

Maureen and Mike

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This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

**Oral History Number: 253-003**  
**Interviewee: Donald Carey**  
**Interviewers: Elizabeth Rice, Charlotte Hopper**  
**Date of Interview: October 31, 1990**  
**Project: Missoula Musicians Oral History Project**

*Note: There are two interviewers and it is difficult to tell them apart. They have been identified as "Unknown Interviewer" throughout the transcript.*

Unknown Interviewer: —October 31, 1990. Beth Rice and Charlotte Hopper interviewing Don Carey, choral conductor at the University of Montana.

Donald Carey: Hi.

UI: Hi. Okay, first we'd like to ask you since it's part of our class of worlds of music, what your definition of music is?

DC: Oh well, music is designed in sound, I guess.

UI: Do you suppose that this has to be conscious and organized?

DC: Very conscious and very organized.

UI: So a bird singing is not, in your mind music.

DC: Not in the [unintelligible] that nature imitates art and that the interplay back and forth, I suppose, between art as we would call a melody and art in nature [pauses] related to each other. So there are there are elements in a bird's song which would be or could be called art and other parts, I think, that probably are random. There is, at least in a traditional sense, not very much that's random in art because even randomness is done on purpose. So yes, design I think is very much on purpose, or you might put it another way that nothing in art happens by accident.

UI: Okay. I'm going to stop this for a minute.

[Break in audio]

Okay, since we have your answer to that question, this leads me into my next question, and that is what do you think about the music you perform? Why do you choose it, and why do you consider it good?

DC: First of all, I like it. I suppose I don't ever perform anything I don't like. One or two exceptions come to mind, in certain military situations. But I have to like it. I think that if it's a

composer that I trust, an arranger that I trust, and a text that I respect, then I'm going to have a worthwhile result. And I don't think that any of those things will tolerate cheapness or less than the best. I don't really enjoy performing music by, what I consider, a second-rate performer or a composer or somebody who's really not the very best. I guess there's too much really good and first-rate stuff to be explored to waste your time on something that's not quite so good.

UI: And what makes it really good?

DC: Well, the relationships that we as perceivers can examine. That is to say, an aesthetic perception—what we're looking at in the music is relationships of qualities, and those qualities are certainly more in number and better in the music of great composers. When I say better, what I mean then—the definition of better—is that those qualities can move us farther and deeper into an aesthetic experience.

UI: Okay. So the music is good if the person perceiving it can have an experience listening to it?

DC: That's right. [pauses] Well, no, that's not right. Because maybe the person listening isn't qualified to have an aesthetic experience with that particular music. I could not have a...I wouldn't have a valid aesthetic experience listening to music outside of my culture, for instance, and I could be thrilled by it, I could enjoy it, but I could only go so far with it because it really was not my property. Until I became—I suppose educated is one word—but until I became accustomed to that music then I really couldn't take it very far in an aesthetic way. So I have to have some qualifications myself as the listener to the music.

UI: Okay, well, perhaps that answers my next question, but what kinds of music outside your perception of what you are qualified to do you have contact with, and does it do anything for you?

DC: Well, do you mean could I handle a horn triple trio or something like that?

UI: A horn triple trio, or perhaps as we...a cultural song that might not be so far out of Western civilization, say, Eastern European folk literature...anything like that or anything out of the corollary.

DC: Well, folk literature, of course, is much more accessible across cultural lines because of rhythmic considerations and melodic ones. There are certain there are certain melodic movements that are kind of universal, I think. And of course, rhythm is very exciting to everybody. So those two things I think you can identify with or understand. Other things, not so much.

Say...ask that again.

UI: Well, what kind of music outside your [unintelligible] do you have contact with?

DC: Oh yeah. I don't have any contact with music outside of this culture. So—

UI: Do you want to, or are you satisfied with...

DC: I guess it's just a thing that I have never had the opportunity to encounter. I don't know. I don't know the music of another culture really, and I've never had a confrontation with it. So I'm curious about it, but I simply have not had that opportunity or at least I've not taken the opportunity through recordings perhaps.

UI: Okay. One question that kind of relates to your culture or our culture since we're a part of it, and it's not so much a problem in other cultures, is the status of the musician in society. How do you feel about Western civilization in that the arts and religion and everything that's considered non-material is separated as where in other cultures, they're almost the same? I mean, music goes with religion because it's divinely inspired, or you know what I mean.

DC: Functional music. Yeah.

UI: Yes.

DC: Well, we do have functional music in this culture too, but we...since the patronizing system was established—speaking of the status of the composer and musician—we have tended to look at music as an aesthetic, as an object, to be admired rather than as a practicality to be used. At least certainly more so than earlier in our own culture or various other cultures, in various cultures in the world.

I think that the main use...one of the main uses, of course, in our culture today is advertising, and that has become a real insidious tool for the people who are smart. I think that by that I mean smart enough to use it to manipulate people, because music certainly does manipulate people—physically, mentally, emotionally. It's a manipulative device and a very powerful one. And people who know that certainly can turn into their own ends. You only have to look at religion, which has done some of that, to politics—Hitler was smart in using it—to advertising where much of what we were encouraged to buy today has some sort of musical component in its advertisement.

I guess, there is a fragmentation in our own culture today, and all of that fragmentation is watered down by the imposition of mass culture on it and we tend not to have a high regard for art. We tend to look for the lowest common denominator in art. That is, whatever is easiest, and that is simply a fact of life today in the U.S.A.

UI: Okay, I have a question too. Why choral music?

DC: Why did I get into choral music?

UI: Yes.

DC: Well, that's...I guess I don't know. I had a person who, that I wanted to emulate. That's one reason. In my public school days, I was able to be...because of my voice and my musical ability, singing ability—and I guess, keyboard also—was able to do some things that I felt were advantageous to me, and certainly those were not musical reasons, really, I don't think but probably social right. I got to do or to be with people, and in situations, that may be social situations, that wouldn't have happened otherwise. So I guess I liked the idea of what singing could do for me. Then when I saw somebody that had made some kind of logical use of that that I respected and admired, then I just sort of naturally fell into that pattern. I don't think it was toward that direction, career direction. I don't think it was...I don't think I ever sat down one day, and figured out that I was going to be on a choral conductor. It just grew that way.

But there was a role model back there that began it all.

UI: And who might that be?

DC: A high school choral conductor of mine.

UI: So you don't necessarily think that aesthetically you find singing more pleasing than instrumental music?

DC: Oh well, I wouldn't say that. I'm just saying that applies to my own personal moving into the musical profession, and I probably...Today, I feel that I can get just as much personal enjoyment out of other media as choral. I enjoy and appreciate and respect many other forms, and very often feel that being in choral music in reality is some kind of a handicap if you're looking at a purely aesthetic point of view.

UI: Okay, in Western civilization, what use does music have? Personally, maybe I think one of the problems with our culture not appreciating music is our idea that we all have to go to a concert hall and sit around and listen to a performance instead of it actually being parts of these people's lives where it's that way in different cultures. So do you think...I mean obviously you think that music is necessary, or I mean art—the arts—is necessary, for a person to have a full life or a whole life, I suppose, but what used...going to a concert hall...I mean, do you believe in that aspect of our Western society that that's how we should get music in our lives?

DC: I think you get it where you can get it—in concert halls or one place. They are the places which we have surrounded with an aura of... [pauses] I don't know what—importance maybe is the right, which they probably don't deserve, because I suppose some of the most meaningful music that could be made might be made around a campfire in a certain social situation or might be made in somebody's living room. As in the 19th century parlor music in this country or in any place where music is useful. The early churches in this country, the rise of music

education in this country came because of a need—a felt need by the people—to learn how to sing the hymns in church, and that's purely functional. That's strictly a functional purpose. So there are practical applications that we have had and do have with music outside the concert hall.

But I find more and more that people are reluctant to, let's say, sing informally. If you asked a roomful of people today to sing a song, if you tried to lead them in a song, they'd be very embarrassed. They probably wouldn't want to do it and probably wouldn't do it, in fact. Whereas, I think even 30 years ago, there were occasions when groups of people did sing, and certainly they were untrained people. They were simply laymen—citizens—who happened to be together at one place and to sing a song was a right thing to do, and nobody felt embarrassed by it. I think of school assemblies in junior and senior high school earlier in the century—I'm talking, you know, toward the middle of the century—or the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts or religious, social gatherings where singing used to be a major part of that. Or the Rotary Club today—it's in the rules that they will sing, and they do but they don't like to and they feel uncomfortable with it.

So that is a changing in an attitude that I think is wrong. And I see this not only in music but in many places in our society. That is, a reluctance of people to be an amateur in whatever. That is to say, people really don't...I think, are reluctant to take part in sports on an informal basis because they somehow feel they're not good enough or they're led to feel they're not. That unless you've got uniforms and cleats and shoes and helmets and pads and the rest that you're just not equipped or qualified to play a little football out in the side lot. Or that unless you had formal training in whatever activity we're talking about—unless you have formal training in that thing—then you shouldn't be doing it. I think it's kind of the death of amateurism or doing something to have fun doing it or to enjoy doing it. That isn't happening very much today. I don't know the reason for that, except that people do not really want to expose their inability or clumsiness or lack of aptitude, I guess because they compare themselves to professionals and they figured that they're going to be professional and perfect or they're not going to do it. And that's certainly not the way music began in this country, and that attitude I think takes us farther and farther away from the possibility of having functional music throughout a society.

Now, this is not quite the same thing, but I'm reminded of last summer's International Choral Festival here and how this community was stimulated and motivated and excited by that musical event. And the music did excite them. But I think it was not a...And it was cross-cultural certainly. I think most of the music performed was basically Western music—Occidental—so that we had no problems with it. But I think the real excitement maybe came because Missoula citizens were turned on by their association with people from some other part of the world. They enjoyed their music very much, but again that...well, and it was a very vital experience, but I'm not sure how much of that you could call pure music appreciation. I think not a whole lot. So I think music in our culture is used—it is functional—but I guess in a manipulated way rather than a participating way, and that's not good.

UI: How do you think the music education system in our country affects this problem?

DC: I think it's pretty much irrelevant because I think the music education system in this country today is virtually impotent, worthless, because it isn't training a citizenry in how to use or appreciate music. It's training a small percentage of a citizenry to participate in music until age 17 and then they quit. Forever. I think that's a really appalling thing because we put lots of money, lots of energy, time into what we are calling music education, but what music education is happening, and I say virtually none. If you use as a measure of that the quality of artistic material used today in our society, then you'd have to say no music education is happening because what people choose to do—I'm talking about the majority of people now—the majority of people choose to listen to whatever they are told to listen to by television. And most of that comes in the form of advertising. So whatever the psychologist who works for a Madison Avenue marketing firm decides is going to sell their product is what the listener then hears and makes their own, and it's that level of musical quality that people choose. Again, I'm talking about majority of people. It's really chosen for them, you see, but they choose to accept that regardless of what kind of...regardless of the fact that we've had music education in this country since the last two decades in the last century. So where's the education is my question. If the answer to that ought to be what people choose to listen to, then I think we've obviously failed.

UI: Well, then it seems that there's a direct relation between technology and music education system, because you were saying 30 years ago where although people didn't have access to have really quality music with recordings and things of that nature they still had a better appreciation for music and any opportunity they got to listen to real music or good music. Now that people do have the opportunity to choose what they want to listen to and they can obviously hear what they want, they choose—

DC: Inferior.

UI: —kitsch.

DC: Yes, kitsch. Precisely. Kitsch is what they choose. Yeah, I guess this is maybe relating to what I said a while ago about amateurism and reluctance to take part. Before the technology of recording and broadcasting were around, people had to do it themselves or it didn't get done. That goes for the sports participation, the activity participation, and now you don't have to do it yourself because somebody will do it for you—or a machine will do it for you—and you can sit back and watch or perceive what this technology will produce and you don't have to do it yourself. I guess that allows you to choose kitsch rather than something valuable because it's easier. It's much easier to look to low quality art because it appeals but it doesn't demand. I like that.

UI: That was very good, yeah. [laughs]

Okay, to change the subject slightly and to go back to something that we were talking about previously, I was wondering what you think about—in our culture—about music composition. I mean all through Western civilization is composing in question to religion and not necessarily organized religions or churches, but people's own feelings about religion and their other beliefs.

DC: I guess folk music answers that in the best way. I don't know that... [pauses] I suppose folk music and the heritage of hymnology that has come down traditionally are the sources which people have used. They've depended on those things, most of all, in religion. Now, I don't...I think that that the so-called great works of music that have a religious theme, I think certainly their art vastly...is vastly, vastly superior to their religious qualities, and they are really, in fact artistic pieces and not religious...not for religious contemplation. And I'm not quite sure about your question about composers, but I think that to set out to compose a piece of music for religious purposes...Is that kind of what you meant?

UI: No. Actually not. I mean just any music they compose. It doesn't necessarily have to be for a religious purpose, but do you think there is a relation to their actual religious feelings about how music they wrote...Well, to say if they were divinely inspired or if they just thought they were great with chords and stuff, you know.

DC: Well, no. I don't think...I think that Mozart when he wrote the *Grand Mass* [*Great Mass*] in C Minor had zero religious inspiration when he did it.

UI: Well, I guess it was leading to my question about how do you feel about music as a religion as opposed to religious practices—

DC: I see what you mean. So art replaces religion?

UI: Actually...well, yes. I mean...

DC: Well, I think that that's actually a pretty good idea. And I think that that ought to be explored by a lot of disciplines and a lot of people. I think that people blame people who criticize religion without saying, "Well, what are you going to replace it by because here is a need that in society needs to be filled." Well, if you want to fill it then I think it can be filled very nicely with the arts in how they operate on people. That's a very big and major and dangerous topic fraught with fraught, but [pauses] I think that art could, and does, replace...does take the place of religion in that it provides answers to the unknown that are based in reality. Religion can't do that. It claims to, but it simply can't. It operates around the word called "faith", and I guess that's a word. "Hope" would be better...Well, "hope" would be more honest, would be a more honest word to use. There is none of that hope in the art world because what you see, what you perceive, is what is there, and what is there is a very fulfilling and rewarding and...What's the word? Fulfilling, rewarding experience which certainly leads us through the mind of the artist—creator—to the core of our own understanding and humanity.

I didn't say that very well, but the thing that art provides is a stability and reality and honesty that's not available anywhere else. Anywhere else. Art can be trusted. Name one other institution in man's society that can be trusted. Politics, religion, education? Find me one. Find me one. But art can be trusted, because it demands scrutiny whereas other institutions try to hide or cover up or make unavailable their weaknesses. Art simply says, "Here I am." And, "You're welcome."

UI: Do you think that other cultures' religions are actually...Well, that music is such a big part of their worship or more so...Do you think that in other cultures, art has already replaced religion, just because those people have not had Western civilization's separation of religion and music?

DC: I don't know.

UI: I've been wondering the same thing.

DC: I don't know the answer to that. I don't know how they...I don't know how that functions in other cultures. As far as I know, religion has to be based on words. At least, the religions that I know about are based on words, and there may be others that aren't and I don't know about that. But all of us know that we soon run out of words, and that's when art...then therefore we have art. If words would suffice, we would not need art. So I don't know about other cultures and how their religions work. I can't really address that question.

UI: Well, we just heard American Indians using all those vocals because they don't have any words for their tunes. It's all in the meaning, but anyway. Okay—

DC: Well, you musicologists and ethnomusicologists will have to take care of that question.

UI: Well, I was just wondering. Okay, so how do you go about learning music and learning new music, and how do you expose yourself to music in your culture, or in your realm.

DC: [long pause] I don't know. The answer is I don't do it very much. I don't...I don't hear very much new music. [pauses]

UI: But at one time you had to or else you wouldn't know it already.

DC: Right. Well, that sort of...that happened as a result of academic work. So that in this or that history course or musicology course, I was exposed to composers and their works. So that was an academic procedure and really not a valid cultural one. That was something I had to do to a grade in the class. Since I haven't had to do that, I've had very little exposure to new music, and I haven't purposely set out to find any. When I have encountered it, it has been at conventions, the occasional recording that somebody would play for me, publishers sending various things through the mail, reading about this or that composer or new work, getting newsletters from publishers, finding a composer that I really like who is new and then being on the lookout for

that name. But I would call myself a very bad example of somebody who has sought new music of my time. I have not done it. [pauses] Well, I simply haven't.

And that might that might be a choice of taste right there. There was one time when I was very interested in new music and the performance of it because I was challenged by the tremendous difficulty of performing it. I always thought I'd like to have an ensemble that would do new music, and I don't have that interest anymore and I don't know why not. It just went away.

UI: Okay—

DC: And it went away easily because that need was covered by or fulfilled by my whatever dealings with traditional or...yeah, with traditional music.

UI: Do you think that Western civilization music needs to keep progressing and progressing, or do you think that the realm of their tonality's in systems weren't expanded on enough? I mean, that there is always the possibility of four composers to keep composing within classical, romantic, baroque standards?

DC: Tonality.

UI: Yes, tonality.

DC: I'm sure somebody could go back and do something really major with tonality, pardon the pun, but I...to answer your first portion of the question, I think that is not a matter of should Western culture do that. Western culture is going to do it no matter what. It's going to keep expanding, and new things are going to be with us all the time. And exploration—it's going to happen. That's the nature of art and the nature of the artist. Remember the artists lead society, and you don't lead it by going back to tonality and saying, "Oops, Mozart, you could've done this." You don't lead by doing that. You might fill a gap here or there in traditional music, but it's not a matter of choice—that expansion and new developing-ment is going to happen, period. And it should.

Now, I don't know whether...Well, then you say, "Well, we're living in a museum," and we are pretty much. We're living in a tonal museum and we're living in a museum that loves and pays for the major composers that we all know from concert houses. They don't pay for new music. There is not very much demand for new music. It's a rather dilettante area—area for development. It gets lip service and it gets grants, but it doesn't get the heart and the guts of an audience. That hopefully will change, and there will be some change on the part of the composer who will create with a little bit more of the frame of mind of the listener and there will be some education happen on the part of the listener, so that his ears become attuned more to music that's closer to his own life timeframe and that it doesn't have to continue living in the 18th and 19th centuries. But that goes very slowly, and we have so many fragments in our musical development today that to keep up with them is not easy, or to be able to pick out

one path that music takes and say, “All right, this is what I would like to explore”—I, the listener—“and really get good at being a listener.” It's hard to do that because there are so many directions that you could go. I have to go to class.

UI: Okay.

[End of Interview]