We stayed three months, starting with a Beethoven Cycle in the Teatro Colón [Colón Theatre], which is a world famous opera house with three thousand seats and seven floors—levels or balconies. Three thousand seats full of people. Everyone—Every concert was sold out. They were so hungry for good, western music, because during the war there were no visiting artists, or hardly any. And they were so hungry for music—classical music—and Beethoven is a good seller, let's face it.

MN: Yes.

LV: Good [unclear]. And so—Let's see. After we finished the six Beethoven programs, they engaged us for two extra Beethoven programs, again—

JH: Wow!

LV: —repeat certain ones—because they were insatiable. And we were very—very successful. And then we began to travel in Argentina for about—almost two months all together; all over. And then to Chile and to Brazil and to Venezuela and—and Peru, and all the countries. It was all throughout, for three months all together.

But at this time, Léner began to be sick. His problem was that being a violinist, his skin was infected by the violin. Occasionally, people are allergic to something, either the lacquer of the violin or some wooden parts, and he began to get infected and had a heavy sore under—under the violin. [Varga indicates under the left jaw bone area.] And it was operated on in Switzerland while we were there, and they thought they had it, but no. It became cancerous. So he got—And the last two or three months he could hardly put the violin close enough because it was heavily bandaged. It was treated in—in Buenos Aires, and right away they wanted to operate on it but, “No, no, no, no. We finish the tour of South America and Brazil, and all these other countries, and when we get to America, I will be operated [on] in the Mayo Clinic;” because he trusted American clinics. And by that time, it was too late. We arrived to America, and he was already seriously affected

and ill. We arrived in New York, they operated on them—on him right away, and six weeks later he died at age fifty-four. At the top of his glory! He was—beautiful play—

But that was a very troublesome tour. But we managed to play everywhere; all over South America. And I remember an interesting detail in Caracas. We had to fly from Rio de Janeiro to Caracas, which was our last stop for two concerts. The best way to do it was a small plane—fairly small, like twenty passenger plane—that was going from Rio, leaving still in the dark outside, to first Belém, which is at the delta of the Amazonas [Amazon] River, and then the next day, flying, with many stops also, to Caracas. This was really a mail plane so it had many stops to take, and sometimes this little plane just landed in extremely small airports. But I never remember[?]
—This was my first flight in my life, and the plane took off in total darkness, early in the morning, and I was a bit nervous. And I look out of the window and see sparks coming out of the engines—lit up sparks—and I called over the stewardess and she says, “Quiet. Don't worry about it. That's normal.” Those were different type of engines which caused this backfire, especially at the take-off. And—You know, propeller planes, and it was a normal thing that you see only in total darkness, otherwise you're not aware of it.

MN: Yes.

LV: And it scared me. [chuckles] I thought that was the end of me. And it's still not.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: So—But I remember—Oh, so we stopped five times on our way to Belém. Then by the time we arrived there in—three o'clock in the afternoon, the plane was sleepy. I had to sleep there. And so, then we took a hotel with heavy netting against—against mosquitoes, because it was just very unbearable. And the next day, again with many stops, like in Trinidad and Aruba and Curacao; it was like a mail plane, you know, just delivering things. Many, many landings, and sometimes we couldn't take off because it was a rainstorm suddenly, so it was delayed.

Anyway, we arrived to the port of Caracas, which is—which was on the seashore called La Guaira, at that time. And Caracas happens to be three thousand feet higher, up in the mountains. We were already worn with all this flying and so on, and we wanted to get—Oh! We had a concert that same evening in Caracas. So we arrived, like, five o'clock in the afternoon.

MN: Yes. And you had a concert that evening?

LV: Yes. And we took a taxi, who—with all that luggages [*sic*], and five of us in the car, and it was a big taxi, but still. And the driver was taking a serpentine road up the mountain

hill—mountainside—up to Caracas like a—like a madman. We thought we'd never survive that. I mean, so many cars rolled down the hill—trucks—you know. Because that was common that these—[unclear] were just driving like anything—madmen.

So we arrived to the hotel—finally to Caracas. This was already eight o'clock, which was passed the concert starting time, and all of a sudden there was no electricity at the hotel. So—And all the busboys and bellboys disappeared because they have to carry luggages up themselves on the stairs instead of—the elevator wasn't working. So there were no help, and we had to carry our own luggages upstairs, and it was already late. But we managed. And we just fell into our full dress as fast as we could. And we had no time for eating anything. And we came down, and the audience was notified that we are late—for obvious reasons—and they were happy, drinking at the buffet and the bar, and they were enjoying themselves. And they waited for us. So finally, we got into a taxi to go to the concert, and we were all dead tired, and the taxi driver asked, “A dónde vas?” He says, “Where are you going?”

And we looked at each other. Nobody knew what hall—where we are to—we forgot.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: You know, because we were so dead tired with all this delays and—So I said—In Spain—I mean, in Spanish countries, it's either “teatro municipal” [municipal theatre] or “teatro nacional” [national theatre]. You have to [imitating accent] speak like this. And so, I said, “Go to Municipal!” Alright. We will go there, and paid the cab; let it go, stupidly. We go inside, and there's a circus act in there.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: So it was obviously the wrong theatre. And then went—tried to find another cab. No. We couldn't. Not at that point. So we went to—People told us, “Oh! The Teatro Nacional is only dos cuerdas izquierdas;” two blocks left. It turned out to be twenty minutes of walking. Finally, we found it and finally—Can you imagine, starting—carrying the instruments, which was enough, especially me with the cello.

And so finally, the audience welcomed us. They stopped drinking and they came back to the hall. We were an hour late already, but nobody left and nobody—they all understood; it was announced that we were late. And we started to play one particular quartet that starts with a soft area, very translucent, with—you have to play notes lightly and slow bows like this; a Beethoven Quartet. And we had never heard four bows rattling more instead of a smooth—because everybody was shaking, you know, just to hold—you couldn't hold it a steady, soft. You can—a lashing to loud, yes, that's easier.

MN: Yes.

LV: But not soft. That you have to have a quiet, steady—That's how it started. But nobody complained and we finished the program and that was a memorable evening.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Now, this was Caracas—

MN: Yes.

LV: —and the next day we played another concert that turned out to be our last concert.

MN: Yes.

LV: And we flew to Miami, and that was the entrance to America. And soon after, to New York. And, well, that was the end of the quartet.

MN: Yes. And that's your arrival here.

LV: Yes. That was my arrival. And again, I didn't speak one word of English. Well, maybe, "Thank you," and, "Hi, My name is Laszlo Varga." [chuckles]

MN: But you—So once here, you finally became a member of the Union and—

LV: Yes. That was already at the end of the season.

MN: Yes. Ok.

LV: So it was hard to get anything. As I mentioned to you, I think, that—that during that time—five months into this waiting period—there—there was three auditions for cello positions in the New York Philharmonic and I wanted to go. Did I tell you this?

MN: No.

LV: No. Alright. So—And it happened to be the fifth month of the six month waiting period, and I go to the manager of the Philharmonic and I said, "I would like to play on one of the auditions."

He said, "Fine. Yes. Welcome. Are you a member of the Union?"

I said, "Not yet, but I—in one month I will be."

He said, “Sorry. Regulations don't allow to do this.”

So I was very upset. I said, “In a month, I will be a member.”

“No. Sorry. Against regulations.”

So I put my tail between my legs—Or how do you say? [MN and LV chuckle] —
went home, and that's what—

[End Tape 2—Beginning Tape 3]

JH: Okay. We're rolling again.

MN: Okay. I'm Mac Nelson, here with Laszlo Varga at his home in Sarasota, Florida. Videographer Joanna Hay is with us too. And it's Friday, the twenty-seventh of May 2011.

LV: Hey!

MN: And Laszlo, we were just talking about your audition.

LV: Oh, yes. Well, as I said, I spent the whole season in—my first season in New York, totally without anything to do, so to speak, professionally, because I had to belong to the Union and there was a six-month waiting period. And finally, the six months ended and I found out that The New York City Opera is auditioning for a solo cello job, which was much more interesting and better paying, so to speak, than those two jobs that they were auditioning for in The New York Philharmonic.

So I went, finally. I played the audition for the Opera, and I think I played for an hour; it was a long thing. And I got the job, and I happily started working for them, and I was there for two seasons—two summers. Two seasons, not summers. And I was very happily—The director of The Opera happened to be Hungarian—Laszlo Halasz—who—who organized it; founded the whole City Opera. And I don't think he took me just because I was a fellow Hungarian, but—Actually I think I mentioned to you that even in The Philharmonic, the most famous conductors, among them were several Hungarians, like [Sir] Georg Solti and George Szell and [Eugene] Ormandy.

MN: Yes. Was [Antal] Doráti?

LV: Doráti, yes. And Solti. Did I mention Solti? Georg Solti? They were all over America and the world. So they were—It wasn't rare to have Hungarian conductors.

MN: Yes.

LV: By the way, eventually—years after—I became a Hungarian conductor in New York and I formed my own New York Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble. But that's another story.

I was so happily a member of The Opera, and two years later, I found out—the contractor at The Opera told me that he hates to tell me because he hates to lose me, but across the street—on 56th Street—in Carnegie Hall, there's going to be an opening for solo cello in The New York Philharmonic. So not a tutti position but a solo cello. Because Leonard Rose, who was a very famous and excellent cellist decided to leave and be a soloist only.

So he told me that, “Remember, there's an audition.”

So I was very happy to go and I intended to try it. And it was in a few weeks—within. And getting closer to the date, I also found out that The Philadelphia Orchestra was also opening an audition for solo cello, and this was during the winter season. Because it seems that Paul Olefsky, who was the solo cellist there, was called into the navy in the middle of the season. You know, at that time, American youngsters were called into the navy.

MN: Yes.

LV: This is '46 and—or '48. I'm sorry.

MN: '48, okay.

LV: And so, I thought this might be an interesting thing. Somehow I heard through the grapevine that many very famous, well known American cellists are trying to play for The New York Philharmonic job. Among them Frank Miller. I don't know whether you know this name?

MN: Yes.

LV: He was the famous cellist on the NBC [Symphony] Orchestra with [Arturo] Toscanini conducting.

MN: Yes.

LV: And Toscanini retired and NBC also petered away, and Frank Miller was in the seat as an obvious choice because he was the best known and was famous, and well deserved successor to Leonard Rose, who happened to be his first cousin.

MN: Really?

LV: Can you imagine? So I felt—You know, this seems like a precondition and a—as a preset situation that, "I will never get this job." And there were many other quite well known cellists trying for The New York Philharmonic job. So I became more interested in the Philadelphia job. And the two auditions were five days apart. First the Philadelphia and then the New York. So I decided to go to Philadelphia, and I played for their conductor who just happens to be Ormandy, another Hungarian, who—We played in the big concert hall—on the stage—and he wouldn't show his face to me. He was in the last row, I hardly could see him, with his cronies there, and they just conveyed what they wanted to hear. And I played decently, I thought; many different things. And there was no opening—expression of like and dislike—nothing—because there were many others playing.

So I finished my playing and I thought I did quite well. I was quite happy and hopeful. And I went home and I was waiting for the call from Philadelphia. Passes one day, two days, three days, and in five days The Philharmonic audition. I heard absolutely nothing. So I decided to go to The Philharmonic audition. And I went and I played for an hour and a half for [Dimitri] Mitropoulos, the director. Leonard Rose was still playing there; he was one of the judges. The concertmaster, John Corigliano. The leader of the second violins, Imre Pogany. And the first violist, [William] Bill Lincer. Five of them. They asked me to play for an hour and a half, all kinds of detailed, important cello solos that occur in the orchestra literature. And I think—the best of my offering—to begin with, they asked me what I want to play. I offered the Kodály Solo Sonata, which is a famous, difficult piece—a demanding piece—and it's a half an hour long. And I played it through. They let me through. It's very rare that they wanted to hear so much. So they thanked me very much. —"Thank you"—and didn't say, "Boo." And I went home, and I figured maybe by that time I hear from Philadelphia, but I never heard from Philadelphia. Maybe this telephone call must have been—possibly—

MN: [chuckles]

LV: —telling me, "You failed."

MN: [laughs]

LV: No, never—never

N: Never—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LV: —Ormandy or anybody bothered to call me. As it turned out, Philadelphia decided to finish the season with their assistant first cellist; was moved up to take the first cello. So they didn't take anybody. That was—But three days later I got a call from New York; “You got it!” So I was very happy and I started an eleven-year tenure that was very happy and successful, almost always; very few, little bumps. But then I had the chance to play with the world's best soloists and one of the world's best orchestras.

MN: Yes.

LV: And the greatest conductors. So it was an ultimate dream; best dream.

MN: Yes.

LV: And I established myself as a significant cellist in the scene. And you know, I was first cellist of the Budapest Symphony for about two years, but member of it for five or six.

MN: Yes.

LV: And we played through the literature many times there, so I was familiar with it, so it wasn't sight-reading for me. Except modern pieces or unknown pieces. There were many of those. But I was quite experienced so I—I did well.

MN: Yes. Yes.

LV: Then I spent eleven years with The Philharmonic, till 1962. The Philharmonic slowly became a year-round season. When I started, it was only twenty-eight weeks a year. And I usually had summer jobs in summer places, resorts and so on, with[?] symphonic. Have you heard of Chautauqua Festival?

MN: Oh, sure.

LV: Well, I was there for thirteen summers, and it has an excellent symphony orchestra made up of members of New York Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony and the Pittsburgh Symphony and all the best people; very experienced. And we had a season of seven weeks—Or was it nine weeks? Nine weeks, every summer, where we played four concerts in Chautauqua every week.

MN: Wow.

LV: And full symphonic works for three times; the fourth one was a pop concert. And we played through everything—the most difficult stuff—and we all were so experienced and it was a pleasure. We had one rehearsal each. There was no need for more because we knew the works. And there again, I had additional experience to gain because the occasion to play something that I never played.

MN: Yes.

LV: And some new works and commissions, and these kinds of things. I also was the only cellist of the Mischakoff Quartet. Mischa Mischakoff was the concertmaster and he always had a quartet, and I became a cellist from the beginning on. The first cellist was always his cellist, and the first violist and so on. And we worked together for thirteen summers. Did I say thirteen seasons.

MN: Yes.

LV: Yes. Thirteen.

MN: And this is still at Chautauqua?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: We had three chamber music concerts during the summer, I think, within the nine weeks; every three weeks, one concert. And there was an opera season. There was a play season there; just a wonderful—My kids grew up there, and my wife loved it. It was a real vacation on the path of Lake Chautauqua, which is just a lovely resort. It's hot as hell, like this, but still marvelous, and we had many happy summers there.

MN: Laszlo, was it in Chautauqua that you unveiled your Chaconne?

LV: Yes.

MN: I thought it was.

LV: You remember. That's an interesting story. I was working—Some place I [unclear]. The Chaconne. Not—Not this.

Anyway, I always loved the Chaconne, which I think is the greatest Bach movement for violin solo, and I—whenever I heard violinists speak—play it, I was awestruck because it was such a marvelous movement; over six movements; partite. It's fifteen minutes long. It was just my ultimate wish. And I always was trying to arrange it for cello, because I think it should be sung by the cello. I was working on it for a year or more. And while in Chautauqua, during rehearsals, and there was a little quiet in the cello section, I began to work on the Chaconne, trying this part, that part, this measure, this way, that way. So people heard me just squeaking on the cello, very soft. And they made fun of it—me, because I[?] says, “You play the Chaconne? Fooling around with it?” They thought it was impossible. And I sounded impossible because it was ugly and just tests. And they heard me week after week doing this, and they never thought that I can play the whole thing.

That summer, I was scheduled to play the Dvorak *Concerto* as a soloist, and I played it and everybody was applauding and it was nice and successful. And the conductor suggested I play an encore; said, “Ladies and Gentleman,” I said, “I'm going to play the Bach *Chaconne*,” in front of ten thousand people. By the way, that's a very big amphitheater, and it has a roof, but no sides. So when it rains, it's like the Niagara [Falls] off the roof, but we are all dry. So I'm—just to describe the place. It was called an amphitheater. The orchestra, you heard the biggest groan you can—“Ugh!”—because nobody in the orchestra thought that I can go through it. Number two, I had my doubts myself.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But they were groaning because it meant they had to stay on the stage for fifteen more minutes [LV and MN chuckle]—That was the real reason—before the intermission. And I started to play, and I get through it. And in spite of all, I got through it and I got the biggest, successful ovation afterwards. And I remembered every note, even though the fingerings and others changed, maybe, five minutes earlier.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But I knew the notes by then, of course, but there are, you know, many ways to skin a cat, and to get the most smooth transitions between sections. And it took an awful lot of changes and examinations. That was my first appearance of the Chaconne.

MN: And the audience loved it, didn't they?

LV: Oh, yes. Yes. They loved it. I don't say it was an impeccable performance, without any blemish. Little problems. But the audience didn't know the piece that well. The orchestra

did, but they were all awestruck also. But they were so—that they had to sit for fifteen minutes before they could smoke.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: That's very important. That was my first Chaconne. And then I played it many times on all kind of occasions.

MN: Yes. But you wanted to keep doing that and The Philharmonic schedule was beginning to crowd your—your summer engagements, wasn't it?

LV: Yes, yes, and that's why—by—Let's see. I—'57, '58; I forget when I finished going to Chautauqua. But eventually I—I was—Actually I was in Chautauqua in '62 when—I don't know if everybody knows that Chautauqua is on the shore of Lake Erie, very close to the Canadian border.

MN: Yes.

LV: And it seems that in Toronto, at the radio station where I think I mentioned that we were in—There was a Canadian string quartet who was broadcasting our broadcasts—fifty a year, weekly—of different programs. I think I mentioned it already, didn't I?

MN: No, I don't think so.

LV: Well, it was an attractive thing for me to do after eleven years of just orchestra because I wanted to teach, I wanted to play solo and quartet, which was always my desire and I loved it. And the quartet literature is one of the richest. It's an incredible, large beautiful level. And at the end of the Chautauqua season—which I said is close to Canada—all of a sudden, three wise men came over from Canada to Chautauqua, from Toronto, from the radio. The director and one of the honcho—music honcho, and another one, with a message that their cellist, George Ricci—You've heard of the Ricci name?

MN: Yes.

LV: By his—his brother, Ruggiero Ricci, the famous violinist.

MN: Oh, sure. Yes.

LV: Well, George Ricci was an excellent cellist.

MN: Yes.

LV: He was one of the ones who tried to get into The New York Philharmonic, but I got it. But we were always very good friends, and he was an excellent—he would've been a fine, first cellist also. I had tough competition. By the way, Frank Miller, who I mentioned—who was a sure 'in'—decided not to play—audition because he didn't want to step into his first cousin's shoes. They were a lot like this [clasping his hands together]; you know, a real family.

MN: Yes. Yes.

LV: Can you imagine?

MN: Wow.

LV: He didn't play. He would've been a sure—sure bet to get. And that was my luck. So we are—where are we? Now, in Chautauqua.

MN: Yes. But we're in Toronto.

LV: The three—three wise men are coming from Toronto. What did they call it in the Bible? Three—

MN: Magi?

LV: Three Magi, yes. I call them three wise men. Wise guys.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And they heard I'm there, and they try to entice me to take the job because it had to be open in September; it was a last minute affair. And they offered me a good position at the [University of Toronto] Conservatory [of Music], half time teaching, half time quartet, and playing quartet concerts, as well as make the weekly broadcasts—pre-taped—and something else—oh, playing solo; solo concerts.

MN: Yes.

LV: So I was very interested in getting it except I already had a signed Philharmonic contract from April, and you can't quite get out of that, you know, just three weeks or four weeks before the season's starting. And I called up the Philharmonic management and I says—

“We are sorry. We cannot let you go because the contract is signed and we cannot replace you on such short notice.” And it was true. It would have been—

I said, “But I really would like—” It's not that I disliked it, but I had eleven years and it became a full-year job from twenty-eight weeks, eventually—to start with. It became growing and growing, and finally it was a year-round job, and it was a little bit too much. And that was one reason I wanted to change. But since then, the last—the next cellist, Lorne Munroe, stayed there for thirty-five years. Poor guy.

MN: Yes. [chuckles]

LV: So I said, "I really would like to go."

[unclear] said, “Well, sorry.”

I can call Lenny Bernstein, who was gallivanting in the Riviera, half nude.

“Sorry, we have to talk to Lenny.” He was the boss at that time.

I said, “Alright.”

Well, Lenny called me in Chautauqua from the Riviera and I—since—I had a long, hour and a half conversation with him, and I told him exactly why I—not that I disliked him or anything else, but it became just too much. Year-round job and we didn't have a summer off. We had four weeks off. That wasn't quite important enough.

And I said, “It's a very attractive position that they're offering there and I really would like to leave,” and I made a very strong point.

And after an hour and a half, he says, “Look, if this means so much to you, we will release you.”

And they didn't have anybody to replace me, but he was a gentleman. He understood the point that one wants to reach out and differ.

MN: Yes.

LV: That's how his life was always.

MN: Yes.

LV: So they released me.

MN: So you had a very, fulfilling career with Bernstein though.

LV: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MN: You played the Beethoven *Triple Concerto*.

LV: Twenty times. All over the—Europe and America; throughout Russia. Yes, it was just wonderful.

MN: And you managed to meet Boris Pasternak before he died, didn't you?

LV: Right. That summer, I was facing the Philharmonic tour to Europe and Russia, and I flew ahead to London a week earlier because I got two CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation] solo broadcasts. And I figured—And my family was to follow me by boat—I flew over—and—to meet me a week later and then we would have—traveling together whenever possible, or meet at certain places when The Philharmonic landed here and there.

I started rehearsing for the broadcast with a pianist, and he—he was a very good pianist, but he excused himself. He has a terrible cold; he says he cannot hear anything below middle C.

I said, “Well, the cello goes two octaves below middle C.” But he was completely full—

MN: He's congested.

LV: Congested.

MN: Yes.

LV: Thank you. I still need help in English.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Yes, and so finally, it just didn't go because we weren't together. He excused himself and called up the management of CBC—no. What is the—BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation].

MN: BBC, right.

LV: BBC. And they got another very fine pianist who ended up playing with me. Why did I mention this?

MN: Did it have to do with the Russian tour?

JH: Pasternak.

MN: Pasternak.

LV: This was before the Russian tour and the European tour.

MN: Yes.

LV: The reason I mentioned is this: I ordered a brand new van from England that I was to use from England on my European trip with my family. I already had two kids, three and six. So I ordered a cab—a car, then it was waiting for me. And I ordered it with a wheel on the American side—left side—and I wanted to pick it up on the last day, but two days after—I finished the broadcast and I had two days, so I decided to pick up the van, and I wanted to get used to it. But in England—Have you ever driven in England? [chuckles] Well, everything is on the left side, and every turn is one way; the wrong way. [Chuckle] All the—All the streets, mews [A mew is a small, urban street, similar to an alley] and squares, and all the crescents [A crescent is an architectural structure where a number of houses are laid out in an arc to form a crescent shape]; all these little—

MN: Yes.

LV: All the—Everything is in the wrong way somehow. And to drive this car, on the wrong side, with the shift on the right here, it was a major [unclear], and I never drove such a car in my—well, never drove on the left side. Let's put it that way. It was very unusual. Well, I managed to do [it] unscathed, with any problem, and I learned how to do it.

So the last night in London I went to the hotel concierge and said, "Excuse me, how do I get a boat trip for my car to Calais—over to Calais [France]?"

He says, "Excuse, when would you wish to cross?"

I says, "Tomorrow morning."

He says, "I beg your pardon. This is May." He says, "You have a three months waiting period for a ferry boat."

I fell over. I said, "What do you mean? I can't—"

He said, "Sorry, I can't help you. There's a three months waiting period for a spot on the—on this ferry boat."

And my bo—my family was in the boat crossing—almost arriving—because the next day was their arrival time to Le Havre, which is a five-hour drive from Calais. So I was desperate.

He says, "Well, sir, maybe you can go down to the Royal Automobile Club and maybe they can help you. Maybe there was a cancellation or something."

So I rushed down there and they told me the same thing, "Sorry. Three month waiting."

I says, "It's impossible!" I made such a scene, in Hungarian—

MN: [laughs]

LV: —that they came up with the tickets. It seems they put in an extra boat because of the extra demand, and I found myself one car out of twelve in a ferryboat that holds hundred and twenty. So that was the surplus and they put in an extra boat; happened to be that same morning.

So I got the ticket and I drove to Calais and got on the boat and smoked while we crossed. And I arrived to Calais and I immediately drove over to Le Havre, and I got there in the evening and there is the boat already. I wanted to go aboard. Oh, no. They had to spend the night and wait for the Customs exam.

MN: Yes.

LV: And my family was there and I had to take a hotel on the shore because I couldn't see them. So I did and the next morning they let me finally out. And then I found out that my son, who was six years old, got the small pox, or chicken pox—one of those—and you are—they are not allowed to board a boat with an infectious disease. My wife had to put him in a big blanket, carry him; the six year old is not so light, and my wife is about this big. And carry him aboard and they got on. And they had to spend the whole transatlantic trip in—in their cabin. And the steward fed them well, they took care of her, but it was illegal.

MN: Yes.

LV: But eventually, he—he got over it, but still, it was against—against the law. I didn't know this because they couldn't notify me and I couldn't connect with them onboard at that time. So that was their crossing.

But finally they got off everything, and we got into the car and began to drive around. Oh, this was ten weeks before The Philharmonic started, and so we had ten weeks to travel on our own, and then we embarked on a ten weeks Philharmonic tour. And this is why I went—had to Europe, so I can, you know, join them in Europe. Not to be. We finished and drove across all Europe and had a wonderful time with a couple who was close friends at that time. But we—we took hotels every place and ate well, and really enjoyed the trip.

At the end of the ten weeks, something like the eighth week or so, I got an urgent telegram from New York from The Philharmonic. It says, "Lenny Bernstein decided to—to play through the Triple Concerto before the tour in the New York summer season," and I have to come back. So—And I felt I had to because he would have been happier to

start the tour if we played it there, because we hadn't [finished rehearsing?] it yet. So I felt I had to.

So I flew back and I left my family in Europe. That was a strange feeling. On all tours, I was always away and my family stayed in New York, but this was just the opposite. And I flew over just for less than a week, and we rehearsed and we played it in Lewiston Stadium, which was a place where The Philharmonic had a season—a summer season—with [Josef Alois] Krips conducting. [pointing to photograph off screen] Krips is there someplace. And it was successful and—and I flew to Europe with the orchestra, together, and whenever I could, I got away from symphony for a day or two and met the family. And they followed us, so this way we could do both.

MN: Wow.

LV: And then comes the Russian trip. Do you have tape?

JH: Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: We had to—We started playing in Prague. And there, the Russians sent their own jet planes—passenger planes, that were brand new and they were very proud of it, to take us to Russia. Because we had chartered American jets but they said, "No! No! No American planes! We have our own beautiful planes."

So they wanted to fly us from there, so The Philharmonic accepted it. And in Czechoslovakia, Prague airport, we changed planes. We arrived to Prague with our plane—American planes, and we took off with the Russians for three weeks Russian trip between Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev. We played nine concerts in Moscow, all different programs, six in Leningrad, and three in Kiev. Each places [*sic*] we played the Triple Concerto also. So the trip was very successful and we were a great welcome; we had very hardy welcome.

One of our bass player friends—colleague—found out that [Boris] Pasternak just won the Nobel Prize for *Doctor Zhivago*, which was recently published. But the Russian government insisted that he refuses it because it wasn't Communistic enough for them. It was the heavier Communist Era. And he had to denounce the gift. And this bass player somehow got a Russian friend—a musician friend—who knew Pasternak, and mentioned it that we would love to meet Pasternak.

He says, "I'll—I'll arrange it. I'm sure he would like you." He lived in a suburb—Peredelkino—of Moscow, not far, and he arranged a meeting for three of us; two bass players and me. And he was out on his doorstep to welcome us, with all white hair and with his wife. He lived there already in retirement even though he was writing. And we

had an unforgettable afternoon in his house; very gracious and offering us coffee and cakes.

And we discussed—And he—we, of course, asked him, "Well, how come he refused the Nobel Prize?"

He says—He says, "Well, I really didn't deserve it. It was over—over thought—" What do you call it? —over—it's not deserved; not properly deserved. He let himself lower it in estimation.

MN: He underestimated himself?

LV: Yes.

MN: Okay.

LV: He had to.

MN: Yes.

LV: But the next sentence he said, "That's a pretty good novel."

MN: [chuckles]

LV: He rectified himself. But we talked from everything; you know, the difference between the East and West in musicals and literary circles. And at one point, he excused himself and he disappears, and we're left staring at his wife, who spoke nothing but Russian and Yiddish, which we didn't speak. You speak? No. And they're almost a half an hour. That seemed like a in—terrible, long time, between non-speaking—not able to speak—people. But we survived somehow. We were trying to do a little German and a few Yiddish words, but we got smiles and nothing much else.

Finally he returned with three handwritten sheets of paper. Beautiful ink. One of each of us—for each of us by name. He wrote me: *To Laszlo Varga, In remembrance of this wonderful get together of musicians, or artists, of the East and West*, and a few other sentences. Very lovely. And he handed it to each of us, because—You know, his handwriting—I have it framed ever since, but I gave it to a famous Jewish organization.

MN: Yes.

LV: Donated. And it was really a—And he was—And we invited him to the concerts, of course, and The Philharmonic did also. And the next morning I go to the restaurant in the hotel, and there is Bernstein and many of my colleagues eating there. And he already

heard that we visited Pasternak, and he called me over. He said, "How the hell did you get there?!" He says, "How dare you!" He says, "I wanted to be there and I couldn't."

I said, "We had a contact and he was welcoming us, and you know, we didn't think of inviting you too." [LV and MN chuckle] Well, I didn't say it that way, but I didn't see anything wrong. Well, of course, he was halfway joking, making this mock-anger, but a day or two later he found somebody who took him there too. [unclear]

MN: [chuckles] Well, didn't you also see Pasternak when you performed the Shostakovich?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: Yes. I don't know whether it was the same concert.

MN: Okay.

LV: But as I said, we played nine times.

MN: Wow.

LV: Nine concerts. He came, and as I came on stage, much before the conductor—not even the full orchestra was there—all of a sudden I see in the last—one of the last rows an old man with all white hair getting up and he says, "Hey!" like this, greeting me.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: He saw me coming. And he did the same for the two bass players when they came out on stage. It was just a very warm, personal attribute.

MN: Terrific.

LV: And of course, after the concert we all met him. Of course, he was occupied, busy talking with Bernstein and the other high officials, but we also managed to put a few together. But it was an unforgettable afternoon.

MN: Yes.

LV: And he knew a lot of music. I don't think he played anything, but he had a son who was a pianist. So that was a memorable occasion.

MN: Wow.

LV: Of course, when we kept going to St. Petersburg and back, it was always an overnight journey by train. And so, we got around. If we didn't play or rehearse, we were on a train or a plane.

MN: Yes.

LV: It was—So finally, the tour ended and the Russians flew us back to Prague with their plane. We said goodbye to them and we went to the waiting room—restaurant, and there we met the whole [The City of] Prague Philharmonic [Orchestra]. Can you imagine? Another hundred twenty people—musicians—who were waiting for *their* plane to go on a tour someplace else. And for two hours, the two orchestras blend—blended, and they drunk us under the—under the floor. They were greeting with endless beer—

[Telephone rings]

LV: Shut up.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Oh, my daughter!

MN: Yes.

LV: Can you stop? Hello?

[Interview Paused]

LV: —I believe[?], and we met the Prague Philharmonic and The New York Philharmonic, and the two orchestras merged happily. And they were very generous and they drank us under the table, and—for two hours, and we exchanged experiences by hand and foot, because very few of them spoke English and none of us spoke Czech. But it was a very enjoyable and friendly gesture.

So that was the end of our Russian tour and we continued our European trip. And the next stop was another memorable story. Will be Scheveningen in Holland; Scheveningen. [Scheveningen is one of the eight districts of The Hague]

MN: I'll have to let you say that one.

LV: Yes, it's—I think I'm close to the original, but only the Dutch have the proper throat disease to—to say it. Okay.

MN: Well, I—You know, we've talked about The Philharmonic and your life in New York, but something else very important happened. I'd like to hear about your meeting your wife.

LV: My second wife.

MN: Your second wife.

LV: Yes. Well, I will be glad to oblige. Of course, that happened much before. The tour was in '59 and I was married in '52, after a very, torturous divorce from my first wife. And I want to describe that first.

MN: Yes.

LV: My first wife was a lovely woman, but she was incurably religious; Jewish Orthodox. We were married in an Orthodox ceremony, even though I have nothing religious in my background. I'm very aesthetic—Or what is the—

JH: Agnostic?

MN: Agnostic?

LV: Agnostic. That's what I meant. But I went through it because of her and it was a lovely ceremony. And as I said, we lived together for a year and a half and we had happy months and so on, but later on we realized that we were too far apart. She was much younger than I. She was about twenty-one and I was twenty-eight, and somehow we didn't really—weren't the same wavelength, so the divorce was inevitable. But for an Orthodox Jew to divorce—I think that divorce did not exist. But it had to be an annulment on a religious basis. They agreed to it, so it was fine. And the only time to do this ceremony, when the Rabbi was available, was on a certain Sunday; we negotiated times and so on. I was already very busy freelancing and The Philharmonic, and the only time we could get that was mutually available was a Sunday noon or at one o'clock time

when I was in between morning rehearsal with [Leopold Anthony] Stokowski recording—rehearsal—and the three o'clock broadcast. And I had time from 12:30 [p.m.] till 3:00. And so, I accepted it and finally they accepted it, and the Rabbi reassured everybody that, "It will take a half an hour."

Well, I got there as fast as I could. I drove across Manhattan, because the Jewish ceremony was way down in the sector—I've forgotten now what it's called, but you know, the southern part of Manhattan. There is a name for it. The Jewish sector.

JH: Near Greenwich Village?

LV: Below Greenwich Village. And so, I showed up on time and they were there, and the Rabbi came late, but he came in too. And nothing happened because the Rabbi had to write—handwritten—beautiful, calligraphic Hebrew—a page document; it's all handwritten. And he—With shaking hands, he put down a mat first, and this page, and ink and a pen. And fin—And he drew nine lines, but very slow, at the rate of a minute a sen—minute a line. Like this. Nine lines. So I thought, "Oh, boy. This will take a lot of time until he finishes all the nine lines with calligraphic, Hebrew letters." And he started writing at the rate of one letter a minute.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Or two, and I told them—I said, "I have to leave. I'll be late." This was way down south, below Greenwich Village, and my broadcast was at 67th and Broadway, where the Lincoln Center [for the Performing Arts] is now.

MN: Yes.

LV: There was no Lincoln Center there. So I was sitting on pins and needles, and you know, I didn't want to quit without the—without the document and the—the degree, so to speak—

MN: Yes.

LV: —because I was ready to marry my second wife, who also was divorced but with less problem. So—And it took an eternity. He was—with the shaking hands—writing, writing, writing. And until he finished the document and folded it up—and the ceremony was that I had to hand the document into the hands of my ex-wife, and that signifies the divorce—or the annulment—but not before. So I wanted to be—get rid of this whole situation and marry my next wife. And it took an eternity. Finally finished that paper eleven minutes before 3:30—2:30, 3:30; which one—whatever it was.

MN: Yes.

LV: Eleven minutes before the broadcast [unclear]. I shoved the thing in her hand and ran out. Got into my car and crossed Manhattan like this. Every light, if it was green, I went seventy miles an hour. If it was red, I went fifty miles an hour. I crossed every red light. Luckily, it was a slightly drizzly, Sunday afternoon and there was very little traffic compared to the work time. And I got there in front of the studio, I left the car there in a no-parking zone, ran out, and the contractor was holding my—holding my cello already. [He knew that?]-ready to play. And I walked on stage just as Stokowski was walking on the other side. So I made it. But to cross Manhattan like this [makes zigzag pattern with hand], you know, from way down south to 67th Street and Broadway—I'm sure you know enough—

MN: Yes, sure.

LV: It's not an easy thing. But—And I didn't get a ticket. I didn't get anything. And I—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MN: Except an annulment.

LV: A what?

MN: You got an annulment.

LV: Yes! So I achieved what I wanted, but it took—that ceremony took almost two and a quarter hours. I'll never forget it.

MN: And when did you, then, marry Lillian?

LV: Oh, I think the next week. But not a big celebration or something, just in City Hall with a judge, and that was fifty-nine and some years ago. And we are still together. And we are looking forward to marrying—celebrating our sixtieth wedding anniversary.

MN: Gosh! Congratulations, Laszlo. That's wonderful.

LV: Mostly happy, with intermissions. [LV and MN chuckle]

MN: And she's an artist, right?

LV: Oh, she's an artist. Did you see that picture where she's—

MN: Oh, yes. We got that this morning, yes.

LV: She's a marvelous ceramicist. And painter. I can show you some of her paintings. And—
And dress designer.

MN: Yes.

LV: I should show you some of her clothing because they are one-of-a-kind, special museum pieces. She—She is really a great artist. And she is a marvelous mother of my three children. Or mother of my three marvelous children. Whichever.

MN: [chuckles] Both maybe.

LV: Right. And we are happy most of the time.

MN: Yes.

LV: And we are here to stay.

MN: Very good. Very good.

LV: To the—To the very end, whenever it comes. Unfortunately—It's too bad she's not home.

MN: Ah, yes. I'm sorry she wasn't here for this session.

LV: Yes. Well, she could add a lot to my memories.

MN: Yes.

LV: Now, when did I interrupt my—Well, I interrupted my tour story at the marriage story.
Which one would you like to contin—

[End Tape 3—Begin Tape 4]

[Extraneous remarks redacted]

MN: I'll—I'll ask the question.

[Recording Interruption]

LV: —have always been my favorite in Hungarian, originally. I always loved to twist them and look at different ways and so on, and led me to joking around with—sometimes stupid, sometimes clever—

JH: Ok, go ahead and introduce him.

MN: Ok. I'm Mac Nelson, here with Laszlo Varga at his home in Sarasota, Florida. Videographer Joanna Hay is with us too. This is interview tape number four on the twenty-seventh of May 2011, and it's the third tape of today's interview. Now, Laszlo, I had a question. We were talking about your time in Toronto.

LV: Yes.

MN: But before you—before you went to Toronto, you had actually met the great pianist Glenn Gould in—

LV: That's Right.

MN: —in New York.

LV: Yes. Almost every year, he appeared as a big soloist and with big success playing brilliantly, but in a strange way as is his want. And I befriended him, and he was very kind and very generous and so on with his time. I remember one famous concert of him where he was scheduled to play the Brahms *First Piano Concerto* with Bernstein conducting. And it seems they had dis—disagreements about tempos and other details about the progress, and on the rehearsals they differed because Gould had very idiosyncratic ideals about the Brahms, playing it fairly slower than customary. And Bernstein tried to change his mind, but you don't change Glenn Gould's mind.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Except him. And so, Bernstein agreed to—to the slower tempos and other differences, giving in. But before the first concert, Bernstein came out alone and gave a speech, and explained to the audience that, "Yes, Mr. Gould and I have certain differences about interpretation, and—but I certainly am willing to accompany him the way he wants it because that's his choice." And—but he explained that it was really not his choice.

Meanwhile, Glenn Gould in the door, waiting for his appearance, was laughing his head off and thought it was a great entertainment. And he came out and he played in a deliberate fashion—his own style—which was acceptable; it's somewhat different than the normal—norm. But still, he was a creditable artist and was entitled to his own tempo. We all are.

So he played and Bernstein made some faces. [LV and MN chuckle] And this happened four times. We repeated every concert four times, and he made the same speech four times. And Glenn Gould steadily stuck to his own guns. Is that how you say it?

MN: Yes.

LV: And comes the fourth—the last performance—and he played the same thing for the first and the second movements. The third movement starts with piano alone. I don't know whether you recall it? [Varga sings a portion of the movement] This is the usual tempo that everybody takes, but Glenn Gould played it [Varga sings a portion of the movement with a different tempo]. It's a believable thing but not necessarily likeable. This time, he started it three times that tempo just to show—By the time, we all thought, orchestra members and maybe the others, that he cannot play it any faster. He played it [Varga sings a portion of the movement with the faster tempo]. Perfectly! And he was laughing his head off, meanwhile. [chuckles] It was a game for him.

MN: Wow.

LV: And that was the last time. You know, by the time we all—the orchestra thought, "Well, this is his way. He cannot play it in the regular tempo, fast." [chuckling] He played it three times the—

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MN: So you had to keep up with him.

LV: Oh, yes! We had to get speeding tickets.

MN: [laughs] But your friendship continued after you went to Toronto?

LV: Well, I ended up in Toronto, and of course, I kept in touch. I invited him to my house. We both had beautiful houses there in the outskirts. And he came on—came out once and I had a big party around—including my old friend and colleague, János Starker, the famous cellist who was my—I wanted to tell you in Hungarian; *kortars*, it means equivalent in age.

MN: Oh, your peer? Your—

LV: Peer. Peer. Age.

MN: Your contemporary?

LV: Something like that, yes. And he also is a personality. And so is Glenn Gould. But we had about twenty other people. We had a beautiful, big house. And right away, somehow, magnetically or anti-magnetically, they rubbed each other the wrong way. Two major personalities. They each ended up into a different part of the house, holding court to their courtiery, but they wouldn't be seen in the same room. Well—And Gould ended up in the kitchen sitting in front of the washing machine on the floor and holding court and talking stories, and everybody admiringly—

MN: Yeah.

LV: And during the evening, I said, "Glenn, how about playing something?"

He says, "Ok. Alright."

And we got up, and my studio—forty-foot studio—was downstairs. Our house was built on a mountainside—a hillside, and you entered on the top level. There was the kitchen and the living room and so on, and the studio was the bottom level, and my piano was there, of course. Glenn Gould took one step down and says, "Oh, it's terribly cold there!" One step. You know, he was deathly afraid of cold, and he felt happier upstairs; at least, he didn't complain. But one step did it. He already figured out that downstairs would be too cold, and he wouldn't play. So that was the end of it. [MN and LV chuckle] But we continued with the discussions—

MN: Yeah.

LV: —and wonderful evening.

MN: Yeah.

LV: That—That's the most memorable evening over there.

MN: Well—Go ahead. He did want to you play Bach on an [ice flow?] once, didn't he?

LV: Yes, that's what I was planning—planning to—Actually, I suggested, "Let's play some Bach." And no, I never played with him, but I wish I did. Oh, as I said, we spent a very short time in Toronto because we finished a quartet series of concerts and broadcasts much earlier than the fifty-week, and I got this invitation from California to—full-time professorship, and teaching, and conducting the orchestra, which was very impressive to me, and con—teaching, conducting cello, chamber music and other things. Very attractive, full professorship and tenure. All I wanted. And I accepted it and I resigned Toronto, and we left before the year was over.

MN: I see.

LV: Because we did all the quartet work and that was—that was the major reason.

MN: Yes.

LV: And I handed over my teaching, but I left about two-thirds after the year and settled down in San Francisco. At first, we rented a nice house, but the next year we bought one and I stayed there for twenty-seven years.

MN: And this was at San Francisco State?

LV: Yes, I was engaged at San Francisco State University. At first, it was called San Francisco State College, but during—after a few years it became a university, and it was very—the biggest university, and it was a good one. And I had a hundred-piece orchestra almost every semester. But as you know, the membership changes per semester. People stay for four years but always different ones. But I kept a very good orchestra there. I trained them well and we could play anything. You name it. Whether it's Shostakovich *Symphony* or Prokofiev or—or [Vaughn?] Williams. I'm just thinking of—And we played Stravinsky *Petrushka*.

MN: Wow.

LV: You know, I'm just describing what the orchestra was able to play. We had two programs per semester so we had plenty to work.

MN: Sure.

LV: But orchestra met Monday, Wednesday, Friday, two hours each day. And I was able to choose the best players, and everybody wanted to play in the orchestra because they thought it was exciting and they learned a lot. And while I had different first flutists sometimes each year, or changes in the strings, and—and the tuba, but still, most of the people were very capable and they all ate out of my hands. Mainly because I was joking also. I couldn't live without it.

And so, I spent twenty-seven years at the helm of the orchestra, and we played all kinds of first performances, modern American works and modern European works. So we really covered much more than a university orchestra is supposed to, or expected to, because of my experience and acquaintance of these works, and the kids were just hanging on my words—

MN: Terrific.

LV: —and instructions. And many of them became professionals. And so, I'm very pleased with it.

MN: And you really enjoyed the teaching, too, didn't you?

LV: Oh, yes! Well, as I said, I thought conducting—among them, Taki—Takiasumi[?]-No.

MN: Kent Nagano.

LV: Kent. Kent Nagano. Yes, [unclear] somebody else.

MN: Yes.

LV: I'm thinking of Japanese names. Kent Nagano was my prize student.

MN: Wow. He's become such a distinguished conductor.

LV: For two years. He graduated from Stanford and then came to do graduate work at San Francisco State with me, and he blesses me ever since.

MN: And he conducted a program in honor of you, didn't he?

- LV: Oh, yes! One of the—I think seventy-fifth birthday, or one of his, you know, youngster birthdays.
- MN: And that was in San Francisco, right?
- LV: That was in Berkeley.
- MN: In Berkeley.
- LV: Yes.
- MN: Okay.
- LV: Because he was the head of the [University of California] Berkeley Symphony [Orchestra] for twenty-some years; Kent.
- MN: I see.
- LV: He formed the orchestra, and yes, he—he—that—he was sticking to the Berkeley Orchestra even though it cost him a lot of light while he was already director of other symphonies. He is now head of the Montreal Symphony [Orchestra], for many years now. But he was directing many—not first-rate, but second-line symphonies. And also in Europe, he was head of one of the Paris operas for ten years. [Kent Nagano was music director of the Opéra de Lyon in Lyon, France, from 1988-1998.]
- MN: Wow!
- LV: He had a wonderful—wonderful career. I'm proud of him.
- MN: Oh, yes.
- LV: And he never forget that I'm—I made him ashamed because he didn't recognize the wrong notes in the Debussy *Preludes* that the orchestra was playing wrong. And at rehearsals, I stopped him and said, "Now, please, correct the notes." And I had them play it again and most of the wrong notes appeared, and he didn't quite know it. And from then on, he really began to study his scores. So I made some hard times.
- MN: Well, you know, I remember, Laszlo, when you were in Greensboro, you were conducting the ensemble on your arrangement of the [Richard] Strauss that you arranged; the Strauss *Sonata*.

LV: Yes.

MN: And I remember you picking out wrong notes—

LV: Oh, yes.

MN: —regularly.

LV: Well, God blessed me with perfect pitch, and I know the scores totally that I conduct. And I know hundreds. I still do, and I don't let anything bypass. And once one or two persons in an orchestra is caught playing a wrong note by a conductor, all of them are much more careful and stick to the correct [unclear].

MN: Yes.

LV: I was conducting in—Where was it?—someplace, that same work; the Strauss.

MN: It's the *Cello Sonata* but you arranged it.

LV: The *Cello Sonata* orchestrated—orchestrated for ten winds. And it needs a conductor. And I did it with David Garrett, who is my doctorate student who—who handles my publications.

MN: Right.

LV: He was the soloist, I was the conductor, and the orchestra was from the Oakland [Symphony Orchestra] and the San Francisco Symphonies; good player. There was a second bassoonist who thought I didn't know my job and he began to act up, playing wrong notes and—in the heaviest, thickest passages, and I began to know that he's misbehaving. You know, we all do—I did it sometime in orchestra; playing the wrong note purposely. And he did. And after two or three times it happened, finally I picked him out and I said, "You, second baboon, what the hell are you doing?"

MN: [laughs]

LV: I says, "You played this and that wrong; caught every note." He behaved like an angel after that. He knew how to play it perfectly, and it was a halfway demanding passage, but after that, there was never a wrong note. And the others take note of this too. And I

remember "the second baboon;" I called him that. [LV and MN chuckle] But it was bassoon.

MN: But you made quick work of the problem, didn't you?

LV: Oh, yes. Well, I knew and—but I let it go to see whether he's going to pull another fast one, and he did. I—I—I know the orchestra's behavior. It happened in The Philharmonic too. We were trying to pull things on George Szell. Some people were fiddling around while he was speaking, and he turns very suddenly; he wants "Quiet!" And when he turns that way, the other side started.

JH: [chuckles]

LV: We had ways of having—

MN: Yes.

LV: I think I told you about [Herbert von] Karajan conducting?

MN: Oh, but do tell! Do tell! When he—

LV: He—He was refused to enter the United S—who refused visa or invitation to America for fifteen years after the Nazi Era ended. And he was generally hated as a big Nazi. But finally—He was so famous in Europe that finally The New York Philharmonic felt that they had to invite him. And they did. And we had to suffer through two weeks of him conducting, because I—I couldn't bear the fact that I'm too afraid of him, or [in] awe of him, or what—I just couldn't stand playing for him, but I had to because that was my job. So I did. I hated it, but I did it. I didn't do anything—I didn't pull anything, but I hated every bit of it.

But the orchestra began to play wrong times, wrong places, and so on, and he similarly began to notice this, but he was clever enough not to notice, or not to admit. So there was no outright—but on a con—one of the concerts, the violins, instead of repeating a section, some of them—the first violinists—went on; the others repeated. So there was a commotion and it was purposely done, I know, and it took quite a bit of digression until we found our way back. That was a way of an orchestra paying back. So that's my story, because I didn't talk there.

MN; Yes. Yes.

LV: I, you know—I went through the Nazi Era, as you know.

MN: Yes.

LV: And he [Hebert von Karajan], who has been a top officer in the German Army. He was head of a *Sturmabteilung*, which mean a Stormtrooper group. [*Sturmabteilung*, or Storm Detachment, functioned as the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party.] When Germany overran Austria, he was one of the officers leading one of the groups. And we all knew it, but of course, he denied it, but there are records of this. And I always held it against him that he tries to be a popular conductor with such a war record.

MN: Yes.

LV: But you know, he has had a very good musical reputation, not agreed to by everybody, because he was a big actor.

I never forget, he came to Budapest once in 1941 to conduct the Budapest Symphony; Brahms *Fourth Symphony*. I clearly understand. And we didn't know much about him—or nothing against him—and he was a famous conductor and we wanted to—he had a concert. And students of the academy—this was at Academy Hall [The Liszt Academy of Music?—students were allowed to go behind the stage on the upper level; that was open for students.

And in comes Karajan and we had a very good, front view. In comes—closed eyes—goes between the orchestra, takes his place, and—or else maybe he closed his eyes later, I suppose, once he—podium—and he began to go into a trance, standing there for an indeterminable time. And closed eyes; didn't open. And all of a sudden—I don't know whether you know how the Brahms *Fourth Symphony* start. [Varga sings a portion of the *Fourth Symphony*] And like this. [Varga standing with eyes closed] Everybody is looking at him and waiting. He didn't move for a minute, which is a long time. And then all of a sudden he does this. [Varga demonstrates the slight motion of Karajan]. Just minimal motion; posing. This was very awkward acting for the audience and the orchestra. And throughout this symphony, was very acting-out in ex—extreme.

MN: Yes.

LV: We all hated that kind of circus behavior and everything, because he wanted to remember unique—by his acting, not by his musicianship. That's—That's all I remember, so. I didn't like him ever since, but later when I found out about his Nazi background—He was one of the first Nazi member; like hundred—hundred, by—and join the Nazi Party. Each one has a number and his was one of the low numbers; less than a hundred. [Herbert von Karajan joined the Nazi Party on April 8, 1933, and membership number was 1,607,525.] That shows something. But he became, initially—maybe 1933 already, he became a—

You didn't have to be a Nazi member in order to be a Nazi, but to be a Party Member was a special thing, and he made sure that he was an early member. Of course, they had special privileges from the leading people. And so, he was a sympathizer. I cannot say that he killed anybody; I don't know. But I assume he might. But that had nothing to do with my musical hatred, because he was such an actor.

MN: Yes.

LV: Anyway, let's get off the Nazi time.

MN: Okay. [Chuckle]

LV: Now, where are we? In San Francisco?

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MN: Well, we were in San Francisco, yes.

LV: I thoroughly enjoyed my time in San Francisco. I was really appreciated there. And as I said, I had a wonderful orchestra and audiences came. And I often appeared as soloist with pianists and sometimes with chamber groups, even though the music department had an excellent string quartet that was also on the faculty, especially in the later years, called San Francisco String Quartet, I think. [LV and MN chuckle]

MN: Okay. Did you have a regular accompanist in—in solo performances there?

LV: Oh, yes. Yes. Actually, Sylvia Jenkins, who was on the record.

MN: Oh, yes. From your recording, yes.

LV: Yes, and she was an excellent—She was a wife, for a while, of one of our best piano teachers there, but she wasn't on the faculty at the university. She was elsewhere on the conservatory. But she was—I would have rather played with her than him, even though he was a good pianist too. But they eventually divorced, and whenever I—San Francisco—played, it was her who played; excellent pianist.

MN: Yeah.

LV: A beautiful lady; right there. [Varga points]

MN: That's right. [chuckles]

LV: Where is she?

MN: I remember we saw her.

LV: Oh, second from the top, in between the violinist and the cellist, who looks like me. Can you see? No, from the top, the second level.

JH: Yes.

MN: Oh, yes.

JH: Is that her in the middle?

LV: Yes.

JH: Yes.

MN: Yeah. Yeah.

LV: Fabulous pianist.

MN: But you were there, and then it was after that—after those twenty—Well, your children grew up, then, in San Francisco, and—

LV: Oh, yes. Well, my oldest son was born in New York, but he was about six years old—No, he was nine years old when we got to San Francisco and my daughter was six. There was no Michael. Not even a sexy thought. [LV and MN chuckle] Alright, well, Michael was born in San Francisco.

MN: Right. Well, you were—And you were going to Aspen in summers by that time; were you?

LV: Oh, yes! I start—started in—No, not at that time. I started Aspen in '66.

MN: Okay.

LV: And I was there till '91.

MN: Wow!

LV: So twenty-five or twenty-six years. Every year, except '67. I was there in '66 because they called me to substitute for Zara Nelsova—you'll know the name—

MN: Right.

LV: —who was the regular cellist there, and she couldn't come that summer so I went. And then she came the next summer, but that was the end of hers. And I—From '68 I was back, till '91. And I played every year solo, and a member of the string quartet, and played all kind of different ensembles. I played with Perlman and [Pinchas] Zukerman, both of them in a sextet—Brahms *Sextet*—but Perlman played first violinist and Zukerman played first viola. And they came every summer. They were almost there for the whole summer, but not quite.

MN: And you played the Kodály *Duo* with—with—

LV: Oh, yes!

MN: That's a wonderful piece.

LV: I played the Kodály *Solo Sonata* also. And it happened to be—I don't know whether you know [The] Aspen [Music Festival and School], but it's a concert place in a tent; a gigantic tent. About sixty-eight hundred seats in it, but it's a tent. And exists rain, occasionally. Well, during—whenever I played, it was raining. I was known as the rainmaker.

JH: Would it cancel the—your performance?

LV: No, I stupidly—and I didn't quite know that I could stop it, wait out the rain. I went on. Didn't speak. Nobody heard a note. I hardly could hear a note. It was cello alone. It was stupid, but I was fine. It was very early in my sense. I didn't quite know how the habits are.

Later on, I once played the [Camille] Saint-Saëns *Concerto* with the orchestra, and in the middle of it, a deluge. So again, nobody could hear me so I stopped and the conductor agreed. So waited fifteen minutes, and then the rain stopped and I continued from that point. And we called it—that this was a hyphenated performance. First, we played the Saint, and then the Saëns. [LV and MN laugh]

MN: [laughing] That's great.

LV: Yes.

JH: I have a question. Could you tell—Could you talk about the significance of the Cello Quartet, and when did you form that?

LV: Yes. Good question. I got the idea of the Cello Quartet with The Philharmonic. I had twelve excellent cellists, and I always thought that the range of the cello is like the human voice. It's from the lowest bass to the highest soprano. Almost as high as the violin. So I said, "This is within the range of a string quartet; almost the whole range." I said, "I don't see why four cellos could not be—" And those are the same colors, and represent the different ranges of the cello. It's still different from a string quartet. The string quartet is more ideal, I agree, but I wanted to show, first of all, what the cellos can do way high and way low, whichever, and in between. Also, I wanted to challenge my cellist colleagues to play more demanding things. So I began to make arrangements. My first was—One of the best known is the Vivaldi *Concerto Grosso in D Minor*, which is a string orchestra piece, and I arranged it just for four cellos, and I made many others since. I'll come back. I'm going to show you a list. [MN holds a list of arrangements and editions by Laszlo Varga in front of the camera] Oh, this can read English? [JH and MN chuckle]

JH: Not very well. Just for the record.

LV: And frankly, I love to play first violin.

JH: Say that again.

LV: On the cello.

JH: Say it again.

LV: I said, I formed the Cello Quartet because I wanted to play first violin.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And very often I found myself in the range of a violin, and it helped me. Well, most concert cellists also get acquainted with those upper reaches, but it's very hard to play up there reliably, especially fast passages. Well, I extended the cello—cello range by this because the first cello usually scratches up there. So—But everybody had—In my

arrangements, everybody has some turn to play high stuff, as well as the others. So that was the reason—my reason—and I—we continued the Cello Quartet, which you'll see up there—one cello quartet—and then on the bottom, you'll see my cello quartet in San Francisco, who was also very good. Yes. Do you see four people?

JH: Yes.

MN: Just for a clarification, Laszlo, your first cello quartet was from The New York Philharmonic, right?

LV: Yes. It's called New York Philharmonic Cello Quartet.

MN: Right.

LV: That other one was San Francisco Cello Quartet.

MN: Okay.

LV: So—And we made recordings for Decca [Records] with The New York Philharmonic. And special cello quartets were written especially for us by Gunther Schuller, by Meyer Kupferman, well-known New York composers, and several others. And we gave first performances, and—and further performances, of each. I am very happy.

MN: Yes. You performed quite a lot of Meyer Kupferman's music, didn't you?

LV: Oh, yes. Twenty-five different works, most of them written for me, and not only cello solo; two cellos, four cellos— quartet—but cello/piano and many others.

MN: Isn't there one with guitar?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: Yes, there's one. And all kind of crazy combinations also. Oh, there it is. Here is a tape that has all cello quartets. Can you see this? [LV holds cassette tape in front of camera]

JH: Yes.

LV: It's close enough?

JH: Yes.

LV: It's—has my arrangements of Vivaldi and the Bach *Chaconne*, I think; Bach. And two original works written by Gunther Schuller and Meyer Kupferman; very interesting works. Can you read it?

JH: Yes.

LV: Good.

JH: Vivaldi, Schuller, Haydn, Popper—

LV: Oh, the Haydn is a string quartet that I arranged for four cellos, which is spectacular—

MN: Yes.

LV: —because I didn't change anything.

JH: Jongen?

LV: Jongen. Yes, [Marie-Alphonse-Nicolas-]Joseph Jongen, a Belgian composer, wrote original cello quartets, which are very pleasant.

MN: And there's [Béla] Bartók as well.

LV: Bartók, [those are?] my abominations.

MN: [chuckles]

JH: What do you mean?

LV: Arrangements. Derangements. Well, you know, people sometimes pull up their nose, "Arrangements? That's not valid." But I tried to make it interesting and make it believable on those instruments. And it's mostly cellos, or cello/piano.

MN: And you—Of course, that was your reputation, right?

LV: Yes.

JH: I also was amazed by the story of you playing the viola part in a string quartet; when you played the viola. Can you tell that story?

LV: Oh, yes. I was engaged to teach chamber music sessions—summer sessions—at the university—I forget where it was. But I had a good class and people came from all over. I had five or six groups to work with, and there were famous violists, [unclear] others, and a violinists [was there?]. So—And there was a concert scheduled for the different groups—student groups—each to be playing one, big movement of a work. And my groups already played and I was listening to it, and it was fine; everybody played well. The next one was a group of students coached by a violist, a very well-known violist. And we wait for the—for them to appear and nobody comes. We sit. Wait. Nothing.

So I went back stage, "What the hell is going on?"

And there is the violist—is in tears because she had a terrible pain in here—carpal tunnel problem—which didn't happen for a while so it was—she was playing and rehearsing, but all of a sudden hit and she couldn't play. And they already notified the teacher, the violist, to come and bat for her. She wasn't at the—listening. But she came in ten minutes, and that was the reason for the waiting, and brought her viola. She comes in and says, "Oh, let me see the part." It was the Brahms *Clarinet Quintet*. And she looks at it, and she said, "You know, I've never played this. I'm not—I'm not comfortable playing it without rehearsal."

So I hear this and I said, "Will you lend your viola for me?"

She looks at me like I was out of my mind.

I said, "Please let me—" She let me her Amati Viola—beautiful viola—and I walked out to the quartet, sat down with the viola like this, and I played the whole thing. To me, if you know enough, the viola is tuned exactly like a cello, but an octave higher. Oh, you should know, of course. Exactly an octave higher, and I have been teaching quartets all along, all my whole life. I certainly can read the clef, which most violinists, they are stymied by it. And so, it's an alto clef, and sometimes treble clef. And absolutely no problem. And the playing is the same as the cello except it's an octave lower, and every—every interval is much closer. That's the problem.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Because you play—On the cello you play [Varga sings and displays an example]. Open. On the viola [Varga sings and displays another example], it's much closer. So one has to get used to it. Because you—violinists play—That's a pleasure and a great advantage of violin, because you can finger a scale without open string and in one position. On the cello, we have to—we have to shift. When we play an F sharp major or something more complicated, you cannot play open strings because there's no open—they are [Varga sings and displays an example]; shift all the time.

That's the uncomfortable part of cello, because that is a three-note hold. For the violinists and the violas, it's four notes in one position, and it's a big difference. So I had to get used to it. But you know, in classes, often the violist doesn't show up and the quartet is there, and cannot play without a viola, so I'd go to the library, get a viola, and play with them. So I didn't do that the first time. Confession.

So I played it and the first violinist couldn't play her part because she kept looking over—what the hell I'm doing.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And the cellist, who was my—my student, also sometimes forgot to play his part because [unclear] admiring what I was doing, [chuckles] and I had to cue him in sometimes. He was occupied looking at me and forgot to play his own part.

JH: How did you—How did you keep it from sliding off? Did you just hold on to it?

LV: No problem. Here—I sat it here, and the viola, you know, is substantial enough. Oh, wait a second. Not on—I held it in between.

JH: So it didn't slide.

LV: Cello style.

JH: Yeah.

LV: It's a cellino.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Not a cello piccolo.

MN: Well, that seems to me, Laszlo, to have been a big part of your teaching, your arranging, your performing, and that is this—the versatility.

LV: Yes, right.

MN: The resourcefulness.

LV: Being an orchestra conductor, I was familiar of the possibilities of the bassoon and the oboe and the horns and everything else. My biggest problem in orchestra was transposition. You're familiar with clarinets transposed?

MN: Yes.

LV: And horns transposed—trumpets—and many other instruments; English horn and—
When I see a pitch on the score, I hear it. But if I look at the clarinet part and I see a C, it has to sound like a B flat or an A or an E flat. It depends whether it's an A flat clarinet or a B flat clarinet or an A clarinet. And to me, that's a very difficult thing because I hear the C—I see the note and I hear that very pitch, but not transposed. So it's an extra calculation that I have to do, almost for every note. Later on, I got a little bit more experienced, in doing it more fluently. Especially if I have to—have to read just one instrument transposed. That I can do. But in the orchestra score, every harmony is many different transpositions, along with normal. Mostly abnormal. [LV and MN chuckle]
So—Why did I start on this?

MN: Well, I was asking you about versatility.

LV: Oh, the playing the viola.

MN: Yes.

LV: I—I had great fun, myself, but I did this in teaching sometimes. It wasn't a totally unknown quantity. And the violist, she almost fell over. She couldn't believe it. [chuckles] So this—this is my story about that.

MN: Well, in speaking of the practicality, I'm just thinking of an example. You play the *Fourth Suite* of Bach—you changed the key, didn't you?

LV: Right, and I'm the one who does it alone. It happens to be here.

MN: Is it in—What?—E flat, I think?

LV: Yes, it is.

MN: Okay.

LV: Here is the original. Do you want to take a picture of it?

JH: Can you turn the stand?

LV: I can hold it. Just take a picture of one page.

JH: Yeah. [MN holds up the score for the camera.]

LV: And I'm [unclear] same page.

JH: Hold on. Wait.

MN: Okay.

JH: Got it.

LV: Here is the same page. Which—Which—

MN: This is the courante.

[The courante, corrente, coranto, and corant are some of the names given to a family of triple metre dances from the late Renaissance and the Baroque era.]

LV: Oh. What is—copied the pages.

MN: I can tell you while you're looking that I've had an inquiry about this at the library. Somebody says, "I think this is a great idea. I'd like to have this music."

LV: Well, here is the one in my version, in G major. [LV holds sheet music up for camera] The same music exactly.

JH: Yes.

LV: And sometimes I even added a few harmony notes, but that's basically the same music. But a great—great advantage is that the E flat key, which it is, is the only one that's not C, or G major, or D major or minor. This is the only one that's written in E flat and it's very complicated, because I don't have open-string availability and it's a great help because of the key itself. And it's a major third lower than G major. See, the difference between E flat and G major—turned[?]. So it's brighter. The original is a little bit logi[?] sounding; that's lower. And this one is a little bit brighter. But the main advantage is to

finger it, because of the available open strings and harmonics, so it somehow adds an additional dimension. And every cellist understands this—and I'm sure you do as a violinist. I'm sure you do too. Just figure out—Can you—Did you ever play the Mozart *Sinfonia Concertante*?

JH: No.

LV: That's for violin and viola.

JH: Yeah. No. No.

LV: A beautiful piece. And orchestra. That's written in E flat major. And do you know how Mozart conceived that? In D major, but the violin tuned up a half note higher, so it sounds E ma—E flat major, but you're fingering it in D major, which is available open-strings again. So on that new fingering, you have an open E flat and an open B flat. You—You visualize?

JH: Yes.

LV: People normally play it as it is with E flat because they can play it. But Mozart wrote it in D major, because he thought of this. Now, Bach wrote this—I didn't talk to him lately, but—he wanted to have a little differentiation. All the other five suites are in the basic key of C, G, and D, which are basic on the violin too. Well, on the violin the equivalent would be G major, D major, and A major, starting with open strings.

So I—By the way, this is the least often performed work. This is only played when people play the whole set. And if people choose, [that will always be the others?].

MN: Yes.

LV: The only difficult suite is the *Sixth Suite*, which is played for a five—written for a five-string cello, like mine. And I am the only one who bothered to have one strung that way and rebuilt, and I play the *Sixth Suite*, always, on five string. On the recordings. Where is it? Oh, this is the score.

MN: There you go.

LV: Look at this addition. This is the *Suite Four*. Oh! I changed—This is not what I wanted. *Sixth*—Oh, this is very interesting to note this. The *Fifth Suite*, it says '[originale notium?];' original note—notes, and here is the pitches with—it should be—the cello should be tuned. The A-string lowered to G. Do you see here?

MN: Yes.

LV: Many people play it that way, and that's the original. However, here the whole suite is printed again. It says 'enriched for normal tuning,' so it's printed out again in normal tuning, where the chords, like this one—in the original version, you can play it in a four-note chord. In this, people consider it impossible, so they will play a three-note chord. Of course, I play four. I'm that way too. You see, I introduced[?] an F.

MN: Yes.

LV: And here I make it more like the original, but in normal—it's very hard on the cello to tune it back and forth. So I don't like to do it, and most cellists don't. So they play with the norm—normal tuning, but with missing notes. I call it—It's like missing front teeth.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But it's interesting that this official, best addition has both versions. So it's open. And—Oh, I wanted to show you the *Sixth Suite*.

MN: Oh, yes. Let's see your *Sixth Suite*.

LV: That's the hardest and the busiest.

MN: Oh, gosh.

LV: That's in D major. It's printed in only one—once. It wasn't—This doesn't say that it's written for five, but here in the notes it mentions how it's written. *Sixth Suite*. Manuscript shows the title 'A[?] cinque cordes;' for five strings. And here's the pitches. That's what a cello piccolo is tuned.

MN: Yes. Now, have you—Are your fingerings—your annotations—are—is—

LV: For five fingers.

MN: For five. Okay.

LV: Yes, but I—my student days, I never had a five-string cello, and of course, we played them with four strings, and that's extremely hard. It involves complex thumb positions, which otherwise is much less complex. And Bach knew exactly what can be done for five

strings. What can be done for the lower bass string. He was a brilliant man. Even the most, good composers knew how to vary these requirements and use it for the best possible reason. Now, the cello—cello lesson is over.

JH: I loved the cello lesson.

MN: Oh, I enjoyed the cello lesson, Laszlo. Yes. [chuckles]

LV: I did too. Alright. Where were we?

JH: Well, I think we're just finishing this tape.

LV: Already?

JH: It's—Yes. We've just got a few minutes left, and it's 6:30 [p.m] already.

LV: Oh, really? Time for a drink. [all chuckle]

JH: I think that we should close this interview session, if you think so.

LV: Well, shouldn't we finish that tape, at least?

JH: We've got four minutes left so what would you like—

LV: Oh, let's—Well, where were we?

MN: Well, we were in San Francisco but we haven't gotten to Indiana or Houston.

LV: Well, that was much later.

MN: Yes.

LV: I spent, as I said, seven—twenty-eight years, or twenty-seven years, in San Francisco.

MN: Right.

LV: And we loved every moment of it.

MN: Right.

LV: But I decided to take an early retirement—I was only sixty-three at the time—because I somehow wanted to be free. And—Where did I go? Oh, we first moved to—north of San Francisco—Sonoma—and we lived like a Lord. A beautiful, big house. And I did some private teaching, but I didn't want to do the—and we wanted to move out from San Francisco. So Sonoma is a beautiful place and we enjoyed it, and I played a few concerts and did some teaching, but not full-time. I wanted to enjoy life.

And I did—We did that for about two or three years. Let's see. I retired in '58, and by '62 moved to Indiana. There they invited me to do a little teaching on the side, and we were there for two years and I had a lot of friends at the university—musician friends—besides János Starker, who was the main—main cello teacher.

So we had a good time. And during those year—two years, I was taking those summer invitations for teaching chamber music, among them, at the University of Houston. That's when it happened, this viola incident.

MN: Yes.

LV: Or accident.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: But after the second summer, they invited me to University of Houston in '94, and I accepted it for one year until they find—they'd have a search and find somebody permanent. And at the end of the first month there—I was teaching—and I went to the director and said, "Alright, who's coming to try out for the job?"

He says, "Nobody." He says, "We called off the search. We want you to come, [unclear]."

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And so, I thought it was funny, and I stayed for six years, and I enjoyed it. But after six years, which was—brought me to 2000, I finally decided to say good-bye for professional teaching. And we moved, definitely, into here, even though we had the place from 1991.

MN: Right.

LV: But we only used it on vacation time. And ever since I'm retired. I was already seventy-six then. That's time to retire; seventy-six.

MN: Yes.

LV: Even though [Pablo] Casals never did.

MN: Right. Well, you know, a great many of the performances in your new CD set—

LV: Yes.

MN: —the ten that have just been released—most of those were recorded in Houston, weren't they?

LV: Exactly. Yes.

MN: Right.

LV: For instance, the Strauss *Sonata* orchestrated and—by *Don Quixote* arrangement was all with the Houston Symphony [Orchestra] members; also, members of the same university; faculty. Excellent musicians. And I was doing the conducting, with my head, and played a solo part.

MN: In the *Don Quixote*, and the *Sonata*?

LV: Yes. No, the *Sonata* I—I didn't conduct.

MN: Okay.

LV: Somebody else conducted it, but I played it. And *Don Quixote* I was playing and conducting with my head. I call it dog shit.

MN: [MN and LV laugh]

LV: It was performed here in Sarasota, very well, by an excellent first cellist but with a conductor. And that's how it should be done. But it wasn't performed elsewhere.

MN: Well, it was—Now, we did it at the Greensboro celebration. Didn't we have—

LV: Yeah.

MN: Yeah, I think we did. I think it was performed there. I thought—

LV: *Don Quixote*?

MN: I thought so.

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: It wasn't too well. I was conducting that, but the cellist wasn't too good. What's her name?

MN: I don't remember.

LV: I'm sure she was a good cellist, but she wasn't up to that.

MN: Okay.

LV: The others were quite good.

MN: Yes.

LV: Quite good. But the cello part is extra difficult.

MN: Right. Right.

LV: Listen. If—It's 6—6:30 [p.m.] plus, so do we have enough—Did we—

[End Tape 4—Beginning Tape 5—May 28, 2011]

LV: —and I don't play every day anymore, so my muscles are different. They are not as taut and ready.

MN: Was that that lovely [Bach] B minor *Sarabande*?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yeah. I adore that music.

LV: Good for you, but I played it in D minor.

MN: [chuckles]

[LV plays a sample on his cello]

LV: It's a very artificial fingering because I cannot play it in B minor. Well, the first—[LV plays sample] I don't have any strength[?]. So the equivalent of the violin fingering, it would be like this [LV plays sample], almost. But it's too low.

MN: Yes. Yes.

LV: The Chaconne, or the whole D minor partite, I'm playing it an octave lower than the violin.

MN: Right.

LV: So its total different fingerings, and—[LV plays sample]—See, I break up those four notes because I—[LV plays sample]

JH: Do you mind if I move this, just for the picture?

LV: Oh, you want to—

JH: It's ookay.

LV: All this mess? You want to—

JH: Yeah, I like the mess.

LV: Oh, because I can get rid of the mess.

JH: No. No. I like it.

LV: You like it messy.

JH: I like it. It feels—It's got a nice—The bridges and the music there, I like it. [chuckles]

LV: Alright. You want to see my bridges too? [Varga points inside his mouth.]

MN: [laughing]

LV: [LV tuning his cello]

MN: That's right, as you were saying yesterday, if you play the whole Chaconne, you might lose a few teeth. You think? [laughing]

LV: Chacun [en sans? unclear]. In French they say, "Chacun;" "each one." Chacun.

MN: Chacun.

LV: And then, the Chaconne, I think, the base is in Italian also; ciaccona.

MN: Ciacconna, right.

LV: Each variation. [LV plays sample]

MN: Yes. Yes.

LV: I love to research the differences between languages. Sometimes with the same work, the French version or the English version is recognizable after a little thought involved in it.

MN: Yes. Did you play the Vitali *Chaconne*, with it's—

LV: [LV plays sample]

MN: That's it, yes.

LV: My fingers don't go to the right place.

MN: My father had a recording of—

LV: Did you applaud?

JH: [JH claps hands once] [all laugh]

LV: Thank you.

MN: My father had a recording of [René-Charles] "Zino" Francescatti playing that piece. Oh, when I was a little boy, it almost made me cry.

LV: Oh, it must have been beautiful.

MN: Yeah.

LV: He was a great violinist.

MN: Yeah.

LV: Played many times, six feet away from me.

MN: You—You know, that's—You had the best seat in the house.

LV: Exactly. Yes. Yes. Everybody has—Heifetz was—You know, Heifetz was playing the Sibelius *Concerto* once with us and—Let's see. How does it start? Oh, how does the Sibelius go? But anyway, he started on the G string. I cannot play it. And just six feet behind him, I heard nothing but [LV plays unpleasant sound]. This kind of a sound. Very forced and—but six feet away front wise, it sounded like a very, beautiful strong sound. But behind, it wasn't. It was just, you know, very heavy. How does it go?

MN: That's a mystery to me, Laszlo.

LV: [LV plays sample] Is that it? That's not it. Yes, so it starts out on the G string.

MN: Yes.

LV: [LV plays sample]

MN: Oh, that's right. Yes. Yes. Oh, yeah, good.

LV: And it sounded beautiful out to the audience, but behind, it was scratchy as hell.
[chuckles]

MN: Well, you know, I heard Heifetz play it once, too, but it was Daniel Heifetz.

LV: Oh, that's a different sound[?].

MN: Yeah, it was—

LV: A different firm.

MN: Yeah. [chuckle]

LV: Yes. Oh, I have the greatest admirations for Heifetz. So impeccable. Never a—Never an out-of-tune note, and it was beautiful.

MN: So you—

LV: It's like, you know, seeing Broadway actors with stage paint, close by.

MN: Yes.

LV: Six feet away. But at a distance, it look just beautiful.

MN: Yes. Yes.

LV: Only[?] if she think so.

MN: [MN and LV chuckle] Do we have to count for our microphones?

JH: I think I'm—I think we're in good shape. Go ahead and count to five for me.

[Extraneous conversation redacted]

JH: Can you have the cello count to five for me?

LV: [LV plays sample] Or upwards. [LV plays opposite sample] Oops.

JH: It can count, in any language. [chuckles]

LV: Right.

JH: Okay, so would you like to go ahead and introduce—This is tape—

MN: Oh, wait a minute, let me change the date. [chuckles]

LV: What the hell are we going to talk about?

MN: [laughing]

LV: I have to get into the mind—mindset.

JH: Yeah, let me turn—I'll turn this—

[Recording Interruption]

LV: Oh, do you remember that?

MN: [laughing] Oh, I do, yes.

LV: Yes, I was about ten.

MN: Hold on one second. Let me introduce us.

JH: Introduce us.

MN: Is this tape number one; first of today's interviews? Tape—

[Recording Interruption]

JH: Okay. Alright, we're rolling.

MN: Okay. This is the second day of interviews with Laszlo Varga. This is tape number five with Laszlo, and today's date is May 28, 2011. I'm Mac Nelson. I'm here with videographer, Joanna Hay, with Laszlo, at his home in Sarasota, Florida. And Laszlo, we were going back to your tender childhood, your youth, and I remember that you once played a concert in a drugstore. [chuckles] Can you—Can you tell us about that?

LV: Doesn't everybody? Well, I was about ten years old and my sister, who was four years older than I, took me to a cello lesson—to my teacher—which was just a few corners away from us in Budapest. And on the way, I somehow acquired a taste or a desire to collect little soaps, little—little tiny bottles of shaving lotion, or something—this kind of thing—

MN: Samples?

LV: Samples, yes; the advertising samples that drugstores gave away to customers, easily. And I acquired quite a—quite a collection of those things, and at age ten I didn't know any better, so I collected. I was a cute kid, they say. I don't know. I used to go into these drugstores and ask for a sample of this and that, and they usually gave me—because they thought it was quite cute. And once, on my way to the cello lesson, I went into one of these stores with my cello, holding it, in a soft case, of course; it's a small cello. And the guy said, "Well, alright. Do you want some soap? Well, good, but you have to pay for—play for it." And I didn't think much about it, so I said—took out my cello, and sat down and I played something simple; I forget what it was. And then they—You know, they paid me back with samples, which was very good. They asked me to play for my money.

MN: Right.

LV: So that was that, and then they even applauded and I felt very important. That was age ten, or maybe even earlier. I forget.

MN: You had been playing since you were six, right?

LV: Seven.

MN: Seven, okay.

LV: I started piano at six.

MN: Okay.

LV: And started cello at seven, so I knew what four strings were and what the bow was. [LV jokingly holds cello bow vertical and pulls back simulating an archer's bow]

MN: [laughs]

JH: What do you think you played that day in the drugstore?

LV: Oh, some stupid song.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Some children's tunes. I don't remember.

MN: Right.

LV: You know, that was a long time ago. But it was very successful because they enjoyed me playing there, right in the store, and they rewarded me.

MN: May we proceed from here to some of your studies? You know, you were ten at that point, but you began serious study at seven, you said.

LV: Well, as serious as you can be at seven.

MN: Yes.

LV: Very basic. But I had a wonderful teacher called [Dr.] Laszlo Vincze, who taught me till age twelve. And that was 1936. But at that point, he decided to move to Israel and became one of the founding members of The Israel Philharmonic; from the beginning, The Israel Philharmonic was founded by Toscanini, and they started in '36, and he was one of the cellists.

MN: Right.

LV: And his wife was excellent pianist. [Ilona Vincze?]. Ilona[?], who was the teacher of my sister.

MN: I see.

LV: And so, my sister was fourteen when I was ten and she always took me to the lesson.

MN: Yes. Well, after he left who became your teacher?

LV: The greatest teacher in Budapest at that time called Adolf Schiffer—

MN: Schiffer, right.

LV: —who was already quite an old man, but he was the teacher of [Janos] Starker, of Gabor Rejto, and many other Hungarian, excellent cellists. But he was about to retire from the Uni—from the Conservatory of Music—or [Franz Liszt] Academy of Music, and he started teaching me privately in his home while he was still finishing teaching at the academy. Later on, he became my main teacher, but a year or two later, he assigned three

or four of his graduate students to teach me and several other of my—my age level cellists.

MN: Yes.

LV: So I went through about—semesters, or a half-year, studying with four different graduate students, who—I think I mentioned it in my notes, that they—one became the director of The Budapest Opera House [The Hungarian State Opera House, originally known as the Hungarian Royal Opera House]. Another one became the first cellist of The Symphony. Another one—So they took important jobs. But I had a semester with each one, under the tutelage still of Schiffer. And I also had lessons with the old man, but he was already retiring and so on. At one point, he retired from the Academy, and I was assigned to another teacher at the Academy, because I—my mother could have chosen[?] me to stop studying at the Academy and continue privately with Schiffer, but she thought that I would better be at the Academy and with the regular class, and take the classes that goes with it. So I was under the next teacher called Miklós Zsámboki. I dare you to spell that.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Who was a very lovely gentleman, but he couldn't play the cello. Otherwise, he was fine.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: No, he could play but he didn't care to. He—While I was playing, or the other students were playing, he was paging through his albums of wartime pictures with him as a very handsome soldier, and that's what he'd do. And when I'd finish playing, he say, "Oh, that was very good, Laszlo. Next time, take the next one." That was the amount of teaching I got.

MN: That was a lesson, huh? Yeah.

LV: We learned from each other, because we—all of us were required to not only be there for our own lessons, but many others, and listen and comment. And so, we taught each other much better than he did, and I was with him for seven years. But he was a very lovely gentleman, very courteous and nice, and a good pianist, so he accompanied everything we played. On his own concerto study, he made up the accompaniment, and very well too, but he couldn't play the cello. When he did, it sounded like [LV plays unpleasant sound on cello]. [LV and MN chuckle] And I spent seven years with him.

But I was also attending all kinds of chamber music classes and harmony lessons and analysis and so on, and that's where I learned all the sights and make sure—done by a

very creditable teacher. I started—let's see—when I was ten, so that was '34. So I spent about ten years at the Academy; '34 till '44. But the war stopped everything.

MN: Oh, right, yes.

LV: And in spite of the laws that forbade Jews to stay at the Academy in the last two years or so, I was able to maintain my status as an Academy student until—into 1944, which was the worst year, and the last year of the war. Finally in early '44, I had to quit because no Jews were allowed to—and I was about the only—Well, maybe one of the last three who attended, and we all were kicked out and—

MN: And '44 was the year the Nazis invaded Hungary, right?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: Actually, that was the last place that they invaded, officially. Actually, is this—it was '44, September, when the army came in; the German Army and the Sturmabteilung. And the Hungarian Nazis were even worse than the Germans, so it was just terrible. And that's when I ended up in labor camps with hard, physical labor, and I didn't know at what day—the next day I will be killed or tortured [unclear]. I was tortured but in a minor ways. Physically—Putting more and more heavy, physical labor.

MN: Right. Do you recall how long you were in the camp?

LV: Yes. I was—Let's see. The Germans came in '44; February 19th, I think that was it; February 19th. And that's when—I was able to hold my job as a cellist in The Budapest Symphony until that—It was a Sunday, and we were scheduled to play a Sunday afternoon concert with *Fantastique Symphonie* [*Symphonia fantastique...*] of [Hector] Berlioz, and do you know the fourth movement?

MN: The "March to the Scaffold"?

LV: The "March to the Scaffold," yes. We were rehearsing it on Friday, just before the Sunday, and during the scariest part of this "March to the Scaffold," the sirens began to go on—you know, air raid sirens—and it was—we had to go down to the cellar, which was common. But it was a coincidence, which was foreboding. And nothing happened at that time, but during the Sunday, I woke up and the rumor went out that the German Army has closed the borders from Austria and marching on Budapest. It was—It was—

You know, by car, it was just two, three hours. So they were there before noon, and—and it was a bedlam. We didn't know what was going to happen. And we didn't know whether the concert is going to be held at three o'clock. But the order came out, "Everything has to be normal, and yes, the concert has to go on as scheduled." And we played in a scared—we went through the program and the audience came, but it was a terrible feeling.

The next morning, I and five other Jewish members of the symphony—left over already up to that point—were called into the office of the director and he says, "I'm sorry. We have to let you go." They were really remorseful. And he says, "The law is that no Jews are allowed in the orchestra."

So we went; we were upset and so on. And we had, at that time, one concert every week. The next Sunday, when the next concert was mentioned, the concert was cancelled because—I forget why, but we were [unclear]—"See, they cannot play it—the concert—without us." It wasn't really so but it gave us a little satisfaction. [LV and MN chuckle] But a week after that, I got my call in—How do you call it?

MN: A draft?

LV: Draft. You know, a beautiful invitation to the army—the labor army—because Jews weren't able to do the regular soldiers, thank God.

MN: Yes.

LV: But it was a labor camp, and a labor army, and they took us in cattle cars—not regular trains—to a place, which at that time was still Hungary. It was the northern part of Hungary, called Losoncz and Fülek. You want me to spell it? L-O-S-O-N-C-Z. That's Losoncz.

MN: Losoncz.

LV: The C-Z together is a sharper C. Losoncz. And Fülek is F-Ü-L-E-K. The Ü has two dots on it, which makes it foo-leck. Without the two dots it's full-eck. Ull. Oo. So now, you owe me ten dollars for the Hungarian lesson.

MN: [laughs]

LV: And there we spent the whole summer and—working like dogs. Carry—It was a food depot—army food depot—where flatcars came with bags of food, like flour and—and wheat—

MN: Right.

LV: —and all kind of other food for the army. And we had to unload these eighty-three kilogram flour sacks. Eighty-three kilogram is 2.2 times eighty-three, so it's about two hundred pounds.

MN: Yes.

LV: And three of us had to lift one of those sacks on the back of one other, like this: across [LV motions across his shoulders]. It was quite big. That's where they put it, against our neck, and we had to march—climb up sometimes two flights of rickety stairs, and pile these sacks on a big pile, and sometimes climb up on the other sacks to put it on top. It was—You know, if you lifted two hundred pounds—So we first collapsed under it, but they beat—beat me up until we could do it. And we got good food; we got the army food. Eventually, I, and all of the others, became able to carry these sacks. And I did that for months, all through the summer, and other things—

MN: Was it—When you were doing that, was that the time you mentioned in your notes that you heard the Debussy; *The Nocturnes*?

LV: Yes. This guy remembers everything. Yes, while—Oh. There was another thing. We also had to carry hay bales and straw bales that are with wires held together; big square. It's also about two hundred pounds. To carry it on our back like this—hold it, and carry it through the whole courtyard, which was quite large, to the other side where there was a hay bale being built by—that again, we had to climb over this high bales that were already laid down, step by step, with two hundred pounds on our back, and—Can you imagine? It was very hard.

But some—I—We did—We worked on Sunday also, but there was no difference. Every Sunday, the Budapest Symphony was giving an afternoon concert, and as I was going with my hay bale on my back, hardly able to breath, I heard the Debussy *Nocturnes* played by my own orchestra, and I always loved that piece. And when I was coming back, empty and refreshed a little bit, I stopped in front of the window and I heard the radio and I was just savoring every measure and every note of it because I'd loved the piece so much. And the fact that I was able to—But out came a Corporal Somebody and—"You dirty Jews! If you want—"

I said, "Oh, please let me watch—or let me listen to the music a little bit because this was my orchestra."

He said, "Well, if you want to listen to it, do it with the hay bale on top of you. Not when coming back empty." And I did that, because I just had to listen to it.

So going there with a bale on top of me, I listened and heard it as long as I could. And it wasn't long. [chuckles] I almost collapsed, but he didn't let me do it when I was

free from the weight. But I still wanted to stop because the music meant so much to me. That was just one little incident.

We were allowed to send one piece of postcard a month from there, and I wanted to—I always did that. But that was official. It had to be open so they can read it. But I wanted to tell my—my mother and my sister, and so on, other things too. So occasionally we were taken to a clinic if we had some major problem; not—not for pimples, but other things. So I once went on sick leave with a group of six or seven, with a soldier accompanying us, and—and I wrote a letter in an envelope where I wrote secrets, so to speak, and on my—oh, and I tried to mail it in the—in the little village where we went to. But we were watched so closely that I couldn't get—get away from the group and do it. So coming back, I still had the letter with me and I decided, "Well, I shouldn't be caught with the letter." So I signaled and I said that, "I have to go into the forest to urinate," and he let me, and he suspected that I had something to hide. So I went into the trees and I tore up my letter and the envelope and left it someplace there. I thought I hid it someplace. When I came back, the soldier went there and looked and found the letter, and he took it along to the—How do you call the ezredes? [Ezredes is Hungarian for colonel] Colonel. The high official who was the head of the camp.

MN: Colonel, maybe?

LV: Colonel, I think it is. We called them—There was százados [Hungarian for Squadron leader; Centurion] and ezredes. One is who is ruling of a group of a hundred soldiers, and the other one was ruling thousands.

MN: Wow.

LV: So the hundred and a thousand equivalent in Hungarian was his rank. And so, they took me in front of him and he beat me up, and yelled [unclear], and punished me for this great crime that I committed by tying me, on a very hot summer day, to a tree in the middle of the big courtyard—very large courtyard—which was used for military exercises too. Tied me to a tree. And that was already, I think, August, so late in the summer. Troops mainly occupying—Hungarians who were—How do you call it? Unofficial soldiers?

MN: Gorillas?

LV: Gorillas, yes. Gorilla troops were occasionally attacked nearby this camp. And the Russian Army also began to get closer and closer to that area. And sometimes they came and they shot a few shots. I was—And when the Soviets or others began to shoot, all the Hungarian soldiers, they were hiding in the buildings. I was—And I was left alone there; they forgot all about me. I was there tied to the tree on a hot sun—and some shots came

by me were quite close. I heard them. Lucky nothing hit me. I was there for three or four hours in the middle of the day, and—but then, finally, they let me out. That's what I remember. I don't know whether I mentioned it in my—

Soon after that, the Russians came closer and closer and our camp was evacuated because it was dangerous, and we were sent walking from there. We were about a group of twenty Jews—labor—labor campers—and we were walking every day in a normal walk, but, I don't know, maybe—maybe three miles an hour. But still—So for about ten hours we covered about thirty miles. For ten days, we walked and at night we stopped in villages or someplace; hay bales; wherever we could just sleep a little bit. And sometimes in teaming rain. And we were watched by armed soldiers.

Ten days later, we reached a place—a little town—which was on the Danube. [The Danube is Europe's second-longest river, located in Central and Eastern Europe] And [in] regular times, there was ship line from Budapest to Vienna, and with many stops in between. At that time, I found out that the ship only went that far, not all the way to Vienna. The place called—was called Komárom, and I decided this is the—my last chance to get back to Budapest somehow. At night when we tried to sleep, I escaped into the forest and I hid there all night, and I was waiting until the group left next morning. And when they did, I tore off my Jewish Star [of David] that we all had to have sewn to our jacket.

[Speaking Simultaneously]

MN: Was it the yellow star?

LV: A yellow star, yes. And I had a—kind of an artificial leather jacket and the star was sewn there, and when I tore it off, of course, the stitches were exactly, beautifully showing the star shape, and—so I had to hide that. So I had a little pack with me, and I was holding it against here so nobody—Of course, that was very suspicious; if anybody on the left—left side was hiding something.

MN: Sure.

LV: That meant, obviously, that we were Jews or Jewish. But luckily, I made my way to the ship stop in Komárom, and I had some money. I bought a ticket and got on the boat without any problem, went to the bottom of it, and I was sitting there with these peasant women who were holding live geese, and ducks, and chickens, and pigs, and other things, taking it to Budapest—the big town—to sell it. And I just tried to hide and I made it to Budapest.

There I—You know, there were very few Jews walking around and people somehow sensed who was and who wasn't. But I decided it was safe if I go to the military headquarters and blended—already was a big bedlam in Budapest because this was late August. And the opp—the enemy troops came closer and closer to Budapest. And there was daily bombardment by four nation's airlines—air bombers; Russian, German, English or American, and French. And so, we had a variety of bombs. We could smell which one was which. And so, it was just total bedlam.

So I got lost somehow, and for one day I was at the military camp and I was totally unnoticed because everybody was just trying to survive from the bombardment and other problems. Finally, I went out and I looked up my half-sister who was—who turned from Jewish to Christian.

MN: Was that Piri[?]?

LV: Piri, exactly; Piri. She married a Catholic guy and they had two beautiful children, and so she was able to stay safe in her apartment. So I went there and I was greatly welcomed, and we all were crying because I was away for six months or so at least. And at her apartment, I found my sister, Klari, who was there. You know, Klari is my regular sister and Piri was from my father's first marriage. We had a great homecoming and so on and were very happy. My sister escaped from her confinement, which was also in the country someplace, and arrived back to Piri's house just one day before I did. It was an interesting, wonderful coincidence. So we had a homecoming, but we couldn't stay there for longer than maybe one day because she would have been in trouble if they found Jews hiding there.

MN: Yes.

LV: I left the next day and so did Klari. Klari—Piri got some false Christian papers for Klari, and they found also some false papers for me, because people manufactured those freely, but later on became totally useless because they knew it was false. But right away, it helped me escape the worst. And Klari went and hid with her little boy. Oh, she had a two-and-a-half year old son who was staying with Piri while she was away. But Klari could not escape with a Jewish boy—young boy because he was circumcised like every Jew and no other people were circumcised; only Jews at that time. So that was a telltale sign that he was—so she could not hide as a Christian with the boy. She got some Christian papers which showed that she was born Catholic, or I don't know what, and so she was able to hide herself but not with the boy. She placed the boy in a—in a international group that was looking over our orphaned children. And they accepted him and they held in a certain building where all the children were held. Klari went and hid in a Christian neighborhood that accepted her.

I—Let's see, what was it? I went into the ghetto, which was strictly for Jews, and walled-over, and you couldn't get out because—without permit. We were all locked in except when we were collected for work, like clearance of rubble, you know, ruined houses. We had to clean them out and pull out some dead bodies if they were—happened. And so, that was our work. And we were taken by strict army guards to this place and brought back to the ghetto. And so, that's what I did there. Alright. Let me just skip.

MN: Yes.

LV: Luckily, I survived the worst of it, and finally the Russian Army liberated the ghetto area as well as the rest of Budapest, gradually, block by block, pushing the Germans and the Hungarian Nazis away. Finally, they liberated the ghetto area and opened the gates, and opened up everything. And we were all deliriously happy. We went around and looked for something to help us out because we had nothing. Luckily, we—in some basements, there were some slight amount of food and so on, and there was one particular place, which held heating oil by the barrel full. Barrellfulls of cooking oil was there, which was already opened up and people went there with containers and grabbed hold of a gallon or more of cooking oil because that was a great value. And I did too. I found a container and got about a gallon full of that. That was my only possible food that I was able to take away from the ghetto.

And then the first thing I did, went and looked up my sister. I knew where she was. That was the first time we were allowed beyond the confinement of the ghetto. I found my sister and we had a tearful reunion, and very glad—we both were glad that we were alive. And the first thing we did—went to look for her child. We knew where she left it. And this was at least six or eight weeks after she left the child. And we went there and instead of the building where he was taken in, we saw nothing but ruins. The place was bombed down, or burned down; I don't know whether it was bombed or resulting or not. And everybody died. They were buried in a neighboring park in one open, big sepulcher. How do you call it?

MN: Grave?

LV: Grave.

MN: Yes.

LV: And we realized that the little boy wasn't there. We were both broken down and—but we couldn't do anything else. So we went where we always lived and we found the apartment empty. The window was all blown out by some artillery fire or air bombs; whatever; I don't know. But it was—And it was the middle of the winter; it was December. But we

found our apartment fairly intact otherwise. Not only that, but when we began to look in drawers and so on, we found a small amount of flour and some sugar, coffee; this kind of things. It was just God's gift. It seems that some Hungarian Nazis occupied our place, and they had to leave very short notice because the troops were coming around the block, so they had to leave all the things they had stole elsewhere for us to—So we had quite a few things. Even cans of sardines, which was great.

MN: Oh yeah.

LV: And things—And similar things. We had everything except oil or fat to cook with, and I was bringing the gallon of—it was such a God-given coincidence—blessing. Can you imagine? So we were able to cook simple things for ourselves, and we lived on it for weeks because we used very sparingly. Not only that, but we were able to exchange some of it for whatever else we could use—need—like blankets and these kinds of things. So it was God-sent; God's gift.

And so, my sister and I, and we were waiting for our mother to come back because we hadn't heard from her. She was taken away while we were out—away by a Hungarian Nazi group and put on—we found out many months later that they were put on some death trains where they went as far as the Hungarian border with Austria. And still in Hungary, they were gassed in the train—train cars; wagons.

MN: Some of your uncles, too, right?

LV: Uncles, aunts. Yes. Almost was everybody; very few people left out of my large family. They all were taken away. And so, it was just a—But at that time, we were already so beaten down by this horrifying news that, you know, we ran out of tears, so to speak. And—Well, we had to make a life for ourselves, slowly. I don't want to go month by month.

It took about three months until the first normalcy began to appear in Budapest. But it took about three months until electricity was restored, and water, and some common supplies. And even The Budapest Symphony began to reassemble, and I—being an ex-member, of course I did too. About four months later, we had a big celebration for the liberation of Budapest by The Russian Army—this was thanking The Russian Army—in one of the decrepit theatres that was bombed also—it had roof with holes—and this was still winter; cold. And there was no electricity at the theatre yet, so there were army—Russian Army lights were used. They were helpful and, you know—they're trying to help.

And the orchestra assembled without—maybe, I think, we had one rehearsal somehow. And the orchestra was missing this instrument, that instrument, like missing teeth, but we played and we were very excited. We played the Hungarian National

Anthem and this and that, and a few things. And there was a full audience. People came and everybody was very happy for this liberation concert.

I remember—Of course, there was no streetcar or bus or nothing yet, and I remember it was ice covered roads, and we had to walk from the rehearsal place, which was in The Opera House to the theatre. [LV to JH] Are you running out?

JH: No.

LV: To the theatre, and we were all having fun sliding on the ice and just—and carrying our instruments. So I didn't slide too much with the cello, but others did, and everybody was just—there was no traffic whatsoever, so we were in the middle of the—the pavement. I remember the tuba player was carrying his tuba without the case, and sliding and having fun. [chuckles] And then he slipped and fell on top of the tuba, and that became a pancake[?]

MN: [chuckling]

LV: —because he was a heavy player. And—But—So we played without the tuba. But this is what I remember. Those first few months were very—you know, we all starved really; ate very little. Even though we had this God-given, few pieces of food, but it was very limited.

MN: May I ask you in this context, you also met your great teacher, Leo Weiner.

LV: Yes, that was a little later—

MN: In the—Oh, you—Okay.

LV: —when things began to normalize. See we are talking about '45.

MN: Yes.

LV: This is January '45, or February. Oh. The ghetto area was liberated on January 17, '45. I remember that. And so, February, March, already toward the spring, things began to be normalized, but not completely. Slowly, electricity was returned and water service, and slowly things began to—mainly, with the Russian Army's help, and other nations also flew in support and so on. So slowly, we were normalizing and I—The Academy of Music began to function toward the end of the spring and began to work all summer and—because of the missing—and I went back and continued my studies. Slowly, through 1945 and the beginning of 1946, we managed to normalize quite a bit. And I got

my graduation from The Academy by May '46. But you know the story that I had to give a big recital?

MN: Yes.

LV: Shall I repeat this story?

MN: Yes, indeed.

LV: I—I had to give a solo recital and it was demanding, and it was scheduled in the middle of May sometime. I chose a program which was quite demanding, starting with the Bach *Suite No. 5* and the Haydn *Cello Concerto*, which is usually played with piano.

MN: The D major, right?

LV: The D major, yes, which is the hard one.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And weeks before that, I—at one of the orchestra rehearsals, I stood up and invited my colleagues to my graduation concert; "Please, come. All welcome. It's free and it's not dangerous."

And—And they said, "Ahh—you know, they started groaning. They said, "Who wants to hear so much music?"

But two days later, the first flutist comes to me and says, "Look, several of us are planning to come to your concert, but we don't just like to listen and stay doing nothing. We decided to accompany your Haydn *Concerto*;" about thirty or so people; you know, it's a chamber—

MN: Sure.

LV: I was floored.

MN: These are your colleagues from Budapest?

LV: Yes.

MN: The orchestra.

LV: The Budapest Symphony! That's like The New York Philharmonic in New York. That was The Budapest Symphony in Budapest, and I was thrilled and touched very much for this expression of—of solidarity and interest and colleg—collegiality.

And they arranged for the assistant conductor to stay over after one regular rehearsal for an hour or so and run through the *Concerto* twice, and that was it. And they came to the concert. For the occasion, I obtained a fine cello from the local maker. One of his own cellos. You recall this story? And that was far better than my own instrument, and I was very happy and that's what I was planning to use. And comes the big—Oh, and I mentioned that the program was the Bach *Fifth Suite* and the Haydn *Concerto*, and after the intermission, the first movement of the very difficult Kodály *Solo Sonata*, the Bartók *Rhapsody*, which was with piano, and I had—not that closing piece with a punch, you know—effect. [light flickers in background] Hello? Did that one go out?

JH: It was this one.

LV: But that also was on.

JH: No, that was off. You know what we need to do? The tape is just about to run—

[End Tape 5—Beginning Tape 6]

MN: —twenty years I went a different direction. So it was good for my character. [chuckles]

LV: But you taught it so nice.

MN: I did.

LV: Yes. It was very professional. Alright. Are we with you or you are with us?

JH: I'm almost with you.

MN: And we're on tape number six this time, right?

JH: We're on tape number six.

MN: Okay.

[Recording Interruption]

LV: —is already printed.

MN: Right, but it—I think it's so very effective for the film.

[Recording Interruption]

JH: Okay, we're rolling.

MN: This is the second day of interviews with Laszlo Varga. This is tape number six. Today's date is May 28, 2011. I'm Mac Nelson here with videographer, Joanna Hay, at Laszlo Varga's home in Sarasota, Florida.

LV: You got it.

MN: Alright.

LV: Alright. So let me continue with the concert that I described; my graduation concert—program. As I mentioned, the program—the four out of the five pieces, but I did not have a concluding piece at that time, and I just wanted to have a piece which virtuosity and a good punch so that the audience would be all over the place and praising me. So—And I still—six weeks before, I didn't have decided. But just then I heard a fellow student play the Ravel *Tzigane* on the violin, which is one of the hardest, toughest pieces for violin. And I fell over in admiration because I loved the piece and the playing. I said, "Well, can I possibly adapt this for my giant fiddle?" And I started working on it like a—like a madman and I arranged it in a week. I found a way and I kept practicing it and I decided that will be my concluding piece.

So let me jump to the day of the concert. I thought I was fairly ready with everything including that piece, but the morning of the—Saturday, [unclear] afternoon concert was held, in the morning, I had to go to a pianist's house for a rehearsal of Beethoven *Triple Concerto* that I'd play a week later, for rehearsal. And I was nervous because of the concert coming up, and my borrowed cello under my arm in a soft case. It was kind of a very touchy time. And I was waiting for a streetcar, of course. I didn't have any limousine to take.

JH: [chuckles]

LV: I was waiting and every streetcar with their open ar—open doors had people hanging on the stairs, all full. I couldn't possibly get on, especially with a cello. And I let one after other to go, but they were all full. But finally after the fourth car, I couldn't just let it go by. I fought myself on the bottom stairs with the cello under my arm like this, holding it for dear life. And I was hanging on the bottom stairs. And the streetcar merrily went ahead, and as I'm looking ahead—since I was outside of the car I saw ahead—I saw that there was a horse cart parked close to the tracks; too close to the tracks. I said, "Oh, boy! There will be a problem," because the cello was hanging, you know—I was holding it this way by the neck and the rest of the cello was hanging behind me and—It's like this. [Varga demonstrates] And I was holding on dear life for this, in the case.

And the streetcar didn't slow down or didn't care about any cello or anything. I pulled against the humanity inside, but it was a limited possibility; very limited. I managed to save myself from being hit, but the cello was torn from my arms, hit on the bottom by the corner of the streetcar—or the horse carriage, and fell down. And I was just stricken by all kind of terrible thoughts. I didn't even dare to jump off the car, which we did—up and down, you know; that was free game. But after the stop, I ran back and there it was, the cello, in a hundred and fifty pieces. Maybe a hundred and forty-nine.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And I was out of my mind. I was in a delirium. How do you call it?

MN: State of shock?

LV: Yes, something like that. Total shock. I said, "Now, what to do?" I picked up this bag and everything in it, but it was dangling like—terrible. What to do? Should I go to the rehearsal? They expect me and I already was a half an hour late. Because, you know, without a cellist, that is no Triple Concerto. And—But I have no cello so—I can't sing the part. And then began to think, I have the recital this afternoon on this same broken cello that was borrowed for the occasion, and I felt responsible for it and I was totally out of my mind. Can you imagine?

MN: Yes.

LV: So without really thinking, I walked to the place where the pianist's house was, and it took me another ten minutes. I knocked—I rang the bell and they opened, "Ah! Where the hell have you been? We are so late and we don't have much time!"

I couldn't say a word, but I just shook this bag of bones, you know, and produced a dangling noise; so describing the break. Of course, they understood it right away. They

pulled me in and gave me a drink to wise up, or wake up, and began to talk about what to do. We have to rehearse or not? They called up my colleague and stand-mate in the orchestra and he immediately brought over his cello, which was a totally different feel. Different type of strings and even the sides different, and it was very hard for me to play on it, but I had no other—

So we—we started rehearsing a little bit but not much because I wasn't in shape. I was totally out of my mind. And so, we decided what to do with the concert. Well, the concert has to go on, you know. I didn't have the cello that I already worked on for weeks and got used to it and loved it. It was far better than my own. And I had to play the concert—it just occurred to me for the first time—that I'll play it on my colleague's cello, which was so different in feeling and size and type of strings and so on. But that's—I didn't have others. And—But it never occurred to me to cancel the concert because in Hungary you don't do such a thing. It's not done. If you die, you play it posthumously.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: So—And I went to The Academy with that borrowed cello—the second borrowed cello—and the first person who greeted me before the concert was the old gentleman—the maker of the cello; the one that broke.

MN: Do you remember his name by chance?

LV: Yes, János Spiegel. He was a very well known, Hungarian maker, and that cello that he lent me, he made about twenty-five years before, and it was a beautiful instrument. So I went to The Academy even though I was only half aware of what the hell I'm doing—even less than half—and I was faced with a very difficult program, as I described—discovered—dis—

MN: Described.

LV: Described. Thank you. I can't speak English good. And I somehow—They say that I went through the concert; everything. I have no recollection of it up to this moment of what took place. It's totally erased from my memory because it was such a horrible experience. But people who were there, they told me many times, "Oh, yes, you went through the concert and you completed everything." They didn't say to me how I played, tactfully. [LV and MN chuckle] But my whole—my teachers were there listening and so on, including Kodály, and so it was just an occasion that is erased from my mind. But I was told that they were there, and many of my friends. And the orchestra came to accompany my Haydn *Concerto*. So they all were testifying that, "Yes, I went through the concert." But as I said, tactfully avoiding to tell how—how I went through it. But they all were

very sympathetic and helpful and so on. So this was my graduate concert and it was accepted as a graduation. A month later, I got the invitation to join the Léner Quartet.

MN: That's right.

LV: And that's where another tape starts. To my greatest surprise.

MN: Yes.

LV: That is continued—

MN: The gentleman was gracious about the broken cello, wasn't he?

LV: Oh, yes! Thanks for reminding me. He told me, as I was there totally grief-stricken—he says, "My son—" he called me; I was twenty-two. "My son, I heard about your terrible accident. It's too bad, but don't worry about the cello. I'm going to put it together." So that was a great relief to me to know. And sure enough, in a month or so he made new parts that was [*sic*] needed, and used the old ones—old ones that was usable, and rebuilt the cello, beautifully.

MN: Yes.

LV: And that was the cello I eventually joined the Quartet [with], and everybody was enjoying and admiring the cello's sound, and [telephone rings] —Oh, that's—And I got into The New York Philharmonic with the cello, auditioning, and so on. I think I mentioned all that.

MN: The mended cello?

LV: Can we interrupt?

[Interruption] [Personal telephone conversation redacted.]

LV: —and everybody admired it. I'm sure you—

JH: I think we got that.

MN: I think we got that.

LV: Alright.

JH: Can—There were two questions I had about your earlier life that I didn't quite know what happened. Could you tell me what happened—

LV: Prenatal?

JH: [chuckles] Not that early. What happened to your mother in the war?

LV: She never came back. She was gassed while still in Hungary, I think I mentioned it, in a freight car along with many others, relatives or strangers, but she never came back, so. But I only found out about it—or we only found out about it months later because—She's—I don't know where her power—powders are, but she has a beautiful tablet in the Budapest cemetery along with hundreds others. Okay, so let's change the subject.

JH: Sorry. The other thing I wanted to ask about your childhood is the way you and your sister both were given piano lessons and music lessons. Would that have been normal for all of the children?

LV: Well, everybody was musician in my family on the mother's side. And even on my father's side. He played the violin, but not as a professional. But on my mother's side, my mother was a pianist, very good. And her mother, my grandmother, was also a concert pianist. And my mother's two sisters became solo violinists. So we had a lot of music in the family. My sister started piano at an early years, and later on switched to violin, but she didn't go beyond the age of fourteen or so. But I—I started to hit the keys myself. I didn't study piano except for my sister, and I figured out things myself. And I started cello at seven and it's ever since—it's here, look. It's still with me. [LV and MN chuckle]

JH: I read the story of your father, how you—Can you tell that story of when you were the tiny, little boy?

LV: Yes. Yes. My father, as I said, played the violin very nicely but not professionally. But he loved the violin. And when I was about three—you know, he died when I was three and a half. But around age three, he carved a little, wooden violin shape; you know, a make-believe little thing. It didn't have strings or anything but it was just roughly the shape of a violin, and it was enough for me to imagine at age three. And he showed me how to hold it under my chin, but it wasn't good enough for me. I said, "I don't like it that way. I like it in between my legs, cello style." So that was the divine sign of getting stuck for life with this instrument.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Well, that was the story of the violin.

JH: And it also predicted your penchant for taking violin music and playing it.

LV: You know, I never thought of that, but you're right. Yes. I was always jealous of violin—violinist's and the capability and the virtuoso that can be done on the violin, which is almost impossible on the cello. So I was always trying to achieve more of that excess on the cello. And through my long life, I achieved part of it. It's never ending and there's never enough, but I'm delighted that I got this far. And I'm still figuring and [unclear] all the parts. But I always envied and admired the violin literature and the capability of the violin, which is the best string instrument; there's no question about it. I always played second fiddle.

MN: [chuckles] Yeah, that's right, you were playing the B—well, the B minor Sarabande, but in D minor.

LV: In D minor.

MN: That's right.

LV: I—I have a penchant for changing keys. If one key doesn't open a piece, let another one do it.

MN: Right.

LV: I find different keys.

MN: Yeah.

LV: And hardly any other cellists do. Very few, in the whole history of late cellists, who really make this kind of research, so to speak. Or else that they dare to. There are many easy violin pieces that are arranged by cellists, widely, and so there are hundreds of such pieces. But the pieces like the Ravel *Tzigane*, nobody would even dare to think of it. I did, and six weeks later I played it through on a different cello, in—in half of mind, on my recital.

MN: Was that the first appearance of the Lone Ranger in public?

LV: [chuckles] No, that came later because I didn't speak one word of English. I didn't know what the Lone Ranger was.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Did you ever play the Ravel *Tzigane*?

JH: No.

LV: Do you know how it goes?

JH: I want to hear it.

LV: Well, I can't play it now.

JH: Play a little of it? A taste of it? Hang on. Hang on. [One clap]

[Varga plays a sample on his cello]

LV: On the violin, this is all on the G string. I play it all on the D. Oh, it's awful! Something like this. That's enough.

JH: Oh, that's great. The demo—I love the demonstration.

MN: Yeah.

LV: I can't play that anymore. I hardly could play it when I was twenty-two.

MN: [laughs]

LV: And now, I'm eighty-six. And the cello grew quite a few years since then too.

MN: Yes.

JH: Can you tell me about the cello; this instrument?

LV: Yes. This is a beautiful, French instrument made by Claude Victor Rambeau—I called him Rambo—in 1846, in Paris, and I bought it decades ago; at least twenty years. I love it, but now I can't play it unless I like to because my fingers are weak and my bow arm is not steady. You know, in order to play and produce a good tone on the D string let's say—or any string—one has to fully depress. [LV plays sample] I can do it with slow notes but not fast passages because my fingers just are not strong enough anymore, and not exercised because I now rarely play. I can play slow things but not the Ravel *Tzigane*.

MN: Do you know, Laszlo, when I first met you back in 2005, we were talking about historic instruments and different cellos. And I asked you how many you had and you told me you loved your cellos but you tended not to revere them. Do you remember?

LV: Alright. Well, you know, people own Stradivarius', Amati's, and great name violins and cellos—Guarneri's—and they revere them because they are just beautiful, museum pieces. And much of them are still in very good condition because they are kept up, but many of the great Stradivarius' have been opened and parts replaced. It is not the way it was born. It's had all kinds of operations on it.

MN: Yes.

LV: But done beautifully, and hardly noticeable, and it doesn't much effect the sound so it is still a beautiful sound. But people who own such instruments attribute angelic qualities to them. Whether it's true or not, I'm not so sure. They are beautiful instruments and beautiful sound, but so is this, and this has not the great fame as those Italian instruments.

We used to have Cello Congresses every year and I was part of it very often, and one of the activities that we designed on those meeting times—usually big, long weekends—is people came with very fine instruments, and medium quality instruments, and some new—brand new instruments. So we arranged to meet at the concert hall and had one cellist, behind curtain, try to play ten instruments—ten different cellos—that was handed to them without mentioning what it was, or whose it was. And we all listened to the sound and we voted as for tone quality, not knowing which one was which. And the player himself was not told which instrument he was playing. He played the same segment of a Concerto or whatever on each of the ten cellos, and then we voted; who likes the best: number five or number seven or number one. Then the cellos were revealed and among them were Stradivarius, Amati's—in different years—and Goffriller's, and all famous names, as well as brand new cellos and not known names; cellos that had big cracks on it [unclear]. And more often than not, some of these medium quality, or even so called inferior quality cellos, were judged best sound, without knowing—So it was all secret. It was an interesting thing that purely by sound, you hardly can divulge the real quality.

MN: Yes.

LV: This happens—It happened with my mother cello that was rebuilt after this accident. And I left Hungary with it—with a Quartet—and I played all over Europe and South America, and one people after the others came back congratulating me and—"What is the cello? A beautiful instrument and sound!" They couldn't believe that it was a brand new cello—like twenty-five years old—because it sounded like a Strad, or close to it. As long as you don't know what it is, just by sound many cellos sounded gorgeous. And some Stradivarius' don't. So you cannot just attach the quality to the name.

MN: Yes.

LV: This is my long-held position, and people disagree with me because they think that the big Italian names are just the greatest. Many are, but so are some brand new cellos who can outplay, or play along with, the Strad. So it depends how well it's built and how well it's constructed. The rest is just hearsay. Now, if you really judge a Stradivarius and you admire the gorgeous workmanship that Stradivarius'—and look at it and the condition—whether it's heavily repaired or healthy and so on—those things are very important factors, and that, also, is praiseworthy and noteworthy. But the pure sound? No. It's not telling enough. Yes, Strads sound beautiful. There's no question. But so do other instruments if they are well built and well re—well kept and well repaired and so on. And this is one of them.

MN: The Rambeau has been with you—how long did you say?

LV: About twenty years, but ever since I owned it, this had cracks on it. Look at this. Do you see this crack? Can you?

MN: Yes.

LV: Can you notice? This is heart disease because this is over the soundpost. So this is a very crucial area, but it's well repaired and it's just like new. And there are other little flaws on it. Here are some cracks. If they are repaired correctly, it's meaningless. Actually, just like any natural, wooden subject, after a hundred years this is—we all get old that way; so will cellos. They get cracked on the way and needs repair. The sides open up here at the seams. Here, this is another crack here. All this are visible if you really look for it. This is what the cello goes through in a lifetime, and the lifetime can be three hundred years. And so—But if it's kept in good shape, it's just as good as new. Whereas some cellos that have absolutely no cracks and all healthy, but through the years they take different—

slightly different shape because of different weather conditions and others, or if they are beaten up or hit or something. So they all claim to be intact, but they are not really. Are you intact? I have been punched in the nose already.

MN: [laughs] Right.

LV: Nobody survives eighty years without having some problems. I thank God that I'm still around, and I don't have any major complaints and I don't have pain. I have a amazing ability of not feeling pain, or else discarding it, or putting it in a second rack. Second what? Second something. Put it in the background.

MN: Yes. On the back burner?

LV: Yes, back burner. There are people who have a little pimple and they complain [to] no end because it is a little bit painful. So what? I prefer to negate or eliminate that. And I don't—I'm not a complainer.

MN: Right.

LV: I leave it to my wife. [chuckles] She's a monster—or mistress of complaint.

MN: Maybe she does enough for both of you?

LV: Yes, she has done more than enough. Actually, she was born with a very, seriously sick mother who was a complainer. But it's—it's a type of nature. I was lucky. After what I went through in the war—I didn't give you one little percentage of it, in my stories. But I learned to take it and nothing can compare to the pain and the suffering of those times. Even though I got away with most everything. I didn't end up in a gas chamber, but I could have. I was close to it. I'm very happy that I'm here, and I'm happy with every moment that I live—I live.

MN: Yes. Laszlo, that's one of the first things you told me, because you had—we were walking and you had told me some of your experiences and I said, "Well, how on earth—I can't imagine. How on earth did you come to—come to terms with it?"

And you said, "Well, nothing worse will ever happen to me." Do you remember that?

LV: Right. Yes.

MN: And then—

LV: I usually say that. That's—How could anything worse happen? And so, ever since, I think I'm an optimist because what ever happened to me is just great. Here I had success, I had a wonderful family, and I'm generally lucky. And I'm lucky with my trait. [LV holds us cello]

MN: Yes.

LV: And I was able to know it and do certain things that enhances the cello literature or playing technique, and that's a great credit for myself.

MN: Yes.

LV: I don't brag about it, but I mention it.

MN: Sure.

LV: Because it's—I think it's legitimate. And I'm delighted about these improvements and something that I can add. I don't consider myself an inventor or something great, but in a little way, I added a little to the cello literature and the cello technique; improvements; certain little changes that helped some cellists. And I kept teaching it all my life. So all these things makes me happy.

MN: Well, and the body of arrangements. I simply think it was so marvelous at the celebration—at The Varga Celebration at UNC Greensboro, the Ralph Vaughan Williams [OM, or Order of Merit]—the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*—with how many cellos?

LV: There was about thirty-two or something.

MN: Yes.

LV: But I did it elsewhere for a hundred cellos. It sounded beautiful.

MN: Oh, it was stunning.

LV: Would you like to hear it? I have a tape of it someplace.

JH: I'd love to hear it.

MN: Can you play it solo? [MN and LV chuckle]

LV: All thirty-two parts? Well, let's see? [LV counts fingers]

MN: [chuckling]

LV: Tomorrow.

MN: [chuckling]

LV: I have to practice it.

MN: Yeah.

LV: But yes, it's a beautiful sound.

MN: It is. And I remember thinking—in advance, I thought, "Will it sound dark?" You know? That was just my question. The colors were marvelous.

LV: Yes. Right.

MN: And there the high register was stunning.

LV: Well, I'm going high here. Yes. I'm the first cellist that—all the others—well, I'll play it when we have time.

MN: Yes.

LV: Alright. Now, let's see. You wanted to go back to my married life?

JH: Is there anything from childhood?

MN: I think the only thing—The only question I would have is: I've really always been interested in your—in Leo Weiner, your relationship with him. And I'd love to hear a word about your experience there.

LV: Well, as I described earlier, Leo Weiner was one of the stellar teacher of chamber music who taught some music analysis, and—but mainly chamber music. He had classes every single day of the week, 5:00 to 7:00 in the afternoon. And up to fifty people were listening, and only a trio or a quartet playing. But his chamber music was always with

piano, so we started with piano sonatas, cello and violin sonatas, viola sonatas, and trios, quartets, but always with piano, because we have—had four mornings each week [of] chamber music for strings alone with another teacher called [Imre] Waldbauer, who was a very, wonderful violinist and he was a specialist. He had his own quartet, and he was quite well known internationally.

So this was two type of chamber music and we both—we took both at the higher level. So Leo Weiner was a brilliant teacher who knew how to demonstrate the hardest piano because he was a pianist, and explain, in the clearest language for a string player, how to do it; how to play according to the style. It was mainly classic and romantic works; we didn't go profile into the modern. And—But he had a thorough encyclopedic knowledge of the classics and romantics and Debussy and Ravel and whatever he'd do. He could demonstrate on the piano anything; not just the piano parts but how to play the violin or the cello parts also, or singing it. He was an analyst of first-class. He knew exactly what to comment on, how—beneficially and understandingly, and sometimes very critically. He didn't waste words when somebody was stinking. And almost always, we had at least forty listeners at the class, and we were expected to be there as much in the week as we can because by listening, and listening to his comments, we learned a lot. And we only had a chance to play as a group maybe once in two weeks. But we [were] expected to be there as many times during the week as possible just to listen, and more often than not, somebody in the listener group would say, "Ok, what was wrong now?" Whether it would be the cellist, or the violinist, or whoever—or the violist. And you had to be ready for an answer. If you didn't, you were cursed out, or almost. They made mincemeat out of you because he was a strict disciplinarian.

"You are not listening!" He says, "Didn't you hear that wrong note?" Or wrong phrasing or wrong bowing or something. We all had to know. After a while, people didn't know so we had to listen to what he commanded and remember what he said three weeks ago, or three months ago. So we all had to be alert, and listen—listful? Is there such a word?

MN: Attentive?

LV: Attentive, thank you. How much is for English lesson?

MN: [laughing]

LV: Yes. Thank you. You know, the older I get the more I have to look for words. I used to be quite more fluent when I was cohesive, but now I'm adhesive. [chuckles]

MN: I think you do brilliantly.

LV: It doesn't come as naturally as it used to.

MN: You worked with him before and after the war, didn't you?

LV: Yes, thanks for reminding me. Leo Weiner, being a Jew, was also having a tough time, and he ended up—Oh, first, some Jews who were lucky enough were allowed to wear—not a yellow star—Jewish Star—a six-pointed star—but a white one, which we called them the White—White Sign. Those were especially allowed to go through certain buildings that were assigned for those who had some excuse to be separated from all the regular Jews, for many different reasons. And I somehow got, through the—through my sister, Piri, one of those permits, which was a little better treatment given to us, and we were—we were allowed to be in certain apartment buildings that was assigned for just those with White—White Star—Jewish Star. An old [Biblical] Hebrew name occurs to me: *Māgēn Dāwīd*, which was the Star of David.

MN: Right.

LV: Okay, so I had one of those and I was assigned to go to one of these buildings, and I walk up into the apartment which I was assigned to, in the living room, already, were eighteen people there, assigned, and everybody was sleeping wherever they could; on the floor mainly, or in sleeping bag if they were lucky. I couldn't find anyplace other than on top of a closet, which was not more than four feet wide and I was a little bit longer than that, and I slept on there. I had to climb up this high, you know—I had to have a chair—and there I slept, folded up. But what I really wanted to mention, that in that room the—there was one bed, and in it I happened to find Leo Weiner, just by pure coincidence. He was there under the cover in his winter coat and scarf and hat, freezing because it was cold. And he was kind of 'out' and he hardly recognized me. Because he was already past sixty and he was—he didn't—he wasn't sickly, but he was affected by all this.

MN: Yes.

LV: He couldn't understand. He kept saying, "How could the Pope allow this to happen?" As if it depended on the Pope.

MN: Concerning the war—

LV: Yes and the—

MN: —and the Holocaust?

LV: The Holocaust and the Jew's persecution. He was very naïve in everyday things, but in music and some other—in literature and so on—he was very literate. And he was a fabulous chess player. So I tried to get him out of bed during those ten days while I was there, and he began to come out from his cocoon. And I attracted him to come and walk with me just outside of the—there was a big elevation—or a big opening in front of the window where we could go out and we saw the sky, but just in a completely enclosed area. And we walked up and down, and talked, and so on, and I knew—I heard that he wrote a book that was not yet published about musical harmony and theory. A basic book. And I asked him questions about the book, and he—during those ten days, we walked hours there in that open thing, and he proceeded to describe [to] me the whole book, chapter by chapter; he had it in his head. I learned an awful lot about it because there were many, novel ideas and explanations for general musical questions. I—So it was just an individual thing. And I got him out of his dark mood. It was very curative for him and me. I felt wonderful.

But after ten days, the German soldiers came in and they examined everybody's paper that were proving that you were entitled to this White David Star treatment, and they found that my paper was falsified, which was true because, you know, people were copying these things by the hundreds or the thousands and gave it to everybody to save lives. And my life was saved for at least ten days by this falsified paper.

But the Germans knew the difference and they took me away into a big, brick factory just outside of Budapest. There they locked me up behind big gates, into big kilns—brick-making kilns. It wasn't working so—It was not used so it wasn't hot. But we slept on bare bricks and in dust, and we ended up in these closed ovens. It was the forwards to later things, but luckily it didn't happen there. But we were incarcerated, and every day we lined up, and people who were my age, like twenty-two—this was in forty—well, I was only twenty.

MN: Yes.

LV: But children under sixteen were separated in one row. People in between forty-five in men and fifty-five in women—so adult age—were in the center. And the older people—the women over forty-five and the men over fifty-five—we in the third row. And we—the center—always set out for rubble clearance and other kinds of heavy work, carrying things. Every day we were taken out with a heavy cart and we did the work and then we were taken back to the brick factory. For three days. Then, after three days, nobody was going out and they lined us up the same way and allowed the children and the older ones to go back to the ghetto, which was an enclosed area in Budapest. But the middle people were taken out to concentration camps. And I, being twenty, was—almost twenty—was belonged to that one, but I didn't like it. So I decided to look over my papers that I had. I

threw out every one of them except one that was filled out with ink. What is that called? The youthful military groups. I belonged to one of those. And my birth year, which is 1924, December 13, was in it, made with ink. I decided to change 1924 to '29. Made a nine out of the four with ink. And that showed me that—this was November of '44—that I was still under sixteen by one month. This was November '44 and I was born in '24, December. So just a week or two away from my sixteenth birthday. But I was twenty and I was kind of middle-sized, so it was hard to sell myself, but there are some sixteen year olds who are taller.

So I stand—stood in the line of children and I pulled myself together and waited all day in the rain among the children until the evening when they came with supervision and everybody's paper was examined. And I showed my—this proof that I wasn't yet sixteen and they accepted it and I was sent back to the ghetto. That's how I got into the ghetto. The others—the middle group—who were taken to Mauthausen[-Gusen concentration camp] and Auschwitz and other famous places—and none of them came back.

MN: So after that, was—did you then wait out the war in the ghetto?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yes.

LV: Yes, and I think I mentioned earlier that I was liberated, and everybody was very happy and broke down the gates and so on. And that's when I got hold of the cooking oil.

MN: Yes.

LV: Because everybody just held a dish under it and took some.

MN: Yes.

LV: That's when I looked up my sister and so on. So this plugs up one other hole.

MN: [chuckles] Great.

LV: By the way, I should mention—do we have some tape?

JH: Yes. Six minutes on this one.

LV: After—Let's see, what happened? I want to have the correct timing. It was still under the worst Nazi Era. Oh! When I came back to my sister Piri's house, the first thing I heard [was] that my mother was taken away along with aunts, uncles, and everybody from our house. So the first thing I did—"Well, I have to find my mother!" I heard rumors that maybe they went through the brick factory. Oh, by the way! I arrived escaping back from the camp two days before my mother and everybody else were taken away from our home.

MN: So you just missed her.

LV: Two days. And it came—I came back one day after my sister came back. It was just an incredible coincidence. It was two days after my mother and all my aunts and other relatives were taken away. So I felt that they were collected at this brick factory because it was well known as a collecting point for people before they were sent here and there. So I decided to save my mother. Stupidly not thinking about any possible danger, or not enough—but the blind fate.

I was in a—I lived in a suburb, which was in the southwest part of Budapest. Of course, there was no conveyance of any sort. I walked in my fake-leather coat—ripped off the Star and covered it with something and—but without any fear, or any sane fear, only insane. I walked through Budapest, which was full of soldiers, and nobody—a twenty year old Jew—were left intact, you know, unquestioned and so on. I walked through the whole Pest-side. You know, Budapest is divided by the Danube River. And all the bridges were bombed down, all nine bridges. And only one pontoon bridge was usable to cross the Danube. And of course, that was heavily guarded by soldiers. That was the only across. And I had to go to the Buda-side because the brick factory was about five miles north of that part, on the Buda-side. I walked without any seeming fear, with full belief that I'm going to save my mother. And I made the trip without anybody questioning me. I was walking with perfect self-respect or something. I wasn't cowardly hiding or—as if I was—had a certain right to walk by—and I reached the brick factory. Of course, there I found not only a big, closed gate, but twenty-five soldiers in front of it. And then I woke up and I said, "I cannot get in. If I would get in, I would never get out." I didn't know whether my mother was there, still, if at all. Finally, I took my tail between my legs, as I like to say, and I walked back the same ten miles or so—through the same dangerous places—totally intact. Nobody bothered to ask me questions. But I was extremely saddened because I failed. And I'm quite sure that my mother was not there anymore, but was already distributed—deported someplace else. She never turned back. Six months later, after things quieted down, I found out that she was executed with gas. And so were my aunts and uncles and—so this is the story.

MN: Yes.

LV: I don't know where I fit this into it, but yes, this was—this was happen[ing] still the last few days of the Nazi occupation of Budapest, but it was— People were rounded up— Jews—on the shore of the Danube and just—with machine gun, shot and let them fall into the river. They were standing upright on the shore so that they— It was just terrible. Yes. I hate to think of it. But I think my story should include these kinds of things.

MN: Sure. Thank you.

LV: Well, why don't we take a little rest. It's one o'clock.

MN: Yes. Terrific.

LV: I was planning—instead of resting I'm—

[Extraneous Conversation Redacted]

[End Tape 6—Begin Tape 7]

LV: —very badly, and he used to get lost. [chuckles] Finally, they were playing some quartet and he got lost at one point and one, first-rated colleague says, "Doctor Einstein, can't you count?"

[laughter]

JH: Okay, will you count to five, Mac?

MN: I'll follow Laszlo's lead. One, two, eight—huh?

JH: You're not on. Your counting is no count. Maybe I haven't turned your battery pack on.

MN: Oh, I'm no count.

JH: Can I see your pack?

LV: I thought she said, "Porno count."

[laughter]

JH: No count. No count. Yep, my fault. That's why we test.

MN: So it's count twice. That's a lot of labor. One, two, eight, thirteen.

JH: Okay, you're set.

[Recording Interruption]

[Varga using telephone redacted]

[Camera now filming outside]

JH: Action!

LV: [waves] Hello!

JH: Action!

LV: Action? Alright, I'll open the door. I need the key. Exciting action. Actually, I'm going to have to go back.

JH: Okay. Do you want to do it again?

LV: Should I?

JH: I'll just follow you.

LV: Alright.

JH: Do you need to go back and—We'll just wait. I'll just wait. No hurry.

LV: Alright, so you want to see the back of me?

JH: Yeah. [LV walks away towards house] I was hoping we'd him to—

[Camera cuts to shot of mailbox with “Varga” on it]

LV: Action!

JH: Action!

LV: Goodbye. See you at three o'clock.

MN: See you at 3:00, Laszlo.

LV: Hello, sweet people. See you later.

[Varga gets into a car and drives away.]

[Camera pans around Varga's garden and neighborhood.]

[Camera repositions back in Varga's home.]

MN: Well, how was Lillian today?

LV: She is better, but she is still not used to the new place and she [unclear]—

MN: Well, you know, Laszlo, sometimes when I travel—since I live two places anyway—when I travel and I wake up in a third place—

LV: Yes, it's—

MN: —I have to sort of remind myself where I am.

LV: Please, sit down.

MN: But it's not quite what she's going through. The medication, I'm—

[Skip]

LV: —except she's a lousy driver. She veers to the right. [all chuckle]

MN: Does she—I saw you took her the book.

LV: Yes. She loves history. Did you look at this?

MN: Yes.

LV: We have a beautiful [Cyril] Lavenstein right there; that big thing. And Lynn Chadwick, we have one of his unique pictures; one of the originals that's unduplicated. Some of these come in sets of five.

MN: Beautiful. We've been admiring that.

LV: Oh, isn't that lovely?

MN: Isn't it gorgeous, yes? I just gave my wife a scarf, it's mostly in browns, but it's something like that.

LV: It's got beautiful, symmetric designs.

MN: Yes.

LV: See over there?

[Camera pans around Varga's home.]—

[LV and MN speaking background, unclear]

[Camera repositions again to focus on Varga.]

LV: —Jan Lebenstein.

MN: I looked.

LV: Yes, and that big painting is by him.

JH: Which? The dark, at the top of the stairs?

LV: Yes.

JH: Who is it?

LV: Jan Lebenstein, a Polish artist.

MN: Here's Jan Lebenstein, lighting one cigarette off of another.

JH: Chain smoker.

MN: Did you meet him, Laszlo?

LV: [unclear]

JH: Beautiful pieces. Now, is your mother's—Mac told me about your mother's needlepoint.

LV: Oh, yes. I wish I knew where it is.

MN: It was in here the last time I was—

[Interruption]

LV: This is a very close friend of ours. An artist who did this especially—Can you read that?

MN: Let's see. I think it says, "Speaking of preserve—Joseph and Debbie."

LV: Yes. [unclear], he was a wonderful artist.

MN: Yes. I see a carving.

LV: It looks like an instrument; some kind of flute.

JH: Flute.

MN: It does. Oh, yes, it does.

JH: Oh, nice. Chinese.

MN: Do you know the secret to playing this one, Laszlo? You have to monkey around with it.

LV: [chuckles] Very good.

MN: I'm learning lessons from you.

LV: It describes a flutist, or something. No, doesn't work.

MN: I'm not sure it's the instrument's fault. [chuckles]

LV: No.

MN: Is it ivory, do you think? Or bone?

LV: Yes. Yes. It's ivory. Bone. It may not be a tusk but it's bone. Where was this?

MN: In there, yes.

LV: I'm looking for that beautiful—

MN: I'm wondering—I was thinking that it was perhaps in the cabinet, but I don't know.

LV: Mostly photographs.

MN: No, doesn't look like it's in that one, does it?

LV: I could call my wife. These are all my wife's work.

MN: Oh.

LV: Combined rare materials, together. Oh, this is not even sewn. I wanted to show both of you my wife's jackets.

MN: Yes.

LV: This is my Paul Clay.

MN: It's you Paul Clay?

LV: Yeah.

MN: Is that your imitation of Paul Clay?

LV: Yeah, just pulled together. That is a well-worn—

MN: Well, we'll have to sell that to the gallery.

LV: Oh, sure. The Rose Gallery.

MN: [chuckles] Here's your cane.

LV: Alright, thank you. Oh, you're there. [speaking to JH] Can you come this way, please? I want you to see my wife's beautiful clothing. She combines all kind of rare materials.

JH: Beautiful.

LV: Here's another one.

JH: Oh, beautiful!

LV: Even the inside.

JH: Does she wear them?

LV: Oh, yes. Occasionally.

JH: They are very special.

LV: Well, she used to, but not—she—we rarely have occasions to dress up. She was basically a clothing designer. See. She makes these.

JH: That looks like your tapestry.

LV: Yes. It's very much the same Indian style.

JH: Yes. Beautiful.

LV: She made this vest for me.

JH: Oh! Very handsome. Is she a sewer as well? Does she do the sewing?

LV: Oh, yes. Yes. She does everything.

JH: Amazing.

LV: She used a very rich collection of materials, to select [unclear]. She's a real collector.

JH: Beautiful. You've simplified things in this house, haven't you?

LV: What?

JH: You've simplified things in this house. You don't have her materials and things anymore?

LV: No. I don't think so.

JH: That one was my favorite.

LV: Which?

JH: The one you just showed me.

LV: Yes. Mine too. Okay, that's enough bragging.

JH: [chuckles] You go first.

LV: I should take your picture. Some of these pillows are her designs too. I forget now which ones. She loves to—some of those pillows are also—

JH: They're beautiful.

LV: She used to be always busy combining materials, and matching and— She did this too. Combinations of different types of materials.

JH: Yes.

LV: And if you want to see something else—here, I'll turn the light on. There is my sister's needlework.

JH: The portrait?

LV: Yes.

JH: That's a needlepoint portrait.

LV: Yes. If you look close and you will see. My sister used to make many of these. She also was very artistic.

JH: That's beautiful. Let me get you with that.

LV: Well, I'm not so beautiful.

JH: It's with your sister's—that's beautiful.

LV: Yeah.

MN: Maybe you'll make the picture look even better, Laszlo.

LV: You saw that card that I showed you. That beautiful, little painting from our best friend, Joseph Goldyne, who is a major artist. This is his work.

MN: Wow.

LV: And so is that. And so is this.

JH: So this is Goldyne?

LV: Joseph Goldyne.

JH: How do you spell Goldyne?

LV: Like *Gol-dyne*.

JH: And that's his—

LV: Gold-Y-N-E.

JH: And that's him to the right there.

LV: This also—And also that piece of fish.

JH: Both of those?

LV: Yes, all of those.

JH: The salmon and the dress?

LV: Yes.

MN: Beautiful.

LV: By the way, can you turn around?

JH: I'll turn around.

LV: This is my wife's painting. She actually copied a—I think it's a—She made a very close, wonderful copy of a famous work.

JH: Nice.

LV: And this one also. Her copy, I think, of a baroque[?].

JH: She painted that?

LV: Yeah. But it's a imitation of another [unclear].

JH: Yeah.

LV: I'm not an imitation, I'm real.

JH: You're the real thing. [chuckles]

MN: You're an original, Laszlo.

JH: Could I get you to walk this way and then—

LV: Well, I can only do it fairly slowly. My speed limit is very low.

JH: Say that again.

LV: My speed limit is very low. This is my favorite.

JH: Sweet.

LV: Yeah.

JH: Sweet.

LV: Looks like Siamese cats.

JH: Yeah, in a hat.

LV: In a hat.

JH: In a circus—In a—some kind of a hat. And who's this?

LV: It is my son, Michael, without the beard.

JH: He has a beard now, doesn't he?

LV: Yeah.

JH: Alright. Well, we should probably go upstairs and—

LV: Alright.

JH: Do the last of our—

[Recording Interruption] [Camera begins with LV playing the piano.]

LV: This is out of tune. Let's see what my compliment— I like to accompany singers.

JH: Do you?

LV: [LV plays more] Well, this is not worth hearing.

JH: I'm mostly getting the picture. It's a nice picture of you playing.

LV: Okay. [LV plays more] I'm trying to play the voice part and the piano part together, but I'm not quite perfect. These are good, any one of these. [LV plays more] Okay, I think this was enough of that.

JH: A little more from this angle; at least you sitting there.

MN: She's a tough teacher, Laszlo.

JH: [chuckles] [LV plays more] Thank you.

LV: You're welcome.

JH: Thank you so much.

LV: My fingers don't work.

MN: May I request the three movements from *Petrushka*?

LV: Oh! [Uses arms to push lots of keys together.] [All laugh]

[End Tape 7—Begin Tape 8]

JH: Okay, we're rolling. Would you like to announce the tape?

MN: Sure. This is the second day of interviews with Laszlo Varga. It's tape number eight. And today's date is May 28th, 2011. I'm Mac Nelson in Sarasota, Florida, at Laszlo Varga's home, and with us is videographer, Joanna Hay.

Well, Laszlo, you've often said that you had the best seat at The New York Philharmonic. When you had the great soloists come to play with the orchestra, you were—What?—six, eight feet away from them?

LV: Yes, well, I was right there under the nose of the conductor, and almost next to the soloists, especially violinists.

MN: Yes.

LV: And cellists. Pianists are a little bit further away. But I had the most great soloists and names, right within six feet of me, including Rubinstein and Heifetz and Piatigorsky, and you name it. It was a great eleven years where I not only had a chance to meet these people, but hear them, and repeatedly. It was great.

I remember once, Rubinstein played the Brahms *Second Piano Concerto*, which has a slow movement which is every cellist's dream—first cellist's dream—because it has a great solo. I played it many times with other pianists, including Cliburn and Glenn Gould and others, but Rubinstein was so happy after that movement finished that—I was, at that time, sitting at the end of the piano on the other side, outside of the stage, and he came out in the middle of the Concerto, around, and wanted to shake my hands.

MN: Ah!

LV: This was really a touching moment because he was so pleased and enjoyed it. Do you remember the piece?

MN: Oh, sure.

LV: [LV plays a bit on his cello] That's just the first stanza.

MN: That's lovely!

LV: I always loved to play that. And many other cello sections—solos—where the cello—only one cello is playing. This is the solo part that the first cellist plays. It's accompanied by three other cellists—cellos—but accompanying lines, and it's beautiful.

MN: Yes.

LV: This is before the piano even starts playing in the movement, so it's a big, big movement.

MN: Beautiful. Yes.

LV: There are many works requiring some outspoken, cello solo lines. Of course, I always enjoyed playing them. And even the listeners enjoyed it. [MN and LV chuckle]

MN: Well, speaking of Rubinstein, didn't you participate in a Marathon Concerto?

LV: Oh, yes! I'm so glad you remember all of these things. There was—In the middle of the season there was a three-week period—consecutive three weeks—where Rubinstein was engaged to play three concerts each week. So that meant nine concerts in three weeks. And each of the concerts to play three piano concertos. So all together eighteen works.

MN: Wow!

LV: With The Philharmonic; I forget who was the conductor. And after playing both Brahms *Concertos*, all five Beethoven *Concertos*, Mozart *Concertos*, Tchaikovsky, and you name it, everything. Eighteen concerts. Eighteen—what did I say? Nine concerts, twenty-seven works.

MN: Wow!

LV: Because he played three, full *Concertos* on each night. All the big—including [Karol Maciej] Szymanowski, a Polish composer.

MN: Oh, yeah!

LV: And of course, both Chopin *Concertos*.

MN: Yes.

LV: That he was nurtured[?] at that.

MN: Yes.

LV: And one or two contemporary works, too, but that wasn't his favorite. But all the great ones. And so, our schedule was that those weeks, that we had a Monday morning rehearsal, Tuesday morning rehearsal, and Tuesday night concert. Wednesday rehearsal. Thursday rehearsal. Thursday concert. Friday rehearsal. Saturday rehearsal. Saturday night concert. Three times. And after each concert, the whole orchestra and Rubinstein went down to the recording studio, the RCA [Radio Corporation of America] place. This was all in New York, of course. And we recorded all three *Concertos*. So what we just played that night. So we started recording after eleven o'clock, and we finished at around 4:00 [a.m.].

MN: Wow!

LV: And out of all of us, Rubinstein was the most sprightly and ready to go and do anything. He was the least tired, or the least sleepy. The orchestra was falling on their noses already by three o'clock in the morning. But that's how it was. And he was about seventy years old already. He was playing beautifully and without any problems and so on. And when people—the recording people were listening to the takes we just did, he didn't bother to listen himself. He stayed at the piano, fooling around, playing, and telling us stories and jokes. He was incredible; younger than all of us combined.

MN: Wow! Wow.

LV: And so, for three weeks straight we did this, three times a week. Can you imagine?

MN: No, I can't. [chuckles]

[Speaking Simultaneously]

LV: It's hard for me to imagine that we went through it, but it was a famous three weeks.

MN: Wow.

LV: He had indefatigable energy and capability and artistry. And he was jovial and happy, and it was nothing.

MN: That's just an amazing story.

LV: It's unbelievable.

MN: It really is.

LV: Well, I attest for that. I attest. I was there. [chuckles]

MN: Right.

LV: And that's where I played this Brahms solo too.

MN: Great.

LV: And others.

MN: Yes.

LV: Rubinstein, a great man. A great man. He came every year to play with us. This was his specialty. Let's see. About violinists. Milstein and Francescatti and Heifetz and several other wonderful— Do you know the name—first I have to remember. An Israeli violist—violinist who came to play with us. What was his name? A very fine, young man, and very energetic and romantic and expressive. I forget.

MN: I can't—

LV: He was very successful all over America for just three or four years, and then somehow he fell off the schedule. But I forget his name. But I remember very emotional playing of Alban Berg *Concerto* and similar—Sibelius *Concerto*. Who else? Let's see. Violinists? Of course, our concertmaster, John Corigliano, played every year beautifully in a very special way. We did the Brahms *Double Concerto* with him, and the Beethoven *Triple*, I mentioned.

MN: Right.

LV: And Bernstein at the keyboard. How do you call it when a jazz player plays? At the helm or something? And yes.

MN: How about the Rostropovich, the Prokofiev? That's a good story.

LV: Yes. I was promised by the Russian publishers, who spread the news in New York, that Prokofiev wrote a brand new Concerto just before he died in 1953, and they promised me the first American right to perform it; the Concerto. We kept asking, and Mitropoulos kept asking, for the score and the part, but somehow, they always said, "Well, we are not quite ready with it." And so on. "It's just not printed, or not final," and so this—always some excuse. It never came. But The Concerto, which is called *Sinfonia Concerto* [Concertante, or *Symphony-Concerto in E minor, Op. 125*], was a rewritten version of the earlier *First Cello Concerto* that he wrote thirty years before. And I didn't know about that either, because nobody knew it in New York that Prokofiev wrote it.

But when this delay happened, then I never got the score and never got the promise, we changed our plan to play the *First Concerto*, so I got that music and learned it, and we [were scheduled?] in 1956, I think. I was sorry that it was not the new work, but this was quite nice. The new work turned out to be a rewritten version of the *First Concerto*, which we didn't know.

So comes the fall of '56. All of a sudden, big news arrives in New York that the great, Russian cellist, Rostropovich, is coming to New York. He came in December or so, and he gave a fabulous recital and knocked everybody over, especially the cellists. And we all loved it. And he was very generous and played a rich program, excellently, so we all adored it. Immediately after the recital, The Philharmonic invited him to be soloist with the orchestra. What does he want to play? The new Prokofiev *Concerto*, which was really not only written *for* him, but in a way *by* him, because he spent almost a year in Prokofiev's home—*Dacha*—near Moscow. Stayed there to help Prokofiev write and shape the work, which is very demanding. And actually, I'm sure he wrote some segments or some passages himself, or suggested it to Prokofiev.

So he suggested that's what he would like to play. And his date—they found a date for him—just a week after mine, which I'm—my date was set already for The First Concerto, and until he brought the new music score, nobody knew that this was the same work, rewritten, because the publishers didn't say it at that time. So we ended up playing, in successive weeks, the same work in two guises, two versions. Everybody—not only the audiences but the reviewers—had a heyday—

[Telephone rings]

LV: If it keeps ringing I think I better—[Interruption]—and we adopted her as a daughter. I think you will be the next one.

JH: Oh, goodie! [chuckles]

LV: And you will be my next son.

MN: Very fine. Very fine.

JH: You had just—You were just talking about the reviews of The Prokofiev.

LV: Oh, yes.

JH: So if you could go back to that bit.

LV: Alright.

JH: The reviews that you did okay.

LV: Well, yes. It was an interesting superimposition of the two versions of the same work, but considerably different, that we played in successive weeks and as I said, the reviewers had a heyday comparing the works and the cellists. I didn't come up too badly, but he was the big story. And so, I asked him—he was extremely friendly and wonderful. A great character, making jokes about everything. I'm trying to copy him.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: I asked him for the score of the new work, because that was my original plan, to play it. And he immediately gave a copy of his score to me. That very same summer, I went to—was it Chautauqua or Aspen? I forget. It was '56. No, that was Chautauqua. And I scheduled it to be played in Chautauqua. I was a big success with it there. I learned it in a couple of months, but it was a much more complex work and much harder, and actually much better also. So I was pleased. And later on I recorded it for Vox [Records], and I think you have—

MN: We have it on LP, yes.

LV: Yes, well that was my version of the new version. But *The First Concerto* is ever since forgotten. It was interesting that when I kept asking the publishers to send me the new version, they kept asking, "Well, which one do you want? Do you want *The Concertino*, or *The Concerto*, or *The Concertante*?"

And I says, "I don't know. Which one is the new work?" Nobody knew it in New York. It seems that Prokofiev also wrote a *Concertino*, which was a smaller orchestra and shorter work. The original—*The First*—was *Concerto*; that was the first one. And this one, as I mentioned, the title was *Symphony Concerto* because it was much more symphonic, much more interrelated between large orchestra sections and cello. A big cadenza for five minutes, and everything but the kitchen sink. I had to play, including here. [LV points to lower area of cello strings] But I really enjoyed playing it. It was a big challenge for me. It was hard to play it after Rostropovich, who played it brilliantly, but ever since I've played it a few times elsewhere, and it was always a success.

MN: That's terrific. I must ask you for one more story. It seems I remember that Vladimir Horowitz was once late for an appointment.

LV: Oh, yes. We were scheduled to record the Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto*. The famous *Piano Concerto* with Horowitz one morning in Carnegie Hall on a cold, winter day. At the proper time—at nine o'clock or 9:30—all orchestra was on stage with Fritz Reiner, with a sour expression, conducting. He was an excellent conductor, but he always was cross with himself and with us. Comes the time, 9:30, everybody was tuned up and I was

waiting. No Horowitz. Well, you cannot do Tchaikovsky *Piano Concerto* without *him*. Finally, he shows up about seven minutes late. You know, recording time goes by minutes, and a hundred piece orchestra sitting there doing nothing, very costly for RCA—or Columbia [Records]; it was Columbia.

And finally, Horowitz comes in with a winter coat, a scarf, and a hat, and he just took off whatever extra and sat down at the piano without touching anything, looks up at—he gave a little excuse for his being late—but he was obviously very cold, coming in from a icy outside. And without touching the piano or anything, without playing one note, looks at Reiner, says, "Okay, I'm ready," and he starts with gigantic chords.

MN: Oh, sure.

LV: [LV imitates conducting] We played through the first movement, non-stop, perfect. That was the take. I don't know how he did it, after coming in from the cold, without warming up. With one note. He was a superhuman man. Then we recorded the other two movements. There, he made maybe one little insert—extra something. But the first movement, that was the take. It never—So we always have to rerecord at least part of those movements, with everybody else. But not with Horowitz. It was an incredible achievement. But Reiner really was looking cross at Horowitz, because nobody does that to Fritz Reiner, even Vladimir Horowitz. But Horowitz made a fool out of him by playing it like this, impeccably. Not so easy to play those big runs and chords impeccably. Well, these kinds of things happened occasionally with several of our soloists and conductors.

MN: Didn't he play the third movement so brilliantly that the orchestra responded? Was that that time?

LV: Oh, yes! That's right. God, I am amazed that you remember this. Yes, the third movement—at the end, just before the final conclusion—has a terrific run on piano alone, a double octave. [LV demonstrates] These kinds of things, with double octaves. And he played it faster than anybody before that we heard. We know *The Concerto* because we play it every year, and—but we never heard it so perfectly, and so fast, and so brilliant that the orchestra instantly turned out—Oh! This was in the recording. Yes, that is the same. The orchestra couldn't help but broke out with, "Bravo! Bravo!" We ruined the whole thing, because it was irresistible. It was—you know. We couldn't hold out, and almost like one, the orchestra just rose and said, "Bravo!"

MN: So you had to go—you had to—

LV: We had to record it again. [LV and MN laugh] And he did it again. It was like natural. That's right. I'm so glad you remember these early stories that you remind me because I forgot them. I'm glad that you thought of it.

MN: I'm delighted to be of service, Laszlo.

LV: Well, you are a very good service.

MN: They're terrific stories. Yes.

LV: Yes. I had another story with Leonard Rose. You know, he left and I took his place, but he was invited back as a soloist. He was scheduled to play the Brahms *Double Concerto* with John Corigliano, and I was sitting in my regular place where the first cellist sits. And The Concerto starts with a very short orchestral beginning, and then a little cadenza for cello and violin, alone, without the orchestra. He played the little cadenza with Corigliano beautifully, and it lasts maybe three or four minutes, not much, and as he finished, just before the orchestra was coming in with a big, first tutti, which is the longest in the piece, and Bruno Walter conducting. On the last, big chord, he broke his C string—or A string, and the orchestra went into this big, orchestra interlude, the longest in the work. Leonard Rose looks at me and I immediately offered my cello because he couldn't play without the A string, and he says, "No," like this [LV makes face], because he couldn't imagine playing on anybody's cello because he was used to his, and he was a very punctilious person, who wouldn't touch anybody else's instrument, especially in the middle of a concert, because he didn't have that flexibility like some others have. I will tell about that.

So he refused my cello. So I thought very fast. I ripped off my A string and—since it was already stretched so it doesn't have to be moved a lot—and brought it over to him, and he put it on his cello, and while we were playing, Bruno Walter didn't quite notice what happened. He went on conducting and the orchestra played the big tutti. While the orchestra played the tutti, he put the string on his cello, tuned it up, and he was ready for the next entrance, which is [LV plays a sample]. The audience was watching this whole scene and rooting for everybody to be ready. Bruno Walter didn't notice a thing—

MN: [laughs]

LV: —even though I was walking around in front of him with a string, because the cellist was on the other side. I was sitting on this side of the orchestra [LV motions to his left] if you feel the stage. So I had to move into the center and hand him the string, and he was putting it on. And he was ready for it. And I finished with three strings, but that was no problem.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: The audience enjoyed this circus act. But Bruno Walter didn't notice; at least, he didn't want to notice.

MN: Right. Sounds like what Bernstein used to talk about: *The Sportive Element* in music, I think. It was like a game, wasn't it?

LV: In a way, yes. Things happen. That was an interesting—But just as a contrast to Leonard Rose's behavior, because he wouldn't touch my cello, or anybody else's cello, because he liked his and nothing is good. He was a very hard practicer and worker. He had to prepare everything and just—matches correctly. We suspected he was a beautiful artist, a very fine cellist.

But contrasting it to this young, Japanese violinist who was the rage of the time in the fifties. Who was the first, very famous violinist? Not Miss Chang? Another one, but a Japanese name. Anyway, I can't think of it. She had the same problem at one point. Much after I left, but I heard about this. She had a Stradivarius, and in the middle of The Concerto, or whatever it was, she broke an E string, and without losing more than two measures, the concertmaster offered his violin, and she handed hers to him and took his, and she continued with only missing two measures, without batting an eyelash.

MN: Wow.

LV: And then it happened again, on that fiddle. The E string. And then picked up the assistant concertmaster's fiddle, the same thing, again without losing a beat. So as a contrast, people are willing to take chances like this. Totally alien fiddles. Even though the difference might not be so much between the instruments, but still, it's a habit. It's two contrasts really. Two ends.

MN: Wow. Wow.

LV: Yeah, those kinds of things happened. It made my life more interesting.

MN: Oh, I'm sure it did.

LV: But I had a lot of fun as a first cellist there for eleven years. But after this, as I mentioned to you, I had enough of it, because it became a year-round job and we had nothing else able to do except the orchestra.

MN: Sure.

LV: That wasn't sufficient for me.

MN: Right.

LV: Some of my colleagues are still there—

MN: [chuckles]

LV: —after seventy-five years. But I had a chance to leave and change and I took the chance. I was always like that. I liked to change and explore new fields. I'm amazed at your ability to remember these little things, and I'm so happy that you remind me to repeat it for the screen.

MN: Well, Laszlo, there are so many reasons to remember your accomplishments. There really are.

LV: Well, yes. I had many others, but I don't remember.

JH: It seems—Tell me about—It seems like you didn't always do what people expected with your music, and did you—how was that and how did people respond? Did they sometimes think, "Oh, he shouldn't have done that?" But then you did it anyway, and they were—

LV: I don't remember such an instance.

JH: Or arranging—arranging pieces—arranging violin pieces and then playing them?

LV: I think I told you the story of the Bach *Chaconne*. You know, while I was trying it, the orchestra was groaning. And when I announced it as an encore, they wouldn't believe that I could play it more than the first team, the first eight measures. I remember I mentioned that they were groaning because they had to stay here for fifteen minutes. [LV and MN chuckle] You know, there is an orchestra thinking. They are thinking of their vacations or intermissions, and the cigarette, because many of them were smokers at that time, including me. That was more important than finishing the symphony or the concerto.

JH: Can I go back to Hungary? You had mentioned all of the Hungarian conductors.

LV: Yes.

JH: And the other remarkable thing is you and Starker grew up together, were peers.

LV: Yes.

JH: Can you tell that story about you and Starker growing up together and what was that like?

LV: We met at age eight or something. We were about the same age. He is half a year older. But he was already a wunderkind at age ten. Played already concerts at eleven; was very talented, like Yo-Yo Ma, started very early. We often met just friendly, and always played certain things for each other, and criticized each other, and suggested things. When he was already about fifteen or so he had many friends who sent him interesting, new works for cello that was published outside of Hungary, but not in Hungary. So he was—he had quite a few interesting works. I remember a new [Darius] Milhaud *Concerto*. He eventually wrote another one, but this was the first one. It's a very nice, whimsical jazzy piece, especially the last movement. And he got the score and looked at it, and played it after just a couple of days. And when I once visited him, I accompanied him on the piano and we had great fun. That was the first thing anybody had ever touched or played that particular work. So that was just one—we exchanged these kinds of things, and played two-cello things, and exchanged secret fingerings. We got along well.

MN: Yeah. Do you have—Oh, go ahead.

LV: That same *Concerto* has another story.

MN: Oh, good.

LV: Much later on, I was in Aspen; the Aspen Festival that I had spent twenty-six summers. The first time I was asked to go to Aspen was because Zara Nelsova, who was their first cellist, could not go. I think I mentioned that already. But they asked me if I would play the work that she was scheduled with. What is it? The Milhaud *First Concerto*, which I never played before. Starker did, but not me. I played the piano part. [chuckles] And I said, "Alright."

So I got myself a score—by that time it was available—and I learned it on short notice, because they asked me, maybe in April, to start for the summer. So they asked me and that was the schedule because Milhaud was invited as guest conductor and composer. Very often a composer was invited to represent and teach some of his works, and the orchestra to play a Milhaud Festival. And so, that was my chance to play. And Milhaud was conducting it.

So I learned the piece and I wanted to play it for Milhaud before, and he was very satisfied and happy, said, "Oh, bien sour[?]. That was kind of good." He was overweight and was falling over the chair on both sides, but a very lovely man, and intriguing. He loved the way I interpreted the work, he was very happy, and he was scheduled to conduct it. Comes the rehearsal, and somehow with his fat arms and hands, somehow he was too slow for me, especially in the fast, jazzy last movement.

I asked him, "Cher [unclear]. Could we do it a bit faster?"

"Oh, sure. Bien sour. Sure."

And so, he started faster, but his hand was too heavy and by three measures it slowed down and I couldn't play that pace because it was—It starts with chords like this—[LV plays a sample]—something—

I said, "Sure, sure, [you can play?]" but his hand didn't cooperate.

Finally comes the concert, and there was no problem in the first and the second movements, but the third movement, I started this way and he somehow—I asked the concertmaster before the concert, "Please. Would you please come with me and bring the orchestra to it?" Concertmasters can do that. Of course, they're not supposed to if the conductor doesn't wish it, but it can be done. He helped me and we went down speedily and we left Milhaud by the wayside. I think he's still conducting. [MN and LV laugh]

MN: Did he have a response? Milhaud?

LV: Yes, a dirty look. [MN and LV laugh] No, he didn't quite realize that it wasn't him who drove the tempo, but the orchestra did because they all felt the tempo. It has to be a swinging, moving type of tempo. It's very lively. It's a good work. That was my Milhaud story.

MN: It's a good one.

LV: He was very nice. Everything was fine.

MN: Good.

LV: And he wasn't really a conductor. He hardly ever conducted. And when he did, it wasn't what it should be, let's put it that way. There are people who think the work, obviously, in his mind and he imagines, but he doesn't realize that his arm is not really up to the tempo, whatever is required. He might have wished it himself to be faster, but his arm didn't cooperate because he wasn't an experienced conductor.

MN: Yes.

LV: It's a kind of interesting mixture. Copland. You see that picture shows me playing the Schubert *Concerto* with him conducting? [LV pointing to photograph]

MN: Yes.

LV: He never conducted, or hardly ever, but they invited him to conduct a concert at Aspen, I think, with one of his big works *Appalachian Spring* or what—and the Schubert *Concerto* that I was [unclear]. And before the first three hours—he didn't last long. He says, "How do you conduct this?" [LV and MN chuckle]

MN: That's what he said to you?

LV: Yes. He says, "Tell me—"

He was very sweet and open about not being an experienced conductor. He knew, but he was much better than Milhaud, [chuckles] and he took my suggestions very sweetly and friendly, and he did a beautiful job so I had no problem. Different from the story of Milhaud. But it was so lovely and immediate for him to ask me, "How do you conduct this Schubert?"

Well, I played the tempos in the first one, and in other movements, and he got an idea of it. He did it very, very well.

MN: Right. Right.

LV: All these stories.

MN: Are we on time?

JH: Yeah, we're at forty-five minutes. I was trying to remember my two additional questions.

MN: I know you had one more about Laszlo's education. I don't know whether that one would go here. What was the—There was one further thing we talked about.

JH: It was the further thing. Oh, I know what it is, but it's at the end. The question we talked about at the very end.

MN: Oh, yes. Okay.

JH: Here are the gaps I have in mind that I need a little info on. Going back again to Hungary and your childhood and your years in the orphanage.

LV: Oh.

JH: And how that speaks to what was going on at the time with persecution against Jews, that kind of thing. Was that kind of connected?

LV: Well, that was—you know, I was at the orphanage from '35 to '39. It was the beginning of the troubles for the Jews. And so, the orphanage existed beautifully and undisturbed, except when I was walking to school—or some other orphanage members—we often were called names, Jews and worse, and sometimes even threatened by some little, young gangsters; fellow school students. But that wasn't too bad. But the orphanage was just a beautiful organization, supported by very well-to-do Jews and it was—we only had about a hundred forty boys; it was only boys. There was another girl orphanage someplace else. But it was only Jews, and they had a beautiful building which housed one of the gems of a synagogue. A small synagogue, but beautiful, decorated. But still at that time, women—mothers and so on who visited—were always sitting upstairs and men in the downstairs. That's an old segregation—Jewish segregation. I had my so-called Bar Mitzvah festival there, which was very lovely, the way it was arranged. And I was the only—musicians would be able to play on holidays and so on, and I was always asked to play, and I did with the accompaniment of the organist in the synagogue, who was a very lovely Christian man, because Jews weren't supposed to play an instrument on Saturday. So they had a Christian man and he was a very lovely friend who appreciated my musical talents, and I his. He was also very [unclear].

One of my favorite jobs was on Fridays and Saturdays, to go up into the organ loft and volunteer to pump the organ. That is, I had to do this in order to supply the air for the pipes, and it was an old fashioned thing. But it had a four-clavier tier organ—four keyboards—big, big instrument, and it needed a lot of air. I loved to be so near to the organ because the sound was overwhelming, right there, and I felt engrossed and entombed—or engulfed. That's the word. Engulfed with the sound. It was just so exciting and beautiful, and he was a very, fine player. He accompanied me on those occasions when I was asked to play on holiday times. The orphanage. Orphanage.

JH: What was the family situation? Why were you—

LV: Oh, yes. Thanks for reminding me. I was half-orphan only. My father died when I was two and a half, and my mother, with great difficulty, brought me and Klari up to [unclear]. Piri was already older and she was able to have jobs and support herself, but not Klari and I. By the time I became eleven, it was so impossible for her to educate and help us and help me grow up that she couldn't do it, so she applied for me to go to the orphanage, even though I was just a half-orphan. The orphanage was really for those who lost both parents, but there were a few exceptions. They accepted me because I had a

special talent. Not only did they accept me, but they welcomed me. And I was the only one out of the hundred and forty who was allowed to go to The Music Academy, and also to a Gymnasium. You've heard of this school—

MN: Yes.

MN: —outside of the Jewish Gymnasium. There was such a thing that was a Jewish Gymnasium, only for Jews, but I already started before I entered the orphanage at the different school, and they allowed me to go to that one and continue. So I was treated as a special person, and I was the only one who was allowed to go alone at that age, with my cello, walk to The Academy, and to the school, of course. So I was treated very beautifully and specially and I felt really grateful. I had four wonderful years with all the kids my age—many my age—but they were up to eighteen there, from age six. So it was a wide variety. I remember that one—when I was about thirteen—one of the eighteen year olds befriended me, who was about to leave the school—finish school and leave the orphanage at eighteen. But he was a very good friend of me. He eventually became the leading architect in Vienna, and I visited with him after I was with the quartet already. We had a lovely time together. He became a very famous man in Vienna. He was my mentor, so to speak.

MN: Do you recall his name?

LV: Yes, I think. You had to ask me that? [LV and MN chuckle]

MN: No, it's okay. It's okay.

LV: Just a second.

MN: Yes.

LV: It will come to me.

MN: Okay. Sure.

LV: I should remember him, he was a wonderful guy.

MN: I seem to remember that—Was your mother at one point a teacher?

LV: Yes, a schoolteacher. She was an art teacher, and also taught some piano music because she was an expert in that. She was a very fine artist, but she was fired from the schools because of being a Jew. And so, we—

MN: And that happened when you were how old?

LV: Oh, I must have been still under ten. And from then on, she was struggling by—she was a very excellent and meticulous dressmaker, and repaired—how do you call—dress—

MN: Seamstress?

LV: Seamstress, yes. She had some orders for ladies dresses, or just to repair or readjust or refashion. And she was such a beautiful, meticulous worker that it took much longer than anybody else to just do it just right because it had to be so—before she submitted the record[?]. She got very little for it, certainly not commensured with the hours spent. I remember that she was working on her sewing machine till two o'clock in the morning. We were living in the same room so she was working there while I was sleeping, and sometimes I woke up at one o'clock and she was either working still or else fell asleep on top of her sewing machine because she was dead tired. So it was very hard to make enough money, or barely enough.

But Klari began to work as an office worker so earned a little money, and I used to deliver milk before school. So I got up at 4:00 [a.m.] and 4:30 and I was taking milk bottles in a carrier to everybody who needed it or ordered it, sometimes four stories high without any elevators, of course. You know, up and down. But I was young. I could do it. And I made a little money. Every penny I handed to her to help her. So this is how we managed. But by the time I got to be ten, eleven, it really—she couldn't quite keep me and that's why the orphanage came in the picture.

MN: I see.

LV: And there they treated me beautifully and we had wonderful food, wonderful teachers, and we had to follow certain Jewish rituals but—even though that wasn't my style, but I accepted it and cooperated. But that's about it that I can [unclear]. God, I'm so glad that you remember these things—

[End Tape 8—Begin Tape 9]

JH: Okay, we're back.

MN: Okay. This is the second day of interviews with Laszlo Varga. It's tape number nine. Today's date is May 28th, 2011. I'm Mac Nelson, here in Sarasota, at Laszlo Varga's home, and we're here with videographer, Joanna Hay. Okay.

LV: Okay.

MN: Yes.

LV: I would like to talk about several aspects of my long marriage.

MN: Yes.

LV: Which is almost sixty years since it started.

MN: Congratulations!

LV: Well, it's too early. [chuckles] It's fifty-nine years, really, but it's getting there, and we are still together, and we still go through mostly happy times, but not without occasional arguments, but it's perfectly acceptable for most people. But we manage. We grew up three wonderful children, all are doing well. But I already talked about the beginning of our marriage, which is second marriage for both of us. My wife was married for four years to a gentleman who was an artist, but he had something mentally wrong with him, so they couldn't get along and she decided to divorce before I was—before we met. But I had to wait for my divorce from my wife, and that took some time, but I already mentioned that. Our marriage started, of course, in New York. We lived in an apartment in Manhattan, and we enjoyed the hubbub and the traffic and the excitement of New York, and soon after our marriage—our marriage was in 1952. May 1. May Day! May Day!

MN: [chuckles]

LV: I was already in The New York Philharmonic, so I didn't know my wife while I was at The City Opera, but during the last months of that, and The Philharmonic time, that's when we met and instantly fell in love and agreed to marry as soon as possible, as soon as I was divorced. That was a long story. I talked about it.

MN: Right.

LV: I did get married, right—the first week after I got divorced. We were quite anxious. And we moved into a nice apartment on the west side of Manhattan, and we had a happy time

furnishing the place and arranging everything, and getting used to each other, so to speak. [LV and MN chuckle] That was in '52, and I was full-time busy with The Philharmonic, but we had a very happy life. I was very busy and so was Lillian, her building the home, and as you notice, how artistic and meticulous and anxious to decorate everything in the most tasteful and beautiful style. So she was doing that. And we had a large coterie of friends, and we visited everybody, and by the time—János Starker came to America the same year I did, in 1948, and he was invited by Antal Doráti to be the first cellist of his Dallas Symphony, and he was doing that while I got the job at The Opera—The City Opera; The New York City Opera. Then, a year after I moved to The Philharmonic, he left The Dallas Symphony because he was invited to be the first cellist of The Metropolitan Opera. So we were the two leading horses of the two opera houses in New York. [chuckles]

MN: Wow! That's terrific.

LV: And then, he got jealous that he didn't—Oh! He auditioned for The New York Philharmonic job, too, without me knowing—secret—and he didn't get it. There were many others that I mentioned that didn't get it.

MN: Right.

LV: And that's when he accepted The Metropolitan Opera, and he was there for several years, and then he was invited to be the first cellist of The Chicago Symphony. You know, the biggest ones. He was there for many years, until '58, and then he decided he'd had enough of orchestra playing, similar to me four years later, and he left for the professorship at Bloomington.

MN: Right.

LV: Indiana; Indiana University. And he's there ever since. He brought out the beautiful, big cello class through the years, and he's highly regarded as a professor; very good. Meanwhile, he had a solo tour, and so he traveled around and recorded many things also. So we had a very parallel career.

Going back to my marriage. We lived in New York till I retired from The Philharmonic in 1962, and we moved to Toronto. So I gave up our apartment and moved to Toronto and bought a beautiful house, right in one month. It happens that the first violinist's wife was a real estate agent, and she had the right thing for us.

MN: This was the first violinist of your quartet?

LV: Yes.

MN: In Toronto?

LV: Yes. In Toronto.

MN: Yes.

LV: By the way, he was the only Canadian in The Canadian Quartet.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: We three were from New York. But he was excellent.

MN: Yes.

LV: But he didn't really know all the other twenty-five quartets we were required to play during the year. Fifty broadcasts. Fifty broadcasts means two and a half quartets each. Yes.

MN: That's outrageous.

LV: Well, that's about an hour's work; an hour's time.

MN: Okay, but each week?

LV: Each week, and it was all pre-recorded. And we couldn't repeat anything so it has to be— Well, listen, considering that Haydn alone wrote eighty-three quartets, and one is more beautiful than the other. Eighty-three. And Mozart wrote thirty. No, symphonies. About sixteen quartets. And Beethoven wrote seventeen quartets. You know, just—that's already a sizable thing.

MN: Sure.

LV: We played the whole Beethoven Cycle.

MN: Sure.

LV: And Brahms wrote three quartets. And Tchaikovsky wrote three quartets. And so, it's— there were plenty to play.

MN: And Mendelssohn? Did you play the Mendelssohn Quartets?

LV: Oh, yes. He wrote more.

MN: Yes.

LV: There were six, at least. I forget how many. So there was plenty to play, but we didn't know all of it by previously working on it. Especially he, who was a solo violinist and a concertmaster. He knew the orchestra literature, but not so the quartet literature. And he had the hardest role; hardest part to play. So he had a tough time because that was the most technically demanding part. So we had to work an awful lot. And because we decided to work forward, rather than just week by week, we had at least two, full concerts to prepare each week. So it was piled up. And we taped them off and finished the whole thing in thirty-six weeks.

MN: Wow!

LV: By that time, we were in each other's hair because we argued quite a bit. I was part of it too. I decided that this wasn't for me. Actually, the cellist before me, who had to replace—they had to replace with me, also got up in a huff because he didn't like all the arguments, and the demands, again, of recording so much per week. A lot of work, because that was only half of our job. The other half was teaching. And playing solo and other things. And travel. We played concerts outside of Toronto, and even sometimes on the west coast of Canada. So it was a hard life and I decided to resign, and that's why we were hurrying up finishing the whole series. I got an invitation to San Francisco, to the university, to teach conducting, and do—conduct an orchestra, and teach cello and chamber music and others. And that's what I really enjoyed. We moved to San Francisco the next year. We stayed in Toronto less than a year. And we had to sell our beautiful house within nine months. That was the only house we lost a little bit, but little.

MN: Yes.

LV: Because we bought the house in Bloomington, Indiana later, and of course, in San Francisco, and in Houston, and of course, here in Florida. And whenever we had to sell them, we made a lot of money because the prices would grow.

MN: Well, you know, Laszlo, you told us yesterday about your teaching in San Francisco, but you had a young family in San Francisco, too, didn't you?

LV: Yes, not that young, but yes.

MN: Yes. But I think I remember—didn't Peter build an electric guitar?

LV: Yes.

MN: Yeah. That's a great story. Tell us about—

LV: [chuckles] Yes, well, we spent every summer—or twenty-six summers during that time—in Aspen. And of course, the kids were with us and we had a wonderful time for seven/eight weeks there. And Peter was growing and was very interested always in mechanical things. He was really an ideal engineer-to-be. He was—let's see—He must have been fifteen, maybe sixteen.

In Aspen, he had a little friend—or a friend—who had a bicycle, and he came to me and said, "Hey, Dad! Buy me a bicycle!" Because he wanted to—he loved to ride it, but he didn't have it.

I said, "No." I says I didn't feel like buying a bicycle, but I said, "If you are so interested, build one yourself," because he was very good with his hands at making things. From early years, he was always in the garage doing something that became something, mechanical and so on.

He looked at me and said, "What do you mean? I don't know how to build a bicycle."

"Well, listen. I will help you. We'll go to the junk yard and find a bicycle shape"—how do you call it? Frame.

MN: Frame, yes.

LV: "And we can possibly find some wheels, and maybe chain, and all kinds of—" because they were big junk yards and you can find things. And we did find—and whatever we didn't find, I bought, like the chain, like the sprocket wheel. And he became very attracted to the idea, and I haven't seen him for days, and he built a bicycle that was working, eventually. As I said, I helped him, and I helped him build also because I also liked to build. And I bought whatever he needed after I see the project.

He had such a marvelous time to ride his own bike, and he was so proud to be able to tell his friends, "Oh, look! I built this!"

It wasn't the last work. It was used parts and peeling paint, and so on, but that didn't bother him. Several times, things happened that he was wishing to do something, and so I encouraged him to make it, because I liked that, and he became very interested in doing his own designs.

MN: Didn't he help you work on the house in San Francisco?

LV: Yes. Yes. We had a big living room, which ended up in a wide window like this, in front of which was a long terrace in a hillside. So it started at level, but the end of the terrace was already eight-foot tall posts. It was a hillside, and it was forty feet; very large. We needed more room in the living room, so I—at first—had the idea of extending the living room itself to part of the terrace, but we did that by a professional builder. But then, the terrace had to be rebuilt and I began to do that. I, myself, participated with Peter's help, in roofing the extension that we added to the living room. I don't know whether I've really described the situation, but it had to have a translucent roof, slanted from the house itself, slant down until the eight or nine foot tall beams on the end of it. This is the screened part. So I had to put up the big header, which was heavy as hell, you know, because it was eight by four, a big piece. And it was twenty-six foot wide or long, and we had to lift it in place, so I had a friend of Peter's helping us. I had a six-foot ladder and a ten-foot ladder. At first, I asked the boys to watch the beam, and I climbed up the six-foot ladder with one end of the beam, and I parked one of the boys to hold it there. And then I went to the other side to the ten-foot ladder and I lifted the other side for eight-foot high. It was heavy as hell. Then, the other fellow held it. And then I nailed it in just so that it will stay in place, and eventually, later on, when it was—I nailed it fully. And then the crossbeams [unclear], and in between we used fiberglass segments, which we bought, ready, each about two-feet wide and ten-feet long. Nailed all that with the boys' help. We all helped, hanging on the roof, nailing. But it was great fun to do it with the boys, especially with Peter. And we built that room ourselves, and later on a glazier did the glasswork. I was very proud that we were able to do it. And Peter was very helpful with me, or by himself, to do certain improvements in the house. Ever since, he was always engineeringly minded. But I should mention that Peter, after finishing high school, got into The University of California, Santa Cruz, for four years. He finished there, undergraduate years, and was majoring in what? I forget.

MN: Engineering, was it?

LV: No, not engineering. It was a general degree. After he finished he got into graduate school, but he wasn't sure what he wanted. Let's see, I mixing it up with Michael. Peter was in graduate school. Oh! When he got—finished the undergraduate degree, he was appointed by the physics professor—oh, it was biophysics that he was doing. Biophysics was his major. His physics professor was so impressed with him that he had a certain invention, or a patent thing, that needed to be—an example built. I don't exactly know what it was, but some electric machinery. And he engaged Peter for three years to sit in a studio and build that machine according to his specifications. And Peter loved to do it, and he finished it to the very satisfaction of the professor.

By that time, he got tired of that. So he was already eighteen—twenty-two—about twenty-four. All of a sudden, he wanted to get away from mechanics and machinery and physics. Says he wanted to go to law school. That was the furthest thing of signs that I visualized for him, or for himself, but he wanted to be in law school. So he auditioned and got into law school in no time, just the next semester, and he stayed in law school for two and a half years, almost finishing the three year course. But during that time he began to suffer with Schizophrenia, which slowly developed. At first, we didn't realize that that was the case, but eventually it came—He got married during that last year, on a sudden impulse, which didn't last long because he was unhappy and so was the wife. I think he mishandled her, and occasionally harmed her; beating. So they divorced in six months. And that was the end of his studies because he—that became a serious case of Schizophrenia. He was treated and then he decided to live on his own. He didn't want to have anything to do with us. At first, he got angry at Lillian. Oh! That was the time when we separated.

Actually, once we separated for one summer when I went alone to Aspen because we had some problems; all married people have. And I had a very happy summer by myself. I had a beautiful affair with an interesting person. I was in Aspen for the first week or so and I was very lonely, even though I knew a lot of people. But after a week or so I was having dinners in some restaurant, and afterward I took a walk by myself. I was going down one road, and at the corner I was ready to turn, and just as I'm turning, I bumped into a beautiful girl. "Hello, Mr. Varga!" She was as surprised as I.

I said, "How do you know my name?" And I looked at her.

She said, "Oh, I was in your chorus when we did the Brahms Requiem or something."

You know, with my orchestra at San Francisco State, I did those choral works at least once or twice a year, and she was a member of the hundred and fifty singers of the chorus, and she was an excellent soprano. I didn't know her. I didn't recognize her because, you know, I don't have memorized a hundred and fifty faces. But she was something to be memorized.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: And we had a wild affair, even though she was half my age. But at the end of the summer, I decided to go home to my wife, and we parted—with her, and we got back together for four years, and after four years, again, we had major differences. And then I moved out in San Francisco to an apartment and I stayed for three years, separate. I had my own apartment very near to the university, and I had a chance to meet some beautiful girls, and I did. I felt rightful about it, and Lillian knew about it also. She wasn't too happy but I think she had some affairs too, but we didn't ask too much.

But after the four years—Oh! Those were the four years when Peter—that's what started me. Peter alienated himself from us. At least, he couldn't stay in our own house with my wife, alone. I was out. So he wanted to move out. And so, we talked it over, and of course, I invited him to stay with me, and he stayed for more than a year, and we got along, but in a strange way. But after a year or more, at one point we began arguing, and we came to fist-a-cuffs because he came at me, and he was a big bruiser, and he knocked me down to the floor, and in one moment he was pummeling me and he was really hurting me, and that was the last. So I freed myself from him and kicked him out of the house, and that was the last I saw him for twenty years.

MN: Wow.

LV: Because he alienated himself and didn't want to do anything with either one of us, and made his life very, very meagerly and modestly, alone. He was working certain jobs here and there. Nothing lasting but it was a difficult time. Then, finally, he became—under the city's help—city's rule—and got a hotel room where he still is, in San Francisco. But later on, about eight years ago, we got back together again and he is a totally different person, but he still has his illness and crazy, hearing voices and other strange behavior, but he is now a loving son. We talk every week and—

MN: He has been here to see you, hasn't he?

LV: Yes, he has been, but I invite him all the time to stay here with us. No, he prefers to stay alone, and he's now fifty-eight years old.

MN: Now, does your daughter see him some? They live—

LV: Yes.

MN: They both live in California?

LV: Well, my daughter is in Oakland and Peter is in San Francisco, which is across the bay. Oh, yes! Oh, she took care of him and was needed. She's a good sister. She's a good soul. A good daughter. A good everything. And so is he, actually. And so is Michael. I have nothing but raves about my three children. So this is how it is. This gets me where? Do we still have some room?

JH: Yes, we've got thirty minutes left on this tape.

LV: Oh, boy!

JH: Is there anything else about your marriage that you—

LV: Well, I came back after the four years of things, because I missed her and she missed me, and finally we made up again. I didn't feel comfortable, but neither did she. And so, we came back together in 1984, and since then we are together. That's a long time ago. The regular marriage, occasional arguments and fights.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: What else is new? But we love each other still, in a way. Then we moved to—Well, let's see. Were we in San Francisco yet? Oh, yes. All these things happened already in San Francisco while I was teaching at the university. I enjoyed the university life, and as I said, I always played solos and chamber music right there, and also was engaged to play with the orchestras nearby. And solo recitals and—I had a busy life and I loved it. I was full-time teaching so I wasn't home too much, but we managed. And she was busy with her art, and a lot of friends we had, and so she had a full life too. She took care of the kids, and she was a very good, wonderful housewife and excellent cook. So I had a good time with her. But we all have reason to complain occasionally. We still do. [LV and MN chuckle] Who doesn't?

MN: Yeah, that's true.

LV: And so, the rest of our life was similar to this, but by 1988, I decided to resign from the university because I had enough and I was already seventy—let's see. Eight-eight—twenty-four—'88, I was sixty-four, and old enough to retire. I had to take an early retirement because I think sixty-five was the retirement age, but I managed to get it at sixty-four. And we moved out of San Francisco to Sonoma, which is a beautiful suburban, hour drive out of San Francisco, and we lived there for two years, beautifully, until '90. And then, Lil was the one who always wanted to move. She had had enough of Sonoma, and we moved—when did we move?—in 1990. Oh, that's when I moved to Indiana, and I was there for two years. Was it '92 that we moved? I think in '92 we moved to Indiana, and I was there until '94 when I was invited to The University of Houston.

MN: Right.

LV: And as I told you, at first, I was just invited to do for one year an interim appointment because they were holding auditions for permanent cello teachers, and I didn't want to be there permanently. I accepted, though, for one year while they are listening to auditions. During the first month, I asked, "Who is coming to play auditions?" He says, "Nobody is

coming." He says, "We cancelled the auditions because we want you to stay." The old fart business.

MN: [laughs] Yeah. Right.

LV: And I stayed. And I enjoyed it. I stayed for six years, until 2000 when I finally said good-bye to the whole thing, and we moved into here permanently, and we are here ever since. And love this Shangri-La here. It's a beautiful nature, and we are very happy living here in the nature, and do what we want.

MN: Right.

LV: We did many trips to Europe, to elsewhere, to California several times, either together or I alone. So we were free. But unfortunately, now I don't think I *can* think of flying anymore. Even though I would do it with great difficulty, but Lil doesn't want to anymore. And she would be worrying about me—what happens if I fall in the plane or on the way on the stairs, or whatever. So I said good-bye to travel. That brings up us very close to today.

MN: Yes, it does.

LV: I still know how to hold the cello, but not much else. [all laugh]

JH: Could you take a few minutes to talk about what you feel your legacy is in the cello world? You've had so many roles you've played. Tell me about that.

LV: Yes, well, I didn't spend much time about my recording projects, but Vox Records, who were quite well known in the '70's, recorded many of my Concertos with different orchestras. I remember the Lalo Concerto, the Saint-Saëns Concerto—both Saint-Saëns Concertos—the Tchaikovsky Rococo Variations, and Kupferman's Concerto—a big Concerto that was written for me—and two Haydn Concertos. So I'm quite well represented. Oh! And the Dvorak Concerto. So I did that and recorded all the Beethoven Sonatas. Oh! By the way, I discovered a sixth Beethoven Cello Sonata. I saw in a Beethoven list of works, by numbers, that there was a number sixty-four called Sonata for Cello and Piano. And I said, "Sixty-four?" I knew about the sixty-nine always, which was the great A major Sonata.

MN: Yes.

LV: Everybody knows the five Sonatas, but nobody knew about the sixty-four. I went to the libraries—the biggest collections in New York—and tried to find it, and I did find it in an old version; and old addition. The sixty-four, which is a transcription by Beethoven of his Opus 3 String Trio. And I got a copy of it, very excitedly, and soon I recorded that too. And that was the first Opus 64. I have a tape of it, but you have the music.

MN: Yes. [chuckles] We have the tape too.

LV: Oh, you do?

MN: Yes.

LV: Well—And nobody plays it, because it's an arrangement, but that's—By the way, that old addition from the 1800s was printed, the piano part separately without the over—the cello part over it, and the cello part separately. And it needed additions and I edited it. Then I played it with people, and it's a sixth-movement work like the String Trio—the first String Trio—about the biggest, or longest. And beautiful. And it's a very good arrangement, but nobody plays it. Even today. I have a tape over there. That was a discovery, so to speak.

MN: Yes.

LV: I recorded that and the fourth, regular Beethoven Sonata. And then I recorded the Brahms Sonatas, earlier, and then added the violin Brahms Sonatas also.

MN: Right.

LV: Then recorded the Ernő Dohnányi Sonata, and many things that's on my legacy. You asked—started—the legacy. I call it my ten-disc series of my recordings, with twenty-seven different works on it, called My Varga Legacy. And out of the twenty-seven works on it, I think more than half of it is my arrangements, because even I call the arrangements, the three Gamba Sonatas of Bach, which are written for the Viola da Gamba and Csembaló [Harpichord]. Of course, everybody plays it on the cello, but I decided to play it on the cello piccolo with five strings, and in a way, that's an arrangement. So I was happy because the sound of the cello piccolo is much closer to the Gamba and the range is easier to overcome. So I call that three arrangements along with the five Brahms Sonatas, the two cello Sonatas and the three violin Sonatas, and the other arrangements by Kodály, The Galanta Dances, and the Bach Organ Toccata and Fugue, which is an organ piece but I arranged it for cello and piano. And a Mozart Sonata, which

is originally Four-Hands [Sonata for Piano Four-Hands], one of the most beautiful Mozart Sonatas. I arranged that for cello and piano.

MN: And that stunning Schubert Fantasy.

LV: Oh, the Schubert Fantasy, yes.

MN: Oh, what a beautiful piece.

LV: That's also Four-Hands Piano. Yeah. Oh, that's a lovely work. I always loved it. I loved to play it on piano. When I decided to arrange that because the high Two-Hand is the typical piano part, and the low Two-Hand stays in the lower range, and that gave me the idea that, "Well, that low range is good for the cello and why not alternate the theme? Sometimes in the low ends. Sometimes the high ends." And the low range is ideal for cello range, and the high ends are piano. So I separated them. It's like separating twins. [LV and MN chuckle] I was very happy with that arrangement. But all of those things took me months to do, and a lot of overnight stays. So those are arrangements, and the Brahms Sonatas.

And then I was very happy to arrange the Strauss Cello Sonata, which is an early Strauss work for cello and piano, originally. I played it many times and I love it, but Strauss has been very fond of wind ensembles. Some of his early works, around the Sonata time, are for large wind orchestras; his special, only winds. Some with just ten winds. Some were for thirteen and larger. So he was fond of that sound, and I was aware of it, I was fond of it, I was familiar with it, and I decided this piano part would sound wonderful orchestrated for winds. So I arranged it for ten winds, and one cello, one bass, and that's what it is on the recording. My other sin is the arrangement of the *Don Quixote*; that full work for a hundred-twenty piece orchestra, reduced to six people. Just violin, viola, cello—who was a soloist, the cello—Don Quixote's the cellist, and Sancho Panza is the solo viola. The solo violin is—what is the lady?

MN: Rocinante?

LV: Rocinante, yes. And the others are just—So I arranged it for cello, viola and violin, clarinet, alternating with bass clarinet, horn—French horn, and piano.

MN: Yes.

LV: Just six people, and I recorded it. I recorded both work—I recorded it with me playing the cello part and conducting the rest. My neck is still hurting.

MN: [chuckles]

LV: Pain in the neck. Since then, it was done, but with a conductor.

MN: What a musical adventure it is.

LV: Yes, well everybody thought I was crazy, but when they heard it. I never thought this could sound so well. Well, you know. You have the records. I don't know whether I gave it to you.

JH: I haven't heard it.

LV: Well, alright. Maybe I'll give it to you. I'm an easy Indian-giver. [chuckles]

JH: Don't take it back.

LV: I didn't give it to you yet. [MN and LV laugh] I love to give.

JH: Thank you.

LV: Alright, I will. That's about it. What shall I brag about now?

MN: I think you can brag about your teaching, your conducting—

LV: Well, I have many wonderful students through the long decades. One of my last was at San Francisco State, was David Garrett, who was my doctoral student, and before. He got his doctorate with me and now is a member of The Los Angeles Philharmonic, and he accepted my request to print out my arrangements in a computerized way. He was a master of that. And he is now the publisher of all my scores. That list that I showed you is all his firm. I gave all these things, and the right to sell, and I didn't take one penny out of it.

MN: It's MusiCelli, right?

LV: MusiCelli Publications. That's him. I am under MusiCelli. That has been my firm name all the time, but I encouraged him to use that same name. And he sells these things and he keeps everything because he put so much work in translating my hand script into computerized script, and he did a very fine job. I'm still editing some of his versions. [chuckles] He was a very wonderful—he is married to a gorgeous, Japanese pianist, and they live very well together. He's busy with the orchestra and teaching full-time at Los

Angel—Long Beach State, California. He has a good class, and he plays an occasional solo, and he always sends some recordings of his recitals to me. He expects me to criticize it, but I don't. He plays very well. But he is my editor. We have a wonderful—I advertise his productions, or publications, that are available. All my scores, or my arrangements, are available through him. At the same time, my recordings—the *Legacy*—is sold by me. So we split the job.

MN: Great.

LV: So I keep doing all kinds of things as you can see. [chuckles]

MN: Yes. Yes.

LV: And I'm very happy about it.

JH: What about reflections on your conducting; your conducting years?

LV: I love to conduct, and I think I mentioned that during twenty-seven years at San Francisco State I brought up a very fine orchestra. The membership changed, every semester almost, to some extent. But we almost covered all the times of compositions from Handel and Bach to today. Many of the current romantic symphonies and the classical works; symphonies, concertos, and what. So I covered—We had four concerts every semester, and I had varied programs and sometimes very demanding programs. Many first performances I commissioned, or else composers offered their works as first performances, or third performances, it doesn't matter to me. Sometimes it's harder to get a third performance than a first, because people liked it; "Oh, his first performance I never heard before." And it's attractive to performers and audiences. But to get a second performance, that's not so easy. It has to be an overall success.

JH: How did you come to composing? As an instrumentalist—

LV: I'm not a composer.

JH: I'm sorry. To conducting? Sorry.

LV: I'm a decomposer.

JH: [laughs]

***** -9 50:02LV: I decompose pieces. I take them apart and re-put it together again. How did—? I always thought beyond the cello. As I mentioned, I always was envious of your violin repertoire, which is immense and beautiful, endless. The cello is quite limited. In possibilities, the violin has much more. I tried to increase the cello—available literature for cello by trying to arrange. Of course, one of my first arrangements was the Ravel: *Tzigane* and the Bach: *Chaconne*. Easy pieces. Five easy pieces. [Chuckle] But as you know, I've arranged an awful lot more. That's how. It was always natural to me. I can hear things in the future in a different guise, a different instrumentation. I always try to play it from the original, and find a way how the cello can play the same thing, usually an octave lower, and sometimes in different keys. But I make it work on the cello. I have a considerable technique that enables me to play the whole range of the cello somewhat easier than others. However, I must say that today—in the last thirty years—there are so many extra, extra fine and advanced cellists—soloists, existing and playing and performing—that they have amazing technique and ability to play any of our marriages just like I do, but they are not too happy to play because it's an arrangement. That's a detrimental expression. People are purists. They'd rather play an inferior, original work that not many people like, than a good piece—a famous piece—in arrangement. Even if it's well arranged. I am one of the best arrangers. *The Lone Arranger*. I think this is enough bragging.

JH: What about conducting?

LV: Oh, conducting! As I said, I always loved conducting and because of my own orchestra experiences, I knew the whole literature, almost. Not that I didn't have to learn the scores, separately. I did. That's very easy for me because I have an easy capability to read all the clefs and all the transposing instruments, which usually causes trouble, especially for one with perfect pitch, which I happen to have. For me to see a pitch, I hear that pitch, and if it's a transposing instrument that I have to compute, that's much harder. But I learned enough to be able to do it. I can build the harmonies in my mind from a score, and that's the difficulty of it. Not every conductor knows except by listening to it a hundred times, and then, of course, they know it by memory. That's a special talent. Most of the famous conductors have it, but not everyone. I always enjoyed that challenge and I used it. I was always an organizer. While in The Philharmonic, I had my Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble. While I was an eighteen year old back in Budapest, I had a little Baroque String Ensemble that I was conducting, sometimes, or else I played in it. So I was always interested in beyond just playing. I formed a few Chamber Groups, as you know, with the Cello Quartets, and I was a member of many Quartets and Trios.

MN: Didn't you conduct an all-Bach program of The Budapest Orchestra?

LV: All-Bach?

MN: Was it? Or am I remembering inaccurately? But you conducted that orchestra, didn't you, before you—?

LV: I orchestrated The Budapest Symphony also as a winner of a competition.

MN: Yes.

LV: But only program, but it was a Haydn *Symphony* and a Bartók *Romanian Dances*.

MN: Ok. Ah, yes.

LV: Original. Not arranged. [Chuckle] Because I was taking conducting lessons with the head of the orchestra. By the way, he—János Ferencsik—was a very fine conductor, also the head of The Opera and The Symphony. He gave us private lessons, me and two others. Good minds who were interested in conducting. He was many times invited to America to conduct operas, mainly. In New York and in San Francisco, and I met him in San Francisco several times. He was a big success. He was my ideal conductor. He was an easy-going guy and fairly young, and achieved quite a bit of fame all over. He was conducting a lot in Vienna and Prague and Paris, so he was well known in Europe and in America, and by us in the symphony. He was a funny guy. We enjoyed him personally. So this about covers my conducting too. I still love to conduct and still love to correct wrong notes whenever—

MN: Who corrects them?

LV: I do.

MN: Yeah. Oh, yes!

LV: You know, I was just starting with The Léner Quartet after leaving Budapest, and we already played six months together so we covered quite a bit of the repertoire. In one rehearsal, the violist happened to play the part—he was an excellent player, but he somehow misread a note. He was playing a sharp instead of a non-sharp, natural. And he did it a couple of times and it hurt me, because it's like somebody's stabbing me. So I said, "Hey, Micky, that's an F sharp!" He looks at me, "You're right!" And Léner, who was considerably older than us—we were in our thirties. I was in twenties and Léner was already fifties. He was the famous part who organized the Quartet. He looked at me in a strange way, as if saying, "How do you know?" It was like somebody stabbing me, you

know. A wrong note causes a certain reaction that I almost cannot control. So it stabs me, and I know the right answer, especially the classics. I'm not so sure I can do it in an—work, even though—what I know, I could. So this helped me with my conducting greatly because in the orchestra you can find wrong notes all the time, and you have to be extricated so it will be the proper person, and I was good at that. And I knew the styles because I played those very works with the famous conductors in my Philharmonic eleven years and in The Budapest Symphony I was with five years. There we played everything too. So that's how I learned the score and it remains in—

[End of Tape 9]

[Beginning of Tape 10]

LV: Yes.

MN: That's what it says. And it was February 20, 1956.

LV: Yep. That was a good year. That was my daughter's birth year.

MN: Oh, so Robin and I are the same age.

LV: Right.

JH: Just move up to about here, and we'll put the chair—come up a little further.

LV: You want me to sit?

JH: And then you'll sit—or we could stand.

LV: Yeah—

JH: Let's all three stand.

MN: Ok.

LV: Of course.

JH: That will be nice.

MN: I'll move the chair back. Don't sit down, Laszlo.

LV: Alright.

MN: It'd be a long drop.

JH: Ok. Oh, look! We can see us. [Laughter]

MN: Now, are our heads being cut off?

JH: Ah, yes. [Laughter] Ok, so we'll have to duck so our heads aren't being cut off.

MN: Alright. [Laughter]

JH: *Cheese!* We'll pretend it's a photograph. Then let's do another. We'll try something else. Ok, I'm going to tilt it up some so our heads aren't cut off this time.

MN: Ok.

LV: Shall I break it down?

JH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. [Laughter]

LV: That's the wild me.

JH: Ok, now we could actually have a conversation.

MN: Sure.

JH: You know? We could pretend—

LV: In what language?

JH: Hungarian.

LV: Hungarian, of course.

MN: Sure.

LV: Alright. Look there. You are the most beautiful—

JH: *Cheese!* See, I can take a still. We'll do a *Cheese!*

LV/MN/JH: *Cheese!* [Laughter]

JH: Alright. A little bit of—

[Interruption]

LV: Well, you want both the inscriptions and the record?

MN: Well, if they're available.

LV: Of course they are. I see a moving cello.

JH: Yeah. I've got a little bit of—um—

LV: You have the most beautiful smile.

JH: That's my favorite. That's nice. Ok.

LV: That's what they call *full-coverage*.

JH: Yeah. Could I ask you to take your bow and draw it across?

MN: [Laughter]

LV: I have to extend the endpin. Do you mind if I'm at this angle?

JH: Yeah. You can move.

LV: I don't want the cello to get sunburned.

[Plays a little bit]

MN: Easier with a fifth string, isn't it?

LV: [..]

MN: Yeah. Seven forty seven.

LV: Do you hear me playing cello sometimes?

?: No. I can't hear nothing.

LV: Her bedroom is just beyond this wall.

MN: Oh!

?: Yeah. I think I have too much insulation. I'm not sleeping through this bedroom. I sleep in the other room.

LV: Oh! You don't? Oh! That's one way to escape my music here.

[Plays more]

MN: Bravo!

LV: You can hear it on my first record.

MN: Right here.

LV: First piece.

MN: First piece.

JH: Thank you.

LV: Are you still filming?

JH: Yes. I'm done now.

MN: Yeah. She runs the show.

LV: She doesn't know about to stop.

JH: I'm done. [Laughter]

[Interruption]

LV: Hello, Mac! Hi, how are you?

MN: Laszlo! I am fine. Good to see you. It's terrific to see you. Now we get to go inside.

LV: Yes. Alright. Shall we go inside?

JH: That was great! You guys are stars!

LV: We are stars!

MN: Did we do it in one take?

JH: I think you did it in one take.

[Interruption]

JH: Ok, Mac. Come on and say hello.

LV: Hello, Mac!

MN: Hello, Laszlo! Alright.

LV: Alright.

JH: Good.

LV: We met.

JH: Alright. That was easy.

[Interruption]

?: After the—relaxing—. Going to play the piano now. I'll bring the Greek music. You can play the Greek music on the piano.

MN: Do you play the Bouzouki?

?: No, I don't play the Bouzouki. [Chuckle]

MN: Oh, it's lovely.

?: No.

MN: I bet you'd—

?: You know, I grew up in Greece and when you grow up in Greece, to have an instrument in the house, or piano, for lots of reasons—lot of when grow up, not too much money, so we dream about music to them. So when my kids born, seven years old, my Stevie was the first one to push the piano. She loved the piano. She never had to practice. When my husband was sick and felt lousy, he didn't want to let me play any.

LV: Well, you know, in Hungary, when we grew up, there was an awful lot of music study among youngsters.

?: Yeah.

LV: And the whole culture of Hungary was very musical, and—

?: Yeah.

LV: I'm sure it was so in Greece too.

?: No. Only music like Bouzouki and things. No piano. No violin or those kinds, the years I grew up.

LV: Gypsy orchestras were very popular, and that was violin playing.

?: Yeah.

LV: And some of them were really excellent. But it was still popular music, you know. Dances. The classical musicians were slightly different. My family happened to be musicians.

?: The fathers and the belles—like I taught my kids. I remember when he was in the third grade, he started the violin. The daughter said, "I don't want to play the violin. I'm going to play the drums." "

For God's sake! Please," I said. [Chuckle] You know. "Stop it, Evangeline! Your brother, your sister—" Yeah. She wanted the drums. I said, "Please!"

LV: She has the most gorgeous daughter you ever saw.

MN: So she didn't play the drums?

?: Are you kidding me? I couldn't get her the drums in the house. They would drive me crazy! Drums? Can you imagine?! [Laughter] I don't know how she thought of playing the drums. God, please! Please! Please!

LV: How do you say thank you?

?: *Charistó.*

LV: *Charistó.*

?: No. *Charistó* repeat thank you. Have some cheese! [Chuckle]

LV: Have a cracker to go with it. Shall I help you?

?: No. She wants alone. She wants alone.

LV: You got it.

?: She can not spoil her—. But anyway, Evangeline, she's a better musician—

[Interruption]

?: They played in the orchestra in the high school—in the middle school—in the violin, but that—in the house with the piano—

[End of Tape 10]

[End of interview]