



8-9-1972

Margaretha E. Lohmann (August 9, 1972)

C. Richard Arena

ABSTRACT

Oral History Interview

with

MISS MARGARETHA E. LOHMANN

August 9, 1972
Whittier, California

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

Miss Margaretha E. Lohmann was a music instructor at Whittier College, and her interest in music led her to teaching.

Her verbatim recollections of specific contact with the President follow:

* * * *

ARENA: The President's family included an aunt, Mrs. Jane Beeson, who studied at the Indianapolis [Indiana] Music Conservatory. Do you believe his was--I won't say an average--not an unusual Quaker family, where he was exposed to some fine music, and where they had family reunions, especially at the Milhous ranch, I understand, where his grandmother, Almira Milhous, expected the youngsters to perform? Do you find that you were surprised by that, or did that come naturally?

LOHMANN: Well, I wouldn't be surprised at that at all, and I think that's a natural thing. I think that Richard Nixon was raised in a musical atmosphere; his mother, I know, particularly. There was always music in the home.

ARENA: Do you recall any conversations with the parents, the mother or maybe even the grandmother, concerning the subject of music? Mrs. [Hannah Milhous] Nixon herself may have thought about it, even about Richard's future and music.

LOHMANN: No. My only recollection in talking about music with Hannah Nixon, who was Richard Nixon's mother, was on the advice of the grand piano she wanted to buy for their home, and the fact that she wanted a piano there because Dick liked to play when he was home. I believe they had an upright before and she wanted to get a good grand.

ARENA: Do you recall about when that conversation took place? Was this when he had left college and was practicing law and living in Whittier?

LOHMANN: Yes, I believe so. This would be in the late thirties.

ARENA: Just to refresh our memory, he did graduate from law school in '37 and began practicing then, and it was between '37 and '42 that he was in the immediate Whittier area, and then went to Washington D.C. with the OPA [Office of Price Administration], and then military service. When he came back he went into politics, so his professional local life was between '37 and '42.

LOHMANN: This, as I remember, would be in the late thirties and forties, because that was the time when I knew Mr. and Mrs. [Francis Anthony] Nixon, Sr., the President's father and mother, because we were neighbors. We lived on Leffingwell Ranch which is now Whittwood [Shopping Center]. We lived on three hundred acres of lemons.

ARENA: May I ask when you first moved out there?

LOHMANN: September of 1939.

ARENA: They had been living there since '22.

LOHMANN: Oh, yes. Their store was just across Santa Gertrudes [Avenue], which was the east boundary of the ranch, that part of the ranch there that was near the boulevard.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, was your father's source of livelihood based on the citrus crops, based on the lemons?

LOHMANN: No, no. My father at that time was retired.

ARENA: Would you say that you were living in a rural environment, or would you call that an urban environment?

LOHMANN: I would call that an urban environment. I believe we were about four miles out of town. One reason

we went out there was that we obtained this lovely, large home which was always good for music, and that was the main thing. It had so much wood inside, the old Leffingwell home was a great place for concerts.

ARENA: May I ask if that home is still standing?

LOHMANN: No, unfortunately after we left it I watched them tear it down, and as I remember it turned into the Security Bank while the Security Bank Building was being built out there.

ARENA: I wonder if I could also get you to comment on this situation: The President as a youngster went from his local area and lived with his aunt--this would have been around 1925 possibly, '26 or '27. He lived with his aunt, Jane Beeson, in Lindsay [California] on a farm, and this was strictly a rural area. And that is where he studied under her religiously, so to speak, for some six months. He actually left school, left the area, and then returned back to Whittier and resumed his schooling, but in the meantime he actually, for six months, lived and studied the piano, had his recitals with Aunt Jane Beeson. To what extent was he at an advantage or disadvantage, do you think, in learning or studying music under such circumstances?

LOHMANN: Well, I don't know the exact circumstance, but it sounds like a very happy one to me. I didn't know that he left school. I assumed that he was in school.

ARENA: Transferred.

LOHMANN: Oh, yes; that was what I was thinking.

ARENA: But actually entered a new school for that period.

LOHMANN: Up in Lindsay.

ARENA: Yes.

LOHMANN: And stayed with his aunt.

ARENA: Yes.

LOHMANN: Well, all I've ever heard of his aunt was that she was a very dedicated teacher and very knowledgeable musically, and that would be indicated to me by Richard Nixon when he studied with me. He was very serious about his music. I always had a feeling he didn't want me, for instance, to write too much publicity to the football department that he was devoting some hours to the piano. However, in those days the college enrollment was so much smaller

than it is currently, and again under this wonderful concept of being allowed to do as I wanted to do, I thought it behooved me to help the students REALLY enjoy music, and so I took as many as possible to the symphony concerts in Los Angeles [California].

ARENA: Do you recall that Richard was along on some of the trips?

LOHMANN: I have been trying to recall and I don't quite remember. I do know this, that a lot of the fellows who were on the football team at that time spent a great deal of time in my studio. It so happened that they were rather interested in the girls who were music majors. And on the morning of the symphony concerts, Thursday morning, I canceled my harmony, composition and my counterpoint class and devoted three hours for a discussion of the program to be given by the Los Angeles Philharmonic [Orchestra] that night, because by understanding the music you enjoy it so much more.

So we had sort of a morning session on the concert, and I am sure that Richard Nixon attended many of those mornings. I think one of the most interesting things. . . . I knew Dr. Rodzinsky, who was conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In fact, I was coaching with him, and he would let me have the conductor's scores, which to the uninitiated is quite a complicated thing. And I think one morning that stands out in my memory very much is having the conductor's score of [Igor F.] Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring," which is one of the most complicated huge scores you ever saw, and I had it on the floor. I had a new recording of it, and all these football fellows and girls--and I think Dick was among them--because we could get closer to the score and we could get more on the floor than we could in chairs, and we propped up the score and they all followed that score all the way through and listened to the entire "Rites of Spring." Well, they were rather in awe of it, but they thoroughly enjoyed it that night. We had a regular caravan that went into Los Angeles every symphony night. There weren't so many things to do.

And you ask whether I think Richard Nixon's study with his aunt and sort of devoting himself exclusively to music When was that?

ARENA: This would have been around 1925 or '27. He was in East Whittier Elementary School at the time and just simply left that and lived with his aunt for some six months. And I have interviewed her about this. I put the questions to her: How did he study and how often did he practice? It was very definitely a serious situation with his aunt, who taught music regularly, especially on a private basis, and still does. She has some fifteen students a week. She taught him on a regular basis, and it was during this six-month period where he left his local school in East Whittier,

attended a school in that area--the precise school was Strathmore [California]--and I have spoken with fellow students of his there. And then he came back to Whittier.

LOHMANN: That's up in the San Joaquin Valley [California].

ARENA: Yes. But the interesting thing was that, whereas this area could be considered a suburb and very definitely a part of a big cosmopolitan section, Los Angeles being so close, that area is really not near any big city at all and his aunt was strictly in the country. She now lives in the city of Lindsay, but at that time she was in strictly a rural situation. I was just wondering to what extent, if any, that made anything special about his music?

LOHMANN: No, I do not think so. I do think one is stimulated by having a city and major concerts to go to, but I think living in the country and getting away from the crowds is conducive to more study, and you will find that the creative artists and the greater performers that I know usually all maintain homes away from centers. No, I think this would be an advantage.

ARENA: May I ask you, while we're on this subject of Richard Nixon, precisely what personal experiences you do recall with him at this point, regardless of whether you recall the precise class and the precise year? But what does come to mind, and if he does not come to your mind very strongly, or even if he does not stand out, let that be on the record, too. But what would you say about your personal recollections of Richard Nixon?

LOHMANN: I believe the first word that would come to my mind would be seriousness, because I believe that anything that Richard went into in campus activities, whether it be a class or extracurricular activities, he went into it very seriously. And his study of piano, I think he considered it as an important part of his curriculum at that time. He was a good student. I could not honestly say he was an exciting performer but he was a serious performer. He never played in a major concert, but he did play in class recitals that were just for students in the department in my studio. I frankly don't remember him ever playing at my home. Those were slightly more formal, the Poet musicals. I don't think Richard ever played in those, but he did play in class performances and he had very good taste musically. He liked serious cerebral type of music, and as I remember once, a work that always comes to mind that he did rather well, was the Opus 79, G Minor Rhapsody of Brahms. In fact, when Richard Nixon was on campus as Vice President at the dedication of some portion of a new building or something on campus, we were

having a visit, and at that time our new chapel was being built and our new music center, and I asked him what the chances were of him coming out and playing at a dedicating concert, which, of course, was a little bit facetious on my part, because I knew he hadn't touched the piano seriously. (And please don't judge what you've heard him do on television as the way that Richard could play, because he really could play.) I said, "How about a little Brahms on a concert." And he said, "Oh, you know, I'm too busy, but you know, I just might to it." [Laughter] Well, he never did it. I always felt his very serious interest in music, and he was a good logical student of piano. I thought his practicing was very regular. He never practiced as much as I would like, but that was because he was interested in many things on campus, as you undoubtedly know. He was interested in drama, he was interested in football, he was interested in debating, so that didn't leave too many hours for the keyboard. But he had respect for the keyboard.

ARENA: From the standpoint of the layman, I wonder if I could ask this question: Given your years of experience with all types of students, what difference would a person's other interests--in his case history was his major, another person may have been majoring in nursing--have on their music study ventures?

LOHMANN: That is a most interesting side, I think, of music. Perhaps one of the wonderful things of music is that it is not always the person who is a music major, per se, one who devotes all his studying to the various aspects of music, who in the end becomes the best performer or continues to work in music. I can think of two or three examples, and interestingly enough, these are men, two of them are in other fields, one of them is teaching on campus at the moment, and none of these were music majors as undergraduate students.

ARENA: This interview is continued on Side II.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

ARENA: Did you want to continue answering that same question?

LOHMANN: Yes, because I find it most interesting. One of the teachers of piano in the Whittier College department now and one who has done a tremendous amount of performing very creditably was a pre-law student in his undergraduate years. He'd always been interested in music and particularly in piano, and I can say that in his four years as an undergrad he never missed a lesson regardless of how many other interests he had, he always practiced a maximum

amount. He graduated with high honors in the field of pre-law studies and won a Woodrow Wilson scholarship to Columbia University to further study international law, but his interest in music prevailed, and he is teaching piano on the Whittier College campus right now.

ARENA: Excuse me, on that subject of hours of practice, did you ever have words, so to speak, with the young Richard Nixon and say point blank, "Instead of putting all this time in football, where you're not playing in the game" And I don't know if you noticed he was not playing in the game.

LOHMANN: I knew.

ARENA: "Why not put some of this time in piano?" Did that ever come up?

LOHMANN: I'm sure I said that more than once, twice or a dozen times, because I've always been known, I'm afraid, as a tremendous pusher of students if I felt they had ability. I did everything to get them to spend as much time as possible, and I made available to them as much as possible, particularly if I thought it would help, a time to practice on the best piano I could find for them. We often were limited in what we had to practice on, but I found very often that, "Now you can come to practice on my Steinway here in my studio. I'm going to be out for a few hours. Come on over and spend a few hours here, or go up to my home. There's a fine piano up there, a big Steinway up there. Go up there and practice." And I said this to Richard Nixon more than once. He was interested in many things. But I think two things: First, I would say his very serious interest in music and then his very serious interest in a very lovely girl who was a music major at the time.

ARENA: Would it be too personal if I asked that girl's name?

LOHMANN: Ola Florence Welch, a music major and a very excellent pianist.

ARENA: If it isn't too personal, also, would you say that his interest in music was matched by his interest in Ola Florence, or were these two separate interests that just happened to come together?

LOHMANN: Well, I think I would have to be honest and say they were separate interests because I think Richard had this love of music. I think he also played the violin.

ARENA: Excuse me, while we're on this subject of the violin, I want to ask this on the record--I think

we discussed this off the tape--his uncle, Griffith [William] Milhous, who taught briefly in a school such as John Muir Junior High School, taught privately more extensively and taught the violin, among other things. I just wanted to ask if you had any contact with him or knew of him?

LOHMANN: No, never. No, I'm sure that Richard's interest in music was very genuine because of the love and the desire. No matter what he did, he tried to do it very well, and I think he brought this same emphasis to music that he did to other things; but face it, he was a better researcher into history and writer of documentary research material for the history department.

ARENA: May I ask you this, Miss Lohmann: As an educator, as one who knew Richard Nixon before and since, of what value do you think the study of music--whatever his ability in music is--has been to him over the years, right up to the present time? If not Richard in particular, to any professional person like that?

LOHMANN: I cannot measure the value of that, Dr. Arena. I think that the understanding of creative art, and let's say music, leads anyone to a much more abundant life because you have this. If you perform yourself, all the better, but I know people who do not perform but they understand music from the listener's angle and this makes such an important part of their life. I'm sure, and I don't like to say this is for relaxation; I would say for enjoyment, which relaxes all of us.

ARENA: From your own contact possibly with persons under pressure, as he obviously is nowadays, does it serve any usefulness?

LOHMANN: Absolutely. I think to be able to leave the pressures of one's work or profession or whatever, and certainly as the most pressured office in the world, of the United States, the President's, to be able not only to listen to something that takes hold of one in a way that no words can, that's music.

ARENA: Possibly a good comparison on that particular question of another famous political person, Winston Churchill who, as you know, enjoyed painting. Would you say that this would be a good comparison, that the two served the same function, that music is to Nixon what art is to Churchill? Or is that too much of a simplification?

LOHMANN: No, not at all. A little closer to Nixon, don't forget that [Dwight David] Eisenhower did a good deal of painting.

ARENA: Yes.

LOHMANN: I don't think it's always the golf course that unwinds a person. I can think of my own experience with some very dedicated people in the other professions in the business world. I think of one man who was one of our successful textile men of the United States who said he counted his day lost if he didn't listen at least to a half hour of the music of [Johann Sebastian] Bach, and he meant it, and he was a high-powered businessman.

ARENA: On the question of favorite pieces, do you recall the President ever bringing that subject up with you at any time, either before or since?

LOHMANN: No, but I rather gathered from conversations that he has a rather extensive recorded library of good symphonic literature. But when he was a student of mine, I remember very distinctly that the two composers he seemed to enjoy and certainly did the better with were [Frederic F.] Chopin and [Johannes] Brahms. He is a romantic at heart, but he doesn't like to let this show. But at least that is where I found he did his best work.

ARENA: Would you mind exploring that further, the subject of his interest in music, his particular interest, and the subject of his personality, bringing it right up to the present time? What comments would you want to make? Not going into politics per se, but thinking about the Richard Nixon you knew, the Richard Nixon we all know now, and any particular facets of his personality which might be explained by his music, or don't go into music at all, but however you would want to comment on his personality as you know it.

LOHMANN: Well, I haven't been able to follow him closely, only as we all know from our great interest. I would say from his personality, first and foremost the word that comes to my mind is seriousness. And another is adaptability. Richard Nixon, I believe, inherently--we've seen this in print and I believe it's true--is in a way a shy person, but I think he has the capacity, and I noticed it as a student and a friend, to try very hard to adapt himself to whatever group he was with. I am sure that in my studio he made a very serious effort to be as interested in everything that was going on musically as he possibly could. In the history department I know he was very seriously interested and was alive to everything that was going on, particularly in the department of American history. I think that in the athletic department he loved Chief [Wallace J.] Newman and he loved athletics, as we all know. He had a football in his desk drawer and we know he is a great enthusiast, and

we know the advice he gives to coaches now and then in the small hours of the morning by phone. But I do think that, really, he is a very private person. Maybe that's a better way to put it, one who could be content not to have to talk to everybody, and yet I have noticed that he has this capacity to adapt himself to the group of people he is with.

ARENA: This may be more psychological than anything else, but from your overall experience in the performing world, yourself being one, bearing in mind Richard Nixon, is a person born shy? If he is, can he learn and can he really get it out of his system through serious study, of saying, "Well, I know I'm shy; I don't want to be shy; I'm going to learn not to be shy?"

LOHMANN: Oh, I don't know. I believe this has to come from just doing it. I doubt that anyone ever studies this point out too much. I'm sure that. . . . Well, look--people who have to speak to the public as President Nixon does--that's his life, speaking to the public. [Laughter] This is one way you communicate. This doesn't necessarily mean that you want to go and talk with all these people immediately personally, but you can talk to them. The same thing of performance, the communication with a vast number of people, whether it's a big auditorium or on a big broadcast or a televised concert; in my own case it's the keyboard. That wouldn't necessarily mean that I could talk to all these people personally. I think you communicate through what you do.

ARENA: Speaking of communication, and this might be too far afield, is there any connection between being a good extemporaneous speaker, which he obviously is, and a student of music, in which you are learning, or are you learning, by repetition, a piece? Is there the opportunity to be extemporaneous if a person wants to be a serious concert musician? That might be too far afield.

LOHMANN: Well, let me see. Wasn't it [James] Whistler who said, "Great art is when all evidence of work is erased by work?" You said repetition. There is so much goes into music that is technical, let's be honest about it, but the real communication has to be something far beyond technique. Technique is only a means to an end. It's what you have to say, it's your convictions and an interpretation of music is really a recreation of music. And in performance, if you can give the effect that you have never heard this before, it sounds spontaneous to the audience. Well, that might have a counterpoint in other fields.

ARENA: Miss Lohmann, I have taken more of your time than I should have, but I'm not apologizing because

this will be something that future historians, whether their interest be pure history or musical history or what have you, will be grateful that you did give us so much of your own self in answering these questions so fully and frankly, which I know called for more than a simple yes or no answer, and I'm not apologizing for making you work, so to speak, and I know you have and I appreciate it very much.

LOHMANN: You are most welcome.