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Madi Bacon : thoughts on conducting, a video documentary

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MADI BACON: THOUGHTS ON CONDUCTING
A VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

BY
DEBRA K. GOLATA
DECEMBER, 1996

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Dr. William George

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ABSTRACT

MADI BACON: THOUGHTS ON CONDUCTING

A VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

This thesis consists of a fifty minute videotape, a transcript of the videotape, and a biographical chronology of Madi Bacon, founder and former conductor of the San Francisco Boys Chorus. In the video Madi discusses various aspects of conducting: the role of the conductor; conducting techniques; use of the body, face and hands in conducting; score preparation; tempo and dynamics; and program preparation. There are a few anecdotes about her own conducting training and about her composer brother, Ernst Bacon.

The biographical chronology includes Madi's family and educational background, her teaching and conducting experiences, her personal interests and travel, and her professional affiliations and honors.

In 1948 Madi Bacon was approached by Gaetano Merola, general manager of the San Francisco Opera, and Kurt Herbert Adler, chorus master, to recruit and train a boys chorus for the Opera productions. Madi conducted the chorus from 1948 to 1972. She is a prominent San Francisco area musician.

To Madi

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PREFACE

Madi Bacon is best known for the founding of the *San Francisco Boys Chorus*. In the spring of 1948, Gaetano Merola, San Francisco Opera's General Manager, and Kurt Herbert Adler, Chorus Master, asked Madi Bacon to recruit and train a boys chorus for productions of the San Francisco Opera. The following fall twenty-five boys trained by Madi appeared in *Carmen* and *La Boheme* on the stage of the War Memorial Opera House. This grew into a full repertory chorus for which Madi was the music director and conductor from 1948-1972.

"It's cumulative," was Madi's response to the question: "What does it take to be a good conductor?" The chorus was not the extent of her interests. Having first entertained the sciences, art, and languages, this Renaissance woman finally devoted herself to music, but she continues to pursue new ideas, read new books, seek new experiences. Madi turned ninety on February 15, 1996. Her memory is sharp as she remembers dates, names, texts to choral works, themes, and events. Her energy is bountiful. She's still more than willing to play piano duets, hike Mount Tamalpais, or relax with a glass of wine. It is my wish to preserve a bit of her personal history, musical experiences, life philosophies, and her vitality. May this video serve as a resource of information, inspiration, and pleasure for those who view it. My special thanks to Madi for her cooperation, friendship, and generosity with her time and talents.

CHAPTER 1

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Interviews with Madi Bacon began in the summer of 1991 and continued periodically until January, 1996. The discussed topics were Madi Bacon's personal history; the founding and implementation of the *San Francisco Boys Chorus*; her composer- brother, Ernst Bacon; and Madi's thoughts on tone and conducting. All interviews took place at Madi's home in Berkeley, California. Interviews were conducted, videotaped and edited by the author. There are eight ninety-minute audio tapes that have been transcribed and eight two-hour, eight-millimeter video tapes. There are also videotapes of special events--Founder's Day, birthday parties, and concerts--which were, of course, recorded at the site of the event. The videos were edited onto Super VHS tapes, into the following categories:

1. Madi talking about Ernst
2. San Francisco Boys Chorus; Founders Day; Madi about Ernst
3. Family Background 1
4. Family Background 2
5. Conducting
6. Tone; Conducting (concluded)
7. Madi conducting; Madi--old photographs

The resultant fifty-minute videotape--*Madi Bacon: Thoughts on Conducting*--was edited from these tapes. Jim Delcourt of East Bay Media Center, Berkeley, California, was the post-production engineer.

It seemed most appropriate to use a video format, rather than a written or an audio format, to capture Madi's gesture, expression, and energy.

CHAPTER 2
MADI BACON: THOUGHTS ON CONDUCTING

See accompanying video.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

One of the things that I do is, I bare myself. I become naked in front of my pupils, in the sense that I give them all my secrets. I give my students all my thinking and my analysis, and all my feeling. I'm exposing my feelings to my pupils, so that they will expose theirs to me. That brings unity. . . .You get what you give.

Madi Bacon, 1995

APPENDIX
TRANSCRIPT OF VIDEOTAPE: *MADI BACON: THOUGHTS ON*
CONDUCTING

Madi Bacon (MB): Conducting is the epitome of putting together all your musical knowledge and being able to convey it to the performers and then to the audience in the right manner. Well, any rate, I'll read you what I wrote, shall I?

The apex of all musical exploration is conducting. Piano performance, singing, far-reaching instrumental study, and of course, a profound understanding of the music. And finally, an urgent need and desire to share one's deepest musically expressive feelings with others. These are the building blocks of a great conductor.

I'm being very condensed here, putting it all together. Because it's 89 years of living I'm putting together here...and working.

Energy, sensitivity, a profound experience of living while seeking the meaning of life, of love, and of beauty, with curiosity and discipline are needed to achieve the ultimate goal of choral and orchestral expression. A timeless oneness with a great audience. When the conductor experiences this union of Bach's perception of the word 'Magnificat' all of the efforts at rehearsals in preparation, night after night of work, practicing, have become worthwhile for a short moment of cosmic unity and understanding.

I perceive the conductor at the middle of an hourglass. Chorus and orchestra, conductor and the audience. The conductor starts by setting the mood, the rhythm and tempo, the dynamics and the quality of the sound--and soars away to a desired climax. The chorus and the orchestra in front of the conductor and the audience behind him. The conductor becomes the magnet that brings about that unforgettable moment in time and space which is almost supernatural.

It carries me back five, ten centuries, to the stigmata, which was a supernatural thing. Now, you know a heart, you're a conductor yourself, you know how it is, how much practice and time. And you get paid so little. The only real satisfaction, and now after all these years that I can think of, is that wonderful moment where the music is holding a thousand people out here listening to you creating this music, written by Bach, and honestly presented with joy and enthusiasm, and hopeful decent technique, to this house, this audience. That is the joy of a conductor. And then, you'll find that individual singers fall in love with conductors, because the best conductors open up the hearts of the people that are singing or playing under him. A great conductor can make you love Brahms and Schubert and Schumann. And Gilbert and Sullivan. And for the pop singer he's good too, in his way. But what I want to do is be professional in what I give my six-, seven-, eight-year-old kids even. I don't want them to be treated as children that haven't any brains and sit on the floor and play games all the time. They can be treated professionally by bringing out a sense of rhythm, giving them an experience first and then analyzing the experience, and not being academic about it. And to me, the big universities that have music departments and are entirely theoretic and turn off the young undergraduate beginner who's coming to school to learn, because it's all theory and not enough music. That I can't take. I think they've got to start with the music and then explore and be stimulated in it. And that means technique as well as bringing out the emotions in the people. Don't you think so?

Isadora Duncan stood a half a day in one position, absolutely quietly....not half a day, it couldn't have been....at any rate, to find out where does her

energy start? Is it the diaphragm? Where is it? Is it your heart? What are you doing? Where does your energy come from? And then, how do you express it? Now you will express energy differently for a highly trained chorus than you will for an elementary chorus. When you have an elementary chorus, you feel that you're an elephant, you're pulling them, you're pushing them, you're making them do things, you feel....struggling to get it. If you have a fine chorus, and if you teach a fine chorus: "Now is the month of Maying..." that's all you need.

You're the point of focus. Your baton or your hands, your entire body is the point of focus. So you are binding and holding the whole group together. And you are the interpreter between Bach and the audience. With these hundred people out here. And that's a big responsibility. That means you have to be a good musician, and it means so many things that you have to prepare. It uses all you know, you are, and you feel. In order to be a good conductor, you have to be more than a brain, you have to be more than intelligent. You have to also be supple with your body, you have to feel the emotion yourself. And this is the experience I mentioned in the *Magnificat* which made me so aware that when I reached that word "Magnificat" with the whole group, I suddenly became self-conscious and thought to myself, "Madi, don't get more active with your conducting, don't retreat, don't do anything different" because at this point the music, the orchestra, the singers and the audience and the conductor, you are all one unit, it's almost a cosmic experience. It sounds banal to say it, but what was happening was Bach's music was holding them, and I didn't get in the way as a conductor. You must not get in the way of the music. The horizontal line implies legato.

Do you feel that as a legato? A real smooth thing, this motion...or doesn't this feel smoother? Now my students have to conduct so the palm of your hand feels as if you're on a cloud on certain legato. Put your hand over on a cloud and get a beautiful.... Now use your wrist much more than...also, learn to conduct close to your body. I'm just beating time now. I find that the focus, if I take a baton or a pen or something as a baton, I insist on practicing with a short baton for a long time. A short baton allows you to even play with the baton and let it go down if you want, and want to use your hand. But a baton is a focal point. The hand can take the place of the baton and do much more expression than you can with a baton. The baton is for rhythm. And if the rhythm isn't good you immediately pick up a baton and get it going. But, a strong beat comes with the heel of your hand. You've got the heel of your hand, you've got your fingers, you've got the forearm, you've got the upper part, you've got your whole body to deal with. Now let's have for madrigals and lightness small motions like this, just from your wrist. And keep your body quiet, don't bend at the waist, that's what so many young conductors do. All right, you want that quiet wrist motion, and you want to focus. Now, I close my fingers for a focus. But you don't want this kind of thing sticking out somewhere, because it attracts attention away from what you want. All right. The up and down, if you go "Break forth, oh beauteous heavenly light"--a Bach chorale--did you notice my hand went forward? I'm in a box here, you know about that, if you try to conduct too low down, the chorus can't see you. Now, Mr. Koussevitzky, with whom I studied one summer at Tanglewood, had a motion, when he got excited he'd conduct down here, but he wasn't conducting, he was just expressing his emotion. So you have to

distinguish between conducting, when you are signaling, and expressing your own emotion. And some of these, the Baroque conductors who dance up and down with enthusiasm, and bounce a lot, it bothers me when I feel there should be more legato. I don't like a whole body bouncing too much. I think you should study enough modern dance, or with a teacher who understands body motion. Now you know what ballet is, ballet is a very strict discipline. The minute I think of ballet I think of sixteenth notes. But I also remember Pavlova unfolding as a swan, when she unfolded her body there was a wonderful legato. But, you have to think of light and heavy weight. If you're going to do staccato notes and sixteenth notes, you've got to be on the tips of your toes as a dancer and as a conductor, you've got to get the feeling of lightness. Imagine the dancer on the tips of their toes. I've seen much too heavy conducting, much too big motions. Now what inspires your chorus, what inspires your orchestra? The eyes, the face, your vitality, energy. Energy is the electricity, isn't it? All right, you have to have the electricity turn on. All right, I'm going to turn on the electricity, now, my energy. Now a strong downbeat with the heel of the hand is necessary, whether you have a baton or not doesn't matter. Now, if you want Brahms and warm emotion, you're going to use your hands a little differently. Now, I believe in the first place, you don't want to separate your fingers too much, because it distracts doesn't it? So keep a comfortable hand. Now, if I'm going "Break forth"--the chorale of Bach--"break...."--I have to prepare my beat don't I? Because you have to breathe. So, let's do it, let's get our chorus going. Be a student yourself as you conduct, for a moment. Take a breath. How does it feel? Now put your hands up here, now breathe. "Break...." Okay. Did I go forward? I'm

teaching a chorus now. "Break forth..." Now "forth" is important, so "break" All right. Now, I have to remind you, vowel is tone and consonant is usually stoppage of tone, except for an "m" or an "n." Remember that the vowel of the word, if you're going to sing words, is what has to be on the beat.

Debra Golata (DG): Where did you first study conducting?

MB: I first studied with Ernst. Ernst taught conducting to me in 1928 and '29. We had a little class of about four or five of his students.

DG: That was here in San Francisco?

MB: Right. Well I went to the Concord Summer School of Music first, where the father of American choral music, the head of the Harvard Glee Club, "Doc" Davison. Concord Summer School which was run by Surette and Zanzig. Thomas Whitney Surette, sort of a philosopher, Augustus Zanzig, head of the American Recreation Society, the music director/head. And who was the third person? That Concord Summer School in the East was wonderful: had a large chorus, and that became the Tanglewood School of Music in 1940. I went to the first year of Tanglewood, when Serge Koussevitzky was the head of it. And I came from California, and that's when I remember driving across the continent in five days, alone. That was quite an experience because the roads weren't what they are now. Driving alone, it was quite a trick. I arrived and had a room in a private house, and outside of my room was an open area, and a cow was grazing there. I kept

looking out at this cow chewing it's cud, and it made me realize what the human jaw was like. I remember trying it out the way the cow rotates its jaw when it chews. And if my voice students would only get that awareness of how that jaw works and how it looks when you're singing and not let it get tense. Of course my brother Ernst, when he played the piano, always tightened his jaw, so did I, until I became aware of these things.

And you know, that first summer at Tanglewood, Koussevitzky insisted that all the conductors have dance. But he got us a ballet dance teacher. And ballet is not what I'm talking about when I talk about dance for a conductor. I'm talking about what now in the nineteen hundred and nineties we call body movement. It's all the Feldenkrais, all the Alexander Technique, all the modern dance people are aware of the refinements of body movement.

We were assigned a piece on a Monday and had to perform it on Friday. In other words, we were supposed to be experienced enough to read a score and be able to conduct it in four or five days study. Of course we had other things besides conducting, too. I had chamber music group and so on. But it was very stimulating. Leonard Bernstein was....there were three students there that were with Koussevitzky daily. We had him about three times a week for six weeks I think it was. And his assistant Chappell was a very good man. Was it Stanley Chappell? We had of course daily classes. I had the experience, at Tanglewood, that I was supposed to conduct the *London Symphony* on Friday night and one of my colleagues on Wednesday morning said, "What are you conducting Friday?" and I said, "*The London Symphony*." He said, "I don't think you are." And I said, "That's what I was assigned." And he said, "Well go look at the bulletin board, your name's on

the board.” So I looked at the bulletin board and there it said I was doing the Mozart *Flute and Harp Concerto*. Wednesday, and this was for Friday. So that’s what they did to you in that first summer! I went to my bedroom and went to bed, propped the pillows up on my bed, and began to study my score, just looking at it, because I thought first I had to get it into my vision and analyze it, which I did before I went to the piano to play it. I already had decided that looking at it first was more important than playing it. So I did that, and I spent two days and nights concentrating on that, and the funny thing is that I don’t remember it very well now. This is interesting. I can’t sing you the opening phrase now. Isn’t that funny? A peculiar lack of memory. It may be just because I’m older, I don’t know. It didn’t make such a deep impression. I had already studied the *London Symphony*, was already working on that, was deeply involved with it. It was pretty harrowing for me.

DG: You said that in your score preparation you like to stand up on a chair and look down on your score.

MB: I found that if I put the score on the floor I’m far removed from it, and if I look down at it on the floor I have a feeling of seeing the broader outlines of it, rather than details.

My heroes Koussevitzky, Bruno Walter, and Stokowski, didn’t I? Bruno Walter, to me, is the grandfather of conducting, in my lifetime. He had a beautiful slow...he could do Brahms like nobody, I mean the elegance of Brahms. He could do slow things so beautifully. He had an eloquence, that’s the word, eloquence. And “Koussy” was exciting, he was not a good

conductor, but he was musically exciting. He wiggled down here in his excitement, and that touched the orchestra too, we have to let them know. But it doesn't make sense, you couldn't even see him down there, but his whole body was excited, and he got good results because he was dramatic.

Let's talk about tempo, because I realized when I got into professional conducting in Chicago, with orchestra and chorus, I wasn't always clear how to establish an *adagio*. *Allegro* is a little easier, *adagio* is harder to start just right. Or a *largo* is very difficult, with long notes. Or you start the Brahms *Requiem*, something like that. I developed during wartime a system for myself, because I didn't have a system, and with the best teachers they never stabilized anything for me about tempo. Sure, there's a metronome, sixty is sixty ticks per minute. Alright, those are seconds, we know that. So when I did my private teaching of singers and pianists, I devised this scheme which might be comfortable for you. I had my students take their pulse. Take your pulse. It'll range somewhere between fifty and seventy. It's pretty close to sixty in some cases. All right, now you set the metronome and you've got your pulse. Well, I'm about sixty-two. That's pretty close to sixty. Now, if I'm at rest, I know my pulse beat. All right that gives me sixty-two on the metronome. Okay, now I call that a quarter note, and I call it *andante*. *Andante* is simply an Italian word from the verb "to go"--*andare*. Speaking of Italian, I think conductors should early in life, if you're very musical, take up languages very early. The joy and the necessity of knowing foreign languages. I studied Italian, French, I'm fluent in German, I know French pretty well, I spoke decently at one time in Italian. I've lost it, but have read a lot, and recently studied Spanish. The joy in life and in travel and with music and with religion and with paintings, is so great, that it's worth the

effort to learn language. Sure, study Latin. Here I have a degree in Romance Languages and I haven't studied Latin. But I would rather study the living language or have my children have that experience because then if mentally you're the type that wants Latin—"God bless you"—you can always learn it. And you can study it, and you don't have to speak a certain kind of Latin. My mother spoke Germanic Latin, my father spoke American Latin. And the heads of departments in Italian of the University of Chicago and the university departments here, they don't know how Latin was pronounced in those days, and Italian is the vulgar Latin to a certain extent. Well, so much for languages.

I'm making a "V" for "Victory."¹ This is wartime when I thought of this. *Andante* is down here at the joint. And I put a quarter note there. And a quarter note equals sixty. Now, let's see, you're opposite me. On the right side of this joint, *andante* is right here at the joint, underneath it. Then I go up the right side halfway and I call that *allegro*. *Allegro* has two meanings. It means "fast" in Italian, and it's also "happy." *Una donna allegra* is a happy woman. So, halfway up this side of the "V" is *allegro*. All the way up top I put what? *Presto!* *Presto* is simply indicating speed. Right under *presto* I'm going to put *vivace*. It's very fast, but *vivace* means "lively, vivacious"

¹Madi's "V":

doesn't it? So that's a mood indication. So if we're taking the tempo, we're talking about mood and speed. Now I'm connecting this up with what used to be a dreadful instrument, the ticker, the metronome, which was invented during Beethoven's time--and by the way for school teachers, Beethoven wrote a marvelous round about Maelzel's metronome which you must look up. I used to have my boys' chorus walk on stage with a metronome ticking there, and then they'd sing Beethoven's round in time with the ticker. It was fun to walk in with Maelzel's *Metronome*.

Now here's your *andante*, your *allegro*, your *presto*, and your *vivace*. So mood and speed are both on this "V" for "Victory." On the other side of course we have *adagio* and *lento*. And then you have *grave* and other terms that relate to *lento* in some way or other, slower or faster. Then you have the words that describe these, *piu* or *meno*, "more" or "less." Or you say *andante moderato*, simply saying "moderate walking, moderate going." Now you walk your student across the room, *andante*, at sixty. Those are quarter notes, I said. Now those quarter notes might, if you are going up to *allegro*, become eighth notes. You might say *allegro* could be half as fast, and be an eighth note, and if you go way up to *presto*, that could be a sixteenth or a thirty-second note. I'm just making my own scale out of this, because I never had one given to me by a conducting teacher. And I think you must have a scale in your mind or you're not going to be very sure of yourself. All right, now put metronome marks with these tempi for yourself and try them out, explore them. Do it in English, why not? Now, walking is quarter notes. How do you walk? Do you start with your heel, do you start with your toe? Or are you walking flatfooted? You will find you are not

aware of it. If you walk quarter notes, they are a certain weight, a dancer will show you this, in beautiful walking. Now, double that exactly and walk eighth notes and you'll find you'll hardly use your heel any more, you're already getting on the ball of your feet, and you're going to sixteenth and you can't put any weight on it, you have to almost stand still and move your feet very fast. Try it out, it's really fun.. Because people have no idea how light-weight sixteenths should be. And naturally, in performance on the piano or on the string instrument, if you learn from the beginning that a quarter note has a certain weight, it also it has a certain volume and intensity. All right, I ask you to study tempo, and light and heavy weight, and duration.

It's wise if the soloist, if the soprano is fully aware of the conductor's personality, and the age and so on. When Bruno Walter worked with us, with the opera, he took such a slow tempo, and he was already way over seventy, and he was so genial and so gracious with the little boys at the opera house. But a younger man would take a much faster tempo, and I think if you are aware of that... However you as a singer have to fit your actions while you're praying there and kneeling, into the musical tempo that you're taking. You have to have your own, but I think you'll always find a faster tempo in a younger person, no doubt about it. I'm old now, so I've slowed up my tempo, I certainly have, in music I have. I find myself taking things much slower with Faure and all kinds of things that I used to.

Bruno Walter seemed to take all tempi a little slower than others. But it depends on your personality as a conductor. If you're a rapid-moving person, if you feel music faster, you feel it faster. If you feel it slower, or with more dignity, you've got to be honest.

DG: Do you think that's being honest to the composer?

MB: Well, you're going to be as honest as...if you follow the composer's directions. Now, composer's directions are often very vague. Some of the most amusing terms I can remember of any composer putting words on paper was my brother, Ernst, who used English words. After all, the standard musical language has been Italian, and we've come away from that a good deal. Now it's whatever country....the French always stuck to French. The Ricordi publications, for instance, were always in Italian. Now the American composers have finally started to trust themselves and not always look for European conductors. It's a tremendous change, in my own lifetime. I've seen the change, because, other than Bernstein and a few recent conductors, we didn't have any Americans. They were almost all foreign-trained.

There's a "Holy Trinity" about conducting: I call it preparation, attack, and release. Only I don't like the word "attack," because attacking has a mood with it. Preparation, sound, and release, if you wish. Something like that. Now, make up your own. And make up graphs of these things. Now, what else did I want to tell you?

DG: About dynamics.

MB: Loud and soft.

DG: And how do you indicate it with your gestures?

MB: All right. Well, a quarter note is a fairly heavy walking note, isn't it? Now, the quarter note...all right in dynamics I want my students to become extremely conscious of all least six degrees of loudness. We start with *pianissimo*, *piano*, *mezzo-piano* because, like most judges, you always have to do something half. It isn't quite that, so take it *pianissimo*, *piano*, *mezzo-piano*, *mezzo-forte*, *forte*, *fortissimo*. Then you can add the Tchaikovsky and the later triple *f*'s and so on, all you want, or triple *p*'s. But the school teacher has to be careful how you discuss two *p*'s together! Otherwise you'll have your whole class laughing. I'll leave that to you. Dynamics. Volume. I had a long time where I put my feeling first when I was studying piano, playing Chopin. My feeling was there right away. I disregarded the dynamic markings to some extent. It took me quite a few years of teaching before I was accurate with dynamics as demanded by the composer. In fact, I think I was twenty-five years old or so and had already explored quite a bit because I was singing and piano-playing at that time, already had done conducting. To be an honest musician and interpret the composer, you really have to follow his dynamic indications in great detail. But your own feeling about the sound of a melody, or of a phrase, comes so rapidly when you're sight-reading and when you're reading music, that one tends to disregard the details that are given by the composer.

DG: Did Ernie have any thoughts on this?

MB: I should have looked up before talking to you. He had really humorous indications. He would just take adjectives and describe it

DG: How would he feel about people's interpretation of his music and his dynamics? Would he hope that they would observe them carefully?

MB: Ernst...I think he would, but he always gave a feeling of freedom. He, for instance, gave me carte blanche to make any changes I wanted. He had a comfortable way of saying, "Well, if you don't feel it my way, do it your way." But I think he was very sensitive to the quality of words. I think his Emily Dickinson songs prove that. Take almost any of those songs, the quality of the harmony, the duration, the dynamics goes with that poem so beautifully. Now, I feel that Brahms did some beautiful music to the words. Schubert, in his direct, free-handed way--remember he died, what was he thirty-five or -six years of age when he died--and what a great vocal composer he was. He was an instinctive, intuitive composer, and carries you with him so readily. Put your time into things that'll last through your life and that you'll always enjoy.

DG: Would it not apply also to a conductor, when a conductor is beginning a piece, to recite the poem, recite the words?

MB: Oh, by all means! I'm glad you asked that question. What would the Brahms *Requiem* be if you didn't know the meaning of the words? The second movement, "Behold, all flesh is as the grass..." and so on. Biblical words. And here's a secular man putting great religious words to music. With the longest breaths for the soprano solo which he wrote in memory of

his mother, it was put into his *Requiem* later, after he finished it, and it's one of the great solos.

Planning programs is very important for a conductor. And I think a program should be planned according to your own desires, and according to what the audience can take. I think concerts of two and a half or three hours are too long. I think I'd always let the audience ask for a little more. I think it's wrong to make a break if you really break a spell. I had the experience of telling my chorus and orchestra in a Brahms *Requiem* performance in the Chicago area, that we would make a break after the third movement, before "How lovely is they dwelling place," the fourth movement, that beautiful lyric thing. I gave directions, we would sit. I started the Brahms *Requiem*. We went through it. When we got there I went on conducting; I forgot all about my directions to the chorus and the orchestra. We went through the whole *Requiem* with no rest for the chorus, standing up all the time. Orchestra has it easy that way, of course. I apologized to them afterwards, and they said they didn't notice it. "We were all so involved with the music, held, that we didn't notice that." Now when you have those experiences, people can't argue with you because you've gone through it. So be careful what you tell your chorus and orchestra to do.

I would like every instrumental conductor to have at least a semester of vocal study with a teacher that's very much...I think conductors should have training from an outstanding voice teacher, that is both analytical and very musical. So that they can get the feeling of a singer, so that you know how a singer feels when you conduct them. We have a conductor right now, you know who I'm talking about, whose hand flops along, just moves along, some sort of a beat, with an open hand, it drops from the wrist, the fingers

and the hand have no particular meaning to me, they don't mean anything. The hand has to always be talking. You're talking through your hands, you're talking through your eyes, you're talking through your face, you're talking through your smile, you're talking through your chest, you're talking through your posture, you're talking through all of these things that a dancer is involved with. And to me conducting is one of the greatest arts that exists and it comes at the end of your training, I think that every graduate with a music degree should have at least one semester of conducting, because you summarize all of your other knowledge. You need your harmony, you need your counterpoint training, you need your orchestration training, which you don't get in some schools, like the great universities, like the University of California doesn't require orchestration for a degree, a bachelors. Some of this, I don't understand. You see I like to explode on things. I can't help it, I think we don't....we're not profound, I don't think we're fair to the undergraduate students. Go back to the old master singers, the guilds, where you had to be a great craftsman. Hans Sachs in *Meistersinger* was such a wonderful example that Wagner used, and you see the jealous Beckmesser that is objecting to Walter's beautiful musical rendition because it isn't accurate. I think we could stand a modern opera similar to the *Meistersinger* now, if somebody would write something and then put in some musical terminology into it. Well, any rate, you get me going, Debbie!

BIOGRAPHICAL CHRONOLOGY

Introduction

Madi was raised in a politically liberal household that offered her a blend of art and science, and of American ruggedness and European refinement. German was spoken at the dinner table with the pending threat of the loss of dessert if one lapsed into English. In her bilingual environment Madi developed an appreciation for languages, travel, and other cultures. Physical robustness, feisty intellectualism, and a hearty sense of pride was encouraged by her family. She speaks with gratitude for her parents having instilled in her a love of nature and music, and a sense of responsibility to society.

Following is a chronology of Madi's background and experiences that will give an overview of the influences and events of Madi's life.

Family

Father: Dr. Charles Sumner Bacon: July 30, 1856-July 10, 1947. He was from a farm family in Spring Prairie, Wisconsin. He graduated from Beloit, College, Beloit, Wisconsin in 1878, and Chicago Medical College (part of Northwestern University) in 1884. During his post-graduate study in Germany and Austria with the American Medical Association in 1895, he met his future wife. He was professor and Chairman of the

Obstetrics and Gynecology Department, University of Illinois. Madi describes his private practice as that of a "horse & buggy doctor." His strong interest in politics and literature was imparted to his family.

Mother: Marie Francisca Emelie von Rosthorn: October 1, 1862-September 24, 1951. Born of Austro-Hungarian nobility, Marie's ancestry can be traced through baronesses and countesses to the Esterházy family, patrons of Haydn and Schubert. She grew up in Vienna, later moving to Graz where she studied piano with W. Mayer-Rémy (Busoni's teacher). Madi's interest in music and the arts and her strong connection to Austria come from her mother, her "home school" teacher until seventh grade.

Charles and Marie were married in Vienna, Austria, August 17, 1895, and resided in Chicago, Illinois, where they raised their family .

Children: Karl died around the age of two or three from tuberculosis contracted from bad milk.

Alfons Bacon: 1896-1988. Alfons was Doctor of Medicine in Chicago and on the staff of the University of Illinois, succeeding his father. He moved his obstetrics and gynecology practice to Bradenton, Florida in 1953 (where the landlord locked him out of his first office because he treated black patients, along with whites), and later to Sarasota. He encouraged mothers to nurse, contrary to the custom of the day.

Ernst Bacon: May 26, 1898-March 16, 1990. Ernst studied at Northwestern, the University of Chicago, and in Vienna, and then moved to San Francisco to study with Ernest Bloch. He began a lifelong friendship with Ansel Adams, who was at that time a pianist, musician, Cedric Wright, and with music scholar and composer, John Edmunds. Ernst

directed the Federal Music Project and was the first conductor of the Carmel Bach Festival. He was Dean of the School of Music at Converse College in South Carolina, and was Director of the School of Music and composer-in-residence at Syracuse University. He was winner of a Pulitzer Prize and two Guggenheim Fellowships. He retired to Orinda, California in 1968. There he continued to write, paint, and compose--including compositions commissioned by Madi for the *San Francisco Boys Chorus*.

Charles Sumner Bacon, Jr.: December, 13, 1901-January 4, 1978. He was professor of Geology at Riverside, California; Associate Professor of Geology at A.M.A. College, Texas; and Chairman, Department of Geology, Case Institute of Technology, Cleveland, Ohio.

Maria Helena Bacon (Madi): born Chicago, Illinois, February, 15, 1906.

All four children are in *Who's Who*.

Personal Background & Experiences

Home schooling, including piano lessons and French and German languages was provided by Madi's mother until 1917. From age eleven she attended Sunday symphonies with scores in tow.

1917-1922: Francis W. Parker School, Chicago. Madi entered as seventh grader. Noted school visitors included Albert Einstein, Vachel Lindsey, and Rabindranath Tagore. In the ninth grade she organized a school orchestra which included young Alfred Frankenstein, later to be eminent music critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

1922-1923: Art assistant--Hull House, Chicago. Unbeknownst to her mother,

Madi worked at Hull House, sharing community dinners with founder Jane Addams.

1922-1924: Camp counselor, Girl Scouts, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, She taught nature study, music, recreation, and dance.

1924-1933: Summer employment usually involved camp work: Waterfront Director--Camp Kechuwa, Lake Michigan, Michigan; instructor of swimming, life saving, diving, boating, canoeing, and tennis ; American Red Cross life saving examiner and teacher; swimming instructor--Lake Geneva Conference, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, where Johnny Weismüller (Tarzan) was also on faculty; dance teacher--Luther Gulick Camp Sebago Wohelo, Maine. (The Gulicks founded the Camp Fire Girls and were associated with the founding of the YMCA.) The University of Iowa offered Madi a position as diving instructor.

1923-1927: University of Chicago--Ph.B., 1927. Undergraduate degree in Romance Languages (major) and History of Art (minor). She accompanied dance classes at the University.

1920's and 1930's: Conductor of chorus--"Boot and Shoe Workers" Union and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, in Chicago and later for the same union in San Francisco.

1928-1930: Moved to California. She studied conducting with her brother, Ernst, Beethoven sonatas with Ernest Bloch, and Gregorian Chant and voice with Giulio Silva at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

1928-1930: First Director of Music--Katherine Branson School, Ross, California, Grades 1-12. She also taught tennis.

1930-1931: Studied piano in New York City and taught piano in two

houses--one the Christodora House Settlement School. She was an accompanist at the *Isadora Duncan School of Dance*.

1931-1936: Returned to Chicago and was conductor of the Grant Hospital Nurses Chorus.

1931-1942: Founder-Conductor of the *Elizabethan Madrigal Singers* (specializing in motets, madrigals, and Masses), a recorder ensemble, and an *Old Music Society* in Chicago. While reading the *Oxford Book of Music*, Madi saw samples of music that she wanted to hear. The only duplication processes available at that time were a gelatin process called hectograph, or the cutting of a mimeograph with a metal stylus. Working from these crude duplications, Madi and her singers stimulated the revival of Renaissance and Baroque music in the Chicago area, performing in museums and educational institutions. She considers this the first of her most valued teaching and learning experiences.

1936-1938: Supervisor of Music--Glencoe Public Schools, Glencoe, Illinois. Her successor was Beatrice Krone.

1936-1946: Conductor--North Shore Choral Society, Winnetka, Illinois, a mixed chorus of 70 voices.

1938: Studied at the Concord Summer School of Music with Thomas Whitney Surette, Archibald Davison, and Augustus Zanzig.

1938-1941: Music Director; instructor of High School Glee, Chorus, and Music Theory--Roycemore School, Evanston, Illinois.

1938-1939: Began graduate work at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

1939: Sierra Club High Trip, out of Bishop, California--the first of many.

1939 -1941: University of Chicago--M.A., 1941, in Music.

1940 (Summer): Studied conducting at the Berkshire Music Center, Tanglewood, Massachusetts with Serge Koussevitzsky and Stanley Chappell. Leonard Bernstein and Lukas Foss were attending the same summer. Madi played tennis with "Lenny."

1941-1946: Dean of the School of Music, conductor, and instructor--Roosevelt University (formerly Central YMCA College), Chicago. She hired Max Rudolph and Nikolai Malko as orchestra conductors.

1946: Assistant Professor of Music, Lecturer in Music Theory--University of Chicago.

1946-1954: Head of Music Extension Division--University of California, Berkeley. Madi developed the Music Extension Division and a number of courses. As part of Extension, she was lecturer in Choral Literature and Conducting at the University and was choral director, and voice and conducting instructor at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Madi secured authorization for funding for veterans in extension classes. She arranged for the purchase of twenty to twenty-five pianos to be installed in two empty houses then on the campus of U.C. Berkeley as the University's first practice studios, preceding Morrison Hall.

1948-1959: Continued as conductor of the University of California Extension Chorus after resigning as Head of Extension.

1948-1972: San Francisco Opera Music Staff as conductor of the the *San Francisco Boys Chorus*. Founder of the *San Francisco Boys Chorus*. Madi was called upon in 1948 by Gaetano Merola, director, and Kurt

Herbert Adler, chorus master, of the San Francisco Opera to recruit and train a boys' chorus for local opera productions. Her successful efforts resulted in the founding of the *San Francisco Boys Chorus*, at that time America's only boys' opera repertory chorus. Music Camp Director for SFBC--1952-72

1957, 1958, and 1959: Idyllwild Music and Arts Foundation, developed Junior Choir School, Idyllwild, California, at the request of Dr. Max Krone.

1955: Developed chorus, taught music appreciation--Athenian School, Danville, California

1967: Taught Conducting--College of the Holy Names, Oakland, California

1975: Festival adjudicator and conductor--Metropolitan Opera District Auditions

1986 and 1987: First Conductor of the San Francisco Revels (with John Langstaff)

Currently: Music consultant, private piano and voice teacher.

Madi was responsible for soliciting funds and donations for music and electronic keyboards for students in Nicaragua. Her concern for her community is evidenced by her continued involvement in community music projects, stimulating communication between artistic groups and city staff and politicians.

Teachers

Piano: Her mother, Maria Bacon; Alexander Raab,--Chicago; Ernst Bacon--San Francisco; Alexander Siloti (Rachmaninoff's cousin) and his daughter Kyriena Siloti--Juilliard, New York (Madi occasionally had

lessons in Rachmaninoff's apartment).; Arne Oldberg--Northwestern, Evanston, Illinois.

Voice: Mrs. Samuel Wright--Chicago; Giulio Silva--San Francisco; among others.

Conducting: Carl Bricken--University of Chicago; Nikolai Malko--Chicago; her brother, Ernst Bacon--San Francisco; Archibald Davison and G. Wallace Woodworth of Harvard, successor of "Doc" Davison--Surette Summer School, Concord; Dr. Serge Koussevitzky and Stanley Chappell--Tanglewood.

Music Literature: Cecil W. Smith--University of Chicago; Ernest Bloch, San Francisco

Theory: Thorwald Otterstrom and Rossetter Cole--Chicago; Carl Bricken--University of Chicago.

Travel

Europe in 1911 by ship to Glasgow, London Holland, Berlin and by ship again in 1927 and 1928 to study art and Italian.

Many Sierra Club High Trips beginning in 1939.

Mountaineering and travel to Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, England, Australia, Alaska, Japan, Yugoslavia, Romania, Nepal, Greece, Africa, Egypt, Lebanon, Fiji Islands, Hawaii, South America, Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Guyana, Surinam, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Turkey (1994)

Chief Interests

Music; teaching and education; conservation; travel; mountaineering; tennis; reading; community involvement

Professional Organization Affiliations and Memberships

Music and Education: Progressive Education Association; Music Educators National Conference; National Association of Schools of Music; American Musicological Society; Music Teachers National Association; Adult Education Association; Sigma Alpha Iota (Honorary Member, Conductor--1945); Choral Conductors Guild of America (Honorary Member--1960); National Association of Teachers of Singing.

Other: Sierra Club (Life Member--1939); United Nations, World Affairs Council; World Federalists; American Camp Directors Association; American Red Cross; UNESCO; Friends of the Earth; American Friends Service

Honors

Sigma Alpha Iota (First Honorary Conducting Member) 1945.

Choral Conductors Guild of America Honorary Member, 1960.

Phoebe Apperson Hearst "Distinguished Woman" Award, 1967.

American Camping Association Pioneer Award, 1974.

California State Resolution honoring Contributions in Music and Education, 1975.

City and County of San Francisco, Certificate of Honor, 1976.

City of Berkeley Proclamation, 1976. ("Madi Bacon Day"--February 15, 1976).

Norman Fromm Citation for Excellence in Musical Performance &

Leadership, 1979.

Alameda County Women's Hall of Fame-Culture and Arts Representative,
1994.

Honorary Member or Advisory Board

Berkeley Community Chorus and Orchestra; Berkeley Opera; Oakland Youth Chorus; Pacific Musical Society; San Francisco Boys Chorus.

Biographical Works in Which Madi is Recognized

World's Who's Who of Musicians; Leaders in Education 1943 and 1948; Who's Who in American Education, 13th Ed. 1947-48; Men and Women of Distinction, International Biography; International Who's Who in Music and Musician's Directory; International Book of Honor 1981; The World Who's Who of Women (Volume 6--Commemorative Award) 1982; Directory of Distinguished Americans, 1983; Who's Who in American Music 1983; Foremost Women of the 20th Century, 1984.

RELATED RESOURCES

Madi Bacon, "Musician, Educator, Mountaineer," an oral history conducted from 1985-1987 by Janet G. Harris, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1989.

San Francisco Boys Chorus Office , 801 Portola Dr, San Francisco, California.
(415) 665-2330.

San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum, 339 Grove, San Francisco, California. (415) 255-4800.

Other related Videos

Ernst Bacon interview, 1988 by Debra Golata and Jon Harris.

Ernst Bacon 90th Birthday, May 1988

Ernst Bacon Memorial-2 tapes

Please Note

The video cassette is not included this material. It is however, available for consultation at this author's Graduate School library.

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