

INTERVIEWEE: ERICH LEINSDORF

INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

March 18, 1969

F: This is an interview with Mr. Erich Leinsdorf, Musical Director of the Boston Symphony Society, in the Hotel Madison, Washington, D.C. on March 18, 1969; the interviewer is Joe B. Frantz.

Mr. Leinsdorf, will you tell us how you came to know President Johnson?

L: The simplest thing seems to me is to relate my acquaintance with the gentleman who introduced me to Lyndon B. Johnson, because when I was introduced to (Johnson) he was a freshman Congressman. So I want to start in 1937.

F: And you were a freshman American.

L: In 1937 I had never seen America. I met, in the summer of 1937 in the vicinity of Salzburg, a man by the name of Charles E. Marsh, who was a newspaper owner or publisher from Texas (ed. note: Marsh-Fentress chain, esp. Austin and Waco). I knew that in November of that year I was going to come to the United States. He wanted to be sure that we would meet in the United States. We became very quickly fast friends, we had a lot in common, we talked a great deal.

When I came to the United States in November, I picked up again my acquaintance with Mr. Marsh. I was an assistant conductor at the Metropolitan. It was my first trip to America. During that winter, (rather in March of 1938) Austria was swallowed up by the Nazis, and I didn't know how I could return to Austria. However, my plans were a little bit in confusion, and it was most welcomed when Mr. Marsh and his wife, who had a beautiful place in Virginia, asked me to spend some time with them after the termination of my first season with the Metropolitan.

Before I left New York to go to Virginia and to enjoy the country and the beautiful estate, I filed an application with the Immigration (Bureau) which was at that time, I believe, under the Department of Labor, if I'm not mistaken. I had come to America on a visitor's six months' visa, not being sure of being able to obtain a quota. The Austrian quota was very small, and I wanted to be sure to get to the United States. My visitor's visa was going to expire on May 8. I had arrived on November the 8th. I left somewhat in the latter half of April for Virginia, very calm in my mind that I had proved satisfaction of the American government, the United States government, that I was going to be self-supporting, I had a new contract in my pocket.

I had a wonderful time in Virginia with the Marshes. But one day (I think it was the 30th of April) I said, "Charles, I had no answer from the Department of Labor. What

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do I do? I've only eight more days to go and my six months are up. And I've heard nothing." But Charles was a man with quick decisions said, "I know a young Congressman from Texas, whom I've helped in his campaign and I don't mind asking for a favor. He can find out for us what happened to your application. We go to Washington tomorrow." And I think that evening he phoned the young Congressman and the next day, May 1, we drove to Washington. The country place of Charles Marsh was in Boston, Virginia, of all places, it's near Culpepper. It's in Culpepper County. And we drove to Washington and obtained a day room at the Mayflower Hotel. There appeared there a tall, young man, and I was introduced to Congressman Lyndon B. Johnson. The young Congressman was very friendly and paid the closest attention to Mr. Marsh who related to him how this young man (myself) had come to the United States on a visitor's visa because he wasn't sure at the time that an Austrian quota was available, and now he was in a jam because he had only seven more days and he didn't want to be expelled and didn't know exactly where to go. Would the dear Congressman be kind enough to do something about it? So they began to chat, I suppose about politics, which was to me quite Chinese at the time, and I thanked the Congressman very much and left. I found out later what happened, because the young Congressman came very frequently to visit the Marshes. It was a short drive from Washington and he came with his young bride, Mrs. Johnson, and I got to know them better. So I shall jump now for a minute and tell you what he did. He left the hotel and he mused, as he told us later said, "What should I do? I haven't got the foggiest notion what this is all about, but this is a man who (Marsh) has been very nice to me, who has helped me in my first campaign, and I better do something about it." So with the kind of energy which I think we all have seen in action now for some time, the Congressman proceeded--it was a Sunday, I think that first of May, that can be checked in the calendar.

He summoned his office and said, "My friends, we've got to do something about this fellow here." And they began to work on the case. And the next time we heard was when the Congressman telephoned in the place in Virginia and said, "Now, I've found out something about the application of your friend," he said to Charles. "It has been handled and since it has been handled, there can be no reversal of the decision of the government agency. The Department of Labor found that his intention to stay for another two years extended beyond the possible prolongation of a visitor's visa, so it will be refused. But we have been able to do the following thing--instead of filling in "Your application has been refused, you have (and now instead of filling in eight days or ten days) to leave the country," they filled in six months. This was the first acquaintance with Congressman Johnson.

He did not let this go merely at that, but began with his office staff to work on finding out what the situation was with the quota numbers. The United States had very soon after the Anschluss recognized that particular move of the Germans, which meant that there were now instead of one thousand four hundred, over twenty-six thousand quota numbers available. The Congressman ascertained that the consulate in Havana had numbers to feed the pigs.

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And so by May 17, I remember, I was sent down to Cuba. Everything had been prepared with the help of Congressman Johnson and his staff. The consul in Cuba had been called off the golf links, I understand, by Mr. Johnson to tell him something about the situation with German-Austrian quota. I was sent down to Havana and came back seven days later, and filed my first application for first papers in Alexandria, Virginia. This was my first and a very memorable occasion, of course. It was my first encounter with the very remarkable man. And then--

F: This gave you the right then to stay without any termination--

L: Oh, yes. From that moment on I was an immigrant and there was no further problem about this. And in due course--this was May, 1938--in November, 1942, I became a citizen and of course from that moment on, everytime I met the Congressman we became a little better acquainted. He was very much interested in me because he felt sort of a part of my entire career. Later on, when he ran for I think Senator Shepperd's seat--wasn't that the first time he ran for the Senate?

F: Yes, right.

L: I made the modest contribution to his campaign and by that time I had established myself in the United States. In this way we kept contact, a loose contact of course, because our paths didn't cross very frequently, but when they crossed it was always very cordial.

I remember once a marvelous incident. He was Senator and had on some bill, on some issue, voted in a way in which I did not particularly fancy and I wrote him a note in which I expressed my own feelings on the matter--my own disapproval--and he replied in the most charming way. He said, "Dear Erich. I did not know what a marvelous citizen I was going to help in making when I was fortunate enough to be able to be of service because the way you express your views. That's just what this country's made of and about." This was a very charming way.

As I said, through the years we did not have a very frequent contact, but when we met it was usually through Charles. I noted later on, when he became Vice President and President, that he always spoke about Charles. The loyalty of Mr. Johnson--he had that kind of loyalty, which I think he sometimes felt that some of his associates did not quite bring to him, in an unusual degree. That was a very moving thing.

Well, I would say the next more remarkable and memorable set of encounters was after 1960 when he was the Vice President of the United States. He and his family occupied a mansion here in Georgetown. When I was to come to Washington the first time as Music Director of the Boston Symphony, Mrs. Johnson had phoned us in Boston to find out if they could give us a party and who we would like to meet. So I asked if I could meet Newton Minow and then--Secretary of Labor, Arthur Goldberg. The night

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after the concert here, a very, very remarkable party was assembled up in the place in Georgetown where they lived.

Particularly Mr. Minow, who was at that time Federal Communications Commissioner, asked me, "Now, how did you meet the Vice President?" The Vice President stood by when I related this incident with Charles Marsh and the immigration problem and how they later prepared the whole thing with the American Consul in Havana. After I had told the story, the Vice President was asked if he could sit down and have his picture taken with me. We sat down on a little sofa and he put his arm around my shoulders and said, "Now Erich, this is a lovely story and I certainly would like to hear it again, but let me ask you something: what kind of town shall we now put in that story to replace Havana?" Which, I think, is one of the most charming memories I have of Mr. Johnson, because it shows the very highly sophisticated sense of humor. You know, he had that glint in his eye and said, "What town shall we make it, instead of Havana." That was when he was Vice President. Then, of course, in November 1963, he became President. He--I say this, not without some pride--he frequently turned to me. First of all, I was very often invited to the White House, usually when some occasion made the list up of people who were somewhat connected with cultural life.

In the fall of 1964, the President appointed me to be a trustee of the Cultural Center, which by then was already known as the Kennedy Center. At the ground breaking ceremonies, which, if my memory serves me right, took place in early December 1967, I was sitting on that rostrum behind the President and chatted. He was always, invariably, most cordial and always asked about my family and children. As a matter of fact, I would say that we became more closely acquainted when he was President than I'd ever been with him.

F: You saw him more often.

L: Yes, much more often, because I was several times at the White House and once I arranged (the years now get a little bit confused because it was so frequent) for a chamber group of the Boston Symphony to play at the White House for a party which was given for the children of various foreign diplomats. That was a very nice party which Mrs. Johnson presided over.

I later on was invited in 1965 to attend the ceremonies on Liberty Island--the signing of the new Immigration Bill. The President had already spoken to me about the new Immigration Bill the night before his inauguration in January 1965. We had been invited to all the affairs here in Washington. We went to the pre-inaugural concert at which I sat in the box with the President, Mrs. Johnson and the family. After that concert, there was a reception and supper at the State Department and the President asked me to ride in the limousine with him.

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During that drive he referred to that bill, and said, "What do you think of that bill?" He spoke very, very movingly about his feeling that the name of a person, what its suffixes were, should not influence if he could get in the United States or not--which meant actually he was very much opposed to the racial or national quota which had been the 1922 law. He referred to the fact that my own case, which he had handled as a young man in 1938, had been perhaps the beginning to open his eyes to the difficulty which a man could have. He always manifested that he was very happy and proud to have gotten me into the country. It was a very strong bond between us because I was very grateful. The stress I had felt in 1938 is very difficult to describe.

So that was before the inauguration and then later in 1965--in October I would say, October 3, I believe--there was a ceremony on Liberty Island. There was a tremendous crowd. I think the arrangements broke down a little bit and people just milled around and I was nowhere near the signing. But when the President and his party left he spotted me someplace and he invited me to go on the helicopter with him back to New York. And that time we had a nice visit because after the helicopter he asked me to ride in the limousine. As a matter of fact, he made everybody crowd together very much to make space for me. The limousine was chock full, in front the driver, the Secret Service man and Jack Valenti in the front seat. In the back there were two couples. There was Ambassador Arthur Goldberg and his wife--he was by that time in the United Nations--and the President and Mrs. Johnson. Then in the two jump-seats--there were bucket jump-seats, you couldn't seat three--was Mayor Wagner and myself, so there were actually nine people. Everybody was terribly crowded because I was not of the party originally, but he made space. We went to the Waldorf and he asked me to come up to the apartment. This was the day before His Holiness, the Pope, came to visit, so I remember it very well. It was the week or three or four days before the President had the operation for the gallbladder ailment.

And then, this was '65 again, from time to time there were White House invitations. Unfortunately, I couldn't always respond to them. In 1966 we had in Tanglewood engaged the winners of the International Tschaikowsky Competition in Moscow, and I phoned the White House to tell the President and Mrs. Johnson that I thought this was a good opportunity to do something. Perhaps they wanted to come up to Tanglewood. The Johnsons said they were very grateful, and then later, early in September, arranged for a party for these winners at the White House. That was a very nice affair. It was an informal supper and I played the piano for Veronica Tyler and Van Cliburn was Master of Ceremonies. It was as I've said before, when there musical and cultural things happening, the President used to turn to me sometimes for a little assistance. I was, of course, very happy if I could be of some assistance.

Another time there was a dinner when people of the Cultural Arts Council changed. I remember it well because there had been a sudden change in the weather. People coming from out of town were not as fortunate as I (who did catch a good plane and arrived in Washington), and the dinner became very informal as all during dinner

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people came in and were seated in the dining room. I sat next to Mrs. Johnson during that dinner.

Then the last time I spoke really with the President was when he appointed me--had appointed me--to be one of the Assisting Directors of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, that new corporation which takes care of the non-commercial television particularly. This went somewhat like this--Douglass Cater phoned me in January--January 1968 that must have been. I was in Paris at the time, and he asked if I wouldn't accept this appointment. I said, "Of course, I consider this a very important thing." He explained to me what the Corporation was about and I said this is a very important thing. He asked me to come in and have lunch with him, Mr. Cater, when I was in Washington next time.

That was the end of January 1968 and as I was greeted by Mr. Cater he said, "The President would like you to come in. He wants to say hello." We had a very nice visit. He told me mainly about his grandson who had just burnt his hand by going into hot cereal, I think, and he was very descriptive about it. We had a very nice, very good visit, and I was very glad to see him look so well.

Since that time there have been other invitations to the White House which, unfortunately, due to schedule difficulties (because I have a great many concerts to conduct), I could not fill. Every year around Christmas time I got a very beautiful Christmas card which the Johnsons send out. In general, I have a very warm spot for Lyndon B. Johnson and I think this is about the long and short of my contact with the President.

- F: Did you have any opportunity to form an opinion about either of the Johnsons' musical taste? Were they fairly receptive to what you wanted to do?
- L: Well, I think that the President was perfectly aware of the enormous importance which music played in the creation of a better life for people. I think he was perfectly aware that when people set more leisure time that music of all kinds--particularly music of the classic masters, modern masters--would play an ever greater role. I feel that his social awareness was so enormous that through that he appreciated the position which music had to play in the lives of people. I think his social consciousness was very keenly aware of the position which all the arts played for the leisure hours of people.
- F: You would then deny the critics who say that his tastes run strictly to sort of country and western music?
- L: I wouldn't know.
- F: I don't mean what he likes, but what he would accept.

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- L: I wouldn't know because I don't think we engaged in this kind of conversation. When he talked to me (of course, you realize, we all realize, a President doesn't have a terribly long time to talk to people who are not really on the agenda), he would usually talk to me about matters relating to the immigration problem. He associated me with that and, of course, through my professional affiliation with the musical world. I would say that was our principal contact.
- F: In your way, you may have changed an immigration law then.
- L: Well, I wouldn't be surprised that it had something to do with it because he was very very strong on that subject. I'll never forget one night--the night before the Inauguration in that limousine--there were just four people in the limousine (the glass was closed with the driver and Secret Service man in front), my first wife and I, driving with the Johnsons. There was nobody else in the car and he just talked very feelingly about the fact that because somebody's name ended in an Italian suffix or Polish suffix, that should be no deterrent to his admission to the United States.
- F: Thank you Mr. Leinsdorf. Did the Johnsons ever come to a concert?
- L: Yes, indeed. The boys of the Boston Symphony were very proud. The announcement was, of course, for security reasons, when we were in Washington that time that Mrs. Johnson would come. I would say this was January 1967, the end of January '67. Mrs. Johnson was announced and then whispers in the afternoon came very privately to me that the President himself might come, and indeed he did. We spent the entire intermission time in the lounge in Constitution Hall. The President and Mrs. Johnson and, of course, several of the people connected with the Boston Symphony, the management was there. I saw that many of my associates with the Boston Symphony got the chance to meet the President. It was a very nice evening for the trustees. Some of the trustees of the Kennedy Center and their wives were invited for that night anyhow because it had been planned that Mrs. Johnson would attend, so we made sort of a gala of it. But I can't begin to tell you what it meant to the musicians of the orchestra.
- F: Did they seem to put more into it?
- L: They were honored. I have heard a great deal--now this was 1967--and they said not since President Truman has any president ever appeared in their concerts in Constitution Hall. They were very flattered and very honored, and so it meant a great deal to them that President Johnson came to that concert.
- F: This was the National Symphony, it wasn't the Boston.
- L: No, no, no. It was the Boston.
- F: It was the Boston.

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- L: You see, the Boston Symphony plays regularly, once or twice a year, in Washington. Of course, there are difficulties for a President, I noticed at the time, because there was right away the talk. "Why doesn't he come to the National Symphony, or why doesn't he come to this orchestra." So then the answer was because the conductor of the Boston Symphony is a friend of his, which of course, I have only reasons to be proud of.
- F: Do you remember, was the program anything particular that night--
- L: I was very fortunate because on the program was New World Symphony by Dvorak. So that was very good that it was a piece which had sort of an American connotation. It was a nice popular piece and I think I played some of Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet" and I think the program, in general, was fortunately one which I was very happy to present.
- F: What is directorial protocol in a case like that? The President comes in and is seated and then you come out. Or do you come and then he comes in? I mean, what's the order of the seating?
- L: One waits for the President, and since, of course, the President is enormously punctual, there is really no waiting. That is, of course, when such a guest of honor comes in, it awaits his arrival. Of course, in Constitution Hall everybody knows where the box of honor is located and paid special attention when we bowed to greet and thank first in the direction of the President and Mrs. Johnson.
- F: Right. Thank you, Mr. Leinsdorf.

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Orchestra conductor; b. Vienna, Austria, Feb. 4, 1912; came to U.S., 1937; citizen 1942; ed. Vienna, Mus. D. (hon.) Baldwin-Wallace Coll., Berea, O., 1945; Rutgers U., 1952; Asst. cond. Salzburg Festival, 1934-37; cond. Met. Opera until 1943; Cleve. Orchestra, 1943; music dir. Philharmonic Orchestra, Rochester, 1947—56; dir. N.Y.C. Center Opera, 1956; Met. Opera, 1957-61; music dir. Boston Symphony Orchestra, 1962--; guest appearances with Phila. Orchestra, Los Angeles, St. Louis, New Orleans, Mpls., Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Israel Philharmonic, San Francisco Opera, Bayreuth and Holland Festivals. Fellow Am. Acad. Arts and Scis.

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