Armin J. Watkins oral history interview by Nancy Hewitt, August 13, 1985

Armin Watkins (Interviewee)

Nancy A. Hewitt (Interviewer)

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Hewitt: I am speaking this afternoon with Dr. Armin Watkins, Professor of Music, as part of the USF Silver Anniversary Oral History Project. Could you tell me first of all Dr. Watkins, what was your first contact with the University of South Florida and what made you decide to come here?

Watkins: My first contact with USF came in 1960 when I was, at that time, employed by Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, where I was Chairman of the Piano Department in the School of Music. My wife had family here in Florida and we were visiting here. I got, just by word of mouth, the news that this new university was starting up then, thought it might be a nice idea to, just out of curiosity, to stop and see what was going on. At that time there was no campus here. It was just an office downtown that had some of the first administrative officers, the president and the Director of the Division of Fine Arts who was A.A. Beacher. So I just made an appointment to stop by and talk with these gentlemen, and the more I talked with them about the new university and the opportunities that were there the more excited I got. They seemed to like me too. We sort of hit it off just from our first conversations. Then I went back to Peoria. We had some correspondence after that and before I knew it, I was hired to be on the charter faculty.

Hewitt: Now when you first actually saw the campus, at USF, how much of a shock was that?

Watkins: Well my first impression, of course, was wide open spaces. I thought I was out in Texas or something. There was the Administration building. I might say, by the way, that I was hired before I ever saw the area out here where
the campus would be. So my first view of the campus was on coming here to teach. The first building that they had was what is now called the John and Grace Allen Administration building. The Student Center was here. I think they were just finishing what is now the Student Services building, and was at that time to be the library. As far as classroom buildings went, that was about it in this area. They also has some buildings up in the science area and so forth. I found myself trudging, during the day, back and forth between the Student Center, which is where our offices were, and the Administration building, which is where Mr. Beacher had his office, the administrative offices, for the Division of Fine Arts. There was no sidewalk at that time. So at the end of the day, the standard operating procedure was to take your shoes off and empty all the sand.

Hewitt: Now obviously pianos aren't the easiest things to haul around. How many times did you actually have to move your studio or your office before you got settled someplace, semi-permanently?

Watkins: Quite early on we had our studios selected in an area of the Student Center on the first floor. There was a suite of rooms I might say, which I guess are now offices. They were on the first floor, just to the north side of the entrance and facing the south side. The most interesting feature of the studios was that the wall facing the outside hall was all glass. So anybody walking by, in the suite, could have a full length view into the studio. It made us feel like we were in a fish bowl. It was a little unusual. I have never had that situation before.

Hewitt: Now were you originally hired as part of the College of Basic Studies as well as the Division of Fine Arts?
Watkins: No. I spent my first three years in the Department of Music as part of the Division of Fine Arts. We were, administratively at that time, a part of the Liberal Arts College under Dean Cooper. So we didn't have a College of Fine Arts at that point.

Hewitt: But you were also not part of the two year basic...?

Watkins: No. There were professors, as I remember, even at that time who had dual appointments. I was not one of them. Quite soon into my first years in the Music department I got to know John Hicks, who was the director of the humanities program--brilliant person who had made quite a reputation in this area in pioneering the teaching of humanities. He had his own special way of running the program which was very interesting. His interest in me was that he wanted to introduce a number of humanities-music workshops as a part of the basic program in humanities. And the humanities, by the way, was a part of the Basic College, the so called Basic College. Nobody knew quite what to do with these humanities-music workshops. We had some discussions about it and he became interested in having me teach some of these workshops. I remember that Edward Preador, who was also another member of the Music Department and was another one of the charter members, also taught some of the basic humanities-music workshops. Each of us sort of groped around in the dark with it. The idea was to present a creative musical experience that students of varying backgrounds could benefit from. And of course we had students who played instruments and played very well and were quite advanced. Then we had students who couldn't read whole notes. So it was quite a challenge to come up with a program, meeting once a week for ten weeks, to come up with really creative experiences for all of these
different types of people. Out of that I developed, in my own experimenting, a course which could be called Music Composition for the Non-professional. So it was a composition course. The idea was to teach the concept of creativity working with musical sounds and teaching basic notations, but always with the emphasis on what it communicates. A lot of what we did we did in coordination with poetry. We composed songs. We set poetry to music and that sort of thing. We got some very interesting compositions. In fact, at one point, there were some television courses made based on the compositions that came out of those workshops. They were very interesting. The best part of it was that after a few years, as we really got into it and we knew what we were doing, we had a very high success rate, must say--got into the high 90%. I think we could safely say that every student who took the course came away with a sense of having done something musically creative that didn't really depend on any kind of ability to play an instrument. Of course most of the students did have experience. Those who were experienced had experience playing instruments of some sort. It didn't depend on that. So in a sense, that put most of the students in the same boat to begin with. It was very interesting.

Hewitt: That sounds fascinating.

Watkins: But I still didn't have an appointment of any sort in the Basic College. I was borrowed to come do that. So after three years of being in the Music department and having also taught with a team, a course called History of Fine Arts... I taught it with two other teachers from other areas of the Fine Arts is what it amounted to. But after three years of teaching piano and teaching theory... One summer I directed the chorus and even from those early years we had a faculty string quartet that also used a very
talented and advanced student on the viola. I played second violin in the quartet. I had an invitation from John Hicks to come and join the Humanities faculty. By that time, John had assembled a Humanities faculty which had specialists in different areas who all came together and taught the first year freshman basic course in the Humanities. All of us taught that. And in a sense, the course taught us, too, because obviously we were not experts in all the areas of the Humanities. So we learned from each other. And then in more advanced courses, the Humanities faculty would consist of its own little Music faculty, its own little Language Arts faculty and so on.

Hewitt: So for you, in those early days, the "Accent on Learning" and the interest in interdisciplinary team teaching was something that you put into practice in your early years?

Watkins: Yes. Well we had to in those early days because we had a limited faculty. In the Music department there were four of us who were the first faculty. In addition to myself, there was Edward Preador, who taught violin and who conducted the beginning orchestra that we had. He also taught some other subjects. There was Wayne Hugoboom who was the choral director and taught voice. There was Gale Sperry who was the band director and who taught the wind instruments.

Hewitt: You have all had a wide range of fields.

Watkins: Yes, it really was. And I taught, as I said, Piano, Music Theory, the History of Fine Arts course, and the Humanities-Music Workshops. I participated as a violinist in the faculty string quartet. I even played in the little orchestra. We needed all the bodies that we could get to make an
orchestra. I just sort of taught everything, put all the fixings in the kitchen sink.

Hewitt: Now in those early days when the campus was much smaller and when there really was a need for innovation in terms of spreading the faculty over a wide range of courses, how much influence do you think the faculty actually had in terms of the establishment of programs and the instituting of academic policy in departments and divisions?

Watkins: Well, I think on the whole we had a lot to do with it. Not because the administrators in the various areas didn't have their own ideas about what to do. I think the University was very fortunate in having, all across the University, really talented people. Not only in their own specialties, people who had made a mark in their own specialties, in other words they were doers, but also people who were organizationally talented. They were people who were interested in having the faculty that they hired put into the program. All of us realized that we had an unusual opportunity to start from scratch. So we really took it literally and tried the very best that we could to take advantage of it. To think creatively and not be bound from traditions that were not here.

Hewitt: How would you characterize the relations between faculty and administrators and faculty and students in those early days? Was there more camaraderie and accessibility?

Watkins: Sure. Well, yes. If only because things were much smaller. Everybody knew everybody else. In those first two or three years, I guess I must have known, personally, almost the entire faculty at the University. After the first three or four years or so, that became a lost fond hope.
Hewitt: Let me ask you about one incident that happened in those first couple of years that had the potential to either bring the faculty closer together or tear them apart. I'm talking about the Johns Committee investigation. Do you have many memories of that? What are your memories of the Johns Committee being here?

Watkins: The best that I remember was that there were a number of accusations that were made more or less outside the University. Of course it came from Senator Johns. This is where the name for the investigation came from. One of the accusations was homosexuality and communism. At any rate there were some sort of broad, nasty allegations made. The investigation didn't turn up very much. There was a kind of McCarthy-era type of atmosphere that was trying to be created by the investigators from outside the University. It was very difficult. It was embarrassing and probably humiliating for the administration. Trying to act as responsible administrators, who were responsible to the state, responsible to the tax payers, and who had a legitimate right to know what the condition of their institution was, but at the same time adequately protecting the rights of their faculty, students, rights of privacy, and so forth. All of those things were involved. The best that I remember was that out of the whole furor that there may have been one or two professors that resigned over it. I really never knew myself personally what there was to it. I didn't know why they really resigned—because they were investigated or because they were found guilty of something. I really don't know. The investigation caused alot of upset on the campus and then it seemed to sort of disappear. And that was it.

Hewitt: And you were able to pretty much go on as before?
Watkins: Yes. We kind of carried a bruise after that. We were always a little bit sensitive to our condition as being in between the duties that we feel professionally that we owe to our students and on the other hand the responsibility to the tax payers. After all they do pay our salaries. I don't think that there were really very many faculty people who wanted to disregard that responsibility.

Hewitt: Let me ask you a little bit about a more positive event that occurred at USF that you were involved in, the USF Opera Theater. When did that get off the ground and what was your role in that?

Watkins: Well, we always had a very active vocal program here. Wayne Hugoboom was a national figure in the American Choral Association and I think also in the National Association of Teachers of Singing. He attracted a lot of students who loved him to death and he taught them a great deal. It set a very fine foundation for the development of singing at USF, both chorally and individually. Unfortunately, as I remember and I think is was in the third year of the University, that he suffered a heart attack and had to resign. I believed he died not too long afterwards. Replacing him was a wonderful man and teacher of singing. His name was Everett Anderson. He has been with the University up until the last couple of years, when in fact he became incapacitated and had to retire. But we had him a nice long time. He had been a prominent singer, both opera and oratorical singer in New York, and was also a teacher of singers in New York with students in the Metropolitan Opera and so forth. A very distinguished man. After he left New York, just to get away from the strain of living and working in a place like New York, he went to the University of Oregon and then from there came here. He
immediately expanded on the good foundation for singing and singing students that we had here at USF and began an opera workshop program. He and I were good friends right from the beginning. By that time, by the fourth year, I found myself over in the Basic College on the staff of the Humanities department. But of course I still performed all the time with the Music faculty. So he and I were very good friends. We struck a deal that I would be his accompanist and play for his recitals if he would teach me singing. I have always enjoyed singing and I studied a little bit in the past, but I loved to sing and what an opportunity with such a magnificent teacher. And I thought that I just couldn't let this go by. So we struck this deal. So for about six or seven years, I studied every week with him. I went to the voice classes with the students, I was treated just like a student, I was expected to sing in the classes, and be criticized and so forth. I learned a lot. I think I got the better of the deal actually! I played for his recitals and he taught voice to me. As the opera program progressed, although as I remember I didn't take part in the very first opera. I probably didn't sing well enough. Very early on we did The Barber of Seville by Rossini. I managed, in an open audition, to get the part of Dr. Bargelo, which is a baritone role and a comic role. I just loved it. I had an awfully good time doing that. I guess it brought out the natural ham in me. So every year after that, for many years, I always tried to reserve enough time in the years that they did operas, which was generally every other year—where we could get the cooperation of the Drama department in coaching, costumes, scenery, and all of that because it was a major production to do it. USF did do wonderful things with opera. They were just first class. The operas were always in English which made our opera productions at the University special in the area because the other opera
companies, the Tampa Opera and St. Petersburg Opera Companies, were old-line mainly Italian literature operas. They were sung in the original language with guest stars and local people to sing in the chorus and do the minor roles. But at USF we did operas in English, which made it very accessible for everybody. Anybody could come and sing in the opera from the community. And it was simply open by audition. Whoever was the director of the opera would of course be in charge of deciding who sang what. So for a number of years I sang the role of the marquis in La Traviata. One of my great memories was in singing the Marriage of Figaro, Mozart. I sang the role of Figaro under the directorship of Boris Goldofsky, who is one of the greatest opera directors in America. He was the director of the Goldofsky Opera in Boston and one of the regular commentators on the Saturday afternoon Texaco broadcast of the Metropolitan Opera. A very well known person. Fabulous director and he was brought here to direct this production. So it was a great honor, of course, to work with such a person. I learned so much from doing that. After that I sang leading roles and sometimes title roles in Gianniscicci, the one act opera by Puccini. I sang Ben in the Telephone by Menotti, Marcello in La Boheme by Puccini, and sang the Bat in Fledermaus by Johann Strauss. Dr. Falca was The Bat. Wonderful role.

Hewitt: You must have been incredibly busy in those days if you were doing those auditions and teaching at the same time.

Watkins: I was. I was doing too much. I try to do less now.

Hewitt: You mentioned people from the community coming in and trying out for some of these roles in the early operas. I have also heard that the community people played in the orchestra early on when you were looking for anyone who played an instrument. What would you say, overall, was the relationship
between the Fine Arts program at the University of South Florida and the larger Tampa community? Was there wide spread support for the Fine Arts here and was Fine Arts a way for USF to reach out to the community?

Watkins: Absolutely. It is for every university and it was then and it is now. Our main problem at that time was that we weren't very well known. We were way out here in the boonies. Of course since the building of the interstate highway, 75 and 4 and all of that, USF doesn't seem so far away. But in those days it certainly was quite a distance from downtown and the old Tampa crowd, so to speak, was in many ways a pretty tight-knit and tough nut to crack. Of course the University had, as a whole, great support in Tampa from the Tampa civic leaders. They were terribly glad to have a major university here. Even in the arts we had our supporters from the Tampa community. But we were small and what we were doing was on a limited scale. We didn't give nearly as many concerts in those days as we do now, or theatrical productions and art exhibitions and that sort of thing. So it was a problem just to reach the community and keep them interested.

Hewitt: What do you think has been the influence, over 25 years now, of the Fine Arts program here on music, opera, and fine arts in the city of Tampa?

Watkins: Ever since the very beginning USF has had a major impact in what went on down there. In those early days, for instance, there was the Tampa Philharmonic Orchestra which then became the Gulf Coast Orchestra and is now the Florida Orchestra. But in those early days, it was the Tampa Philharmonic Orchestra which had not yet been combined with the St. Petersburg Symphony. So there were two separate orchestras there. The Tampa Philharmonic was under the direction of Alfredo Antonini, who was the Director of Music at CBS in New York. He was a very fine conductor who commuted down here to
conduct this orchestra. We were very lucky to have him because he really
was in many ways a first class musician. I should say in every way he was.
He taught us a great deal. I have very fine memories of Maestro Antonini
and his dear wife. The Maestro passed away just a couple of years ago after
he and his wife retired in Clearwater. When he was still living, the two of
them began and promoted a concert series called the St. Brendons Concert
Series in Clearwater, which is really a very fine and high type concert
series in which it has been my pleasure and honor to perform.

Hewitt: Now do you think there has been much change in the types of students that
have come to USF to learn music or to take part in the Fine Arts program
since those early days?

Watkins: We have and are attracting now more of a better grade of students. That is
students who come to us with more musical experience, who are more efficient
usually in playing an instrument or singing, before they ever come here.
But I can look back into those early days and remember, even with the small
number of music majors we had, some students who came to us who were very
talented and well prepared and who have made distinguished positions for
themselves. For instance, one who was in the very first class, and I was
her piano teacher for three years, is Dr. Averill Summer, who is on our
piano staff now. I had her as a freshman student and she went on and
studied with me for three years and then studied with Jacques Abram for a
year or so. Then she went to Indiana University and got the very highly
sought after doctorate in Piano Performance and Literature there. Along
with her husband, who is our choral director, both of them got their doctor-
ates there. Of course she has made a fine career for herself. So I am
really very proud of her. There are others that have done extremely well even from those early years.

Hewitt: From those early years you had some very talented students, but you were also spending a lot of time teaching courses to people who came to USF without very much background in music or with musical instruments. Creative workshops now, I assume, pay more attention to students who come with a background?

Watkins: Yes, we are a little more selective about it now. One thing that distinguishes us from the other state school—which is our principal competition so to speak in Florida, Florida State University,—Florida State University is a professional school of music. The most sought after degree there is the Bachelor of Music degree which is a professional degree. Our school, at USF, is not made up that way. We are a liberal arts institution basically. The degree that we offer here is the Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Music or a major in Music Education and so forth. But it is a Liberal Arts degree. There is a greater emphasis on the academic here and on a broader background which we find is really a very advantageous thing.

Hewitt: Now let me go back and ask you about what happened with your career since you are on the Music department now . . .

Watkins: Oh excuse me. Let me just interject this here when you were asking me about the influence that the faculty has in the community. I meant to say that almost everyone of the faculty, performing faculty here in the Music department, has at one time or another played in the Tampa Philharmonic, the Gulf Coast Orchestra, or the Florida Orchestra as it is now. Most of the faculty carried out first chair positions. So the orchestra really depended on,
particularly in those days . . . There are fewer of us now who still perform down there, simply because the weight of our duties has become so broad and we just don't have the time to do that. I don't know if we had the time then, but we made the time. But there are still some, on our faculty presently, who are in first chair positions in the Florida Orchestra. We also took on a great deal of the teaching of private students, high school age students and grammar school age students, as beginners. So the influx of this music faculty into the Tampa community . . . There were, of course, some private teachers and some of them were quite good. Still it upgraded the quality of teaching that was available and provided leadership for the private teachers who were already here. It was a way for them to upgrade their experiences and ways for us to help them as well as the students. But we, ourselves, have always taught private students. I can remember, for instance . . . Here is a poster, in fact, up on my wall. Elisa Garth, the pianist. A girl who I taught when she began, when she was about 12 years old. When she was 16 she graduated from the Academy of the Holy Names downtown. I recommended, at the request of her family, a college for her to go to. She was accepted at Yale. She was accepted at Connecticut College. She was also accepted at a couple of other places. But because she was so young I rather favored her to going to Connecticut College where there was a very close friend of mine who was teaching there. I knew he would look out for her. He and his wife would sort of take her under their wings. Then she went from there to Boston University and went right through in a very distinguished way. She got her Masters degree and later went to Juilliard and got the highly-prized graduate diploma and is presently performing free lance in New York making records and making a real career for herself. She was, as I said, a local girl here in the community. Well, of course, not
all of our private students go that far. I feel very proud to have been able to do that with her and for her.

Hewitt: Well it certainly sounds like it has made an impact on the community, both on these individuals who might not have had that opportunity to move on and on the community at large in terms of the quality of performance that they can provide through the orchestra and the Gulf Coast Symphony. Now when did you actually move back into the Music department?

Watkins: Well, that occurred after about 7 or 8 years, and the thing that brought it about was the reorganization of the University. Dr. Allen, our first president, a very dear and wonderful man, had resigned and we had a new president, Dr. Mackey. He instituted almost immediately a reorganization of the University. Of course the University was growing by leaps and bounds and the organization that was suitable for the University in those beginning years was no longer suitable and it needed to be shifted about some. The College of Liberal Arts, which included the division of Fine Arts, was so big by that time that the College of Liberal Arts just included almost everything and everybody. So there was a great need to divide it up into more natural divisions. The College of Basic Studies, in which the Humanities was, was dissolved. I know that many of the faculty who were in the Basic Studies College were given the choice of joining this or that unit depending on what their specialties were in the new colleges that were created. Of course at that time the College of Fine Arts was created. Of course, many of the staff that had been here all along were the same and so forth, but the organizational chart then looked different. But at that point, I was invited to come back into the Department of Music and to do what I was originally hired to do. Or I had the privilege of staying with
the Humanities faculty where I had such a wonderful time and learned so much and had so many friends. It was a hard choice to make to tell you the truth. But I guess after a lot of thinking, I felt that I should get back to doing what I do the best and came back to teaching the piano and performing more and that sort of thing. Getting back to my basics I guess. So I accepted the invitation to come back into the Music Department.

Hewitt: Now when you think over . . .

Watkins: By the way, I might say that one of the things that I'm really proudest of is that I earned my full professorship, my promotion to full professor, in the Humanities. Something I would have never expected before I came to USF to be involved in, to say nothing of having achieved that honor. It is something I am very proud of. While it would have been wonderful to have been promoted as a member of the Music department, just the respect and the affection that I was shown by the Humanities faculty has always stayed with me. It is one of my great joys.

Hewitt: When you think back over your 25 years here, and obviously you have been involved in an enormous number of activities, programs, colleges and departments, what would you say have been the most important developments, either positive or negative, over that 25 year period?

Watkins: Do mean in the University as a whole?

Hewitt: Or in music.

Watkins: Well, the Music department has grown steadily from those early days. It began with four faculty members in addition to the director of the division of Fine Arts. Today we have a faculty that is in the middle 30s and we are
very much a fully performing faculty. We have many performing organizations, both faculty performing organizations—the Musart Trio, for which I am a pianist, the University String Quartet, for which I currently play viola, the very distinguished Wind Quintet and other organizations that we have. We used to have an organization which may be resurrected, I don't know. It is simply known as the Faculty Chamber Players. It is a kind of flexible instrumental organization which is constituted to play the kind of music that is not likely to be heard under ordinary traditional circumstances, either new music or music that is not usually heard because of odd combinations of instruments that can't be gotten together in order to perform it. So we have a very broad performing nature to the department today. It is one of the most active performing departments anywhere in Florida. We feel that we can easily compete with Florida State University and their very fine staff over there, both for the quantity and the quality of our performing services to the community. So that has been a very positive thing. We are quite proud of that and the community can be very proud of that. We have had ups and downs, of course, like every growing department, trying to figure out how we can gain our own identity and organize ourselves. We've gone through stages of great disagreement amongst ourselves. I can remember times in the Music department when other departments in the University would gather together and grumble about "those music profs over there, they can't agree on anything." If you are going to talk about the Music department you might as well realize that nobody can agree on anything over there. I'm sure that we have been, many times, a thorn in the side of the administration at the University and they have gotten sick and tired of hearing our troubles at one time or another. We had an interesting time of it when our chairman, who was Larry Austin, a nationally
known figure in Contemporary Composition—he was a pupil and very close
colleage of John Cage—he has some very interesting ideas about the organ-
ization of the department which caused great division in the department and
alot of reassessment amongst ourselves as to what our functions should be.
It kind of stopped us cold for a year or two, in sort of trying to get past
this point because of the need to assess what we need to be teaching, how we
should be teaching it, what we should perform and how we should perform it.
We came out of that period, I think, bloodied, but not cowering at any rate.
We've suffered also in these more recent years, in this department, as
circumstances would have it, from rather long periods of administration by
acting chairman. Of course what that means to anybody who understands the
University administration is that somebody is the boss, but isn't really the
boss. So it's very difficult to make major strides in certain ways when we
are stuck with that situation. I am happy to say that we have had some very
innovative and talented people in that position. It has saved our necks
more than once. We are just now beginning this year with a new permanent
chairman, regular chairman of the department, Dr. Jack Haller, who comes to
us from the University of Connecticut, where he was the Assistant Dean of
the College of Fine Arts. He is a very distinguished man and a lovely
person. He is an internationally known person in the fields of his
interests—the Psychology of Music Education and so forth. He is also a
graduate of Juilliard in Violin Performance. So we are really looking
forward to a creative time with him.

Hewitt: Sounds like your next 25 years should be as exciting as your first. Thank
you very much Dr. Watkins.